

Within and Without

By Cloudy Skies



Table of Contents:

Prologue	3
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	34
Chapter 3	50
Chapter 4	73
Chapter 5	95
Chapter 6	123
Chapter 7	142
Chapter 8	165
Chapter 9	185
Chapter 10	208
Chapter 11	230
Chapter 12	251
Chapter 13	270
Chapter 14	290
Chapter 15	308
Chapter 16	326
Chapter 17	346
Chapter 18	364
Chapter 19	383
Chapter 20	400
Chapter 21	416
Epilogue	422
Credits	431

Prologue

The Sun hung low on the horizon. The innumerable towers that made up the Canterlot skyline cast shadows that fell not on the city itself, but rather on the mountainside in which the city was embedded. As had been the tradition every evening for over a millennium now, Princess Celestia stood upon the tallest balcony of the royal palace enjoying the last rays of sunlight.

As a more recent addition, Luna stood at her side trying not to feel like she was tacked on to the beautiful picture with spit and glue. Where Celestia stood with her head high and wings spread out as if to catch every last bit of light like a sail in the wind, Luna was hunched over the railings, staring down at the city below. The quiet between them was tainted with the usual tension of these meetings, but Luna did not want to disappoint her sister by refusing to join her. Besides, it was practical. It would not do for the moon princess to be absent when her namesake was raised.

Thus passed the last moments of the day, and with a almost imperceptible flare of magic from the horn of the elder sister, the Sun slowly disappeared. Left behind was a vivid orange sky that gradually darkened, paving the way for the Moon's part in keeping the order of the sky unbroken. Folding her wings gracefully, Celestia turned and looked at her sister. Luna, for her part, was watching a baker close his shop in the streets far below. She idly wondered if he was happy.

There was a pregnant pause, and Luna could count down the seconds in her mind until Celestia would say that she worried about her. She would express concern that she hadn't yet opened her court. Suggest that she try to "get out more." Her timing was off by less than a heartbeat tonight.

"I worry about you." Celestia's words, so often spoken, seemed to hover between them for a moment while both of them contemplated exactly how spent and useless they were. They were almost part of the ritual, now, and fell flat to the ground as if they'd never been spoken.

"If you will not open the night court, will you sit with me in the day court tomorrow?" Princess Celestia tried instead, voice laden with concern that was every bit as genuine as it had been the last two hundred times she had asked similar questions.

"Perhaps," Luna lied, watching the baker round a corner and disappear from view, leaving the street empty for the moment. The fact that Celestia's sympathy was pure as daylight only made it more painful that she could not bring herself to say yes.

"If not for yourself, then do it for your loving subjects who wish only to see you, Luna." The sun goddess was pleading now, and Luna couldn't help but turn to look at her, though she knew the reluctance was plain on her face. Trying to fool her own sister had never been anything but a losing prospect. They had always seen straight through each other.

"My subjects?" Luna asked, noting Celestia's little sigh and continuing before her words could be taken amiss. "I try to love every pony as dearly as you do, Tia, and you know that, but this place..." Luna gestured with a hoof towards Canterlot at large. "It is not home. Not like the castle was. This city is beautiful, my chambers are opulent, and I've been met with nothing but understanding and compassion in magnitudes I do not deserve." Swallowing as bile rose in her throat, she forced the last words out before she lost the courage to say them. "Yet all the generosity and kindness in Equestria can not make this feel like *home*."

In a rare moment of deference, Celestia nodded, and when she managed to reply, the words were heavy with sorrow. "I understand."

The sisters watched the last remnants of color bleed out of the sky. As if by an unspoken signal, reacting to an inaudible horn or an invisible flare, Luna closed her eyes. For the second time this evening, alicorn magic briefly lit the balcony, and shortly thereafter, the Moon rose up to take its place. It was followed soon after by the stars that dotted the night sky, all falling into place where they belonged in constellations and formations. When everything seemed in order, Luna's attention was fixed on the exquisite marble tiles of the balcony.

The carefully choreographed melancholy debate had played itself out for now, Luna figured, the night sky being the final point on the program.

She took a moment to gather herself before looking her sister in the eyes, clearing her throat unnecessarily. Celestia's attention had never left her younger sibling.

"Do you have a moment?" Luna asked.

"For you, always," Celestia replied without hesitation.

"I, ah. Inside, perhaps?" Luna did not even wait for a reply and began walking down the steps that led to the interior of the palace.

Her sister glanced up at the sky and nodded in understanding. "Of course."

Well inside the palace proper, the royal sisters walked together down a hallway that seemed doomed to be always considered too large. It would be impossible to find a use for all of the space the delicately arched hallway offered. The ponies of Canterlot had tried to make it hospitable, a wealth of statues and tapestries each worth a fortune lining the walls. All they served to do, Luna felt, was make the hallway seem even larger by comparison, swallowing up the artists' efforts.

"I have finally gotten around to perusing all those 'friendship reports' written to you by your student, Twilight Sparkle," Luna began. "I had something of a dream, and remembered you suggested I read them."

Celestia's countenance eased up a little and she offered a genuine smile. Luna's was relieved; the sympathetic smiles her sister usually bombarded her with did neither of them any good, she was sure. For once, Celestia seemed truly happy with her.

"I am pleased to hear it, my dear sister," Celestia said, motioning for Luna to go on.

"I also read the relevant correspondence with Mayor Mare of Ponyville and all official documents concerned with the six elements' bearers," Luna continued. Celestia nodded as if she had expected as much.

"Have I mentioned that Twilight Sparkle reminds me of you in some ways?" Celestia asked with a little chuckle. "Never content with finding just the answer to the question. She, too, has to understand absolutely everything."

Luna nodded, only half-listening. Her heartbeat quickened a little as words jostled for position in her throat. "I did not stop there. I felt I could not leave any stone unturned when I started researching the role of the elements in the past months. I was reluctant to look into it at first, you see. I mean, it is not so much a sore subject as, well. The elements have changed. It's not the same as when you wielded them, or the time before..." The words tasted very bitter. This wasn't how had she had imagined the conversation going. Her eyes stung. Celestia apparently noticed Luna's discomfort, and slowed until their walk came to a full stop.

"Luna," the sun goddess said, simply, making the younger sister look back up at her. When had Luna's eyes slipped to the ground again?

"I am weak, Tia. There is no reason why this should be hard to talk about. Ridiculous," Luna spat.

"Not more ridiculous than the fact that we can not seem to look each other in the eyes without feeling pain," Celestia said. "Go on, please."

Luna took a deep breath trying to steady herself and nodded even as her brain went off on a tangent. She was seized by a single thought, engulfed by what had been an aside of what she meant to talk about, but she couldn't let go of it. "I am not sure how to say this."

"Yet you are going to say it," Celestia stated not as a command, but as prophecy delivered with a smile.

"I just thought about the elements and how much closer our association with them used to be before. Many things have changed in my absence, as is natural." Luna felt a seed of trepidation take root in her heart as she spoke. She had meant to comment on the reports, not discuss history, but she was rapidly losing control of her mouth.

"A lot of things have changed, yes," came the reply in a carefully measured tone. Her sister seemed a little confused, even more so as Luna went on.

"You leave the elements to their own devices most of the time, and they grow so much with each passing day, but they are, for all purposes and intents, unguided. Their bonds are strong, and they seem capable, but I do not know what to make of your approach."

Celestia was quiet for a long while. There was no menace to the silence, but Luna's mind conjured up for her visions of a million ways in which this conversation could go horribly wrong. Regardless, she could no more stop speaking than she could stop breathing. Something welled up in her, and it had to be said.

"You know what effect the elements of harmony have on ponies. They used to be our greatest tool, our strongest weapon." Luna's had to pause and gather her courage at this, her mind visiting a moment a thousand years ago and snapping back, all in the space of a second. Her voice was thick sadness and loss. "And our closest friends."

Every second that Celestia didn't reply was pain, now. Luna was unsure of what to make of her sister's reaction, or rather, lack thereof. The sun goddess was rigid perfection, frighteningly similar to a statue of her likeness a scant few paces away, except for the multi-hued mane and tail billowing on an unseen wind.

"The world is bigger, yet smaller, now, Luna. Ruling is not an easy task, and my time is limited," Celestia said at length. Luna could swear she heard the unspoken addition of *"At least when you are alone, and your sister spends the day wailing and gnashing her teeth, being useless."*

"This is different," Luna said with a small spark of anger that even she felt was undeserved and out of place. "There are no excuses with the powers you command."

Celestia glared at her with one eye. "I still cannot be everywhere at once. Neglect? Is that my crime? Have I done wrong by them? Have you forgotten why we do as we do?"

The night princess snorted. "You have done no wrong. According to the books that have been written in recent times, the elements are tied to you, and yours to do with as you please. Pawns. I read the 'Elements of Harmony', 'Predictions and Prophecies' - all the books written after my banishment. None of them mention the old order. None of them mention that they were mine, too, once." Speaking of what had happened so long ago only emboldened Luna, pain fuelling her. Her voice had risen, becoming almost an accusatory yell. Her tongue was its own creature now, a vile thing over which she held no power.

Celestia's face hardened and her voice became crisp. "They are yours too, the elements, but most of all they belong to themselves. It is perhaps too easy to forget, but don't you *dare* lecture me, Luna."

The unnatural heat of Celestia's anger washed over Luna, and a lesser pony would've automatically prostrated him or herself before the sun goddess. She glowed with a painful light and looked like she could ignite any moment. Princess Luna, however, just felt a cold core in her gut grow and envelop her, darkness tainting the edges of her vision as her own power flared. She heard herself reply. "It seems we are both forgetful. Me, I forget that history is written by the *victors*."

A soft noise shattered the princesses' standoff, and they turned as one to face a pale blue earth pony who had no doubt just been walking past. The pony seemed frozen in fear, his pupils mere pinpricks, and the clipboard he'd dropped ignored. Luna quickly glanced around and noticed that the nearest duo of unicorn guards, usually stone-faced creatures with all the emotional range of a slab of granite, also stared at them. They were all transfixed, eyes wide and fearful.

Luna looked down at her own hooves and felt wretched. She wanted to throw up, and Celestia seemed similarly shaken. The two alicorns folded their wings carefully and took a few deep breaths before Celestia spoke up, once more smiling gently and warmly. It was all too easy to pretend nothing had happened, but Luna refused to let herself forget.

"Scribble, take the rest of the night off. Earth Razer, Bonfire, you are dismissed." How her sister knew the names of the seemingly-identical guardponies without even being able to see their cutie marks, Luna did not know.

The earth pony attendant Celestia had named Scribble slowly managed to figure out how his legs worked and began vacating the area. He paused every few steps to turn and bow low before the princesses in mechanical repetition. His eyes were streaked with tears.

"Your Majesties, we are fit for duty." One of the guardponies tried as they both bowed low.

"Dismissed," Celestia repeated. "Thank you for your hard work."

The unicorn ponies gave another bow and marched smartly down the hall, leaving the two sisters truly alone. Luna nudged the closest door open with a telekinetic nudge and slipped inside, followed by Celestia. It seemed to be a meeting room, empty save for a mess of tables. Luna gave a single flap of her wings and alighted on a sturdy table before turning to face her sister. She lay down, resting her head on crossed hooves, and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Tia," she said, feeling cold and numb.

"I'm sorry, too, Luna," Celestia said, walking over to nuzzle her sister gently before sitting down on her haunches by the table. It took a long while before Luna realized what was wrong with her sister's face. She had to decrypt the expression, bit by bit, to understand what it was she saw.

Fear. Celestia was afraid. She had not seen that in a thousand years and more, and it made *her* afraid in turn. Luna stared in abject horror. "Tia..."

"We are feared. All I wish is for the ponies who seek to live under our rule to be happy. I can understand why some may hate me, and I try learn from my own mistakes; I am not perfect, but I never wanted to for us to be feared. Sometimes I think even Twilight Sparkle fears me. Why..." Her voice petered out and her eyes closed. Luna felt her stomach lurch at seeing her indomitable sister like this.

"It is my fault," Luna muttered. Immediately, Celestia's eyes sprang open again, moist with tears. A trace of savage anger crept back into the elder sister's voice, but with a different purpose.

"Do not let me hear you say that *ever* again! This is not your fault. I have forgiven you and you have forgiven me. It *is* over! It is the past, curse it!" Celestia's voice managed to carry an unnatural echo even in the small room.

Luna winced, but her mind was her own again now, and she was thinking as she spoke. "We have, and I hope it is, but I am still causing this. We are making each other behave like this. Tearing each other apart. Ever since I came back, we've done little but quarrel. Let me go to Ponyville."

Celestia looked away and gave a shuddering sigh. "A thousand years apart, and you wish to leave me alone again because you think you are the problem? Ponyville?"

Shaking her head a little, Luna explained. "I just cannot seem to get comfortable here." She shifted atop the table. "Things are not getting better, either. Rather the opposite. Remember I said I had read the friendship reports?"

Spurred on by a nod from Celestia, Luna went on. "Twilight Sparkle and her friends are growing to be fine ponies, but I found a few items in the reports I wonder about. I did some, ah, extra research, and I think I have a plan..."

It was deep night when Luna gave the order for the librarians and archivers to put all the papers, reports and charts back in place. The rather inconspicuous meeting room had not seen this much activity in years, and Luna was sipping on her sixth cup of black tea when Celestia leaned against her affectionately. "I am proud of you, Luna. Tell Twilight Sparkle and her friends I said hello, and do come back in one piece."

Luna nodded and leaned back into her sister, feeling hopeful for the first time in a long while. "The elements will benefit a lot from this, I think. It will be a good experience for all of them."

"For all of you," Celestia agreed with an enigmatic smile.

Chapter 1

Twilight Sparkle had read and re-read the letter three times now. Only when she realized this did she become aware that Rarity was trying to get her attention. How long had she been gone?

"-that I don't sympathize with your priorities, but it is a little rude to ignore your guests, especially when we had a date, so to say," Rarity finished, fidgeting with her mane. Spike stood at her side, the purple baby dragon looking concerned.

"Um, hey, Equestria to Twilight. What's in the letter?" Spike tried. Twilight finally managed to tear her attention off the letter completely.

"It's from the Princess." Twilight said very carefully and slowly, as if afraid her voice would betray her and crack.

"I inferred as much from the fact that it came via dragonfire, dear. What does Princess Celestia say that's left you so dishevelled? Is everything alright? We can postpone this for another day." While she couldn't fault Rarity for her assumption, Twilight shook her head at her friend's words.

"Wrong princess." The purple unicorn said numbly.

Rarity blinked, stared, and blinked again for good measure. "Whatever do you mean?"

"The other princess. Princess Luna sent me a letter. She's coming to Ponyville tomorrow."

"Zuh?" Rarity gracefully blurted, eyes still wide and head askew.

"Princess Luna! Formerly Nightmare Moon, freed by the Elements of Harmony? That being you and your friends?" Spike helpfully provided, indicating the two unicorns with a pair of claws. Rarity composed herself and frowned at the diminutive dragon.

"I know, Spike. It is just terribly, well, out of the blue. And why would she send this message to you, Twilight? I mean, no offense, but isn't this the sort of thing that Mayor Mare deals with? Why is she coming to Ponyville, exactly?" Rarity's eye for detail was as sharp as ever, and Twilight had asked herself the very same questions as she'd read the letter.

Twilight levitated the letter over to hover it in front of Rarity. It was stamped with the royal seal and written in heavily curved letters that were both quite hard to read and unfathomably beautiful all at the same time. "Oh my, this must have been penned by the princess personally," the fashionista said with an appreciative nod to herself.

"She's not so much coming to Ponyville as she's coming to see us. She wishes to meet you, I, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy," Twilight explained, trotting over to a bookshelf more out of habit than anything else. It was pretty obvious that no book would help her explain this, but brainlessly scanning the titles brought her a measure of calm. She absentmindedly put a book by Hemingneigh back in its proper place. Spike's alphabetizing was lazy sometimes.

"I know we'd planned this sleepover for a long time, Rarity, but I should start preparing. There's so much I have to do. I'm really sorry." Twilight frowned at the whole situation. She'd spent a lot more time with Rarity ever since the gala, the normally-independent fashionista having become nervous and wary of being alone. Twilight worried, and had hoped to ask her about it tonight.

"No, that's quite alright. I think this is wonderful." Rarity said brightly, making Twilight start. She'd evidently finished the letter, and was smiling ear to ear.

"You do? I- I mean, not that it isn't, but..."

"Twilight, darling, Princess Luna hasn't made a public appearance since that whole Nightmare Moon debacle. If she wishes to mingle for whatever reason, we owe it to her to be good hosts, yes?" Rarity was all smiles, and Twilight felt a little ashamed that her first reaction had been to gallop straight for panicville. A couple of deep breaths later, the bookish unicorn nodded in agreement, trying to get back in the saddle of her brain.

"You're right, Rarity. I'm just a little nervous," Twilight admitted, still wishing that the letter had actually told them the reason for the visit. Somehow, she doubted that the princess of the night sky had just decided to end her self-imposed house arrest with a visit to see their little group of friends for tea and cupcakes.

"Twilight dearest, she explicitly states that this is an informal visit with no duties attached, and that we shouldn't make any effort on her behalf. A simple request, she says." Rarity emphasized her point by telekinetically tapping the very letter that Twilight levitated. The latter of the two sighed and carefully placed the letter in question on a nearby desk. She would have to decide whether to catalogue it under L for 'Luna, Princess' or put it the album with the letters from Princess Celestia.

"She's a princess, Rarity. I'm not sure what is considered more rude, ignoring her request for informality, or heeding it! Did you catch the part where she asked that I prepare a room for her here at the library? I'm expected to play host to a princess in a library!" Twilight was whining and she knew it; she just gave up altogether and lay down on the floor, legs every which way.

Undaunted, Rarity moved up to Twilight's side and insistently began headbutting her repeatedly, growling in annoyance. "Up! It's all going to be fine. Now. Get. Up!"

Twilight flopped over to her side and groaned dramatically. Rarity rubbed her own face with a hoof and let her be, sitting down on the floor only after sweeping the area with her tail.

"Twilight, you are simply being ridiculous. I will head by Sugarcube Corner to let Pinkie Pie know before I abed. You tell Rainbow Dash to let Applejack and Fluttershy know, and we'll all come over early tomorrow to help you clean the place up a little." She narrowed her eyes at Twilight. "You are Princess Celestia's personal protégé! Out of all of us, you are the one who should have the least to worry about. You've spent more time with Princess Celestia than anypony else in Equestria save for her sister!"

"Exactly!" Twilight said, flailing. "What if Princess Luna doesn't like me? What if I say the wrong thing at the wrong time? They're sisters!"

Rarity's shook her head in a simple show of disagreement, though her voice was kinder now. "She will, you won't, and, well, yes they are."

Twilight wanted to ask how Rarity could be so certain, but she was fully aware that she was, as she had been told, being ridiculous. She held her silence for a few seconds before her curiosity got the better of her. Raising her head off the ground she squinted at Rarity with grave suspicion. "Why aren't you, though?"

"Why aren't I what?" Rarity asked as Twilight slowly got back on her hooves.

"Why aren't you worrying and freaking out over this?" Twilight clarified. Rarity should be thrilled and mortified at the idea of meeting Princess Luna, the lesser known part of the royal duo, surely?

"Oh I am. I just thought I'd calm you down first. I mean, the possibility of a tête-à-tête with Princess Luna! " Rarity's voice was reverent and bordering on hysterics, suddenly. Twilight couldn't quite hold back the laughter. Though it looked at first as if Rarity might take offense, the mirth was infectious, and the two friends were still laughing even as Spike rolled his eyes and left them in favour of his bed.

Early next morning, the six friends were gathered at the ground floor of the library that was Twilight's home. Once the last of their number arrived, five pairs of eyes were trained expectantly on Twilight Sparkle, but she was ready now. She was armed. She had made a list.

Applejack looked a little annoyed as she seized the word. The orange mare had been the first to arrive and she had been more than a little frustrated when Twilight insisted they wait for everypony to arrive before she explained. "Right, Twi'. Rainbow Dash's been tellin' me that both Princesses are arriving to 'party hard' with us tonight, an' Ah figure that's a load of hooey. Mind tellin' me what's really up?"

Rainbow Dash snorted and broke into a fit of laughter.

"OooOOo." Pinkie Pie said, her eyes wide with wonder as the trigger word was spoken. Fluttershy for her part looked mortified, the pegasus prudently but passively protesting to partying with the princesses.

"No, Applejack, and Pinkie for that matter, there's no party," Twilight sighed, nipping the impending riot in the bud. "But yes, as some of you might know, specifically those who weren't relying on Rainbow Dash to give them the scoop-" Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes at this, but still grinned at her own prank. "we are getting a royal visit by Princess Luna. She made it sound very unofficial and relaxed, so no need to panic." She automatically glanced over at Fluttershy who looked like she disagreed with the very last notion.

Applejack whistled and scratched her withers with a hoof. "Weeeell, alrighty then. Guess this meeting ain't a waste'a time after all. What's the plan?"

"Um, Twilight, you know you're the only one who panicked when Celestia came over to Ponyville for tea that one time?" Rainbow Dash sniped, earning a scowl and a nudge from Rarity, both of which promptly went ignored.

Twilight conceded with a nod and a light blush, having to actually think a bit on that. Dash was right, of course. All the same, she didn't know whether Luna was as forgiving with regard to her friends' eccentricities. Said friends were staring at her now though, and even Fluttershy looked like she felt Rainbow Dash had a point, though she was of course far too kind to ever give voice to that.

"Uh, anyways, she'll be here at noon, and I figured we could all be here to greet her, if you have the time. She sounded eager to meet us," Twilight said, verbally sidestepping. "Spike and I will be cleaning up the library. I don't expect you to help, but-"

"Course we'll help," Applejack said. "Since somepony left me a bit confused, Ah got Big Mac to cover most'o the morning chores at the farm today anyway." She glared over at Rainbow Dash not for the first time. The pegasus had the grace to look a little sorry this time.

"I'm on cloud detail today, so as long as I peek out the window every hour, I'm cool. No stress. Dash out, kick a few clouds, back in to wash the books or whatever it is we're doing," Rainbow Dash said, not wanting to be left in the metaphorical dust where actual dusting was concerned.

"Housecleaning party!" Pinkie Pie cheered. "We could even mess it up a little with a proper party-party before we clean it, because this isn't really that messy! You should've seen Sugarcube Corner after I tried my new muffin recipe yesterday!" The pink earth pony sobered up momentarily, her voice suddenly flat. "If you can barely fit a muffin in the oven when you put it in, just say no. The cakes weren't very happy. But on the bright side, I got the day off!"

There was a brief pause in the conversation, as was often the case after Pinkie Pie spoke.

"Ahem. Anyway, I really need to mind the Boutique. I'm expecting somepony from Hoity Toity to come by and pick up the last dresses for the season," Rarity admitted with a sigh. "I really should be there, especially if I am to close at noon to attend when the princess arrives. Will you manage without me?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine, Rarity. Thank you, everypony. Between all of us, this should be quick. I think the biggest problem is point number two – neatening up the outside area. I really haven't minded the flowers outside recently," Twilight said, brandishing her list and already deep in thought as Rarity said her goodbyes and left the five of them.

"You okay there, sugarcube?" Twilight heard Applejack say, looking up to find the orange mare standing near Fluttershy, who had been conspicuously quiet for a long time now.

"I think so. Oh. Sorry, Twilight. I can help, but, um, do you think I have to be here when Princess Luna comes by?" Her voice was barely audible, diminishing with each pony that turned to listen.

"Well, she didn't really say that she expected a full welcoming party or anything, only that she'd like to meet us." Twilight admitted with a cocked brow. "Why, are you busy?"

"Oh yes. Um, that. Busy, with, um, the animals. That I love. Very busy," Fluttershy managed. It was pitiful to watch her try to lie, and Twilight sighed inwardly. Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and groaned rather audibly instead, and Pinkie Pie was even less subtle. The pink earth pony bounced right over to Fluttershy and giggled.

"She's not black snooty any more, you silly filly! She's a princess now, I'm sure she's not all that scary!"

"Fluttershy, you're not afraid of Celestia, are ya?" Applejack asked, her voice gentle. Fluttershy hung her head and looked away.

"Princess Celestia is... nice," Fluttershy admitted. It was amazing what stealing somepony's treasured pet could do for your relationship in the end, Twilight thought.

"Well, it'd be a bit rude to assume that Princess Luna isn't nice too, no?" Applejack's words were of course sensible, but Twilight feared for a moment that all she'd accomplish was making Fluttershy terrified of Luna and make her feel bad about it. At length, though, the yellow pegasus nodded, and Twilight seized upon the chance to change the subject.

"Well! Spike is already cleaning upstairs, so we need to dust and clean the kitchen and the library proper, neaten up the facade, and sort out some logistical issues. I've written everypony a copy of the things that need doing," Twilight happily explained, ignoring the exasperated groan that orders and lists seemed to elicit from Rainbow Dash.

A few hours later, the library was as spotless as it had ever been, this despite Pinkie Pie's attempt to liven up their lunch break with games and dancing. When and how the candy-colored pony had managed to sneak in balloons and party poppers, none of the others even wanted to know. Twilight had given up the pursuit of those secrets long ago. After the library was declared spotless, they had all split up to freshen up before they reconvened at noon when the princess was scheduled to arrive. 'Freshening up', of course, meant very different things for each of the ponies. Twilight Sparkle settled for brushing her mane and reading a book while waiting for the others.

She still didn't know what to expect. Her curious nature had led her to ask many questions about Luna in her numerous letters to Celestia. The answers she got were always vague and unsatisfactory, and once, the Princess had even admitted that she didn't like speaking on her sister's behalf now that she could speak for herself. That rare, candid remark had only served to make Twilight even more curious.

Now that she stood at the precipice of maybe getting answers straight from the pony's mouth, Twilight wasn't sure what she felt. That very same intense curiosity made it hard to feel anything else. The letter she'd gotten explained essentially nothing, and Celestia hadn't sent her any letters about it either. She'd briefly considered dictating a letter for Spike to send, asking Princess Celestia about the whole thing, but decided against it. If Celestia believed that her sister could and should speak for herself, then it would be rude to try to get answers from the other sister, no? She remembered how her mother would react when she went to her father for a "second opinion" on whether or not she was allowed to do something.

A series of knocks on the library door interrupted her, and she had already started opening it before she reflected on the fact that her friends usually let themselves in. Fluttershy was the only possible exception, but the pony in the doorway was most decidedly not the timid pegasus mare. A duo of royal guard pegasi nodded in concerto to Twilight and stepped aside even as they raised their voices together.

"Her Royal Highness, the Princess Luna, Ruler of Equestria, here to see Twilight Sparkle, Protégé of Her Royal Highness, Princess Celestia, Ruler of Equestria!"

Twilight stared, her ears still ringing from the point-blank sonic attack. The princess in question gingerly stepped off a gilded chariot that stood at rest outside the library. Four more pegasus guards were tethered to the chariot, and a crowd was rapidly gathering, gawking at the scene. With confident steps, Luna made her way over to stand in front of the doorway. For all their differences, the alicorn sisters' bearing was much the same, and Twilight felt very nervous very quickly.

"May I come in, Twilight Sparkle?" Luna asked in the same tone Twilight might ask Pinkie Pie for a cup of sugar. Twilight jolted to and

bowed low to the ground so quickly she actually bruised her snout on the threshold of her door.

As Twilight stepped aside, the dark princess turned to the pegasi. "You are all dismissed, thank you for the escort." The words were spoken kindly enough, but the two guards by the door stiffened a little.

"With all due respect, princess, Princess Celestia suggested that we stay by your side." The guard to Twilight's left sounded a little reluctant and would not meet the present princess' eyes.

"She suggested. I am ordering. Thank you for your escort." Luna's smile dimmed a little, but that was enough and a half.

The guards saluted so swiftly and stiffly that Twilight idly wondered if they would have hurt themselves if they didn't wear helmets. "Hail Luna! Hail to the night!" they barked before joining the chariot crew and taking off, leaving Twilight with the princess and two dozen curious ponies.

Luna finally stepped inside, and Twilight quickly shut the door after her. The princess of the night seemed to have grown since last Twilight had seen her, though she was still easily recognizable. The dark alicorn was definitively smaller than Celestia, but she was taller than Twilight or even Big Mac, and her wings were proportionally bigger than that of most pegasi. Even if she tried to pass off as a particularly tall and lanky mare, the horn, wings and crown marked her as royalty. Royalty with a preference for arriving ahead of time instead of adhering to Rarity's "fashionably late" principle.

As if listening in on her thoughts, Luna spoke whilst she took in the library. "I realize it is not quite noon yet, but I, ah, had to get out." Twilight knew she should say something or else be considered rude, but she was drawing a total blank. What had Luna just said? She was staring at the princess. She probably should not be staring at the princess. Hadn't she read something on a law about that? It was a horribly old book though, and most of the laws from before-

"I'm sorry. Am I making you uncomfortable, Twilight Sparkle?" The words were considerate, but Luna's face seemed entirely devoid of expression. The word 'sterile' popped into Twilight's mind unbidden.

"Oh, uh, no, I'm just, I didn't expect you yet, and my friends aren't here, and, er." She stopped, took a deep breath, and tried again. "I don't know, I just didn't expect such a fuss."

Luna raised an eyebrow in lieu of a query. Twilight indicated with a hoof the throngs of ponies that strained to get a look at the Princess through the library's windows behind her.

"Ah," Luna said with a shrug and turning back to Twilight as if it didn't make any difference at all. "Well, that was bound to happen."

"I just thought maybe, um, Celestia sometimes uses disguise spells." Twilight realized only after she spoke that giving suggestions to a princess could be considered offensive, but if she thought so, Princess Luna gave no indication.

"Twilight Sparkle, I have worn another face for a thousand years now. I'd like to be myself from this point on." She offered the barest of smiles, gone in a second, and Twilight's jaws went slack.

"I'm sorry, Princess, I didn't mean-"

"Relax, please." Luna slowly walked around the perimeter of the ground floor and browsed the bookcases and scroll-laden shelves. Twilight found that she did, indeed, relax a little. Was this some sort of spell? She hadn't noticed any magic.

"I know my sister thinks highly of you," Luna continued. "You and your friends. From what I have read, and given the very fact that I am here and myself, sane, hale and Nightmare-free, she is right to do so." Twilight's cheeks were burning now, and it didn't help that Luna ended her little inspection round not five hoof-breadths in front of her. "Where will I be sleeping?"

Twilight ground her brain back into gear and nodded to herself. "Right! Give me a second, and I'll show you. Let me just..." the unicorn trailed off as she trotted over to the front door of the library and opened it with a little bit of magic. She glared at the gathering of ponies of all kinds of

shapes, colors, types and sizes outside. They could only be called a throng at this point, or possibly a swarm if you were generous.

"If you're not here to borrow a book, scram!" Twilight yelled, earning a slew of sheepish glances and a handful of disappointed frowns. She looked over the dispersing crowd, noting that two earth ponies had not, in fact, not cleared out.

"Oh, Pinkie! Applejack! Come on in, the Princess is here." Twilight waved her friends over, and they bounced and trotted inside, respectively.

"We kinda figured." Applejack chuckled as she paused to wipe her hooves off on the doormat before following the pink earth pony inside. Twilight sadly reflected on the fact that this had been the first time she'd seen more than four ponies take an interest in her library at the same time, aside from her friends. She almost missed the throng already.

"OooooOo, you're pretty," Pinkie Pie declared as if she'd never seen Princess Luna before. "Much prettier than black snooty ever was." There was a little pause while Pinkie Pie bounced in circles around Luna, and Twilight held her breath. Mercifully, the princess seemed to take it all in stride. When Applejack knelt before the princess, however, Pinkie Pie was quick to follow suit, even as Luna shook her head.

"I will be with you for a while, hopefully, so let us just make away with the bowing and the scraping, please. It is a waste of time and not at all appropriate for you." Applejack nodded, and Pinkie Pie resumed her bouncing, albeit with less direction this time. Twilight felt it was a slightly odd choice of words, saying "be with you" rather than "staying with you", but nopony else seemed to have picked up on that.

It didn't take more than a few minutes before the rest of the gang arrived. Rainbow Dash looked a little worn out and had a few long pink hairs in her mouth, while Fluttershy's tail was frazzled, but when the door opened to reveal the two pegasi and Rarity, nopony offered a comment on these little details. The latter of the three was, unsurprisingly, dressed up in one of her finest of formally informal dresses, a subdued yet stylish taffeta affair. Being able to wear taffeta in a subdued and informal manner was quite a feat, Twilight thought.

"Please, none of the formalities," Luna told the new entrants from her spot by the table the gang had begun gathering around. Rarity gaped.

"It would be improper not to pay our respects, your majesty, surely?" Rarity said as the other two newly arrived ponies found seats near a table without a word. If Fluttershy was trying to avoid looking at Luna, Rainbow Dash made up for it by staring twice as much.

Luna looked mildly amused at Rarity's etiquette-fueled quandary. "If you feel you must, you may of course, but it is entirely for your own benefit, then." Taking this as permission to do what she had no doubt practiced for hours on end, Rarity made an elaborate sweeping curtsy with her head low that Twilight knew she couldn't replicate even if she tried. Her snout still hurt from the vagaries of formalities.

"I am pleased to meet you once again, Princess Luna. Your presence honors everypony," Rarity said before she got back up.

Twilight took a seat next to the perpetual eye-rolling machine that was Rainbow Dash, who was operating at full capacity at the moment.

"I am pleased to meet you, Miss Rarity," Luna replied, nodding and letting her take a seat by the table as the last pony to do so. With all the ponies thus seated, Luna continued. "As am I pleased to meet you all, this time under slightly better circumstances. I hope that my arrival has not caused you and your respective businesses undue stress, for I may take up more of your time yet. Or, at the very least, I hope so." The princess livened up a little bit when everypony was still, Twilight felt. She looked hopeful.

"We are of course always at the leisure of the royal sisters," Rarity affirmed intensely. Applejack, for her part, gave a rather obvious frown at Luna's words, no doubt letting her thoughts drift to her farm, if the way she touched her hat for reassurance was any tell. Applejack never played poker with her hat on any more, not after she realized how easy she was to read. Not that Applejack had the best poker face to begin with, anyway.

"You should totally stay so I can throw you a surprise party! Oh, but you have to forget about it first. Do you need help with that? I can mix a mean salty-sugary drink that'll make you forget – sometimes it works

almost too well!" Pinkie Pie bubbled before a look of dawning horror and exasperation stole her face. "Wait, I forgot how to make it. Again!"

"We're of course glad to have you," Twilight said, looking around and wondering how many of them she spoke for. Rainbow Dash looked bored, and Fluttershy was staring intently at her own forehooves. "but I don't think I'm the only one here who's curious – I mean, if you're just here to visit, that's of course fine, though..."

Her voice trailed off as she failed to find a graceful way to continue, but the princess nodded in understanding, obviously neither unsympathetic nor oblivious.

"No, you are right, and you're right to ask, too. I may as well speak plain. I am hoping you will all join me on a journey," the princess explained, her gaze growing distant. "I've spoken with 'Tia- Princess Celestia, and we agreed that there are some unresolved issues that we wish to, well, resolve. Most of all I personally hope that you will want to help me, but I wish to stress that this is not an order, nor even a request by us sisters. This is an offer."

Twilight looked around at her friends, as they all did. Personally, she was conflicted. She doubted she could make herself turn down a request – an offer, she corrected herself – from one of the princesses. At the same time, she realized that her connection to Princess Celestia probably played a huge part in this. Her friends looked less varying shades of unconvinced.

"How long're we talkin' 'bout, Princess Luna?" Applejack asked. "If Ah'm gone from the farm for more'n a week, there'll be all sorts'a trouble."

"Before we get to that," Twilight interjected, "could we actually get to know what this is all about? I mean, it's still a little vague."

"Yeah." Dash agreed. "Flying blind blows."

"Is there evil to be vanquished?" Pinkie Pie asked, sounding almost hopeful.

"Of course, details," Luna answered, dropping her voice down a little, from speaker to storyteller. She rose and walked over to stand next to Fluttershy and Rarity, the former of which cringed a little.

"Do you remember Trixie?" She asked, earning a murmur of assent from the ponies.

"The Great and Powerful," Applejack snorted, only just catching herself before she spat on the floor in disgust. Twilight fixed her with a glare. They had just washed it.

"More like the Great and Boastful Disaster," Rainbow Dash said, crossing her forelegs.

Luna looked as impassive as ever. "Did you ever wonder what happened to her following what happened here in Ponyville?" The princess' question was innocent enough.

Applejack grinned. "After Twi' beat her, y'mean!"

Twilight blushed a little and shook her head at the memory. "I'd say nopony won, really."

"Well, somepony lost at least," Rainbow Dash cackled gleefully. Rarity was suddenly focused very intently on her mane, frowning.

"It's not as simple as that, Rainbow Dash," the white unicorn muttered. Pinkie Pie was uncharacteristically quiet. Fluttershy was characteristically quiet.

"Keen eye there, Miss Rarity," Luna agreed. "Fact of the matter is, Trixie, great or no, does not have a registered address. She has no listed next of kin, and she hasn't checked in with her associates in the entertainers' guild since she headed for Ponyville."

"Wait, so the wagon was her home?" Twilight asked, blinking. She remembered that the wagon got crushed to splinters under the paw of the Ursa Minor, along with most of Trixie's effects.

"Indeed," Luna said, and the ponies were quiet indeed around the table now. Pinkie Pie's bottom lip was quivering ominously, but Luna did not pause. "Rarity, did you ever ask yourself what happened to Sir Blueblood after the fracas at the gala?"

"I must confess I haven't offered him a lot of thought," Rarity said, a little too quickly. "I thought it more of a debacle, personally." She looked like she wanted to say something unsavory, but restrained herself. "Is... surely he is okay? What is it you're not telling me?"

"Is Trixie okay?" Twilight asked weakly, but Luna went on, heedless.

"And after Gilda was driven out of Ponyville, where do you think she went?"

"What happened to her?!" Rainbow Dash blurted, already halfway up on the table, but Luna's calm was impenetrable.

"I'm thinking the answer is varying degrees of no, then," Luna said as she began walking in a slow circle around the table. "What I want to do is try to find the answer to those questions, and perhaps teach you something about forgiveness and acceptance in the process. It is as simple as that. Celestia would have done something like this long ago, not necessarily exactly this, but some form of journey. As she has been rather busy, I will take on the mantle of teacher this time. We have not forgotten all you have done for us." She swallowed. "I have not forgotten."

Rainbow Dash, who had been quivering with pent up anger until now, chose this moment to fly over the table and hover right in the face of Luna, arresting her slow walk around the table. Pinkie Pie stood up, and the other ponies gasped. Twilight sat paralyzed, briefly wondering what life would be like on the moon. Then again, perhaps Luna would banish people to the sun instead? Was either of the two preferable?

"What gives you the right to come in here and say these things, huh? Trixie got what was coming to her and Blueblood is a jerk. We didn't do anything to Gilda, she screwed everything up just fine by herself!" Rainbow Dash spat out those last words not a hoofbreadth from Princess Luna's snout.

"Dashie, stop it!" Pinkie Pie said. Applejack already had the frothing pegasus by the tail, trying to pull her back, but to no avail. The pegasus' wings were flapping frantically, countering her pull.

"You misunderstand. I'm not suggesting you've done wrong. Tragedy can spring from a situation without any offenders, without anyone out to hurt anyone else. The purest of virtues and the noblest intent can still end in tears with nopony to blame." The princess' voice was laced with something else now. Was it sorrow?

"I do not blame you, Rainbow Dash. Please be calm and believe me. I am only saying that if you blame yourself, then there are two parties who need help here." As Luna spoke, Rainbow Dash swallowed hard, and she finally let herself be pulled back by Applejack. The orange earth pony looked at her as if she'd gone crazy, but she got no response from the suddenly morose mare. Pinkie Pie gently separated the two of them and put a hoof over Rainbow Dash's withers.

"We may try to keep your status as elements of harmony hidden, but we have not forgotten you," the princess repeated. "I wish to help. While you are destined to act together as a group, you're also allowed to make your own decisions, and this is no grand journey upon which the fate of Equestria hangs, I should think. It's an opportunity to see the world, and perhaps get some... closure. Learn some things about yourselves." Surveying the range of expressions that met her, Luna brightened a little for no reason Twilight could discern.

"You do not have to answer me now. I was thinking of leaving tomorrow, along with whomever wanted to come along. Think on it. I shall go meet with Mayor Mare so she does not feel slighted that I would visit her town without even acknowledging her."

With those words, Princess Luna left the Ponyville Library. The calm before the storm lasted for exactly as long as it took Twilight to jam her hooves in her ears. Aided with a little magic, a modified number sixteen to plug her ears, the scene played itself out in almost serene silence. Silence, at any rate. The serenity would have been nice, too. Twilight tried not to think about what Luna might be thinking about them right now. Her mind felt like cotton, and that was not the doing of any of her magic.

Rainbow Dash was probably yelling very loud, given the way her mouth was moving. If Twilight had to guess, she'd put her bits on it being a string of curses that would make Celestia blush. Applejack was trying to calm her down with very little success. Rarity was pensive, and Pinkie Pie was trying very hard to get everypony's attention, raised up on her hind legs.

Fluttershy, notably, just stared pleadingly back at Twilight, who had very little success in thinking or not-thinking about anything at all. Right, this isn't going anywhere, Twilight finally realized, giving Fluttershy a defeated nod. Watching their friends argue like this tore at her, and nopony else looked like they were going to bring about order. Hastily removing her hooves from her ears, her horn flared with magic.

There was resounding *CRACK* as the table split down the middle and along a few bonus axes for good measure, too. Twilight looked as surprised as the rest of the ponies as they shut up. Rather, as most of them shut up.

"-further indemnify the affected parties, oh! What happened to the table?" Pinkie Pie gasped. "It broke!"

"Uh. Sorry, I didn't mean to do that," Twilight said, frowning at the table even as the slain piece of furniture collapsed. Before Rainbow Dash could go back to whatever she was yelling about, Twilight raised her voice.

"We're not gonna get anywhere if this is a shouting match! Rainbow, is there a problem?"

Perhaps it was the fact that she was being asked. Perhaps it was the fact that she knew she had their undivided attention for sure. All the same, Rainbow Dash did indeed 'simmer down' half a notch, as Applejack would've said.

"You bet your flank there is a problem! What I'm saying is, who the hay does she think she is, strolling in here and dropping a bomb like that? Taking whomever wants to go with her, tomorrow? I mean, what?! She's splitting us up! Or trying to, anyway." Dash was livid, breathing through her nose as she tried to collect herself. She looked like she wanted to go on,

opening her mouth, but nothing came out. Eventually, she just sat down again, offering no further comment.

"She thinks she is, and she is indeed, a princess," Rarity said, though she sounded a little unsure herself. "My only question is why she'd concern herself with us in such a direct manner. Celestia never did anything like this. I can count on my hooves the amount of times I've socialized with her. Journeying with us? Chasing down Gilda and Trixie?"

Rarity shook her head a little at the thought of it. "For her to take time off for what she makes sound like a private tutoring trip is very unseemly. And the way she wouldn't answer my question about Prince Blueblood, most rude." If anything, Rarity looked distressed, not offended, at this.

"Ah can live with Luna offerin' to learn us somethin'. Straight up enough. What Ah don't understand is how she expects the farm to go 'round with a full set of hooves less to go around," Applejack said with a shrug. "If y'all are going, Ah want to do the same, but Ah'm not sure Ah can."

"Teach us. Not 'learn us' something," Twilight corrected before she could stop herself, earning a nonplussed look from the farm pony.

"S'what Ah said."

"Wait, going with her? Are you kidding me?" Rainbow Dash yelled, staring at Applejack. "No pony here's actually thinking of going with her, right? She's trying to split us up, what the hay is her angle, huh?" There was a moment's silence as Rainbow Dash looked around the table before settling on Twilight. The unicorn had no idea what her face showed, because she wasn't quite sure what she was thinking herself.

"Of course," Rainbow Dash groaned.

"What?" Twilight asked, looking around.

"You do everything Princess Celestia says, and now you're going to go along with everything Luna says, too? Come on! Celestia is cool, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything they say!"

Twilight huffed, feeling her face heat up with embarrassment and anger. She rose and stared back into Rainbow Dash's pink eyes, tired of being accused of this. Not that anypony else had accused her of this before but herself.

"I don't do everything Celestia tells me to because I'm some sort of puppet. But Celestia is my mentor, and I try to help her as best as I can, when I can." Twilight's voice had dropped, and Rainbow Dash took an inadvertent step back in surprise. "And when a house guest, Celestia's sister no less, comes in here and makes an offer, I try not to spit in her face instead of thanking her for it!"

"Twilight, I-" Rainbow Dash began, but Twilight cut her off.

"I am just happy that Luna was so graceful about the whole deal, because you could have ruined everything! You embarrassed me in front of Celestia's sister!" Twilight shouted in Rainbow's face. Dash cringed, and Twilight offered no protest as Fluttershy put a hoof on her withers, gently sitting the unicorn down. She hadn't meant to sound so angry, but she had sat there worrying about what Luna would think of her friends for so long. When Rainbow Dash had gotten up in the princess' face, she swore she'd had a heart attack. It was still unfair, though, and Twilight knew it.

"Okay, listen, I'm sorry-" Twilight began weakly, but Rainbow Dash swallowed and made her way over to the door with a muttered "Later." She slammed the door for effect, and before Twilight knew it, she had a very stone-faced looking Pinkie Pie next to her, staring at her.

Twilight felt a headache coming on. She made a mental check list. Horrible first impression on Luna? Check. Probable banishment and imprisonment after Celestia and Luna have their next talk? In progress. Offend best friends with inappropriate outburst? Check. She deflated and lay her head on a piece of the wrecked table. Pinkie Pie ran out the door after Rainbow Dash.

Fluttershy was idly running a hoof through her mane, Twilight realized. She didn't deserve to have any friends, anyway, but she was so glad she wasn't alone right now that she didn't dare protest. Rarity looked thoughtful and Applejack was frowning still, but Twilight realized Fluttershy

had hardly said anything all evening. Earlier, she'd attribute this to shyness around Luna, but the princess was gone, now.

"What about you, Fluttershy?" Twilight asked, though all she wanted to do now was sleep. Never mind the fact that it was barely past brunch time.

"I think you should apologize to Rainbow Dash. I'm sure it will be fine," Fluttershy said serenely as she kept working Twilight's mane.

"I know, I know, and I will." Twilight Sparkle sighed. "I meant about Luna and the whole thing."

"Oh," the pegasus said, blushing a little and looking down at the ground. "I'm going."

Twilight could only blink. Every set of eyes in the room trained on the demure pony who futilely tried to hide behind her own mane. Twilight had assumed that she'd be reluctant to go or perhaps say she would do whatever her friends would do, but this, she had not expected.

The unspoken question hung in the air until Fluttershy looked up again, remembering bit by bit that she was among her best of friends. "I wasn't there when Trixie visited town, and I, um, don't remember much about the gala." She admitted. "But when I heard about Trixie fleeing town like she did, I felt terrible. And I always wondered if Gilda would be okay. I have to help."

Twilight sighed and nodded. The pegasus mare was far too soft and kind for her own good, sometimes. She still remembered Fluttershy's tear-laden tale of her encounter with the bullying griffin. Fluttershy still didn't want to blame anypony but herself for her part in it, figuring she had really gotten in Gilda's way, or somehow offended her.

"I just can't stand the idea that there might be somepony out there who's hurt," Fluttershy admitted, swallowing. Rarity was already by her side, offering a hug which Fluttershy instantly accepted.

"AJ? You said you were going?" Twilight asked.

"Ah ain't letting you and Fluttershy go alone if Ah can help it, if that's what yer askin', Twi', even if Ah think it's a load of hooey." The earth pony shrugged.

"If you need to mind the farm, Applejack, dear, I'd be happy to accompany them," Rarity said, making it sound like a protest.

"Ah just need to make sure the farm'll be alright, if Ah can get the finances sorted, Ah'm free," Applejack countered, quirking a brow.

Rarity's eyes were lit with pure fervor, glaring hard at the apple farmer. "I am going."

Twilight coughed in an attempt to dispel whatever the heck was going on. "Um, I'm sure you are free to come along. No pony's trying to stop you, Rarity. What's going on?"

The fashionista blinked and laughed nervously. "Ah, um, I am just thrilled to have a chance to travel with royalty, of course! I am sure there is so much we can learn, isn't that so?"

"Uh huh," Applejack muttered. "Learn, is it? Ah gotta admit Ah'm not too happy about tryin' 'ter find Trixie again. That one's trouble, she is, sure as rain. They all are, Ah reckon," Applejack added as an afterthought, earning a sharp glare from Fluttershy that Twilight Sparkle was pretty sure she was the only one who noticed.

Twilight had decided, for her part, that she was going. She had made up her mind the very second Luna asked, but Rainbow Dash's words stuck with her just like a cloying headache. In fact, she was sure that the words were the headache at this point. No pony had asked her whether she was going or not, and that hurt a little. It wasn't that she had some foal-like need for reassurance, but she feared it might mean that Rainbow Dash was right.

With very little else to say, the four remaining ponies had split up then and there. Applejack had to head to the farm to try to sort things out, Fluttershy had to find some pony to take care of her cottage and all her little animal friends, and Rarity had to make her own arrangements. When Twilight failed to find either Pinkie Pie or Rainbow Dash before full dark set

in, she headed up to her own room in the library, only to find the door at the top of the stairs locked. She turned the key from the outside and came face to face with a very irate baby dragon with his arms crossed. Behind him, the bedroom was immaculately clean save for a crude and unflattering effigy of Twilight Sparkle created out of cleaning supplies.

"Oh," Twilight said. "Right. Because you took your break up here."

"Uh huh." Spike said.

"And then I locked the door here before we got started on the rest of the library, not knowing you were in here."

"Apparently." Spike agreed.

"Because I didn't want the girls going through my private stuff, because I kind of lost control of the whole cleaning effort after Pinkie started thinking of it as a game."

Spike stared.

"And not asking myself where my number one assistant was for this many hours was really crummy," Twilight said with a sigh, walking past Spike to throw herself on her perfectly-made bed. There had to be a way for a pony to go into hibernation, surely. A spell?

Perhaps noticing that Twilight seemed out of sorts, Spike suddenly looked a bit nervous. "Um, Twi, are you okay?"

"And you've spent the time you've been locked in here just cleaning the room and making it look beautiful for the princess. And now I'm ruining it by sitting on the bed and getting the sheets all wrinkly," Twilight continued with a single snuffle, fully aware of how stupid it was.

"That's, um, the least I could do?" Spike said, padding over to the life-sized Twilight voodoo doll and dismantling it bit by bit, starting with the dirty mop-mane. "What did Luna want?"

Realizing that she had forgotten to mention this all to Spike, Twilight groaned. Yet another obstacle she'd forgotten about. Twilight buried her head in the pillows. Spike blinked, nonplussed.

"Uh, nothing good? C'mon Twilight, talk to me."

"How'd you like to be a librarian for a few weeks?" Twilight asked, her voice muffled by the pillows.

Chapter 2

"It might be longer than that, but I cannot say for sure," a third voice broke in. Spike yelped, and Twilight rolled off the bed in less than a second with an "oof". Princess Luna stood in the doorway looking neither amused nor repentant. Twilight struggled to extract herself from the sheets she'd gotten herself entangled in and failed miserably in her panic, ending up almost fully cocooned.

"I'm sorry. Princess," Twilight groaned, but she wasn't really surprised anymore when the alicorn again failed to even bat an eyelash.

"My meeting with Mayor Mare dragged on a little, and shortly following that, I got caught up into a conversation with my sister," Luna explained. The last few words made Twilight freeze as surely as if she'd been Stared. Oblivious, the princess walked over to a bookshelf that sagged under the weight of glorious literature and made it *un-sag* with a brief glimmer of umbral magic.

"I had hoped to talk more with you and your friends before you went to yours. I do not know if I managed to make my intent clear, and I suspect I came across a little strong," Luna admitted, frowning and turning to the still-trapped Twilight. She gently unwrapped Twilight and telekinetically made the bed as she spoke. Spike looked as if he wanted to protest to the princess doing housework, but he said nothing.

"Tia felt that we should leave you to decide for yourselves, and I of course agree, I just wonder if I sufficiently explained what the purpose of this little journey is, as it pertains to you as elements." Twilight had no idea why Luna was telling her this. She didn't owe her an explanation at all, she felt. It was true that there had been a quarrel in her wake, but that wasn't Luna's fault.

Shakily getting to her feet, Twilight shook her head a little to right her mane. "That's okay, I know at least four of us are coming with you, if you'll have us." Twilight tried to smile, but she knew she was a mess, and her mind was already working against her. *She's talked to her sister, to*

Celestia, already. How had she even done it? Did she teleport to Canterlot and back? Twilight knew very little of Luna. Perhaps they could simply speak mind to mind? Could they do that across such vast distances? Twilight suddenly became acutely aware that she had been staring at the princess while she was talking to her, without actually hearing a single word because her mind had skipped from worry to arcane questions. *Kill me now.*

"I, I'm sorry, I sort of, um missed that, Princess Luna," Twilight admitted, hanging her head.

"You do look a little out of sorts. Might I suggest that we retire for the evening? There is nothing that cannot wait until later." Luna offered. Nodding dumbly, Twilight snagged on one thing before she acquiesced.

"Wait, we? You sleep? During the night?" It sounded rude coming out of her mouth, but Twilight was genuinely surprised. Luna nodded.

"That is why I requested a room be prepared, yes." Twilight blushed a little, realizing that she really hadn't given this all that much thought.

"I just figured you slept during the day, but I guess that would make this whole journey very awkward and, yes, that would be very silly. I mean, I know Celestia sleeps during the night, but that doesn't mean you should, um, I mean, that you *have* to be a polar opposite and everything, but-" Twilight was rambling, she knew it, but she couldn't stop.

"I used to," Luna said, halting Twilight and gesturing to the two beds in the room. "Now, which of these beds is mine? This one, I presume?" She indicated the guest bed. The one Twilight hadn't been in when she entered.

"Oh, um, actually, this one, mine. I've got a mattress in the cellar that I'll drag up to the main floor," Twilight explained, calming down a little. Spike perked up at this and sauntered off.

"That does not seem right at all," Luna frowned.

"Why, what?" Twilight was back in panic mode immediately looking around for anything that might put the princess off. Had she forgotten to hide all her personal effects? Was something not properly cleaned?

"There are two beds, Twilight Sparkle."

"My bed is softer, and it wouldn't be appropriate for us to sleep in the same chamber, surely?" Twilight blanched. It was Rarity who had mentioned this to her, that it would be very 'unseemly' to share a bedroom with a princess. *"Twilight, Darling, in all your years as her student, have you ever been to a sleepover with Princess Celestia?"* It just didn't add up.

Luna regarded her carefully. It felt like the moment stretched out, and Twilight had more than enough time to go through the conversation so far and try to decide when, how and if she'd jammed her hind-hooves in her mouth. She was still drawing a blank when Spike burst back into the room.

"Got the mattress up by the 'Fantasy and Ponytales' section, Twi."

Twilight smiled. "Thank you Spike, you've been a great help today." The dragon preened until Luna turned to him.

"Spike, thank you, but that won't be needed."

"I, um." Spike glanced up at Twilight, but she had no answers. In the end the dragon just shrugged and left, grumbling. Luna closed the door gently behind him and hopped onto the spare bed in a very unprincesslike fashion. She looked a lot less intimidating all of a sudden, but that didn't make Twilight any less of a statue. Twilight yelped when she felt herself lifted by telekinesis and promptly got put down on her own bed.

"This is getting silly," Luna said. She looked exasperated.

"I'm so-" Twilight didn't even get that third word out before Luna held up a hoof.

"I am a guest here, and I am thankful for your considerations, but I will not chase you out of your own bedroom, Twilight." Noting she didn't use Twilight's full name, the unicorn pony blinked. "I am not my sister, and I'm not here just on a whim or on impulse," Luna said.

Twilight had no idea what to make of those words. Obviously Luna wasn't Celestia. She of course knew that Luna was getting at something

else, but she couldn't think very straight, locked in her own room with one of the royal sisters. Well, the door wasn't actually locked, but it might as well have been.

"What worries you?" Luna's voice was soft now, and for a moment, it was very easy to imagine that the alicorn who sat on the bed opposite wasn't the co-ruler of Equestria and the creator of the night sky, but merely a concerned friend. Tired and dejected, having no will to resist, Twilight Sparkle told Luna everything. That she'd yelled at Rainbow Dash. That she worried that she only went on the trip because Rainbow Dash was right and that she didn't know how to say no to Luna. She told her how she worried that her friends would argue with each other and stop being friends altogether because of this. It was all too easy to just talk, suddenly, and Luna made all the right noises at the right time, though never interrupting.

"And now," Twilight concluded soberly, "I've been whining to you like a foal for over an hour, and I'm sorry, princess. Please don't tell Princess Celestia about this." Glancing out the window, she saw that that it was apparently deep night already, the moon hanging high in the sky. Luna followed her gaze and magically closed the curtains. Twilight thought she saw the princess frown from the corner of her eyes, but when she turned back to her, Luna was wearing that same calm smile she'd had since Twilight began pouring her heart out.

"I understand you worry about your friends, Twilight. If you did not, I would worry about you, instead. Trust me when I say I did not mean to cause strife amongst you, and I am quite sure it will be okay. You might be a very clever pony, but you need to realize that just because your friends do not necessarily appreciate a good book, they are not stupid."

Twilight blushed even though it didn't feel much like an admonishment. Luna smiled for as long as it took Twilight to realize she didn't mean to offend. "I cannot tell you what your motivations for joining me are, though. That is something you have to figure out for yourself. And besides, I am fairly sure everyone is going to come along, anyway."

Twilight scratched one hoof with the other, uncertain. "I don't know if Applejack can find time off, and even if Rainbow Dash and I do make up, I just don't know, she didn't sound like she liked the idea. And I don't know about Pinkie Pie. No pony ever does."

Princess Luna chuckled a little, honest amusement that was as far from Nightmare Moon's mad cackle as anything could possibly be. It was a sound of contentment and mirth that made Twilight a little happier just for having heard it, though she couldn't quite say why. Even so, she didn't know what was so funny, and she didn't like the idea that she was being made fun of, not even by a princess.

"Twilight Sparkle, what are my domains?" Luna asked. Twilight blinked and quickly started going through the library that was her head, the fruits of years of meticulous study.

"Domains, in the meaning of an areas of influence and power?" she asked. Luna nodded, appearing very pleased. It was not unlike the private little smiles that Celestia graced Twilight with when she had performed above expectations, and it drove Twilight on.

"The 'Studies of Power', which claims to reference now-destroyed books over one and a half thousand year old, acknowledges that the banishment upset the balance between the royal pony sisters. It goes on to explain that beyond their association with celestial objects, sun, moon and stars, Celestia was specifically closely associated with daylight, creation, birth and various weather phenomena. Luna was associated with darkness, renewal, prophecy and dreams." Twilight snorted and shook her head. "Personally, I'm leery of a book that claims to cite other material that mysteriously doesn't exist anymore. Princess Celestia recommended it, though."

Princess Luna was grinning. "I have read it. It references 'Sources of the Divine, Demystifying the Goddesses', yes?"

Twilight nodded, fully in scholar mode by now. "That would be one of the books it claimed to reference, I think, yes. You've read it? Really?"

"That volume was written by a scholar named Sand Burst after a good amount of lengthy discussions with a certain princess over the course of many years."

Twilight gaped. "With you?"

"Indeed. It was a very good book, but ponies are not generally very interested in the collection and archiving of knowledge, as you no doubt can attest, Twilight." Luna smiled wryly, and Twilight had to give a grumpy frown and a nod at that.

"No books have been written on the subject for hundreds of years." Twilight said, awestruck. The few books on the Elements of Harmony were old and rare enough in and by themselves, but everything written in recent times on the subject of the princess – princesses, now – was of the sort that made its way into the newspapers and trashy magazines.

"To repeat myself, I am not my sister," Luna said patiently. "But that is not very important right now. My point is that while I have not had any prophetic vision of tomorrow specifically, nor have I peeked into any of your dreams recently, I can still *tell* that it will all work out. So please do not fret."

Twilight nodded, trying to make herself trust Luna, though it was a little hard without any scientific explanation. It was like Pinkie Pie's twitches all over again. She smiled privately at the thought.

"Can you really do that? Look into anypony's dreams?" Twilight asked.

Luna nodded. "It used to be considered an honor, but these days, I feel most ponies would think it rude. And, while on the subject of dreams, you should get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day, I suspect."

Twilight nodded, though she wished she could ask Luna about the second issue – she had alluded to there being a second reason for seeking out Twilight and her friends. She thought she'd try to find a careful way to broach the subject before sleep claimed, but she was gone the second her head touched her pillow.

And awake again after what felt like no time at all. She doubted Celestia would raise her bothersome ball of sleep-deprivation earlier than usual just to spite her, so it had to be morning. She slowly got out of bed noting that the other bed was empty and neatly made. The curtains were pulled aside, and the sun was higher in the air than it usually was when Twilight got up. Well, higher than it was when she woke, but she didn't allow herself the extra happy snoozing hour today.

Rubbing her eyes with a hoof as she worked her mane into shape, Twilight wondered what today would bring. She always wondered what the day would bring when she did her short morning routine, but today it was more an honest question and less idle curiosity. Making her way downstairs, she saw the library was far from empty. Around the table, presumably repaired by magic, sat Spike, Princess Luna, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie.

"And there she is now," Luna said, gesturing to Twilight as she made her descent. Twilight tried to avoid Rainbow Dash's eyes, and instead found herself looking at Pinkie Pie, who was suddenly so sternly neutral and unreadable that Twilight would've preferred a second round of the staring contest with the cockatrice. Pinkie Pie was supposed to *smile*.

"Morning," Spike said.

"Hey," Dash said, quickly followed by a yelp. "Whoa-hey, Pinkie!" Pinkie Pie was shoving the pegasus towards Twilight with all her might until the unicorn had to back up a little 'lest they collide. Ponyville's primary party pony stared at them each in turn. Twilight sighed. It wasn't the ideal way to start the day, but it would be nice to get it over with.

"I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash. I didn't mean anything with what I said, I was just stressed out, and it was unfair of me to take it out on you," Twilight said and smiled hopefully at her friend, sincerely apologetic.

The pegasus whooped and did a hoofpump. "Ha! See? She was wrong, and I was right! I don't have to apologize! I win!" Rainbow Dash cheered, but she shrank back as Pinkie Pie leaned over her, pushing her down to the ground with only her nose and her glare. Dash shrank and eeped as she became a multi-hued carpet. "I'msorrytooTwilight."

Twilight took a deep breath and chanced a laugh. "That's okay. Water under the bridge."

Rainbow Dash nodded and got back up as Pinkie Pie pulled back, but Pinkie was not satisfied. Her voice was frosty. "*Hug*," she commanded. Twilight was getting a little scared now, but it was Rainbow Dash who took the initiative, snaring Twilight in a crushing hug with speed borne by fear.

"We cool?" Rainbow Dash asked desperately, though Twilight wasn't quite sure whether she was addressing her or Pinkie.

"We're, um, cool, Rainbow Dash. I really am sorry," Twilight agreed. Pinkie Pie's smile returned as if it'd never been gone in the first place, and she grabbed both of them in a group hug.

"Makeup mini-party-hug!" Pinkie yelled happily as she did her best to suffocate the other ponies. Twilight and Rainbow Dash shared a bewildered look and just went with it. It was probably the safest thing to do. Luna could barely contain her amusement over by the table. Spike went into the kitchen with a little gesture that explained exactly what he felt about girly stuff such as hugs. It was not a particularly nice gesture.

"Come on in, Fluttershy!" Pinkie suddenly and cheerily chirped as she let Twilight and Rainbow Dash tumble to the ground, bouncing over to the new arrival.

"I'm not, um, interrupting anything?" Fluttershy asked. She wore the saddlebags that Rarity had made for her for another trip, and they seemed packed to the brim.

"Don't be silly, Fluttershy. Come in!" Twilight said, waving her over, and the timid mare joined the other ponies with a bit less reluctance than yesterday. Privately, Twilight hoped that she warmed up to Luna quickly. If not, this could get very frustrating, very quickly. Not that it was easy to be angry with, or even frustrated with Fluttershy for more than a second at a time.

"What're you bringing, huh, huh? Tell auntie Pinkie Pie, I just have to know!" Pinkie Pie giggled as nudged Fluttershy in the flank repeatedly and stared at the saddlebags. Fluttershy just smiled.

"Oh, just some, um, supplies," Fluttershy explained as Rainbow Dash flew over and opened one of the saddlebags and peeked inside, taking the more direct approach.

"Bandages? Salves? Oh come *on!* Booring!" Rainbow Dash declared. Pinkie had been distracted by Fluttershy's tail, batting at it with her hooves.

"I think it shows foresight, but I can guarantee you will be safe with me," Princess Luna said, reminding everypony that she was still in the room. Fluttershy yelped and backed into Pinkie Pie, who blinked, fell back on her flank and stared at Fluttershy, muttering something about *"One nil, Flutterbum. One nil."*

"Um, I didn't mean any offense, Princess Luna. I- I can leave them here," Fluttershy stammered, but Luna shook her head.

"That's not what I meant, we cannot know for sure what we run across. I only mean that I am delighted, but not surprised, given what I have read about you. Ah, and unless we are in public, just 'Luna' will do, Fluttershy." The yellow mare nodded and stared at her own hooves, muttering.

"O-okay, thank you, Luna."

"Right!" Pinkie Pie said, bringing the noise level in the room back up. "What're you bringing, Twilight? Books about travelling? Books about books about travelling?" The bubbly earth pony was giggling, and Twilight huffed at the good-natured insult.

"I'll have you know there are many good volumes on travel and geography that might be useful," Twilight said, indignant. She glanced at Luna for support, but the night goddess wasn't sticking her snout anywhere near this debate, content to watch.

"Yeah, see, that's also totally boring," Rainbow Dash sighed, then grinned as she pointed to a pair of saddlebags parked by the door that were emblazoned with three balloons. "Pinkie Pie is bringing a party!"

"You're coming with us?" Twilight asked, delighted and incredulous, trying very hard not to ask how you pack a party in two small saddlebags. She would ask, she would get a silly answer or a random fact in return, and in the end she'd be none the wiser and possibly one headache richer.

"Of course!" Pinkie Pie beamed before dropping her voice to a nigh-inaudible whisper, intense. "It's dangerous to go alone." She grinned and

put a hoof on Rainbow Dash's withers. "And Rainbow Dash asked very nicely. So there's that, too!" The pegasus groaned.

"Pinkie!" Dash said, looking a little hurt. Pinkie blinked.

"But, but, you didn't say it was a secret! And we're all friends, and, aw. Don't be sad Dashie. Wait! I know how to make it up to you! Muffins!" Rainbow Dash blinked and complained even as she was being carted off to the kitchen.

"Wait, I just ate, it's not-"

"Silly pony, there's *a/ways* room for muffins. And besides, Luna hasn't tasted my double-blueberry triple-chocolate quadruple-pistachio muffins yet!" There was a loud clatter of pots and pans crashing down in the kitchen seconds later.

"Wait!" Twilight yelled after them. "You're coming too, Rainbow Dash?"

"Yeah, well, that a problem?" The pegasus' head poked out from the kitchen. Her mane was already covered in flour.

"No, no, that's great!" Twilight said with an earnest smile. "I just didn't expect..."

Rainbow Dash disappeared back into the kitchen soundlessly and Twilight looked over at Luna. She didn't know if she expected her to smile innocently and whistle or something, but the alicorn just gave a very unprincesslike shrug.

"Well, I guess that means we're all going, if everything works out for Applejack." Twilight said to nopony in particular as she started roaming around the room gathering all the books she thought she'd need.

"Oh, she's coming," Fluttershy said. "I talked to her, she said Big Mac didn't at all mind the idea of hiring on Caramel while she was gone, and they found the bits for it."

"I am glad to hear that," Twilight admitted.

"Yes. I have made arrangements on that front," Princess Luna said, frowning. "I really do not like the idea of using my status so directly, it is not quite in the spirit of this journey, but I provided a sum."

"If Applejack was forced to stay here while we travelled, she'd go mad with worry," Twilight said, thinking about it. Applejack was protective and dependable, and forcing her to split her loyalties would drive her crazy, even though she'd never admit it.

"Poor Applejack couldn't be the only one staying!" Fluttershy agreed, aghast, apparently having come to the same conclusion.

"She can of course stay if she wishes to, but I agree that it would be sad if bits were what made the decision for her. That's why I offered to cover the inconvenience out of my own pocket. Whether she thinks of it as payment for her services or a gift is up to her." Luna nodded.

"Hey, uh- whew, er, Luna, does that mean we get like a reward too?" Rainbow Dash asked, sticking her head out of the kitchen again. She looked worn out and looked even more of a mess. Her snout was covered in melted chocolate, and from what they could see, one of her wings were splotched with blueberry jam. If Rarity had seen what had happened to her mane, she might've fainted.

"I'll tell you what, Rainbow Dash," Luna said, looking shrewd. "If you feel you want a reward when we get back to Ponyville, ask me for it, and I'll give you whatever you desire. Within reason, of course."

Rainbow Dash grinned widely. "Cool!"

Failing to see the pink hoof closing on her from behind, the pegasus was yanked back into the kitchen with a yelp. There was a moment of relative silence, Luna still staring towards the kitchen. Twilight and Fluttershy both looked at the princess.

Twilight was just about to apologize for Rainbow Dash being Rainbow Dash, generally, when Fluttershy spoke up with a nervous smile. "Um, is something wrong, Luna?"

"Hm? Not at all. I am just pleased that I really have not seen it all yet," Luna said with a growing smile. "Are they always so, hm."

"Energetic? Um, yes." Fluttershy admitted.

"I was going to go with loud." Twilight said.

When Applejack and Rarity arrived a little later, they found two very messy ponies and three less messy ponies in the middle of devouring a batch of very complicated muffins. In addition, there was also one very distraught baby dragon wailing over the state of the kitchen that he considered his territory. Pinkie Pie had tried distracting him with muffins to no avail.

"These are really very very good." Princess Luna said enthusiastically as she took a good chunk out of one of the multi-colored cupcakes. Rainbow Dash blushed a little, and Pinkie Pie beamed.

"Thank you Princess Not-At-All-Snooty! You're very good, too! I mean, at the stuff you do, you know, um." Pinkie Pie paused, scrunching up her face for a second in concentration. "I think the moon is very pretty," She finished.

Princess Luna lowered her eyes to the table at that and gave a weak chuckle. "Thank you."

"Princess Luna," Rarity said by way of announcing their arrival to the muffin-frenzied table, bowing. Forsaking form for functionality for once, the fashionista favored fewer fru-fru, frilly dress elements, instead simply adorning her head with a simple hat that matched her saddlebags very well.

"Naw, it's just Luna, now!" Rainbow Dash said, happily spraying crumbs all over the table. Rarity turned her eyes on the pegasus who, for all purposes and intent, was fifteen minutes in the oven short of being a muffin herself. The unicorn looked like she couldn't decide whether to cry "*makeover!*" or just plain old regular cry.

"S'that really alright?" Applejack asked with a cocked brow as she shed her own saddlebags on the floor and took both a seat and a muffin.

"As long as it is just us, I would rather we dispense with the title, if it is all the same to you," Luna said, giving Rarity a glance as she said so. "If it makes you uncomfortable, do as you please. I draw the line at 'Lulu', though." This drew assorted chuckles and giggles.

"Well then, Luna, um." Applejack swallowed the better part of the muffin she'd collected. "Ah'm to say thank you from me, Big Mac, Applebloom, Granny Smith and Caramel all. Ah don't reckon' Ah'd enjoy staying behind, though Ah might not care too much fer the goal of this here journey."

Twilight winced at Applejack's trademark candidness, and sighed inwardly at herself for doing so, considering Luna had yet to take offense to any of her friends' antics or remarks. Perhaps she gave the princess far too little credit.

"I am glad to be of help, though I hope you might come to change your mind. We are shaped by all our experiences," Luna replied. Applejack nodded and then shrugged as if the words meant little to her.

"Ah wouldn't hold my breath, but Ah'm still plum grateful," Applejack said with a tip of her hat. "A while ago Ah might not've let anypony help, even, but if this is what it takes for me to come with, then that's how it has to be. Which reminds me..." Applejack said, getting up and trotting over to where she'd put her saddlebags, rummaging around in them.

"Princess Luna, you mentioned earlier something about Prince Blueblood?" Rarity asked while Applejack was busy.

"I did." The princess said, focusing on her muffin suddenly and apparently ignoring Rarity, something which confused Twilight.

Luna said nothing more on the subject. Rarity tried to cover up her frustration with relative success, but the silence stretched on until Applejack came back to the table, tossing a large and tightly closed pouch onto the table in front of Rainbow Dash. There was a clatter as it hit, and the farmpony walked up to the pegasus. Rainbow Dash said nothing as Applejack nosed her withers. "You're solid stuff, sugarcube, but Luna had it covered," Applejack said, before taking back her seat.

The clattering noise had unmistakably been that of bits. Twilight blinked. "Um, what's going on?"

Applejack frowned and looked over at Rainbow Dash. "Ah ain't gonna lie, so you're gonna have to do that for me."

Rainbow Dash stuttered and fumbled for words. "Oh, yes, that's, uh, my huge bag of bits. Which I dropped as I flew by your farm, and, um, thank you for returning it to me! You're the best, AJ!"

All eyes turned to Rainbow Dash, and Twilight could swear the pegasus' ears were so red they could be used as very creepy reading lights. There was an awkward silence in the wake of Rainbow's refuse to elaborate further during which Twilight joined the club of those who were trying to find answers deep inside their muffins, instead.

"Well then, Princess Luna, you spoke of an early departure?" Rarity finally asked, apparently trying to distract herself from Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash who sat nearby. She was constantly twitching and jerking away whenever one of the two offending messy ponies moved.

Twilight elected not to mention to the white unicorn that she already had some blueberry jam in her mane.

"Indeed, Rarity," Luna confirmed. "In fact, I was thinking of leaving once we have finished eating, but my plans were made fairly arbitrarily. If you need more time, I am sure we can arrange for something." She glanced around the table, having spoken not a single word on the topic of her ignoring Rarity earlier.

"Mr. And Mrs cake were very glad to have me out of their manes!" Pinkie Pie chirped as she licked her hooves clean in great big licks. Twilight blanched. She was eating plain flour as she was talking. "And they'll take care of Gummy, no problem-o, though he'll miss mommy."

"Eh, I'm always ready to fLAUGH, Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash yelled and fell over as Pinkie Pie had begun actually licking her clean. Rarity nearly fell over on Twilight trying to get away, and Twilight stood up, stopping the domino effect before it reached Luna.

"You had chocolate on your muzzle. And I like chocolate!" Pinkie Pie pouted. The pegasus was just staring at her incredulously.

"Anyway!" Rarity huffed before sitting down again. "Carousel Boutique will be closed for the season, and Sweetie Belle is with our parents. I'm scheduling it as research trip, gathering inspiration in royal company!" Rarity's eyes actually threatened to sparkle.

"Ah don't have that sort'a wiggle room, but with the bits to hire on some extra help for the chores, Sweet Apple Acres won't mind me being gone," Applejack said by way of a summary.

"I asked Lyra and Bon-Bon to check the cottage once a day. They were very nice, and Angel knows what needs to be done," Fluttershy said with a smile and a nod.

All eyes turned to Twilight Sparkle, and she herself looked over to the kitchen entrance just as Spike exited. He hummed happily to himself, evidently happy with having restored order to the kitchen.

"Spike?" Twilight called, making the dragon stop in his tracks.

"Uh. It was like that when I got here?" Spike said as he slowly turned to suddenly face over a half-dozen pairs of pony eyes. Pinkie Pie took a sudden step towards him.

"We know what you did last summer..." the pink pony said darkly, making the dragon back up against the wall.

"Actually, I was just checking that you are okay with minding the library while we're gone. I checked with Cheerilee yesterday, and she agreed to pop by to see if you needed help," Twilight said, making Pinkie Pie stare at her and pout as her fun was ruined. Spike, however, breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, that. Yeah, no sweat! Just, uh come back in one piece?" Twilight felt a little touched at Spike's concern, especially since he usually wouldn't be caught dead saying anything bordering on mushy near anypony.

"I'd Pinkie Pie Swear properly if we had cupcakes, but you can count on it. I'll see if I can find you something nice out there."

"Like a big ruby?" The dragons' mouth dripped a little and his eyes glittered. Twilight sighed in exasperation.

"We're gonna travel the countryside and you want *food*?" Twilight asked.

"Hey, I'm a practical guy." Spike shrugged.

Chapter 3

"Are we all ready, then?" Twilight asked, inspecting the ponies that stood in a half-circle around her. Her saddlebags were full, and she was confident. She was packing *knowledge* and she was ready to go.

"Got my tools an' some apples. All ready ta hit the road," Applejack nodded. The farm pony looked confident and comfortable, though Twilight guessed that the load she carried in her saddlebags would likely snap her own back.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Rarity said, adjusting her hat.

"Ready, I guess, yes," Fluttershy said.

"Let's DO this!" Pinkie Pie said with a little hop.

"Ready for takeoff!" Rainbow Dash cheered. Notably, she was the only pony without any saddlebags. "*Not my style*," she had explained earlier.

There was a moment in which exactly nothing happened. Ponies went about their business all around them, sometimes nervously glancing at the princess who was patiently waiting nearby. The tall and imposing alicorn looked around slowly, appearing to do some stationary sightseeing. Twilight scratched the back of her head and frowned. Something was missing.

"Um, speaking of readiness, princess," Rarity said, turning to the moon princess. The fashionista pointedly glanced around the town square and its myriad of roads. "which way is it that we are going?"

Directions. That was the missing component. Luna simply smiled and approached the group, the ponies spreading out a little to let her join their huddle. "Twilight Sparkle, do you have a map of our immediate environs?"

Twilight expertly fished out a small guide from her saddlebags with magic. "Of course! 'The Traveller's Guide to Equestria', though, truth be told, it was harder to find maps and such than I would've thought." She frowned at that even as she opened the book with her telekinesis. Mapmakers were apparently as undervalued as librarians in Equestria.

"Hm. That is very basic, even if accurate. I should have brought a map from my personal library in Canterlot, if only for your benefit." Luna said, apparently disappointed with what she saw and dismissing the book. "I know the roads by heart though. They cannot have changed that much in the last thousand years."

There was a brief pause before Luna added. "That was a joke." Rarity immediately laughed, and Twilight looked a little sheepish, with the rest of the assembled ponies in various stages of awkwardness. Twilight petted her book and stowed it away before the princess could slander it any further.

Princess Luna began a slow walk towards one of the bridges that crossed the nearby stream, explaining as she went. "I am thinking of heading West and South out of Ponyville. Trixie was last seen heading South, and it puts us closer to the border to Scandineighvia," the princess clarified, glancing behind her to make sure the ponies were following. "There are a number of villages that are so small that they do not have a direct line of communication to Canterlot, and I think it would be prudent to see if Trixie passed through there."

"Scandineighvia? We're leaving Equestria?" Twilight had to struggle to keep moving, her legs threatening to lock up for a second. She had never been beyond the border. From the look on their faces, most of the other ponies shared her sentiment. Fluttershy only seemed determined.

Luna's pace did not slow one bit, and she kept her gaze forward. "We may have to, yes. While I'm fairly certain Trixie went south, I don't know where she is now, but reviewing monthly reports from the southwestern border posts, I read about a lone griffin leaving Equestria's border."

"The griffin tribes in Scandineighvia," Rainbow Dash muttered to nopony in particular. "Gilda, you complete and utter haybrain..."

"What of Prince Blueblood? If you'll forgive me, princess, you never fully explained what became of him?" Rarity's voice was tense, but Luna just shook her head. Once again, the white unicorn didn't dare push the issue, but it was clear she was getting frustrated.

"We'll get to that later," the princess said cryptically, glancing around at the ponies that watched them go. They had an unintended entourage, but the closer they got to the outskirts of Ponyville, the fewer curious ponies were following them, and soon it was just the seven of them.

It wasn't before they walked past the turnoff that led to Sweet Apple Acres that Twilight really appreciated what they were doing. They were actually travelling by hoof, and they might be gone for weeks or even months! While she was certainly comfortable enough in the houses and libraries that had been her home so far, she couldn't pretend to be immune to the allure of adventure. As Sweet Apple Acres threatened to fade out of view behind them, Applejack shot a look backwards and sighed deeply.

"Cold hooves already, AJ?" Rainbow Dash asked, but Twilight noted that there was no trace of the usual superiority, no challenge in her voice. The earth pony began shaking her head, but arrested the movement and just trod on. Twilight remembered when Applejack had told her of how she got her cutie mark, how homesick she had gotten. She trotted up to her and offered a sympathetic smile.

"Ah just know Ah'm gonna miss'em," Applejack said. "Don't mean Ah regret this, or that Ah'm gonna go back, but Ah can't help it."

Twilight didn't quite know what to feel, herself. Of course she'd miss Spike and all the friends and acquaintances they'd left behind, but there was so much to see and learn out there! For every time Celestia had applauded Twilight's academic prowess, she'd also warned her that experience was equally important.

And thus time flew by, the shadow of the Everfree forest ever to one side, and open fields on the other. The road was a broad and well travelled dirt road in good maintenance. The few times they encountered other ponies, they were usually earth ponies hauling large carts, often in teams. They would without fault stop and stare or bow, and Luna usually either seemed uncomfortable or simply walked on, ignoring them.

The princess often joined in on their chatter, and where she'd initially taken the lead, they all walked together in a tight cluster by the time the sun set, with her as the center of attention. Fluttershy seemed less reluctant to be near Luna, but Twilight doubted any of them would live to see the day Rarity stopped calling Luna 'princess'.

"I do not think I have ever had the pleasure of tasting distilled rainbow, I must admit, no, Pinkie Pie," Luna chuckled. "Nor does it sound like something I would want to try." The party pony had hogged most of Luna's attention with questions for the past few hours, much to Rarity's subtle chagrin. Luna seemed tireless, Twilight noted. Most ponies could get a Pinkie Pie overload after a short while, but the princess answered every question patiently to the best of her abilities.

"I want to try using them to make cupcakes or maybe muffins! But *somepony* is being stingy with the rainbow juice." Pinkie Pie huffed and pouted in Rainbow Dash's direction. The chromatic pegasus sighed, and it became very obvious this had been a recurring discussion between the two of them.

"I can't just check buckets of rainbows out of the weather factory just like that!" Rainbow Dash explained, but Pinkie Pie was still pouty. In the end, Dash threw her head back and groaned in frustration. "Fine! I'll see if I can't get you a sample for you when we get back."

Pinkie Pie's resulting cheerful antics went on long enough and distracted the group so efficiently that they didn't even notice they had come up on a building before Luna stopped. Twilight and the others looked up at the large two-story log cabin while Rainbow Dash was still trying to get Pinkie off her back. Soft light spilled from the windows on the first floor, and the sign outside proudly proclaimed it to be the "Copper Road Inn".

"This will be a good place to stop for the night. If we have to travel outside of Equestria, there will be no shortage of nights under the naked sky, so we may as well indulge ourselves while we can," Luna said. The notion met with agreement. Leading the way, Luna opened the heavy wooden doors to a large common room filled with tables. The room was largely empty except for a pale green unicorn colt with a frizzy grey mane

who stood behind the bar and a pair of gruff earth pony stallions nursing their cider in a corner.

"I'll cover expenses," Luna said as they approached the counter. The unicorn perked up at the sound of customers and looked up from the cup he was cleaning with a rag. Spotting the princess, he gasped and threw himself into a low bow. Being behind the bar, it almost looked like he dived to hide, and there was a muffled giggle from Pinkie Pie.

"Your majesty! Our humble establishment is at your service," the unicorn, who had a torch for a cutie mark, declared. A brown unicorn mare poked her head out from a nearby door and disappeared again immediately. There was a loud clatter of pots and pans.

"Nonsense. We're paying customers," Luna responded, but before she could go on, there was a clatter of bits on wood as a hoof-ful of currency landed on the counter. Everypony turned to Applejack. The farmpony had opened one of her saddlebags and was, for her part, looking at the unicorn stallion. "That enough for three rooms? Ah assume the beds're big enough for two?"

The innkeeper nodded, though it was obvious that shifting his attention off the princess was very hard for him, and he kept glancing at Luna. "They're big enough to share, Miss. Three rooms for the night, dinner and breakfast tomorrow?" Applejack nodded, and he obviously did some quick math in his head, prompting Applejack to put a few more bits on the counter, which she did. Only then did Luna finally voice her protests. The princess looked a little confused, Twilight thought.

"I did say I would cover expenses, did I not?"

"Respectfully, princess," Applejack said with a dip of her head. "Ah can't let you cover for Sweet Apple Acres and then go and do somethin' like this without feelin' bad about it. Ah'll pay for my friends and myself."

Twilight felt a little nervous all of a sudden. Luna actually looked indignant, and Applejack herself even looked a little sorry. Not sorry about what she'd said, Twilight knew, but that she felt she had to do it. That pony was more stubborn than a mule.

Luna dispersed the tension with a little nod. "I cannot very well stop you. At any rate, I need to attend my royal duties. We will meet here for breakfast in the morning, yes? I am eager to cover more ground tomorrow, today was cut short by our late start." With those words, Princess Luna turned and walked back out through the door.

"She's not having dinner?" Pinkie Pie asked, a little puzzled.

"Evidently not," Rarity said, failing at masking her disappointment. "Applejack, I insist on covering at least half the cost. While I think it's rude to reject a gift like this, I can easily cover for all of us. The boutique is doing very well, thanks in part to your help and modelling." The unicorn swept a hoof over to indicate all her friends, smiling.

Applejack herself shook her head, adamant. "Ah get to choose how I spend mah own pocket money, don't Ah? Sweet Apple Acres might not leave me swimming in bits like your business, but Ah've made up my mind." Rarity looked a little wounded, and Applejack huffed, looking down at the ground. "Thanks Rarity, but you can pay next time or somethin'."

Twilight had no idea what to say to any of this. Truth be told, she hadn't thought about money at all, assuming that travelling with the princess meant such things were a non-issue. Given that she lived in the public library at Celestia's behest, bits were a thing of leisure to her. She coughed and drew attention to herself. "I, um, thanks. I didn't really bring any bits myself," Twilight admitted, even though she still felt the princess could have covered it. The other ponies also said their thanks, and Applejack looked a little happier for it.

The innkeeper had apparently disappeared a while ago as the ponies talked, and now he returned, exiting through what must be the kitchen door. Following him was the brown mare they'd seen earlier, and a little turquoise unicorn filly about the age of the cutie mark crusaders. All of them carried trays of food, and one of the large tables was soon set for dinner. Honeyed oats, daffodil burgers, hay fries and more was laid out before them, and the ponies wasted no time in setting to work filling their bellies.

When the last piece of bread was made a victim of Pinkie Pie's unfathomable appetite the air was heavy with contentment and laziness, and there was a brief lull in the small talk about travel and who was paying

for that. The earth pony stallions had vacated the common room for their own rooms above sometime earlier.

"Um, how do we split the rooms?" Fluttershy asked as she gingerly pushed her plate away from her.

"I'd love to share a room with you, Fluttershy, darling," Rarity told Fluttershy to nopony's surprise and nod from the butter-colored pegasus. Twilight got up and looked around, wondering if they were expected to help clean up. She'd eaten in many fine bars, restaurants and diners in Canterlot and Ponyville, but this was an inn. How did they even work?

"I'll take a room with Pinkie Pie," Applejack declared. This caused a few raised eyebrows, including Twilight's. They were all good enough friends that she hardly expected any drama from something as simple as sleeping arrangements, of course, but it was still a little surprising. Rainbow Dash glanced between Twilight, Pinkie Pie and Applejack and shrugged nonchalantly. Pinkie Pie nodded at Applejack while scratching her chin with a hoof.

"Well played, Apples', Well played," Pinkie said, her voice comically gravelly.

"Ah intend to get some sleep tonight," Applejack said with a shrug, though Twilight couldn't imagine how Pinkie Pie was conducive to sleep. She was, in fact, pretty sure that Pinkie herself never actually slept. She didn't do sleep-overs. She did parties.

Soon enough, the ponies had split off and found their rooms. Fluttershy, of all ponies, had commented that travelling could be tiresome, and that they really should get as much rest as possible while they could. Closing the door to their room after she and Rainbow Dash were well inside, Twilight lit up her horn.

It was a small, cozy and mostly clean room with a large bed, a nightstand, cupboards, a washbasin and a mirror. The walls were bare, the corners were a little dusty, but it was certainly more than Twilight had expected of a roadside inn.

Rainbow Dash's first instinct was apparently to hop onto on the bed and bounce up and down on it with enthusiasm. Twilight lit a candle with her magic before she sat down on the floor and merely watched the pegasus until she noticed and stopped.

"Er, I was just testing it. See if the springs are any good." The multicolored pony shrugged and grinned as she hopped off the bed. "They are. Great springs!"

"Uh huh," Twilight said with a smile, glad to finally have Rainbow Dash alone for a second. "Hey, listen, about that little argument, I really am sorry. And, um, I think you just kind of struck a nerve."

The pegasus looked blank for a second, and then huffed. "You're still thinking about that? Come on Twi, it's cool. I wasn't even thinking, I just don't like Luna pushing us around. Heh, and she wasn't. She's cool, I guess."

Twilight nodded at her friend, a little relieved, but also beset by a nagging feeling that Rainbow Dash didn't give her own perceptive abilities enough credit. She didn't mind letting the subject drop, but now it was Dash's turn to look a little hesitant.

"But, er, I'm still not sure about this whole trip. I didn't want to say anything since Applejack's already pretty busy with that. You know. Busy saying she's not cool with this." Dash looked uncomfortable and almost uncharacteristically serious as she gazed at Twilight. "And nopony talks about why we're going, you're all just excited that we're going at all."

Seeing Dash openly distraught like this worried Twilight a little. Back in Ponyville, she'd never speak so openly about something that concerned her, at least not to Twilight. She thought about it for a moment before she replied. "We just left today. There'll be plenty of time for that, and I'm sure Luna will tell us everything she knows eventually." Twilight thought about their conversation with Applejack earlier in the day, understanding dawning on her slowly. "Besides, I think we all have cold hooves to some degree. I'm a little scared, too, but this'll be fun."

Rainbow Dash jerked and looked like she might protest at being called out on it, but deflated again almost instantly, puffing out her cheeks.

"Yeah, heh, sorry. I just, I've never really been anywhere except Ponyville and Cloudsdale, I guess."

"Will you be okay though?" Twilight asked, but Dash hopped onto the bed and grinned, her trademark confidence quickly returning.

"I'm not really scared, it's kind of nice, too," The pegasus said, gazing out the window. "It's like doing a really cool stunt, you know? Or, well, I guess you don't." Twilight rolled her eyes. "Just a lot slower... Luna?" Dash finished with a note of surprise.

Twilight followed Rainbow Dash's gaze and trotted over to the window, pressing her snout against the glass.

The small window faced away from the road, giving them a nice view of a tall grass field of perhaps a hundred paces across leading up to the edge of the Everfree forest. As Rainbow Dash had suggested, Princess Luna was in clear view, standing in the middle of the field and facing the forest, her head hanging low. On the horizon, above the treetops of the nearby forest, the moon began its ascent even as the two ponies watched.

"That is so cool," Rainbow Dash gasped.

"It doesn't even look like she's doing anything. It's nothing like when Celestia raises the sun at the summer sun celebration," Twilight mused as the night sky slowly came alive with the twinkling of innumerable little stars. Indeed, the night princess appeared to have done very little. It must be very subtle magic, if it was even conventional magic at all. Perhaps Luna would be less cryptic than Celestia in answering questions about it?

After the night sky was in place, so to say, there was a long pause where nothing happened. Eventually, Luna slowly began raising her head. As Twilight and Rainbow Dash watched, the princess first levelled her head with the forest, and then craned it upwards to gaze at the sky. All the while, she opened her wings, tentatively at first, but when her muzzle trained on the moon above they were fully spread, large dark wings that seemed a part of the night-dome itself.

Suddenly, Luna folded her wings and sat quickly down in the grass. She lowered her head and sat completely still. Twilight had no idea how

long they had been staring at the princess doing nothing at all when Rainbow Dash broke the silence.

"What the hay just happened?"

Twilight climbed onto the bed, sitting down atop the covers before she replied, feeling a little scared and numb both. "I have no idea, but I suggest we don't tell Luna we saw that. I mean, it's probably nothing, but..."

Rainbow Dash sat down on the bed as well. "It? We don't even know what that was, if it was anything at all." She said, though whether she was agreeing or disagreeing with Twilight, the unicorn couldn't tell. Rainbow Dash was still looking out the window, past her. "I think she's crying."

Twilight Sparkle felt her heart stop for a second and made a noise halfway between a snort and a cough, incredulous. "That's crazy," she said, but she didn't dare turn around to see. Instead, she slipped under the covers and shut her eyes. There was shuffling next to her, and cracking one eye open a little, Twilight saw Dash had just laid down on her back atop the covers. Twilight fervently hoped that Rainbow Dash would just be quiet and sleep.

"I bet they're just ponies too, you know." Dash muttered. "Luna and Celestia. Why can't they cry, too?"

"Because that's crazy." Twilight said, hating herself for her own irrationality. Her eyes popped open of their own accord, and she lay staring at the ceiling. Luna was Celestia's sister. They were not just royalty, but goddesses. Of course they had emotions, but Celestia had always been strong, always had a smile ready for her and everypony else. Luna was not at all what she had expected – she was, simply put, confusing. Were the two sisters really that different? Did Celestia ever cry? Did it really matter?

Twilight turned her head and saw that Rainbow Dash was still looking at her, no doubt waiting for a better answer. The purple unicorn swallowed. She had no idea what to say, so she did the only thing she could. She changed the subject. "Fluttershy's travelled this road before? She's not as, um, Fluttershy about this as I thought she'd be."

Rainbow Dash smiled wistfully. Twilight hadn't known Dash could pull off "wistful", but there it was. "You could ask her about it, but yeah, I think she's seen more of Equestria than any of us."

Twilight scanned the pegasus' face for any indication that it was a joke, but no. Wistful. "Er, haven't you known each other for a very long time? Wouldn't you know?"

The brightly colored pegasus turned away and she sounded very tired all of a sudden. "Can we just go to sleep, please?"

Twilight got the impression that she'd said something wrong without knowing exactly what. She stared at Rainbow Dash's back for a few moments before muttering a pained *"I'm sorry."* It took an uncomfortably long time before she managed to fall asleep, dreaming something about darkness that was not quite a nightmare.

A knock on the door woke Twilight and Rainbow Dash up, and the former's first thought was that having the two late sleepers share a room might not have been the best of ideas. The sun was already up. Twilight groaned as Applejack's voice came through the door, loud and clear. "Wake up lazybones, breakfast's served!"

"Right." Willing herself out of bed, Twilight's body thankfully soon obeyed and followed. Dash made an incomprehensible mutter and curled up into a ball. Without waiting for the notoriously lazy pegasus, Twilight walked down to the common room. As it turned out, all the others were already nibbling on or gorging themselves on breakfast. Everypony seemed in high spirits, but Twilight found that she had a hard time looking straight at Luna as she shuffled over to take a seat next to Fluttershy. She attacked her oats with a vengeance as the others discussed their opinions of inn life. Rarity, unsurprisingly, wasn't quite satisfied with the quality of the rooms, but she also admitted it was to be expected, and she never said a word on the topic when the owners of the establishment were nearby.

Not half an hour later, having dragged Rainbow Dash downstairs and practically forced her to eat under the threat of whining, they said their goodbyes and were out the door, facing yet another stretch of road that seemed to go on forever.

"I am hoping to reach the village of Braidford today," Luna said once they started moving, setting a higher pace than yesterday. "We should have time for a few breaks, but do not be afraid to say if you have trouble keeping up, please." This earned set of nods and a little chuckle from Rainbow Dash and Applejack as if the very notion of falling behind was unthinkable. Dash hovered up over their heads.

"Actually, I'm gonna go for a little flight, see how things look up here. You know, stretch my wings and get a little speed. No offense or anything." Dash was grinning even as she rocketed off straight upwards, leaving an explosion of dust in her wake. Rarity coughed and Applejack shook her head, but Twilight saw an opportunity. She aligned herself with Fluttershy, who was staring straight ahead, gaze distant as she trotted mechanically on. The others had began asking Luna questions about Braidford, giving the two of them a small measure of privacy.

"Fluttershy, I was wondering about something..." the purple unicorn began, a little hesitant, but much too curious now to hold back. Fluttershy looked over at her and was at once her usual self, brought back into focus. She smiled back at Twilight expectantly.

"You lived in Ponyville when I moved over, but where did you live before then? Just Cloudsdale?" The question was carefully thought out. If Fluttershy didn't want to talk about it, she could just say yes and leave it at that, but Twilight knew there was more to it. The pegasus mare didn't shy away from the question, though, shaking her head slightly.

"After I finished flight school I, um, travelled a little. All over the place, actually. I didn't go very far, but I spent a year on the road." The answer was given with a smile, but Fluttershy stole a quick glance up into the air where a rapidly dimming rainbow trail was all that remained of Rainbow Dash's departure.

"You stayed in flight school?" Twilight asked, unable to hide the surprise in her voice. Thinking back on it, she knew that Rainbow Dash had quit, and that Fluttershy had attended the same class. Also, Fluttershy was a notoriously weak flier, at least in comparison to Rainbow Dash, and she had fallen in love with the creatures of the ground during that one fateful

race that had shaped the fates of the six friends. Twilight had simply assumed that Fluttershy had dropped out around the same time.

If Fluttershy took offense, however, she didn't show it, merely nodding. "I didn't really have anywhere else to go, and I couldn't... I couldn't follow Rainbow Dash." At Twilight's wordless question, Fluttershy visibly hesitated. Twilight looked around and saw that the others had pulled a little ahead, Rarity and Luna apparently engaged in a debate that had the former looking very disappointed. The pegasus at her side, though, wasn't looking at them, but at Twilight still.

"I tried finding Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy finally admitted. "She'd been so nice to me, and I'd never had... I didn't have a lot of friends. And she just left m- the school." The quick little correction was very obvious. "I had no idea where she went. I looked all over, until I finally found her in Ponyville. Um, and I was kind of tired of travelling all over the place, and then I found Angel bunny." Twilight tried picturing Fluttershy travelling all over Equestria looking for Rainbow Dash, and just shook her head in disbelief.

"How could she do that?" Twilight finally asked, breathless. Fluttershy suddenly went wide-eyed and shook her head swiftly, slowing down a little.

"No, no, it's not her fault! We're very different, Rainbow Dash and I. She didn't realize. She said she was sorry, that she just had to get away. I just wish she'd told me where she was going, but we're okay now. It was a long time ago." The pegasus was beset with that indeterminable fervor that occasionally shone through her shell of shyness, and Twilight reluctantly nodded, if only to calm her down.

"No, listen Twilight, you *have* to understand," Fluttershy said, desperate.

"I get it, it's okay, Fluttershy. I'll let it go," Twilight said, almost getting a little afraid, but the pegasus seemed to calm down, placated.

She remembered yesterday night, though. It was obvious that Dash still felt terrible about it, and she couldn't quite decide whether that made the whole situation better or worse. Before she could say anything else, though, Pinkie Pie stopped and let them catch up. The others were quite a

bit ahead now. "Come on girls, we're all iron ponies today!" The pink pony giggled and upped her pace to catch up to the others again. Fluttershy broke into a brisk canter, and Twilight followed suit.

They kept up the canter for a few hours until the sun crawled high in the sky. Rarity was obviously struggling to keep up the pace, yet she didn't say a single word of complaint, laboring silently in the shadow of her hat. Twilight herself was also feeling the effects of the pace they had set, but she resolved to say nothing, either. If Rarity could keep up, so could she. Even so, when Luna slowed down, she was very grateful.

The Everfree forest had fallen away, no longer following them to the West, and as they came to a stop, it felt like they stood on the top of the world. The gentle upward slope that they'd followed all day relented and released its height in the form of a huge valley. On the other side of the valley, across a river, they could barely see a settlement surrounded by expansive worked fields. Further still, at the top on the other side of the valley, a dense mass of dark green.

These were only afterthoughts, though, compared to what drew their eyes. The entire valley was covered in beautiful flowers of every color imaginable. Botany had never been Twilight's strong suit, so she couldn't name many of them, but it was hard not to be amazed by the carpet of yellows, blues and reds, streaked with violets and lush greens.

Rarity gasped. "I have never seen anything like this," she said. "The colors are simply beautiful. I mean, certainly, I've seen paintings and such of scenes *like* this, but..." She trailed off and rummaged through her saddlebags, extracting sketch paper and a piece of coal with which to take notes and draw sketches.

Luna nodded appreciatively. "I was in fact looking forward to seeing this place again, and I'm glad it hasn't changed much. Is it still called Breezevale?"

The question, another reminder of the temporal gulf between her and the rest of the ponies, gave Twilight pause. She almost wished she was a simpler pony, that she couldn't frustrate herself with the impossibility of understanding the difference, the orders of magnitude that separated the princess and the other ponies on so many levels. She had been banished

for a thousand years. How old had she been then? How could she remember a specific valley after so long? And what had she been doing yesterday? Twilight stared straight ahead, unmoving, trying to understand how Rainbow Dash could claim she was 'just a pony' other than out of simple ignorance.

"Yes," Fluttershy answered after a brief pause. Perhaps it had been expected that Twilight would answer? No pony was looking at her, though, busy taking in the valley still. She shook her head to clear it and puffed out her cheeks.

There was a thud as Rainbow Dash not so much landed near them as she impacted, sweating but grinning. They'd spotted her in the sky a few times, but she hadn't rejoined them since she took off.

"Why're we stopping?" Rainbow Dash asked, and Luna chuckled at the smaller pony.

"Because not everyone is as prolific a flier as you, Rainbow Dash. Besides, this is a nice place to stop for some food. Surely you are hungry?"

Shrugging then nodding, the pegasus smiled at the princess. "I guess I could eat, sure. The village is like, right over there, though. It's kinda small compared to the ones to the East, isn't it? This road is getting smaller." She waved a hoof in the general direction of Braidford.

"It's not as close as it looks, I think. It'll probably take us the greater part of the day to get there," Twilight said staring at the settlement, and Luna nodded at her words. It was impossible to make out individual houses at this distance.

Pinkie Pie shrugged at this, losing none of her mirth. "At least we got dinner!" She set about munching on the most colorful flowers she could find, hopping along and sampling them one by one.

Rarity was frowning now, staring at the grass and flowers. "Grazing, is it? I suppose it was unrealistic to think there would be a restaurant or even a bar at every corner of the road, but..."

"Ah think Ah prefer apples," Applejack agreed between mouthfuls. "But what can ya do?"

The ponies ate in relative silence for a short while until Fluttershy finally spoke. Twilight had noticed she was giving the princess occasional worried glances. "Aren't you going to eat, princess?"

Luna looked a little surprised. She had indeed not been eating, apparently content simply enjoying the sight of the valley. "Ah. Of course, Fluttershy," the princess finally said with a smile, and she walked a little ways off to graze. Twilight, feeling satiated, sat down on her haunches and rested while waiting for the others.

"I don't think my hooves have been this sore since, well," Rarity said, having sat down next to Twilight. "There's the problem. They haven't. I didn't even know hooves could get sore." It was a less of a surprise to Twilight, but she decided that it might not be the right time for a lecture, so she just offered a sympathetic smile.

"Y'get used to it," Applejack commented as she walked past. "Guess for my part, applebuckin' kind of toughened up my hooves a bit though." Rarity shot Applejack a sour look.

"Pinkie Pie ready to roar and soar!" Pinkie Pie announced as she hopped over to them. "And these flowers are *tasty*! I mean, way better than the flowers in Ponyville!"

"I thought you didn't eat anything, well, not sugary," Twilight chuckled as she got up and stretched her legs.

"Oh, when I'm out and about, sometimes I get so hungry I just can't wait until I get back to Sugarcube Corner. I'm so happy Daisy usually leaves snacks for me outside for when I just need a little pick-me-up!"

There was a moment of silence as Twilight mentally checked this against some gossip and a discussion she'd had with the earth pony herbal shop owners and florists in Ponyville a few weeks ago. "Wait, you're the one who's been eating Daisy's flowers?!"

Pinkie Pie bounced and nodded, clearly not seeing a problem. "Yepsy-depsy!"

Rarity sighed heavily, and Twilight noted that she'd have to have a chat with Pinkie about this before they got back. Luna was making her way over to them that very moment, though, addressing the group. "Are we ready to move? I think we can afford to set a slightly slower pace and take another break in the afternoon. How are you all feeling?"

"I think I can keep up," Twilight said, and Rarity nodded as well. The rest of the ponies agreed, though Rainbow Dash was still eating and said she would catch up with them later. The colorful pegasus pony was a tempting next candidate for Twilight's cellar laboratory by virtue of her remarkable metabolism, she idly thought to herself.

Even at a slightly more leisurely pace, the distance diminished at a reasonable rate. In part, Twilight suspected it might just have been that their surroundings were so pleasant it was hard to complain about anything. Even for the bookish unicorn, rarely concerned with such things, trotting along amidst the flowers was a pleasant affair. That said, she was reasonably sure that Celestia's words on 'getting out more' didn't stop her from combining the best of both worlds. Twilight soon levitated a book in front of her as they moved, busying herself with some light meta-magical theory. It took a little while to compensate for the movement with her telekinesis, but it worked out in the end.

As the princess had predicted, they made it to Braidford with time to spare before sundown. Twilight's hooves and legs began to ache the second they passed the stone bridge that took them into the centre of the village, as it were. Most buildings were hay and oat farms scattered in the distance, and the village centre offered only a dozen buildings. Of these, one was marked as the town hall, and it was this one Luna beelined for. Twilight was eager to learn how the smaller villages organized themselves, and as such, she was smiling brightly.

"Well, here we are. It is a relatively small farming community, and it is the first village South of Ponyville. As such, it would make sense to see if Trixie has passed by here." The princess surveyed the assembled ponies. "We may not have a lot to go by yet, but I hope something pops up before we hit the border, which I suppose is our main goal. If not, we will pull on

further resources. Braidford has a mayor, from what I read. I thought it would be prudent to begin there. The rest of you may of course see the sights, if you wish." Luna looked expectantly at the group, and Rainbow Dash gave a laugh.

"Look at what, farms?"

"What's wrong with farms?" Applejack asked with a frown, but all the same, everypony followed as Luna entered the large wooden structure. While there were few ponies about outside, probably by virtue of it being fairly late, they found two ponies amiably chatting inside. An earth pony and a pegasus, the former a dark red and the latter a shade of off-white, turned at their entrance. As was the norm, they both bowed, wide-eyed. Twilight wondered if Luna ever tired of having to ask ponies to get off the floor.

"Please, rise," Luna said, indeed sounding a little weary. She turned to the older of the two, the white pegasus with a silver chain as her cutie mark. The mare had been leaning on the table behind which the other pony sat, in what seemed to be a simple but functional reception room. The Braidfordians were quick to gather their wits again, and rose to smile at the party.

"Silver Links is my name, Princess. I am thrilled, but surprised, I must admit, to meet you." The mare, presumably the mayor, spoke swiftly, but it sounded as if it was out of habit rather than nervousness. "This is Double Time, my assistant."

Names were exchanged all around, and Luna briefly explained the nature of their visit. When it became clear that it was an unofficial visit rather than the business of the Royal Castle, the mayor further relaxed and invited them to join her in her office, even though she was just closing up for the day. The mayor's office was a fairly humble affair, and the eight ponies crowded the room a little. Twilight had to get more intimate with a potted plant than she would have liked.

"We would greatly appreciate food and lodging, though I must insist on paying you," Luna explained when they were well inside. "However, our real business here is one of an investigative nature. We suspect that some months past, a blue unicorn mare called Trixie passed through here. A travelling magician."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie," Twilight corrected, remembering well her mannerisms and boastful nature.

"S'what she'd have called herself, anyway," Applejack snorted, and Twilight couldn't keep her eyes off her friend, surprised at the level of venom in her voice at this. Sure enough, Applejack had been upstaged by Trixie, but so had Rainbow Dash and Rarity, neither of which seemed to want to offer comment on this.

Silver Links shook her head. "I don't think so, I'm sorry. I think I've heard the name before, but only two entertainers have passed through here recently. Bumble came by a month ago or so, he usually visits twice a year in addition to festivals. He's from Nipswitch to the West." She paused and smiled. "Terribly talented magician and comedian, in fact. The other was Phantom, Perigrin or Phoenix, I think." She frowned, clearly trying to remember, and eventually just sighed in defeat. "I'm afraid I don't recall the name, it was something with a 'P'. She was a mare, but bright red and not a magician. A storyteller, rather. I didn't have an opportunity to watch her personally, but I heard of her visit."

Twilight sighed inwardly. To think they might have missed entirely on the direction of Trixie's travel was depressing to say the least. She had been content to think that the blue unicorn had learned her lesson, and assumed that everything would work out as it usually did. Then she'd learned how much Trixie had actually lost, and if Luna was worried, or at the very least felt there was reason for concern, then so did she. It would feel a little odd to disagree with a goddess of dreams and prophecies.

Fluttershy was looking a little distraught as well, and the same held for Rainbow Dash, though Twilight assumed that was simply because she usually hated wasting time. Luna, thoroughly practical, nodded her thanks to the mayor. "That still leaves the issue of lodging, though. Do you have anything suitable?"

Silver Links smiled a little at that. "I am sorry I couldn't be more help with finding your friend, but the rest, I can easily help with. We don't have a real inn or hotel here, but we have plenty of families and ponies who have room for a couple of extra ponies, and I think the idea of being able to say they played host to a princess would be a big deal too."

"Actually, I will not be requiring quarters. But if you can provide beds for my... companions, then that would be very much appreciated." Luna hesitated a little, and it didn't go unnoticed by Twilight. The mayor looked a little disappointed, but nodded.

"The Oat family has a lot of room, I'm sure we could fit at least three of you in there. They never turn anypony away, and they're very friendly ponies all." The pegasus mayor paused, pensive. "Ah, and the rest of you could share a bed at Summer Glare's place, perhaps? His wife and foals are out of town, so his house is very empty these days. He'd be glad for the company, I'm sure."

Twilight was very fascinated by how close-knit the community seemed. The idea of Mayor Mare doing anything similar in Ponyville, of Twilight Sparkle having people knock on her door telling her that Mayor Mare had sent them there to sleep, that was worth a little giggle. She resolved to write a report to Celestia about community sizes and bonds.

When they all stood outside, after a brief debate that Twilight didn't participate in, it had been decided that Rarity, Applejack and Fluttershy would head over to the pony called Summer Glare, and that Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie would take the short trek to the Oats' farm. The first trio broke off swiftly and headed for a nearby building indicated by the mayor as Summer Glare's house.

"You guys just go ahead, I'll be there in a moment." Twilight told Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash after they'd gotten their directions to the farm. The mayor was quick to excuse herself saying that she was expected home an hour ago.

"Okie-dokie-lokie!" Pinkie Pie chirped and bounced off, Rainbow Dash quickly catching up and flying at her side. They lapsed into a hushed conversation, leaving Twilight a little curious, but she had another, far more pressing curiosity-itch to scratch. She was left only with Princess Luna, who looked down at her, patient and neutral, obviously aware that Twilight wanted something.

Twilight, for her part, was nervous. She stood at the precipice of getting answers, but she had no idea how Luna would react. She seemed

steel-faced much of the time, friendly the rest of the time, and whatever had happened that night, she wasn't even sure she wanted to know. The princess in question glanced over her shoulder at where the sun had just set. "Twilight, I do not have very long. What is troubling you?"

Aiming for the honest approach, Twilight wrestled with words. "Well, I have some questions." She smiled sheepishly. "A lot, in fact. I don't know if you can or want to answer them, because Celestia never really did. Or, sometimes she did, but usually, she'd just be cryptic and smile at me." Princess Luna chuckled a little at that, as if she knew exactly what she was talking about.

"She can be like that, these days, I suppose. She has a lot on her mind. What kind of questions?"

Twilight wanted to ask if Luna didn't have a lot on her mind also. She had no idea what Luna did or didn't do in a royal capacity, but that wasn't exactly a question to set the mood. "For example, well, immortality."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "What of it?"

Twilight couldn't comprehend the answer, eyes wide. "What of it? What *not* of it! I mean, as a concept, immortality is keyed to eternity, which is close to incomprehensible on a non-philosophical level! I-" Twilight caught herself, breathing a little faster. Her eyes shone as she stared up in wonder at the Princess. "What's it like, living forever?"

After a contemplative moment, Luna finally replied. "Would you walk with me?"

Wordlessly complying, Twilight fell into step at Luna's side as they set out towards the outskirts of town where the sunset had been, as if chasing Celestia's sun itself.

"Celestia and I are not unique. At least in the immortality aspect. At the beginning of time, many creatures were born immortal. There were very many of us, once, but not many remain," Luna said, and Twilight interrupted her right away.

"Wait, how can they be gone? Doesn't that fly in the face of the 'immortal' part of it?"

Luna smiled at the question, shaking her head. "Immortality doesn't mean indestructibility. Noone is so much stronger than themselves that they cannot unmake their own form."

Trying to wrap her head around the statement, Twilight frowned. "Can you reformulate that? I'm not sure I understand. You're implying something."

"I suppose," was the answer Luna gave as she sat down on the flowery ground by the roadside. It seemed like a spot like any other. Twilight sat on her haunches next to her, but the princess was intently staring up at the sky. She was about to ask the princess whether she had asked an inappropriate question when she realized what was happening. Craning her neck, she saw the celestial namesake of the alicorn at her side crawl up from the horizon to take its place on the sky-dome where the stars already waited. Luna quickly looked down at the flowers in which they sat, studying a dark purple bell-shaped specimen in the sparse moonlight.

"What you do not understand, Twilight Sparkle, is the burden of eternity. We who are left are those who can best adjust. We can avoid the pitfalls of the Forever. Me and my sister, we are alive because we learned how to cry and laugh. How to accept emotions, experience them without fully succumbing to them."

Twilight felt her lower jaw go slack. She had intended to take notes, but the weight of the words killed the last of her lingering frustrations that she hadn't brought her writing tools.

"At any rate, eternity is a word noone really understands. Not even I can see the end of time, and foresight is one of my gifts. All we know is that it all began. Immortality means even less than the word eternity, does it not? But if all you mean by it is that we choose when we die, then yes, you can describe us with the word 'immortal'. But it is not the same as forever. Noone wants forever. Noone endures forever. Eventually, if it comes to that, you end yourself because the alternative is madness. And those who go mad..." Luna sat stiff on the ground, fixed upon that one flower as she finished. "...have to be put down." There was a practiced neutrality to the

voice, but it wasn't perfect, and Twilight realized that she could believe Rainbow Dash, now. Perhaps she hadn't been lying.

Being able to visualize a goddess crying didn't feel like an achievement. Luna looked over at her, as if waking up from a nap, her eyes suddenly a little panicked – that made it two things Twilight did not hope or think she'd see. "Oh horseapples, I did not mean to- that was a bit gloomy, no?"

And three. Luna had just swore in front of her.

"No, no, I asked!" Twilight said, her voice rising. "I just, uh, I didn't, I-" What? She hadn't expected to get answers? She hadn't expected that she'd be unsure, for the first time in her life, if she had wanted those answers? No, that wasn't it. Twilight collected herself with effort. She tried to make her words have some meaning. What did she think?

Twilight looked at Luna. The princess was looking very different from her usual self, and she was struck with an urge to fix something, but it was impossible. There was nothing she could do. The purple unicorn finally managed to find her voice, but finding the right words was an entirely different matter.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry," Twilight said. It was barely a whisper.

Luna was frozen, mouth half open for a second. "Ah... I, that is quite alright."

The silence was uncomfortable, and Twilight rubbed her forehooves together as if noticing the chill in the air for the first time. She gave Luna a little smile as she got up. "I should probably leave you to it," she said, still not really quite sure what the elusive 'it' was. Luna nodded as if she didn't really know either, and let her go.

As Twilight trotted off, she heard Luna's voice behind her, though she didn't know if she was *meant* to have heard it.

"Thank you."

Chapter 4

Finding the Oats' farm was easy considering their rather descriptive family name. Arriving at the main farmyard, Twilight briefly worried that as farmers, they would already be abed and that she would be waking somepony up. Before she could knock on the door of biggest building, though, she spotted light coming from a smaller house by a barn nearby. A guest house of sorts? The unicorn carefully approached, emboldened when she heard a familiar giggle. No pony else had a voice of that pitch – Pinkie Pie!

Twilight had no idea what, if anything, she'd tell her friends, but that would have to wait until morning. Right now, she only wanted to sleep. She pushed opened the door with her magic and stepped inside, hoping her friends wouldn't see she was upset.

As it turned out, that wasn't an issue at all. Entering, she found Rainbow Dash flat on the floor, Pinkie Pie clinging to her back with Dash's ear in her mouth. The two ponies froze, Dash with her eyes wide, Pinkie Pie smiling widely around Dash's ear. "Hi Fwilightf!" Pinkie said, hopping off the pegasus to give Twilight a hug heedless of her discomfort and the fact that Rainbow Dash's cheeks were burning. "Where've you been? Have you been exploring and sneaking around like a sneaky explorer who explores sneakily?"

"No, I just, uh. Had a chat," Twilight muttered as she took in the room. It seemed to be a a guest house indeed, with the beds, kitchen area and a few sofas all in one large room. The two big beds stood near the entrance in defiance of conventional interior decoration. Gently disengaging herself from the hug, Twilight plopped down on the closest one, the weariness of today's march suddenly making itself known. She couldn't have moved if she wanted to, and she certainly didn't want to.

"O-kaay?" Rainbow Dash said somewhere behind her.

"I think Twilight's just tired. My legs are tired too. Oh, and my pink little hoofsies are sore! Look, Dashie, look! Sore and icky!" Pinkie said, quickly followed by the tell-tale sounds of a scuffle.

"Augh, get those out of my face, Pinkie! Come *on!*" Dash groaned.

Twilight fell asleep soon after, despite the two other ponies' best efforts.

Twilight awoke the next day with a start, up on all fours and looking around in a panic. She was still in the same little guest house, the sun spilling in through the numerous windows that lined the walls and creating shafts of light in which dust floated serenely. The room was warm, almost stuffy, and on the bed next to her lay Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, breathing softly. All was safe, but she was possessed of a fear she couldn't shake off. Trying to grasp the tatters of what she had dreamt even as it unravelled, all she was left with was an image of the night sky and a waxing moon.

After rousing Pinkie and Dash, they all grabbed a quick breakfast at the Oat family's home before they set course for the centre of the village. Luna, Rarity, Applejack and Fluttershy were already there and had become the centre of attention, trapped in the middle of a couple dozen ponies. As they drew closer, it became apparent that the village ponies were eager to simply meet with the princess, and some of them even brought small gifts of food and such. Rarity looked positively delighted at the attention as she, Applejack and Fluttershy graciously accepted the gifts and thanked the village ponies, the majority of which were shades of pale yellows and greens. More of the Oat family, no doubt.

Luna, however, looked less thrilled. The royal pony looked the part of a princess, for sure. She was saying the correct words and nodding politely, but Twilight had already seen that the princess could be, for lack of a better word, warmer than this. There was a stiffness to her, now. When Twilight, Pinkie and Dash drew near, Luna said a few quiet words to the mayor at her side and shook hooves with her. Silver Links nodded and raised her voice over the din of the assembled ponies. "The princess appreciates having met you, but she has to depart now."

"Thank you," Luna herself added as the ponies parted to let her and her entourage through. Fluttershy was the first to offer comment on the whole ordeal as they were out of earshot. The ponies still stood near the village square, some of them waving.

"They were very nice. Everypony in the village was, I mean. And Summer Glare was ever so nice, too. He told us about Braidford and his family and everything." The pegasus was smiling with delight, and Applejack gave a nod in agreement.

"Equestria needs more ponies like him. Good fellow." the apple farmer said, and Rarity nodded as well, making it fairly evident that he'd been a good host. Before any of the others could say anything about their own stay, however, Twilight addressed the princess.

"You don't seem very happy. Are you disappointed we didn't find any leads?" She asked with earnest concern. The princess was trotting slightly ahead of the group and didn't even appear to be listening to the conversation. She did perk up at Twilight's words, however.

"I am not worried about a minor setback like this. We will ask in Grey Hollows and change our approach if they have not heard anything, either. No, I am just a little uncomfortable with attention of that kind."

Rainbow Dash seemed almost insulted. "What? Are you kidding me? They were all over you!"

"Precisely." Luna said, flatly, with a smile that was everything but content.

"Rainbow Dash, please," Twilight tried, but she knew Rainbow Dash wouldn't listen, and she was proven right.

"What's the point of being a princess if you don't love your fans?" The chromatic pony snorted, shaking her head at what seemed to her an impossibility.

"Fans?" Luna asked, looking back at Rainbow Dash.

"That's what they are, aren't they? Ponies who admire you and look up to you 'cause they think you're awesome? I know fans when I see them."

Luna shook her head sadly, her voice bordering on condescension. "I do not think you do. I have done nothing to deserve admiration from these ponies. They see the crown, and bow before it. In my sister's case, there might be something like what you describe, but not me."

Twilight tried to get eye contact with Rainbow Dash and hint that she should just drop it, but the pegasus was intent upon Luna and Luna alone.

"That's a load of crap," Dash finally said. "You have to take some pride in who you are. I wouldn't be half as awesome as I am if I didn't believe in myself. We all..." she glanced to her left where Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy walked, without turning her head. The pegasus looked resolved, her faced steeled as she finished. "We all get things we don't deserve. Doesn't mean you should throw it away. That's just bucking rude."

No pony said anything, least of all Luna, who still trotted a little ahead of the group. Twilight couldn't believe the conversation had happened, but the oppressive air that surrounded them all was a potent reminder. She had read wizened philosophers' treatises on virtues and sins, always with pride solidly in the latter category. Was it really that simple, though?

What little was left of flat ground was covered soon enough, and they begun their ascent out of the flower-filled valley well before noon. Cresting the top not long after, they could look back at the same wondrous sight they had found yesterday. Ponyville already felt very far away. This time, however, Luna did not pause, forging ahead under the canopy of a dense forest, the transition so sudden that it reminded Twilight of plunging through the brush into the Everfree. Despite the fact that little light pierced the forest-dome that hid the sky, though, there was no menace in this forest's embrace.

"My hooves hurt," Rarity muttered mostly to herself, but at least two sets of ears perked up at this.

"It'll get better," Fluttershy promised with a little smile, though her gait seemed every bit as stiff as Rarity's.

"Easy for you to say, you could simply fly. Speaking of which, why don't you?" Rarity asked. "Surely it's got to be better than *this*."

"I'm sorry, it's just, flying is very tiresome, too. I guess I could hover a little, but I like feeling the ground under my hooves," Fluttershy said, and Rarity nodded at her words, needing no further explanation. Twilight, glad to have something to talk about, spoke up.

"Actually, pegasi expend a lot of energy flying, generally, unless they can glide. And since we're stuck with the speed of the slowest common denominator," she shrugged, "it makes a lot of sense." Fluttershy nodded gratefully at Twilight.

"Speaking of which," Luna said from the front, making Twilight start. She was unaware the princess had overheard them. "Rainbow Dash, I would ask that you stay with us here on the ground until we leave the Oakwall forest."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "Uh, why?"

"Fly up through the trees and you'll see why," Luna replied cryptically, coming to a stop. Rainbow Dash, never one to back down from what was tantamount to a dare, did exactly that. Five seconds later she came down again, albeit off the road, a little ways off from where she had pierced the canopy. It took a moment before Dash spotted the rest of the party and flew over to rejoin them.

"Right," Rainbow Dash said, swallowing. Luna just nodded and picked up the pace again, settling for a brisk canter. At the questioning glances, Rainbow Dash looked more than a little troubled. "The forest is huge and, um, *samey*. No way am I gonna find you again."

"I could send up a magical flare or something," Twilight suggested. "To help you locate us?"

"*Really* huge," Rainbow Dash sighed, apparently settling the matter as far as she was concerned.

The entire day disappeared into small-talk and little complaints about the pace that always met with a good-natured jibe from Applejack or Rainbow Dash. While the canopy was dense, they could still tell the passage of time well enough. When Twilight and Rarity had lighted the way with their horns for over an hour, Luna signalled for their third break for the day and the final stop for the night.

"If nothin' else, we're not like to starve or resort to eatin' grass anytime soon. Ah got my saddlebags burstin' with food. Let's get a fire started so we can have some toast!" Applejack declared with a grin as she began gathering dry twigs around the camp area. Twilight knew what she was doing, having read a short primer on camping before they left, and she helpfully cleared the grass from a small area, scrubbing it down to dirt with her magic. The earth pony nodded her thanks. "If you can spark it too, that'd be great."

Rarity stepped up, her horn glimmering with a sheath of energy for a few seconds before one of the sticks caught fire. "There you go," she said with smile, and truthfully, Twilight didn't mind that she'd seized the task from her, a little concerned that she might have overdone it herself. The smallest of spells had a tendency to go awry these days. She'd try to test a new spell for cleaning her bedsheets, and before she knew it, she'd teleported her friends to the other side of Equestria.

"Not a lot of people on these roads," Twilight remarked after they'd eaten their fill on roasted bread and fresh fruits. Eating the food that would spoil first and the food that weighed the most was done at Fluttershy's recommendation.

"Braidford and the outlying hamlets there, as well as the villages to its West and East are almost considered a frontier by many," Princess Luna said, talking between delicate bites of a grilled apple. "We should reach Grey Hollows within five or six days, but those of the Hollows keep to themselves. Few people visit or leave that place, except for the lumber shipments they send every season."

Appearing to briefly consider this, Rarity looked consternated. "What makes them Equestrians, then? How do they communicate with the rest of the nation? No dragonfire line to Canterlot? No pony coming or going? How

do they know the news? How do they keep up to date on fashion and other matters of grave import?"

There were assorted chuckles and eyes rolled at the last bit, but Luna didn't share their mirth, speaking in a very deliberate tone. It was as if she didn't want anything to slip out that she didn't mean to say. "They are still very much citizens of Equestria, do not doubt that. They are just a little, set in their ways. I may not agree isolationism is an admirable trait, but it is not for me, or you, to judge. Then again, I have not visited the place for myself, this is all based on reports I have read."

"So you're saying they're a bunch of creepy ponies who don't have any friends," Rainbow Dash suggested, earning a very faint scowl from Luna.

"I am not quite certain how a village with hundreds of ponies could manage to leave anyone friendless," Luna protested.

"Ooh, you should ask Twilight!" Pinkie Pie suggested with a cheerfulness that clashed with every thing and thought in the camp other than her own coat and mane. "She was a total No-Friends McLonelypants until she came to Ponyville, and I'm sure Canterlot has a lot of ponies!"

Twilight couldn't help but chuckle at Pinkie despite herself. She couldn't really harbor any painful memories of it when she hadn't perceived it as loneliness back then, and now she had the best friends anypony could ever ask for. Pinkie saw her smile and hopped over to nuzzle Twilight affectionately, which earned a series of laughs from the rest of ponies around the camp. Twilight shrank back though she was still grinning. "Pinkie!"

Princess Luna just shook her head with a small smile, announcing that she had to attend some business. The mood around the camp dropped a little as Twilight finally extracted herself from under Pinkie Pie and stared off after Luna who had disappeared between the trees.

"She confuses me," Applejack finally said with a huff. "Princessy an' proper one moment, chummy the other, an' then lookin' at other ponies like they're so much dirt. Not that there's nothin' wrong with dirt, but, eh. Got a bad feeling about this."

Rarity hesitated. "She's well within her rights to act the part. She *is* a princess, and we're the entourage, yes? *Companions*, rather." The pristine unicorn looked unsure despite her words. It was obvious she, too, had noticed the little hitch during yesterday evening's conversation with Mayor Silver Links.

"I-I'm sure she doesn't mean it. And it's not that she doesn't like anypony, she just doesn't mean..." Fluttershy said, nervously pawing at the ground.

"I don't think she knows what she means," Pinkie Pie said, her head tilted. The pink pony looked oddly contemplative. Rainbow Dash snorted, but offered no comment.

"No thoughts on the issue, darling?" Rarity asked, and it took a second for Twilight to realize it was she who was being addressed. She just shook her head mutely, earning a worried look from her unicorn friend. Fluttershy was the one to voice the concerns, though.

"Twilight, are you okay? I mean, you don't have to answer that if you don't want to, but you look kind of, um, glum?"

"I'm fine," Twilight said with what she hoped was a reassuring smile to the sensitive pegasus. "It's just not quite what I expected. For better and for worse," She said, thinking not for the first time back to how different the two royal sisters were. Celestia burned brightly, but was always beyond reach. Even though it only rarely frustrated Twilight, it was something she was aware of. Celestia was the sun, warm and distant.

And as a contrast, Luna was the moon. She was at hoof right now, and had answered questions that she'd been dancing around with Celestia for years. Both metaphorically and literally, she was close, but also cold? That last bit didn't fit as well in Twilight's mental chart as she wanted it to. There was no flawless symmetry, reminding her that Luna was, indeed, a pony, and ponies weren't simple. All the same, much of the time, she seemed to *try* to fit the profile, stonewalling Twilight and her friends.

"Twi'? Why don't Ah believe ya when you space out for a minute after you say somethin' like that?" Applejack asked. When had she snuck up on

her? That'd probably be the spacing out bit, Twilight supposed. She hung her head, wondering why nopony asked her why she worried so much about the princess all of a sudden. She wondered, but more than that, she appreciated it, because she had no answers. Twilight lay down by the fire.

"Sorry Applejack." She offered, but the farmpony shook her head.

"There ain't nothin' to apologize for. Anyways, Ah reckon' it's time for us to tuck ourselves in." The suggestion was met with a murmur of assent, Rarity in particular eager to catch up on her beauty sleep despite her apprehension of sleeping without a bed. Fluttershy suggested they huddle up even though it was warm enough, and except for a token protest by Dash, they all lay near the fire soon enough, sleep claiming them one by one.

"Um, who's ... chewing on my tail? Not that I mind, but, um," Fluttershy whispered.

"Oh. Me. Sorry! Wrong tail!" Pinkie Pie chirped.

"Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash groaned.

"Aw fer Celestia's sake, simmer down and go to sleep you silly ponies!"

"Sorry!"

"Sorry."

One by one, albeit *slowly*, sleep claimed them. Twilight woke briefly to a noise and cracked half an eye open in the dead of night when the fire was down to mere embers. Luna stood looking down upon them, though she didn't seem to notice Twilight was awake. After a few moments, the princess turned and lay down on the opposite side of the campfire, closing her eyes. Twilight went back to sleep, meeting the dark open sky in her dreams yet again, along with the waxing moon.

The next five days passed in relative monotony, perhaps all too appropriately given that the dirt road, the name of which Luna did not know

given that it was 'new', seemed to be utterly unchanged all the while. Aside from bending a little to go around hills, it never turned. For all Twilight knew, they could have been walking the same stretch of road in a loop all the while, and they wouldn't know it. The forest itself was an almost entirely unbroken expanse of thick oaken trunks, and Rainbow Dash was complaining louder every day about not being able to fly.

"You can fly just fine!" Applejack had finally said, annoyed, pointing at the pegasus who was, indeed, hovering at least ten hooves in the air above her.

"It's not the same, AJ, and you know it! Augh! I need *air*!" Rainbow Dash had groaned, but when Twilight had tried making helpful suggestions about how she could locate them again, to try to facilitate a little flight, Rainbow Dash had adamantly refused to abandon her friends for even a second. Twilight had no idea how to interpret this. Exasperated and worn out by a million little fruitless debates like that, she had simply given up.

The food they had gotten from Braidford ran out on the third night, but the grass was green and healthy, though none of them were pleased about resorting to grass and leaves for food. Fluttershy admitted she missed her vegetable garden, and nopony faulted her for that.

It became a routine of sorts. Sleeping by a campfire in the deep of the forest and having to groom oneself in the morning to get rid of grass and leaves. Cantering onwards for hours on end leading to aching hooves and legs and making Twilight's thoughts drift longingly to the chariots that Canterlot fielded. What waited for her every time she closed her eyes was an ever-waxing moon and a dark sky that seemed clearer with every night. Twice, Twilight woke up due to the vivacity of her dreams, however formless they were.

The princess answered any questions asked of her, and for each day that passed, seemed more at ease with Twilight and her friends. Rarity asked her about Blueblood twice more, once to no reply, and the other time the princess quickly gave a vague answer involving the word 'later'.

At the dawn of the fifth day, Twilight thought Luna was back to being the companionable princess she had been shortly after the onset of their journey. Whether that was true or not, Twilight was afraid to try to repeat

the stunt of that night in Braidford, as much as she wanted to ask more questions, simply because she did not know what would come of it.

Luna's estimate had been close to the mark. On the afternoon of the sixth day after they had left Braidford the ponies were rewarded with a change of scenery. Slowing down to a walk, they came into a large clearing where a small stretch of farmland preceded a myriad of tightly clustered wooden buildings. The houses were never less than two stories high, and often twice as tall as that. It reminded Twilight of a small, severe and unpretentious Canterlot, presumably to utilize cleared land as effectively as possible.

Passing through the outlying farms, they were quickly spotted by a duo of young earth ponies who stood by a fence, their eyes slowly growing wide. After looking at each other for a second, the two grey colts bolted for the city as if chased by death itself. Luna tensed a little at this, but Twilight figured that a little superstition and fear wasn't out of place in a remote town like this. And it truly was a town, not a mere village, teeming with ponies even this late in the afternoon. The townsp ponies were a good mix of unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies all, but they were almost universally built stout and strong, a natural effect of being a community of woodsp onies, Twilight assumed.

"Where do we start?" Twilight asked aloud as they traded the forest canopy for a claustrophobic valley of buildings. The houses all looked similar, built in simple unpainted wood. Here was none of Ponyville's individually styled houses, and no exquisite masonry or loud signs and posters vying for attention like in Canterlot. Instead, every wall and door looked the same except for the occasional demure sign advertising a general store or a carpenter's.

"Grey Hollows is led by its eldest, but I see no reason to bother them," Luna replied quietly. Remarking upon her tone, the purple unicorn glanced to her sides and saw that the ponies around them were either hurrying away from them, or regarding them silently with suspicious glares.

Pinkie Pie toned her bouncing down a little and looked sceptical. "Maybe they just need a party? They don't look very happy. Why aren't they happy? Luna! They're not happy!" The last few words were said with no

small amount of frustration. Seeing so many ponies with nary a smile in sight was anathema to her existence.

"That would be because of me," the princess said. She had been gazing straight ahead the entire time as they wandered down the main street of the town, as if she wasn't acknowledging the existence of the town at all. When she spoke, it was under her breath, and her bearing was stiff. Darkly regal, even. "If we did not need to check for any traces of Trixie, I would have preferred to avoid this place altogether. I should have mentioned this."

Obviously disagreeing with the princess' approach of ignoring the strangers, Pinkie Pie was looking every which way, going so far as to wave at some of the ponies that looked at them. She got very little for her troubles except snorts and shakes of the head.

"Oooor, they just really need a party!" Pinkie Pie suggested again. "I mean, if they're afraid of you, shouldn't you just show them there's nothing to be afraid of?" The question was almost child-like in its innocence, but six heads were turned waiting for the reply which never came. Pinkie hmpf'ed and frowned to no effect.

Pausing at the narrow intersection in the centre of town, Luna glanced around quickly before turning to face her companions. "Rainbow Dash, would you be so kind as to fly up and see if you can find out where in this maze we might find someone to talk to?"

"Would I!" Rainbow Dash replied, shooting up into the sky even as Twilight wondered if she would know what to look for. Obviously, though, the pegasus had just been aching for an excuse to take to the air after so long trapped under the forest's shroud. High above them, Dash pulled loops and corkscrews and a series of maneuvers Twilight was certain didn't even *have* names because they weren't so much maneuvers as they were a particularly liberal interpretation of what a drunken bumblebee might do on a Saturday evening.

"So much for the low profile approach," Applejack muttered, noting the amount of skyward glares from ponies around them. When Rainbow Dash finally deigned to come down to ground level again, she came in low through a side street and took off more than one clothesline with her drag,

earning a string of unsavory curses. The chromatic blur skidded to a halt in front of the party with a loud whoosh and a huge cloud of dust that finally settled to reveal a beaming Rainbow Dash.

"Aw Celestia's privates, Dash, what'n the hay was that for?" Applejack asked angrily, but Dash's reply was a snort and a subsequent giggle. Applejack opened her mouth to say something else, but paused as she contemplated the nature of her swear, blushing fiercely. Luna looked a little uncomfortable and scratched a fore-hoof with the other in the following moment of silence.

Still snickering, Dash explained. "You want a favor from the Dash, you pay the toll, and I haven't gotten to use my wings for a week! Anyway, we probably want to head that way." She indicated a road like any other in the maze of buildings. "Lots of ponies gathering around a big building. Let's check what's up?"

Now that they had been made aware of the fact, it was obvious that most of the local ponies were generally gravitating in the same direction, and the streets were quickly emptying around them.

"If there is a public gathering, I suppose it makes sense for us to go see, yes," Luna said reluctantly, setting the course in the suggested direction. "Though I want to stress again that all I want is to do is ask our questions and be on our way."

They hadn't taken many steps before Rarity spoke up against the princess, so to say, to everypony's surprise. "Princess Luna, you claim these ponies are citizens of Equestria, you defend them, but it's very plain and obvious that there's something you're not telling us. Something is wrong here. Are we expected to follow you blindly like this? Is this what you want?" There was both frustration and a passion to her voice that Twilight didn't quite know what to make of. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who had found in Luna a strange set of contradictions and dichotomies.

"Not here," Luna sighed deeply. "But you are right, you deserve better. I promise you will have your answers tonight, after we have seen what we can learn here." Luna turned back and seemed earnest, almost apologetic, though an actual apology didn't fit with the part of being a princess. "Will that suffice for you, Rarity? And for the rest of you as well?"

Twilight nodded without thinking. She couldn't see the others' reactions, but Rarity managed to maintain her composure to answer. "That would be very welcome." As soon as Luna turned back to look ahead, the unicorns shared a surprised look. Neither had expected a concession like that.

As they turned a corner, Dash indicated the wall of pony flanks ahead. She had not lied when she said there were lots of ponies. It reminded Twilight of Ponyville's gatherings at the yearly winter wrap up. The main difference was that the gathered ponies seemed apprehensive, not expectantly excited. That, and where Twilight had struggled to get close enough to hear Mayor Mare's announcements last year, the crowd here parted before them like clouds before pegasi when they saw Princess Luna.

"Horseapples," Luna muttered. "I guess there is no way around it now. Follow me and do not make a fuss." The princess followed in pull exerted by the vacuum of ponies ahead of them, ever driving them forward through throngs of muttering, staring ponies. In moments they stood before a podium which rested in the shadow of a huge wooden building with multiple sets of doors. The place was labelled as the 'House of the Voices' by a sign over the central doors.

Atop the podium stood a quintet of aging ponies of which there were three mares and two colts, all wearing severe expressions as well as worn and aging formal attire. Judging by Rarity's subtle twitches and other tells, their clothing did not conform to current trends at all. As Luna stopped just short of the wooden steps that led up to their perch, the mare in the center addressed them. She was a dark grey unicorn with a golden bell cutie mark, and her expression reminded Twilight of Opalescence when she dug her claws into somepony.

"Greeted be, Princess of the Night," she sneered. The title sounded more like a curse than anything else when she spoke the words. "What demands does the crown have of Grey Hollows?" the mare asked. Perhaps it was just the height difference due to the pony quintet's elevation, but it seemed to Twilight that they looked down upon Luna on more than just the literal plane of things.

"I require only lodging for the night for me and my companions," Luna answered with practiced, affected boredom. "The crown has no business here in Grey Hollows today. We are passing through."

The five elders, to the last pony, scowled at that. A ripple of murmurs went through the crowd before another of the elders spoke up. He was a brown pegasus colt of immense build at the first speaker's left. "Anything you have to say to the people of Grey Hollows, you can say before all of its citizens. We, the elders of the Voice of the Hollows, will not brook discussions behind closed doors!" There were scattered agreements across the crowd. There must have been over five hundred ponies, Twilight guessed, and while she'd never been particularly claustrophobic, this seemed a great way to *acquire* such a phobia. She felt trapped, and the ponies around them radiated malice. Even the foals peeked out from behind their parents to sneer.

"Very well," Luna said, entirely unmoved. "I require lodgings for the night for me and my companions." The princess repeated. It was a deliberately unimpressive display. Twilight knew Luna had to be able to be as intimidating or inspiring as Celestia if she so desired, but here was none of that. Just a tall and dark lanky pony mare who happened to have a horn and wings both.

Another surge of angry mutters spread throughout the crowd. "Um, Princess Luna, what is going on?" Fluttershy asked nervously, but she was ignored. The pegasus mare turned to Twilight instead. "Twilight, what is she doing?"

"I don't know," Twilight whispered back. "Just stay close."

Rainbow Dash looked like she was seconds away from getting up on her hind legs and starting a fight just to relieve the tension. Applejack stood protectively behind the group, opposite of Luna.

"Very well. Have it your way, Princess Luna," the mare who had first spoken spat. "I am sure you will understand, your *Majesty*, that we are a self-sufficient community, and as such, we cannot spare anything but a room or two at the pub. Winter Sun will see to it. We of the Voice must discuss this, but we would greatly appreciate it if you would meet with us in the morning. This townsmeet is over!"

With those final four words, the ponies began scattering, going back to their jobs, homes, families and what-not as surely as if it had started raining. A few ponies lingered and stared, but the only one who approached then was a lithe white pegasus mare who looked to be about Twilight's age. Her mane was a pale yellow, and her flank was adorned with a sun that had a blue tint to it.

"I am Winter Sun, your majesty," the mare said to Luna, gracing them with what was the first smile the travellers had seen since they entered Grey Hollows. "Let's get you inside, it'll be dark soon."

Without waiting for a reply beyond Luna's nod, she turned and confidently led them through the narrow streets. Within minutes, they arrived at a flimsy door flanked by a sign nailed to the wall proclaiming it to be "Winter's Inn, Pub and Brewery". The buildings were but a mass of carpentry here, to the point where it was impossible to say where one building ended and the next one began. Not a single drop of paint had been used except for the signs.

As they stepped inside, it became clear that Winter's establishment was a humble one. The proprietress' eyes seemed to pick up on their assorted reactions that covered various states of polite dismay. She flashed another wide smile in return that seemed genuine and warm, reminding Twilight more than anything of Fluttershy when she had a moment to sit in her meadow and just enjoy the company of her animal friends.

Twilight realized that Winter Sun must have been working very hard to suppress her own demeanor while outside. Indeed, once the white pegasus began talking, it was as if a dam had burst. "It's not much, but you take what you can get, yeah? Not that I've any idea why the Voice decided to toss you in here, but hey, here we are, huh? Not a lot of inns to choose from here. It's a little messy, I guess, I was just about to start cleaning up before the regulars arrived for the evening, and then word went out that there was a townsmoot, and you know how that goes. Ah, well, you don't. Well, and I don't, either. That was my first. Oh, um, your majesty." She quickly bowed to Princess Luna, who was still stone-faced. The princess' passivity was made a little comical by the fact that the ceiling was so low she had to bow slightly to avoid getting her horn stuck.

"It's very nice here," Fluttershy said, and Winter Sun beamed, turning around as if she was watching her own pub for the first time, too. It had a small counter in the back, and what little room there was on the first floor was largely dominated by six small tables. A narrow stair down to a cellar, a narrower stair up to a floor above, and a door-less portal in the back suggested there was more to the place than what they saw. The present area was scattered with empty wooden mugs, the occasional glass, and it all smelled faintly of cider.

"It *is* nice, isn't it?" Winter Sun said. "I only set it up half a year ago, but I'm already turning a profit. 'Logging puts a thirst in ya', they say, and I'm thinking, hey, that's swell!" She grinned at this as she went on. "That means they all come to drink here, and then I get bits in my pockets! Just wish I had space for more rooms. And more travellers to put in those rooms, too."

"You don't have any pockets, though," Pinkie Pie pointed out with a gasp. "You should get some! Rarity here makes the prettiest pockets, even though they're usually attached to dresses that aren't always as pink as they could be." She said this last bit as if it were a grave issue. If Rarity had anything to say on this, she gave no indication. The white unicorn was busy telekinetically cleaning up the place, dirty mugs levitated in a line after her as she walked off through the portal in the back.

"I don't have anything like that, but I do have a- hey! Where are you going?" Winter Sun yelled after Rarity, turning to follow.

"This is the kitchen, yes?" Rarity replied as she disappeared out of sight.

"Well, yeah," their host agreed, peering in after her.

"Then it wouldn't be so hard to guess what I'm going to do. Where do you keep the soap? Ah, to the moon with this, can somepony give me a hand?" Rarity called, and Pinkie Pie bounced into the kitchen past the increasingly-flustered Winter Sun.

"But that's my job!" Winter Sun whined.

"I learned long ago," Twilight said with a smile, glad that not everypony in this town was hostile to them. "that sometimes, it's just best to accept gifts without making too much a fuss about it. Let Rarity and Pinkie help, it's the least we can do to repay you."

"We're still paying, Twilight!" Came the fashionista's voice from the kitchen. "But I haven't seen soap and a washbasin for a week, and I'm not leaving this kitchen until I'm clean!"

Twilight and the others shared a little chuckle, and Winter Sun herself seemed to relax a bit. "Anyway, isn't your 'job' to play host to royalty for the evening?" Twilight asked. It felt odd speaking as if Luna wasn't here, but the princess hadn't said a word since they entered. She was about as lively as any of the tables that surrounded them. The princess herself seemed perhaps to pick up on this now, and looked at Twilight, ever unreadable. She blinked as if clearing a film from her eyes.

"Oh, I suppose!" Winter Sun said. "Good point. Um, it's just, I've never met royalty before. I have two rooms upstairs, but they're kind of small. When I got permission to set up my inn-brewery-pub, they suggested, or, well, demanded I fit in the pub part. I think they disliked the inn idea altogether, but I convinced them that a town's gotta have an inn! You can have both rooms. No pony's used them for weeks." Twilight had to concentrate to follow the pegasus' meandering manner of speech, though it wasn't quite up to the level of Pinkie Pie's trainwrecks-of-thoughts.

"You're not local," Luna said, making everypony look up. Twilight had to suppress a snarky comment along the lines of '*Good morning, moonshine!*', not quite certain how the princess would react to a joke considering her mood.

"Oh, no, not at all, your majesty. I come from Grazeland far up north!" The pegasus was smiling broadly and bowed yet again.

"You don't have to bow every time you say something, you know," Rainbow Dash suggested with a smirk.

"Told you I've not met royalty before! Celestia visited Grazeland once when I was a little filly but I don't remember anything about that, and, you know, I didn't actually *meet* her." Winter Sun huffed before turning to Luna

again. "How am I doing, you majesty? I guess it's not quite ten out of ten, but is it at least like a seven? A six?"

"What." Luna said. It was not a question. "No, wait, never mind. You're not from here, that is what I wanted to know. I will return tonight." Luna turned carefully, barely avoiding impaling a low-hanging brass chandelier with her horn.

"Oh. I thought you were going to, um. You said you were going to tell us-, and, um, Rarity," Fluttershy muttered. Twilight had been about to protest as well. Rarity and Pinkie Pie came back into the common room again at this point, the former smelling faintly of soap.

The princess hesitated visibly, and finally let out a sigh that seemed to begin at her snout and carry on through to her tail, eventually seating herself on the floor next to a table. A little bit of the Luna beneath the princess shone through, and she nodded. "You are right, Fluttershy. I promised, and I do not intend to go back on that. Thank you for the reminder."

Fluttershy did not meet the princess' gaze, nodding meekly. Pinkie Pie trotted up to Fluttershy's side and sat next to her, which seemed to calm her.

"Ah hate bein' a stick in the mud, but don't you have to raise the moon? And is it okay for Winter Sun here to be here when we discuss business?" Applejack asked, giving the pub owner a glance. Winter Sun seemed to take no offense.

"She is not local. And I am sure Miss Winter Sun would hear what I am about to say anyway. Sooner or later, in some form, that is. If she stayed here in Grey Hollows." As if those words weren't cryptic enough, she smiled enigmatically and continued. "Plus, it will not matter in the end."

"What?" Winter Sun asked.

"Precisely." Luna concluded.

"Well, if it's okay, it's okay, and that's okay," Winter Sun concluded, disappearing under the bar desk. After a series of sloshing noises and a

few grunts, she returned with eight wooden mugs filled to the brim with cider, all balanced on her wings. Rainbow Dash was staring, jaw slack. Pinkie Pie was salivating.

"Uh," Twilight blanched. "Is this, um. I don't think this is *that* kind of story."

"On the house!" Winter Sun said, by way of nothing, least of all as a reply, as she spread the mugs out over two nearby tables. "Houth' fineth!" She grinned around a stein-handle.

Princess Luna gave a shrug and levitated up a mug, drinking deeply. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Applejack didn't need any further invitation. Rarity gave it a cautious sip at first, but her frown was short-lived. Fluttershy stole sips from her drink when she thought nopony was watching.

Peer pressure being the best type of pressure, Twilight sighed and gave it a taste, finding the taste quite pleasant. It was sweeter than most cider she'd tasted, and left a distinct aftertaste in her mouth, followed by a delightful tingle. The princess, having finished her entire mug and put it aside, looked up at the ceiling. It was if she thought she could see something through the roof, beyond. She drew a sharp breath.

"It goes back a thousand years," Princess Luna began, her eyes shining with ancient memories. "To the city of *Crepuscin*." She scanned the eyes of the listeners for any sign of recognition, and settled on Twilight's. The purple unicorn was thinking hard, having heard that name before, somewhere, in some books, but unable to remember anything tangible. With no answer forthcoming, Luna continued.

"*Crepuscin* was situated in what is now the Everfree forest, though the forest itself did not exist at the time. The city was built around the castle of the royal pony sisters." This elicited gasps of surprise, but Twilight just nodded. She remembered, now. It had been mentioned in the books that referenced the castle, but only as a ghost of a memory. Searching the very library of the castle in Canterlot had yielded no results. One day, Celestia herself had approached her faithful student and told her, without explaining why, to stop looking for books on the city. It hadn't stopped Twilight, of course, but there truly was nothing to be found.

"It was, at its height, almost the size of Manehattan, or even Canterlot. While that may be impressive in itself, you have to understand, there were fewer ponies back then. By today's standards, it would have no equal. Without the advances of architecture and engineering we have now, it was also more... spread out." The princess grew silent for a minute before picking up an untouched mug and taking a swig. It was Winter Sun's, but she hadn't moved since Luna had started talking.

"Standing upon the tallest parapet of the castle, you would be hard pressed to find the horizon amidst the buildings. Ah. But a thousand years ago, the city of *Crepuscin* was already ancient, and something festered in its midst. Corruption and betrayal given form." The princess grimaced and mercilessly finished the second jug before setting it down on the table with exaggerated care.

"There were those who saw it coming. The impending doom was in plain view half the time, and soon enough, the city began to wither and die as ponies moved. Fled. Have you ever watched a city die?" The question was sudden in its intensity and seven heads shook mutely. "I hope you are spared the sight. Watching somepony die is tragic, but watching the sum of everypony's labor and love, watching a community that is the *heart of soul* of an entire nation's efforts die?"

Luna looked like she was about to choke, her lower jaw trembling. She took a deep breath. "*Crepuscin* was reduced to a shell of its former glory in a matter of years. Faith in the... ruling body wavered, and for better or for worse, the borders of Equestria expanded in the wake of the exodus. But not everyone left."

"There were those who were blinded by loyalty and oaths. Those who would sooner die than abandon their promises. Those who were too stubborn to move." There was a small, almost derisive snort from the princess. "And those too brave to yield."

"When betrayal struck. When the corruption bared its ugly face, those who had asked for death by remaining in *Crepuscin* got exactly that. In a matter of minutes, *Crepuscin* ceased to exist. The Everfree forest is the fallout of the tragedy that occurred."

"The relevance?" Luna collected herself with these words. "The ponies of Grey Hollows are the descendants of the survivors. Those who survived the cataclysmic disaster in Crepuscin took up refuge here in the Hollows. To them, everypony else betrayed them by abandoning them and the city of *Crepuscin*. If they could survive declaring themselves independent of Equestria, they would."

Rainbow Dash shook her head and finished her cider in one gulp. Most other ponies hadn't touched their drinks in a while.

"But why are they angry with you, Princess? Why are they all so angry?" Winter Sun asked. The white pegasus looked confused, but the other ponies in the room knew the answer, and averted their gazes, wincing.

"Because I betrayed them more than anyone. I am the disaster that happened." The princess said. "I *am* the betrayal."

Chapter 5

Luna disappeared out the door without another word, her countenance wavering. Twilight had made to go after her, but Applejack had silently held her back by putting her forehooves on her tail.

Winter Sun was the first to move after the door had closed, heading behind the counter again and filling up seven more wooden cups of cider. This time Twilight Sparkle did not make so much as a token protest. The only pony who didn't eagerly grab a cup was Rarity, who donned her hat and excused herself to take a walk to 'clear her head'. Luna had, yet again, disappeared without so much as commenting on Blueblood. Somehow, Twilight couldn't make herself resent her for it this time, though.

Two hours later, the pub looked much like it had when they had entered earlier in the evening. Wooden cups adorned every table, much of the floor, and, as part of something Rainbow Dash had been itching to try for a long time, a cyan pegasus' wings.

"How do you *do* it?" The rainbow maned mare asked as she lost the two cups she'd been trying to carry. Fluttershy yelped as she got drenched in cider. This all earned a giggle from Winter Sun who was currently strutting around the limited floorspace with no less than twelve wooden cups on her wings. The 'practice sessions' were doing a very good job of keeping the cider flowing. Twilight appreciated the escape from her own mind. She didn't want to think right now.

"Years of practice! It's the same muscle set you use on the upbeat, but it's more about stamina. I'm not a very strong flier. Heck, I think I'm a worse flier for having done this for so long!" Winter Sun explained.

"Still awesome!" Dash declared, grinning at Winter.

"Hey, sugarcube, somethin' Ah've been wonderin' about." Applejack said as she sidled up to Twilight, taking her attention away from the pegasi. "Luna left here after sundown, didn't she? Or, Ah mean, after moonrise."

"Oh yeah." Twilight said, frowning as she tried to remember. She was feeling a little light-headed. "She'll be back before we wake up though, I'm sure." She giggled as she accepted another full cup. "Very sure!"

The farmpony grabbed another cup from the pegasus cider patrol that passed by and downed it almost as an afterthought. "Uh huh. But see, ain't she supposed to be raisin' the moon?"

"Oh! Oh. No, she's super good with that, I don't even think it's like, magic," Twilight explained with a superior grin. She knew something Applejack didn't. "You see, back at the inn..."

Pinkie Pie happened to choose that moment to cartwheel by, giggling madly. For a second, Pinkie met Twilight's eyes, and while she was most certainly smiling, it triggered a series of unpleasant memories related to secrets and the invasion of privacy. She and Dash hadn't actually Pinkie Pie sworn on saying nothing of what they'd seen, but the very thought sobered her up a bit. "Uh, actually, never mind," Twilight finished lamely.

Applejack raised an eyebrow, but didn't press the issue. Twilight sighed in relief.

"Aw, I wish we had some music or something to make this a *real* party!" Pinkie Pie said with a pout, lying on her belly over Rainbow Dash's back. Rainbow Dash had evidently just fallen asleep on the floor. "You know, like, some real entertainment! Not that I'm not the best entertainment anypony could possibly ever ask for, but you know, look at what I've got to work with!" The party pony poked Rainbow Dash in the flank with a hoof and was rewarded with a groan.

"Entertainment," Twilight repeated, squinting and hunting for an elusive idea that almost managed to dodge behind a cider cup before she seized it. "Wait! Winter!"

The white pegasus looked over at her from behind the counter, frowning. "I think I'm gonna have to get a new cask from the cellar, actually, Twilight. Do you mind helping me?"

"Yes- no, wait, I mean, not that! You said that somepony had rented a room weeks ago? Or did I imagine that? Or was that Pinkie Pie?" She'd

said it. The question was out in the open, and she no longer had to cling to it to remember it. Twilight sighed a sigh of disproportionate relief.

"Oh, yes. An entertainer. Oh hey, I wish she'd been here now! Uh, but she'd kinda kill the mood. Well, okay, I guess the mood is sort of dying anyway." Winter Sun giggled as she watched Pinkie Pie and Applejack carry Rainbow Dash upstairs, only to return a moment later. Fluttershy hadn't moved in a while, sitting in a corner by herself staring at a cider cup.

"Tell me everything!" Twilight blurted. "Important! Business with the crown. Of the crown. Whatever." This made the still fairly sober Winter Sun raise an eyebrow but she flew over to sit on top of the counter, sending a few empty mugs flying.

"Sure! She was a bright unicorn mare who came into town two weeks ago. Entertainers don't really do well here, because, um, I don't know if you've noticed, but the ponies here aren't exactly the type to appreciate a good comedy. Or even a fancy show."

Twilight frowned. "Bright? What color?"

Winter Sun blushed a little. "I don't know."

Blinking, Twilight tilted her head a little, almost spearing Applejack with her horn. The other ponies were taking an interest in the conversation, now. All except Fluttershy, who was still staring forlornly into her cup. "Didn't you say she stayed here at your inn?" Twilight asked.

"I'm color blind." Winter Sun explained with a bemused smile.

"Ooh, how many hooves am I holding up?" Pinkie Pie asked, holding up both her hooves and smiling with delight. Twilight facehoofed.

"Color blind. It means she can't see colors, Pinkie," Twilight explained, making Pinkie nod in understanding, gravely serious for a split-second before she suddenly gasped.

"But, if she can't see pink, how will she know who I am and where I am? Oh no! Can you see me Winter? I'm heeere!" Pinkie waved frantically with both her forehooves, making the white pegasus giggle. Twilight had to

admit it was, at the very least, one way of preventing an awkward moment. Winter Sun didn't seem quite so ill at ease now.

Applejack grabbed Pinkie Pie by the tail and dragged her off to explain and calm her down, the pink pony giggling and offering no complaint.

"Anyway," Twilight said with a little chuckle. "Did she perform here? Her name began with a P, right?"

"Oh. Yeah, Phoenix. How'd you know?" Winter asked in surprise as she produced a ledger from beneath the counter and opened it on the first page with reverent care. "Do you know her?"

"No," Twilight admitted. "I just heard of her, and guessed. Truth be told, we're looking for somepony else. A blue unicorn, and Phoenix is red. What's that?"

"Well, er, I like keeping a tidy business, so I have a little ledger that I ask visitors to sign when they rent a room. Would you mind signing later?" Winter asked, and Twilight nodded noncommittally.

Indeed, on the first and second pages, a number of names were written in different styles, all identifying the tenants and listing the duration of their stay. Two score names were all the book offered. If these were all the visitors she'd seen in half a year, the inn side of her establishment wasn't going very well at all. Twilight looked at the recent-most names, scanning for anything remotely familiar as she read aloud.

"Ocean Breeze, Sunbeamer, Princess Celestia- wait, what?" Twilight looked up, meeting an even gaze from Winter Sun.

"Sometimes, it's best not to ask, okay? It's not like I'm required by law to maintain this."

"Right. Green Sand, Potato Chip, Lovedthecider, and last, Phoenix, who stayed for four days it says here?"

"Mm. Who are you looking for? Maybe I can help?" Winter Sun closed the ledger and carefully put it back in its place.

"Trixie," Fluttershy suddenly said, hiccuping loudly in her corner of the room before going still again. Apparently, she was literally looking for answers in the bottom of her cup. Twilight had seen Fluttershy deep in her cider a few times before, and it invariably looked like this. It was one of the many reasons they were partial to sticking with sarsaparilla during Pinkie's parties.

With a sigh and a shake of the head at Fluttershy, Twilight added. "Trixie, yes, of the Great and Powerful Kind." She counted off two seconds on her hooves, and on the third there was a snort from Applejack behind her. It was almost comforting to know that when Trixie's name was mentioned, Applejack would, without fail, react thus.

"Oh, her!" Winter Sun beamed. "Funny you should mention it, actually. And she's so much fun." The pegasus smiled at some memory and giggled.

Twilight blinked. "What, you know her?!" It had come out a lot louder than she'd intended, and she covered her mouth with a hoof. "Sorry."

"Oh, well, she travelled by Grazeland twice, and I went to see her shows both times. She was really good! So many pretty explosions, so much fun!"

Disappointed, Twilight nodded sluggishly. "Ah, that makes sense. We just thought she might have travelled south, but I guess that's not-" The unicorn paused, suddenly dizzy. She fervently wished she'd thought to eat something. "That's not very likely," she continued. "Since there seems to be all of two entertainers travelling Southern Equestria at the moment. And of the two, the one who's a unicorn mare is the wrong color."

Winter Sun looked thoughtful, and Twilight figured their conversation was concluded, so she walked over to where Applejack and Pinkie Pie were building a tower out of empty cups. As she watched, Pinkie Pie added another cup on top of their ramshackle construction. It was nearly as tall as a pony, and it looked like the tower would fall. Twilight very subtly steadied it with magic without either of the earth ponies noticing.

"Actually," Winter Sun said, coming up at her side. "I think she did come by here two weeks ago after all." The white pegasus was sipping from a cup of water she balanced on a wing in an act of freakish flexibility.

The tower exploded, the cups scattering in a burst of purple smoke. Drunken magic was volatile magic. Applejack yelped as a cup bounced off her forehead leaving a painful welt. "Say *what*?" Twilight urgently asked.

"I think Phoenix is Trixie. I didn't think about it before now, but I'm fairly sure. Many ponies know of Trixie, especially in smaller places, since travelling entertainers kinda make rounds of Equestria, you know? Perhaps others can be thrown off by a little color change, but not me!" She gave Twilight a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Her hair was the same, even if it was shorter. I'm almost surprised I didn't see it sooner. And she was a lot thinner, too."

Rarity came back in through the door at this moment. She took one look at the room, sniffed, and gave a mighty frown. "Are you drunk? Eugh, this is positively disgusting!" Applejack groaned. It probably did not help the first impression that Applejack and Pinkie Pie were all too literally buried in empty cups on the floor.

"Phoenix is Trixie!" Twilight exclaimed. She noticed her words were slurring a tiny bit, but she didn't care. The newly entered unicorn blinked and carefully picked her way through the embattled pub to come a little closer.

"Excuse me?" She asked, but Twilight just hushed her and focused on Winter Sun.

"Go on! Tell us!" Twilight ordered breathlessly. She had no idea how much of this was an earnest desire to find Trixie and how much was a cider-borne focus.

Realizing she'd been put on the spot, Winter Sun seemed a little nervous. "Um, right, no pressure, right? I'm no showpony!" Twilight nodded, as did the others.

"Sorry, just, how was she doing?" Twilight asked again, trying to sound less exited, but all she managed was an almost comically exaggerated whisper.

Winter Sun frowned. "Well, when I said it was funny you should mention it, it's because, um, because of the story that 'Phoenix' told, right? She told a story about Trixie. And what a story! When she came into town, she spoke to the elders- the Voice, that is, and explained that she was a storyteller with a cautionary tale of woe and despair. Her own words!" She shook her head a little in disbelief.

"That sounds odd," Rarity noted. "It doesn't fit with her personality to not take credit, does it? I mean, we are hardly experts on her, but she seemed to fit a type, would you not agree?"

Twilight nodded at this, something that was harder than she'd have liked. Bringing her head back up took effort. Why hadn't somepony invented a detox spell yet? "If she's boasting about Trixie, why not do it as Trixie?" She said.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie," Pinkie Pie said, gravely. "You have to say her full name!"

"Says who?" Challenged Applejack.

"Says I!" Pinkie Pie said, crossing her hooves and staring back at the farmpony. "Apple."

"What?" Applejack asked squinting at the pink pony who stayed miffed and silent. "Is it just me, or are you even *more* random when you've had a bit to drink?"

Pinkie Pie's reply was to touch a hoof to Applejack's nose, and that settled that. Winter Sun took this as her cue to go on, though she was still smiling at the exchange.

"She wasn't boasting, I told you. Woe and despair, right? She got permission to use the podium at the gathering place. She called it the second chapter of the Great and Powerful Trixie's 'fall'. When she announced it, I thought it'd be a bad idea. An entertainer doing a story

about another entertainer?" Winter Sun shook her head at the idea. "At least, that's what everypony thought it was. Besides, who the hay wants to hear chapter 2 when you haven't heard chapter 1? Especially when she was gonna move on afterwards! I wanted to know how it ends."

The pegasus looked frustrated. "I still do, in fact. But anyway, it was good. I've heard a lot of stories back up in Grazeland, and I can tell a good story from a bad one. My family ran a huge inn, and we had lots of storytellers and stuff before everything went to the moon."

Sensing a story there, Twilight wanted to stop her and ask, but Winter Sun went on. "I can't tell you everything, of course. I mean, I don't remember it all, and you don't write down anypony else's stories. Bad form, you know? It began with Trixie having left home seeking greatness. She was challenged every step of the road, but it wasn't anything special like you'd expect. Nothing about chimeras or dragons, just a tale of, hum, adversity?" Winter Sun nodded, apparently pleased with that word. "She was denied spots in magic schools because her parents wouldn't vouch for her. Got into bloody fights that were described in detail. It made her out to be frightened and lost, but determined to carve her own place in the world despite having nopony to, well, watch her flank."

The mere memory of the tale stirred something in Winter Sun, as much was apparent from the way her voice fell as she went. The pegasus shivered. "I thought and hoped it was just a tragic tale written to inspire, but this chapter didn't really end well. She eked out an existence as a street performer and returned home only to be scorned by her parents. Rather than let her help them out of relative squalor, they clung to some stupid notion of pride, and it all ended up in a great fight where Trixie thought she had mortally wounded her mother, and fled."

The room suddenly felt that much colder. "I- do you think it was all true?" Twilight asked.

Winter Sun looked unsure and a little frightened. "I don't want to think about it as truth. I don't retell the tale very well, I'm sure, but when she spoke, it was real enough. She didn't use a shred of magic in telling her tale, and I'd love to know why she's changed. If that's actually Trixie's past, I don't... Nopony should have to live with that."

"Have to live with what?" Applejack drawled. "If she's a murderer, how'n the hell does that make her the victim?"

"It's not always that simple, everypony can be a victim," Fluttershy muttered quietly, almost forgotten in her corner. She nursed her cup as if it were a loved pet. Applejack puffed out her cheeks but held her tongue.

Rarity walked over to sit by Fluttershy, slowly stroking her withers and doing an admirable job of keeping the disgusted crinkling of her nose very subtle. Fluttershy still hadn't washed since her cider bath.

"Where are all the other ponies, Winter?" Pinkie Pie asked suddenly. Winter Sun scratched a cheek and looked around.

"It's true, usually the pub's full by now. Aw horseapples, I really should clean up the place in case somepony does come by. Uh, I mean, paying customers." The pegasus groaned. "I don't even know what I'm saying, sorry."

Rarity chuckled as she got up, trying to get Fluttershy to do the same by nudging her. "Darling, you have a business to run. We will of course pay for the rooms as the Princess promised-"

"And I for the drink," Applejack added with a tip of her hat.

"-but we understand. Shall we retire for the evening, perhaps?" Rarity finished, looking at Pinkie and Twilight as Applejack went upstairs.

"Aw, if you want to hang with the grumpy ponies instead, that's your loss!" Pinkie Pie giggled and bounced up the stairs, leaving Twilight to help coax Fluttershy up the stairs. After trying begging, pleading, asking, demanding and dragging the intensely depressed and unhelpful pony Twilight gave up and simply levitated Fluttershy, carrying her upstairs. The pegasus pony said nothing, not even when Twilight banged her head against the roof by accident.

In the end, nopony wanted to split up from the others after the revelations of the evening. Though the single bed was slightly smaller than Twilight's own bed back in ponyville, the five ponies ended up in the same little room where Rainbow Dash was currently sleeping. The chromatic

pegasus was on her back and had every leg and wing pointing in a different direction as if she was trying to cover the entire bed in as much Rainbow Dash as possible. As it turned out, she was doing a fantastic job of it. Every so often, one of her legs would twitch violently, making reclaiming the bed a dangerous task.

"Right," Twilight said, not quite sure what she meant by it. She sat down on a pillow in a corner and leaned back until her head hit the wall, horn pointing straight up at the ceiling. The wall rewarded the back of her head with a small splinter, but she didn't even care.

"Quite," Rarity agreed, sitting down next to the now-sleeping Fluttershy on the floor and giving her a very worried look. She fished out a brush from her own saddlebags which were placed on the floor nearby, and began brushing Fluttershy's mane.

"Uh-huh," Applejack pitched in as she closed the door very gently so as to not wake up either of the two sleeping pegasi, tossing the proverbial torch to Pinkie Pie.

"What are you guys talking about?" Pinkie asked. Twilight shook her head. The simple question sounded so profound to her that she must have been very far gone indeed. What *were* they talking about?

Twilight got up and climbed onto the bed, very carefully lifting one of Dash's wings away with her mouth so she could lay down, making herself as small as possible. She felt heavy and tired, and the second she lay down on the bed, she knew sweet oblivion was waiting for her around the corner. "I don't have a clue, and I don't care. I don't understand anything or anypony and I just want to sleep," Twilight said with a weary sigh as she closed her eyes. There was some noise and movement near her as somepony scooted up to her side, but she had no idea who it was. Sleep claimed her within seconds.

Only to throw her right back out. Twilight snapped awake, but she felt even more tired than before. She was left only with a vague memory of a dream where the moon loomed close and pushed the stars out of the sky. It was still dark outside, and the only thing that prevented the room from being in total darkness was a few slivers of moonlight through imperfectly mounted shutters. It felt like somepony had sprinkled salt in her eyes, and

when she lit her horn, the added light was a murderous series of stabs through her skull.

"What the hay?" Twilight muttered quietly, looking around. In the faint illumination granted by her horn, she could see that Rainbow Dash was awake too, staring at the room's sole door. They waited in silence for a few seconds before there was a series of knocks. Twilight had no idea why she was holding her breath. Who could it be except Winter Sun or Princess Luna?

Rainbow Dash carefully extracted herself from the middle of the pony pile on the bed and jumped over to open the door. This stirred the rest of them awake, and there was a series of confused looks. As the door slid open a crack, Rainbow Dash came face to face with an unfamiliar unicorn stallion whose colors were hard to make out in the relative darkness. There were more ponies behind him, but they remained in shadow.

"You are the princess' escort?" Asked the unicorn in a gravelly voice, putting a hoof forward so Rainbow Dash couldn't close the door. Applejack, now alert, hopped off the bed to stand at Rainbow Dash's side, effectively walling off the entrance.

"Escort? Sure, what's it to you, and who the hay are *you*?" Rainbow Dash challenged, her voice as dangerous as she could make it. Applejack widened her stance and looked grim.

"S'alright, Dash. Ah'm sure they mean no harm, despite how they're comin' off. That bein' as a bunch of skulking creeps knocking on ladies' doors in the middle of the night," the powerfully built farm pony said. The unicorn stallion appeared a little nervous, glancing behind him.

"We mean you no harm. Please. We are trying to help. The moon princess is gone for the night, yes?" Came the reply.

The ponies inside the room glanced at each other, but nopony interrupted or made a move to stop him from speaking. The stallion seemed pleased with this, and gave a small sigh of relief before continuing. "I can see you are all mares of reason. We are only trying to warn you. You do not know the creature you travel with. She is not who she says she is. She claims to be the sister of Princess Celestia, but she is much less, and

much more."

Twilight suddenly found herself between Applejack and Rainbow Dash, and she couldn't tell how she had gotten there. She must have blinked. The purple unicorn stared straight at the mysterious stranger in a wordless challenge, and he seemed taken aback.

"You do not understand!" The dark stallion's words were desperate now, his words coming faster and faster. "If you heard our elders speak- let me explain. The words of the Founders tell the story of what happened a thousand years ago, of the secrets we guard!"

"We are well aware," said Rarity calmly, getting up to stand behind Twilight. "The princess has given us the full tale, and we know everything. Everything on that subject, at least."

"You *know*? You carry with you the tale of her betrayal, yet you stand by her?" The eyes of the pony on the other side of the door grew wide. "Lunatics, all of you. You know what she did, you know what she could do again, and you stay by her side?! She has fed you a false tale or poisoned your minds!"

Rainbow Dash snarled. It was a feral sound from the back of her throat that made even Twilight back off a little. Applejack did not move an inch, still staring at the strange pony. It was Pinkie Pie who spoke up, though, peeking her head out from under the covers on the bed. "You don't think a thousand years cooped up in the moon was enough? She's all better now!"

"Exile for an immortal as a trade for near genocide? We still live with what she did. We are *still* in exile here," the stallion spat vehemently.

"More pain won't change anything," Fluttershy said softly, half-hiding behind her mane. "I mean, um, I'm sure nopony hates Grey Hollows and its ponies, but you're still angry with everypony else. Maybe it's time to let it go and move on?"

"Oh buck you. You don't know what you're talking about!" The stallion yelled and there was a murmur from the shadows behind him. Rainbow Dash looked like she was about to give the unicorn a taste of her hooves,

but he seemed to pick up on that, and backed away with a growl. "You are not welcome here." Those last words lingered as multiple sets of hooves disappeared downstairs and out, their mysterious visitors vacating the premises. The pall of menace that hung over the room was only partially dispersed by their departure.

"Well, that wasn't quite as cozy as a meteor shower. You know, when it comes to stuff to lose sleep over at night," Twilight remarked dryly. "Close, though."

"Why are they so angry?" Fluttershy asked, looking thoroughly saddened. "It won't help at all. They're hurt just as bad as Luna, but she's not trying to stop it, and they're not trying to stop it either." The yellow pegasus caressed an empty cider cup she must have managed to conceal while they brought her to bed.

"And who are they? Do their elders know of this visit, do you think?" Rarity asked. "And where is Winter Sun? I mean, visitors on our door in the middle of the night? Not very polite!"

Applejack perked up at this and immediately tore the door fully open, galloping downstairs. Seeing her haste, Rainbow Dash darted after her without question, and the other ponies followed suit, tackling the narrow staircase with reckless speed.

Downstairs, where they had been socializing earlier, they found Winter Sun on the floor by the bar with a huge lump on her head. Applejack had an ear to her muzzle, listening intently while she rested one hoof on the limp pegasus' neck. She waved for the others to be quiet, and got up a moment later, looking relieved. "She's still breathin'."

Fluttershy hurried back upstairs declaring she would get her saddlebags, dropping her pet cup on the floor in her haste.

"Okay, that's it, they're going down!" Rainbow Dash said, taking off and darting for the door. Twilight, seeing that nopony else would be able to stop her in time, held the door fast with a burst of telekinesis, jamming it. The pegasus crashed against the door and sank to the ground with a resounding *whump*.

"Medic." Rainbow Dash groaned as she tried to get back up, but Fluttershy ignored her, intently focused on making sure Winter Sun was going to be alright. Twilight fixed Dash with a stare.

"Haven't you been listening?" Twilight said, stomping the ground with a forehoof. "We don't know who did this, and we can't take on the whole town, even if we wanted to!" The anger in Twilight's voice wasn't really meant for Rainbow Dash, but at the situation as a whole. She turned around to look at where Fluttershy was carefully bandaging Winter Sun's head. The sight of the wounded pony did nothing to calm her down.

"The best we can do now is wait for the princess and explain to her what happened. She'll know what to do." Twilight concluded, sitting down. She felt incredibly impotent right then and there.

Applejack didn't look entirely convinced. "You sure we should tell her, Twi'? She's a bit odd, that one. Ah ain't sayin' she's going to put the town to the torch or somethin', but as Fluttershy says, more violence won't bring anypony back. Might be the best would be to just up and leave."

"She said she's not here as Princess Snooty!" Pinkie Pie protested. "She said she's here unofficially and stuff! And besides, when she failed to declare her visit as official and specifically noted that it was an informal one instead, it would be hard to justify a political response, such as taking pre-emptive martial action!"

There was a round of blinking and staring. "How-?" Twilight sputtered.

Pinkie Pie shrugged. "I read a book once! Or, well, Neighton's Laudable Lexicon of Law fell on me once, I guess. But it was open, and fell words-first! It was good."

"I see. I think," Twilight said. "Well, still, this is where we're meant to meet the princess at any rate, isn't it? We can't just run off without her."

The orange earth pony fixed her with a no-nonsense look. "You really trust her, don't you, Twi'?" She asked.

"I trust her judgment, at the very least, and I don't see why we should protect strange ponies who mean her harm." Twilight replied, trying to maintain her calm.

Rarity glared at Applejack. "It's a sensible point, and the princess hasn't given us any cause to not trust her, has she?" The fashionista shot.

Applejack merely nodded, satisfied. "If you trust her, then Ah'll make an effort to do the same," she said to the two of them, and Twilight smiled back at her, glad for the support.

Twilight loved all her friends dearly, but she didn't think any of them were qualified to decide how to respond to these hostilities, especially since it was aimed at Luna and not them. If she didn't trust her friends with this, she trusted herself least of all. When she had faced the unicorn stallion earlier, her primary instinct had been to take him apart with her magic and it had taken all her focus to stay her hoof. It frightened her.

Winter Sun stirred a moment later, staring up at Fluttershy who cradled her head. "Eurgh, my head! I swear, I didn't even *touch* the shadow cider."

"No, you got knocked out by creepy ponies who hate Luna," Rainbow Dash said with enviable succinctness even as she inched closer to Fluttershy. Dash pointed to her head where a small lump had begun to form after her impact on the magically reinforced door.

Fluttershy wordlessly fished out a salve from her saddlebags and set to work on the second patient of the evening. Twilight hoped it would be her last patient of the day.

"What? No! Oh horseapples, why do I *always* get mixed up with the crazy ponies?" Winter looked all around the room trying to get her bearings. "Half a year without a single incident, and now *this*?"

Twilight scratched the back of her neck, a little confused. "Uh. Sorry? What happened, do you remember anything?"

Winter a deep breath. "Um, I don't mean to say you're crazy, that wasn't what I meant to say, though I guess I said it." She blushed and

chuckled weakly before going on. "And yeah, well, a couple of stallions and some mares came by, I told them that I had closed for the evening, and, well, they asked to see 'the princess' party'. I said you were asleep, and they didn't really want to take no for an answer, and then it gets a bit hazy so yeah. I can add two and two together. Anyway, um, are you okay? Is the princess okay?"

Pinkie Pie almost looked disappointed at the suggestion that they were, in fact, possibly not crazy. Applejack helped Winter to her feet, nodding as she explained. "We're all okay, though Ah reckon' we got us a bit of a fright, too. How're you feelin'?"

"Alive!" Winter said with a broad smile just as the door to the inn went up, and a tired-looking Luna entered. The princess of the night raised an eyebrow at the state of things in the inn, the scattered cups, the smell, the two bandaged pegasi and Fluttershy's medical supplies spread out on the floor before her.

"I appreciate that you believe in living in the moment, but you should consider going to bed soon if we are to leave at first light tomorrow." Luna said without humor. Twilight had underestimated how happy she would be to see that the princess was alright, and struggled to keep herself from running over to her. It was made easier by the fact that the floor seemed to wobble a little for some reason.

"Actually, I think we have bigger problems, princess." Twilight said, morosely.

After the events following Luna's departure had been explained in full, the princess was quiet for a short while. The tale had been short, but Pinkie's miming and Rainbow Dash's sound effects had expanded a little upon it, especially when it came to their daring 'confrontations' with the proselytizers. Winter, in particular, seemed very anxious about the wait for an answer, and Twilight soon realized why as the second to pick up on it. There was a commotion outside, and one by one, the ponies' ears perked up.

"We have to leave right away," Luna said to nopony's surprise. "You are of course free to come with us, Winter Sun." The pegasus pony just nodded at the mention of her name and trotted behind the bar desk.

"Ooh, yay!" Pinkie Pie cheered, though was the only one to do so.

"Do you not have a business to maintain here, Winter Sun?" Rarity asked, though she sounded very uncertain.

"I did," Winter replied, surfacing with a stack of three books on her back, supported by her wings. Around her neck she had a pouch that jingled with the noise of hard currency. "But I don't like the way things are going here. I can't live in a place where that kind of anger's just beneath the surface. Or, well, it's not really *beneath* the surface anymore, is it?" She gestured to her bandaged head.

"It's hardly fair that you lose your business over this!" Rarity complained.

"Yeah, well, like, what can you do? Not your fault, not my fault, and if it's the hundreds of angry violent ponies' fault, you tell them, I won't. Besides, it's a new record for me, I think! Half a year! My last inn burned down after two months." Winter Sun almost sounded cheerful.

"Speakin' of hundreds of angry ponies," Applejack said from the other side of the room where she was peeking out a window. "There's a lot of angry ponies out there, and they got torches."

Twilight and the others rushed up to the window in a near-stampede that shook the floor. Pressing their faces to the glass, they could see what Applejack had seen. A semicircle of ponies stood outside, many of which held torches in their mouths or levitated them with magic. More ponies arrived by the second.

"We should go," Luna repeated, still standing in the middle of the room. "Now."

"Can't you simply blink us all out of here with magic?" Rarity asked, eyes still nervously glued to the spectacle outside.

"I could, but I fear that if they do not see us leave, they might set fire to the building or do something equally irrational." As she spoke, the princess was already moving towards the door. She had her mask back on, or at least, that's what Twilight had begun thinking of her expression as. A mask.

"They wouldn't..." Twilight said, running through the scenario in her mind, even though she didn't believe her own protest for one second.

"I hope you are right," Luna said, pausing before the door. Her tone was the spoken equivalent of steel, each word weighted. "Yet, I do not want to take the chance. Stay close to me and you will be safe. I promise you this. None of you will suffer for my failures."

"Who cares?" Rainbow Dash finally said, even as the door was magicked open. "I mean, if they're dumb enough to set fire to the place while we're gone, so what?"

"Rainbow Dash. The entire town is built of wood, and the streets are narrow. The entire city will burn." Twilight shuddered at the thought. "It's madness."

Dash paled. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not, but I hope I'm wrong, too," Twilight said.

The princess waited until they had all swiftly collected their saddlebags before she stepped out into the open. Her dark coat shimmered in the torchlight provided by the mob. There were jeers and insults, and more than one cry of *'for the fathers!'*, but nopony dared to take a step forward. Twilight and Fluttershy followed as close to Luna's flanks as they could get with Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash and Rarity one step behind. Applejack and Winter Sun brought up the rear.

Without breaking step, prompted by Luna, the entourage marched straight at the crowd and towards the middle of the road. Reluctantly, the crowd parted, but not before another wave of insults was hurled at them. *'Betrayer.'* *'Murderer.'* *'Go back to the moon!'* Twilight's heart sank at the hatred directed towards them. Towards Luna. While she herself had done

nothing to these ponies, she couldn't but feel as if the anger was directed at her too, merely by association.

As they reached the road, a tiny bright green colt with a yellow mane barred their way, glaring at Luna with such intense hatred that Twilight's step almost faltered. She had never before seen a colt or a filly wearing such a dark expression. The princess was not deterred, and it looked as if she would trample the little pony, but at the very last second he darted off, crying.

On the road and past the majority of the crowd, Luna marched straight south. She glanced behind her every now and then to make sure everypony was following, but she never stopped. She needn't have worried. Everypony stuck as close as was possible without tripping each other. The crowd followed them every step of the way and seemed to grow, still. Ponies appeared in the windows above them only to sneer and curse. *'You should have died, too.'* *'We will never forget!'*

The first stone was cast before they were halfway out of town. The ever-louder mob finally resorted to flinging rocks and other objects, but right before the first projectile would have struck Fluttershy on the flank, it evaporated in a burst of dark magic. A faint shadow of un-light clung to Princess Luna's horn now. Without fail, every time something would have hit Luna or any of the other ponies, the objects disappeared with an angry hiss of magic.

Twilight was so intently watching the phenomenon that it took her a little while to realize that amidst the shouts and roars of the crowd there was another distinct noise right by her side. It was Fluttershy, the yellow mare sniffing, trying to hold back tears and failing. Twilight exhaled deeply before giving her friend a wry smile. "Not quite the sightseeing tour we wanted, is it?"

Fluttershy's mouth twitched as she tried so very hard to smile, but ultimately she failed and looked away. "I just don't understand why they're all still so angry. No pony deserves this. And it's not just hurting Luna. They're all hurting, too." A rock whizzed over their heads and evaporated before it could hit an earth pony in the crowd on the opposite side.

"Yeah." Twilight agreed lamely, not sure how much she wanted to discuss this within earshot of Luna herself. The purple unicorn knew she was perhaps not as idealistic as Fluttershy, but it was hard to see and agree with a point of view that currently expressed itself as a lynching mob out for blood not fifteen hoof-lengths to your side.

Despite the relatively small size of the town, it felt like hours before they finally reached the end of the valley that was Grey Hollows. Every step of the way they were pelted with insults and rocks, and the press of ponies with bared teeth only grew and grew. Twilight could have sworn she saw the gleam of metal in the crowd, but suddenly they were out. The buildings finally gave way, and the purple unicorn breathed easier. Before them lay a few large farms, and beyond that, the forest and the night sky waited. The mob gave no indication that it intended to part with them, though. If anything, they pressed on harder, mere hoofbreadths away from the party. Twilight imagined she could smell the collective breath of the entire crowd.

They made it halfway past the farms when Luna suddenly halted. The last words hurled at them hung in the air still, and time seemed frozen. *'You'll never be free from the Nightmare! You're the real Nightmare, slayer!'*

The speaker, a young earth pony mare, stood one step ahead of the crowd, sneering. No pony moved except Luna. Twilight realized now that nothing had interfered with time. It was as simple as no pony *daring* to move. The princess wheeled around and lifted off the ground with but a single beat of her wings. The blast of wind forced Twilight to steady herself, and the dust that whirled up stung her eyes.

Luna hovered right over the heads of Twilight and the others with lazy flaps of her wings while the crowd slowly drew back step by step, further isolating the one mare. Thus, for the first time, Luna, Princess of the Moon, attended the ponies of Grey Hollows and acknowledged them. As they all watched, the princess wrapped her wings about her, suspended impossibly in mid air. Behind her, high in the sky, the Moon suddenly seemed to glow brighter, becoming an orb of pure silver, and the moonlight bent around the Princess-Matriarch in unnatural ways, orbiting her form as no light had a right to do.

The princess spread her wings again. In an instant, the entire area as far as Twilight could see, from city to horizon, was bathed in a sharp

moonlight that came from everywhere. Not a single shadow could be seen. All that remained was a cool and omnipresent moonlight glow that set a chill in her. Twilight was horrified, but more than that, she was utterly fascinated. Her body screamed at her, told her to run, but she was rooted in place, transfixed.

“Your hatred. It makes you blind,” Princess Luna boomed in a voice that seemed to rattle every bone in Twilight’s body. The goddess alighted on the ground in front of the crowd, wings still spread, drawn up to her full size. Slowly, she stalked towards the crowd and the lonely mare. Under her gaze, the lonely earth pony’s legs gave out from under her and she collapsed.

“Your quarrel is with me and me alone, and I ask you now, citizens of Grey Hollows, does anyone here *dare challenge me?!?*” The princess roared in a voice that must surely have been heard in Canterlot, rearing up on her hindlegs. Her horn flared to life with a bright silver sheen. Twilight tasted blood in her mouth.

Pure chaos ensued. Every single pony in the crowd fled, a wave of terror sweeping over the mob with such force that it seemed as if a gargantuan pony swept an outsize hoof over it. More than half the ponies fell outright in their haste to get away, and the thundering hoof-falls took minutes to die away. Dozens of ponies limped after them with obvious injuries, and a few lay on the ground still, trying to get away but their legs failing.

The fallen mare who had uttered those fateful words tried to stand and failed, looking like a foal trying to take her first steps. She looked up at the wrathful goddess standing over her one final time, pupils mere pinpricks. Convulsing, the smaller pony passed out.

Only when relative silence settled and Luna folded her wings again did Twilight manage to move and think again. A few ponies were darting out to try to collect their wounded friends, but the moment had passed. Only the earth pony mare lay alone. She was moss green, Twilight noted by way of nothing now that the regular moonlight slowly returned. Turning away from the mess, Twilight gasped at the state of her friends. They clearly hadn’t reacted in the same way to Luna’s power as she had.

Pinkie Pie's gaze was fixed upon the ground, the earth pony utterly expressionless. Tears were dripping steadily to the ground, and she did not move. Rainbow Dash stood in the middle of all her friends with her wings limply spread out to cover them as best as she could, but her face was averted. Rarity was staring at Luna with eyes wide and unblinking, her breath shallow. Applejack seemed out of breath, sweating and staring at the ground in front of Luna. Winter Sun lay huddled on the ground further down the road, apparently having fled.

And Fluttershy's face was a twisted mask of rage.

"You *brute!*" The pegasus yelled at the princess, spittle flying from her mouth as she blocked her path. "Haven't you *all* suffered enough? What do you even think you are trying to accomplish!? You're just hurting yourself and them, you're hurting *everypony!*" Their eyes met briefly, and Fluttershy was heaving for breath, her incensed expression a perfect opposition to Luna's apparent impassivity. The alicorn responded by sidestepping and walking calmly past her, to all outward appearances unrepentant. For a second, it looked like the usually-shy pegasus mare would charge after her, and Twilight's brain nearly shut down at the thought. Instead, Fluttershy ran over to the fallen mare. She barely had time to shed her saddlebags before Luna spoke without turning.

"We cannot linger. Can we just leave? Please. I am... *sorry.*" Luna's voice cracked and trembled, drawing everypony's gaze, including Fluttershy's, almost against their will, but the moon princess continued walking slowly down the road without any further words. Rainbow Dash shakily collected herself, wings hanging listlessly at her side, and looked to Twilight.

"I'll make sure Fluttershy's alright, Twilight. We'll be over in a sec. Just get going." Dash said, finding her courage and voice again before flying over to Fluttershy. Dumbstruck, Twilight just nodded, putting a hoof to Applejack's withers. It didn't take a lot of prodding to round up the rest, though it took a few words to encourage Winter Sun to move. The pegasus seemed embarrassed and frightened still, keeping almost uncomfortably close to Twilight and the other ponies once they got her up.

By the time they reached the edge of the forest, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash touched down next to them and fell in step. The forest looked depressingly similar to any other edge of the clearing.

Fluttershy would not meet anypony's eye. "I'm sorry," she muttered, all anger long since drained from her. The group walked a good distance behind Luna, unwilling to close.

"You've got nothing to apologize for, sugarcube," Applejack said hoarsely.

Pinkie Pie shook her head slowly. "Luna apologized, too. So we're all going to be okay, right? We're all going to be happy and laugh together again, right?" Her big blue eyes stared pleadingly at Twilight. "Can you go talk to her, Twilight?"

Twilight swallowed. She had no idea what she would say to Luna. Fluttershy quietly spoke up, adding to the burden. "I... can you please tell her I'm sorry? I didn't mean to, I- I didn't want..."

"Dangit, Fluttershy, Ah told ya, you ain't got nothing to be sorry about." Applejack huffed. "But all the same, Ah'd like an honest answer on what the hay that was all about. Ah don't rightly blame Luna, Ah think, but Ah'd feel a lot safer knowing what was actually going on." The farmer grunted, and Twilight slowly realized it had to be her that talked to Luna. Rarity looked lost, and Rainbow Dash was sticking close to the others, quiet, now.

All the same, Applejack's words surprised Twilight. "You're not mad, Applejack? You've kind of been the biggest, er." She paused.

"Stick in the mud? Seventh wheel? Yeah. Well, Ah still don't know about Trixie or Gilda or anything. But Luna's let her true colors show, an' now Ah know what she is, an Ah can look out fer it." She snorted. "Ah reckon' they're just as bad as each other, Hollowers and princess all."

Pinkie Pie looked away, and Fluttershy apparently could not bring herself to say what she wanted to say. Twilight was not restrained in the same way, feeling a sneer creep up on her face. "This is *not* the 'real' Luna."

Applejack seemed taken aback by the sheer ferocity in Twilight's voice, apparently even forgetting to be stubborn for a second. "Ah didn't mean- or, well. We'll see. That's all Ah'm sayin'."

"Right. Well." Twilight said conclusively, willing herself to up her pace before she could come up with some excuse to put this off further. Soon enough, she drew level with the goddess who had, moments ago, routed an entire town with her presence. An alicorn who, despite Twilight's anger for what she had just done to her friends, despite disagreeing with her treatment and handling of the whole mob, she could not manage to fear any more. Luna still intrigued her, fascinated her and perhaps most of all, worried her. But somehow, after the recently display, it was impossible to fear her.

Because Twilight knew Luna herself was terrified. Perhaps it would have been more rational to fear her even more, now. An unstable, frightened pony with powers like these at her command was surely twice as dangerous, especially since Twilight suspected the subject of these fears was, in fact, Luna herself. It was something she had seen before.

But she couldn't. She looked up at the tear-streaked face of Princess Luna, and only felt concern and sadness. Perhaps Rainbow Dash had been right. She was just a pony like any other. The princess had alluded to as much herself; that immortals would go crazy if they couldn't adapt and be like most, laughing and crying.

"Fluttershy is sorry. Everypony worries about you," Twilight said softly, though she hadn't really asked. She assumed. Or projected. "I worry," she admitted. "Are you going to be okay, Luna?"

The princess nodded mutely. She managed to look a little regal even in her grief, but only as far as grace went. There was no haughty poise or commanding aura surrounding the alicorn now.

"Please tell me. What happened back there?" Twilight sped up a little to walk a step in front of the princess, looking up at her and willing her to snap out of her reverie. It took a few moments, but eventually, Twilight could be ignored no longer.

"Why did you not side with the people of the Hollows?" Luna asked, her voice thin. "Why do you refuse to hate me still? You have seen how ugly I am on the inside. Why are you even talking to me, Twilight Sparkle? You want the sun goddess, not the damned alicorn princess of night, and you are right to do so."

Twilight felt as if she'd been slapped, though the words have had neither anger nor disappointment in them, only sadness and loss. "Y-you're wrong." She stammered, looking behind her to see her friends still following. Pinkie Pie saw her looking, and gave her a confident smile. Seeing this, Rainbow Dash perked up, too, draping a wing over Pinkie Pie and smiling, too. Rarity gave a little nod, and soon, everypony silently lent Twilight their support, and that was all she needed. Maybe she was right after all. "You've got it all wrong." She repeated, putting everything together in her mind as she spoke.

"You may think of us as pupils or companions, but everypony around you is trying their very best to think of you as a friend. Sure, you make it hard sometimes, but you haven't scared us away yet, and I don't know if you could do that even if you tried." Luna offered no comment as Twilight spoke, but the bookish mare didn't stop.

"Perhaps what you just did was wrong, yes. You hurt a lot of ponies. But the why matters as much as the how." Twilight blushed a little as she realized she was reprimanding a goddess. She didn't let that stop her. "I don't pretend to understand you entirely. None of us do, I think. But that's just because you're not trying very hard to *let* us understand you."

The moon goddess, it seemed, wasn't very used to being spoken to like this, looking at Twilight in a mixture of surprise and an indeterminable something else. Respect? Recognition?

"I'm not going to ask questions, because I know you probably won't answer. You do that a lot, but, well, if you want to talk, I'm all ears. I think Fluttershy would love a word with you. She's very scared of you still, but she's tough. If you win her over, Rainbow Dash won't be far off. She thinks you're cool."

"Pinkie Pie already wants nothing more than to be your best pal. She's the most open-minded pony you'll ever meet. Applejack will come

around, too. She's just trying to protect us, but I think she realizes now that you're not a threat to *us* at least. I don't know what Rarity's thinking at the moment, but you know she's reasonable and smart - even though you're ignoring her." Twilight sighed and threw her head back, exhaling. "We all have our bad days, right?"

"If I am feared, then I have already lost, so I will try to make amends," Luna agreed. "But what about you?" She asked quietly. "What do you think of me, Twilight Sparkle? You fear me too, but in a different way. I do not understand how or why."

Twilight found it hard to reply, and harder still to look at Luna, now. This only proved the princess' point but certainly didn't help explain it. "I, um. I worry about you a lot. And I want to help."

"Obviously," Luna said with a little grin, finding a hidden reserve of mirth somewhere. "Considering you are here playing ambassador for your friends. I think even my sister fails to understand your true strength, and it has nothing to do with your magical powers."

Twilight's cheeks felt hot, and words were harder to come by all of a sudden. "Uh, right. When you say make amends, do you mean with regard to the people of the Hollows, too?"

Luna's smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and Twilight almost regretted asking the question. "I will have to think on what to do about the Hollows. I do not know what I can promise you beyond that. Can I ask you a question, perhaps?" Luna asked, waiting for Twilight's nod before she went on. "Do you, Twilight, feel I was unjust? I may have had an... unfortunate reaction, but those ponies were getting violent. Perhaps they would have left us alone, eventually. Alternatively, it could have escalated and somepony would have gotten seriously hurt. What would you have done in my stead?"

"Princess Celestia always stressed that with great power comes great responsibility," Twilight began, a little uneasy. "And few have greater responsibility than the two of you. But I don't know what that really means. They are empty words. All it says is that you have a responsibility to use that power properly, but what is proper? You defended my friends, but you hurt others." Twilight tried very hard to form an opinion. She knew

Fluttershy was somewhere between enraged and mortified, or rather, she straddled the two reactions. It was not as easy to find her own answer when she was put on the spot, though.

Philosophical questions had never been easy. They had no clear answers, and while Twilight knew she couldn't ignore the study of morals, it was all too easy to end up stranded and lost. Just like now. All she had left was what she felt at the moment, and it threatened to express itself in tears.

"I'm sorry. All I can think of is that I'm glad I'm not you, and that I didn't have to make that choice myself." Twilight said, swallowing. Luna leaned over to gently nuzzle Twilight as they walked, stopping her tears before they could form. The unicorn's heart skipped a beat.

"I did not mean to trouble you. I could have gone easier on the ponies of the Hollow. Do not think too much about it, and do not mourn for me, ever," Luna implored.

Twilight felt the final words, even though Luna never said them. She had no idea how, but she heard it. *'I'm not worth the tears.'* Twilight was still completely blank, torn between shock and depression as the other ponies trotted up to join them, seeing their conversation concluded. They all fell in step around Luna in relative silence, though Winter Sun still shied away from the princess. Noticing this, Rarity moved a little closer and tried to talk to her, but the pegasus was withdrawn, different from her earlier talkative self.

Nopony set to broach the issue of their pace, and the eight ponies walked slowly through most of the morning. The canopy gradually thinned, and even though the sun had risen, the air was still cool. Before long, it started raining. It never amounted to much more than a light drizzle under the protection of the oaken forest.

Even though nopony complained, yesterday's drinking, the lack of sleep and the fact that nopony had eaten much all finally expressed itself in Fluttershy stumbling and falling to her knees. While she was quick to get up and pretend nothing had happened, Applejack stopped, which in turn made everypony halt.

"We can't go on. We need a break," the farmpony said, as if daring Luna to disagree.

"I'm fine, Applejack," Fluttershy protested, rubbing her eyes.

"No, she is right. We need to set camp and have something to eat. We should not really sleep until nightfall, but a nap would be welcome. I need rest as well," Luna admitted. Twilight noticed that the moon princess did indeed look haggard. Was that a result of the power she bared yesterday or something else?

Chapter 6

Eager to put as much distance as they could between themselves and the town of Grey Hollows, Twilight, Luna and all the others were quick to break camp after eating. They travelled through the entire day, though they were forced to keep a slow pace, pausing almost every hour. None of them had slept much, and some, Twilight among them, were still nursing headaches. Winter Sun seemed a little more at ease, but the usually jovial pegasus was still quiet. There had been a round of demure apologies all around earlier in the day, yet the memory of what had happened was still fresh.

The forest finally started thinning out in earnest as the sun's journey neared its end for the day, much to the exhausted ponies' relief. The canopy cleared and the Oakwall forest became a mass of green left behind. Rainbow Dash celebrated by taking wing immediately.

When Luna called for the last stop of the day, they stood at the top of a small cliff where the road forked. Ahead, a mass of rolling hills and small valleys were flanked far to the east and west by mountains. One of the roads wound south down the cliff side and was visible here and there as it meandered through the highlands. The other road went straight west through gentler hills, disappearing around a bend to the northwest. The only trees present ahead were in small copses, and patches of snow clung high up in the shadows of the mountains. The wind picked up a little, as if it had been waiting for them to step out of the forest.

"Going west here will probably be the best way to get back to Ponyville, turning due north, then east," Luna announced. "We can set up camp for the night in cover of the cliffs here. Perhaps we should have taken advantage of the protection of the forest while we could, but I do not think any of us desire to take a single step back."

"Ponyville?" Rarity asked, looking up from her sketchpad. She had been quick to grab her sketching coals when they stopped and was struggling to hold the paper down in the wind.

"Yes. Home, I believe you would call it," Luna replied with a quick glance skywards.

"Who is going home?" Twilight and Pinkie Pie asked in chorus.

"You, surely?" The princess looked a little confused.

"Gilda is like, south of here, yeah? Why turn around now?" Rainbow Dash said, incredulous. "What's up?"

"Ah think the princess is callin' us a bunch of quitters." Applejack's announcement was delivered with a smile, and Fluttershy gave a start, looking at Luna with wide eyes.

"And you still owe me an answer," Rarity shot in with a bemused smile. None of the ponies moved an inch, facing Luna and the road south.

"I, ah. I simply assumed that after, well." Luna turned around, putting her back to the cliffs. She faced the ponies, but seemed at a loss for what to say to them.

Twilight grinned, emboldened by the fact that her friends seemed to be of the same mind as she. "I tried telling you. Give us some credit," the purple unicorn said. Any trace of smugness she might have felt was smothered by contentment. They'd get through this, and everypony was prepared to do so together. If only Luna was willing to try.

Winter Sun looked a little uncomfortable in the quiet that followed, and Twilight's heart went out to her. The pegasus stood a little off to the side, almost forgotten. Fluttershy seemed to notice this, too, and went over to talk to her in quiet tones. Luna was still looking at them, switching her attention from pony to pony with almost painful slowness. Her eyes bored into them one by one, and she seemed satisfied with whatever she saw.

"You are resolved, I see. Once again, I underestimate you," Luna said as she started down the southern path. The other ponies followed without hesitation. "I will do everything in my power to make sure you do not regret it."

"Winter Sun," Luna said. Her voice was soft as she looked behind her at the pegasus, but Winter Sun could not keep from flinching under the princess' attention. "I suspect you might want to head west down this road from here tomorrow, though you are welcome to stay with us for the night. Unless you are heading for the border fort, or going back through the Hollows, you have precious little choice. Do we have any spare food for Winter Sun here?"

"I got some fruit cake!" Pinkie Pie piped in, though she looked a little unconvinced. "You sure you have to go tho, Winter? You're really neat."

"This is more than I really bargained for," Winter Sun said with a bleak smile. She was still staying on the other side of the group, keeping as much distance between herself and Luna as possible on sheer instinct. "I don't... this isn't my life. I love listening to tales, but this is all a little too real for me. No offense. I'm not a hero, and I don't want to get tangled up in whatever it is you do."

Twilight nodded, still feeling terrible about Winter having lost her establishment. She'd noticed the looks Rarity had been giving Winter Sun, and it was obvious the white unicorn also felt strongly about that exact point.

After following the road that hugged the cliff for a few minutes, they were on level ground below. Luna prompted the party to set up in what wasn't so much a cave as a half loam, half stone indent in a less-than-sheer cliff face. All in all, it looked like a very unimaginative and unskilled giant had made a half-hearted attempt at a cave in a very bad spot. The theoretical giant must also have gotten bored half-way, because it could barely fit everypony. It was better than nothing, but only marginally. The wind was getting stronger and colder still.

"This will have to do," Luna announced, glancing about. "I'll stand watch."

"Stand watch?" Twilight asked as the ponies huddled closer for warmth. "Is there anything to stand watch for? We're still in Equestria, right?"

"Ah. Nothing like that," Luna said with a chuckle as the last of the ponies clustered inside the chosen shelter. With everypony behind her, she turned away from them and slowly spread her wings. Winter Sun looked a little nervous, but Twilight was paying rapt attention.

From the edges of the alicorn's wings, a half-globe of transparent purple energy sprung forth, covering the area around the little cave-indenture and sealing the ponies in. The princess stood half inside and half outside of the bowl-shape that enveloped them. The wind suddenly stopped, and the air felt comfortably warm.

"Well ain't that somethin'," Applejack said. "Guess we don't need firewood after all."

"That. Is *awesome*," Rainbow Dash said, gaping. Twilight was just staring trying to analyze what exactly Luna had done. What surprised her the most was that there was no evidence that Luna was even using magic right now. The princess stood at rest, her horn silent and dead.

"It's very nice." Fluttershy quietly remarked. "But, um, don't you have to go, soon? You don't have to, you just usually leave around now to raise the moon." The butter-colored pegasus pointedly glanced skywards where the sun set in the mountains to the west.

The princess looked back over her flank at the assembled ponies with one eye, offering Fluttershy a lopsided smile. Only Winter Sun had gone to sleep, the now former pub owner exhausted by the rigors of the day. The rest of the ponies, though tired and aching, were awake and attending.

"I have not raised the moon in over a thousand years, Fluttershy." Luna explained.

Twilight felt a nervous chuckle form and die in her throat. Luna did not seem to be joking. Everypony else seemed confused, too.

"My sister handled the night in my absence as you no doubt know. She still does so, day after day, even with my, ah, return." The princess cleared her throat. "I find it hard to even look at the moon, now. Perhaps it is natural, after so many years. I think it is pathetic, personally."

Pinkie Pie rose and took a step forward, looking up at Luna. There was a number of awkward noises. "Princess?" Twilight asked, unsure what she even meant to say, but Luna was undeterred.

"When I came to you with the offer of this trip, I thought it was for the benefit of you and our quarries, if you will. Long ago, I was known to certain tribesponies as the goddess of second chances, tied to renewal and rebirth. It felt natural that I should be the one to lead you," Luna said, with a sigh. "I am not so sure who this journey is intended to benefit anymore, now."

The alicorn let her eyes roam over the surprised ponies again, a smile forming on her lips. "No more of this, now. We have more important things to do. Please, rest, and sleep for as long as you like tomorrow. The highlands ahead of us will take many days to cross on hoof, and then we go through the Scar to Scandineighvia."

It didn't take long before every single pony was asleep aside from Twilight Sparkle. The unicorn was annoyed with herself for being awake, and twice as annoyed for wasting time being annoyed with herself. After listening to Applejack's soft snoring for the better part of an hour, Twilight got up. Her legs protested, her eyes were sore and tired, but she walked over to stand by the princess for lack of a better thing to do. The princess stood with her eyes closed, but clearly heard or felt her approach.

"You really should rest, Twilight," Luna said. She sounded neither surprised nor annoyed.

"Why haven't you done this before?" Twilight asked, experimentally pushing a hoof through the translucent dome of shadowy energy. There was no resistance, and outside, it was even windier and colder than it had been earlier. "It's... very cool." She immediately felt stupid for having said those last words, and winced.

"I underestimated the memory of ponies when I plotted our route through Grey Hollows. I had hoped to make this journey as Luna, not as a princess, but I no longer see the point in being so strict with myself," Luna murmured. She looked and sounded like she was half asleep, entirely still and unmoving except for her mouth.

Twilight thought about that for a second. "What's the difference? I mean, I'm sure you have a life outside of being a princess, but you don't just mean the magic, right?"

Luna inclined her head ever so slightly. "You are right. What is the difference between Twilight and Twilight Sparkle, favored protégé of Princess Celestia?"

The question stayed put while Twilight mentally nibbled at it from different directions. Luna waited patiently. Or slept. The princess was breathing softly, but except for that, she may as well have been a statue.

"I don't know if I'd ever separate the two," Twilight finally admitted, thinking back. She realized that she had almost as many memories of Princess Celestia as she did of her parents. She remembered when Celestia had taught her how to teleport, and how proud she had been when she finally mastered the notoriously complicated spell.

She remembered when she beat Celestia at chess, even though she knew she'd let her win. To this day, Celestia refused to admit it. She remembered when she had hidden in Celestia's closet until the princess became so worried she called for the guards to help her look.

The last memory was a little painful, too. She had come running out of the closet right away when she heard Celestia raise her voice, afraid she would be angry. The princess had swept Twilight up in a crushing hug and told her how much she loved her. It had made Twilight even more afraid than if she'd been angry with her, she reflected.

"I suspect what you are getting at," Twilight mused, trying to bring herself back to the present. "are the duties and obligations that come with titles." Luna nodded at her words.

"There is that, yes. For you and I, more directly, there is Celestia herself, too." The princess tilted her head down an inch. "I love my sister just as much as you do, but after all these years, there are none alive who remember me as I was. For generations I will be compared to my sister, and I will forever be the younger sister. Never you mind that the time between our births is infinitesimal on the grand scale of things, compared to how long we have lived."

Despite that there was nothing but warmth and resolve in Luna's voice as she spoke of her sister, Twilight was greatly saddened. Was that how ponies thought of Princess Luna? Forever the lesser of the two, simply because of that damnable word, "younger"? She had to suffer this atop the vague yet indubitably negative rumors surrounding her return?

"I do not know everything that will come of all of this, even now as I realize this trip is for me as much as it is for all of you." Luna chuckled quietly. "Prophecy and dreams, remember? I have seen that at the end of the journey, I will be able to take up my duties again. It gives me hope. A princess of the moon who cannot even look at her namesake? Laughable."

It was the second time Luna had said words to that effect tonight. That she could not stomach the sight of the Moon. Twilight may have lost her fear for the princess, but she did not want to confront her about it directly, fearing she may only cause more pain. She felt she had to acknowledge it, however.

"Me and Dash, we... saw you on the first day at the Copper Road Inn. You were sitting outside." Twilight admitted, glad to have it off her chest. The princess shifted a little.

"I wish you had not seen that," Luna muttered. "At any rate, I have seen other things, too, in my dreams. If you do not mind me leaving the subject of me and my woes behind, that is. I know that you all have much to gain from this journey, and that Gilda and Trixie are involved. I am very grateful that you managed to convince everyone to stay."

"I didn't do anything," Twilight protested. "You did, and *they* did. Besides, don't you mean Trixie, Gilda *and* Blueblood? You haven't said anything about him." She still wanted to know why Rarity had been ignored or rebuffed so many times when she asked about him.

"It's not about Blueblood, it's about your friend Rarity," Luna said with a smirk. "I am sorry, but I can't tell you, but I think you will understand eventually." She sounded everything but sorry, and Twilight rolled her eyes.

"Right. Well, I am going to see if I can sleep before you start bombarding me with riddles or something," Twilight said huffily, a little frustrated with the lack of answers. This earned a little smile from Luna.

"Sleep well, Twilight."

It seemed that every night, Twilight remembered more and more of her dreams after she woke. When she stirred, she had to blink multiple times before she could erase the night sky from her vision. It took actual effort to convince herself the tall spires and towers she had seen weren't real.

It was daylight, and the Sun's position told Twilight that it was almost noon already. She'd been awoken by a book hitting the ground near her, and came face to face with an apologetic Winter Sun.

The pale pegasus carefully put it atop the stack on her back again. "Sorry, Twilight," the white pegasus said. "I didn't mean to wake you. I was just leaving."

"Leaving," Twilight repeated, rubbing her eyes. All around her, her friends were already up and about. Fluttershy was massaging Rarity's hooves with some ointment and Rainbow Dash had evidently just landed, coming back from a flight. "Ah, you're going west. Right." Twilight finally remembered now, and got up slowly. She had not slept well at all. While she did feel better than yesterday, it was only by the barest of margins.

"There's nothing for me further south," Winter confirmed. "Your friends were kind to share of their supplies, and I've travelled before. I'll be fine, even if I can't fly with all this." She indicated her stack of guest books with her head. "There are oodles of villages west of here. I'll figure something out."

"Ah still feel plum terrible about what happened to ya. It's our fault, at least partially," Applejack said, squaring her jaw. The farm pony did not look happy at all.

"I don't want to blame anypony. These things have a habit of happening to me, heh." The pegasus mare's optimism was almost surreal.

"I got a few bits to my name anyway. And my books. It could be a lot worse!"

"Winter Sun, do you think you might eventually head for Clopenhagen?" It was Luna who asked, coming a little closer.

Winter bravely looked up at the princess, and seemed to manage better than yesterday. She smile as she nodded. "I think so. Eventually, anyways. I mean, it's the biggest town around, and I think I have a cousin there. Even if I head back up north, I mean, I'll pop by. Why?"

Luna seemed pleased with this, turning over to Rarity. "May I borrow a sheet of paper?"

"Of course, princess. Will sketch paper do?" Rarity asked, surprised. She levitated out a clean piece of paper from her saddlebags.

Luna nodded, gratefully accepting a single sheet of paper, though she ignored the proffered sketching coals. The princess set about etching the paper with magic, burning elegant writing onto the letter and filling the available space in a matter of seconds. Folding it by halves, she levitated it in between the pages of one of Winter Sun's books. "If you would do me the favor of handing this to the city council office in Clopenhagen, I would be very grateful," she concluded.

Winter beamed. "Oh, of course. Happy to! But, um, can I ask you a question, though, princess? A little favor?"

"Within reason, of course. A favor for a favor only sounds fair." Luna suggested with a nod.

The pegasus carefully retrieved the smaller of her three books from her back, putting on her biggest smile. "Will you sign my guestbook before I go?"

Luna had been happy to acquiesce, and Winter had insisted the other ponies sign as well, something they had gladly done - in return for a promise from Winter Sun that she would visit Ponyville sometime. With business thus concluded, hoof-shakes and a few hugs exchanged, the road once again stretched out before the party, now consisting of seven ponies.

Despite how uneven the terrain had looked from the small shelf above, the road was well enough maintained. The biggest inconveniences were the cold and the constant switch between up- and downhill trotting.

While she was sure it was just something she imagined, Twilight could have sworn that it got colder with every little hill they crested. Rainbow Dash, claiming that she was getting sea sick from all the hills despite never having been on a boat, opted to fly instead of walking.

The upside was the great amount of berries available in the hilly terrain, given the season. The ponies ate well for the first time since Braidford, something Rarity was quick to comment on. She was swiftly brought back down to Equestria by a callous comment from Dash saying that she never thought she'd hear the fashionista say she was happy about eating wild berries. The resulting quarrel took the better part of their first afternoon in the highlands to resolve.

Whenever the time came for camp to be made, Princess Luna would spread her wings and banish the cold wind, standing silent vigil over the ponies through the night. Unsure of whether she slept like that or if she simply did not need to, Twilight had resolved not to bother her any more during the nights. It was as much for her own benefit as it was for Luna's, though, as she wasn't having much luck sleeping herself. Never before had this been an issue for Twilight; Spike would usually have to throw books at her to get her out of bed in the morning. Now she could not even sleep through the night.

She missed Spike. She missed her bed, too. Twilight had all too much time to think about these things as she lay awake. She would spend hours staring at Luna's back because she'd been startled awake by the vivacity of her dreams. She'd dream of the night sky with each star burning as bright as a little sun and the Moon looming so close it felt as if though she could reach out and touch it with a hoof. Beautiful, tall towers awaited her in the night, and atop the tallest one, a shape she couldn't quite make out. Once, Twilight had awoken to a fell laughter that echoed in her head. She lay there staring at the night sky for the rest of that night, naming constellations to herself for lack of anything better to do.

She missed Spike, her bed and the library, and now she missed her telescope, too. The stars were as beautiful as ever, but through the dome

that protected them from the elements it was all she could do to try to tell Orion and Ursa Major apart. Every night she got less sleep than the last.

Three days after they had left Winter Sun at the crossroads, Rarity approached Twilight in the middle of a brisk trot across the highlands. Or rather, as Luna had gradually upped the pace day by day, it was more a case of Rarity letting herself fall back to the exhausted Twilight. The purple unicorn barely noticed when Rarity fell into step next to her. She was aware she was lagging behind, but it was all she could do to keep moving.

"Twilight, darling, we're a little worried about you. I mean, I know you hardly care about upkeep on the road, at least not on the same level that I do, but you're not just looking tired, you look like death itself." Rarity's wasn't fussing, she sounded thoroughly concerned, and it made Twilight worry in turn. She had hoped the obsessive-compulsive stylist would have had a brush and a makeup kit out by now, but Rarity was just *looking* at her while she trotted at Twilight's side.

"I guess I look about as good as I feel, huh?" Twilight asked with a grimace. "I really haven't been sleeping well." If only this were the sort of problem where admitting it was half of the solution, the bookish unicorn thought to herself. She'd read a few books on 'problems' of different sorts, and this was most decidedly not one of those.

"Yes, well, I've noticed. Worrying about the library?" Rarity asked gently. It was a fair assumption. Twilight had indeed spent more than a little time wondering about exactly how the library was doing. She knew it was in capable hands, though, and shook her head, not wanting to lie to her friend.

"I don't know why I can't sleep. I miss Spike more than I do the library itself, but I think he'd find a lot of this travelling boring." She smiled thought. "For me, talking to Luna teaches me more than any books in any library."

Noticing Rarity's mood faltering a little at the mention of the princess, Twilight sighed at her friend, her voice flat. "She still hasn't told you anything about Blueblood, has she?"

"No. And it is driving me crazy!" Rarity exploded, throwing her head back in frustration. "She keeps saying she'll tell me later, not now, but the

'now' is never going to come, is it? And she thinks I won't dare to point out her rudeness!" The white unicorn deflated. "And she's right, of course. It would be very unseemly, telling off royalty."

Twilight nodded while she brushed the cobwebs off some memories of hers, trying to make sense of it. It was tough going, mired by her tiredness, but something felt odd. Even with the fashionista's penchant for drama, this didn't sound right. She was a little angry with herself for not thinking critically about this before, busy fretting over the princess.

"Okay, hang on. I can see why Dash worries about Gilda, I think," Twilight began. "Hay, / worry about her because Dash worries. Trixie, well, especially after what we've learned, it's hard not to be curious there. I mean, she might not show it, but even Applejack can tell something's wrong, right?" Rarity looked a little uncomfortable, proving that Twilight was on to something here. "I hope they're okay, both of them, and that's part of what we're doing here," Twilight said.

"But unless something happened during the gala that you haven't told me about, I don't understand why you worry so much about Blueblood. I am sure that if something horrible had happened to him, it would have been all over the news. He's royalty, right?" Twilight paused at that, shaking her head in sudden realization. "Okay, I doubt he's a prince, and I'm sending Celestia a letter asking about that the minute we get back, because now I want to know."

Twilight shook her head violently, trying to stop herself from getting sidetracked. "My *point* is, he's fine! I think I even saw him on a magazine a week before we left. It can't just be curiosity over some gossip Luna might have. Why are you obsessing over him? What's *your* excuse?"

Rarity looked around as if for an escape, but unless she intended to flat out ignore Twilight or literally bolt for the admittedly conveniently nearby hills, there was no way out. Twilight moved in for the kill.

"This stays between us. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." Her eye was already half-closed thanks to fatigue, so it hurt less than usual when she forgot to do the swear properly. The fact that they were moving didn't help her precision. Rarity looked as if she was going to laugh, but it never amounted to much more than a smile.

"He was supposed to be the one, Twilight," Rarity began tentatively.

"You said as much, but unless 'the one' means 'the one who got you covered in cake', that really didn't work out, did it?" Twilight quipped, making Rarity swallow and nod.

"Yes, quite. But I mean, the *one*. The one who made me complete, Twilight. The end of the journey. The culmination of all my efforts. The ultimate expression of who I am." Rarity's eyes glossed over a little. "My other half. The goal towards which I have been working all my life, whether I knew it or not."

Twilight suddenly felt wide awake. The words had sparked a memory of something Princess Celestia had told her long ago. She had asked a question with the infinite audacity of somepony who was free to delve into the mysteries of life as told by adults. The big questions that would have marked her as rude and inappropriate had she been older, but were thought adorable from a little filly.

"Princess, why are you alone? Mommy has daddy, and they have me. Why don't you have a daddy too?"

Another adult might have offered some patronizing remark, but Princess Celestia took her seriously. In hindsight, it would have been very easy for her to tell Twilight that everypony in Equestria was her special somepony. She had heard Celestia give that line before, and she did not doubt for a second that it was an honest answer, too. It was not the answer Twilight had been given that day, however.

"Twilight Sparkle, you shouldn't be in a rush to find somepony. I am sure your mommy and daddy love each other very much. I know they do, and they love you, too. But before your mommy found your daddy, and before your daddy found your mommy, they had to love themselves. That's the most important thing of all."

It had been a very responsible thing to say, and it had given Twilight a measure of peace and confidence as she grew up. They were words she had come back to. Thus, although she was hardly the most experienced pony when it came to love, Rarity's words and their implications worried

her. She wanted to tell Rarity this, but she had no idea how. She feared she'd sound patronizing, and she wasn't really awake enough to debate with anypony.

"Um, Rarity, your other half is a bit of a haybrain," Twilight ended up saying. If nothing else, they were heartfelt and honest words. She still pinched her eyes shut in annoyance. *Great going, Twilight. Wise words.*

"But what if there's a reason? What if he was, ah, how would Rainbow Dash put it, 'off his game' that evening? Perhaps somepony spiked his drink?" Rarity was smiling a bit too widely, desperate hope tinting her voice.

Twilight shook her head in disbelief. "He's probably a super neat stallion underneath the part where he's a self-absorbed pompous idiot," she offered. Rarity didn't even comment on the obvious sarcasm, keeping quiet. It felt like Twilight should say something more, but she could not for the life of her figure out what. Just like that, the moment was gone.

Rarity coughed delicately. "At any rate, Luna spoke about setting up camp over the next major hill. She said there should be a brook and a pool in a small forest. I don't know about you, but I'm eager to take a bath. Do feel free to borrow my soap if you need some, I assume you didn't pack any." The delicate unicorn frowned. "It seems like it'll be a while still before we have the chance to take a proper bath in a real town, doesn't it?"

"I guess," Twilight muttered. She wanted to know what Luna was planning. Where was Blueblood? What was the princess' angle for keeping quiet about this? Would it help to ask again? The answers didn't nearly keep up with the questions, it seemed. She made a mental note to visit her parents once this was over, missing them terribly in the aftermath of her trip down memory lane.

The next few days brought no relief from the dreams and the exhaustion, but at the same time, it didn't get worse, either. Twilight settled into a stable routine of being constantly tired, of always lagging a little behind. Every day one of her friends would join her at the rear, and it was easy to imagine that in the vanguard ahead, she was an oft-discussed

topic. They were all aware that she wasn't sleeping well, and expressed their sympathies. Fluttershy had tried to brew her an herbal tea, but it hadn't helped, much to the yellow pegasus' chagrin.

Applejack confessed that she was annoyed with Luna. Apparently, the princess had let it slip that she had some theories on what was causing Twilight's dreams, but she did not want to say until she knew for sure. Well aware that getting information out of the princess took effort, Twilight simply did not have the energy to ask Luna about it. The next day, Pinkie Pie encouraged her to keep moving and distracted her with her stories, and Fluttershy lent her support the day after.

It was hard to remember who had walked with her the preceding day. Twilight's memory slowly collapsed and made every morning feel the same. She was almost lucid in the day, but quickly tired in the afternoon. It was all she could do to put a hoof in front of the other. Her friends grew more and more alarmed, but Luna insisted that they would be alright as soon as they made it to their next stop. Applejack's efforts to find out exactly how had made the evenings a little sour sometimes.

The mountains that flanked the landscape barely seemed to have moved at all, but the tall peaks that loomed ahead were rapidly closing as they trotted on. A little over a week after leaving the Hollows, they finally drew near the foot of the mountains Luna called Orion's Breath. It was just past noon when it became apparent that what Twilight had thought a particularly large rock in the distance was in fact a vast stone structure. With their goal in sight and a gentle slope to aid them, the ponies upped their pace a little, and Twilight found her second wind to join in.

As they closed, the structure gained in detail. It was obviously a fortress of some sort, and quite clearly ancient. The fort was covered in moss and the stones were cracked, but it was still whole and fully functional, the Equestrian colors proudly adorning its poles and walls both. Though the fortress was dwarfed by the looming grey mountains that seemed but a stone's throw away now, it was probably big enough to house hundreds of ponies, Twilight thought. The structure seemed like a mountain in its own right, barely more complex than a slab of stone given windows, crenellations and pegasus platforms. Surrounding the fort, sketching a massive courtyard, was an overgrown and worn-down wall so low in places that it barely reached the tip of Twilight's horn.

Without warning, seemingly coming out of nowhere, a wing of armored pegasi passed low over the ponies and headed for the fortress. Rainbow Dash looked like she wanted to soar after them simply because of the challenge she read in their maneuver, but Luna suggested they might not take too kindly to it.

"You have to realize," Luna explained. "We are at the very border of Equestria, now. While we may not be at war, ponies and other peoples take borders very seriously."

As if to prove her point, eight earth ponies in shining armor galloped out from the maw of the fortress, heading in their direction. While they were indubitably Equestrian and had their weapons sheathed, the display made Twilight a little nervous. The thunder of heavy hooves grew louder and louder as the gilded troop neared.

"Bet you five bits that they'll say 'Hail Luna'," Rainbow Dash said with a grin.

"I'll see your bet and raise you ten. They'll say '*Princess* Luna'," Rarity countered smugly.

"I'll take both of those bets!" Pinkie Pie said with a bright smile.

The approaching earth ponies came to a practiced and precise halt in front of the party. One of the ponies stepped forward to perform a crisp salute. "Hail exalted monarch! Mossy Rock Keep greets you!" His salute was echoed by the other warponies, but he alone spoke. Pinkie Pie grinned while Rarity and Dash frowned.

"Hello, sergeant," Luna said, cutting through the formalities. The princess began moving again, forcing the detachment of armored ponies to break up and try to design some impromptu formation that looked intentional. They settled for walking four to a side of the other ponies, the leader walking at Luna's left hooves.

"I believe I sent Mossy Rock a letter a few weeks ago warning that we may be passing through, yes?" Luna asked.

"Yes princess. We respect your desire for expediency, but the captain wished for us to extend an offer of food and lodging should you wish to halt here for the evening. Mossy Rock has never had the pleasure of your visit." The sergeant stared straight ahead as he spoke and Twilight imagined she could see the muscles in his neck strain to keep him as rigid as possible.

"We will be happy to take you up on the offer," Luna said with a glance back at Twilight and the others. Twilight, for her part, found it hard to contain her excitement at the prospect of a night in a proper bed. There were assorted nods, agreements and at least one loud whoop, and Luna seemed satisfied. "You can tell your captain that beds, baths and food will be very much appreciated. I would very much like to discuss some matters with him right away, if you would be so kind as to show me to him."

They were escorted past the overgrown wall and through the courtyard in short order. The courtyard, it seemed, doubled as vegetable garden, and here the sergeant dismissed the other ponies with an order for them to patrol the perimeter. Next, they were led past an old metal gate and into the depths of the fortress. The spacious hallways were in relatively good repair on the inside, and firefly-globes were evenly spaced, making it hard for Twilight to decide whether it felt like an old ruin or merely a well-used building. Twilight eventually decided to think of it as a worn and venerable building well past the end of its natural lifespan kept alive by the efforts of its inhabitants.

Passing by numerous open doors, they saw ponies at work maintaining armor and weaponry, ponies cooking, sleeping and relaxing. The full spectrum of fortress life flashed by, room by room, until they were finally left in front of an oaken door. Luna opened it even as the sergeant spoke and took up position by the door. "Captain Pike awaits. It is an honor, princess."

Inside, a dark blue earth pony stallion looked up from behind a stack of papers on his desk. The captain wore thin-rimmed glasses and smiled broadly at Luna. The corners of his eyes crinkled, and his voice betrayed his age. "Princess Luna. It has been long years since we've had a royal visit, and this is quite the honor."

"Afternoon, captain," Luna said with a curt nod before turning back to the others, momentarily ignoring the captain. She looked at the pony who

had escorted them here. "Sergeant, thank you for your time. What is your name?"

The sergeant gave a start at being addressed directly, his soldier's countenance shattered in a heartbeat. "Er- I am, er, my name is Princess Longleap! Longleap is my name, princess!" The armored earth pony closed his eyes for a second and grimaced. Twilight would have laughed if she didn't feel so bad for him.

"Well then, Longleap. Would you take my friends down to someplace where they could eat? I will be taking up quite a bit of Captain Pike's time, and I would not want to bore them." Luna was smiling a little too widely, clearly amused.

"At once, princess!" Longleap barked before bowing deeply.

Luna waved a hoof and began closing the door with her magic as she turned to Captain Pike. "Do you have dragonfire?" Twilight heard Luna ask before the door shut and the voices became muffled.

Thus, they traded their princess for a flustered earth pony stallion. The guardpony looked around and was met by a wall of grins and chuckles. He drew deep breath, as if to speak, but Rainbow Dash collapsed to the ground hammering the stone floor with a hoof.

"Princess Longleap! Oh my gosh, that is just awesome!" The pegasus howled while gasping for breath. Applejack had jammed a hoof in her mouth to try to avoid having a similar fit, and Fluttershy hid behind her mane, shaking conspicuously. Twilight was alternating between wincing in sympathy and chuckling.

The sergeant let out his breath again, hanging his head, but he did manage a weak smile. "Right. On behalf of Mossy Rock Keep, let me apologize for that little misstep." Even Rarity was giggling softly and waved dismissively, shaking her head. "May I ask your names? You travel with the princess, so I assume you are no threat, but I would also like to know your purpose if I may. You are clearly not a guard detachment," Longleap commented with a sidelong glance at Dash.

Names were given in a quick round of introductions, with Applejack covering for and introducing Rainbow Dash, who was still in the throes of laughter. It was only when the sergeant turned to Pinkie Pie that Twilight realized that the cheerful party pony hadn't laughed along with the rest. Pinkie was still looking at the door behind which Princess Luna and Captain Pike held their meeting. The pink earth pony was smiling as broadly as Twilight had ever seen her smile, but there was a calm, a serenity to her expression. It wasn't a maddened grin fueled by sugar, this. Twilight moved up to her and poked Pinkie in the side.

"Um, and this is Pinkie Pie, Longleap. She does this a lot. And by 'this', I mean anything that isn't normal. In fact, I don't think she's ever done 'normal'," Twilight said. She was getting a little worried. Pinkie Pie was always the first to laugh.

Roused by Twilight's words, Pinkie Pie turned towards the purple unicorn, triumph in her voice. "She called us friends," Pinkie chirped. She bounced happily over to Longleap and shook one of his forehooves with both of hers. "Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie, and we're Princess Luna's *friends!*"

Twilight found herself smiling as well, along with everpony else. Even Longleap seemed affected by Pinkie's infectious happiness, grinning though he couldn't tell why.

Chapter 7

Longleap led the six friends through a series of stone hallways and intersections that would have seemed utterly identical were it not for the ponies that milled about. While many wore armor, there were also plenty of off-duty soldiers and ponies who toiled with innumerable other tasks about the fortress.

When they passed a small library staffed by two old unicorn mares, they practically had to pull Twilight away from the open door. The sleep-addled unicorn pony's brain reacted on pure instinct at the sight of so many books. Before long, they entered the mess hall, which Twilight noted had room to seat at least a hundred ponies at the same time.

"There are a lot more ponies here than I would have thought," Twilight exclaimed in the wake of a yawn, earning a nod from Longleap.

"We are at full capacity. There is no shortage of ponies who wish to serve, but there is only room and need for so many in Canterlot and the major cities," Longleap explained as he indicated a nearby table. As the ponies seated themselves, he walked over to a long counter separating the kitchen from the table area, trading a few quick words with a ladle-cutiemarked pegasus before returning and continuing.

"Equestria only needs so many overdressed ponies prancing about the gilded streets of Canterlot, is what I'm saying." Twilight couldn't tell to what degree the sergeant was joking, if at all.

"A lot cooler to be on the frontline, yeah? See some real action?" Dash asked, making the sergeant shake his head briskly, all traces of mirth draining from his face instantly.

"No. And don't think for a second I want to see 'action'. The warrior who desires combat and glory is the worst of the lot. I thank Celestia for every day like this one," Longleap said. "And Luna, I suppose. It's going to take some getting used to that. Ah, I told the cook to butter up some

sandwiches for you. I hope you weren't expecting something fancier. We are sort of gearing up for a bigger dinner later, given the occasion."

Dash was frowning at the rebuke, blushing. She seemed to be scanning the room for something else to do, but it was bare except for tables and lights, so she sat there fuming in silence as they waited.

It didn't take long before the pegasus they had seen earlier emerged from a small side door with a tray of sandwiches garnished with a variety of vegetables. If Longleap had any hopes of leaving the six ponies alone there, they were swiftly dashed to the ground and buried in questions about the library from Twilight and various inquiries about the building itself. Even as the earth pony sergeant admitted he knew little about the library, Rarity had questions on the state of the fortress, Applejack was curious about the vegetable farms outside.

As the food disappeared Longleap sidestepped a rather personal question from Rarity regarding his marital status, instead offering the ponies a tour of the fortress, which they were quick to accept. "I haven't reported in to my superior after our sortie, and I am fairly certain that the captain is annoyed with the princess for giving me a direct order. It's pretty convenient for me, though, I guess."

"I noticed that," Twilight said, frowning and stifling a yawn as they made to follow the sergeant out of the dining hall. Standing back up was hard, but once they were moving, she woke up a little. "She is above the captain, then?"

"We swear to protect and serve the sisters two. The vows have been the same for as long as history has been recorded in the guard," Longleap said. Twilight's ears perked up when she heard the H-word.

"Even during Luna's absence everypony who joined the guard, myself included, swore his or her life to both princesses. They are technically our highest authority. Luna tells me to eat gravel, I will," The sergeant said with a proud smile.

"So you went and introduced yourself as 'Princess Longleap' to your top commander, then?" Applejack asked, lips pursed in contemplation.

Rainbow Dash snorted and clutched her chest with a hoof. Longleap sighed heavily as he directed them up a broad set of stone stairs.

"That I did, and if anypony else had seen, I'd never live that down," Longleap said with a blush that was all too visible against the white of his cheeks. "Right, down here, we can exit to the lower battlements-"

The sergeant had paused with one hoof still extended to indicate a direction, gaze locked over Twilight's shoulder in an expression of horror. The purple unicorn followed his eyes to Rainbow Dash, who was grinning broadly at the stallion.

"You can't tell anypony!" Longleap said, his jaw slack. "I'll be the laughing stock for years!"

Fluttershy slowly walked between the two ponies and gave Rainbow Dash a look. It wasn't a stare, but her eyes were dangerously narrow. Dash glanced around nervously. "Uh, of course not, just joking. I wouldn't do anything like that oh sweet Celestia *don't look at me like that*." Rainbow Dash cringed and made herself very small as if bracing for impact.

Fluttershy suddenly giggled, shortly followed by Pinkie and all the others except Rainbow Dash. It took a few seconds before she realized the joke was on her, and when she did, the blue pegasus rolled her eyes and flew off in a huff.

Longleap scratched his neck with an armored hoof. "And you are friends of the princess, you say. Well, this certainly breaks up the monotony of guard duty."

The rest of the tour took them nearly two hours due in part to the size of the fortress but also because of the numerous questions and occasional antics after Rainbow Dash rejoined them. Twilight still had dozens of questions, fascinated by the place, but as they wandered around the fort and the surrounding area with Sergeant Longleap, she kept dozing off whenever they stopped.

Twice, she nearly fell asleep. It was all too easy to tell herself that she was just going to close her eyes. She wasn't really going to sleep. Her friends' voices reminded her that all was safe and calm. Her last memory

was the sergeant answering some questions Fluttershy and Applejack had about the carrots patch they were looking at, having moved on to the courtyard.

"Wake up sugarcube," Applejack said, making Twilight reluctantly open her eyes. It was darker outside than the unicorn remembered, and they were still in the carrot patch behind the fort. Twilight was sure that they had been talking about moving on.

"I wasn't asleep. Are we leaving?" Twilight groaned as she rubbed her eyes with her forehooves, looking around. The vegetable garden that took up the whole rear half of the courtyard was empty except for two pegasi guards on patrol. "Um, where is everypony?"

Applejack winced, offering Twilight a hoof to help her up, which was gratefully accepted. "They're all inside eatin'. Ah'd hardly call it a feast, but there's six score ponies and good food in the mess hall, so spirits are high." The farmpony's green eyes were filled with concern. "When we went inside, we tried waking ya, but, um. You weren't exactly cooperating, so Ah let you have an hour or so. And..." She hesitated.

"What?" Twilight asked, slightly unsettled now. Applejack was not usually one to mince words. The orange earth pony's cheeks were tinted with the faintest of reds.

"Ah kind of told Luna off. Ah know *she* knows why you're not sleepin'." She sighed. "Woke up once to one of your nightmares, Twi'. You were tossing and turning. Ah don't like seein' you like this. Ah may've yelled at Luna. Ah don't regret it none, though."

Twilight swallowed and nodded slowly. Truth be told, she was glad. Glad that she had friends like Applejack, and glad that she hadn't been there to witness the confrontation she had been afraid to force. It was a scene she was happy to have missed, but she simply did not know how much longer she could go on like this. She was *tired*. Just thinking about how she couldn't sleep was enough to make her want to break down and cry. "Thank you," Twilight said at length, her voice thin.

"Which is why she's not comin' with us to Scandineighvia. She said she's got some business to take care of anyway." Applejack said with a little smile.

Twilight froze, eyes wide. "*What?*" she blurted, seized by an indescribable terror. The very notion of leaving Luna behind tore at her, and she had to remind herself to breathe. Applejack took a step back, surprised at Twilight's outburst, even as she went on.

"I mean, that doesn't make any sense, we need her. We can't go to a foreign country without her! We don't know what to do, and the whole thing is her plan, right?" Twilight said, eyes darting about.

Applejack's surprise slowly morphed into disappointment and confusion. Twilight held her tongue under the reproving stare, her energy spent. "Twi', Fluttershy knows how to work a map, and Ah'm sure you do, too. Rainbow Dash said she knows where Gilda will likely be, and Luna has faith in us. Somethin' that Ah thought'd mean more to you than it does to me. What's got you spooked? T'ain't like you at all, this."

What, indeed? Twilight opened her mouth to reply, but her thoughts lagged behind. Seeing her distress, Applejack softened a little, but Twilight could still not make sense of it.

"Like it or not, you're pretty much our leader most of the time. Everypony looks to you, and if you don't have faith in us, what the hay do you think happens then?"

Applejack's words chilled Twilight to the bone. Even if Twilight *hadn't* been the one who often took point, fact was, the friends all looked to each other for support.

Yet still, the idea of leaving Luna behind filled her with an inescapable, grave sense of loss. "I- I don't know," Twilight admitted, hunching over in defeat. "I mean, I *do* have faith in you, in all of us! I just, wait- hold on. Why is she staying? This doesn't add up. I'm having some odd dreams, but *why* is she staying?"

Applejack shrugged at that. "Ah don't know about the 'logic' of it, Twi'. She said it'll help 'cause it's her causing it somehow, and Ah wasn't about

to tell her she wasn't. Ask her, not me! It's enough for me and the others to know you'll get better. If she's right. Now, are you coming with me to get some food, or are we gonna stand here talking all night?"

Twilight nodded, feeling numb. She was still decidedly not okay about the whole thing, but she didn't like the idea of confronting Luna about this either. Nevertheless she followed Applejack around the courtyard in the faint moonlight, back into the comparatively brighter interior of the fortress. They heard the mess hall long before they saw it, the din of the crowd echoing in the hallways. Ponies eating, chatting, and- was that Pinkie Pie singing?

When they entered through the door-less arch into the large room, it was hard to recognize the sterile and almost soulless dining hall they had briefly visited earlier. Every single hoof-breadth of the room seemed covered in ponies, food, or both. Without their enchanted armor to make their appearances uniform, the guardponies were as varied a bunch as any ponies, the bustle a riot of mane and coat colors.

As Applejack had promised - or warned - spirits were high, and so was the volume. By the time they got to their table, Twilight's ears were already hurting. Pinkie Pie had staged an impromptu musical based on their adventures over by the other side of the room, but the rest of the friends, sans Luna, were clustered around a table. Twilight sat down to a round of sympathetic greetings.

"I am very sorry, Twilight. We didn't mean to leave you out there," Fluttershy said, barely audible through the din.

Twilight just waved a hoof dismissively and smiled, collecting for herself a solid helping of honeyed oats from the table. The bookish mare was still blinking a lot to try to clear her eyes and stifled a yawn. Glancing around, she spotted Luna over by another table. The princess was sitting at the head of the table, flanked by Captain Pike and an ochre unicorn mare of advanced age. Luna did not look her way, so Twilight simply dug into her food, thinking.

Separation anxiety. That's what it sounded like to Twilight. Not what it *felt* like, but what it sounded like, based on what she'd read. She shoved another forkful of hay into her mouth as she tried recalling what she'd read

in that psychological primer a few months ago. It relied on there being an emotional attachment present, if she remembered it right. She closed her eyes to see if she could think of anything else.

Twilight opened her eyes in surprise. She felt light-headed, and Applejack was looking straight at her. "I'm awake," Twilight said defensively, looking around. Nothing seemed to have changed, except that Pinkie Pie was now back at the table chatting animatedly with Fluttershy.

"Didn't say you weren't, was just asking you if you were feeling okay. For what feels like the tenth time now, Ah might add." Applejack was frowning, and Twilight shook her head to try to clear it.

"Sorry, I'm just a little tired." Twilight said, her voice reduced to a croak. She levitated over a carafe of watered cider with which to fill her glass, drinking deeply before looking over at Luna again. The princess was busy talking with the captain, entirely focused on the old stallion. If she wanted to, she could just head over there and ask a moment of her time. The princess wouldn't refuse her, she knew that.

She had been thinking about emotional attachment, she suddenly remembered. Twilight had decided she no longer feared Princess Luna, the Goddess of the Night Sky. However, she was apparently a little intimidated by mere 'Luna'. It was an odd realization. She spent almost every night thinking about the mystery that was the princess, and this evening was turning out no different, but this was going somewhere. The analytical part of her mind rejoiced.

Twilight *wanted* to go talk to her, but she found that she simply couldn't. She had never before been particularly shy when there answers to be gotten. It infuriated her and fascinated her to no end. Here she had an honest question, that of why Luna thought leaving her - leaving *them*, she corrected herself - would make her sleep better. She simply could not make her rear hooves move.

Powerless, Twilight remained seated, her gaze flitting over the ponies all around them. The vast majority of them were stallions, and they were mostly sitting at their tables talking loudly. Rarity was currently engaged in a discussion with a group of them at another table, basking in the attention. Twilight chuckled to herself and closed her eyes for a second.

Her eyes fluttered back open. There was a lot less noise, now. Her head was resting on the table and her neck felt stiff. She slowly sat back up straight while wiping off some drool with the back of a hoof. Looked around she found that Pinkie Pie sat next to her now. The pink earth pony had one of her forelegs draped around her neck protectively, holding her close even as she talked to someone else next to her. Pinkie didn't seem to notice Twilight was awake. A good half the ponies were gone from the room. She stole a glance over at a certain table across from her, looking for Luna through half-lidded eyes, and found the princess looking back at her.

As their eyes met, the princess' mouth opened, and her face fell. She looked away as if in shame before quickly engaging herself in a conversation with the captain. Twilight blinked, unsure if she had seen that right, but every time she blinked, her eyes would open less and less. She turned to Pinkie Pie and tried telling her that something was wrong, and that she thought she might- she forgot exactly what, but it was very important. She just had to close her eyes and think for a second.

"The poor thing. Maybe we should just head back home," Twilight heard Rarity say.

"Don't think she'd want that, Rarity." Applejack was speaking, now.

"Well, I'm telling you, if the princess is wrong, I am turning around on the spot tomorrow," Rarity said, sounding angry.

"I'm with Rarity there. Sorry AJ. This is getting stupid. If Twilight gets hurt..." A third voice, much closer. Rainbow Dash.

When she had spoken, Twilight not only heard it, but she *felt* it as a very faint vibration. For some reason, she was also bobbing up and down. It made her a little queasy. Draped over Dash's back, then, she figured. She opened her eyes and looked straight into Pinkie Pie's eyes, the earth pony walking at Dash's side.

"Ah ain't protesting that, simmer the hay down the two of you. Ah'm saying Ah think Twi' will," Applejack said in front of her.

"She's not hurt. She's just tired, I'm really quite sure," Fluttershy's voice added from somewhere nearby.

"Don't you worry, Twilight. Go to sleep," Pinkie whispered with a smile that told Twilight everything was okay. That was all the encouragement the drowsy unicorn needed, so she closed her eyes and fell asleep again, voluntarily this time, and it felt like the best thing in the world. She briefly stirred when she was put down onto something soft, but after that, sweet nothingness all around.

When Twilight once again returned to wakefulness, it was after a long night's sleep. She remembered only fragments of what she had dreamt. It involved Rarity, Pinkie Pie and possibly a cartload of dresses that were also crystal balls, somehow. The memories of the patently absurd dream slipped away and quickly became insignificant compared to the fact that she actually felt rested. Sure, she was tired, but it was a regular brand of tiredness that came with waking up and not being a morning pony. It was *normal*.

Apparently they'd been given a disused sleeping quarter all to themselves. The stone walls were lined with nothing but bunk beds and storage chests. A single, narrow, glassless window betrayed that it was already well past sunrise. Yesterday was still a bit of a blur to Twilight, but looking around at her friends, she suspected that she wouldn't be alone in having a hazy memory of yesterday. Everypony appeared to be fast asleep still. Even Applejack, who usually rose with the sun, was still snoring away.

Somepony must have popped a cask of cider after they had hauled Twilight off to bed. Fluttershy lay in the same bed as Applejack, curled up at the rear-hoof end with an empty pewter goblet. Rainbow Dash was asleep on her back, across Pinkie Pie's back. Twilight winced at the sight. That couldn't possibly be comfortable.

"Good morning, Twilight," Rarity said, looking at her from a bed across the room. Twilight had thought the other unicorn asleep, but she had obviously been wrong.

“Good morning Rarity. Had a good time, I see,” Twilight said with a grin. It wasn't really a question, and Rarity did not treat it as such either, merely smiling tiredly. The fashionista's usually impeccable mane was dishevelled, and true to form, the first thing she did when she got out of bed was to collect her brushes.

It wasn't long before the others awoke, no matter how quiet they tried to be. Pinkie was awake within a minute, and when the party pony was up, it was very hard for anypony else to sleep. Applejack nearly panicked when she saw it was light out, needing a moment to remember that there were precious few apples that needed bucking today, and that she wasn't late for any chores. Judging by the farmpony's look, it was not an entirely happy realization.

The rest of the morning disappeared very quickly. An attendant mare met them at the door and led them to the baths, which was a very welcome stop for everypony. The entire room was deserted, it being between shifts, and they could have taken one of the huge tubs for themselves each if they so desired. The warm water and soap all felt indescribably good to Twilight after having relied on unpleasant but necessary soaks in natural streams for so long. When Rarity started drying herself off, fearing she was getting positively “pruny”, Twilight was still soaking and reluctant to leave.

After hygiene was dealt with, and having consumed a quick breakfast, their attendant took them into the kitchen itself to help them “stock up for the journey” at Luna's suggestion. They were all forced to give up at least one of their saddlebags to make room for food and water for the road. Twilight spent many gruelling minutes pining over which of her books to leave behind, and it took the threat of Applejack choosing *for* her to make Rarity leave behind any of her clothes, mane products or art supplies. Fluttershy donated some of her bandages and herbs to the infirmary at the fort, happy that they would be of use, and they were well received. Pinkie Pie, oddly, already had a free bag.

“You can do a lot of things with a lot of things, but you can do twice as much with an empty bag. I brought *potential!*” the earth pony explained excitedly, making Twilight's head hurt a little. At the very least she wasn't forced to spend a bag of “party” on the spot, as Twilight had feared.

After getting them sorted in the kitchens, the helpful unicorn mare led them to a nondescript storeroom and began fishing out heavy woolen garments from a previously sealed crate. Twilight nodded her thanks, though still confused, accepting what turned out to be a grey and dusty yet well-preserved clothing article of some description. They all received one each except Fluttershy and Dash. Due to the pegasus magic that warded them from all but the worst of chills, there would be no sense covering up their wings.

Rarity was staring at the unassuming grey garment as if its very existence was offensive to her. The thing apparently violated every imaginable principle of fashion, judging by her look, and she hadn't even moved past scrutinizing the fabric yet.

"It's by her majesty's suggestion, though you are of course free to refuse. It's only going to get colder where you're going, though," the older mare said with a chuckle. "You'll want to put those on right away, too. They'll take up a lot of space if you're going to carry them. Allow me to show you."

Without preamble, she walked over to Applejack to demonstrate, seizing a hold of the cloth with a glimmer of bright red magic. The orange earth pony was already trying to put hers on with moderate success, only requiring a little help to get it right. A double clasp fastened the long cloak-like garment around the neck and the heavy fabric fell down to cover her sides and flank, the fabric splitting at the tail. The cloaks were long enough that they nearly touched the ground, and reminded Twilight of heavier, larger versions of the cloak Zecora often wore.

"There's a hood as well," The attendant mare said, indicating the extra fabric that rested on Applejack's back. "And there are straps that go around the belly if the winds get too fierce. We sometimes use these during the winter, but weather rarely gets bad enough to warrant it."

A few minutes and some complaints from Rarity about design later, four of the ponies were well covered, and the attending mare bid them all farewell, her tasks completed.

While the number of ponies around the fort wasn't noticeably diminished in the aftermath of the banquet, there was a conspicuous lack of

higher-ranked personnel around. Sergeant Longleap, they were told, had mysteriously decided to spend the day in 'planning' along with all officers of rank. As one guard bitterly remarked, the officers 'planning' were conspicuously all above the rank one would theoretically require to order the cider out of the kitchen during an equally theoretical after party. Said guard admitted to theoretical bitterness over having left early.

Thus almost leaderless, everypony at the fort ran on routine alone, the result of which was that absolutely nothing changed, testament to the stability of fortress life.

When they were informed that Princess Luna was not currently at the fort, and that Captain Pike was currently unable to see them, there was very little left to do at the fort for the six ponies. Twilight had really wanted to see Luna one last time, gripped by a niggling fear that she might have done something wrong.

Saddlebags heavy with supplies, they were outside the fortress sometime around noon. Even Rainbow Dash had been made to wear a set of saddlebags, and her complaining about this had been the forced topic last five minutes

Twilight eyed the mountains close by and sighed. She felt as fresh as she had the day they had left Ponyville, and it wasn't until she experienced the contrast now that she truly appreciated how tired she had been. Yet for all that she felt refreshed and awake, she couldn't shake the idea that it had come at a cost she did not want to pay.

Applejack took one look at Twilight and jerked her head, indicating the mountains. "Ah ain't got no map, but Ah reckon' it's that way, yes?" The farmpony promptly began walking, leaving the rest to follow. At her side, Rarity unfolded a map they had been given at the fort and held it steady with her magic so Fluttershy could have a look at it.

"You look even dorkier than usual with that cloak," Rainbow Dash said with a grin over at Twilight.

"We look like creepy evil enchantresses!" Pinkie Pie agreed. Or disagreed.

Twilight grumbled, but a smirk crept up on her soon after. "Well, we can't all be pegasi. Speaking of pegasi, how's flying with those saddlebags?"

Rainbow Dash frowned. "We're eating the stuff in my bags *first*."

"Hey, if you can't handle it, Ah'm sure I could carry your bags, too, Rainbow Dash," Applejack offered.

Dash glared at the orange earth pony, looking for a challenge that wasn't there. "I'm *fine*. But really. Can we do that? I mean, I'm all for helping carry stuff, but we need me to, um, scout, right? And flying with these things on blows."

"It makes the most sense. I don't think it'll be a problem," Twilight agreed. "As long as you don't eat everything on first stop just so you can get rid of them."

"Oh come on, give me some credit," Dash groaned.

"Um. About food," Fluttershy interjected, looking up from the map she was studying. "I was just wondering. We're bringing the food because Scandineighvia is kind of bare?"

Twilight nodded. "It's mountains, rocky shores and equally rocky subarctic tundra, mostly, and I don't think any of us feel like eating moss and grazing on any random vegetation we can find. We should have plenty to spare, though. Don't worry, Fluttershy."

"Oh I'm not worried, it's just... There are tribes of griffins there." Fluttershy said, furrowing her brow in mild consternation.

"Well duh, that's why we're going there, right?" Dash said, rolling her eyes. Fluttershy lowered her head a little.

"What do they eat then? If they can't farm, I mean," Fluttershy finally asked.

Dash opened her mouth and Twilight immediately fixed her with an angry stare, as if she could *will* the pegasus to shut up and be quiet.

Rainbow Dash did notice and froze mid breath-intake, but Fluttershy saw the exchange, too. Though the yellow mare may be timid to a fault, she wasn't stupid.

"Oh. I see," Was all Fluttershy said, shuddering at the thought. She was quick to leap back into a discussion on landmarks and campsites with Rarity again. Within a minute, she called Rainbow Dash over to show her where she thought Gilda would likely be, talking a lot more than usual, obviously trying to distract herself from thinking about it.

"We keep moving, they keep getting bigger, but we're really not gettin' any closer, are we?" Applejack said with a note of wonder in her voice as she looked at the still-growing mountains.

"I'm sure we'll get there soon," Twilight offered without much conviction. She craned her neck to look up the mountains of Orion's Breath. The peaks disappeared in the puffy white clouds above.

Every step felt like it was taking her in the wrong direction, like a rubber band just waiting for the opportunity to snap back into place. While she was thus lost in thought, Rarity fell back from the lead to join the other ponies.

"You certainly seem, well, better, if you don't mind me saying. I am glad the princess was right," Rarity said cheerfully. "She's been a little more forthcoming since we left that dreadful village, don't you think?"

Twilight nodded. "I think she's realized she's not going to scare us away. Do you know why she thought she was causing my dreams, anyway?"

"She just knew!" Pinkie piped. "Maybe it's like a tingly Luna-sense? A prin-sense? Or maybe it's because she's the Princess of Dreams? I mean, *duh!*"

Blinking, Twilight turned to the pink pony. It was of course entirely true, and it made perfect sense. That was what made it disturbing. Of course Luna would know. "Okay, I really should have caught up on that," Twilight admitted in a mutter, feeling a little silly for missing what had been right in front of her all the time.

It didn't explain why the princess hadn't talked to her about it, though. And it made her feel twice as stupid for not simply asking her straight up. Perhaps there was another way that meant they could avoid splitting up, but the princess simply assumed that this was the best way? Perhaps there was some sort of alternative?

Pinkie bounced a little closer, her cloak flapping up and down around her like a wayward tent in a storm. She tilted her head at Twilight with concern. "Twilight? Why are you sad?"

Twilight didn't try to hide her frustration. "Because the second the princess starts making even a little bit of sense, I've driven her away. Now we have to go to Scandineighvia *alone*, and I'm pretty sure it's my fault. Of course I'm not happy about that!"

Applejack suddenly stopped right in front of Twilight, making the unicorn collide with her and halting everypony else dead in their tracks. A dazed Twilight looked up to see Applejack glaring at her, annoyance brandished like a weapon. "Okay, Twi'? That's just about enough of your gosh-darn bellyachin'!"

The purple unicorn blinked, scrabbling for a reply, but Pinkie Pie smartly slid in between them, facing Twilight. Fluttershy, similarly, was at Applejack's side putting a hoof to her side. Rainbow Dash looked ready to hop in and hold Applejack back.

"Twilight," The pink pony said, gazing straight at her. "You're not alone. None of us are alone. We have each other, right?" She was smiling, as always, but there was something imploring in her look. One corner of her mouth twitched.

Twilight nodded reluctantly, ashamed. She was about to speak up, but Pinkie stole the initiative again, the party pony implacably chipper. "Besides, if Luna is trying to fix your bad dreams, that means she cares about you and likes you a lot, too, right?" Pinkie paused to glance over at Applejack. The farmpony had thankfully calmed down.

"Even if she's a Blunt McBluntycap, Applejack is right. Well, except the part about belly-aching. Aw, if you have a tummy ache, we need to fix

that! Oo, I think Fluttershy brought some leaves for that!" Pinkie bounced over to Fluttershy, who was giving her a very confused look.

"Oh, no, wait. That wasn't my point! We all love you, but we need you to be extra super Twilight-Sparkly! We're going really far away, and we only have each other, but that's like, a lot! More than anypony could possibly dream of!"

Twilight flushed, looking around at all her friends. She wasn't being herself, it was true. She knew she could be a better friend than this, and she certainly had not meant to make any of them worry. Looking around, she saw five sets of cautiously hopeful smiles. "I'm sorry. I'll try harder," she managed. "I'm just thinking a lot, I guess. And all these dreams haven't helped."

"Don't worry 'bout it sugarcube," Applejack said, moving over to give her a hug. There was a collective sigh of relief. In short order they were moving again, faster this time, and in a considerably better mood.

One thing was gnawing on Twilight's mind still, though, and she felt compelled to ask. "Erh, Pinkie, what did you say about Luna again? That I 'like her a lot'?" Twilight asked, but she got no reply and it soon became clear why. The others had halted. The bookish unicorn had been so used to seeing the grey wall of Orion's Breath ahead of them that she had almost stopped considering the possibility of actually arriving at the pass.

Having just crested a small hill, they could see that said pass was now scant few minutes' gallop away now, and so were the mountains. Looking up the sheer and jagged mountain hurt her neck. The others crowded around her.

"That's... very tall," Fluttershy finally said, looking almost straight up. There was a muted thud of a takeoff and Rainbow Dash soared up into the air. Within less than a minute, she pierced the clouds and disappeared.

"Well, we're not going up and over, at least. There's our ticket," Twilight said, pointing at what Fluttershy had named 'The Scar'. The dirt road they had faithfully followed for so long went straight into what wasn't so much a pass as it was a crack in the mountain wall. It looked open to

the sky from here, but it was hard to see very far as the path fell into darkness.

"I'm tempted to say I'd prefer the mountaintops to that gloomy little path," Rarity muttered. "But most of all, I'd prefer neither of the two."

Rainbow Dash thundered down from the clouds and landed next to Twilight wearing a huge grin. "Oh you guys should see this!" The chromatic pegasus exclaimed. "Mountains and untamed clouds *everywhere*! I don't even know if I could fly through that unless I went above." As she spoke, her eyes grew wider still. "Ohmygosh, but I am so gonna try!"

Rainbow Dash's form sunk down a little as Applejack walked up behind her and put the pegasus' saddlebags back on for her. "Yeah well, not today you ain't. Ah don't care how fast you are, but we ain't losing each other here now," Applejack snorted.

Twilight nodded at the wisdom of this, as did they all. Rainbow Dash groaned and stared longingly up into the sky, but said nothing legible in protest. Taking the vanguard, Twilight trotted ahead into the false dusk of the pass. The others soon followed, hastening to close the gap and stick together.

Though it was still early enough that it would be rather pessimistic to call it afternoon, Celestia's sun disappeared as they stepped into the mountain pass. It would have been difficult to fit two carts side by side, and without Twilight and Rarity, it would be very dark indeed.

The first few minutes passed in silence, everypony glancing about apprehensively though there was precious little to see. To their sides there was only grey rock. Far above, barely any wider than the path, a thin stripe of blue sky taunted them. It seemed to exist only to make sure nopony could call it a cave, for it served no other use. The road soon started sloping gently downwards, and it seemed to Twilight that what little light came in from above perpetually threatened to disappear.

"I really wonder how this place came to be," Twilight said, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You suspect this is shaped? Unnatural?" Rarity asked.

Fluttershy drew a little closer at that, suddenly nervous. "Um. The map didn't say anything about that."

"Maybe the princess did it and ran away?" Pinkie Pie asked, though whether it was said to try to soothe Fluttershy or if it was an honest suggestion, Twilight couldn't tell.

"What did you find out anyway? Can I have a look at the map?" Twilight asked, and Fluttershy was happy to oblige, retrieving the map for Twilight to levitate as they walked.

Fluttershy pointed with her snout at a few key locations and explained. "It's not very detailed when you get through the mountains. I mean, I'm sure it's a very nice map, but..." The pegasus frowned. "Once we get through the pass, we'll be in what's labelled 'The Grand Tundra'. Rainbow Dash says we should head to this point here. That's Clawford, the closest town. There aren't a lot of landmarks, but it's by a mountain that stands by itself, so it shouldn't be very hard to find."

"You think Gilda will be there?" Twilight asked Dash.

"Maybe. She told me about the town way back, should at least be somepony there who knows where her tribe is," Dash explained.

"Tribe?" Rarity asked, surprised.

"Most griffins live in tribes, yeah. You know, hunting. Warpaint. That kinda stuff. Gilda is from a tribe like that." Rainbow Dash looked a little uncomfortable talking about it.

"What in the world was she doing in Equestria then?" Rarity pressed, confused.

Dash looked away, which in these tight confines meant she faced the mountain wall. "Listen, these aren't really my secrets to tell, you know. Can we just drop it, please?"

Twilight shook her head, supporting Rarity. "I'm sorry Rainbow, but I don't think we can. We're here to help, right? And if I'm not mistaken, you know what's happened." She thought back to Dash's outburst before they had even left Ponyville. "If we're going to help you help her, then we need to know what's going on."

After a moment's contemplation, Dash nodded at her friends, though still visibly reluctant. "Okay, just, not now. I'll tell you before we reach Clawford. That cool? Just let me, ugh, *think*."

Twilight nodded and smiled. "That's fine, yes." Satisfied they would be getting answers and leaving Rainbow Dash to her thoughts, she turned her attention back to the map, indicating a symbol. "Hey, what's this, then, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, that's the major trade route from Clopenhagen to the villages just past the Equestria-Scandineighvian border," Fluttershy explained, smiling. "There's a major pass to our west. This pass we're taking now, The Scar, really isn't used a lot. In fact, um, we may be the first to use it in a very long while."

Twilight looked back and forth between the stone walls that flanked them and quirked a brow. "I can't imagine why anypony would want to miss out on this beautiful scenery. This is practically a national treasure."

She remembered her own words an hour later when the little slice of blue that had kept them company far above suddenly disappeared. In a matter of seconds, the pass had finally taken the plunge and become a cave. The soothing blue-white light of Rarity's horn glowed in concerto with Twilight's own, and the six ponies forged onwards with nary a complaint. At least that seemed to be the case until Rainbow Dash noticed something.

"Uh, is it just me, or is the cave getting smaller?" Dash asked.

"I thought it was Fluttershy who was afraid of caves," Twilight admitted, to a weak protest from Fluttershy herself. Rainbow Dash was adamant.

"I'm not! But it *is*!" The blue pegasus pointed up with a hoof, and Twilight obliged by intensifying the light. True enough, the ceiling of the cave appeared to be a lower than it had a while ago.

"Ah hope we're not gonna hit a dead end," Applejack remarked, yet the cave ceiling's encroachment did not seem deterred by her concerns. Soon, Twilight did not have to make an effort with her light to see the rock over their heads anymore, and the walls at their sides began closing in as well. A little later, the ponies couldn't walk more than three abreast. Ten minutes after that, it was uncomfortable to walk side by side for even two of them. Later still, they were walking single file, with many complaints from Dash about being unable to even spread her wings.

"Um, Pinkie? Could you please maybe stop biting my tail?" Fluttershy asked.

"Mrph," came the muffled reply before Pinkie let go of the butter-colored pegasus' pink tail. "I'm sorry, but I'm *tired* of rocks, and your tail is better than rocks, so..." Pinkie paused, shrugged, and Fluttershy yelped and sighed as her tail was once again seized in the party pony's mouth.

"And that's why I'm back here!" Rainbow Dash cheerily piped from behind Pinkie.

"Ah'm sure that's the only reason, sugarcube," Applejack chuckled.

"Well, if you're unhappy about the walking order, that's tough, because I don't think I could even turn around any longer. We'd be walking backwards for half an hour," Twilight said, but even as she spoke, she could see natural light ahead. She upped her pace, careful not to have her saddlebags snag on the uneven walls that nearly hugged them now. There was a round of hopeful noises behind her. Within minutes, they broke through a tiny opening, barely big enough for a pony to pass comfortably through.

Applejack was the last to exit the pass, and the first to comment on what greeted them. "Well, that's about the sorriest sight Ah ever saw since a cart ran over my hat."

Rarity pursed her lips and surveyed the landscape thoughtfully. "Well, it certainly has a savage beauty, I think? It's different, at the very least." The fashionista retrieved papers and coals almost subconsciously as she spoke. "Very different."

The stark tundra ahead presented a variety of colors, but they were all on the darker side of the spectrum. The ground was mostly dry rock or soil with swathes of dark green moss and lichen. Not a single tree was visible for as far as they could see. In the distance, in the gaps between mountains and tall hills, there was a massive expanse of dark blue stretching to the horizon.

After giving the tundra the briefest of glances, however, Twilight's attention was drawn to the immediate area. They were quite clearly standing in a crater that bordered on the Scar's exit. Even though it was heavily eroded, the gentle bowl-shape described a crater the size of the library tree in Ponyville, perhaps six or seven hooves deep at the center. Something had struck here at the base of the mountain, and the 'pass' was directed outwards from the middle of it.

"The ocean!" Fluttershy suddenly said, eyes wide with wonder. "I do hope we get to see the ocean!"

"Well, Clawford is by the coast. Let's take a short rest and get working on getting there, yes?" Twilight asked with a smile, pleased to see that the proposition was met with enthusiastic assent. They briefly considered having their dinner inside the cave, but the cramped conditions made the notion very impractical. Instead, they sat down their supplies and rested in the crater, sharing the food from one of Rainbow Dash's saddlebags.

As they ate, Twilight realized that what was growing in her gut wasn't so much an eagerness to explore and move on, as she had first suspected, but an uneasiness about the existence of the crater as a whole. When they left behind the marginal shelter it offered, packing their things and moving on, Twilight couldn't quite hold back a sigh of relief.

Fluttershy had already decided on a direction, pointing the party almost due south. Twilight was quick to pull the hood of her cloak up as they began moving. As they had been warned, the air was colder on this

side of the mountains, and it didn't get any warmer as the day went on. The situation wasn't helped by the lack of cover from the wind on the tundra. Each of the two next breaks were less cheery than the last, the non-pegasi huddling under their cloaks and eating quickly.

Despite this, the day passed quickly and quietly with so many new smells and sights to explore. Fluttershy was looking for animal life, of which precious little showed itself, while Twilight busied herself watching Rarity sketching away as they walked. The white unicorn's precision was a marvel to behold. She did a better job with her coals on the move than Twilight could when she sat down at her desk. There was a reason the purple unicorn had Spike write her letters.

At the present moment, Rarity was sketching out something that looked vaguely reminiscent of the cloaks they were wearing, but with a number of additions and modifications. Twilight was not usually too concerned with matters of fashion, but she could certainly appreciate Rarity's skill and dedication. When asked, Rarity confirmed that she was indeed working on cloak designs. *"I wouldn't want to be without these cloaks right now, especially if it gets colder in the evening, but if there's a market for these in Equestria somewhere, surely there's a way to stay warm without offending the eyes."* The fashionista explained.

When time came to make camp for the night, the harsh reality of the tundra became even more apparent. There wasn't exactly a lot of firewood around, and while Twilight could certainly have made a fire without any fuel, she'd have to maintain it with her magic all night. Short on options, the ponies huddled close together in the growing shadow of a little hill.

Now that they were no longer moving, the wind was felt twice as keenly, cloaks or no cloaks. Rarity fished out a thin blanket from her bags to cover them all, but it was meager protection from the night. Though they might be less susceptible to the cold, Twilight could tell that the wind bothered Fluttershy, at least. As the dark of night fully seized them, only Rarity and the pegasi were asleep.

"So it's all Celestia, huh?" Pinkie Pie whispered, looking up at the moon above. The party pony was on her back, all but her face covered in cloak, blanket, and one of Fluttershy's wings.

"Guess so," Applejack said quietly. "What of it, sugar?"

"I just know I'm not happy when I don't get to party," Pinkie Pie said pensively. "I'd go crazy alone here without you girls."

Twilight felt a hoof sneak over and draw her into a hug with the pink earth pony. She offered no resistance. "You're right, Pinkie. And Applejack, you're really not happy when you're dragged away from Sweet Apple Acres, are you?" Twilight asked.

There was a moment's silence before the apple farmer admitted as much. "You know Ah ain't, Twi'. There's a reason Rarity brings her work with her, too. And Ah reckon it might explain Fluttershy, um, goin' off her rockers back in the Hollows." Twilight felt a chill go down her spine at the mention of that whole scene, nodding mutely.

The unicorn thought about this for a long while. When she finally spoke again, she wasn't sure if anypony else was awake, so it was in the smallest of whispers she asked. "Do you think that's why Luna's acting strange?"

No reply came. It was a silly question anyway. Twilight had no idea how Luna was supposed to be, despite her protests to her friends earlier. She just didn't know, but thinking about all this kindled another memory, a far more recent one. Twilight twisted around, stuck between Pinkie Pie and Rarity as she was, until she came face to face with Pinkie. "Pinkie, what did you say earlier about Luna and me? What was it you said again?"

Pinkie Pie giggled in her sleep and leaned in to snore against Twilight's neck.

Chapter 8

Waking up in the tundra was an unmerciful experience. While it was certainly warmer than it had been during the night, the chill had not yet completely left Twilight. The purple unicorn doubted she'd ever feel warm again for as long as they were travelling this cold and inhospitable country. They ate a light breakfast and were moving again soon, eager to try to chase the cold away with movement.

Just as had been the case on their approach, the mountains of Orion's Breath at their backs seemed to tower over them. Even with a day's march behind them, they ever remained a fixture as the limit of the horizon to their north, behind them. The hills ahead passed by at a swift canter and the ocean drew ever closer as they cut through the tundra.

By the second evening, Rainbow Dash's saddlebags were empty and she could fly freely again, a right she set about exercising right away. The pegasus was darting about gleefully in the open sky most of the time, while the mood among the other ponies was somewhat tempered by the harsh climate and the lack of animal life.

Twilight had asked Dash three separate times about getting the full scoop on Gilda. The pegasus had replied that they weren't in Clawford yet, growing more annoyed each time. After the third attempt at prying for information, Dash hadn't come back down again until it was time to sleep.

It was early in the third day when they spotted a cluster of shapes passing by far above. When Rarity pointed at them and alerted the other ponies, Rainbow Dash burst skywards without a word of explanation to Applejack, with whom she had been conversing. Soon enough, Rainbow Dash was tiny bright blue dot, nearly invisible against same-colored sky.

"Griffins, I suppose?" Rarity pondered aloud. "I suppose she's gone to ask them for directions. I do wish she'd let us know-" Her thoughts were cut short as two of the shapes split from the loose formation and dived for Rainbow Dash. The five grounded ponies could only stare in horror as Dash narrowly avoided them by going up at the last possible second. The

griffins nearly collided, but continued their pursuit. Fluttershy squeaked and sat.

Twilight didn't even know what she was planning as she gathered her magic about her without purpose, her horn shimmering. Rainbow Dash changed direction twice more trying to find a way to descend, but the griffins cut her off and blocked her at every turn, more of the flock joining in the chase, forcing her to fly higher still.

Having gained a little distance, Dash hovered mid-air for a few seconds as the griffins once more closed in on her, and then dived. The pegasus cut straight through the flock, heading for the ground and her friends. Two of the griffins, those who had originally pursued her, followed in a reckless dive. Rainbow Dash went from a speck to a blob to a near-supersonic pony heading straight for them in the blink of an eye. Fluttershy dived to the ground just as Dash landed with a thud near her. No pony seemed to know what to say or do, and Dash was too out of breath to speak.

For her part, Twilight was still eyeing the sky. The griffins had not stopped, still diving. The foremost one had its claws extended and was seconds away from hitting them. It was close enough that she could make out war-paint on its feathers and some sort of mask on its face. Applejack stood side by side with Twilight now, hooves ground into the dirt. Rainbow Dash was hovering next to them, now.

Twilight threw a book at the griffin.

It might have been a rather weak gesture from any other pony, but as it was, Gallopileo's 'Astronomer's Companion' *shot* towards the griffin with such force that Twilight herself was lifted a good three hooves off the ground from the force of the saddlebags being torn open. The griffin received a heavy lecture that nearly cracked its beak and went sprawling to the ground with a *whump*. The other griffin broke off its dive, heading for the rest of the pack.

"Ohmygoodness," Fluttershy whispered, watching the fallen griffin scramble back upright and test its wings. It winced and advanced on them by paw instead of wing. High above, the other griffins began descending as one.

"Rainbow, what the hay did you *do*?" Twilight yelled, rounding on the pegasus.

"I didn't do anything!" Dash yelled back angrily. "I was gonna go ask if they knew of Gilda, but they just went crazy and attacked me when they saw me! Tribal griffins are nuts!"

The lone griffin stalked closer, body low against the ground. It looked positively feral, and it was on the prowl. Though they had seen griffins before, or rather, a griffin, this was a different creature altogether. Gilda was apparently quite petite for a griffin.

The red swirls and slashes painted on its feathers lent it a fearsome appearance, and a cracked face mask covered the left side of its face, lending it the appearance of a bull. Though she knew she was probably prone to dramatization, as one is wont to do when in danger, Twilight felt that this creature had as much in common with Gilda as Spike did with a full-grown dragon.

Applejack placed herself in the way of the griffin. "You turn and walk the hay away right now," the apple farmer suggested. Twilight glanced nervously up at the sky at the approaching tribesgriffins. There was at least a dozen of them.

"If you can speak, do so! This is very unnecessary. Not to mention barbaric," Rarity suggested from behind Applejack. The griffin made no reply, its eyes past both of them and on Rainbow Dash.

Seeing the griffin thus distracted, Applejack simply hopped forward, spun on her forehooves, and made to buck it with her rear legs. The griffin was too slow to realize what was happening and caught one of her hooves straight in the face, but not before she swiped out with her talons, catching Applejack on the flank. Applejack stumbled and fell on her side but was quickly up again and facing the griffin once more. Her cloak was torn and she was bleeding from two long gashes on her rear, but the griffin was on the ground, dazed. It tried getting up, but failed, and its mask was shattered.

"Applejack! Are you okay?" Fluttershy gasped, rushing over to the earth pony even as the other tribesgriffins landed in a loose circle around them. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Pinkie Pie and Twilight rushed over to support and surround Applejack, facing the griffins.

"Ah'm fine, sugarcube. It can wait," Applejack said, but she sat down nevertheless. Fluttershy pulled back the cloak and gasped in horror, covering her mouth with a hoof. The pegasus wasn't afraid of blood, though, having seen hundreds wounds and injuries before. There was work to be done. She calmly but quickly began dressing and bandaging the wound with single-minded determination, shutting out the world around them.

The griffins, to a one dressed in various paints and masks, began closing the circle step by step. None of the ponies gave any ground. Even Pinkie Pie, wide-eyed and clearly terrified, stood firm. Rarity's eyes were narrow and her head low, horn pointed at the griffins like a spear.

Twilight's horn was enveloped in a sheath of purple light, and her mind was racing. She had no idea what to do. She didn't want anyone else to get hurt, but she would not let anyone hurt her friends, either. The magic around her horn flared up, more intense with every second, layers upon layers of magic without direction. *Please don't make me do this*, Twilight desperately thought. *Please don't make me do this, but I will.*

"Stop!" The sharp voice cut through the building tension like a knife, and Twilight was all too happy to let the magic dissipate harmlessly. The speaker was one of the griffins, clearly distinguished from the others by her full face mask, giving her the appearance of a snake. The mask also muffled her voice, but she sounded distinctly effeminate. The very second she had spoken, all of the griffins had taken a step or two back, giving the ponies a little more room. Dash still looked ready to fight, jeering at the retreating griffins.

"We only want the blue one," The griffin said, as if her proposition was a reasonable one. Even Fluttershy bristled at the words and the tone both, but she said nothing, concentrating on holding Applejack steady as she put the finishing touches on the bandages under her cloak. Rainbow Dash gaped and her fury redoubled.

"Oh, you *do* speak. Well, it's a shame. You can't have her." Rarity's voice was scathing and cold-tempered with condescension. "Why do you want her?"

The griffin shook her head slowly. "She is known to the Blackclaw tribe, but that is none of your concern. Give us the blue pegasus pony. We do not wish to harm any of you, but we will have her."

Within the same second she had finished her sentence, Applejack was up on her hooves again, roaring. "Then you'll have to go through *us*!" Pinkie Pie was trembling. Rarity's jaw was squared, and she was scratching the ground with a forehoof, making an oddly imposing sight in the cloak she wore.

Twilight felt a little sick. Her horn was glowing again, brighter with every second, but she had not called upon her magic. Her eyes hurt from the light, but all she could think of was that she would not let them touch any of her friends.

All the griffins were roaring and squawking, seeing the ponies were all ready to fight. Applejack had managed to slip out of the little circle of ponies and had shoved Rainbow Dash into their midst protectively. Rainbow Dash herself was trapped in a press of flanks, unable to get out.

"Let me the hay out right now!" Rainbow Dash yelled, struggling to stand, but even Fluttershy had joined the defensive circle and ignored her, staring at the approaching griffins.

The surrounding griffins drew ever closer, and Twilight felt the edge of her vision blur. She felt dizzy, and the light dimmed. It was only after the griffins reluctantly stopped advancing that she realized that it wasn't just her eyes playing tricks on her. She was the one *causing* it, and she welcomed whatever was happening, closing her eyes and submersing herself in the river of magic.

To her amazement, she could still see. In fact, she could see everything far more clearly now when she was not held back by her pathetically simple eyes. She stared at the Sun and she did not flinch from the light. Twilight saw the true shape of the Sun, without the corona and the

glare. She stared at the Moon through the mountains and the ground as if they were not there. She brushed against them and felt them both.

Twilight left her body alone and visited her memories. She vaguely remembered feeling something like this a long time ago. She also remembered the training she had undergone to try to prevent this from happening again. The memory was a powerful thing, and it was with her still. The feeling of Celestia's hoof on her withers. The calming presence of the princess slowly soothing her, pulling her back up. Being guided back from the strange and quiet place where all was light and dark, yet neither. She could feel Celestia's touch even now.

It wasn't Celestia's hoof, Twilight slowly realized. The hoof and the voice were both Fluttershy's. "T-twilight?" The pegasus mare's voice was very quiet. Twilight turned to look at her and felt herself again, conscious, alert and awake. That was more than could be said for the griffins.

A faint line was etched in the soil around Twilight and her friends, outside of which the ground was scored with marks from a blast of some kind. Griffins were scattered around the area like a foal's toys, some of them stuck in a nearby tree. This was made twice as odd by the fact that there were no trees in the area half a minute ago. As soon as she'd completed that thought, the tree disappeared in a puff of magic, reforming as a very confused griffin. The avians previously stuck in the tree fell right on top of him.

"Ah. Well, um. So yeah. You can't have her. Like Applejack said," Twilight finished lamely. She could be traumatized about the whole affair later.

Dash pointed at the griffin leader who was only now getting back up. "In your face!" the pegasus yelled triumphantly as she crawled over Twilight's back, finally extracting herself from the circle.

To her credit, the griffin leader did her best to maintain her poise as she walked back to stand before the ponies. On the other hoof, her 'best' was a little marred by the fact that it seemed like every feather on her forebody pointed in a different way. "Okay. I can see we're not going to resolve this here, then." Her voice was a little hoarse.

"How is this not 'resolved'!?" Twilight groaned.

"Do Ah need to buck your hide from here 'till Sweet Apple Acres for you to get it?" Applejack asked the griffin. "We got stuff to do here. We're busy. Scram!"

"Stuff we could do faster if you featherbrains could give us some directions," Dash added. "We just need to find a griffin called Gilda. She should've come here-"

"You're here to find Gilda?" The griffin was incredulous.

"Well, yeah?" Dash was instantly suspicious. "What's it to you? You know her?"

Twilight had never before seen a grown griffin look sheepish. Technically, she still hadn't, since the mask somewhat ruined the whole visual component, but the griffin certainly *sounded* sheepish, she thought.

"I... know her, yes. That was our intent. To take you to- uh, well, because of that. I have standing orders from Chief Blackclaw." The griffins were helping each other back up and formed up near their leader, sensing that the situation had been defused. Many of them still tried to stay as far away from Twilight and Applejack as they could. They looked a lot less like scary monsters now. "My name is Brenliana. I'm sorry for... this," their leader gestured at the scene at large.

"If only *somepony* had agreed to talk before the shoes came off," Rarity muttered as she rolled her eyes at Brenliana. "Or, well, *someone*, I suppose. Either way."

"Oh hey, yeah. Gilda's a Blackclaw, isn't she?" Rainbow Dash beamed. "I think we just got lucky, everypony!"

Brenliana's did not seem to agree with this notion or the use of the word "luck". She sounded positively dour. "Well, we'll see about that yet. The chief is in Clawford. It's where you were heading, yes? At your pace, that'll take days."

Rainbow Dash crossed her forehooves and snorted. "Is that a challenge? Because I think those are big words from someone who got outflown- er, outflied? Someone who just lost a flight fifteen-to-one!"

"I think she means because of those of us who don't have wings, Dashie," Pinkie Pie giggled. "I'd ask if I can borrow yours, but I think this is a bad time?" Pinkie appeared pensive for half a second before she nodded at herself. "Yep! Bad time! My bad. Bad Pinkie-winkie."

Dash blushed a bright red, but Twilight paid her no mind, instead putting her mind to more pressing concerns. "I think Fluttershy said it would take two or three more days at this pace, yes." Fluttershy nodded at Twilight's words.

"We'll fly you there, then." Brenliana's offer was simple and earnest. A few of the half-masked griffins were still a little hurt from the fight and looked rather displeased at their leader's words.

"How do we know you won't just throw them off?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Because we don't have any reason to do so, and we're both heading in the same direction anyway," Bren began counting on her claws. "Because you seem competent enough to save them if we do. Because I don't want to tangle with you after you knocked out my entire flight in ten seconds. Take your pick." The griffin sounded a little sore about that last point. Satisfied with this explanation, Dash shrugged, and nopony else had any protests, though Fluttershy worried that Applejack's wounds might re-open if she moved too much.

The matter thus decided, their saddlebags were given to the youngest of the griffins while Applejack, Rarity, Twilight and Pinkie each climbed onto the back of the older, stronger members of the flight. Before they could take off, Rainbow Dash spoke up. She had been talking to Fluttershy while the others loaded up and got ready.

"Hey, listen, could one of you take Fluttershy, too? She's light as a feather." The blue pegasus looked around and singled out a capable-looking griffin with a very soft and un-Dashy smile. When the only answer she got was a ripple of murmurs that went through the griffins, that smile

was gone in an instant. Fluttershy was staring nervously at her own hooves.

Twilight had heard that the griffins were proud and haughty creatures, and if Gilda was typical in any respect, it wasn't very surprising that they would find this funny or odd. She could easily imagine what Dash and Fluttershy were getting at, though. Fluttershy probably wouldn't be able to keep pace with the others, and this was the best option if speed was an issue.

"I thought pegasuses could fly," the griffin that Twilight mounted muttered.

"I think it's pegasi," a neighbouring griffin commented.

"Pegasuses, pegasi, if they got wings and don't use'em, I call'em snacks." Twilight had a sudden urge to zap the griffin who said this, but decided against it. He was carrying her saddlebags.

"I'll take you. Hop on and hold on," Brenliana said before the situation could devolve. The griffins seemed surprised at this, leading Twilight to wonder if a taboo had been broken, or if it was just usually not done. As Fluttershy reluctantly settled on the griffin leader's back, they could practically *hear* Brenliana smirk behind her mask. "It's a shame, we apparently have no more pairs of strong wings in the flight."

The griffins who did not carry ponies looked sullen at that, and the ones who did, laughed along with Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash.

Once in the air, Twilight realized a number of things. One was that she was, yet again, thankful for the cloaks. Another was that the cloaks could only do so much when you soared through the sky. They must have made quite the sight, the cloth billowing in the wind. Third, she recognized that while she wasn't exactly afraid of heights, she had at the very least a healthy *respect* for potential drops exceeding a thousand strides in length.

Even so, there was a limit to how long you could cling tightly to a griffin's neck without choking him, it turned out, so Twilight eventually relaxed simply because she had to. She forced herself to try to think of other things, and looked around to see how her friends were doing.

Rarity was chatting with her chaffeur a small distance away. Applejack looked like she was going to be sick, and Pinkie Pie was talking non-stop to her new friend amidst whoops and cries of '*Faster!*' Fluttershy, riding with Breliana, was too far ahead to see clearly. With all of her friends occupied, Rainbow Dash still flying circles around the entire pack as if to prove a point, Twilight let her mind wander. There was still something missing.

She'd found that she was still looking for a seventh pony among them. Twilight imagined she could see Luna flying at her side and smiled a little at the thought. The princess would look straight ahead, unfeeling and cold until she noticed Twilight was looking at her. Then she'd turn, and what?

Look at her as if she was stupid? Perhaps she should. Perhaps Twilight was stupid. In her little daydream, Luna would tell her that she'd seen something, but never explain what. Frustrate her with the barest of hints of the secrets of the world, unusable fragments that meant nothing by themselves. And Twilight would thank her for it because she didn't want to hurt her. She didn't want to hurt a goddess of immeasurable power. The very idea actually made her snort with laughter, and the griffin under her gave her an odd look.

So she was crazy and stupid both. She could accept that. What else could explain it? She knew something was terribly wrong with Luna, even if the others tried to ignore it or didn't believe it. Her friends didn't shy away despite the warning signals, and they were probably all idiots like that, but Twilight was dumber still. Twilight drew closer, just like she'd probably freeze and starve to death on her porch watching the stars if she didn't have Spike to take care of her.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon that they could make out Clawford on the horizon, and the growing darkness kept pace with them for a while, preventing them from making out any details until they drew much closer. Pinkie Pie's attempt to get Rainbow Dash to play messenger for a remote game of tic-tac-toe with Twilight had failed, and the griffin Twilight rode wasn't particularly friendly or chatty. As a result, the unicorn mare had

precious little to do except watch the landscape around them as it was claimed by the night. They flew too high to see any evidence of life below except for a single sighting of a herd of antlered animals.

There really was beauty to the place, though. As they neared the ocean, the surrounding mountains became fewer and smaller, and Twilight could already see a myriad of islands of varying size out past the coast. Clawford was built partially on the flat ground where a river terminated in the ocean, but most of the city was situated on the face of a lonely mountain nearby.

Considering the inaccessibility of Cloudsdale, it really didn't come as a surprise to Twilight that the winged griffins would use the mountains. On the other hoof, the griffins could walk on clouds just like pegasi, yet there were no cloudhomes about. Furthermore, the pegasi expressed no interest in the mountain near ponyville. Were these differences simply cultural?

"Rarity!" Twilight yelled, trying to get her unicorn friend's attention. It took her a couple of tries before she was heard over the roar of the wind.

When she did notice, Rarity leaned over to say something to the griffin whose back she borrowed. The griffin smiled pleasantly and nodded before gliding over to fly close by so they could chat.

"Thank you ever so much, Thorvin. What's the matter, Twilight?" Rarity asked.

"I think I need to borrow some writing supplies from you. I have enough material to write a dozen letters to the princess by now," Twilight explained.

The fashionista laughed and nodded. "I'm sure we can arrange for-

"Hi! What's cookin'?" Pinkie Pie interrupted. She was standing on her hindlegs, balancing on the griffin who carried her as if he were a surfboard. Rainbow Dash was flying nearby eyeing her with a mixture of admiration and horror, ready to dive if she fell.

"This buys me five minutes of silence afterwards, yes?" the griffin-turned-surfing implement asked, hope in his voice.

When they finally began their spiralling descent towards Clawford, it dawned on Twilight exactly how different this was from any pony village or city she had seen. The dwellings near the river were mostly single-story houses made of mud bricks or soil, and there were racks of gutted fish drying in the air all around the houses. It was clear that it was a permanent settlement, and a fishing village at that, large stone structures dominating the shoreline.

The majority of the town of Clawford, however, was on the nearby Mount Blackclaw. A distance that would be a major hassle for an earth pony or a unicorn pony was a non issue to a population of griffins. It would take a matter of minutes to fly between what Twilight couldn't help but think of as two communities, not one.

The griffins were clearly aiming for the mountain settlement. They soared past dozens of small plateaus and caves before finally landing high up the mountain. Hooves, rearpaws and foreclaws touched down gracefully on an empty part of the huge plateau, clearly a designated landing zone. A number of caves dotted the mountainside nearby, each easily able to fit a dragon.

In addition to the caves, numerous dwellings dotted the area and the other, nearby plateaus. They were not simply ramshackle piles of stones, but fairly elaborate stone houses. While they lacked doors and windows, the designs were complex enough that Twilight figured this was due to a lack of materials and little else. They had seen very few trees, after all.

Once the ponies and their cargo was safely delivered, the griffins were quick to shed their masks and store them in a nearby cave before scattering. Some went to nearby houses and were greeted by their families, some disappeared into caves, and others still flew over the edge of the plateau and headed for the village below. It reminded Twilight very much of watching the guard units go off-duty after a drill outside the royal palace. The only thing missing was Brenliana shouting "*Dismissed.*" at the end.

Instead, Brenliana had waited while the ponies took in the sights. "Welcome to Clawford," she said with a smile. Removing her mask, she looked like any other griffin, if not for her painted feathers. Twilight

wondered how griffins told each other apart, lacking in bright colors and cutie marks.

"Well. It's certainly, ah, solid," Rarity offered.

"It's bigger than what you can see. The caves go deep, and there are more roosts above and below, though I guess it's hard to appreciate it all without wings." Her voice was almost melodic without the muffling effect of the mask.

"Thank you for the lift. I, ah. What do we do?" Twilight asked, looking around. None of the other ponies looked like they had more of a clue than she.

"That's up to you," Brenliana replied. "You said you needed to go to Clawford, and I've taken you to Clawford. The chief's up top, obviously. I've done my part!" With that, before anypony could reply or protest, the griffin took off, flying higher up the mountain. None of the griffins around them seemed to pay them any mind except for the occasional curious glance. They all went about their business heedless of the lost ponies.

"They were nice!" Pinkie Pie said, looking around, oblivious to their predicament.

"Yes, very nice. I love being stranded on a mountaintop. It is, in fact, my favorite thing ever," Twilight growled. Applejack was clearly with Twilight in this, but she only offered the tiniest of nods to go with her frown, looking very green and queasy. Apparently, flight did not agree with the orange earth pony.

"Aw, we're not stranded!" Pinkie disagreed. "I'm sure Rarity's griffin friend could help us get off this rock. And Dashie is great at flying. Even Fluttershy could flap-flap those little wings and get us back down if we really wanted to!"

"I- okay, maybe you're right," Twilight admitted. "And this *is* where we needed to go."

"Uh-huh," Pinkie nodded, relentlessly optimistic.

"But we're not going anywhere else just yet until you-" Twilight pointed at Rainbow Dash. "tell us everything. I am *not* facing the leader of this community until I know what the hay we're even doing here!"

Rainbow Dash looked very uncomfortable. "Uh, Twilight, this isn't a very private place, is it?" The pegasus pony of course had a point. They stood on a plateau that was quite clearly central to the community, dotted as it was with dwellings. It was about as private as the Ponyville village square. It didn't help that it was only marginally warmer here than it had been mid-flight. To top it all off, the darkness was near absolute now. Soon, it would be hard to see anything at all.

"Um, I kind of agree," Fluttershy said. "And besides, I think Applejack could use some rest. I really want to look at the bandages again, too."

Twilight rubbed her face with a hoof and groaned, relenting. "Fine. But I am serious, we're getting to the bottom of this. Luna only suspected something was wrong, but I *know* that you know more than you've let on, Rainbow. If not, this trip is a huge waste of time. If Gilda is here, and this place really is as cheery and happy as a pile of rocks could ever be, what the hay are we doing here? And why do they want you?"

"I told you I'll tell, jeez, Twilight!" Rainbow snapped.

"Great, great. Now which of these caves is the Clawford Bed and Breakfast?" Twilight muttered.

It was the second cave from the left. As Brenliana had suggested, the city was a lot larger than one would think after having seen just one of its "floors". The spacious and well-lit cave entrance they were directed to quickly opened into a massive complex. From the central cavern, dozens of smaller caves branched off, each marked with signs announcing shops and services, one of these being the Clawford Inn.

It took a while to get the proprietor of the inn to accept Equestrian bits, but Pinkie finally sealed the deal by offering him some brightly colored streamers and paper fans, rarities to the point of being luxuries in the land of the griffins.

"My expectations were slightly lower than this, I must admit, however minor a victory *that* is right now." Rarity sounded almost appreciative as they entered the room they had rented.

Twilight had no idea how the griffins worked the interiors of the caves, but deep in the tunnels stood room #9's fully functional wooden door, perfectly fitted into a door frame. The inside had an almost perfectly even floor covered in carpets and furnished with everything one would expect of such a room, including two large beds. There were even pictures along the walls, perhaps to make up for the lack of windows. Somewhere in Scandineighvia there was a griffin artist with a wonderful knack for drawing landscapes.

Fluttershy was quick to order Applejack out of her cloak and up on one of the beds, something the farmpony did with only a minimum of protest. Within half a minute of entering the room, she had her herbs and ointments out.

While she was getting increasingly worried by how often they had needed Fluttershy and her medical supplies, Twilight knew Applejack was in good hooves, and turned to Dash. The chromatic pegasus looked very irritable when she noticed Twilight looking at her.

"Yeah yeah, getting to it," Rainbow Dash groaned.

"I'm sorry. I just really think-" Twilight began, suddenly feeling a little bad about pressuring Rainbow Dash.

"No, you're right. Just shut up and let me talk. I've been thinking a lot about how to say this," Dash interrupted with a hoof-wave.

"Manners," Rarity huffed, but she sat down on the free bed nevertheless. Twilight joined her, while Pinkie took a seat on the floor, leaning back against the bed.

"I first met Gilda at junior speedster flight camp," Rainbow Dash started explaining. Twilight glanced over at Fluttershy immediately, surprised that she hadn't mentioned it. Noticing this, Dash interrupted her own story with a sigh before it even had a chance to begin.

"No, not flight school. I chose to go here. It's, um, whatcha call it? Voluntary? The tag line was 'An initiative for talented fliers'." Dash shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Pegasi came from all over to attend. Griffins aren't exactly a common sight, but there were, er, exchange students. At least, that's what Gilda said she was."

"*Anyway*, Gilda was pretty much the only gal I got along with there. The rest were just trying to cramp my style, you know, but Gilda, she was cool and quick. She told me where she was from, and that she hadn't really been 'allowed' to come here. She kinda just ran away from home to see what else was out there, and she ended up in Equestria. Since she loves flying, she signed up at flight camp when she heard of it, lying to the instructors." Dash paused contemplatively. "I guess that's why we got along so well, heh. We were real close, and she talked a bit about why she left."

Fluttershy put her finishing touches on Applejack's flank, having dressed her cuts neatly, and the farmpony quietly said her thanks. The room was otherwise still entirely focused on Dash. For once, it was attention that the chromatic pegasus did not enjoy.

"Turns out she's the daughter of the chief here, and she's expected to help with clan business. She says her dad's an idiot, and she doesn't care, so she ran away from it all. I... I told her I thought that was a stupid thing to do, just running away, but she just wanted to fly and be free. I *know* that feeling," Rainbow Dash smiled at something only she saw. "We kind of didn't say anything more about that. End of story, kinda. Well, until some big griffin bullies showed up at the camp one day. They took her home. She said she didn't want to go, but they just took her. I tried to stop them, but... what could I do?"

Despite her words, it looked like the memory still pained Dash. "I tried," she repeated, her voice cracking. "And I wanted to go after her, but one of my camp instructors kind of stopped me, heh. He told me I shouldn't, and not in a nice way. Wouldn't let me go. My wings still hurt when I think about that." She winced, though she was still smiling.

"So Gilda is a tribal princess?" Pinkie asked, head tilted ninety degrees.

"Uh, no. Or, well, sort of? I don't know, she never used that word," Dash admitted.

"That's not the end though. She came back. I mean, we met her," Twilight pointed out, eager to hear the full story.

"Yeah, yeah, that." Dash began pacing the room, her hooves muffled by the carpets. "She came back earlier this year like you say, knocked on my door one day. It was all cool at first. I didn't really ask. We just had fun, it was cool to see her." She glanced over at her friends apologetically, particularly at Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie. "I... wish I could say she'd changed, but I think I have changed a little, too. She was always kinda loud, but never mean. Buck, I don't know, but it didn't work out so well anyway, did it? I'm sorry, guys."

Fluttershy said nothing, and Pinkie Pie was just giving Dash her most supportive smile.

"When I got home after the party she crashed, she was waiting at my house," Dash said. Twilight blinked at this, and judging by the others' surprise, it was obvious that Dash hadn't told anypony.

"Gilda had been crying. She had fled her tribe again because her father wanted her to marry a griffin from another tribe. He was okay, she said, but she didn't love him. She wanted to choose her own mate. And, uh. Yeah, apparently she'd been in love with me since speedster camp but hey." Dash said the last bit very quickly, as if hoping nopony would catch exactly what she'd said.

"Oh," Pinkie Pie said, eyes wide and her mouth forming a perfect circle. The others were various shades of utterly quiet.

"I didn't ask for it!" Dash desperately explained. "And hay, I didn't know what to do about that. I still don't! I'm, uh, not interested. She's not exactly my glass of tea. Not anymore anyway."

"*Cup* of tea," Rarity corrected.

"I don't really drink tea anyway," Dash countered sourly.

"O-kay," Twilight said, trying to collect her thoughts. "But, and I'm sorry to say this, that doesn't actually explain everything. Why did Brenliana recognize you? Why are they so insistent that we should see this Chief Blackclaw?"

"Beats me!" Dash exclaimed, sitting down and throwing her hooves up. "I don't know anything else, I'm trying to tell you what I *do* know, but I have no idea!" She exhaled slowly and puffed her cheeks out. "Okay, after she told me, we may have yelled at each other a bit. Or a lot. She said that if she went back, her father would punish her for having left, maybe force her to marry. She was scared."

"And you let her go?" Applejack asked.

"I said it wasn't my problem," Dash said, looking like she'd finished an entire jug of lemon juice by herself. "That's the third bucking time I abandoned someone like that."

Pinkie Pie walked over to Dash, but the pegasus suddenly got up and headed towards the exit, avoiding her. "Gonna go for a flight." Rainbow Dash muttered before slamming the door shut after her. Pinkie swallowed and hung her head.

"Ah reckon the chief ain't none too pleased with Rainbow Dash, then," Applejack said pensively. "Question is, what're we gonna do about it?"

"We're going to stand by Rainbow Dash, of course. It's only proper, and she would do the same for us," Rarity said with a shrug.

"I wonder if she's going to be okay," Fluttershy said, still looking at the door through which the other pegasus had disappeared.

"Of course she is. She's got us." Pinkie Pie said, putting back on her smile and bouncing back over to the beds. "Right?"

"We're all there for her," Twilight agreed before a great yawn seized her. "We just need to take it one step at a time. And right now, I think a good night's rest is a great first step."

Fluttershy, however, looked unconvinced. The butter-colored mare stood silent while the other ponies got ready for bed. When Twilight finally slipped under the covers next to Applejack, Fluttershy still hadn't moved.

"Fluttershy?" Rarity asked quietly.

"I have to go find her," Fluttershy said.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, darling. If any of us can manage themselves here, it's her," Rarity said as she put her night mask on. "But if you truly believe she is in trouble, then we'll all go." Twilight nodded at this without hesitation, even though the bed felt heavenly.

"Without wings, I don't know if that's such a great idea," Fluttershy said, though she smiled back at Rarity, clearly thankful for the offer and support. "But she's hurt. She hurts twice as much for every time she thinks she's failed her friends. No matter how many times I tell her it's okay, that I don't hate her for what happened after flight school, she never listens."

Fluttershy's eyes were glossing over, but she did not acknowledge the tears that formed. "I have to make her understand," Fluttershy finished and headed out the doors before anypony could protest.

Twilight looked around at those friends of hers who remained in the room. "So, who's next? Anypony else want to storm off? Pinkie? Rarity? Applejack? Is it my turn?" She didn't so much as smile at her own joke, and almost regretted saying it. Slamming her head down on the pillow, she closed her eyes tightly, annoyed.

"Ah'm sure they'll be fine, Twi'. Just get some rest now. Please," Applejack murmured at her side, clearly tired.

"I know. I just remembered Luna's words way back," Twilight admitted, feeling keenly the distance that separated her from the princess even now. "I know she's said this at least twice, but it's so easy to forget. This isn't really about Gilda, or, at least, not just about her. It's not just about Trixie or Blueblood either, is it?" Twilight looked meaningfully over at Rarity, seeking the white unicorn's eyes.

At the mention of Blueblood, Rarity had turned over on her other side, facing away from Twilight. Within minutes, the only sounds in the room was that of ponies sleeping, and Twilight soon followed them to a dreamless oblivion.

Chapter 9

"Twilight."

It was very tempting for Twilight to just pretend she hadn't heard Rainbow Dash. If she fell asleep again, she could go back to her dream. She had no idea what it involved, but she knew it was a regular dream entirely devoid of unnatural scary moons or frustrating princesses. Not a single Luna to confuse her and annoy her.

"Twilight. Get up. Get *up!*"

That may be a slight exaggeration. She did miss Luna, even though the princess frustrated her to no end. Half the time it felt like Twilight was trying to solve a puzzle box wrapped in barbed wire. It was fascinating, yet painful, and she had never been the type to give up on easily. When that puzzle occupied her mind half the day, though, she had to question her own sanity.

"Come *on!* I can see your mouth moving, I *know* you are awake!"

Twilight finally gave up and opened her eyes to find Rainbow Dash hovering over her, close enough that she could smell her breath. All around them, the others were stirring and packing up their things while Fluttershy was fussing over Applejack again. There was no telling what time it was in the dark of the cave. The single firefly-lamp in the ceiling provided scant illumination.

"Finally! And ponies say *I'm* a sound sleeper. We got to go. I think the chief wants to see us. Like, now," Dash said.

Suddenly more worried than annoyed, Twilight was fully awake and scrabbling out of bed in a second. "What happened? Are you okay?" Indeed, everypony did look okay, but Twilight half expected griffins to break down the door any moment.

"Yeah, I'm okay, but, uhm, well, Brenliana came by. Turns out that the chief wasn't very happy that she hadn't taken us straight to him." Dash winced. "She didn't look so good. I think he hurt her."

"Somepony needs to buck that chief in the head," Applejack muttered angrily. "Might just be that it's gonna be me."

"Yeah, well, Bren's outside. Said she'd 'appreciate it' if we would come with her, but she wasn't going to order us to do so, no matter what chief what's-his-face says. I don't think Brenliana and the chief are friends," Rainbow Dash finished with a sour grin. "Yay, right?"

Out from under the blanket, the room was a little cold, and Twilight was glad to slip into her cloak. They were reluctant to leave the room when they realized it was even colder on the outside. Leaving the caves that hosted the inn in favor of the cold dawn outside, they were approached by a single griffin. While she still struggled to tell them apart from each other, Twilight had no trouble recognizing her as Brenliana, even with the state she was in.

Bren walked with a noticeable limp, as if putting down her left foreleg hurt her. Her sides and chest were bandaged, and her warpaint was smudged almost as an afterthought. The griffin flight leader did not offer comment on this, though, speaking up the second she spotted them. "Okay, I'm taking a big chance with you here. Please be worth it," Brenliana said. There was no anger in her voice, even if the words were harsh.

"Um, what?" Twilight said. "Why? How? You were just ordered to take us in, right?"

"Without tellin' us why," Applejack grumped.

The griffin began walking towards the mouth of a huge cave nearby. It wasn't situated on the same level, but a small pathway hugged the mountain and led to the plateau that hosted the entrance. Perhaps the path was intended for young griffins who had yet to learn how to fly, Twilight mused.

"Because of Gilda," Brenliana finally said.

Dash gave a start. "Wait, she mentioned you, I think. You're the gal-pal back home she mentioned? Oh hay, I get it now. Uh, listen, I'm sorry about-"

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I should have given you a chance to explain yourself earlier," Brenliana interrupted. "I've known and taken care of Gilda since she was a little hatchling. Her mother, ah, isn't here any more, and the chief is... busy. She needed a friend. I don't know if I've been the best of friends, but I tried."

The griffin snorted derisively. "The chief blames me for letting her run away from home the first time, and he's right. I told her that if she didn't want this life, she should get out of here."

Brenliana looked around to make sure that no griffins were nearby, and indeed they were alone. Perhaps griffins started their day later, or the unusually cold day kept them inside? Twilight pulled her hood up as the griffin went on, still ascending towards the cave entrance.

"The second time she ran away, I understand it was to see you, Rainbow Dash. She came back hurt and told me and the chief what had happened. The chief wasn't happy. Nor was I."

There was a little pause while the griffin stared contemplatively at Dash, who for her part looked very discomfited and offered no comment. Brenliana eventually shrugged. "Chief said that she couldn't be trusted any more, and that he would arrange for someone to marry her. Gilda didn't like that one bit, and there was a bit of a fight."

"If he's hurt Gilda..." Dash snarled.

"He hasn't. He never would. Anyway, she said that you would come save her, to take her away. I doubted it, but the chief spread the word and told us to be on alert for a blue, rainbow-maned pony with ill intent." The griffin was still looking straight at Dash, and frowned. "I was happy to be on the lookout but I never thought you'd come, and certainly not to take her away."

Dash swallowed. "Uh, I'm not-"

"I know. I guessed," Brenliana said wearily. "I don't need to know why you came here, or if you just happened by and went with it. I just know things can't get any worse. Chief Blackclaw is getting old. Some say he's not himself anymore, that he should let someone else take up the mantle of chief. He disagrees. Whatever comes of this, I'm hoping something will change, and that's why I'm taking this risk."

The griffin paused at the cave entrance. It was natural, unworked stone - an irregular and craggy thing, but richly decorated. Masks, fetishes, stone totems and bone crafts were all spread around the area and mounted above. Every flat stone surface was covered in claw-painted scenes depicting griffins diving for fish and soaring through the sky.

"I don't know what Gilda thinks, though she knows you're here. I'll be very disappointed if you hurt her, but let's skip the threats of violence and all that for once, yeah?" Brenliana said with a mirthless chuckle.

"Let's," Twilight hastily agreed as they followed their griffin guide into the cave.

The inside was decorated with just as much care as the outside. Braziers lined the tunnel and brightly illuminated smooth stone walls lined with innumerable paintings. From the very second they stepped inside, they were surrounded by delicately claw-painted scenes that seemed to tell a story. It all started with a large mottled egg which hatched into the sun and the moon, and went on to show a large griffin ruling over smaller griffins. There were battles, celebrations, griffins shaking claws in agreement- it was a storybook that followed them as they went.

"The story of the griffin tribes," Brenliana commented with ill-concealed disinterest. "It's very uninteresting and irrelevant until you get to the more recent stuff higher up. That, we can use. These are just stories retold."

As the tunnel wound upwards, it got steeper and began turning, but Twilight's attention was fully on the walls. The larger griffin made its last appearance, lying down in front of a mountain. The sun was painted in zenith over the mountain, but there was no telling what had happened to the griffin. After this scene, the griffins were all painted with solid-colored claws, perhaps signifying that it was the story of the Blackclaw. It had a few

dozen paintings of major events showing treaties and agreements, a strong and happy community until a conflict was depicted. The last scene was one of griffins raising claws against each other, and then the walls were bare.

Brenliana offered no comment. The passage's curve became tighter and tighter, steeper and steeper until they finally reached a set of stone stairs. Twilight halted.

"Uh, Brenliana? What's the chief like? I mean, I'd hate to say the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Rarity nodded at the question. "A primer on griffin etiquette would be most welcome."

Brenliana just kept walking, shaking her head. "Etiquette? That's a very Equestrian thing, I think. Just don't make him look weak in front of other griffins. That's common sense, not 'etiquette', though."

At the top of the stairs the tunnel opened up and the walls fell away to leave them standing on a plateau that Twilight quickly realized made up the very peak of the mountain. A large throne stood near one of the edges, a massive thing of polished stone upon which rested a huge griffin. The griffin, presumably Chief Blackclaw, dwarfed the other griffins. He reminded Twilight more of a manticore than a griffin as far as sheer size went.

The ponies were being watched from all around the barren rock area by scores of griffins. Some of them wore warpaint and stood guard in pairs, but the vast majority were clean and curious, with more of them arriving by wing every minute. At the chief's side stood three griffins, two of which were adorned with fetishes and weird paints. The third one, Twilight immediately recognized by her smallish size and dyed feathertips.

"Gilda," Dash breathed, but her voice was swallowed up by the winds that ravaged the plateau. The young griffin in question saw them approach, and her eyes lit up when she saw the ponies, the blue pegasus among them.

Chief Blackclaw slowly stood up on his throne, and Brenliana halted them not ten paces from the throne. "Well well well, little Equestrians.

You've come to my town, slept in my beds, eaten my food, and now you finally deign to come to my court. I am delighted to see that your politeness has wings at least." His voice boomed across the plateau, eliciting a round of amused squawking laughter from the crowd.

"We didn't eat any of your damn food, and we paid the bucking innkeeper," Dash snorted, but Fluttershy shot her a glance to silence her. Rarity quickly stole the spotlight by taking a quick step forward and bowing.

"We are delighted to visit your beautiful town, and it's a truly splendid sight. We heard that your lordship has requested our presence, and so, here we are," Rarity said, smiling. The unicorn was the very picture of elegance, and even the chief looked a little surprised, though it faded quickly.

"Yes. Yes I have. If you choose to think of it as a 'request', then you are free to lie to yourself if it makes you feel better." The old griffin snorted and glanced pointedly at the warlike griffins spread around the plateau. "Just because one of my wing leaders has gone *soft* does not mean they have all become mewling cowards." There was another round of raucous laughter at this, though many of the griffins were grimly silent along with Brenliana. Many murderous glances were exchanged between the griffins of the Blackclaw tribe, and some of the laughter sounded forced.

The chief's face grew grim as the laughter died. He lowered his voice a bit, but he was still loud as a storm and a half as he pointed a huge, sharp claw at Rainbow Dash. "Our business is this. You have *poisoned* my daughter with your ways, and I demand satisfaction. I will take it from you one way or another."

"Jeez dad, she hasn't 'poisoned' anyone!" Gilda yelled, glaring at the chief. "I'm going with Rainbow Dash. I told you she would come, and you're not going to stop us."

"Silence, child," Chief Blackclaw growled.

"I'm not a child, and you know it!" Gilda said, rolling her eyes. "And I'm *not* the only one who thinks you are being way uncool." Neither father nor daughter was watching the crowd, but glances were exchanged, griffins trying to decide who agreed and disagreed, who stood where.

"As long as you keep speaking out of turn, behaving like a child, you *are* a child, and you will hold your tongue!" The chief towered over Gilda, who turned her back and walked towards the ponies in silent defiance.

"You get back here, Gilda, or I swear on the ancestors-"

"No dad, I'm gone. I warned you." Gilda ran up to Rainbow Dash and grinned at her, holding out a claw for a high-five. The pegasus seemed utterly paralyzed, and the crowd was mute.

"We going, yeah, Dash?" She asked, looking at Dash expectantly.

The chief looked about ready to explode, and Twilight flinched, unsure of what was going to happen, but certain it wouldn't be good. The threat of something horrendous and violent hung in the air, obvious to everyone but one pegasus pony and a young griffin. Painted griffins slowly spread their wings. Pinkie Pie's smile faltered almost imperceptibly and one of her eyes twitched.

Rainbow Dash halted it all with a few words. She looked away, unable to meet Gilda's eyes. Gilda's paw was still waiting, and would be kept waiting still. "Actually, that's not why I'm here."

"You're kidding, right?" Gilda's voice was pure disbelief tinted by a growing hysteria. "C'mon Dash, you are *not* saying you came all the way here, and you're not- I thought..."

"We're here to help," Dash stammered. "I mean, whatever we can do. If you want to go back to Equestria, then that's cool. We'll take you." She looked past Gilda to the chief, who was looking at the unfolding event with narrowed eyes. "I'll even fly over and buck that rotten dad of yours in the face if you think it'll help, but I don't- I'm not in love with you. I never was. And besides, I'm, uh. I kind of have someone else."

"What?" Twilight whispered. Applejack, Rarity and Fluttershy all glanced over at her and rolled their eyes or sighed in exasperation for some reason. Pinkie Pie was still looking at the exchange with great interest.

Gilda's face fell. "Ah. Sweet. Great. Awesome. I guess I'm cool with that." She sounded everything but "cool" with it, and Twilight winced. Neither Rainbow Dash nor Gilda would look at each other right now.

"Your place is here, Gilda. The tribe needs all of its wings." The chief's voice sounded almost sympathetic, now. "Swoop is a good griffin. You will be good for each other."

"Yeah, except for that part where I don't like him," Gilda shot back, moving closer to Brenliana, away from Dash.

Brenliana spoke up next, making Twilight jumped a little. She had almost forgotten the griffin was standing next to her, and she was terribly loud. "And except, also, for the part where it is not for you to decide on in the first place, chief or no!" Brenliana's words triggered a lot of noise from the surrounding griffins, some in her support, some in abject disagreement. There were a lot more griffins at the peak now than there had been when they arrived, Twilight noticed. They had never stopped coming.

"I do what I must to keep the Blackclaw strong," Chief Blackclaw said. "And as long as I am chief, my word is law. I only want what is best for everyone." He seemed to have noticed the same thing as Twilight, and his eyes roamed, looking for dissent in the crowd. Most griffins quailed under his gaze, but when his attention came to rest on Brenliana and Gilda, neither of them so much as flinched.

"Law?" Brenliana replied. Her eyes shone and it looked like she was presented with a problem and a solution both. A revelation. She looked over at the ponies by her side, fixing her attention upon Rainbow Dash for as long as it took her to whisper two words under her breath. *"I'm sorry."*

Without giving any explanation, she approached the throne boldly. "Law includes the right to challenge the laws with contests. No one has exercised this right in your reign so far, but that ends now. Chief, I challenge you for the throne in a contest of speed. I suspect your wings are rusty, and it's about time someone stood up to you."

The chief was impassive as Brenliana walked a slow circle around the edge of the crowd. How many griffins were here now, Twilight

wondered? Three hundred? Four hundred? Over half of them were hovering in the air, with no space left on which to stand.

"You've done a lot of good for the Blackclaw, but you wield your subjects as tools. We toil as slaves in the fisheries stockpiling food for a war that will never come. Our flights patrol until their wings are ragged and their families weep, lonely and forgotten. We find no enemies because the wars are over. They were over long ago!" She shouted, voice laden with passion as she tried to engage the crowd.

"Your father had cause to be cautious, but we are free and at peace. It's time you realized this! You bind us to Clawford with chains of steel where bonds of family and love would hold us just as surely without chafing." The crowd was getting noisier and noisier, and it seemed fights would break out any minute. The griffins were slowly splitting into two camps. Many of the painted griffins took up position near the chief, who for his part was scowling as if the sheer weight of his disapproval could snap Brenliana in half. The majority, however, ended up flocking to Brenliana, standing or hovering by the injured wingleader.

"And now?" Brenliana continued, indicating Gilda who stood at her side, head held high. "Now you're trying to force your own daughter to marry off to another tribe in one of your ploys for power? It ends now! I challenge you for the leadership of the Blackclaw tribe, chief. A test of speed."

Under the deafening cheers, yells and arguments that ensued in the wake of Brenliana's speech, the ponies huddled together. "Okay, so we're in the middle of a civil war. Fantastic. Ideas? Escape plans?" Twilight asked, speaking quickly.

"I just want to know why Brenliana apologized to me," Dash said, looking very sceptical. "Nothing's happened. Uh, yet. Oh horseapples, I said it!"

"War?" Fluttershy echoed. "I don't think it's that bad. Is it that bad? We can't let that happen!"

"Oh don't be so dramatic, the word they used was 'contest'," Rarity pointed out.

"There's still a lot of griffins that look awful angry," Applejack huffed. "But Ah hope yer right. Don't fancy our chances right now if this goes south."

"This is no fun at all. We just make people angry wherever we go," Pinkie Pie said sulkily.

"Very well! I accept your challenge," Chief Blackclaw boomed, and all the other noise died almost instantly. He faced Brenliana, stepping down from the throne. Even on level ground, the older chief was a lot bigger than Brenliana. He spread his wings, huge and tattered things. Brenliana followed suit, though it obviously pained her a little. She was apparently still hurting from whatever fight she had been in earlier, and it was plain for all to see that now. One of her wings didn't fully extend.

"You intend to make me fly the challenge like this, oh fair and just chief of the tribe?" Brenliana asked, loudly. It was clear she was counting on the presence of the tribe, now. The chief scowled.

"We will settle this with champions of our choosing, then. It is my right to decide as the defender. You have named the stake. Name your champion." The chief looked as if the words tasted mightily sour. Twice as much so when Brenliana replied.

"Rainbow Dash of Equestria will be my champion."

Less than an hour later saw Twilight Sparkle in a sparsely decorated soil home in the fishing village below mount Blackclaw. With her were all her friends plus Gilda, Brenliana, and Brenliana's husband Kinther. The interior was surprisingly roomy despite, or perhaps exactly because it had no tables or other wooden furniture. This left the assembled ponies and griffins sitting in a loose circle in the center of the house. The sun was barely up, but the room quickly warmed up with so many occupants.

"Okay. Okay. So I'm in a race. Cool. I'm gonna win it. Also cool. But can anyone tell me how the *hay this could happen?!'*" Dash yelled the

accusation at Brenliana, who looked only moderately sorry about the whole business.

"I think perhaps I can answer that. Bren?" Kinther asked, receiving a nod from his wife. The male griffin was slightly smaller than Brenliana, and he smiled kindly. He was the least threatening griffin Twilight had seen so far.

"I am tasked with recording the history of the tribe. Or, I was, before the chief set me to the task of fishing. I kept listening and talking to our tribesmembers, though, and I'd be happy to explain."

"Oh wait, so you're like a librarian? Or a historian?" Twilight asked hopefully. She had not expected to find someone like that here. "Are the paintings in the cave at the peak yours?"

"Librarian and historian both, in a sense, and yes, minding that cave used to be my duty." Kinther said with a nod.

"You don't have a library though," Twilight objected. "And the paintings were only major historical events, right?" She looked around, suddenly twice as surprised by how bare the house was.

"Not everyone lives where they work," Rarity said. "This is obviously not their library."

"There is no library," Kinther said with an amused grin.

"Oh!" Twilight said, her eyes wide with wonder. "Oral tradition! You have it all in your head!" It was obvious she had hit the nail on the head, and Kinther nodded, tapping his own head with a claw.

"I carry with me the history of the Blackclaw, even though the Chief has forbidden me from the cave of memories, deeming it a 'waste of time'," the griffin snorted.

"To answer your initial question, before we get derailed, this 'could happen' because there is no law saying it can't. Challenges favor the challenged, and as such, they are rare," the griffin said.

"Uh, favor the challenged how, exactly? Might be that Ah'm missing something, but Bren here chose the challenge," Applejack pointed out, face scrunched up in confusion.

"So she did," Kinther said with a nervous glance at Brenliana. "She exercised the right of the challenge, and cleverly baited the chief to let them use proxies because of what he did to her – may he drown for that. But *he* chooses the specifics of the contest as well as his own champion. Last, he chooses the counter-stake."

"Wait, so he chooses what happens if I lose?" Dash asked.

"Yeah," Gilda said. She'd been quiet up until now, only tossing Rainbow Dash the occasional hurt or angry glance. "Your flank on the line, heh."

"My flank, rather," Brenliana interjected. "If I lose the challenge, I may not challenge him again, but I have more support than him. He will probably still see me as a threat and demand my exile. The chief is most certainly not an idiot."

"Okay, whatever, what do we do when Dash wins?" Gilda asked impatiently. The fact that she used the word 'when', not 'if', gave Twilight a measure of faith.

"I'll let your father stay if he wants to, but I imagine he'll exile himself out of pride. I just want the tribe to be what it used to be," Brenliana said, extending a foreleg to rest a claw on top of Gilda's head.

"Yeah, great." Gilda replied shaking Brenliana off and staring at Dash. "But I mean, what do we do when you win? You have someone else? Who?"

Obviously less comfortable talking about this in front of an audience, Dash shrank back a little. "I, yeah. I do. I don't think you know them."

Pinkie Pie made a noise next to Twilight. The pink earth pony's ears drooped a little. Dash did not look over at her, looking even more depressed and lowering her head.

"Awesome," Gilda said with a sigh.

"Will you be coming with us?" Rarity asked, trying to shift the subject a little. Applejack muttered something angry to Dash. The pegasus looked like she wanted to sink through the ground, and thanks to the soil floor, she actually made some real progress in that department.

"If Dash wins, then I guess this place won't be so bad. If she loses, well, then I don't know what happens, right?" Gilda shrugged. "Just don't mess it up, Dash."

"Yeah. No problem," Dash said with the least convincing smile Twilight had ever seen.

"Right," Kinther said. "I believe we should get some food down our gullets before deciding the fate of the Blackclaw tribe. I was thinking of making some fish soup, if you-" He stopped speaking at Brenliana's warning expression. Twilight just looked away, embarrassed for his sake. Fluttershy was hiding behind her hair. The rest of the ponies were in varying states of discomfort and awkwardness.

After reassuring Kinther that they were okay and that the offer had not offended the vegetarian ponies, the griffins arranged for transport back up to the main plateau of Blackclaw mountain. When they took off so close to the mountain, it was easier to appreciate just how expansive the network of caves that riddled the mountain was. There had to be over a hundred different caves in all shapes and sizes. Right now the entire mountain was bustling with activity, no doubt in preparation for the upcoming contest. The wind had died down somewhat, but it was still cold, and everything smelled of the sea.

As they flew up the mountain, they were approached by a griffin who informed them that the chief was ready to announce the terms of the challenge. Without time to even dismount, they flew straight up to the peak at a sharp angle. The top of the mountain was packed with griffins both standing and hovering nearby. The chief waited by the throne, looking pleased with himself.

"I have been challenged!" Chief Blackclaw roared. "Challenged by Wingleader Brenliana for the leadership of the tribe. The challenge is one

of speed, to be performed by chosen champions, and it falls to me to set the rest of the terms."

"At your leisure. I am the challenger, Wingleader Brenliana of the Blackclaw, and I say your reign ends here," Brenliana answered confidently.

As the two griffin leaders exchanged unpleasantries and titles, Twilight leaned over towards Gilda. The younger griffin looked a lot less convinced than Bren. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"He's smiling. Bren doesn't know my dad like I do. This is gonna bite us in the flank, backfire big time," Gilda said, shaking her head.

"The fliers," The chief boomed. "will take the challenge of the first flight, for the traditional two laps."

There was a round of mutters at that. Brenliana seemed surprised and explained in a whisper to the ponies. "That's the first trial that hatchlings take when they have learned to fly. It's in and out through all the narrow caves on the mountain. Rainbow Dash is quick and agile. Adult griffins will barely fit. It's perfect."

"Too perfect," Gilda muttered.

"My champion will be my daughter, Gilda," The chief continued, his smile growing. Another round of mutters. Gilda blanched.

"That's a joke, right? You're joshing me, this has got to be a joke. Why would I-" Gilda began, only to be cut off by her father's triumphant voice as he made a grandiose gesture with a forepaw.

"And the stake is this blue pegasus, Rainbow Dash."

"Wait. What?!" Dash shrieked. The audience was shocked into a silence, down to the last griffin. Twilight considered the implications, and soon found herself looking at Gilda.

"It's brilliant," Twilight admitted, and the ponies, including the panicked Rainbow Dash all turned to her. "Gilda is smaller than the other

griffins and she's a trained flier, almost Dash's match. The only obstacle was that she's had no reason to want to fly for her dad." She stared at the back of Gilda's head as it dropped in defeat.

"Surely Gilda can't think..." Rarity muttered.

"Oh come *on* Gilda. You can't do this. *They* can't do this!" Dash groaned. "That's muleshit, you can't-"

Gilda turned around, silencing Dash with a glance. The griffin looked positively feral, angry even as tears streaked down her face. "Can't I? It's all I ever wanted, Dash. I can't not do this. You'd do the same if someone dangled a spot in the wonderbolts at your nose. I'll take whatever I can get, because so far, I've been living on scraps, Equestria or Blackclaw territory, it's been the same. I want something for myself for once!"

"You're not this stupid!" Dash yelled, but Gilda was no longer listening

"Buck it, Dash. They don't have any power over us here. They can't make us do this. Ah say we just go home. If Gilda's gonna be a pea brain-" Applejack began

"Then we'll just leave the Blackclaw tribe, Brenliana, Kinther, Gilda and all the others to this?" Rarity asked quietly.

"Forfeiting will also default to exile," Kinther muttered sourly. All around them, the confused crowd was looking to Brenliana, the leader of the opposition to the old chief, but she was silent, staring at the ground.

Twilight glared up at the chief. His grin was positively infuriating, but Twilight forced herself to stay calm for Rainbow Dash's sake. This was getting out of hand. "It's Rainbow's call," she said, and meant it.

Fluttershy slowly walked up to sit next to Rainbow Dash. "You don't have to do this, but it would be nice. But, um. It's not your fault if you walk away. Please don't be angry with yourself."

"Walk away?" Dash asked, hollowly. "Walk away? Are you kidding me?" She shook her head in disbelief. "Okay, I love the idea of a race. I hate the fact that Brenliana is using us and put me in this situation. I hate

that I *know* this is the right thing to do. But you know what?" She pointed a hoof at Gilda who had sat down at her father's side, much to the latter's amusement. "The reason I'm doing this now is to show that featherbrain how stupid she is being! You can't put somepony up for grabs in a contest like this, and you can't *win* a pony!"

"What they hay are you even thinking, Gilda? That I'll love you because you're gonna try to lock me up or something? Are you that dumb?" Dash yelled at the griffin in question. Gilda made no reply, looking away.

"If we're quite done with the posturing, yelling and delicious drama, perhaps we should get to it?" The chief asked, looking at Brenliana. "Unless of course your little pony champion is feeling weak-kneed?"

"Not. A. Chance," Rainbow Dash growled between gritted teeth.

The chief shrugged as if it mattered none to him, though the hint of a scowl played across his lips. The griffins around the peak knew what was at stake, even if most had not quite figured out the details yet. When the chief himself took off and set off down the mountain, almost every griffin followed save for Brenliana and Kinther. The noise and wind of hundreds of griffins taking off nigh-simultaneously was something Twilight would not soon forget. A couple lingered, casting worried looks at Brenliana.

"Right, let's get off this mountain. The lightest two of you ride with me. I'm hurt but I can still glide. The other two of you, get on Kinther's back. Let's go," Brenliana barked as she snapped to.

There was a brief moment of silence and confusion before Rarity quickly scurried over to Brenliana without a backwards look. Applejack and Pinkie Pie joined up with Kinther, leaving Twilight with little choice but to get onto Brenliana.

"We're checking when we get home! 'Lighter' my hindquarters!" Applejack yelled over at Twilight and Rarity. Rarity snickered.

"Just more to love, Applejack!" Pinkie said cheerily before the rush of wind cut off any further chatting, the two griffins going into a dive. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were on wing as well, following the flock down to ground level. The tribe had landed in a vague semicircle around two narrow

tunnels not far apart, both of them a small way off the ground. The chief had taken up position in the center along with Gilda. Brenliana and Kinther landed close by, letting the ponies off.

Gilda was already warming up, flexing her wings and flying in small circles, and Dash immediately set about doing the same.

"Two laps, remember!" The chief said.

"There are markers along the way," Brenliana told Rainbow Dash. "In and out through a lot of tunnels up the mountainside, and then down the exterior. Look for strips of green cloth. In fact, Kinther, would you be a dear and fly the path to make sure our esteemed chief hasn't messed with them? You're smaller, and I'm not exactly fit for maneuvering."

"And so the claws are bared. You truly don't trust me, do you, Bren?" The chief muttered so the crowd could not hear. Kinther took off, darting into the closest tunnel.

"No," Brenliana said, inspecting her damaged leg.

Looking up the mountain, Twilight could see Kinther soaring out one tunnel only to disappear in through another. When she squinted, she could see small green markers along the side of the mountain, but what went on inside the caves was anypony's guess. After a little while, he exited from a cave near the peak and began his descent. The griffin male hugged the mountainside, going via marker halfway down.

The chief chuckled dryly when Kinther touched down by Brenliana's side. "Excellent. I hereby give you the right to take wing in name of the tribe. Well done, Kinther, and may you fly forever for the Blackclaw."

"Spare me your wit." Kinther snorted before he turned to Dash. "The path is as it has always been. Fly near the middle marker on your way down, or you're disqualified. That's the easy part. The problem is that the tunnels have forks and a few shortcuts. Even though the markers are all in place, it's still a bit of a mess. Any questions, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash had been paying close attention, and shook her head. "Nah. I'm cool."

"Actually," Twilight said. "Wouldn't it make sense to let Rainbow Dash have a test run first? Just so she knows what the caves look like?"

"She has a point," Brenliana agreed.

"She does," The chief admitted, smiling cruelly. "As there are no rules for that, I am going to have to go with... no."

"That's only because no one's designed a challenge through the caves like this before!" Brenliana protested. "It's usually *around* mountains or a flat out stretch, and other challenges don't require beforehand knowledge!"

"I guess that means I'm really clever for deciding to use the caves, huh?" Chief Blackclaw said with a laugh, but the mirth disappeared very suddenly. "What a bleeding shame that someone trying to betray me feels I'm unfair. I'm so sorry."

Brenliana's eyes narrowed, but the chief ignored her, turning to Gilda. "Are you ready, child?"

Gilda gave a start, and landed on the ground with a soft thud, taking her place next to where Rainbow Dash was waiting. "Ready."

"And you. Pegasus. Are you ready?" The chief asked.

"Hope you said goodbye to your chair, chief," Dash answered with enviable confidence.

"Three," The chief said, his face crinkling in disgust.

"Who is it?" Gilda asked Dash in a whisper.

"Who is who?" Dash whispered back.

"Two," The chief counted.

"Who's the 'lucky' one?" Gilda clarified, looking curious and sour at the same time.

Dash focused straight ahead.

"One," The chief said, frowning at the two chatterbugs.

"You're kidding me! You're such a coward that you don't even dare-" Gilda began, incensed.

"Go!" The chief roared, and in the blink of an eye, they were gone. A faint rainbow-trail pointed to the nearest cave entrance as the only indication that the competitors had ever even been there. Even as Twilight looked up, she saw Gilda exit through the mouth of a cave higher up. Rainbow Dash exited the same cave just as Gilda entered another one.

"She's behind," Applejack said as if it wasn't obvious.

"She doesn't know the route. She'll do better on the second lap," Twilight said, sitting down on her haunches. "I guess we just have to wait and see. Um, and while we do so, did you guys know Rainbow Dash had a special somepony?"

Rarity just stared, again. Applejack rolled her eyes, and even Fluttershy looked disappointed in her. "Sugarcube, you don't think anything's odd about this here picture?" Applejack asked.

"About what?" Twilight asked, frustrated and staring at Applejack. "What aren't you telling me?"

Fluttershy coughed delicately, drawing Twilight's attention. The pegasus mare pointed her snout over at Pinkie Pie. "Well, I don't really want to say, but, um..."

"What?!" Twilight gasped. Thinking back on it, it of course made some measure of sense, but she had just figured it was Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie. It was hard to tell, sometimes! She leaned closer to the present party pony. "Pinkie?"

Pinkie Pie offered no comment, eyes still on the race. Twilight had expected *some* form of answer, but either she was being ignored or Pinkie

was not paying attention to absolutely everything around her at once. That would be a first.

Rarity sighed. "Pinkie Pie is quite clearly under a Pinkie Pie swear regarding *something*, don't you think, darling?"

"That's kind of what I assumed too," Fluttershy admitted. Pinkie Pie was still watching the two competitors, heedless of the conversation behind her back. Gilda was racing down the mountain from the top now. She was well past the half-way marker before Rainbow Dash exited the top cave. "Gilda is very fast," Fluttershy said.

"But, but, if she loses, what-" Twilight sputtered. "This doesn't- Pinkie?!"

Pinkie's eyes were locked on Rainbow Dash as the pegasus became a multichromatic blur clinging to the side of the mountain. She was gaining on Gilda now, but the griffin had a huge lead still.

Pinkie Pie mouthed three simple words as she stared up at the approaching pegasus. Three words that she could not speak until Dash let her, because she had promised, because she took it seriously, and because she did indeed love her. Rainbow Dash was too far away to see her gesture intended for her.

Gilda, however, was not. The griffin was just passing by the starting area, about to begin her second lap, when she glanced at the ponies spectating. She saw Fluttershy and Twilight talking, looking worried. She saw Rarity adjusting her cloak and Applejack frowning at her.

Gilda also saw the pink earth pony who had tried her very best to welcome Gilda to Ponyville, a pair of big blue eyes looking up the mountain, her mouth moving silently. Suddenly, Gilda understood. She arrested her flight with a few rapid flaps of her wings, coming to hover on the spot near the start. She crossed her forepaws expectantly as she waited, eyes narrowed.

"What do you think you are *doing*?" Chief Blackclaw roared. "Do you know what's at stake here? You have the lead! Go!" A ripple of confusion

went through the audience, some yelling for her to get a move on, others laughing at the chief's misfortune.

Gilda did not appear to hear her father, content to wait for Dash until she arrived a few seconds later. The pegasus did not appear to slow down until the last second, but when she did, the blast from the force of her wings sent manes askew.

"Okay, wait, it's two laps, right? You said two! I can do this!" Dash asked desperately as she panted for breath.

"Way. Uncool. Never thought I'd say this, but you are a coward, Dash," Gilda said amidst gulps for air.

"What the hay are you on about?" Dash asked. The chief was roaring at the top of his lungs for Gilda to get flying, but even if he had breathed tornadoes, none of the two competitors would have moved.

"She deserves better, you dweeb," Gilda said, slowly coming to rest on the ground. "I don't know how I didn't see this before. You are just a coward."

"You take that back!" Dash yelled back at her, landing in a wide stance and pressing her snout up against Gilda's beak.

Pinkie sniffled. The earth pony was trying very hard to keep up her smile, but tears were lining her big blue eyes. Dash glanced over and trembled, closing her eyes tightly.

"Seriously Dash, I thought you were better than this. This is such a load of crap. You've got someone you claim to love, but you're afraid to even say it? You're hiding it? Loser!" The griffin sneered and began walking away, leaving Dash there. Pinkie Pie looked like she wanted to go to Dash, but she sat still, lips trembling as she forced herself to keep smiling.

"You..." Dash tried, faltering. No other words came out.

There was a long quiet. Even the chief had run out of steam momentarily. As Gilda started walking away from the gathered griffins, he opened his mouth, no doubt to berate his daughter again.

"Oh *do* shut up!" Rarity snapped at the much larger griffin, and to his credit, he did.

It looked as if though it would end there. The onlooking griffins had no idea what was going on, but parted before Gilda. The chief looked aghast, and Brenliana didn't seem sure of what to think. The only sounds were the howling wind and the flapping of scores of wings.

"I love you, Pinkie Pie. I'm so sorry." The words were faint. Twilight wasn't sure she had heard it right. Pinkie Pie looked up and swallowed.

Rainbow Dash still had her eyes closed and was flat on the ground, quivering even as she spoke. "I love you. I'm sorry. I love you. I was just scared. You scare me. I scare myself. I don't understand it, but I love you, I need you, and I'm sorry for making it a secret. I never should have made you swear. I'm sorry. I *love* you!"

Rainbow Dash finally opened her eyes, and she was met with a galloping mass of pink that scooped her up in a hug, squeezing the pegasus tightly. Pinkie's tears were forgotten and there was no trace of sadness left in Pinkie Pie, only sheer, unbridled joy as she clung to Dash who finally cried her heart out, limp in Pinkie's embrace.

"Silly Dashie, it's okay, we all get scared sometimes! But it's all okay now. And I love you too!" Pinkie chirped. "Just please don't cry. Aw, okay, no, cry all you want, but I'll be here. I'm here for you."

Twilight just shook her head mutely, smiling despite herself. She pretended to scratch something in the corner of her eye. Rarity had produced a handkerchief from somewhere, daubing her eyes as Fluttershy clung to her, sniffing. Applejack averted her eyes and muttered something about public decency, though Twilight was pretty sure she could see her eyes glistening.

When Rainbow Dash finally dried her tears, Gilda was hovering nearby. Pinkie grinned up at the griffin. "Hi! I'm still sorry you didn't stay for

the entire party that time, but don't you two have a race to finish? We have have another party afterwards! I even brought games!"

"Oh yeah, race, right," Dash said with a sniff, wiping her snout with a hoof.

"I guess," Gilda said with a grin before taking off. "Race ya!" Her voice disappeared into one of the tunnels.

"Go Dashie!" Pinkie cheered and smacked Rainbow Dash on the flank with a hoof. There was a distinct excess of red in the rainbow streak that rocketed after Gilda. Pinkie bounced back to the rest of the friends, all smiles.

"'Race you'? After this? Are they *playing* with the fate of the Blackclaw?" The chief asked, incensed. "This is ridiculous! I declare this challenge null and void!"

"You can do no such thing and you know it," Brenliana said with a chuckle. "The second we declared our champions, this matter was out of our own claws, *chief*. I'd say I'm sorry, but I don't think I am."

"Uh huh," Pinkie Pie said cheerfully, munching on a stale reserve muffin she had extracted from one of her saddlebags. "Guess that means you lose!"

Brenliana nodded at this and grinned triumphantly. "Gilda has no incentive any more. You've lost."

"Oh, I didn't mean just him," Pinkie said, shaking her head.

"What do you mean? Surely I've won the race?" Brenliana asked, sounding a little concerned now. Far above, the two racers were neck and neck as they exited a tunnel and entered another.

"Probably, but who cares about that? Gilda and Dashie are the *real* winners!" Pinkie laughed before swallowing the rest of the muffin in one bite.

Chapter 10

It had very nearly gone wrong. Even as old Chief Blackclaw departed in a fit of rage and Brenliana began addressing the assembled griffins as *Chief Brenliana*, Twilight was still nervously watching the two contestants. Apparently, it had taken the pair all of two and a half seconds to forget what was at stake. The griffin and the pegasus jostled for position as they ascended, Rainbow Dash nearly missing the entrance to the next cave on the route.

At the top of the mountain, Gilda still came out slightly ahead after the mess of tunnels that were so familiar to her, but Rainbow Dash was practically nipping at her tail as they started their descent. In the dive, Gilda was outmatched. The smaller pegasus was an indistinct blue rainbow-trailing blur against the grey of the mountain until she crashed to the ground next to Pinkie Pie. Gilda followed seconds later, landing a small distance away.

Gilda begun walking towards Dash, obviously still exhilarated and running on adrenaline from the flight, but her grin faded bit by bit as Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash embraced. The two ponies shared a kiss, eyes closed and oblivious to the world around them. Catching Twilight and the others watching her, Gilda gave them a stiff smile before she flew over to join Brenliana and the throng of griffins instead.

Pinkie Pie finally got to host her party.

In the aftermath of the race, Brenliana declared every single griffin in the tribe off-duty and fliers were sent out to bring home those who were on patrol. The festivities were to be held in the village at ground level, out of respect for the ponies. Twilight had no idea how griffins usually celebrated, but Pinkie Pie was quick to throw herself into the thick of the preparations of the party. Before noon, she had half the town helping her cover the seaside village in paper lanterns, streamers, banners and balloons. It amazed Twilight how much Pinkie had managed to fit into the one saddlebag. She knew she shouldn't be surprised, of course, but she was.

For the first time since their arrival in Clawford, Twilight finally had some time to explore the village, and she found it a lot more pleasant than she had expected. Perhaps it was due to the change in leadership, or simply the impending party, but as she wound between the low and simple houses, Clawford simply felt more alive than it had before. Griffins were chatting amicably, carrying food to large wooden tables ferried down from the mountain, and they all seemed in a good mood. Every time a patrol of griffins came back home, a deafening round of cheers went up.

Eventually, Twilight had managed to find her way to the coast. It took longer than she'd expected because she'd been stopped numerous times by griffins thanking her for her help. Even though she told them she had done nothing at all, that Rainbow Dash was the pony of the day, they would hear nothing of it. They knew that the ponies were the reason they had a new chief, and that was all the common griffin in the street needed to know. When Twilight approached Fluttershy on the rocky shores of the great ocean, she was wearing a necklace of seashells that she'd failed to find a way to politely refuse.

"So. How's the ocean?" Twilight asked, sitting down on her haunches. The butter-colored pegasus was sitting on a large rock, watching the seemingly endless expanse of blue. A couple of large stone buildings dominated the shore on their sides, the smell of fish dried, drying and fresh all intermingling with the salty tang of the ocean. The little spot Fluttershy had chosen, however, was bare. A seagull was perched on the pegasus' head. The avian shifted a little when Twilight came near, but Fluttershy soothed it with a soft noise.

"It's very nice," Fluttershy said. "The fishes don't have that much to say, but the seagulls and terns and the oyster-nibblers, they're all sweet." Only now did Twilight notice that the pegasus' hooves and face were wet.

"Been swimming?" Twilight asked with a grin.

Fluttershy shook her head and looked a little embarrassed. "I was going to try, but it didn't go so well. Oh, and I was hoping to see a whale. Kinther told me they breach off the shore here sometimes, but it's very rare this late in fall."

Twilight levitated the paper and coals she'd borrowed from Rarity out from her bags. Writing with a piece of sketching charcoal was hardly the most elegant of solutions, but her quills and inks were back at the fort. "Huh. How long has it been since we left, anyway?" Twilight asked with a weak little chuckle. *Dear Princess Celestia*, she began writing.

"Just two and a half weeks, I think." Fluttershy replied, flinching as the seagull on her head took off. "I hope Spike is okay. And Angel bunny, too. Oh, and I had a bluejay with a broken wing in recovery. I wonder how she's doing."

"Oh I'm sure they're all fine," Twilight said, though in truth she wondered, too. Had it been that long already? What was Spike doing now? Had Cheerilee taken care of him and the library? It felt as if though she had lost some days somewhere along the road during the sleepless haze. *I am writing this report to you from the village of Clawford, where the former chief has been forced to resign his position following a traditional ritual challenge.* She'd written three letters earlier today, and hoped to be up to date before the party started.

"I know they are," Fluttershy agreed as Twilight kept writing at a furious speed. It would suffice if she understood her own words when she re-wrote the letters later. Or better yet, had Spike re-write them.

The pegasus hummed and smiled. "And I'm glad Gilda is so... nice. I hope she'll be okay here in Clawford."

"Well, don't kid yourself. She's not *that* nice," came Rainbow Dash's voice from behind them. Twilight stiffened and flung her coal clean into the ocean in shock, and Fluttershy slid off her rock with a squeak. The blue pegasus pony was grinning in triumph.

"Don't *do* that!" Twilight huffed.

"Did you guys know they're actually making me 'honorary wingpony'? They're making the title just for me!" Dash exclaimed, ignoring Twilight.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you!" Fluttershy said with a gasp as she flew back up on her rock.

"This means what, exactly?" Twilight asked, arching a brow.

"I have no idea," Dash admitted. "But it *sounds* awesome!"

"Maybe you get some scary warpaint for your little feathers!" Pinkie Pie suggested as she came hopping along from the direction of the village. Twilight, who had her back to Pinkie, scattered her papers everywhere as she jumped. Fluttershy immediately began helping Twilight gather the letters back up before the wind could steal them away.

"Or maybe a mask!" Pinkie gasped as she bounced over to Rainbow Dash, her cloak looking absolutely ridiculous as it billowed around her every time she took to the air in her trademark 'gait'. "You could get a mask that makes you look like a shark or an ostrich! Oo, or maybe a sunflower! Sunflowers can be ferocious!"

"Or maybe a dragon!" Dash suggested, grinning and draping a wing over Pinkie.

"Um, maybe not a dragon? Dragons are scary. I think a sunflower would be much nicer," Fluttershy said as she handed Twilight the last of the errant letters.

Twilight tucked all the papers inside her cloak. She would have to finish writing later. She could see Applejack and Rarity approaching, along with Gilda.

"Silly filly, you think *dragons* are scary?" Pinkie asked, giggling. She hopped over to Fluttershy and looked her straight in the eyes. "Tell me, have you ever seen a dragon and a sunflower in the same room, huh?"

"Uh, I- I guess not?" Fluttershy said, retreating a little. The pink earth pony leaned forwards, stretching her neck to its fullest as she ground her snout against Fluttershy's.

"Exactly. Because dragons *know better*," Pinkie finished menacingly before returning to stand over by Dash. Fluttershy's pupils shrank to pinpricks. She had a lot of sunflowers back in her garden.

"Told you they'd be here," Applejack said to Rarity and Gilda as the three of them drew near. "Saw Twilight sneaking away before they could draft her to help hang up the banners."

"I'm sure that a couple of hundred *winged* griffins can manage to fasten a few banners to the rooftops," Twilight protested.

"I'm certain they can, but we need a solution to the food and seating issue," Rarity said. "Unless you want to have raw fish on your table. I mean, they have plenty of mushrooms and some vegetables. I just don't like the idea of, well," she sniffed. "It's barbaric."

Fluttershy swallowed and turned to look into the waters of the nearby ocean.

"We're the guests here," Twilight said, trying to be diplomatic about the whole issue. It was hard to avoid noticing Fluttershy's discomfort. "We could just ask to be seated at the end of a table and see if they can't accommodate us. I'm sure they'll be nice about it. Are you going to be okay, Fluttershy?"

"I will," Fluttershy said with a nod, though she still looked a little unsure. "There are predators and prey out there, you know. It's, um, I guess, *natural*?" She finished with a brave smile.

"Natural, huh," Applejack said with a great snort. Gilda was apparently very keenly aware of what a minefield the conversation was, keeping very quiet.

"I suppose that's as much as we can hope for," Rarity relented. "It will be interesting to see how they celebrate. If it's anything like their politics, though, consider me sceptical."

"Hey, we know how to party hard," Gilda said with a glare.

"That is precisely what I fear," Rarity quipped.

"Anyway! How are the preparations coming along?" Twilight asked, trying to avert a disaster, seeing the looks the unicorn and griffin were

giving each other. Pinkie Pie perked up at this, having been busy trying to convince Rainbow Dash to try on her cloak.

"Oh, it's going to be great! I think there are more griffins here than there are ponies in all of Ponyville! That officially makes this the biggest party *ever*! I mean, okay, so maybe the gala was bigger, but that wasn't a party and you know it." She pouted as if daring anypony to disagree. Nopony did, and so she went on.

"I mean, they're talking about partying all day, all week! I don't know if they know how to play pin the tail on the pony, but I was thinking of maybe making it pin the tail on the politically correct indistinct four-legged blob instead! And we should totally make a conga line. Think about it, I bet we could make it go around the entire mountain!" The party pony's eyes were wide with wonder, her smile threatening to split her face in twain.

"Sounds great, Pinkie, but I think we should get going again tomorrow," Twilight said almost apologetically. "As much as I would love a full week of celebration and fun, we need to get back."

Noting Pinkie's disappointment, Rainbow Dash frowned at Twilight. "Aw c'mon Twilight, we saved like three days because we got a ride here. I may not be an egghead like you, but I'm pretty sure that means we get to party for three more days, right?"

"It's okay," Pinkie Pie said, shaking her head. She offered Twilight a little smile before she nuzzled Rainbow Dash. "This party is a teensy-weensy thing compared to the real party that's going on inside me. And if you're with me, that party goes on forever."

Rainbow Dash blushed but did not shy away. The pegasus put a hoof around Pinkie's withers and grinned. "Heh, well, that works too, I guess. If you want."

"I still don't get it," Gilda commented at the display. She was the only one not smiling, but she looked confused rather than angry. "But I don't wanna know, either. I think the party is getting started, so... later!" With those words, the griffin took off, heading over the rooftops towards the center of the village.

The ponies started heading in the same direction by hoof moments later, all expertly herded by the single party pony's insistence that they couldn't and shouldn't miss a moment of the fun. It soon became apparent that griffins were indeed already congregating in the center of the village, clustering around tables. A band consisting of four young and wild-maned griffins was warming up. Apparently, the quartet was comprised of four guitarists. Pinkie Pie was lost in the crowd within seconds, announcing her intent to set up some games, and Rainbow Dash followed.

"What is it she don't get, then?" Applejack finally asked. The four remaining ponies were stood by the corner of a house, slightly more hesitant to join the horde of griffins.

"Gilda, about Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash? I did wonder at first, too, but not any more," Rarity said, shrugging. "They're great for each other, and I think they even *need* each other. Don't think Rainbow Dash will ever admit it, of course, and Pinkie Pie might not even realize it."

Applejack cocked a brow. "Maybe, wouldn't know about that, but Ah guess Gilda's still a bit sore, and Ah don't blame her for that. It's got to sting."

"She'll have plenty to do if she's staying in Clawford and helping Brenliana," Fluttershy commented. "Sounds like the old chief did a lot of damage, but look at how happy they all are now. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Well, I'm happy for them," Twilight smiled. "Rainbow's been a little, um, weird lately. Perhaps she'll be herself again now. Let's go find them and find out? I'm no Pinkie Pie, but I'll happily take some of the happiness that they're offering at this party right now!"

The party went on well into the night. The dark was powerless before the lanterns, candles, torches and magical lights all scattered around village. Due to the simple layout, without any tall towers or large buildings to navigate by, it was easy to get lost. Around every corner, more cheerful griffins and tables laden with food waited. They had their own table somewhere, free of fish and meats, but Twilight could have sworn it moved around as the evening went on. She hadn't seen it for well over an hour.

Pinkie's politically correct game of pin the tail on the blob was well received, though whether they played it as a game, a joke or a cultural statement, Twilight couldn't tell. She participated in a conga line at some point, and could only assume Pinkie was in the lead somewhere far ahead of her. Later still, Dash soared overhead, chased by dozens of young griffins. Twilight assumed and hoped that it was just some sort of game, but more than one table was upended in the low-flying chase that wound all around town.

It was well past midnight when Twilight finally retired. Brenliana had offered the ponies the use of her home for the night, and they had graciously accepted. When Twilight entered, she wasn't sure she had the right house until she spotted Rarity sitting on the hay in a corner that made up the bed of the humble abode.

The white unicorn wiped her eyes discreetly and gave Twilight a brief smile. "Ah, hello Twilight. I was just going to sleep, actually."

"Rarity? Are you okay?" Twilight asked as she headed over to stand before her. It was fairly obvious Rarity had been crying, but Twilight wasn't about to pretend not to have noticed, much to Rarity's chagrin.

"Don't be ridiculous, Twilight. Why wouldn't I be okay?" Rarity asked, almost indignant. "I am thrilled that Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie have each other, and seeing them happy makes me happy, too, right?"

It had been a question. Twilight moved over to sit at Rarity's side, as close as she could get. She had known this would resurface at some point. "Rarity, when we meet up with Princess Luna again, I am going to tell her that either she explains to you what she knows about Blueblood, or we're going home," Twilight said, meaning it.

"Twilight," Rarity said, gasping. "It's not- you can't mean that! I just-"

"Shush!" Twilight snapped, and Rarity stared at the purple unicorn as if she had grown an extra horn.

It wasn't fair. A lot of things that Luna did weren't fair. She was secretive and plotting, and even when she deigned to explain things, more

questions popped up that she wouldn't answer. Twilight had no problems slowly peeling back the layers when it came to the questions of the past and matters arcane. She didn't even mind the fact that there was obviously more reasons for this journey about which the princess had offered no comment. All these things she could live with because she knew the princess would get to it in her own time. Luna had shown willingness to talk, she just needed time.

She drew the line here, though. It wasn't right to single Rarity out and make her suffer like this. "I am serious. She's ignored you outright, and I want to know why, too," Twilight said, frowning at the whole issue. She didn't like the idea of confronting the princess about it, and the thought of parting ways with the princess was even less appealing still, but some things were simply more important.

"It's not like that," Rarity muttered. The fashionista was not often sullen like this, but there was no exaggerated drama to her expression this time. "I just have to know."

"Why, though?" Twilight asked. "Would you give him a second chance?"

Rarity lowered her eyes at this and shook her head slowly. "What else is there for me to do? He's was supposed to give me purpose. Without him..."

Twilight sighed. She had heard this all before. Slowly and calmly, she got up and walked over to Rarity's nearby saddlebags, opening one of them.

"Twilight? Whatever are you *doing*?" Rarity asked, alarmed. She was up in a second, trotting over to Twilight. "Those are my saddlebags, you'll get everything in disarray!"

Undaunted, Twilight levitated up a large sheaf of papers. Rarity tried to wrest them from her, her horn glowing brilliantly, but all of Rarity's sketches, drawings and notes were surrounded in a purple glow as impenetrable as Twilight's resolve. The white unicorn didn't hold a candle to Twilight's grip, and Twilight's stare was twice as intense as the magic she wielded.

"*This*," Twilight said, spreading everything out in a circle around them. "This is part of the Rarity I know." The papers had formed a near-perfect globe around the pair of unicorns. They were surrounded by dress designs, landscapes, notes on fabrics, fashion and culture, all lit up by the glow of Twilight's horn. The floor under them was the only evidence that they were still in the same house, surrounded as they were by colorful fields, dark forests, regal mountains, stark tundra and the churning waters of the ocean.

Singling out a particular sketch, she brought it over to hover in front of them so they both could see. "What's this?" Twilight demanded.

"It's... a picture of the Oakwall forest with some notes on travel wear and fabric choice," Rarity replied nervously. "Can you let me out, please? Twilight?"

"This?" Twilight asked, bringing forth another sketch.

"My thoughts on streamlining the production of cloaks and color themes inspired by landscapes," Rarity said. "*Twilight?*"

"And this?" Twilight pressed.

"Ah. Well, I ran out of some of the color tools I use, so I- why are you asking me this?" Rarity stopped herself.

"Because," Twilight implored, "these are the works of a talented and skilled pony with vision, taste and drive. These are ideas and thoughts of the owner of Carousel Boutique, one of the finest fashion stores in all of Equestria. A wonderful pony." Twilight smiled gently. "*This* is you, Rarity."

Rarity was stunned. The white unicorn pony did not move even as Twilight neatly collapsed the globe to re-stack the papers, slipping them neatly into the saddlebag again with practiced ease. Paper and magic were two things she knew well. She didn't give the fashionista so much as a moment to recover, though. "In fact, it's just part of who you are. Do you know what else you are? You are the very best friend anypony could have. You're strong," Twilight said.

"You're generous," agreed a voice behind her. It was Fluttershy.

Twilight turned to find all their pony friends standing by the door. They must have entered while they were obscured by Rarity's art, and now stood shoulder to shoulder looking at the two unicorns.

"And clever," Applejack added, taking off her hat.

"Really cool, too. Almost as cool as me," Rainbow Dash offered with a grin.

"And totally drop-dead knock-out pretty! I mean, wow!" Pinkie Pie said with a bounce.

"Which is why you don't need Blueblood," Twilight told the still-silent unicorn. "Perhaps he really is super swell and everything you ever wished for. I hope Luna sets you up for a date with him, and that you have a great time while he explains how he hit his head in the bathtub that morning. Just please try to remember that you're more than this, Rarity." Twilight looked at Rarity, hoping for any sign of recognition, any indication that the words made it through. "You don't need him," she repeated.

Rarity was quiet for the longest time. The other came close, and Fluttershy wordlessly hugged Rarity. The others joined in, one by one, and Rarity hugged back tightly as she replied. "Thank you, everypony. I'll... think on it. No need to trouble the princess on my behalf, Twilight. I think I have a handle on it." She was smiling serenely as she let go, looking over at all her friends.

"You sure about that sugarcube? Because Ah say t'aint right, still," Applejack muttered.

"Positive," Rarity said with nod, lifting her own mane with a hoof and raising her head. "Do you doubt such a strong and clever pony as I can handle it?"

Applejack and the others grinned and laughed at that, and Twilight sighed in relief. Rarity would be alright.

The next morning, Twilight was the first to rise and slip out from under the blanket they shared. The house was a little chilly, but she was eager to finish her last letter to Princess Celestia. Having flung the last of the black coals she'd borrowed well into the sea, she rummaged through Rarity's saddlebags for a replacement. After a few minutes of searching, she had to settle for a bright green coal-like stick. The resulting multicolored letter reminded Twilight a little too much of some of the letters Princess Celestia had on the wall of her study, sent to her by admiring foals all around Equestria.

The thought stuck with her for a while. When Applejack stirred and silently walked over to where Twilight sat, she was still levitating her coloring stick, staring at the finished letter with unseeing eyes. She registered the farmpony sitting down next to her, but did not acknowledge her until she spoke up.

"What're you thinking about now then, sugar?" Applejack asked, yawning.

"Celestia," Twilight replied, frowning.

"Hoo boy," Applejack chuckled. "Just when Ah thought we had you back at the head of the herd, fixin' stuff." The orange earth pony was smiling, and Twilight couldn't figure out whether she had meant to cause offense or not. All the same, the comment stung a little.

"I just think I finally get it," Twilight said, almost surprised at her own words. She was putting the pieces together as she spoke. "Luna told us that Princess Celestia would have liked to go on a journey with us before, right?"

"Yep, that she did," Applejack agreed.

"She never mentioned anything like that to me when I was younger," Twilight mused. "So she must have meant *us*, truly, not just us as in 'Twilight and her friends', though."

"S'what Ah had assumed, yep."

"And while we're all good friends, what really unites us?" Twilight asked, having a hard time keeping her voice down as she spoke.

"Ponyville and the whole elements of harmony thing, Ah reckon?" Applejack asked with a shrug.

"The elements, yes. Luna has talked a lot about the past. Things you find only in history books, and even some things that you *don't*, but she hasn't even once commented on the elements. Celestia has wanted to keep quiet about it, remember?" Twilight smiled to herself. She knew she was getting close to something.

Applejack snorted. "Ah'm well aware, and you can bet your flank that it bothers me somethin' fierce that Ah'm supposed to keep a secret." She gave Twilight a lopsided grin that did not reach her eyes. "And that's the *honest* truth."

"Obviously," Twilight grinned, "this is all related to the elements somehow. I've got to ask her about it when we meet her."

Applejack nodded. "Well, Ah'm with you all the way, anyway."

Twilight was putting the finishing touches on a letter to Spike when the rest of the ponies stirred. Fluttershy accidentally stepped on Pinkie when she got up, and the resulting squeak woke the rest of them. Rainbow Dash waited until all the others had gotten up and wrapped herself in the entire blanket with a smug grin. She had all of three seconds of bliss before Rarity seized the blanket with a glimmer of magic. The pegasus was unceremoniously unrolled and deposited in the hay before Rarity packed the much coveted blanket away.

Outside in the village streets, griffins were hard at work negotiating the unique array of problems related to cleaning up after yesterday's day-long celebration whilst preparing to feast and party again today. Undecided on how to approach the issue, the result was that fish bones and other detritus was swept under the tables while the surviving balloons were guarded like treasures. It felt a little like walking through an unusually festive graveyard, what with all the bones. Twilight and the others eventually found Brenliana and Gilda in the midst of it, talking animatedly with a pair of elder griffins.

"I still say that we should host the coronation and the trials right away. We are technically leaderless until you swear the oath and we take the ritual flight," one of the old griffins said.

"And I say, with all respect to you and yours, that we can afford to wait until everyone has had their fill of fun and rest both," Brenliana said, dismissing the two griffins with a wave before turning to the approaching ponies. "Good morning! Applejack informed me you plan on leaving already?"

"Yeah, you know, got places to be, other towns to save," Rainbow Dash said with a smirk.

"How very big of you," Brenliana laughed. "I shall see to it that we have you well supplied before you leave, and I will have some of my strongest carry you as far as they can get whilst making it back here before nightfall. I'd take you all the way to the border, but I can't bear to see any of my flock gone right now."

"That is quite alright, and more than we would have asked for," Rarity assured the griffin, and the other ponies nodded.

"What's next for you, then?" Twilight asked. "The chief hasn't come back at all? I'm sorry about how it all turned out, Gilda."

"Eh, if he's that dumb, he can stay away. If he comes back, that's cool too, but I got stuff to do now," Gilda said, grinning up at Bren. The older griffin returned the smile. "Brenliana has named me wingleader of her old wing of griffins."

"That is awesome!" Dash exclaimed excitedly.

"I know! Bet your lame little weather patrol doesn't have warpaint," Gilda said. Rainbow Dash didn't reply, her gaze growing distant and an unsettling smile spreading across her face.

Twilight nudged Dash in the side, getting a little worried. "Rainbow, *no*. Mayor Mare would never allow it. I hope."

"Unless it's up to Cloudsdale," Rainbow Dash said.

"Ooo, we can send a letter and ask when we get back home!" Pinkie Pie agreed. Twilight facehoofed discreetly..

"Totally doing that," Dash concluded. The pegasus looked straight up at Gilda, suddenly hesitant. "But hey, Gilda..."

The griffin arched a brow at the smaller pegasus.

"I mean, thanks, for everything," Rainbow Dash said, swallowing. She looked to Pinkie Pie for support, and the pink earth pony smiled back at her. "And I just wanted to say I'm-" Dash made to continue, but Gilda interrupted her.

"Don't say it. Seriously, Dash, that's just not gonna work. Yeah, it sucks, but I'll live and get over it. Can't change anything now, right?" The griffin lit up with a smirk. "Besides, I'm far too cool for small fry like you now. Got my own flight, and I just got my real family back."

"Sure, cool," Dash said, letting herself smile right back at the griffin. "You keep telling yourself that," she laughed, swishing her tail. Gilda only shook her head and laughed right back, holding out a claw for a high-five.

"Don't be surprised if I pop by Ponyville sometime, Dash." Gilda hovered off the ground and gave the other ponies a wave. "I don't do hugs, but yeah, I'll catch you all around." With those parting words, the young griffin took off towards the top of the mountain, leaving the ponies with Brenliana.

"She'll be okay," Brenliana said, watching Gilda go. "Clawford cannot thank you all enough. I am not sure you even realize how big a help you have been. With the chief gone, the Blackclaw tribe will be a peaceful family once again." The chief surveyed the griffins that milled about them with obvious pride. "I do not know what the future holds for us, but I will ask Kinther to make a painting in your honor inside the cave of memories, commemorating these events. I don't expect you to settle for this, though. Please, name your reward, and if it's within my power to grant it to you, I will."

After a last round of cheers for the ponies and their part in aiding the Blackclaw tribe, the party finally departed from Clawford, yet again riding on griffins' backs. When the volunteer griffins put them down and said their goodbyes, they had shaved a good chunk off their journey back towards Equestria, and their saddlebags were brimming with what appropriate food the griffins could find. Though they didn't have a road to follow, it felt good to be moving again, Twilight found.

A month ago, the notion that she would enjoy walking across the windswept tundra would have made her laugh, but right now, she couldn't keep the smile off her face. It was a little hard to keep walking what with Rainbow Dash flying straight ahead of her, though. The pegasus was flying backwards, facing her. Her forehooves were crossed, and she looked thoroughly annoyed.

"Okay, so, this tribe, the Blackclaw, they got this warpaint that colors feathers awesomely," Dash said. It was not the first time she broached the subject. She'd been flying alongside Twilight's griffin for much of the ride.

"I did wonder how Gilda got the tips of her feathers purple like that," Rarity admitted.

"Yes, Dash, they have some very nice paints, and I'm glad they let you and Rarity have some," Twilight agreed.

"And they have these scary awesome masks of all kinds of creatures," Dash continued.

"I bet it'll scare off th' varmints," Applejack chuckled to herself. She patted the saddlebag where she carried hers.

"Mice and rats are all very nice once you get to know them, you know," Fluttershy protested.

"Masks that fit a pony just as well as a griffin," Dash said, staring at Twilight.

"As we can have clearly seen," Twilight agreed.

"I'm a dragon!" Pinkie Pie roared from behind them, wearing her new and fearsome mask. Twilight idly wondered how she didn't trip and fall. She couldn't imagine how Pinkie saw a thing out from behind the mask, considering she was deliberately wearing it upside-down. At least, she hoped it was deliberate.

"Yes, yes you are, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash agreed. "Because when the chief of the tribe said we could have *anything*, you went with the cool mask, and now you are a dragon." The pegasus narrowed her eyes at Twilight. "But some of us didn't go for the cool masks or the awesome paint."

Twilight, for her part, shook her head whilst smiling. "Some of us didn't."

"No, you asked for a *map*. Newsflash, Twilight, *we already had a map!*" Dash groaned.

"We had an old, outdated map of Scandineighvia made by Equestrian explorers long ago. A map nopony has seen fit to update in over fifty years, Rainbow," Twilight patiently explained not for the first time. "What I have is an up-to-date map commissioned by the old chief less than a year ago. Cartography is under-appreciated!"

"How can everypony else be wrong? That's not how it works! If nopony cares about it, there's a *reason!* Like, how about this one - it's boring!" Dash cried.

Twilight rolled her eyes at her pegasus friend. "Okay, first off, that's a major logical fallacy, and second, you don't take issue with Fluttershy's decision."

"Yeah, well, uh," Dash shrugged mid-flight. "She's Fluttershy. She does silly stuff like that. You're supposed to be smart!"

Fluttershy frowned. "I don't think it was silly."

"If you thought declining a reward was silly, and did it anyway, you would be a special kind of mad, darling." Rarity chuckled at her own words.

"I'm *not* mad," Fluttershy said forcefully, causing a few odd looks to be cast her way.

Twilight wondered whether Fluttershy regretted her decision or if she was just still brooding. The yellow mare had said that the only thing she could think of was that she wished the griffins wouldn't eat other animals. Of course she knew that she couldn't ask an entire civilization to change because of her, but she'd insisted it was something she wanted to do.

Fluttershy had admitted that she didn't want any memories of Clawford, and what worried Twilight was the nagging feeling that there was something else to it. The kind-hearted pegasus had seemed to accept the omnivorous nature of griffins more easily than Twilight had expected her to. It did not at all explain why she had been so quiet ever since they left Clawford. Once, Twilight had caught her muttering to herself when she thought nopony was looking.

Late in the afternoon, only a few hours after they had begun their march, it began raining. It started as a drizzle that would have felt refreshing in a warmer climate, but rapidly crossed over into "torrential downpour" territory. While it was still above freezing, each of the huge drops were spat at them in furious anger. The fact that the wind had died down a little was small comfort; tails were drooping and wet, dragging along the ground. Hoods up or no, the cloaks were soaked and manes were slick against their heads and withers.

"Not that Ah mind a bit'o rain, but Ah reckon weather griffins must be even lazier than you, Rainbow Dash. This is just downright silly!" Applejack had her hood half-way pulled over her hat and looked patently ridiculous.

"I don't know if they even *have* a weather patrol," Dash yelled back over the rain. It was hard to hear anything but the splatter of rain. "The clouds are moving so fast, even if I kicked a hole for us, it'd be gone in a second!"

"Perhaps we could simply make camp until the rain passes, then?" Rarity suggested. "I mean, it's not like my mane could possibly suffer any more past this point, but we could slip and fall. A broken leg here would spell disaster."

"Aw, I'm sure we could just carry you!" Pinkie said.

"Yes, well, I'm certain you could, and you're a dear for saying that, but I still don't wish to have my leg broken, Pinkie." Rarity said, smiling at the pink pony. "And the ground is getting very slippery."

"I don't want Rarity to break her leg either, actually!" Pinkie announced, looking at Twilight with big blue eyes and a quivering lower lip. "Twiliight, camp please!"

"It really won't be much of a camp, will it, though?" Twilight said with a defeated sigh, but she agreed. Anything was better than nothing. Within minutes, they located a large boulder, and sought refuge on the lee side. It was marginal comfort, but the ponies seemed to breathe a little easier.

"Ah sure am glad the saddlebags are waterproof," Applejack commented, glancing down at hers as she shed them. It was an almost loving look. "Useful and solid stuff, nothin' fru-fru about'em."

"I assure you, looking fashionable is *useful* too, Applejack, even if you cannot appreciate exactly how," Rarity quipped, but she was smiling at Applejack at what was unmistakably praise.

"Oh no, we are not going to have to listen to you two go on about that while we sit here miserable in the rain!" Twilight warned them, having missed their expressions as her back was turned.

"Miserable?" Pinkie Pie interrupted. "Why would you be miserable? It's just a bit of rain, everything else is still great!" The pink pony was busy massaging Rainbow Dash, kneading where her wings met her back. The pegasus was putty in her hooves, mewling. "We kicked flank back there, and we're heading home!"

"I- well. I suppose it is, and we did," Twilight huffed. Trust in Pinkie Pie to ruin a good complaint.

"Can't you fix that, though, Twi?" Applejack asked. "Ah mean, surely there's some spell to cover us or something?"

"Uh, well," Twilight blushed a little. "See, because we have great weather ponies in Ponyville, there hasn't really been any need for it. Everything's on schedule, so I haven't really had time to research. I know there's a spell for it." She did not like feeling inadequate when her friends actually needed her magic.

"Didn't take you much more than to see Rarity doin' it to learn her little gem finding trick, right?" The farmpony asked, tilting her head.

"Well, no, I suppose not," Twilight admitted, giving Rarity a smile at that, and receiving one in return.

Applejack shrugged, uncomprehending. "You saw Luna do her spell. That round ball. Ring any bells?"

It did indeed ring a veritable clock tower. She opened her mouth to protest, but found no words. It had been *some* sort of magic, and she'd seen Luna do it. She'd even gone so far as to touch it. Visualizing it and creating something similar couldn't be that hard, surely? Twilight closed her eyes and tried to capture what she had felt when she had touched the globe.

The memory came to her almost too easily. She nearly lost her breath as she relived the moment when she had brought her hoof through the light given shape. She went through it a hundred times in less than a second.

"Guess not then," Applejack said huffily.

The unicorn willed all distractions to fall away and focused entirely on the task. She reached out towards what she found in the memory and found it stuck to her like a magnet. Twilight connected with what she thought she had touched and it guided her, willed her to use it. It was something completely both completely foreign to her, yet intimately familiar. Fascinated, she shaped what she found, gave it shape around herself and her friends, fashioning a globe covering them all and the area as she remembered it. She was just about to try to play with this odd presence when she was startled into opening her eyes by a huge, resounding **boom** from somewhere behind her.

"What in tarnation," Applejack gasped.

As it turned out, the spell had worked. They were surrounded by a half-translucent purple globe streaked with reds, blues and, for some reason, brilliant silver. The globe bisected the top of the boulder that Twilight had forgotten to visualize and account for. The part that the light had passed through was cut off cleanly. Half a ton of rock lay on the ground out in the rain.

"That... that could have gone *very* wrong," Twilight blurted, her mouth open. "I'm so sorry!"

"We're all okay," Fluttershy soothed, "What happened, Twilight? That looked... dangerous."

"What would have happened if I'd hit any of you? Never mind the rock, but- wait, why isn't my horn glowing? I-" Twilight was flabbergasted. She wasn't maintaining the spell at all. She willfully tried to shut it off, but nothing happened.

"Well, I take it you didn't exactly plan it like this, then?" Rarity asked, experimentally poking the globe itself with a hoof. Twilight was about to yell for her to stop, afraid that it would be dangerous, but nothing happened. It let her pass as if it were nothing.

Rainbow Dash had stood up at the noise like all the others, but only now noticed that her wings were spread and pointing straight up. The pegasus mare seemed to have some issues folding her wings, giving them a helping nudge with her snout while glaring daggers at Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie Pie was grinning hugely at Dash even as she spoke to Twilight. "Well, some of my best parties are surprise parties, you know! I mean, I haven't nearly hit somepony on the head with a boulder yet, but that's my problem, not yours!"

"Let's make the best of it, Ah say." Applejack said with a little shrug. "It keeps the rain out just fine, and it don't appear to harm us none."

"It's just, this isn't magic," Twilight said, staring at the offending globe. "I'm not doing anything, I don't control it!"

Rarity's raised her brows at this as the only other unicorn here, but the others did not seem to be nearly as alarmed by this as Twilight was. Nevertheless, Applejack's pragmatism had merit, and Twilight did feel a little tired. The purple unicorn gave off a great yawn and sat down. Once she had her hindquarters on the ground, it was very easy to lay down.

"Oh, are you tired? Are we going to stop for the night? I thought we were only waiting for the rain to pass." Fluttershy sounded a little surprised, and indeed, Twilight was the only pony who actually looked ready to go to bed.

"I guess, perhaps I could just have a nap?" Twilight reasoned in a sleepy mumble, and Fluttershy nodded at that, ever smiling. Twilight closed her eyes and felt more at ease right away. She could feel sleep lingering right around the corner, and it felt ever so tempting. The Moon waited for her even before she began dreaming, and the mountains around them were replaced by spires.

"Do not let her go to sleep!", Twilight heard somepony shout. The voice was distorted, both terribly loud and far away. She slowly and reluctantly cracked an eye open to see a silver-trailing shadow fast approaching through the air outside the bubble.

Chapter 11

Twilight saw the approaching shadow grow larger. She tried to open her eyes fully, but it was harder than she had expected. She saw the world through half-lidded eyes, and something in her urged her to sleep. *Rest.* Applejack was insistently poking her in the side, yelling at her in an ever more fearful voice.

Mere seconds later, impossibly fast, something landed with a muffled thud outside of the multi-hued globe that surrounded the ponies. Something reached out and touched the light-crafted sphere, and it instantly dispersed without so much as a sound.

"Lunie!" Pinkie yelled, her voice almost drowned out by the rain that returned with a roar of vengeance, as if determined to make up for lost time. Twilight's head cleared a little. The visions that had crept up on her slowly dissipated, and instead of seeing odd shapes and a starry sky, she looked up to see her concerned friends and a rain-soaked Luna, mane listlessly hanging down over Twilight's face.

A terrified, wide-eyed Luna. As Twilight slowly tried to get up on her hooves, the princess collected herself a little, but there was still a trace of fear in her eyes. It had jolted Twilight awake more effectively than anything and everything else going on right now.

"Twi', - no, actually, hang on a pony-pickin' minute, *Luna*, what the hay just happened?" Applejack asked the princess as she helped Twilight get up. Luna glanced at Applejack but did not answer right away.

"Twilight. Are you okay? How are you feeling?" The princess brought a hoof up to Twilight's cheek, eyes locked with hers. Twilight stared back, her mouth hanging open. The rain still splashed down around them, and it must have isolated them a little from everypony else around, because Twilight could only really see the princess. Her mind was completely blank.

When she felt a tendril of drool escape her mouth, she took it as her cue to start thinking and speak up before the princess thought her crazy.

"Uh. I- um. I think I'm fine. A little tired, but. Uh, and I'm glad to see you," she stammered. They had all been so busy she had almost managed to forget how raw she'd felt when Luna had left them without a word to her. She tentatively picked the scabs of that wound and winced.

Luna looked relieved, and to Twilight's great surprise, drew her into a hug while she looked around at all the others. The princess was as warm as a furnace in contrast to the cold and the rain. Everypony else was still in shock over the princess' sudden appearance.

Pinkie Pie hopped over and joined in the hug immediately. *Almost* everypony was still shocked, rather. They were quick to recover, though. Not about to let Pinkie be alone, Rainbow Dash headed over to lean on Pinkie, which made the pink pony go from happy to positively glowing.

"I feared I had made a grave mistake," Luna said, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. "I cannot decide whether I am annoyed at myself for letting you go alone, or angry with myself for thinking you could not handle yourselves. All the same, I am glad I was already heading in your direction."

"Why do you have you choose between being annoyed and angry with yourself when you can be happy to see us?" Pinkie Pie asked, looking up at the taller alicorn.

"Because I can be stupid like that when I do not have you to remind me that there is another option, Pinkie," the princess said without hesitation. She still had not let go of Twilight or Pinkie, and when she said nothing more, Fluttershy, Rarity and Applejack all came over to hug or lean on them.

"Then why did you leave?" Twilight said. Her voice was thin, and she could not see the princess' face. As they stood, she was looking straight at Applejack, who gave her a sympathetic smile as she asked the question.

"Among other things, I had to make sure that Celly did not do something stupid about the Hollows," Luna began even as she disentangled herself from the ponies. With a glimmer of her horn, a translucent disc formed above their heads to keep the rain out again. It did nothing for the wind, but if anypony minded, they kept it to themselves. The

princess only now appeared to notice the sliced boulder, one of her eye brows quirking curiously. "But first, can I ask what you have been up to? I am not going anywhere, this time."

Those last words brought Twilight immeasurable relief, and she happily began the tale of what they had experienced since they left the keep. When she got to the part where they arrived at Clawford, the other ponies added to the tale of how they had deposed the chief when he had gotten too clever for his own good.

Rainbow Dash was quick to seize the opportunity to tell Luna about her race, expertly narrating the competition, sometimes even taking to the air as she told of her stunts and tricks in the tunnels. When they had reached the end of their tale, coming so far as to talk about the gifts they had gotten, Rainbow Dash interrupted again, commenting on what had turned the race around, admitting she hadn't told the 'best' part. Conspicuously, she did so just as Twilight was talking about her map.

Twilight felt warm inside, though. It was nice to see Rainbow Dash talk about this without hesitation. The ears of the usually-cocky pegasus were tipped with red, but she was still talking excitedly without pause. Luna listened intently, as did all the other ponies who had yet to hear her Rainbow Dash say much on the subject directly.

"I knew it was hurting Pinkie," Dash said. "I knew nopony would *mind* us being together but, uh, I guess it just felt too big for me." She looked down at Pinkie Pie, who was lying on her back looking up at the pegasus. Dash smiled brightly. "I even caught myself thinking I didn't deserve her. And that's just crazy talk, right?"

Pinkie responded by reaching up and pulling Rainbow Dash down into a kiss, which elicited a round of giggles. Instead of pulling back, however, Dash leaned into it, and it was Pinkie Pie who broke off after a few seconds, gasping. The party pony was grinning even as she blushed a deeper shade of pink. Rainbow Dash's tongue was hanging out, and she was smirking in triumph.

Fluttershy had turned away very quickly, obviously embarrassed, and Rarity shook her head at the pair. Applejack muttered something about marriage first.

"Right!" Twilight said, her cheeks burning. "Uh, how about that, ah, anything else? Like how you found us, princess? You were flying?"

"Ah, that, yes," Luna said, tearing her eyes off the spectacle. "That would be because of what you did, as I am sure you could have guessed. I came back to the fort earlier today, and when you predictably enough were not there, I took off over the mountain. Then, you reached out to me."

"I did?" Twilight asked, blinking. "I just, I tried to cast a spell I saw you do, just to keep the rain off us. Something nearly went wrong. Well, *something* did go wrong, I guess. It felt different. It wasn't regular magic, was it?"

Princess Luna shook her head slowly. "I should have known you would try. And I knew you would be able to do it, too. No, that was not your magic, that was mine."

Twilight stared, uncomprehending. There were a million ways in which what Luna had said was impossible. Unicorn magic was something very personal and unique. Was it different for alicorns, then?

"What you did, Twilight, was pull power forth from the Moon itself. As the Moon and I are related, it affected me, too. You shone like a beacon to me. It was simple enough to find you then." Luna dipped her head. "And it is good that I did."

"How is that even possible?" Rarity objected. "I mean, respectfully, Princess, you cannot simply *use* somepony else's magic."

"Never mind *that!*" Rainbow Dash exclaimed while trying to hold Pinkie down. They had both frozen mid-tussle. "What would have happened if you hadn't gotten here? Twilight said she couldn't turn it off!"

"She could do it because of who she is, and who you are," Luna said. "I will explain, and I should have told you sooner. It is a bit of a touchy subject for me, but that is an incredibly inappropriate excuse for withholding information. Understand that I only felt I could do so because I did not think any of you were in danger."

As she spoke, Luna erected a familiar sphere around them and quickly and quietly heated up the ground until it was dry. In a matter of minutes, she had a ghostly flame burning companionably in the centre of the group, and it was positively cozy as she went on, looking satisfied.

"You are the living embodiments of the elements of harmony. You know this, though my sister tries to keep quiet about it and downplay it. You stopped the Nightmare, and you've helped Ponyville and Equestria time and again with matters great and small. We owe you greatly."

Twilight looked away, a little uncomfortable with the admission. Luna did not seem to pay her any heed, fully engaged with telling the story. "Among the many things you have not been told, some are things you will realize on your own, and some things we may have forgotten. The one thing we should have told you first of all, though, is the effect that the elements have on ponies."

"Effect?" Applejack repeated.

"You are all tremendously strong ponies, Applejack, but being an element is not something that is easy to get accustomed to. The elements would not have chosen you if they did not think you could do it, but it can drive a lesser pony mad." Luna looked at the ponies who sat around the campfire, noting their reactions, and Twilight did the same. Confusion and determination was abundant.

"We are all shaped by the sum of our experiences. Some you are who you are because it's in your blood," Luna looked at Applejack, Rarity and Twilight Sparkle. "Others are molded by events," her gaze passed over Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, coming to rest on Fluttershy for a little longer than most. The princess suddenly looked sad, lowering her eyes to gaze into the fire. "Be that by choice or against your will."

"No pony can be anypony but themselves. It hurt us. It hurts us all to deny who we are," the princess muttered. "And this goes twice as much for those as strong as you, and twice as much again when you are an element. When honesty, kindness, laughter, loyalty, generosity and magic isn't just something you feel strongly about. When it's something you *are*."

"Equally real is the threat of becoming a slave to who you feel you must be. When you suffer because you think you have no option. When you do not understand how you can break out of the narrow confines of your element," Luna said.

The wind and rain was cut off by the globe, and the magical fire made no noise at all, so the quiet felt decidedly unnatural. Twilight drew a shuddering breath.

"I could not simply have come into Ponyville and said 'be true to yourselves'. I know a little more about you than you think, though by no means everything. I listen to the night," The moon princess' eyes grew distant with memory. "I listen, and I dream of everypony in Equestria. I know you struggle with who you are, and there is no shame in that. You carry a terrible burden and a wonderful gift both."

"You, uh, can see what we dream?" Rarity asked, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Not always," Luna sighed wearily. The princess noticed Applejack's sceptical stare, and turned on her. "I am not going to try to defend what is part of my being, but at the same time I will not belittle you for your concerns. I am not some bogeypony peeking in on your dreams and thinking less of you for them."

Applejack nodded, though she didn't look happy about it. "Fair enough."

"You are all unique," Luna said, putting on the beginnings of a smile. "But to answer your question on what could have happened, Rainbow Dash; Twilight's situation is special, even for what you are. The element of magic is tied to both the Sun and the Moon."

Twilight shook her head slowly from side to side in disbelief more than anything. She had always known she was special in some regards. It would be ridiculous to be the protégé of Princess Celestia and not feel different, but she'd also made it a point in her life to refuse to let that change her. She was not better than anypony else, she didn't just believe that, she *knew* it, but she didn't know how much more 'special' she could handle being before she exploded.

"It is all a bit much, I know," Luna said, almost regretful. "Thus, this journey. What you were doing was as simple as trying to pull on part of who you are meant to be. Have you ever believed in prophetic names, *Twilight?*"

Twilight shook her head. It was probably a pretty dumb thing to do, but she was blunted by shock, and it was the truth. She didn't. She shook her head, telling the Goddess of Dreams, Prophecy and Foresight among other things, that she did not believe. The implications of her question were nevertheless disturbing.

Luna nodded, unsurprised, as if it made no difference. "Then suffice it to say you tried to reach out to the Moon, what you found was not just my magic, but also, ah, something else. Something I would rather you did not find. It is unlikely you were in any danger, it is just a matter of... privacy."

"The dream," Twilight said numbly. "It's not my dream. It's yours."

The others' eyes rested on Twilight. They all remembered her earlier problems, how she could barely sleep at all, but they didn't know what Twilight knew. Luna looked reluctant. The princess said nothing.

"Okay, enough, then," Applejack snarled. "Ah appreciate much of what you're trying to do, but if you're saying you're giving us answers, then *give* us answers. Ah can't stand for no more of this. What did you do to Twi', and what the *hay* is the deal with Blueblood?" The orange mare was standing, staring hard at the princess.

Twilight couldn't watch. She closed her eyes. She'd always hated watching her friends fight, but it was twice as bad when couldn't break it up like she wanted to. Her first instinct was to try to defuse the situation, but she wanted those answers, too.

It didn't turn out to be much of a fight. Luna nodded gravely at Applejack. "Thank you. You are right."

Applejack looked as surprised as the rest of them, clearly not expecting this. "Ah am?"

"It is not a dream, Twilight. It is a memory," Luna said. "And you threaten to enter that memory because it is tied to the Moon, something we have in common, though you've only now begun touching upon it yourself. I would really rather that you did not. It is private. I ask that you respect that. It is not more unfair than to keep quiet about what we hide under our beds, or what we secretly desire, is it?"

She looked at the ponies. Her words were reasonable enough, and most of them seemed to agree with the notion, even though Twilight was a little reluctant. It wasn't just curiosity. She had a suspicion that she knew what the memory was about.

"Now that I am sure this is what is happening, I can protect you from that memory, Twilight. It is the real reason I stayed at the keep. To get distance, and to think. If you will let me, I would, ah, sheathe your mind with a spell of mine before you go to sleep. It's relatively simple and completely painless. Just to keep you out." The princess smiled hopefully, and Twilight nodded, unable to form a rational protest.

"As for Blueblood-," Luna began, but Rarity interrupted her.

"Actually, I do not think I want to know, after all," Rarity said, waving a hoof dismissively.

"Is that so?" Luna asked, tilting her head a little. Twilight could see that the night princess was smiling ever so faintly as she listened to Rarity's response.

"By all means, Princess Luna. If you have some gossip, feel free to share it, but do not feel obliged simply because Applejack is-," she paused to look over at the orange earth pony. "Well, she is being an absolute darling and being the best friend anypony could possibly have," Rarity said, making Applejack blush a little. Applejack tipped her hat forwards a bit so it partially obscured her face.

"But no. I do not think I *need* to know, simply because I do not know if I have time to be chasing dreams," Rarity finished with a huff.

Luna wiped the smile off her face before Rarity could see it and nodded. "So if I told you he might be in Clopenhagen this time of year, and that we might bump into him, what would be your response?"

Rarity fixed Luna with her gaze. "You may as well end your charade here, princess, but thank you. You never truly had anything of import to tell on the subject of Blueblood himself, did you?" Her tone was almost accusatory. "You simply planned to make me look a fool, and you've succeeded."

Luna actually looked a little hurt by Rarity's claim, and Twilight felt the barb as if it had been meant for her. She didn't say anything, but Twilight frowned at Rarity.

"You tell me now that ain't true or Ah'll buck ya," Applejack growled at Luna.

"What I meant to do, Rarity, was to show you how unhealthy your obsession was getting. Yes, I knew it would probably hurt, but I also know that you have good friends and a sharp mind." The princess sighed softly. "It was a gamble and an underhanded method. Perhaps it could have backfired, but given what I have read, heard and... seen, it was all I could think to do. I hope you do not think any less of me for taking a calculated risk."

Rarity looked away, seeing Luna's distress. "Ah, I did not mean... That is to say, I *am* thankful."

"It did kinda, uh, work out, I guess," Rainbow Dash said, smiling at Applejack. The farmpony huffed and nodded, calmer now that Rarity seemed more at ease.

"Let us speak no more of it then," Luna said with a hopeful smile.

"Wait, come on, now you got me curious!" Dash protested. "What *is* Blueblood up to now anyways?"

Luna chuckled. "Very well, I will indulge you. You did not hear this from me, but I have it on good authority that he recently concluded a visit to

some relatives in the far north to learn some manners, by, ah, *request* of his very rich aunt."

Much later in the evening, after having shared gossip and discussed the events of the past few days, the ponies had reluctantly tucked in for the night. The rain continued unhindered, though they all huddled in relative comfort under the dome that Luna had erected. The princess had begun explaining what she had been doing in the days they had spent apart, from spending the entire supply of dragonfire available at the fort in communication with Celestia, to visiting most of the villages East and West along the border. As Rarity had quickly fallen asleep, she'd told them she'd report her findings on the last matter tomorrow when they were all awake.

One by one the ponies had gotten tired and gone to sleep, but Twilight remained awake even though she, too, would like nothing more than to close her eyes. She didn't really have any question in particular to ask Luna, she just found that she enjoyed sitting with her at the ghostly campfire. It was a comfortable sort of quiet, but she still scrabbled for something to say when Fluttershy finally went to huddle up with the others under the blanket.

"So, you don't have to touch it, huh?" Twilight asked. At Luna's questioning glance, she indicated the globe that warded them from the elements outside with a hoof. "You usually stood inside it, before. I thought you had to."

"I just like the wind on my face, frankly," Luna said with a shrug. "Well, and, ah. It's about as close to the Moon I can get without feeling sick to my stomach these days, so I make the most of it."

Twilight nodded dumbly. She was about to make a noncommittal noise and drop the subject, but she stopped herself. It was the easy thing to do, but it was too easy. The princess had spent the whole evening talking about Twilight and her friends down to the very stuff that made them who they are, but now she dismissed what obviously tore at her? She did not so much as fight it. There was obvious resignation in her voice.

"When did you stop trying?" Twilight quietly asked.

Luna tilted her head. "I am not sure I know what you mean. Stop trying what?"

"It all comes back to that dream, doesn't it," Twilight said, and Luna's immediate, bitter expression told her she was right. "I don't have to try very hard to guess what that memory is. Why do you cling to it still?"

The princess snorted derisively. "I have had a thousand years on the moon during which to contemplate my actions. No one else knows the horrors of that night like I do, and I will not let myself forget."

"You were awake for the whole time?" Twilight asked, horrified. "I- I had assumed-"

"Awake, and aware," Luna confirmed, swallowing. "Stewing in the memories of what I had done for generations. I could of course forget. Wipe out the dream I sustain, erase that memory forever. Scrape it off like so much dirt under my hooves." She smiled at the thought, shaking her head all the while. "If you let yourself forget a mistake, how can you stop yourself from making it again? It is a slippery slope. I have seen others fail. Others who were not given a second chance."

"There's a difference between remembering and- and whatever it is you are doing!" Twilight protested.

"It does not matter, I do not think I *can* get rid of it any more," Luna chuckled darkly. "I have played it out so many times, I can not ever forget."

"Maybe Princess Celestia can fix it? Maybe we, the elements, can? I mean, we defeated Nightmare Moon, maybe-" Twilight tried, but Luna cut her off, her voice savage and cold.

"I will *kill* you, Twilight Sparkle. Those memories are mine! It is the wage of my *failure*." Luna's tone brooked no argument, and Twilight gaped. The warning hung in the air while Twilight just stared at the princess.

Luna turned her back, and a full minute passed before any of them said anything. Twilight was shaking, but no tears came.

"I did not mean to say that. I do not even know what I am *saying*. Please. Forgive me," Luna said. Her voice was quiet, and her head hung low. Her shoulders shook ever so slightly.

"I need you more than I admit," Luna said. "Each and every one of you has already helped me. Without Pinkie, I'd have lost myself to my moods long ago, forgetting that everything has a brighter side, even the Moon. Without Applejack, I would be scheming and lying to everypony including myself, even when there are no enemies."

"Without Fluttershy, I'd forget that everypony matters. Every single pony. She and Rarity keeps me from getting detached, and Rainbow Dash tells me to take pride in who I am." She chuckled. "I still struggle with that last part."

"And you," she trailed off, slowly turning back to face Twilight again, looking so very lost. "You and your friends are all I have that is not my sister. If you turn on me, if you fear me, I have nothing."

The purple unicorn was still staring in disbelief, violet eyes trained on Luna's blue. She tried to keep the anger from her voice, tried to stay steady, but it was a lost cause. A sneer crept up on her face. "I don't fear you, Luna. I fear *for* you, you *idiot!*"

Luna did not appear to know what to say to this, which was just as well, because Twilight was not stopping. She was trying very hard to keep from waking the other ponies, but what her voice lacked for in volume, it made up for in intensity.

"It's tearing you apart, and you are too stupid to let it go. You pretend you're fine and all, that you're going to teach us something valuable when *you* are the one hurting the most!" Twilight had half a mind to try to buck some sense into Luna right then and there. "You put on this mask of yours and tell yourself you're fine. You try to tell *me* you are fine, when I know you're not. Well guess what, you're lying to all of us, to yourself, if you think this is going to go away!"

Luna looked indignant, and drew herself up a little. "Do not presume to lecture-"

"I will presume to lecture whatever the hay I damn *please* if you're going to hurt yourself like this! I am not going to stand by and watch you kill yourself over the past just because you can't forgive yourself!" Twilight hissed.

"Silence, *foa!!* I will not be spoken to like this!" Luna commanded, and she radiated an almost palpable wave of menace, but Twilight saw the bluff for what it was. She stepped closer and shoved her snout right into Luna's face. It was at an angle because of the height difference, but it sent the message across.

"You are right, you will not be spoken to like this, because you are not *listening!*" Twilight spat, her voice rising. She could feel tears finally form at the edges of her eyes. "I don't care about the past. I don't care about anything else. Nothing matters half as much to me now as seeing a wonderful pony, princess-goddess or no, hurt!"

Luna glared at her and turned around, stalking out through the dome and off into the night without another word. Only after she had lost sight of the princess did Twilight notice that Pinkie Pie was sitting at her side. The party pony put a hoof on her withers and gently guided her to bed. Twilight made no effort to resist, still shaking with a mixture of anger and sorrow.

"It'll be okay, Twilight," Pinkie said with a muted smile and uncharacteristic gentleness. She pulled the blanket up to the purple unicorn's neck and whispered. "You'll see."

The first thought Twilight had when she woke up was that the hard ground was just as unpleasant to sleep on as ever. The nights they'd spent in Clawford had somehow made her forget this fact, and she dearly wished she didn't have to be reminded right now.

The second thought was that she couldn't use her magic to lift the blanket away. When she tried to lift it, her head felt like it was filled with straw. It was decidedly unpleasant. Twilight nearly panicked, but before she could properly get into a flailing-and-screaming routine as planned, she heard Rainbow Dash's voice.

"Hey, Luna, she's awake!"

"Ah. Hold on, Twilight," she heard Luna's voice. The princess was walking over to her even as Twilight stumbled to her feet. "It is the spell I spoke of. I'll have to, ah, touch your horn."

"Oh," Twilight said, blushing, suddenly a little nervous. "Uh, well, if you have to you have to, right?"

"Right." Luna agreed with a little cough. The alicorn leaned forward ever so slowly and gently touched the tip of Twilight's horn with hers. A little spark ignited between them in an almost pleasant little shock. Less pleasurable was the "aftertaste" as her magic rushed back into her horn. Twilight pinched her eyes shut and groaned. It felt like a particularly bad case of horn-freeze, but it passed quickly.

Only then did Twilight realize this probably meant Luna had touched her horn while she was asleep. The purple unicorn turned an even brighter shade of red and hoped nopony noticed.

"It's still raining," Rainbow Dash commented from the edge of the dome. "This is just getting stupid."

"I'm sure it'll be okay. We just need to be very careful," Fluttershy offered.

"Actually, I was thinking of presenting an alternative," Princess Luna said with a little grin. If her mood was any indication, she pretended that their spat last night had never happened at all. Twilight resolved to play along for the moment.

"Alternative to rain?" Applejack asked, poking at her still-damp cloak. "Ah'll take it, but with a side order of explanation, if that's fine by you."

"I do not know how much an explanation is of use to you, Applejack. I did not always travel alone, in the past, and not everypony's talents are related to flight. I plan on travelling by moonlight," Luna said.

"By moonlight," Twilight repeated, waving a hoof at the sky. While it was grey and dark, it was most assuredly not night. She'd put it at late morning. "Moonlight during the day."

"Usually that makes it a little harder, but in this case, that is precisely why it works. The Moon is not busy at the moment," Luna explained.

"Is it safe?" Fluttershy asked, looking up from her task of making sure everything was in order in her saddlebags before she put them on.

"I realize I do not have the best track record with 'safe' where you are concerned, but yes, it is completely safe, and far faster. I will navigate by memory, though, and the only places I have trod on ground level are where we have gone together, so it will not take us all the way to Copenhagen."

The princess waited until Fluttershy had closed her bags and everypony had their cloaks on, hoods drawn up, before she dismissed the globe around them without apparent effort. Twilight had a lot of questions she wanted to ask about the spell, but try as though she might to ignore it, last night's quarrel weighed her down. Perhaps worst of all, Twilight realized she didn't regret a single word.

Luna's horn ignited and flared with a subdued light, the corona glowing a pale silver. Layer by layer, the world around them fell away, distance, color and objects winked out in rapid fashion leaving them in near total darkness. They only had the glow of Luna's horn, and it was not the brightest of lights nor the most cheery of colors.

"Uh," Rainbow Dash began. Her voice sounded far away. "So, this is not at all creepy."

Rarity lit up her horn, and a welcoming blue-white light illuminated the ponies as they took a moment to make sure everypony was present. The ground under them was a flat black, just like everything else around them. The only thing that actually seemed to reflect light was the ponies themselves. Twilight's head hurt a little just thinking about it.

"Moonlight, you said. It's not very, uh, bright," Applejack remarked.

"Um, are we alone here?" Fluttershy asked.

"Quite alone, I should think, yes," Luna chuckled. "And yes, it's not the cheeriest of places if you happen to believe that darkness is scary. This way."

Luna set off in a direction like any other, walking slowly, and the other ponies followed. Twilight could see all around them indistinct shapes in the darkness that flew past. While her eyes didn't grow accustomed to the dark in this place as they normally would, she eventually recognized that they were hills and mountains vaguely reminiscent of the tundra they'd been in moments ago.

"So, how does this work?" Twilight eventually asked, curiosity overpowering any other concerns. "And how do you know where we're going?"

"I am following the memory of where I have gone before. I lay down a trail as I flew over the tundra, and when we pass by the fort, I have my hoof-steps to go by. You would not be able to see something as faint as a memory of where I have walked, though." The princess said, turning back and smiling at Twilight. "And what I've done is strip away everything that is not the moonlight. As the moon is not up, this leaves very little, of course, but simplicity begets alacrity. Less to worry about."

Twilight blinked. "That's just ridiculous."

"And it works great!" Pinkie chirped.

All around them, the shadows of the gentle hills and distant mountains still surrounded them, but there was a wrongness to it all. For every step they took, the scenery shifted at a disproportional rate. It was enough to make Twilight queasy. She tried to focus straight ahead to keep from throwing up.

"Don't you think Twilight is great, Luna?" Pinkie Pie asked.

Twilight died a little inside. She prayed to Celestia, which felt very weird all of a sudden, that it was just Pinkie Pie being her usual random self. She had no idea how much the pink earth pony had heard yesterday.

"Twilight is very great indeed, Pinkie," Luna replied very carefully. "She's strong and wise, and I'm sure she respects her limits. She knows what she can and cannot help. It takes a very clever pony to truly know that she does not know everything."

The comment, disguised as generic wisdom, fanned the anger of yesterday's flame inside of Twilight, but she held back. She'd like nothing more than to make a scathing comment and get it out into the open. Instead, she smiled sweetly. "And said pony is also walking right back here, though you are very kind, both of you."

Even in the darkness, it was easy to see that nopony was fooled by the exchange. Rainbow Dash moved closer to Pinkie Pie and began whispering to her in hushed, urgent tones.

The silence held up for a while until Twilight noticed that Applejack, walking at Twilight's side, was looking a little nervous. It was very subtle, the farmpony glancing about once in a while, but her eyes flitted about and she was swallowing excessively.

"You okay there, Applejack?" Twilight finally asked.

"Yeah, Ah just, land sakes, it feels like Ah've never been further from home than this. It's a bit silly, Ah know." Applejack shook her head. "Don't you worry none, Ah'll manage."

"It is still the world as you know it, Applejack, and we should reach Equestria soon enough. Simply think of it as me having closed our eyes as we walk. It is safe," Luna said from ahead of them, trying to comfort Applejack.

"Ah s'pose," Applejack said, though she still seemed out of sorts. Twilight wanted to say something else to try to calm her friend down, but she did not know what. Pinkie Pie, the first stop on the cheer-up express, was still whispering with Rainbow Dash.

At length, though, Applejack took matters into her own hooves. The farmpony took a deep breath and closed her eyes before raising her voice in song. She began quietly, her voice a wavering whisper.

*However far you travel,
Just 'round the bend's your home,
Always just behind you,
So long as you aren't alone,*

*Down the roads of Equestria,
Sun over moon over sun,
Through the plains of Equestria,
Night after day after night,*

As she went on, her voice grew in strength, and a serene smile spread across her face.

*Don't you dare forget now,
That so long as the sky's above,
A traveller's simple truth is this,
Your home's with those you love,*

*Over the hills of Equestria,
Moon over sun over moon,
Passing the woods of Equestria,
Day after night after day,*

When she finished, Applejack was still smiling contently, and Twilight found she shared that smile, leaning on her even as they walked.

"I... did not know ponies still knew that song," Luna said. "It is beautiful. Thank you, Applejack." Her voice was a little unsteady, and Twilight thought she sounded sad, almost melancholy.

"Aw, well, thank you kindly. Was Granny Smith what taught me and Big Mac. Said we'd do well to remember it 'cause she wasn't about to sing it twice, and if we forgot, she'd clout us on the ear." Applejack chuckled at the memory of it.

"I would like to meet your grandmother some day," Luna said. "If you do not mind."

Applejack, however, laughed. "Ah think the real question is if *she* minds."

It was hard to track time without anything to go by except their own hoof-falls. The more Twilight listened, it seemed as if their hooves left an echo that reverberated endlessly in this place, however faint. She was trying very hard to investigate this phenomenon when she noticed something in the distance. In addition to what was unmistakably the shadow of Orion's Breath, the mountains that made up the border between Scandineighvia and Equestria, there was a sharp and colorful glow ahead.

"I suppose you would be able to see that, yes," Luna muttered with a glance at Twilight. "That... is a *mistake*, and not mine. It left quite an impression."

"What is it?" Rarity asked, but even as she did, their leisurely walk sped them past it and into a shadowy mockery of the tunnel-pass called the Scar. The memory of the sight was still bright in Twilight's mind, however. Burned into her memory was an ever-burning pyre of blue, green and pink flames. The odd pastel hued corona stretched from the bottom of the depression and clean into the sky, and Twilight was sure that their location corresponded to the crater in the outside world.

"Nothing," Twilight said, shaking her head. She gave Applejack a pleading look as she spoke, desperately wanting to avoid re-igniting the debate on secrets. It was unfair to expect Luna to sit them down and tell them everything, relevant and irrelevant both. Unfair and impractical. She had to believe that.

Even before she had finished the thought, the shadow tunnel cleared, and a huge shadow zoomed past them. They had just passed Mossy Rock Keep, she presumed, and indeed, the shapes around them looked vaguely reminiscent of the highlands they'd travelled earlier in their journey. Very soon after, Princess Luna halted in the darkness on a spot that looked, at first glance, like any other. When she looked closely, Twilight could see that there was a drop behind them. How had they gotten to the top? If distance was a complicated subject here, height was utterly nonsensical. When she thought of it, she couldn't say how had they all fit inside the Scar in the first place, either. They had to squeeze to get through the first time!

"Here," Luna announced to a large amount of curious pony eyes. Her horn glowed again, but rather than simply reverse the process, everything

from color to shape returned at once with a horrendously anticlimactic lack of sound. The shock of sunlight and color both stung Twilight's eyes and she reflexively closed them, groaning. Judging by the yelps and cries around her, she wasn't the only one.

"I had forgotten how much I love green!" Pinkie Pie cheered.

Twilight opened her eyes again, slowly, clutching her head with a hoof. "Right. Okay, so where are we?"

"At the crossroads," Luna said, and so they were. They stood in the exact spot where they had left Winter Sun, on top of a small cliff at the edge of the Oakwall forest. To their south lay the highlands, bordered by mountains at the edge of vision. The sun stood high in the sky with not a single cloud in sight.

"If you are not too tired," Luna went on, "we go west from here. May as well get started early. Miller's Joy is not even a day's march away, and while walking through the darkness can be taxing, it would be a huge boon to reach the town tonight."

"About that," Twilight said as they began moving along the road. It was good to have something solid by which to pick a direction again. "You visited some of these villages? You have a lead on Trixie?"

"I did, though it was a bit of a chore given how the roads split ahead. There is quite a confusing mass of villages and hamlets here now. Fertile farmland is popular, I suppose. But yes, I know where Trixie is heading," Luna said. "She visited Miller's Haven, then Belltown and Clayvale by the shores of Lake Joy."

"Uh-huh, and in Equestrian, for those of us who don't have maps in our head?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Unless she intends to double back, go on an off-road trek of epic proportions, or leave Equestria," Luna hummed. "Trixie is heading for the city of Clopenhagen."

"What's in Clopenhagen for Trixie, anyway?" Rarity asked. She was still occasionally rubbing her eyes.

"It's the biggest city in this region," Twilight said, thinking. "And she's telling a story. Perhaps she's going to have it published? Clopenhagen has a printing press, I'm sure. Perhaps she's just passing through going north again?"

"She sounds like she's very different now," Fluttershy commented. "And we still don't know why she's dyed her coat. I don't think it was a fashion statement."

"Well, she was vain, and red is terribly in this year," Rarity hummed.

"Yeah, but cutting her mane? And starving herself? Who the hay likes skinny mares?" Rainbow Dash said, sticking her tongue out in disgust. Pinkie Pie beamed and nosed the pegasus, who returned the affection twofold.

Chapter 12

The distance practically melted away before the ponies now. Reunited, and with a certain rainbow-maned pegasus still high on the thrill of victory, spirits were soaring. It felt odd for Twilight to be the exception. She'd always felt like she was defending Luna from her friends to some degree, but it had been quite some time since she'd last had to defend the princess' actions to anypony, even AJ. Now, she was the grump.

She replayed their last conversation in her head over and over again, the sun seemingly blinking vast distances across the sky between every time she checked. She was vaguely aware that Applejack and Rainbow Dash were chatting and laughing somewhere ahead of her. At some point, the road under her hooves had become cobbled and wide. Presumably, it must have joined up with some other road coming from the north. Ahead, the vast plains of southwestern Equestria stretched out before them, broken only by farms and small forests all dotting the countryside. Nearby, not too far down the road, they could see a particularly large cluster of cottages and larger structures, including multiple windmills. Twilight didn't have to engage a lot of her brain to guess they were coming up on Miller's Haven.

Twilight looked ahead. Luna was chatting with Fluttershy now. The unicorn upped her pace a little to join them, refusing to let herself be intimidated into silence, of becoming afraid of talking to Luna. She waited for their conversation to die down a little before she spoke.

"What did you do while waiting at the fort, anyway? You got cut off. You mentioned something about Princess Celestia?" Twilight asked, giving the princess what she hoped looked like an earnest smile.

"Ah, I suppose I did," the princess chuckled. "The first thing I did was fly out on the very first night to the surrounding villages, but you know that. I think I mentioned that I had to contact Celly in case she learned about what happened at the Hollows, yes?" Fluttershy and Twilight both nodded at the question, letting Luna go on.

"She can be a little bit too protective at times, so I preempted her by telling her of it and saying that we should leave it. No sense in digging in the wound." The princess shrugged and smiled.

Twilight clenched her jaws together so tightly it felt her teeth would shatter. Luna seemed perfectly happy to pretend they'd never argued. She had earlier said she would think on what to do regarding the town of Grey Hollows, and she apparently had. The princess accepted it, and ignored it. Luna didn't try to right any of the wrongs; she was hoping it would go away of its own accord. Being immortal, perhaps it would, but she didn't even try to fight.

Before Twilight could say anything, though, the princess went on. "Perhaps more disconcerting, there has been an attempted burglary in the castle. Celestia's wards were triggered, and she sent a unit to investigate, but they failed to discover anything useful."

"A break-in at the royal castle?" Twilight blinked.

"Ah," Luna paused to shake her head, smiling at herself. "I meant the old castle in the Everfree. I am still a little behind on the times, I suppose."

"But there's nothing there," Fluttershy protested. "I mean, I think. We were there, and there isn't exactly a lot to steal, is there?"

"If I remember it right, what you saw was only a part of the top floors of the old royal castle, Fluttershy. There is a lot more below, and there are not exactly a whole lot of ponies brave and stupid enough to go through the Everfree. No offense, of course." The princess offered the two ponies a grin, making Fluttershy giggle. Twilight was still staring.

"What were they after? What did they take? You don't know who? Do you have any leads? Where did they break into?" The questions spilled forth from Twilight so quickly it was a wonder that Luna even managed to catch half of them.

"We do not know, that's the unfortunate answer to most of those questions until somepony with the necessary expertise investigates it, and Celly has her hooves full." Luna answered.

"You're not going to see for yourself?" Twilight asked, suspecting she knew what the answer would be.

"I have no desire to, no," the princess answered, flinching imperceptibly, but she was quick to smile again. "Not that I think I need to. I do not know the who and the why, nor do I have so much as a single lead, but I know they broke into my old, ah, study."

Twilight and Fluttershy both looked expectantly at the princess, who hesitated. "The items contained therein are, well. Suffice it to say that most were meant to be destroyed long ago, but we simply never had the time. We thought them safe. Most likely, anypony who broke in fled at the sight of them. If they had tried using them, they would likely not have survived."

A chill went down Twilight's spine. There it was again. The feeling that there were questions she decidedly did not want answers to. Sadly, the "want" had never been the driving force. There was another, stronger word operating her brain. "Must". She had to know.

"What sort of items could do something like that?" Twilight asked quietly.

"The sort of items created by somepony very far gone, Twilight Sparkle," Luna said, never missing a single beat. "They were not meant for mortal ponies, and their effects would be unpredictable at best. If I feel up to the task, I will ask Celly if I can take over her duties for a day while she destroys them."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if you did it?" Twilight asked. She knew it was a stupid question. She knew Luna would not want to go to the site of the ruined city when the mere memory of it tormented her so much. Even if it annoyed Twilight to no end, she had no right to keep throwing salt in the wound in the hopes that Luna would change. If the princess blew up on her and yelled at her this time, she had no defense. She already regretted asking.

"Please, *stop it*," Luna implored, and it hurt a thousand times more than any amount of anger could have. The princess' voice was a mere whisper, and Fluttershy was quick to look away from the scene, recognizing

the pain in her voice. Twilight fixed her eyes on the ground, swallowing a lump.

"I'm sorry," Twilight muttered. "I didn't mean to say that."

"Hey girls, bet you five bits this is Miller's Haven!" Applejack's voice was a welcome distraction. The apple farmer had hopped onto a rock by the side of the road, her shape outlined by the setting sun. Rarity and Pinkie Pie stood at the base of the rock, and Rainbow Dash hovered overhead. Twilight was quick to leave Luna's side, joining them in surveying the town ahead.

The township was centered around six huge windmills that spun lazily in the afternoon breeze. Clustered all around this half-dozen of white stone giants were thatched roof cottages of varying shapes and sizes. Some were clearly abodes that housed single ponies, and others were two-story commercial buildings. All around the town shapes bustled about, and Twilight was fairly sure she could see a market at the crossroads that made up the centre of town.

"Shall we?" Luna asked as she passed by the ponies and kept walking.

"My turn to pay, I believe," Rarity commented as they fell into step at the princess' side.

"I'll look into paying you two back the second we get back to Ponyville," Twilight told Applejack and Rarity, still feeling a little guilty about the whole ordeal.

"Nonsense. What sort of element of generosity would I be if I let you do that?" Rarity replied with a chuckle, and Twilight just shook her head, joining her in a laugh.

Mere minutes later, the seven of them trotted into Miller's Haven proper. Ponies of all types, shapes and sizes were going about their business all around, and most of them had that business interrupted when they passed by. The locals bowed or stared, and Luna nodded to each of them in turn as they passed. Twilight wondered how the princesses could keep up; her neck felt sore just from looking at Luna.

They passed through where the ponies of the market were packing up their stalls, vegetable and fruit salesponies closing shop for the day. Clusters of ponies hung out in the square or at the corners of houses, and it felt very much like a little slice of Ponyville, making Twilight suddenly miss the little town that had become her home. If she squinted, she could pretend the green mare over there was Lyra, the rather unorthodox unicorn mare. The nearest windmill behind the cottage over there became the library tree all too easily, and she swore Spike was waving from a window.

"Y'okay sugar?" Applejack asked, snapping Twilight back to the present.

"Oh, sorry. I guess you're not the only one who gets homesick," Twilight chuckled nervously. "I bet you miss your family just as much as I do mine. I mean, Spike."

"More'n you even think," Applejack said, but she smiled despite her words.

"This is the tavern at which our elusive 'Phoenix' performed," Luna said as she indicated a large building nearby. It was a two-story stone tavern, and ponies flocked to it now that evening set in. "I did not busy myself with details, only directions. As such, I suggest we see what we can find out before we try to find a place to sleep."

"Elements of harmony private eyes go!" Pinkie whispered gleefully.

"Right," Twilight sighed. "Let's get this over with." She looked up at Luna expectantly, but the princess did not move.

"I think if I go in there, it will cause a bit of a stir. I shall wait outside," Luna said sceptically.

"I regret to say it, but you may have a point. I myself am a little reluctant, too. It doesn't quite look like my type of establishment. Mind if I sit this one out, too?" Rarity said, frowning.

Fluttershy looked over at Rarity, smiling. "I'll stay with you, Rarity. We could maybe try to find a place for us all to sleep in the meantime? If you want, I mean."

Rarity nodded thankfully. "That sounds like an excellent idea, Fluttershy."

Thus reduced to four, Twilight, Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie approached the tavern proudly named "The River of Laughs". Pinkie was bouncing merrily, higher and higher with each hop, as if she fed on the energy of all the ponies around her. Rainbow Dash had to pull her down to stop the party pony from crashing against the top of the door frame as they entered.

Inside, there was hardly any free space on which to stand, and their saddlebags caused quite a bit of trouble, even earning some unsavory comments. They clearly stood out in the crowd - all the other ponies seemed to be locals come to enjoy the cider. In places where the ponies were particularly tightly packed, pegasi hovered over the tables chatting with each other, and Twilight had to wonder if the room had a high ceiling for just this reason.

Twilight pointed towards the bar positioned in the centre of the room. "Maybe we should just ask the barkeep?" Twilight said, her voice disappearing in the chaotic soup of talking, yelling and the clatter of cups.

"What's that?" Applejack yelled.

"I said, maybe we should just ask the barkeep?" Twilight repeated, louder, just as she noticed something. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash were missing. "And where the hay-" she began, but Applejack pointed over her shoulder. Following her direction, Twilight saw Pinkie Pie up on a small stage. They did not so much draw a small crowd as it was impossible, due to the lack of space, for ponies to avoid listening to what appeared to be a stand-up comedy routine led by Pinkie. Rainbow Dash did not look very happy about the situation.

"Right," Twilight said with a shrug. It was easier to get to the bar with only the two of them, and they soon managed to find a spot at the counter, wedged in between a duo of unicorns.

"Strong or weak, how many?" one of the barkeepers manning the desk asked. He was a burly grey unicorn with a tap adorning his flank. Giving them a second look, spotting their saddlebags and cloaks, he paused before elaborating. "Two bits for the weak cider, three for the strong cider. Welcome to the River in Millers', ladies."

"Um, actually, we're just here to talk," Twilight said, offering him the sweetest of smiles. "We think-"

"Plenty of ponies to talk to," the barkeep said almost dismissively, looking around for somepony else to serve. Sadly for him, nopony else needed his services right now.

"Two mugs of the darkest cider you have, then, bucko" Applejack said, throwing eight bits on the counter. The barkeep took six of the bits and immediately obliged. Two mugs were soon levitated onto the counter, filled to the brim with a dark orange sludge.

Twilight grumbled to herself. They could just as easily head outside and ask Luna to come with them. Being seen with the princess would get them the answers in a heartbeat.

Applejack reached out with a hoof and gently pushed the mugs to the side, smiling lopsidedly at the barkeep. "Changed my mind. Ah'll have words instead. You can have the drinks yourself, partner."

"We just need to know about an entertainer who passed by here some weeks ago," Twilight tried again.

"Yeah, well, I'm busy, but you can head up and check with the manager. Second floor, stairs are over there," he waved a hoof. "Tell Rhapsody that Chrome sent you. Just get out of my mane."

Offering no protest, the two ponies left the surly barkeep to his business of keeping the spirits of ponies up and flowing. They wove, pushed and muscled their way through the soup of the crowd until they hit a broad set of stairs guarded by a yellow earth pony with a reed and a pair of water lilies on his flank. He let them pass when they dropped Chrome's

name, and given directions, they quickly found the office of the manager and rapped on the door.

"Enter!" came a feminine voice from inside. Twilight opened the door, admitting the two and revealing a small and dirty office housing a dark red unicorn mare behind a desk. She looked a little apprehensive, but Twilight supposed she and Applejack made an odd pair. The fact that Applejack's cloak was torn on the flank didn't help, either.

"Is there a problem? Can I... help you?" the unicorn mare squinted and slowly stood up from behind the desk.

"Oh, no, no trouble at all, we just had some questions about somepony who performed here some time ago." Twilight put on her most disarming smile. Or, at the very least, she tried to approximate what Rarity would smile like in a moment like this.

Judging from the way Applejack looked at her, she didn't do very well.

"Are you in service of the principality? Oh dear, am I in trouble? You'll have my full cooperation of course! I- my name is Thimble, owner of-"

"Oh sweet Celestia no, we're just- Applejack!" Twilight groaned desperately.

"We're just travellers chasin' a lead that we don't have the sense to leave the hay alone," Applejack said, gruffly. "Sorry fer being a bother."

"Well," Thimble calmed down a little and drew a deep breath. "Okay, well, welcome to Miller's Haven. I'm sorry, I just had a bit of trouble when I let a rather, ah, controversial artist perform here last year, and I still haven't heard the end of that."

"Don't worry 'bout it none," Applejack said. She looked a little sour, and Twilight wondered if the farmpony was still opposed to the idea of trying to find Trixie.

"She calls herself Phoenix. A red mare with short hair, allegedly very thin, and she's a storyteller," Twilight explained, unable to keep the frown off her face at the thought of the confusing mess it was. "She'd be telling

the tale of the Great and Powerful Trixie." Twilight actually stared at Applejack as she said the name this time, but this time, there was nothing.

"Oh, I remember her. She stayed in town for a few days three weeks ago waiting for our weekly open drama night," Thimble said. "It drew quite a crowd considering that Trixie herself has come by the plains more than once. It wasn't everypony's usual fare, being quite tragic."

"You attended?" Twilight asked. "What more can you tell us?"

"Well, it's quite remarkable for a unicorn to abandon all use of magic in a show. The earth ponies and pegasi thought it was very respectful because we unicorns tend to steal the shows with what they perceive as an unfair advantage." Thimble raised a brow at Twilight and Applejack's nonplussed expressions. "It's quite the subject in the entertainer communities. A unicorn storyteller is fairly rare in the first place, too. She seemed quite serious about it – my husband noticed it when she was having a drink after the show."

"How do you mean?" Twilight pressed. "Serious about what?"

"She used her hooves when drinking, even though she looked very clumsy," Thimble said, giving a shrug. "Again, she was a huge hit because of it. The story was remarkably good as well."

Twilight shook her head slowly, trying to put the puzzle together in her mind, but she was astutely aware that she was missing some pieces. Applejack had her face scrunched up, obviously also thinking.

Oblivious, Thimble continued. "It was a re-imagining of Trixie's career, I suppose, with a tragic bent. She told of Trixie's early years, when she supposedly hated her own magic because of something that had happened before. She travelled the roads and would not accept anypony's help, so she was forced to perform magic tricks and such just to survive."

"Being lonely, she got used to depending only on herself, and in the end, she thought she knew who she had to become. If all she had was the magic and the cutie mark she now hated, she simply had to make herself be the best at it. It ended with a bit of a cliffhanger as she approached a

town called Ponyville. Does this help?" The red unicorn looked at the pair and smiled. Twilight nodded slowly.

"I think so. Thank you very much," Twilight muttered. Applejack echoed her thanks as they headed out of the office and started making their way downstairs to find Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash.

"Three weeks ago. She's pulled ahead," Applejack said.

"It's because of our detour," Twilight agreed. "But we're faster, she's apparently not in any rush. If she stayed here for days before moving on, I mean. You still wish we weren't trying to find Trixie?"

Applejack looked a little surprised at the question, and thought about it long and hard. They were on the ground floor, surrounded by ponies, before she answered. "Ah'm not gonna lie," she offered.

"Which means?" Twilight pressed, spotting a pink tail in the crowd ahead.

"That you're right, Twi'," Applejack said, simply. Twilight let it drop as they found Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash in the crowd, dancing to the tunes of a band that had stolen their stage.

"Best. Band. *Ever*." Rainbow Dash explained as they met up. "If they hadn't come along, I'd still be up there, and hey, The Dash does *not* do comedy!"

"Not intentionally," Applejack chuckled, though Dash did not seem to hear.

"They chased us away!" Pinkie said, hopping over, pouting at Twilight. "They said you had to 'register' and stuff, and I'm all, that's silly, can't we make ponies laugh whenever we want? But noooo, they had to have this band, and I mean, they're great ponies and the music is nice, but but- we were having so much fun!"

"Nopony else was laughing, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash groaned.

"Well, as long as one pony is laughing, it's not a total loss!" Pinkie protested.

"You're always laughing," Twilight objected.

"Which is why I never lose," Pinkie nodded, grinning.

Their primary objective completed, the ponies vacated the premises before anypony suggested that they just "grab one drink". On a large stage in the back, a band comprised of four grim-looking ponies was getting ready to play. They were all wearing ridiculous amounts of metal accessories and colored pale white by what looked like copious amounts of flour. Getting out of the tavern seemed like the best option.

Outside, Luna had apparently taken the most literal approach possible to waiting. She stood at the very same spot, entirely unmoved. The princess was talking to a little pegasus filly who couldn't have been much older than Applebloom. It was an easy comparison to make considering she was yellow, though her mane was a pale green, not red. The little pony had taken a seat on the ground in front of the princess, looking straight up at her.

"But if you're a princess, why aren't you in a castle?" the filly asked.

"Because it gets very lonely in the castle sometimes, even if you have the best sister in the world," Luna said, smiling. "And nopony does well alone."

"I don't have a sister," the little filly sulked, sticking out her bottom lip.

"But I bet you have friends, do you not?" Luna asked. She looked up and seemed to notice for the first time that Twilight and the others were watching. The princess offered them a quick smile before she turned her attention back to her tiniest of adoring subjects.

"I have Sugar Cane and Thunder Bloom! Well, and Fog Horn, but he's kind of mean sometimes." She huffed at the thought, wrapping her wings about herself.

"I'm sure he is really nice too, you just take good care of each other, okay?" Luna said.

"Are you *really* a princess? Mommy says the princess is white, not blue," the pegasus filly went on. Twilight winced, but the princess seemed unfazed.

"The white princess is my sister, yes," Luna explained just as a dark pegasus mare landed right behind the little filly. The newcomer pony looked up at the princess, eyes wide and fearful.

"I'm so sorry, your majesty," she stammered, inching forward to scoop up the protesting filly before giving her a harsh glare. "Hopper can, ah, be a bit of a hoof-ful at times."

"She was no trouble at all. It was a delight to meet her," Luna said, her voice a little more formal than it had been. The pegasus mother bowed low and took off, hushing her child even as the yellow filly yelled "*Bye, princess!*".

Luna waved with a hoof before walking over to join the other ponies, her smile staying with her. Twilight idly wondered if Luna would've reacted in the same manner a month ago if a little filly had approached her then.

"You're good with fillies'n colts, Ah guess?" Applejack asked with a chuckle.

"I try," Luna shrugged. "There is something to be said for anypony whose first instinct is not to bow and scrape, but speak his or her mind. What did you find out?"

Applejack and Twilight quickly relayed what they had heard from the manager of the *River of Laughs*, including the feeling that something was missing from the picture, and Trixie's newfound sympathies for the non-unicorn elements of the storytelling community. They had to begin their tale anew when Rarity and Fluttershy rejoined them, but as it turned out, the extra few minutes were time well spent.

"But, Twilight, that doesn't make sense," Fluttershy said, frowning. "I mean, um, I might be wrong, but-"

"Why the hay would Trixie *not* use magic? You even said that the story was about how she became convinced she had to be the best!" Rainbow Dash snorted.

"If I could just-" Fluttershy tried.

"It goes against her character, I will admit that much, but I wouldn't put it past her if she thought it would reward her in the end of things, either, surely?" Rarity mused.

"I just think-" Fluttershy said.

"Ooh, but what if her horn fell off, huh? Then she *couldn't* use magic! Oh no, that'd be so sad!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, horrified.

"But-" Fluttershy sighed, deflating.

"Horns can't just fall off like that. Er, can they?" Applejack asked. "Ah've never had a horn, so-"

"Girls!" Fluttershy said, a little more forcefully. "Luna said that Trixie never reported back to the guild, she's not working with the entertainers."

Twilight stared at Fluttershy. She had forgotten that little detail. "Wait. You're right. There's no reason. Unless she has contacted them since, something I doubt, she isn't doing any of this for the fame. I mean, we already know this, she's taken on an alias."

"Whatever does this mean, then?" Rarity asked. Even Luna looked a little curious now.

"I don't know, but I'm very eager to hear the next part of the story," Twilight said.

Rarity and Fluttershy had done a quick circuit of town and asked around a little, quickly discovering that all the inns were fully booked for the evening. It wasn't very surprising, given the amount of traffic they had seen

on the roads once they hit the southwestern plains, but it was still inconvenient. The best suggestion they got was to check with the local farmers to see if they had a barn to spare. Rainbow Dash was quick to complain about the local weatherponies being too diligent. She'd take a cloud over a barn any day of the week, yet the skies were clear for leagues around.

As it turned out, empty barns were in short supply, too. Luna had refused to take any of the farmers up on their offer to let them have their beds, leaving them very short on options. In the end, they were given the keys to one of the great windmills of the city by an insistent farmer who happened to own it. The the chill would pick up through the night, he'd predicted, and he would hear none of their protests. Twilight had snatched the key and thanked him before Luna could refuse.

Rainbow Dash flew up to Luna's side as they made their way towards the mill. The town lay silent except for the very distant throb of music from the tavern in the distance.

"You know, what's the point of being a princess if you can't let ponies be nice to you?" the pegasus asked, brows furrowed in consternation.

"I do let ponies be nice to me, Rainbow Dash," Luna said. "As long as it is for the right reasons. Me being a princess is a terrible reason for somepony wanting to give me a gift."

Before the pegasus could protest, Luna smiled at her and continued. "You being 'awesome', however, is a terrific reason for ponies to do something nice to you. It is different. If you had not done anything fantastic, would you still want gifts and praise?"

"Sure," Rainbow Dash shrugged.

Luna tilted her head. "How about the idea of a last prize trophy? Would you ever accept a trophy for being the loser?"

The chromatic pony paused, thinking. "I don't know, but you're not a loser."

The princess paused, opening her mouth and closing it again. Twilight was staring intently at her and tried to imagine what she was thinking.

"I am not. Nor did I mean to say I was, I think," Luna finally said, chuckling weakly. "I think perhaps I lost track of my own logic there."

Twilight looked up at the large windmill as they approached it and levitated over the key, opening the door for them as she thought. The princess knew what she was saying, she just didn't think anypony would call her out on it.

The interior of the mill was hardly a palace, but the stone walls kept the night air out, and Luna didn't have to exert herself for it. The mill wheel was disconnected, so the only real noise was the faint creaking of the windmill above. In quick order, the ponies had set about gathering some nearby straw for a makeshift bedding area, and soon the unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies were snug under the cover of Rarity's everpresent blanket. As they closed their eyes one by one, the sounds of soft snoring filled the air.

Twilight, as was fast becoming a habit, lay wide awake for a little longer. She stared up past the rafters to the ceiling of the mill, thinking about nothing at all until Luna approached Twilight and leaned close. Her horn was softly glowing, the princess intending to shut the purple unicorn out from her dream.

"You're going to keep doing this for how long?" Twilight whispered, halting Luna in her tracks. The princess looked honestly surprised at the question. Twilight looked up at her, lying on her back.

"And why wouldn't you meet my eyes that night at the banquet, back at the fort?" Twilight asked. She had so many questions she had never known when or how to ask. They chose now to escape her brain through her mouth.

The princess said nothing for the longest time, their eyes on each other, violet on blue, neither so much as blinking. Luna's horn was still glowing, pulsing without a sound. The light illuminated both their faces, neither of which held any discernible expression.

"When you said there was merit to anypony who dared to speak their mind to you rather than bow and scrape," Twilight said, shaking her head slowly. The back of her head ground against the hard floor. "I thought at first it was an insult to Rarity, but there's a difference between obeisance and observing decorum. *I'm* asking you the questions. Why won't you answer? Why won't you show me?"

Luna was still staring at her. The princess was mute, but she leaned in a little closer. Her breath was hot. Twilight blinked, noting that there were tears in her own eyes, and she was shivering even though she felt hot. Her body obviously didn't even know what it was doing any more.

The final word in their discussion still hung above Twilight, the spell that clung to Luna's horn in silent threat. Despite how much she didn't want that spell cast on her, Twilight felt herself drawn up, raising her head off the ground to get closer to Luna. Her breath came ragged.

"If your duty and your *purpose* is to raise the moon, and the memory you cling to is what's keeping you from doing that," Twilight said, gripped by a surge of the nauseating anger that accompanied thinking about the dichotomy that was Luna. "Why can't you let it go? What the hay am I *missing*?"

The last words were spoken between gritted teeth, and the tears didn't feel so much out of place any more. Luna looked saddened and finally leaned down to touch her horn to Twilight's own. There was an electric little spark that passed through them, muting Twilight's magic, but the unicorn didn't even try to resist, letting her head fall back down to the ground.

"I will tell you what you are missing, Twilight," Luna said. The princess had drawn back a tiny bit. It was an almost imperceptible distance, but also gesture Twilight did not miss. "You are missing the fact that before this is a question of why, it is a question of respect. Of looking at another pony as an equal, as one should."

Luna's was not even a full hoofbreadth from Twilight's face. She smelled faintly of rain. Twilight was paralyzed, trapped, and scrabbled to eject some words. She felt utterly pathetic where she lay, tears streaking

her face. Her voice cracked. "Why don't you... what do I have to do to earn your respect? I just want to *help*. Why are you-"

"I have always respected you," Luna whispered. Her voice was gentle, almost apologetic. "I respect you and your choices, I respect your drives and ambitions, though I sometimes fear for you, too. I consider you my equal, as do I all of you, not as subjects, but as fellow ponies."

Twilight shook her head in confusion, blinking in a futile attempt to clear away the tears. A gentle hoof from Luna came to rest on her cheek.

"I wish I could say I felt the same from you, Twilight Sparkle. I do not think you see me as your equal." The princess slowly drew back, her face disappearing from Twilight's blurred view. "You look down your snout at me because you think I am weak for clinging to a memory, but you do not understand the weight of the burden. If you would respect me, then please, respect my decisions, too. This is not just about you and me."

After a few hoof-falls and a creak from the door to the mill, the princess was gone, leaving Twilight feeling desperately alone and helpless despite being surrounded by all her best friends.

The group of seven spent the next two days on the road heading towards Belltown from Miller's Haven. The road met up with Lake Joy and followed its shore in a gentle curve towards Clopenhagen, the major city barely visible across the crystal blue waters as a grey shadow. The plains were dotted with farms to such a degree that had they desired, they could have sought succor in somepony's home every night. The princess, however, suggested that they not impose, given that warding off the night chill was a triviality, and they still had plenty of entirely palatable rations.

In the aftermath of the night in Miller's Haven, Twilight would barely meet Luna's eyes, much less talk to her, and the others caught on to this rather quickly. When their gentle questions were rebuffed, most of them were quick to take a hint. Pinkie Pie, proving that she would forever be the exception to the rule, was the exception to her own rule about exceptions, and did not press the issue either.

Their time on the neatly cobbled roads on the plains was thus filled with all kinds of other chatter that Twilight did not really pay too much attention to. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash spent a lot of time joking around and Rarity had started conferring with Luna about some of her sketches. When the township of Belltown came into view, Twilight had lost track of how many conversations had gone on around her that she'd instantly dismissed as unimportant, eager to get back to trying to figure out whether she should be mad or sad at herself or Luna. How could she respect what she couldn't understand? How could she understand what she couldn't see?

What finally roused her from her reverie was the clarion call of the bell tower that was the town's namesake. The pure single notes rang out proudly from an outsize tower made entirely in pure white stone, announcing that it was four o' clock in the afternoon. Most of the town was made in the same white stone, wide open streets and large gardens separating the individual houses on the outskirts, with more tightly clustered commercial buildings at the town's core.

For all its elegance and neatness, it was still very much a town rather than a city, the area barely the match of Ponyville. This made it twice as surprising to find that the buildings at the center of town included a large open-air amphitheater. It seemed very odd for such a small town to be able to support such a luxury, but then, the town also had a very elaborate park that seemed very unnecessary in a town surrounded by peaceful plains and forests.

From their approach down a very gentle incline, they had plenty of time to take in the town. Rarity began taking off her cloak as they walked, neatly folding it and stuffing it into one of her saddlebags, which bulged in protest.

"What's up, sug'?" Applejack asked, raising a brow at the white unicorn.

"Well, while it may be a little cold, I will not look like a common wanderer coming into a place of *culture*," Rarity answered. "Belltown is where all the big names in Clopenhagen have their vacation homes."

"So not only do they have an annoying bell that hurts my ears, it's full of boring rich ponies?" Rainbow Dash asked, sticking out her tongue.

"Being rich doesn't mean you *have* to be boring, Dashie," Pinkie giggled. "Rarity's not boring, is she?"

"Uh, kinda? I guess not?" Dash tried, receiving a sharp glare from Rarity.

"We should probably head for the theater. I doubt this is the sort of place to have entertainers perform at taverns," Twilight said. Luna, who had visited the town earlier, did not protest this suggestion.

"I think you'll find that this is the sort of town to have hotels, darling, not taverns," Rarity said with a sideways grin as she brushed her mane mid-stride. "Besides, unless we want to be received as ruffians, I suggest you all doff those hideous cloaks. It's still sun out, no?"

"Yeah, except we're travelling with a princess," Dash said, rolling her eyes. "Not a lot of ruffians do. We just stick close."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Twilight said. "Opening doors just by fear, I mean. If we want to ingratiate ourselves here, the first thing we should do is blend in and make a good first impression. Rarity has a point."

"Egghead's guide to-" Dash began.

"*Chameleon Canter's Applied Social Studies*," Twilight sparkle muttered.

Chapter 13

Wandering through the pristine streets of Belltown, Twilight felt a little uneasy. In so many ways, the well-dressed ponies who walked down the spotless streets with their attendants in tow reminded her of a particular, dull party in Canterlot. In fact, it reminded her of a lot of dull parties in Canterlot way back, but one stood out among them. The very first one.

Princess Celestia had asked Twilight if she couldn't afford to let her books lie just for one day and let the princess show her star pupil to the nobility. Twilight, ever eager to please, had agreed in a heartbeat despite her reservations. Soon she was fitted with the finest dress she had ever worn, made just for the occasion. Twilight had never quite felt so pretty. Nor had she ever since felt so useless and forgotten.

Twilight could not even recall what the ball celebrated, only that it was very important, and that everypony was eager to have Princess Celestia's attention. The princess of course made a point of introducing them all to her protégé, Twilight Sparkle. Without fail, the nobles would nod at her as if she were a piece of furniture before promptly ignoring her for the rest of the evening. If she had ever before deluded herself into thinking she was even visible in the presence of the radiant sun princess, that party was when she learned different.

She had of course grown up since then. No longer were she saddled with the insecurities and worries of a little filly, concerned with the opinions of everypony to the point of paralysis and depression. It was just very hard not to think of that party now as Luna's presence eclipsed that of hers and the rest of her friends. Yet again did she walk among giants, but this time, she didn't mind, nor was she alone.

"Look at them starin'," Applejack muttered, watching a monocled stallion arch a brow at their passing. "But no bowing this time, Ah can't help but notice."

"They would if I approached them, I suppose," Luna shrugged. "But most of them do not know what to think of me, considering I have yet to

attend any of the soirées of the elite. Some of them may even feel insulted by my lack of interest and attention."

"Should they?" Rarity asked with genuine interest.

"No, they should not, but I do not fault them. It is not always easy to distinguish between a personal vendetta and something more delicate and complicated," Luna explained with a backward glance at Twilight that the purple unicorn almost wished she had not noticed.

"Eh, if they're all stuck-up idiots like Blueblood?" Rainbow Dash shot. "No big loss."

"They serve many purposes, Rainbow Dash, and I hope you will have the time to find out exactly how wrong such an unfair assumption can be." The princess smiled despite her words. "Then again, my experience interacting with modern nobility as anything other than a princess is very limited, so I will not dismiss your words."

"Was that a yes or a no?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Sort of," Luna chuckled. "Let us see what we can find out, here."

Their hoof-falls echoed oddly as they stepped off the street and entered the currently desolated yard of the marbled half-circle amphitheatre they had spotted earlier. The stage area was as empty as the curve of seating that faced them, but even as they stood there contemplating their next move, a mare came into view from a tunnel built into the seating. The well-groomed silver earth pony mare raised a brow at their presence and quickly approached.

"The theater is currently closed, tonight's showing of *The Ballad* begins at-" she began, pausing when she actually looked *at* them, rather than through them, and spotted the princess. Her mouth hung open for a good five seconds.

"Ah. Your Majesty," she said, beginning anew. She'd put on a very subtle frown. "I am Lady Argent, and I oversee the operation of Belltown Theater. We were not informed of your coming. An honor, to be sure."

"Since when did the princess answer to *you*?" Rainbow Dash said with a snort, earning a nudge from Pinkie Pie. Lady Argent glanced at the brash pegasus, but ignored her quickly enough, brows arched in query at the princess still.

"We had not planned this, either. This is something of a private visit, I suppose. Call it leisure." Luna smiled pleasantly, and the sentiment was returned.

"We will of course be delighted to find you a seat in the Very Important Ponies area, your majesty," the silver mare said with a little bow, beaming. Pinkie Pie's eyes lit up.

"I hear it's very good. *The Ballad* is supposed to be so much fun! Ooh, and saucy, too!" the pink pony whispered, grinning.

"Ah, that will not be necessary, though the offer is most certainly appreciated. We were hoping you might be helpful in providing some information regarding a pony who would have performed here not long ago," Luna said affably.

Lady Argent's mood dropped a couple of notches. "I see. Well, I was simply hoping that the princess would attend, as it would be a huge boon for the popularity of the theater."

"She would have been called Phoenix," Twilight interjected, fueled by pure curiosity. "A red mare, telling the tale of-"

The silver earth pony gave Twilight a look of the rather displeased variety before she turned back to Luna. "Because, as I am certain you are aware, under the Artist Protection Act, APA clause five-fourty, we are not obliged to divulge any information unless it is deemed a matter of national security."

Luna's face was entirely still, unmoving. Fluttershy, however, took a step forward, aghast. "You can't mean that, somepony could be hurt-"

"Of course, I am very happy to be of service! Now, sadly, I do not have a copy of the general information release form handy, so you will have to supply that yourself..." The earth pony smiled.

"Can't we just ask somepony else in Belltown here?" Rarity asked. "I am not sure I can handle this magnitude of *helpfulness* for much longer."

"I am certain they would be happy to betray the integrity of the artists who perform here. It is considered *very* good form," Lady Argent said with a shrug.

"How's about Ah show you some 'good form' right here-" Applejack began, tensing up.

"We would of course be delighted to attend," Princess Luna finally said, all without smiling even a little bit. "Assuming you can find space for all seven of us, that is. And I do hope refreshments are part of the deal."

"Ah, all seven?" The theater manager's smile faltered a little bit. "I did not intend-"

"It would be very *helpful*, along with hearing what we want to hear right now, all in the interest of preventing an altercation, yes. I am sure that you are eager to sport to a royal attendance, just as I am eager to hear what you can tell us about Phoenix," Luna said.

"Similarly, I am eager to avoid having anypony tell anypony else that this princess is anything but candid and sincere in her dealings with others." The princess allowed herself a small smile that slowly grew into an almost predatory grin. "I would of course hate to be thought of as anything but helpful. But at the same time, I am certain you are aware of exactly how much joy a thorough tax audit and a review of privileges can bring to somepony's life. All without stepping out of the comfort zone of that which we call law."

"Certainly," Lady Argent said with a painted smile.

"You've had your carrot. Phoenix. Speak," Luna snapped.

It looked as if though the silver mare would protest at the tone, but in the end, she maintained her unconvincing little smile and nodded. "That was the name of a mare with a story who came into town a little over two weeks ago. She caught my eye because she looked like a traveller, yet,

well. We get enough of those here, passers-through, but she was different. The way she carried herself, it was obvious she was... special."

"I found her at a café. I offered to pay for her food, and she ate like she'd never seen food before." Lady Argent winced. "She didn't look well at all, but she told me her plans. Her story. I think she felt obliged because I was paying."

"Which weren't at all your plan, eh," Applejack said sourly.

"If you believe me incapable of empathy, that's *your* problem, young lady," the older mare said, frowning. "At any rate, she said she was telling the story of Trixie, a cheap little tart of a magician who tried convincing me to perform here once." She snorted at the thought of it, and Twilight elected not to explain.

"She wanted to tell the fourth part of a story she said would have five or six parts. She wasn't certain whether or not there would be a sequel. I of course admitted I was less than enthused to hear it was an in-progress, advising her to start at the beginning with each show, but she was quite adamant." The theater manager grimaced. "Said it was start-till-end. I let myself convince when she explained the plot because I felt it could work on its own, and besides, we had a free time slot coming up next week due to a cancellation."

"I let her stay at my mansion, and she was no trouble, though my butler reported that she was a little, ah, erratic at nights. Hardly slept," the silver mare suddenly looked a little hesitant, as if though she was unsure if she wanted to say anything more. "Screamed at night. Could not hold her food. She... was troubled."

"And you've just let her go?" Fluttershy asked quietly. The silver mare was quick to raise her snout back up to the sky and snort.

"We are not some charitable operation here, miss. If she had *issues*, then she could have reported them at the nearest hospital, and she would be well taken care of."

"Unless she was afraid to," Fluttershy whispered, but when the older earth pony glared at her, she looked away and offered no further comment. As Lady Argent went on, though, her voice was a little more quiet.

"She performed here early last week. It was a success. Big hit among the tragedy aficionados. You must understand, ponies travel from all the surrounding villages to attend, and I was fearing refund claims when Cadenza cancelled," Lady Argent shook her head. "I've since had ponies approach me and thank me personally for arranging Phoenix's performance."

"A story," Twilight suggested, trying to get the ball rolling, so to say. "I assume she told her story all *sans magic*, yes? What did she say?"

The silver mare silenced her with a hoof and began retelling the tale as well as she could after receiving reassurances that they would not relay it to anypony. They had the dubious pleasure of hearing Lady Argent describe "Phoenix"'s story of what had happened when Trixie came to Ponyville, featuring all of them in name. It was accurate down to the last word, as far as they could tell. Twilight felt a little unwell.

"Thank you," Luna said when the tale was over and they left Trixie perched at the edge of the Everfree forest. The princess had said nothing ever since Lady Argent had agreed to share her story. "We are greatly looking forward to watching the play this evening. Now, if you will excuse us, we should find a place to stay for the evening."

Without further ado, Luna led the party out of the theater area and down the street, and the ponies set about scanning the buildings around them looking for something that offered chairs, beds, food, or all of the three.

"So, that was awesome, but I still don't understand why you said yes to watching some boring old play," Rainbow Dash complained. Twilight was glad that Dash jumped at the questions she wanted to ask herself; she simply didn't feel like opening a channel with the princess.

"She should not have presumed to be able to browbeat me simply because she thinks I am a bit behind on the times," Luna explained. "I read a lot, and when I do, it is not fiction. I do not have time for that. Plus, I know

the current laws. I could even have pointed out that where royalty is concerned, the forms are trivialities. She'd have to answer if I asked."

"Uh, din' you just list *three* reasons why you could've skipped the stupid play?" Applejack asked.

"No, Applejack," Luna said with a smile. "I listed one very good reason why I want to see *The Ballad*. I hear it is really good, and I have not had the time to watch it yet."

Pinkie Pie bounced twice as high.

Given the rates that the Belltown Royal Hotel charged, Luna insisted that they let her pay for the stay. As it turned out, this was hardly much of an issue as the ponies they met in the lobby were very eager to have her patronage free of charge rather than let her suffer the care of the "uncultured, savage brutes" of the Belltown First Hotel across the street.

Applejack nearly bucked one of the bellboys who arrived to take their saddlebags, thinking him a thief, but they somehow managed to get up to the royal suite without incident. Given the small size of the town, and thus the hotel, too, the "royal" penthouse suite of the top floor was actually on the fourth floor from the ground. What it lacked for in size, however, it made up for in thorough dedication to decadence.

"There's a fountain room," Applejack said with abject disbelief as she entered the common room from a side door. "This place has a gosh darn *fountain room*. What the moon do you do with a fountain room?"

"I think you'll find it's called a 'meditation room', Applejack" Rarity chuckled. "It's supposedly very relaxing."

"Yeah, well, I can do that under any darn apple tree. Relax, I mean. Not 'meditate'," Applejack snorted.

"I think the idea is that it's hard to find a nice spot to relax when you're in a busy city," Twilight suggested.

"Hate to break it to you, Twilight, but..." Rainbow Dash trailed off as she peered out one of the many large windows in the opulent maze of pillows and sofas that was the common room. Outside, they could see a few rows of beautiful white stone facades partially obscured by perfectly managed gardens.

Her point, however, was everything beyond the relatively small Belltown. It would take less than five minutes to step out onto the plains that surrounded them. Finding a lonely tree in the gently rolling hills and the tall grass would take you another two minutes, tops.

"Well, I never said I wanted a meditation room," Twilight said defensively. She picked a spot on a pile of pillows and sat down heavily with a sigh. "Anyway, I don't get it. Trixie is telling the tale of her life, probably entirely truthfully. To what end?"

"Consider her name," Luna suggested. "The phoenix is a creature that goes through cycles of rebirth. She may simply have changed the direction of her career."

Twilight nodded at the princess' words, still looking out the window. She still couldn't look at Luna. She still didn't understand what had happened that night in the mill, and it incensed her, which in turn frightened her.

"If she's not associated with the guild, and only performs for scraps, that's hardly what I'd call a 'career'," Rarity countered, pulling Twilight's brain back on track.

"Maybe she's just doing it for fun?" Pinkie asked.

"Yeah, because she was so much fun the first time around in Ponyville," Rainbow Dash snorted, nostrils flaring.

"Ooh, you're grumpy because she got you *good!*" Pinkie Pie giggled, earning a glare.

"Or she's sick and thinks she will be reborn. Like a phoenix," Fluttershy said from over by a glass table. A short silence followed.

"What exactly are you saying?" Twilight asked. "Reborn in a literal sense? She didn't strike me as the, ah, 'believing' type. Not exactly a cultmare."

"Philomena was really sick at first, remember?" Fluttershy said, looking a little uncomfortable even thinking about it. "She got worse and worse until she, um, kind of... turned to ash before she was okay again."

"Ponies don't turn to ash," Applejack said. "But Ah reckon' she does sound sick. Maybe she really can't use magic?"

Twilight blanched, trying to think what she would do if she couldn't use her magic any more. It wasn't just about the minor day-to-day things she did with magic where other ponies would use their hooves. That was just a perk. Magic was part of what made unicorns unicorns. Twice as much for Twilight, whose special talent was magic. What if that was the case for Trixie too?

"I haven't ever heard of something that can take a unicorn's magic away, those are just old ponies' tales," Rarity said, but she didn't sound entirely convinced. The white unicorn was looking at Twilight, and looked a further discomfited by her pensive silence.

Apparently, Twilight was not the only one who had been thinking. Luna shook her head, slowly. "I can think of a few things, but most of them are no longer of this world," she said. "But I suspect I know of a few exceptions."

"Trixie's last tale ended with her fleeing Ponyville heading for the Everfree forest," Twilight said, her voice hollow and lifeless. Fluttershy, as the only other pony to know what they were speaking of, gasped. Luna pursed her lips.

"What?" Rainbow Dash asked, her attention flitting between the three ponies who seemed to be in the know. "*What?*"

Luna did not look like she was about to explain, apparently deep in thought, and Fluttershy looked mortified. It would have been so easy, and it was all too tempting to egg Luna on, to point out that this was partially her fault. She could have asked again why Luna did not simply head into the

Everfree and look into it. Twilight didn't even know why she felt so spiteful, but she was glad she had enough self-control that she could think before she spoke.

"Trixie may have headed to the old castle in the Everfree. She might have broken into an old study and touched something she shouldn't have," Twilight explained, forcing the words past the lump in her throat. "I... guess that could be really bad."

"Tomorrow we set a high pace for Clayvale township. No need to panic until we know for sure, and I am loath to break my word to Lady Argent, however insignificant it may seem," Luna said, though Twilight got the distinct feeling she was only trying to be calm for the benefit of the other ponies in the room. "I am going to see if the mayor of this place has dragonfire or a dragon assistant. I will come by later before we head over to the theater."

"Is she going to be okay?" Fluttershy asked quietly. "Trixie, I mean. The lady at the theater said she didn't know if there would be sequel."

"I am not going to let her *not* be okay," Luna said, slipping out the door.

The very second she had left, Pinkie Pie started digging through her saddlebags. "I know I have a monopony board in here somewhere!" the pink pony muttered before she triumphantly extracted exactly that.

"Oh, I'll be the hat," Rarity announced, taking a seat. "As glamorous as this town is, I don't think there's much point to trying to socialize when I left all my good clothes back at..." Rarity trailed off, looking very sour.

"S'pose we do need to figure out how to get our stuff back from there sometime, yeah," Applejack said, looking none too pleased with it either. "Ah'll be the cart."

"Welcome to the Pinkie Royal!" Pinkie Pie announced to Fluttershy. "That'll be fourty bits!"

"Oh, um, okay," Fluttershy said with a smile and a sigh. Her token, the dog, stood on Canterlot Ave., which in turn had a bright red hotel on its square. "I'm sorry, but I don't have fourty bits. And I don't..." the butter pegasus surveyed her title deeds, all flipped over. "I'm bankrupt, I'm really sorry Pinkie."

"Aww, no, that's okay, you can pay me later," Pinkie said with a giggle.

"As admirable as your generosity is, Pinkie, I think we all 'owe you' at this point. I concede," Rarity said, shaking her head and stacking her deeds.

"Well, that's okay, I had fun, and I hope you did too!" Pinkie said.

"I don't understand how you do it," Twilight huffed. "It's statistically improbable in the extreme to have this much luck." Pinkie had not yet lost a single game this evening. It took all her willpower to suspend her disbelief and *not* peek into the saddlebag from which she had pulled six separate board games. This level of luck was just uncanny, and it was impossible not to comment.

"Oh, I just play a lot of games," Pinkie said, smiling.

"But-" Twilight sputtered as the others began clearing the game board. "They're games of luck as much as they are games of skill. Playing them a lot doesn't make you better at them unless your opponents are horrendously stupid!"

"Silly Twilight, there's no such thing as luck," the pink party pony giggled. "Or, well, sometimes ponies *get* lucky, but that's different! Maybe someday I'll tell you all about it."

Rainbow Dash snorted and giggled. "I'm sure there's a book for that. Egghead's guide to lo-"

"I *get* it," Twilight grumbled. "Thanks."

Spending the day in the hotel room hadn't been bad at all. In fact, it was exactly what Twilight had needed; a distraction. That the opulent

chambers came with room service was just a plus. The real treat, though, was being with her friends and having some time off from her own thoughts. They'd eaten and played games all day – they even had a pillow fight, though it was partially unintended and mostly a result of a misunderstanding between Rainbow Dash and Applejack.

The combination of pillow fights, food and carpeted floor had been particularly unfortunate, but they had cleaned up as best they could, and hoped the hotel staff wouldn't find the stains buried under the pillows until they were long gone. The ponies had talked about Ponyville and what they missed the most; what they'd do when they got home. It was this thread of conversation that Fluttershy picked back up now that Pinkie was declared the winner of yet another game of monopoly.

"I just really miss my cottage," the yellow pegasus said. "I mean, this place is very nice, all the places we've visited have been really nice, too, but, you know..."

"Ah hear you," Applejack said, rolling her neck. "To say nothin' of the ponies themselves. Ah'm gonna ask if Applebloom wants to go camping when we get back, just 'cause Ah can."

"Oh, that reminds me, I think I saw a post office in town," Twilight said, suddenly a little excited. "I could finally send Spike that letter I wrote while I finished up my reports in Clawford."

"I'm sure he would love that," Fluttershy agreed just as the door went up, admitting Luna.

A quick glance out the window revealed that it was indeed getting darker outside, and it was probably time to go, but Twilight found that she was a little hesitant. She wished she could avoid having to deal with Luna for just five more minutes, as if she were trying to ignore the sun in the morning, wanting to sleep – or perhaps more appropriately, stave off sleep in the evening, she mused.

"Well, good evening. The play is starting soon enough. I am certain it will be appreciated if we are not late," Luna said, smiling at the ponies who were surrounded by games and pillows. "I can see you have kept busy."

"If it is all the same to you, I was thinking of staying here," Twilight said nervously, forcing herself to look at Luna. She really did not want another confrontation, but once she looked at her eyes, it was hard to look away, and she breathed a little faster.

"Are you unwell?" Luna asked, looking concerned. She raised a brow in genuine sympathy.

The idea of lying to the princess was abhorrent to Twilight, but she could not think of her own words as a lie when she spoke them. "Sort of, yes. I'd just like to rest here, take an early night, if you don't mind."

Fluttershy immediately got up to feel Twilight's forehead with a hoof. The pegasus mare was half-way to her saddlebags when Twilight stopped her. "Thank you, but it's not like that. I'd just like to rest, please," Twilight said, offering Fluttershy an apologetic smile. It looked as if she'd trigger a protest from the yellow pegasus, but she merely nodded after a moment's hesitation, muttering an apology.

"Oh, I know, I'll stay with you! You can't be alone!" Pinkie Pie declared.

"You were dying to see the play, weren't you?" Twilight asked. She looked at Pinkie in surprise, but the earth pony was implacable.

"Nuh uh, I can't have fun if I know somepony's unhappy. Just doesn't work." Pinkie smiled sympathetically at her, and Twilight couldn't make herself object a second time for fear that she'd actually successfully convince Pinkie to go instead. She really didn't want to be alone.

"Well, if Pinkie's staying with Twilight, so am I," Rainbow Dash said, shrugging. "I mean, no offense, but, uh, I'm not exactly a big fan of... whatever that play is. It's not my favorite. I'm pretty sure I don't like it."

"It's a romantic comedy, Rainbow Dash," Rarity said, frowning. "Are you certain, Twilight? Is something the matter?"

Luna looked a little confused as well. She looked at Twilight, her eyes betraying a little hurt as she asked. "Have I caused offense?"

It was an earnest question. Too earnest and too honest, and Twilight found that she didn't even know the answer to it. Twice as problematic, Twilight realized she wanted to ask the very same question. She had hoped Luna had an answer.

"No, I'm sorry, I'm just really not feeling well." Twilight said, and it still didn't feel like a lie at all. She just needed time to think, and it *was* making her feel unwell.

"You won't think less of me for wanting to see the play I hope, Twilight?" Rarity asked, and Twilight was quick to shake her head again. "If you need me-" The fashionista began.

"I'll be fine. If I have Rainbow and Pinkie here, I'll be more than fine, actually," Twilight said. "In fact, I may be *too* fine, and need rescuing." She added a little chuckle for good measure.

"Are you sure I can't make you some tea, Twilight?" Fluttershy asked, looking a little lost and helpless.

"I'll be *fine*," Twilight reassured her, smiling. "Now go have fun!"

"Ah'd stay myself, but Ah reckon somepony's gotta make sure these here gals stay out of trouble," Applejack muttered.

"Go," Twilight repeated, laughing, and the four ponies disappeared out the door. Luna cast her a glance as she left, but the princess was entirely unreadable.

Twilight let herself fall backwards into a mound of pillows the moment she heard the door shut. She stared up at the ceiling for a few seconds before Pinkie Pie's face appeared above her, peering down. Rainbow Dash soon hovered over her, too, the wing-beats of the pegasi rustling their manes.

"Okay, Auntie Pinkie is going to *fix* this," Pinkie said, her face steeled with determination.

The look in her eyes was very, very intimidating. Even Rainbow Dash backed off a little suddenly. "Uh, fix what?" Twilight asked as Pinkie sat down at her side.

"You, silly!" Pinkie said with a shrug, her mood picking up again with violent suddenness. "Isn't it obvious?"

Twilight had a terrible, terrible feeling about this. So much for a quiet evening of leisurely distractions and light contemplation. She groaned and rolled over on her side, closing her eyes.

"Oh come *on* Twilight, this is getting stupid," Rainbow Dash said. There was a muffled noise as she landed and sat down on the other side of Twilight, opposite of Pinkie. "Everypony else is gonna catch on soon enough anyways."

"Catch on to *what*?" Twilight asked, curling up into a ball. "If they haven't noticed that Luna and I are having some disagreements, then they're blind, but that's just because she's being stupid. And confusing."

"Uh-huh," was all Pinkie Pie said. When the silence stretched on, Twilight popped an eye open, coming snout to snout with an expectant Pinkie Pie. "Aaand?" The party pony asked.

"Stupid, confusing and, uh, irrational?" Twilight tried. She slowly got back up on her feet, noting that Rainbow Dash was sitting on her haunches with her forelegs crossed. There was an almost palpable aura of expectation radiating from the two other ponies.

"Aaand?" Pinkie asked again, relentless.

"I don't know what you're getting at!" Twilight snapped. "And I'm tired of games! I don't need you being confusing and frustrating when I already have my hooves full trying to figure out what the hay I need to do to-" She stopped herself and sighed. Twilight had no idea how much her friends knew.

"It's about the dreams, isn't it?" Rainbow Dash said. Her voice was oddly gentle. Pinkie Pie was silent, a little taken back by Twilight's outburst. The pegasus scratched the back of her own head. "Pinkie told me she

heard you talking to Luna on the night we met back up with her, back in Scandineighvia."

"I'm sorry if it was meant to be a secret," Pinkie said, a little more quiet now.

"No," Twilight said, taking a deep breath. She actually felt a little relieved. It was bad enough that the memory was tearing Luna apart; it was ridiculous how it had managed to weigh Twilight down as well. "It's okay. How much did you hear anyway, Pinkie?"

"Uh. Only the bit between hi and bye, so, pretty much everything," Pinkie admitted. "Rainbow Dash had fallen asleep and I was bored, so I sort of lay there thinking about catapults, and then you started talking, and I was kind of waiting for a moment where I was gonna hop up and yell '*surprise, I'm awake*', and then uh." Pinkie gave a sad half-smile. "It kind of got a bit late for that. And I couldn't fall asleep, because, um, well, you know. Arguing and yelling. And threats which I *know* Lunie didn't mean anything with. And, um, her being hurt bad on the inside."

Twilight nodded numbly.

"And then I just had to tell Dashie, because, well," Pinkie Pie hesitated.

"Because secrets suck. Pinks worries, and now I worry too. Twilight, what the hay is your plan, anyway?" Dash asked. Twilight realized that the two ponies were looking at her in the exact manner they did when there was an obstacle to cross, and they needed Twilight to tell them what to do. How to get to the dragon at the top of the mountain. How to stop Nightmare Moon.

Was it really that simple this time, though? Twilight could recall with perfect clarity every conversation she'd had with Luna. They'd argued more than once, and Luna confused her. They'd share a happy moment, and Twilight would end up confusing *herself*. The princess tried to scare her away, and Twilight refused. Then there was whatever the hay happened in the mill back in Miller's Haven two days ago. She still remembered how she lay there shivering. Still remembered Luna's breath on her face.

"I don't have a plan yet," Twilight said, finally. She looked over at Pinkie who tried and failed to hide her disappointment. "And please, *tell me*, what are you getting at? 'And' what? What am I supposed to say? What is going on?"

"Well, I just thought maybe-" Pinkie began, steepling her hooves together and biting her lower lip.

"We just thought maybe you had a thing going on," Dash blurted.

Twilight's brain froze solid. The words lodged in her ear and were simply not admitted entry to her mind, instead jamming the cogs and whatever else was spinning in her head. "Buh?" she managed.

Pinkie Pie perked up a little, and she looked over at Dash, hopeful. Dash, for her part, shrugged and pointed at Twilight. They kept this up for almost a full minute, mimicking actions and making gestures that became more and more arcane until Twilight finally cut them off. "Okay! I get it! Wait, no, horseapples, I don't. *What?!'*"

"Maybe I didn't fall asleep right away in the mill in Miller's Haven, either," Pinkie said, looking decidedly sheepish. "I mean, I didn't mean to! But, um, well, I didn't. I was so busy thinking about things. I'm sure I'm really close to a working cupcake catapult design."

"Okay?" Twilight shrugged, refusing to think. She wasn't really listening or thinking any more. She was just conversing emptily, hoping that they'd end up anywhere else. Perhaps she could ask for details about the catapult? She was grasping for straws and failing.

Pinkie blinked. "Okay? I mean, you couldn't cut that tension with a spoon, knife, or any other kitchenware! I would have tried if I could, but that would be kind of mean because you're totally cute when you're stumped!"

Twilight exhaled. "A thing," she began. "You're suggesting that I have a *thing* for Luna. *Princess* Luna."

"Uh, nuh-uh and duh-" Pinkie chirped. "I'm pretty sure she's into you, too! I mean, gosh, did you see her? Um, not that I was looking. I had my eyes closed *some* of the time, maybe."

"And if it's not obvious, maybe she's just afraid. Or... well, holding back for some other reason," Dash suggested, giving a wan smile as she looked over at Pinkie Pie. "I hear that's totally 'in' this year. All the cool fillies are doing it."

Pinkie Pie reached over and touched Rainbow Dash on the nose, smiling. "Silly filly."

"Yeah, *no*," Twilight said with all the empathy she could muster. "That's improbable and impossible and the whole list of synonyms from Mareiam-Websteed's for both words, all at once."

"So impossible, but you don't say you don't like the idea?" Pinkie said with a little grin.

Twilight threw up her hooves and groaned before walking over to the window, staring out at nothing at all. With the darkness being near absolute, she could only see her own reflection, but it was more the principle of the thing. "It's, I- I haven't even thought about, but if it's impossible, why should I?"

"Oh come on, you're not that stupid, Twilight. Nothing is impossible," Rainbow Dash said, flying over to sit next to the unicorn. "If you tell yourself that, you're never going to do anything cool in your entire life."

"Easy to say for somepony who's done the impossible," Twilight snorted.

"Uh, okay, yeah, the sonic rainboom was cool, but you know what's even more awesome and impossible? Defeating Nightmare Moon? Sheesh!" Dash rolled her eyes. "Never thought I'd be the one telling you this, but *think!*"

"You're the smartest pony I know," Pinkie agreed, bouncing over to sit between Twilight and Dash, putting a hoof around each of them. "Brainiest pony ever! Come on, Twilight, you can do it!"

Twilight leaned back to stare at the roof, thinking as she spoke. "I don't know or care what I think about Luna right now. It's not half as

important as making sure she stops suffering. I just want her to be happy, and apparently she doesn't want that. How is wanting to make somepony happy different from what I feel for you guys?" Twilight shook her head slowly, trying to make sense of it. "I am happy when Fluttershy is happy, too, and I want you all to be happy because you're my very best friends. What's the difference? I can't rationalize it, sorry."

"Guess being an egghead doesn't help when it's not science or whatever," Dash said, grinning. Pinkie Pie poked in the side.

"Be nice, Dashie!" Pinkie told the unrepentant pegasus. "It's like the best thing in the world, Twilight! But if you don't know what it is, then I guess it's very confusing. And Auntie Pinkie can't help but notice that 'confusing' is one word you've used a lot! Like, more than I use sprinkles on my cupcakes!"

Noting that Pinkie was beginning to make sense, Twilight eagerly ignored her. "Besides, you heard her. She thinks I don't respect her and her wishes."

"Uh yeah, because she thinks you're getting close to actually helping her, and that silly princess doesn't want that." Pinkie suggested as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, duh?"

Twilight drew a shuddering breath and let it out slowly, deflating until she lay flat on the ground like an empty plastic bag. "I just want to help her. I guess she's not some fragile thing, and it's not in my place to decide for her what she should do." She looked up at Pinkie and Dash as she went on the duo listening intently.

"But at the same time, friends don't let friends suffer, and I know she's suffering, even though she won't tell me why she won't try to stop it. If I have the power to change that, I don't see how I can justify sitting my flank doing nothing. After that, maybe I'll consider your, um, suggestions."

"Sounds like plenty of respect to me," Dash said, smiling at Pinkie Pie.

When the others returned, Twilight already lay in one of the many beds offered by the suite, thinking. She had been thinking a lot. In fact, she had excused herself from Dash and Pinkie's company a little earlier for this very purpose. They had been sad to see her go, but very sympathetic, and perhaps a little happy to get to have some time alone, too.

The more Twilight thought about it, the easier it all became. If she wasn't given cause to believe anything else, if she was intentionally kept in the dark by the princess, then it was simple. There was a dragon at the top of the mountain

The door to the room creaked. First it was only a crack admitting a thin shaft of light, but soon it opened enough to admit Luna. The princess looked a little tired, but smiled when Twilight looked up at her.

"There was a bit of a party afterwards, it turns out," Luna said, walking over to the bed. Her horn slowly took on that damnable glow once again. Twilight smiled still.

"That's okay," Twilight said. She closed her eyes as Luna leaned over her to join their horns for but a split-second, that exhilarating little spark igniting the tension between them in an instant before it was gone. She could still feel the princess' warmth even as she drew back, but she refused to let her mind linger on it. Not now.

"Good night," Luna offered, turning to leave her.

"I'm sorry, Luna," Twilight said in a whisper. As with all the other nights, her magic felt muted and dull, but her mind was still clear still.

The princess halted. "It's okay", she said before closing the door behind her, plunging the room into darkness once more. She did not ask why, for which Twilight was thankful. She still did not want to lie to Luna's face. She'd hoped the princess thought she was apologizing for earlier tonight, not for what she was about to do.

Chapter 14

Twilight's eyes were closed. It did not make a lot of difference considering the moon was but a sliver this night, and the little light that spilled in from the street was largely absorbed by curtains. It just felt more proper to have her eyes closed when it came to matters of magic. Besides, it was easier to concentrate this way. She heard her friends talking on the other side of the door, in the common room of the hotel suite. Pony by pony, she let them fall away until she was truly alone in her mind.

Only then, freed from all that which was not herself, did she appreciate the level at which the spell Luna had cast over her worked on. She felt the princess' presence cover her entire body, and more importantly, her entire *being*. She had not simply blocked Twilight's horn, it was nothing so simple. Luna had cocooned Twilight with her own magic. She had never quite felt so close to anypony as she did that very moment, and for a second, she could think of nothing else. It was a level of intimacy, however disconnected, that only a unicorn could appreciate. A unicorn, or an alicorn.

The thoroughness only felt flattering for so long, though. It felt like a hug that she couldn't break off. The second she shed that thought, realized that this wasn't actually Luna but a construct, a spell she had wrought, Twilight began to panic. She felt trapped, claustrophobic, and had to force herself to breathe normally using techniques Celestia had taught her. She nearly lost her calm, and the outside world briefly poked its snout in. She spotted some light in the corner of her eye and caught a snippet of conversation from the other room.

"-just resting. I think she will be fine," Luna said.

"She's probably just stressed out," Rarity murmured. "Perhaps the whole ordeal in Scandineighvia was more taxing than we thought? I know a good psychiatrist-"

Then she was back inside her mind, immersed in her thoughts, again trapped in the shell the princess had woven. Something ostensibly created to protect Twilight from the memory Luna carried with her.

It was with this notion Twilight took issue. She knew this was something made to protect Luna from Twilight. To prevent Twilight from reaching out to her. It was an obstacle that had to be broken. A mountain to be climbed. And so, Twilight reached deep inside of her and bunched up all the magic she could find. She cast her mind around to scour every speck of power she could locate, gathering it into a single core of brilliant power. Every ounce of strength that was trapped inside Luna's prison, she *heaved* against the wall that surrounded her.

Only to find it woefully insufficient. Twilight clutched her head and stifled a groan from the backlash as the energy slammed against Luna's spell and shattered. It felt like she'd stubbed her hoof on a door with all her might, except the pain was on the inside. She forced herself to be quiet and took a few deep breaths before she tried again, shaping the force to a point, trying to pierce the damnable shell.

Again. Twilight tried again, again and again, each time with all the strength she could muster, and every single time broken against the wall as if she were trying to tear down a house with a rubber ball. She lost count of her attempts, and in the end, it was all she could do to keep herself from weeping openly. Twilight lay curled into a ball under the covers, quivering, exhausted on a plane far removed from the physical and mundane realm. Twice as painful as this, however, was the realization that there was nothing she could do.

Would she be forced to watch the princess' descend into depression and madness? Did Luna tell herself that she was happy this way, and envision that this was how it had to be? What if she was right? How could Twilight possibly remain passive and let this happen? She had to act on what little she knew, surely.

And what if Twilight actually loved Luna? Just the very thought made her shiver. She dearly wished that Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash had never made her consider the possibility, most of all because it made some sort of sense when she thought about it. She felt different around Luna. Nervous in a way she didn't understand. She *liked* being around the princess, and

she had felt something that night two days ago. The memory of the night in the mill was still sharp.

Yet, it was unrealistic. There were numerous impossibilities surrounding the entire subject even before they arrived on the word 'princess'. Furthermore, she had no way to make sure it would be reciprocated, and last of all, it was all useless as long as the memory hung between them. Twilight doubted that Luna would let her see it if she asked nicely. It would simply signal her intention clearly and strengthen Luna's resolve. No, once she'd recuperated, Twilight would keep trying to break the spell and enter the memory. She would try night after night if she had to. Every night until the day she died.

What surprised Twilight was that she realized she didn't blame Luna any more. She'd shed her anger somewhere, along with the pity and the frustration. What remained was unbridled determination. She had her enemy in this damnable spell, she would put her mind to fighting it, and she would stop blaming Luna for her own shortcomings. She would simply have to get stronger. Find a way.

When Twilight awoke the next morning, the room was still empty. The sun spilled in between the gaps in the curtains where it could, and the unicorn sleepily got on her hooves. She opened the door with an unsteady hoof and stepped into the common room to find the others eating breakfast.

"Ah. Good morning, Twilight," Luna said with barely-concealed trepidation. The other ponies were looking up from the breakfast, all in various states of concern. The exceptions were Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, who both looked hopeful.

"Morning, guys," Twilight said, walking over to grab a free bowl and filling it with salad. "Clayvale next, huh?"

If there was any tension in the room, it dispersed right then and there as Twilight flashed a smile. Let them think she smiled because all was well. Twilight smiled because she had *purpose*.

Luna nodded. "I would like to make haste, but as I have not walked these roads recently, I cannot guide us through shadows to speed us along. I have a few other tricks up my sleeve, though."

"Ooh?" Pinkie asked, her eyes sparkling. "Wings? Rockets? Magic? *Rocket magic?*"

The carriages made good speed down the road towards Clayvale. Luna had managed to secure the use of two small carriages, each drawn by a team of four earth ponies hired by the hotel. The elegant white-painted wooden transports were hardly suited for longer travel, usually only used for taking the most refined of the Belltowners from their mansions to the theater, but the roads were good enough that it did not pose a problem.

No problems outside of Pinkie's rather vocal disappointment, occasionally expressed in the form of songs, that is. The pink earth pony's skill with impromptu blues lyrics was impressive. For this reason, Twilight was glad she was in the other carriage with Luna and Applejack instead.

"Ah must admit Ah was expectin' some magic mumbo jumbo, no offense," Applejack said, sounding downright pleased.

"Magic is not always the right answer," Luna said with a chuckle. "We should reach Clayvale tonight. We will learn what we can, and take it from there, but the gentlecolts are willing to take us as far as Clopenhagen if it comes to that."

"I'm glad we're taking this seriously," Twilight nodded. "Do you have any theories?"

"I do not. I know that it would take an exceptionally clever pony to bypass the wards, but the effects of the, ah, items in my study, that is a lot harder to predict. If we go with the assumption that Trixie tells the truth, though," the princess shrugged and looked out the window. "I suspect we shall soon know."

"An' it might mean she was sayin' the gol'darn truth about killing one of her parents, too," Applejack said evenly.

"Thought she might have," Twilight corrected her, but she knew it was a weak defense. She looked away. "We don't know the full story."

"She hurt her own family, Twi'. Don't see no excuse for that," was Applejack's response. Twilight could practically feel the orange earth pony's eyes on the back of her head as she watched the plains pass by outside the window.

"I believe in something, Applejack," Twilight said quietly. "Something a very wise pony once told me. That in everypony there is a core of decency, something that's worth saving. There's always a story and a reason. We're getting a re-told tale that isn't even complete."

"Ain't sayin Ah won't hear her out. Just that Ah ain't gonna gallop like my mane's on fire over this," Applejack retorted with a huff, ending the discussion. "Not tryin' to be unreasonable here."

Clayvale came into view late that very same day, and it was, for lack of a better word, drab. Perhaps it was a side effect of being a township centered around the excavation and processing of clay, but the lakeside town seemed almost muted. The clay operations near the lake were partially magically operated, but a great many ponies were at work there even in the late evening. The majority of the town's industry was support for the workers and the potteries. Twilight thought it very unlikely that they would find something so grand as a theater here.

What had begun as an investigation had rapidly escalated well past a hunt and into the territory of a wild chase for Trixie, Twilight felt. When the carriages stopped outside the pub Luna had directed their chauffeurs to, they were quick to canter out and down the steps to the cellar entrance. Twilight slipped inside before the last of them had even gotten out of the carriages, trading the orderly yet sooty brick houses outside for a rustic and friendly interior that smelled of smoke and cider.

The locals, mostly stallions enjoying their cider after a day in the quarry, looked up at the mares that piled in with obvious interest. One even went so far as to whistle when Rarity entered, but when the princess ducked in next, the noise died in the poor pegasus stallion's throat as a gurgle. Twilight barely even cared, singling out the barkeep. It was almost routine at this point, and it was all too easy to imagine she could get a job as a policemare, head of interrogations perhaps? She trotted up to the bar

desk and the stunned pegasus mare on duty who was still trying to get her bearings.

"Uh, can I help you, miss?" the yellow mare behind the bar asked, looking a little lost. Princess Luna did not approach the bar, seeing Twilight had it well in hoof.

"I hope so. My name is Twilight Sparkle, and we believe that somepony by the name of Phoenix came by here sometime in the past week. Have you seen her?" Twilight asked, trying to stay calm. Her heart disagreed, rebelling and beating faster and faster.

"Uh, I don't know, I can't say I remember," the pegasus mare said, chewing on her bottom lip. "I mean, I don't have the best of memories, but I don't think so?"

"She was at the Frazzled Tail three days ago," somepony called from a table nearby. Twilight looked up to find that the pegasus who'd whistled at Rarity a moment ago was now looking at her. "She left town the day after," he continued. Twilight walked up to the table without hesitation. The others stood near enough to listen, but didn't crowd the table, something for which the pegasus stallion looked thankful.

"Uh, you know I didn't mean anything 'bout your friend" he muttered with a glance at Rarity. The fashionista touched her mane and sniffed, but Twilight simply rolled her eyes and motioned with a hoof for him to go on.

"Anyway, yeah, what about her?" he asked, looking back and forth between Twilight, her other five friends and the present princess.

"Everything," Twilight said, staring at him. "We need you to tell us everything."

"Uh," the stallion said, hesitating. He was alone at his table, but he glanced around at the surrounding patrons, most of whom had gone quite still, straining their ears to listen. He gave a nervous chuckle and locked eyes with an earth pony from a neighbouring table. "Hey, Buckles. Does this happen to you a lot? Because I'm getting a little scared here. Usually they ask your name first, right?" This drew a laugh from some of the patrons.

"I'm serious!" Twilight raised her voice a little. "We need to know everything she said, what she looked like, anything she may have done-"

"Twilight's just a little cranky," Pinkie chirped, hopping over to sit down next to Twilight. "She's usually not a yelling angry miss yellingpants, but we really would love to hear the story if you could tell us! Please?" The pink earth pony offered the pegasus stallion a wide hopeful grin, which only served to make him a little more uneasy.

"I'm not 'cranky', but this is important," Twilight tried, only now realizing exactly how much attention they were getting from the patrons of the bar. She repressed the urge to facehoof. This was not going like she'd hoped.

"I ain't trying to be unhelpful here, sorry," the stallion chuckled. "I'll tell you what I know. Have a seat. It's not often I get this much attention from a pack of beautiful mares, so I'm just going to pretend that you're not just here for some boring old story."

Twilight shrugged and took a seat by the table, happy that she'd get to hear what she wanted to hear, but Pinkie giggled even as Rainbow Dash glared at the stallion. Soon enough they were all crowded around the table, and the rest of the ponies reluctantly went about their business, noise slowly picking up again.

"Name's Crumble, by the way," the dark green pegasus stallion offered.

"Twilight Sparkle," Twilight said with a smile.

"Pinkie Pie, hi!" Pinkie said.

"Rainbow Dash," Dash said, putting a protective foreleg around Pinkie and frowning.

"Applejack. Howdy," Applejack said with a tip of her hat.

"Hi, I'm Fluttershy," Fluttershy muttered.

"And I am Rarity", Rarity said.

"Princess Luna, co-ruler of the principality of Equestria and ruler of the night," the princess concluded with a toothless grin. "Please speak, Crumble."

"Your majesty," Crumble murmured with a dip of his head, no longer able to pretend she didn't exist. He was doing an admirable job of not freaking out. "Can I ask why this is such a big deal for you all? Is she in trouble? The poor lil' mare seemed awful nice to me, but if I'm going to break any laws by admitting I saw her, I'd like to know."

"She could be in, um, trouble, yes. Danger, I mean. She hasn't done anything wrong," Fluttershy said, looking over at Luna. "Or has she?"

"Stealing isn't *very* wrong. Only a little, right?" Rainbow Dash asked, sounding earnestly curious.

"Oh come *on*," Twilight groaned. "We're trying to help her, and we need to know what you know!"

"Right, right," the stallion said, throwing up his hooves in a placating gesture. "Just asking. She came into town three days ago. I work as a courier, and I had a moment to spare, so I asked her if I could get her any help or something. She looked a bit lost and all."

"And you make a habit of approaching mares who look lost and lonely?" Rarity asked with an arched brow.

"If I say yes, will it matter?" Crumble asked. When he received no reply beyond an arch look from the fashionista, he merely shrugged and went on. "She asked what the places to be were here in Clayvale, said she needed a scene. I told her the Frazzled Tail was the biggest pub around."

"Then close your damn tab and move your butt over there!" the mare behind the desk yelled angrily.

"You know I love you too much for that!" Crumble shouted back, laughing. "Anyway, she didn't have anyplace to stay, so I offered her my couch, and she accepted. She said she couldn't pay, that she was saving

her bits, but I didn't really care. She talked to Pin Stripe who owns the other pub here and persuaded him to let her perform the very next day. It was a bit darker than the usual fare, even for the weekly horror story nights he runs. I know I left there feeling a little colder."

"It began in the Everfree forest, right?" Twilight asked.

"Yeah, uh, have you heard it?" He seemed earnestly surprised. "We were told it was a once-off, never told before. Huh."

"It was," Rainbow Dash said, annoyed. "Or is, or whatever. What did she say? The *story*."

Crumble cleared his throat, uncomfortable and cornered. "Was a right proper horror story. I don't know if you've heard tales of the Everfree forest, but now I wish I hadn't. They didn't turn the lights down like they usually do for horror nights, but it didn't matter none. It felt like I *was* there, and from looking at others, I wasn't the only one." He chuckled, looking down at the table. "Still not sure if it was a good thing. Gonna have nightmares."

"Trixie, the main character, trudged through the Everfree through the night, scared witless of everything she saw until she hit upon some ruin. She hadn't really meant to find it, she said, but her purpose became apparent when she realized what it was she had found; the ancient castle of the royal pony sisters. Heh, I remember one line. *'It all came together in that one moment for Trixie. Every moment of weakness and failure had been a prelude to this moment, she foolishly thought.'*"

"In the story, Trixie wandered the castle ruins for hours on end until the sun rose, finding nothing at all. Frustrated yet undaunted, she set about searching the area again, methodically. Finally, she located a staircase previously hidden from view. It was locked with puzzles and riddles, but she eventually defeated them all and descended into the darkness below."

The green stallion's smile wavered a bit. "Let me tell you, there's something wrong with the world when a crowd of grizzled quarryworkers and craftsponies is so silent that you can hear yourself breathe."

Twilight found it all too appropriate that even in the retelling, the table was utterly quiet. Perhaps it was just the fact that the purple unicorn was so

focused on listening to the tale and looking for clues – anything she could use – but the other ponies in the room might as well have ceased existing together. She would not have noticed if the room was on fire.

"She found the tomb of a city," Crumble continued. "Collapsed passages. Streets under the ground. An entire metropolis buried under the earth. She knew she was close to where the palace was on the sunny side, above her, and soon found that the palace was a lot bigger down there. Trixie was afraid, but she never doubted that this was her purpose. Within hours, she'd penetrated deep into the ruins of the castle, always haunted by sights and sounds at the edge of perception."

"In the end, she found one door that was sealed with such intricate care that she was certain it was the goal of her journey. It was sealed with sigils and tons of other fancy words for magics I don't know about, and Trixie labored with them for entire days. She hadn't brought any food with her, and feared she would starve, reduced to eating moss off the walls. In the end, she won through, though, and slipped inside the room."

Crumble chuckled and shook his head. "Then the spell was broken, sort of. The ending was a little weak. I think Phoenix was a little tired or hoarse, because her voice started cracking. Apparently, Trixie found lots of things, ancient artifacts from a lost era, each more beautiful and terrible than the next. In the end, she ended up drawn to an orb that entranced her, drew her in, and she knew she had to bring it with her. She reached out to touch it with her magic, however that works," the earth pony shrugged. "And she burned."

"Burned?" Twilight asked. "As in-"

"I said the ending was a bit weak," Crumble interjected. "She said Trixie was no more. Perhaps it was meant to be an open end? She burned until there was nothing but a shell left. It was almost like a moral, her last words before she slipped off the stage. *'She knew she had to shed the last that she contained, her story, before there was nothing left, and she could be reborn.'* After the show, I asked her if she wanted to stay, but she said she'd head to Clopenhagen before deciding what to do next. She was talking about considering one last performance in the series."

"Luna?" Fluttershy asked very quietly.

"We need to find Trixie, *now*," Luna said in a tone that left no room for discussion. "I do not like the sound of this one bit."

"Find 'Trixie'? You're saying this is real?" Crumble sounded almost as fearful as he was incredulous.

"No", Princess Luna lied, voice entirely flat, leaving the green pegasus to decide for himself whether he wanted the headache of considering the alternative. Luna got up and headed for the door, leaving the others to say their thanks before leaving Crumble alone again.

"She left here two days ago, and Clopenhagen is still a little ways off. By carriage, we are faster, but the gentlecolts who have taken us this far cannot pull without rest forever," Luna said as the others hurried to catch up to her in the dark outside. The chaffeurs had left the carriages and were clustered around a nearby muffin stand.

The princess shook her head at the situation. "It will still be too slow. We will not make it there before she does. She may already be in Clopenhagen if she has made good time. The city has a large opera house. It would be the natural place for her last performance, and I am getting the feeling that we do not want her to go on stage."

Twilight sighed, walking a few steps to look around the nearby street corner. She could see past the clayworks and across Lake Joy to the brightly illuminated Clopenhagen that shone across the water. "It's so close," she said.

Luna looked pensive. "There is a time and a place for everything, I suppose," she said. "Sometimes, magic *is* the right answer. Rainbow Dash, would you be so kind as to tell the gentlecolts to gear up and come with us?"

Dash nodded and bolted over to do just that while Luna walked past Twilight and set course for the lake, ponies in tow. Before long the carriages drew up behind them and followed, Luna at the head of a procession fifteen ponies and two carriages strong.

"You have an idea?" Twilight asked when it became clear the princess would not explain without being prompted. Luna nodded as she picked a route past the brick houses and clayworks, many a pony stopping in the streets to watch them pass.

"I do, and if you wish, you may help me," the princess commented before pointing to a road between two potteries that terminated in the lake itself. "There."

Twilight hesitated even as they all, eight confused stallions included, stopped at the edge of the water. The moon was just beginning its ascent, a thin silver crescent now, and the light it cast across Lake Joy was sparse compared to the riot of lights that was the metropolis on the other side of the waters. "You mean to... take us over the lake?" she asked.

"Across, yes. Around, it is a journey of days. This way, it is a matter of a few hours at most," the goddess explained as if it were the simplest of matters. "But like I said, I would like for you to help me."

It hardly mattered whether she angled it as a request or an offer, Twilight nodded enthusiastically. While it was certainly nice to see that Luna wasn't angry with her, that their spats hadn't marred her trust, she wouldn't miss an opportunity like this no matter the specifics.

"Are you actually going to explain *before* you turn off all the colors of the world around us or bring the sky crashing down on us, this time?" Rarity asked, looking a little worried.

"Ah, yes," Luna said, sounding a little surprised. "I did not mean to keep you in the dark, I was simply thinking on how to go about this. It is my intent for us to create a bridge to Clopenhagen."

"You're gonna make a bridge," Rainbow Dash repeated, deadpan.

"Yes," Luna said. "We am going to make a bridge."

"Let me guess, made of pure moonlight?" Dash asked.

"Of course not," the princess retorted, sounding almost a little offended at the very suggestion. "No, we are going to use moonlight and magic both."

"Of course," Dash said, shaking her head and trying to stifle a giggle. "No pony uses pure moonlight."

"Exactly, that would be plain silly," Luna agreed, oblivious, before turning to the stallions hitched to the carriages. "Who is your team leader? Does any one of you speak for the others?"

"I suppose I could?" one of the earth ponies suggested with a backwards glance, receiving a series of nods and shrugs. The stallion, a dark brown with a wheel for a cutie mark, dipped his head. "Spokes, your majesty. I work for the hotel."

"Very well, Spokes. You have been listening, I presume. Do you have any problems with what we are about to ask of you?" Luna queried. "I assume you have not galloped across a moonbridge before."

"If your majesty says it's safe, then my reply is that we get paid by the hour, so as long as we can take the long way home, I'm happy," Spokes replied, eliciting a hearty chuckle from the other transport ponies.

"Very well. I do intend to collapse the bridge behind us, yes, and I am thankful for your faith," Luna said as she walked over to stand at the very edge of the water. The princess peered over the railing set at the end of the street. "Twilight, would you stand with me? Celestia led me to believe you are not entirely unfamiliar with working together on spells?"

Twilight obediently trotted up to stand side by side with the princess, nodding. "When she was teaching me how to teleport short distances, she thought it easier if she showed me the constituent parts of the spell separately, first."

"Very good," Luna said. "Of course, this is slightly different, but considering that you seem to have an intuitive grasp of the other source of magic we intend to pull from, I expect no trouble."

"Intuitive grasp on how to nearly behead my friends, yes, swell," Twilight muttered, but she closed her eyes and reached inside of herself all the same.

It was the first time Twilight sought out the night princess' presence directly in this manner, and she had to ask herself if Luna made a habit of masking her own power. When she sent her presence out from her body and truly saw Luna's spark, that elusive something that made up the magic at her core, it was hard to understand how Twilight could ever have missed her. Where Celestia's magic threatened to blind her, Luna pulled her in, and it was all the bookish unicorn could do to hold her ground.

"Okay, I am going to guide you." Luna's voice sounded distant, though she knew the princess was standing right next to her. "Please do not be alarmed."

Her words had barely crossed the gap to Twilight's ears before the unicorn felt Luna's touch. The princess was all around her, seeping inside the gaps to the core of her being, suffusing Twilight with her own essence. It was as if she'd been plunged into icy water. Twilight gasped, and Luna withdrew a little. Pinkie Pie said something, but it was too quiet to catch.

"I have not done this in a long time, that was a little too much," Luna murmured, deep in concentration. "Let me just..." her voice trailed off. Rainbow Dash snorted and giggled somewhere far, far away.

Finally, they found the middle ground, joined together midway. Luna's grip was strong and cold, but it felt like the princess in so many ways. Protective and implacable, uncompromising and deliberate – and heavy with the weight of the world. Twilight couldn't tell how the princess saw Twilight herself, but she knew her own body was blushing on the outside. It was an embrace every bit as intimate as the spell she wove every night, but it was here, it was now, and it was the princess herself.

Wordlessly, the princess showed Twilight what to do. As surely and precisely as if she had taken Twilight's hoof and led her down the street, they reached out towards the moon. Here, together in their minds, Luna did not shy away from the silvery grey presence that mimicked what hung in the sky outside. When Twilight touched upon the moonlight and reached

out with a tendril of her magic, she found that it was the one and the same as the princess. The moon greeted her and all spoke its name. *Luna*.

"Guide it," Luna said in a whisper, and Twilight felt something pass between them. "Guide me, and show me the way."

Twilight gasped. She nearly lost her concentration completely when she realized that she held the moon in her grasp. If she opened her eyes she thought she might see the whole moon cupped in her hooves. Her heart threatened to leap out of her chest.

"Do not fear me," Luna said. Twilight felt Luna around her, the Luna that was other, yet the same. The presence that surrounded her drew a little closer, becoming a snug blanket. "Do what we set out to do," the princess whispered gently.

Steadying herself, Twilight tried to do just that. With the power she held, it was laughably simple to cast her sight across the lake and see their goal. It was all too easy to draw the line, to paint a broad stroke of moonlight across the waters of the suddenly insignificantly small Lake Joy. Her job done, she realized how pathetically tiny and unimportant it all had been. She drew back a little more, and the plains themselves dropped away. She stopped breathing when she realized what she could do if she could only-

Twilight's eyes popped open from the shock of being alone again. Luna withdrew in an instant, and the moon was once more an unfathomably distant feature in the sky. The princess looked down at Twilight with a quirked eyebrow, and the purple unicorn blushed a deep shade of red. "I'm sorry, I don't know what- I... I think I lost my head."

The princess offered a gentle smile. "That is quite alright, Twilight," she said before looking out over the lake. "And a job well done. Perhaps you can do this on your own one day."

Twilight had barely noticed that everypony else, Spokes and his teams included, had drawn closer. Locals who had been watching them with curious eyes had approached as well. There were astonished gasps, and Twilight couldn't hold back a squeak of her own as she saw what they had done.

From the edge of the road upon which they all stood, clean across the lake until it disappeared in the glare of the lights of Clopenhagen, a silvery blue plane of light stretched. The bridge shimmered and sparkled, partially translucent, and the lake could be seen through it. Twilight stared mutely.

Rainbow Dash, however, was quick to test the phenomenon. She zoomed over their heads and hovered over the bridge, tentatively lowering herself little by little as if she expected to pass through it. When she landed and stood upon it, she tapped it experimentally with a hoof. When it failed to yield, she began hopping up and down on the bridge.

"It's solid!" Dash exclaimed.

"It will only last until morning, but that should be more than enough time for our purpose. Let us get into the carriages and be off," Luna suggested.

"Er, there's a lil' problem though," Applejack said, indicating the railings at the end of the road. "You going to lift the wagons onto th-"

Luna's horn glowed briefly as she systematically yanked each of the offending metal poles out of the stone street with a series of thunderous cracks like a miniature landslide. Bits of rock still stuck to the poles as she put them down to the side of the road.

"I am getting a little tired of delays," Luna commented. "I will contact Clayvale and pay the damages out of my own purse if I must, but I am eager to get moving *now*."

"Right," Applejack said, hurriedly slipping inside the nearest carriage, not wanting to argue the point with somepony who pulled steel out of stone with a thought.

It took the first of the carriage teams a minute of tentatively approaching and testing the bridge, hoof by hoof, until they dared step fully on to it. When they were finally onto the ethereal construct, however, they got up to speed quickly. Perhaps they were spurred on by Luna's little display, or perhaps it was the suggestion that the bridge had a timed life.

Soon enough, hooves clopped and wheels ground against the impossible yet solid moonlight bridge.

"This is a view I don't think I shall soon forget," Rarity said. She had ended up as the third passenger in Luna and Twilight's carriage this time. Outside the windows, Clayvale slowly fell away, and before long, they were in the middle of the lake, the shore distant on all sides. As they were unable to see the bridge under the carriage, it looked as if they rode on the waves of the lake itself.

"Couldn't you just have given us all wings, though? I know there's a spell for it, Twilight cast it once," Rarity asked aloud.

"It is an alternative, certainly, but magical faux wings are not exactly built for speed. Plus, there is no telling if everypony could have handled distance flying," Luna replied. "There were many options, I suppose. I could have blinked us all there with a teleportation spell, but with us being so many, across such a vast distance? It would be a terrible drain."

"And the opera house will probably have closed for the evening anyway," Twilight suggested. "I mean, if we are right, and that's her goal."

"Speaking of which," Twilight continued, clearing her throat. "You know what Trixie did in your study, don't you?"

Luna nodded slowly and sunk a little further down into the plush bench she sat on. "The Star Hammer, it is called."

The words were spoken as if they held meaning, but Twilight had never before in her life heard them uttered. Rarity, similarly, looked curious and uncomprehending. The princess glanced at the two of them, calculating.

"It is the symbol of my office. It is to me what the Sun Spear is to my sister," Luna said. "I understand this probably tells you nothing, but suffice it to say that it is tied to my very essence. It is a part of me." She swallowed and stared at the floor of the carriage. "A part of me that I do not relish. I should not have left it there, though. I cannot imagine what it would have done to Trixie. I am surprised she even survived."

"It's not your fault, princess," Rarity said, noting her tone. "You can't blame yourself for this, surely? When a pony goes spelunking like that, I mean."

Twilight said nothing, and the princess gave a dark chuckle. "It is rational and objectively correct blame, Rarity, but you are kind to say so. I am to blame, but even if I were not, the knowledge that one of our subjects is hurting, it hurts me, too. No pony should ever suffer needlessly. This is one of the pillars upon which my sister and I built Equestria. And needless is exactly what this entire situation is."

Silence descended upon the carriage with those words, and Twilight, for the life of her, could not think of a single word or topic to lighten the mood. Eventually, she gave up, looking out one of the windows. She had never been on a boat, but she imagined it must be something like this, watching the waves pass by. It all descended into pleasant monotony that threatened to send Twilight to sleep, but after a long while, carriage begun to slow down.

Rarity poked her head out the window to see what was going on. The fashionista quickly ducked back in, frowning. "Ah, well. I do believe we're coming up on the city, and we have a welcoming committee of sorts. For better or for worse."

"By which you mean 'worse'," Twilight said with a sigh and a yawn.

Chapter 15

Before long, the carriages ground to a complete halt. Princess Luna appeared entirely calm and collected as she opened the door and stepped outside, leaving Twilight and Rarity to follow. The ponies in the other carriage had also disembarked, quickly joining up with the three of them.

The princess took the simplest approach to investigating, squeezing between their transports and the edge of the moon bridge. The others followed in single file, all of them coming to stand before the team harnessed to their front-most carriage.

The bridge Twilight and Luna had created disappeared seamlessly into one of the piers of a marina at the water's edge. Small leisure crafts were tied to the wooden piers, and behind the mess of walkways, masts and sails waited the city proper with its mass of tall buildings. What had been a single inseparable hazy glow from the opposite shore now revealed itself as thousands of individual lights, be they globes, window-lights or signs that gaudily advertised goods and services.

Of rather more immediate concern than the city of Clopenhagen itself was what Rarity had described as their "welcoming committee". The carriage teams had been forced to stop near the terminus of the bridge. On the broad main pier of the Clopenhagen Marina stood hundreds of ponies, all straining to see the cause of this strange phenomenon, many of them taking pictures. In front of the crowd, occupying the smaller pier where the ethereal moonlight bridge ended its journey across the waters of Lake Joy, about four dozen rather more distinct ponies waited.

White, golden-armored earth ponies prevented passage, standing in a wall two lines deep. Behind these, a full dozen of grey unicorn guards stood at the ready, flanked overhead by two groups of pegasus guardponies. When Pinkie Pie trotted up to stand at Luna's side as the last of them to come forwards, the guards were already stirring a little. The notoriously stone-faced stallions were glancing at each other, as if unsure how to deal with the situation.

"Um, what are we doing?" Twilight asked, peering up at Luna.

"We are waiting to see what happens," Luna replied. "I am of course pleased to see that the Guard is diligent here in Clopenhagen, but I suspect we will not be standing here for much longer." The princess was speaking loud enough for the guardsponies to hear, and the pegasi, earth ponies and unicorns all shifted nervously. The two groups, princess and elements on the moon bridge and the guard units on the pier were no more than ten pony lengths apart.

"Why are they stopping us?" Pinkie Pie asked, simply.

"Their duty is to protect," Luna said, smiling at the pink pony. Lowering her voice, she quietly added, "I could of course tell them to stand down, but I do not want to upstage the guard commander."

On cue, the ranks parted, admitting a single stallion to the fore. He looked like any grey unicorn guard pony except for a large plume on his helmet. The newcomer took up position at the front of the formation, eyes wide as saucers as he stared at the princess, whispering something under his breath.

"Sir?" one of the closest guards asked, nudging the plumed officer with a loud clatter of armor against armor.

The officer pony shook his head briskly, snapping out of it, whatever *it* was. He stamped the ground and went rigid, head held high as he raised his voice. "Hail Princess Luna! Hail the night! All bow before her majesty, the sovereign of the night!" the commander roared. The assembled guardsponies all bowed low, the pegasi dipping their heads as they hovered. Seconds later, the ranks parted and the grounded ponies stood to the side.

"Told you this would be fun," one of the ponies pulling the lead carriage muttered to another, grinning hugely as they were allowed passage.

"Thank you, commander," Luna said curtly as the procession began moving, the seven mares now walking ahead of the pack rather than getting back into their transports. The wooden wheels were loud against

the boards of the pier, the carriages rattling with every step. The entire guard force remained stationary as they moved past the parting crowd and into the streets of the city proper. Cameras were flashing non-stop, and Rainbow Dash did her best to pose as they went, the effect somewhat ruined by Pinkie Pie bouncing up and down and waving at everypony.

Even during the night, the city of Clopenhagen was sleepless. Like a particularly bright and gaudy insomniac, the streets bathed in sounds and sights at the darkest hour of night. When they left behind the lake shore and walked the streets of the metropolis, the city-dwelling ponies were still out in force everywhere, hanging out around nightclubs and bars and refusing to let silence settle for even one second. Without the surroundings of their rather remarkable entrance, very few ponies seemed to notice their passing. Whether it was intoxication, darkness or disbelief Twilight couldn't tell, but whatever the reasons, Luna led the way and they were undisturbed.

Twilight had never before visited Clopenhagen, and it was easy to note the differences and similarities between the southwestern metropolis and Canterlot. The buildings here were often over ten stories tall, reaching for the very sky, but there was litter in the streets – something that would be unthinkable in Canterlot. As they passed by the clubs and pubs into a market district, Twilight noted how many of the stores used bright neon-colored lights to advertise their wares, too. Canterlot was almost understated in comparison, given to baroque grandeur in its extremes, where Clopenhagen flaunted itself for all its worth in every way imaginable like a filly with a new bow tie.

"The guards really like you," Pinkie chirped, hopping over a trash can on the sidewalk they followed. "It's like you have friends everywhere you go, that's really sweet!"

"It all comes with being a princess, I suppose," Rarity chuckled, but Twilight snagged at the thought, suppressing a little gasp as she realized something.

"No, you're forgetting something. It doesn't 'come with being a princess'," Twilight protested, earning a few odd looks from her friends. Luna looked at her as they walked. There it was again, that pleased smile

that Twilight sometimes earned from sister, the pride that she usually associated with Celestia. The smile that made her entire being soar.

Twilight forced herself to focus. "You were an unknown until recently, Luna. Princess Celestia sent out messengers telling of your return the very second you were, um," she paused, unsure of how to say it. "Returned to us? Does that work?"

Luna shrugged and nodded. "It is the truth, and you have the right of it."

"Guards swear the oath behind closed doors as they enter service," Twilight said. "Longleap back at the fortress said he was sworn to both of you, and he had been in the guard for over a year!" the purple unicorn exclaimed. "They- the royal guard. They always *knew*? They *always* swore their service to you both? All these years?"

The princess nodded once more, pausing at an intersection to let an elaborate carriage pulled by a team of six pass by.

"But-what, why, how?" Twilight sputtered. "A thousand year old secret that only they knew? No pony except Celestia and the guard?"

"As keen as your observational skills are, and as clever as you may be, Twilight, you are missing one very important point," the alicorn princess chuckled, her gaze distant. "Why would I know? This is all Celestia's doing."

"You're clearly thinkin' you know," Applejack commented. "Got a 'theory', Ah reckon."

"I think it is as simple as Celly not wanting to sit on the secret alone," Luna mused. "It sounds presumptuous, perhaps, but we share a strong bond. Resetting the calendar and wiping out any mention of my existence must have been grim work for her. She needed somepony to confide in, then, and the guard is an organization older than recorded history. In fact, they were the first to start recording events."

"Resetting-, wiping-" Twilight stammered. When she thought about it, it was almost blindingly obvious. What else could she say? Finding even

the smallest hints on the topic of Luna and the Mare in the Moon before her return had taken a dedicated effort. The few volumes that discussed the night goddess in detail were books she'd never found outside the royal library, and even then, only *after* her return. Had Princess Celestia really done that?

"At any rate, I do not *know*, nor have I had the time to ask just yet, but the oaths have been unchanged for over two millennia, yes," Luna confirmed.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Rainbow Dash asked, and indeed, Twilight too had noticed that the princess was moving with purpose.

"Ah yes, well, before I left Canterlot I read about a hotel that was recently condemned and taken over by the local authorities after some sort of financial trouble," Luna said. "I thought we might stay there. My intent was to confirm that, then head to the Copenhagen Opera House."

"I do believe they call their opera *The Sublime*," Rarity corrected the princess, raising an eyebrow. "And, do you intend for us to stay like squatters in a condemned building?"

"Not at all. The building is being refurbished, but it should be partially functional by now I think," Luna said with a grin, indicating a nearby building by pointing with her horn. Wedged between two larger buildings, a tall and narrow six-story building hid in shadow, its windows all dark. The sign above it was apparently a work in progress, for the moment simply declaring the building to be "The Grand".

"Functional nothin'. It's closed!" Applejack said as they came to stop before the elaborate doors of the silent building.

"Well, yes, I must admit I did not plan for us to arrive in the dead of night," Luna admitted, approaching and tentatively rapping on the door with a telekinetic burst.

"Plan?" Fluttershy asked. "Um, what do you mean?"

Applejack's ears perked up at this too, as if 'plan' had become a very dirty word indeed. She was glaring at Luna, whose smile simply grew wider as a light was turned on in the ground floor of the hotel.

"Perhaps plan is not the proper word. A precaution, then," Luna amended her own words.

Before anypony else could ask further questions, they picked up the distinct sound of hoofsteps from behind the door, clearly audible even through the muted din of the city around them. The door slowly opened, and the bells affixed to a nightcap prefaced a familiar pegasus face in peering out through the gap in the door.

"Uh, hi, sorry, we're not open-" Winter Sun began, her head at the level of Luna's chest and her eyes half-closed.

"Ooo, Winter!" Pinkie cheered.

"Oh," Twilight said.

"Oh hi!" Winter Sun exclaimed, grinning hugely. The white pegasus mare nudged the double doors open and yawned. "Come in, come in. I was wondering when you'd show up, I mean, not that I'm exactly lonely, but you know, carpenters and all those ponies? Not great talkers!"

"Uh, mind filling us in?" Twilight asked as they stepped inside to a small but elegant lobby with a stone-tiled floor, plush sofas and a magical chandelier in the roof which brightly illuminated the room. Winter Sun nodded as she trotted behind the reception desk of the lobby, her voice muffled a bit as she dove under the counter.

"Didn't Princess Luna tell you? She, um, well, the letter she told me to deliver, that's kinda what happened. Turns out she asked the city council to sign this place over to me. I had to take a bit of a loan to cover for the work I'm having done, but, um," Winter's head popped back up, and she let a set of keys fall from her mouth onto the counter. The pale pegasus looked over at Luna, staring in silence for a few seconds. The princess tilted her head slightly.

"You know, I have no idea what I can do to repay you, princess. You didn't owe me anything. I still don't understand why you'd do this." Winter Sun swallowed.

"I take it this means you did not read the letter, then," Luna said.

"It wasn't for me," Winter said, raising a brow. "They councilmare I talked to said it asked me to prepare for a visit soon, but-"

"I was counting on the inquisitive nature of most ponies, which is why I did not seal it," the princess said with a chuckle. "I apologize, you have not missed much, but the long and short of it is that I *do* feel it is deserved, and that it is not just a charitable act. I do expect I will have the use of a suite whenever I am in Clopenhagen."

"Ah, but being Princess Luna's favored staying place, that'll be terrible for business," Winter giggled. "No, seriously. Thank you, princess."

"Think no more of it," Luna concluded. "We should go find the opera, but I am sure we will return soon enough."

"The opera's nearby, just down the road. You can leave your bags here and I'll get them up to your rooms, the keys work for the front door too" Winter said with a nod. "Not that I see why it can't wait until tomorrow, I mean, the opera is closed, doesn't open until late in the afternoon I think?"

"I am awfully tired, I must admit. If it is closed, what's the point?" Rarity asked, looking up at the princess.

"Yeah, I could do with a nap," Rainbow Dash agreed.

"You may of course stay. Most likely nothing will come of this," Luna said, nodding at the reluctant and sleepy ponies. Twilight was not so easily convinced, however.

"But you have a hunch," The unicorn stated.

"Ooh. That changes it. I'm in!" Pinkie said, rubbing her eyes and perking up.

"Hunch? Well, I am actually not quite certain whether it is an educated prophetic 'hunch' or a more mundane helplessness of the desperate kind," the princess admitted with a wan smile. "I must be losing my touch."

Twilight quickly shed her saddlebags, leaving them on the sofa. One by one, the other ponies did the same and stood ready to go, though Rainbow Dash gave the very same sofa a longing look. Rarity and Fluttershy took one of the keys each, and the group was back out on the street after saying their goodbyes to the sleepy pegasus hotel owner.

"You *gave her a hotel*," Rainbow Dash said in awe the second they were out.

"I requested that the local authorities sign it over, but I suppose I did, yes," Luna agreed, craning her neck to look down the street. "I think it is down here."

"Can you even do that? Or, wait, you can do anything, pretty much, right? Why- but you haven't!" Rainbow Dash fumbled, trying to get the words out straight. "I just, you haven't done anything like this before! Why now, and why not? Can I have a hotel too?"

Luna grinned and looked over at the colorful pegasus flying at her side. "Because, Rainbow Dash, generosity is not about giving everypony what they want. It is about giving them what they need, when they need it. I was sincere when I said it was not charity, though, and I am certain Clopenhagen will be a better city with Winter's little establishment. I do not doubt you would make an interesting hotel manager, though."

Turning a corner by a closed café, the opera house that went by the name of *The Sublime* bared itself to them. In the middle of a large and neatly kept garden of low hedges and rose bushes stood a massive building shaped out of multiple arcs and domes. In the relative darkness, illuminated only by the nearby streetlamps, *The Sublime* looked positively otherworldly. Even Luna paused for a second before she began picking her way through the garden. Soon, they began ascending the wide staircase that led to the multiple sets of front doors.

"Excuse me, ladies, but the opera is currently closed," came a voice from the shadows. A unicorn valet stepped forth from a small booth built into the wall at the top of the stairs where they stood. The speaker was a rather impassive grey stallion wearing a formal hat.

"We assumed as much," Luna said. "All the same, can you tell us if any of the opera house staff is currently inside?"

The valet raised an eyebrow, and Twilight had to believe he thought the princess was wearing a costume, that this was a sort of hoax. If not, he had the best poker face she had ever seen.

"I am sorry, you will find the opera house mostly empty this time of night, except for... special arrangements." The valet allowed himself a small, cold smile. "If you and your little act would like to reserve a time slot for practice-"

Twilight cut in, quickly. Luna was beginning to draw herself up a little, and it looked like an *incident* might occur any moment. "Who would we talk to about that if there's nopony here?"

Rarity narrowed her eyes at the stallion, answering for him. "Why, of course, the opera staff would be far too busy to deal with something like this during off-hours. I am certain our friend here is happy to let us in, to have the use of the stage for a little while. If we pay him."

"Astute observation. Of course, if you don't like the idea, I feel compelled to mention you have no proof," the valet chuckled, giving the assembled mares a dismissive look. "What is this, some sort of all-mare musical?"

"Yes!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed happily. "Most of the time, anyway. Not so much lately," she pouted. "Though I thought my 'Luna is boring and we ain't got no magical rockets' number was pretty good."

Twilight glanced at the princess again, who was giving the valet a murderous but thankfully normal and non-magical glare. She rushed to fill the silence. "Ah, well, we don't exactly have a show, no, and we're very sorry for bothering you, so we'll just be on our way-"

"Um," Fluttershy interrupted. "Actually, perhaps you've seen a red unicorn mare?"

"After hours? She would want a crowd, surely," Rarity scoffed, but the valet lit up at their words.

"A red unicorn mare? May be that I have, may be that I haven't, but the pay here at the opera house isn't exactly enough to live the life I want, if you get my meaning," the stallion smirked.

"I don't think she ever really cared about the crowd, just about the performance and the stage," the timid pegasus muttered, peering up at the valet through her mane. "Would you please tell us if you've seen her?"

"Like I said, bits are a little tight these days," the stallion said, looking to the side and grinning devilishly as he held out a hoof. Fluttershy swallowed and withdrew to hide behind Pinkie Pie.

"Oh come on, you're gonna be like *that*?" Rainbow Dash asked, flying up to grind his nose against the valet's. "If Trixie was here, you tell Fluttershy right now!"

"Now, the problem is," the behatted gentlecolt said, smiling. "It's client-customer confidentiality at work here."

"Except your work is illegal!" Twilight groaned. "This isn't work, this is bribery!"

"I'm tempted to ask you to vacate the premises now, ladies. I'm sorry, but the opera is *closed*," the stallion sneered, drawing back from Rainbow Dash and taking a step towards his booth.

"Before we leave," Luna said, her voice crisp. "May I have a word?"

"So she paid you six hundred bits for the use of the stage, how long ago?" Luna asked the quivering stallion who led them through the quiet hallways at the back of the opera.

"Yes, your majesty," he said, gaze downcast and focused on the plush carpets they trod on. "Please understand, I see a lot of odd ponies in my line of work, I didn't realize you were-"

"Save it. I do not care for apologies, we have a task, and we are trying to see it through. After she paid you, what then?" the princess pressed. Twilight was listening intently, as did they all. The valet's voice was very thin indeed now that he realized exactly how much trouble he could be in.

"I led the poor wretch to the stage and said I'd be here to show her out in an hour. That would be around now, so she should still be here," he said. "My name is Red Carpet, your majesty. Please, I-"

Luna sighed. "I do not *care*. I am going to tell your superiors what we have learned, and I am going to tell them you have been helpful in assisting us in a matter of utmost importance. What they do with this is up to them. Can you not move any faster? And why the unkind description of our little unicorn mare?"

Red Carpet upped his pace a little, looking thoroughly defeated. "I'm sorry, old habits. No running in the hallways," he muttered. "Anyway, I took her for a bum at first, frankly, but her money was good. You'll see soon, it's just through here, this is the side entrance to the main hall." he indicated a set of double doors with a nod of his head and opened them with a telekinetic nudge.

In the main hall of the opera, the rows of hundreds of seats were all empty, and the stage far down below was dark and bare. It was easy to imagine how grand this room would look when in use, plush red carpets and elaborate yet modern wooden carvings on every wall. As it was, desolate and dark, it seemed lonelier than any room had a right to be. Twilight thought she heard a noise in the distance.

"Does this place have a back entrance?" Twilight asked quickly. The noise could easily have been that of door slamming shut. The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that it was exactly what she had heard. The others perked up and looked alert as well.

"I- yes, of course," Red Carpet said, looking a little confused. "I left her just here, I swear!"

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight called. She didn't even need to explain herself. The pegasus launched herself through the air, over the seating and towards the stage. The others followed as quickly as they could, leaving the bewildered unicorn valet. Fluttershy took to wing, too, and flew with surprising speed after Rainbow Dash, a yellow and pink blur that followed the other pegasus behind the stage.

"Why is she *running*?" Rarity asked as they thundered down the aisle. Without a word, Luna bridged the orchestra pit with a luminescent arc, and they crossed over, heading backstage at a full gallop.

"Maybe she just loves hide and seek? Or maybe she was done anyway and thought she'd head out for a late night salad burger?" Pinkie asked, but she sounded more frightened than hopeful.

For what was thankfully the first time in her life, Twilight found herself looking for and following the emergency exit signs painted on the walls. The five ponies crowded the narrow hallways and Twilight found herself in the lead along with Luna. Soon, they came upon an open set of doors that let them out onto a street lined with brick buildings in the shadow of the opera house's backside. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash hovered right outside the door.

"Lost her!" Rainbow Dash said. "So close."

"No," Luna said as she scanned the area. "Not this time. I am going to go to the nearest guard house and rouse the pegasi guards, get them out and looking. You look around here in case she is still nearby."

Twilight watched as the princess disappeared off into the night sky without another word, gone around the block with nary a backwards glance. She could only try to emulate her resolve, but fact was, this close to their goal, Twilight felt nervous for a million different reasons. She dreaded to think what they might find.

"Right," she finally managed, surveying the street and all the nearby intersections. "Let's split into teams. From what I can see, there are four major roads that split off from here."

"Twilight?" Fluttershy asked. "Could you maybe be quiet for a moment please?"

"If we split the two of you up, Fluttershy and Rainbow, and take me and Rarity on different teams," Twilight continued, trying to think. The pegasi would be able to survey a greater area from the sky, and she was certain that Rarity knew a trick or two that could help, just like she did.

"Shh!" Fluttershy hissed, shutting the purple unicorn up. A moment later, there was a clatter from the nearest alley, just across the road. The ponies glanced at each other before they began walking in the general direction of the narrow thoroughfare wedged between tall buildings.

Fluttershy and Twilight were nearly at the entrance of the alley when a trash can fell over and a desperate, hoarse cry went out. Six ponies halted mid-step or -hover, frozen.

"Stay back! Let Trixie die *alone*."

Twilight's heart caught in her throat. Half hidden behind a pile of refuse and a fallen trash can, a dark red unicorn mare with a frazzled mane sat trying to hide, doing a terribly bad job of it. It was hard to think of her as Trixie; nothing fit. She was emaciated, rail-thin with her ribs clearly showing, and her breathing was labored. Predictably, but adding to the effect, she was a deep red. Her tail and mane were still white and light blue, but their hairs were frazzled and thin. Her sunken eyes regarded them suspiciously.

Last, being the chief cause of the ponies' alarm, Trixie was awkwardly holding a blade in her hooves, pointed at them. She squinted and peered over at them before a look of horror spread across her face. "Wait. It's you. No, not *you*!" Trixie stammered, shuffling a small distance away from the six friends. "Why the moon are *you* here?"

"She's got a knife," Fluttershy calmly commented in a low voice, appearing very focused all of a sudden. The pegasus mare's eyes never once left Trixie's. "Twilight? Can you take it from her?"

The red unicorn glanced about, suddenly wild-eyed like a cornered animal. "If Trixie sees so much as a glimmer of magic," Trixie impotently warned. Finding no solutions in the alley around her, she clumsily changed her grip on the knife, pointing it towards herself, resting the tip on her throat.

"No!" Fluttershy yelled, arresting her slow creep forwards, holding up a hoof in a placating gesture. "We are trying to *help*! Why do you think you are dying? Talk to me!"

Trixie gave a hoarse laugh riddled with hacking coughs. It went on for so long that Twilight briefly considered trying to snatch the knife while she was distracted, but she didn't want to take the risk. When Trixie finished, she looked bitter and tired.

"You think to help, and you don't even know? Trixie has been dying for a long time, but she's tired of fighting it," Trixie said. "Why are you even here? It's all your fault." The last words were said without much conviction. It sounded like a worn line spoken out of habit.

"Fluttershy told you, we're here to help, you haybrain!" Rainbow Dash said, rolling her eyes. The pegasus had alighted next to Fluttershy and crinkled her nose. "Ew, what's that smell?"

"Dash, leave it," Fluttershy whispered.

"Trixie, please, put that knife down. We know what you did, where you went," Twilight implored. The broken unicorn was a sad sight indeed, and she could only shake her head at the sight. "We have Princess Luna with us. I'm sure she can help you. You... lost your magic, didn't you?"

"Princess Luna," Trixie said, her mouth hanging open for a few seconds before curving into a sour and unpleasant grin. "Of course she's with you. You'd never go anywhere without a princess to hold your hoof. Trixie has read all about you now, Twilight Sparkle. Spoiled brat."

"You take that back," Rainbow Dash snarled, leaning forward and narrowing her eyes at Trixie. "Twilight is twice the unicorn you will ever be."

"You've had everything served to you on a silver platter all your life. You have never had to work for anything," Trixie spat, tears forming at the corners of her eyes, barely visible in the pre-dawn. "Trixie worked her horn raw to practice magic, but just because of your birth, you're given everything for free." She wiped her eyes with a hoof, and knife clattered to the ground.

"So now you're going to cry? And it's just Trixie now, not The Great and Powerful anymore, huh? Get off your flank and do something about it, then. Stop blaming others!" Rainbow Dash said, raising her voice. She'd drawn herself up and stood in front of Twilight and Fluttershy protectively.

"Be *quiet*, Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy hissed, fixing the pegasus with a glare. "Just leave it, please! Don't upset her!"

"Twilight worked hard for what she's got," Dash huffed, ignoring Fluttershy outright.

"Enough," Trixie sobbed, waving a hoof at Rainbow Dash. "Why can't you just leave Trixie alone. Trixie is done. Trixie failed, leave-" she drew a few deep, wheezing breaths and leaned over the trash can between them. "Leave Trixie alone."

With a shuddering breath, Trixie closed her eyes and went limp. The trash can rolled out from under her, and she hit the ground with a muted thud. Fluttershy was already galloping over to her, full tilt. The yellow pegasus immediately set to turning the fallen pony over on her side. The others slowly approached, everypony quiet save for Rainbow Dash who hovered over Trixie.

"Whoa, she's not dead, is she? Oh crap. What just happened?" she asked, gaping and leaning in close to look at the perfectly still unicorn mare.

"Rainbow Dash, give me some space, please," Fluttershy said through gritted teeth as she put her ear to Trixie's mouth. "Move."

"Hey, let me help! What can I..." Dash began, landing next to Trixie and Fluttershy, but her voice trailed off as she noticed Fluttershy looking straight at her. The yellow mare's whole body was shaking.

"The *one* time in my life I want you gone is when you actually stick around?" Fluttershy said, her voice quivering with repressed rage. "You're usually so very good at abandoning ponies when they need you, but now you're in my way, how funny is *that*?"

Twilight was not the only one staring in stunned silence. The voice and words both were worlds removed from what anypony expected of the usually demure pegasus. Rainbow Dash's wings went limp as they all watched Fluttershy carefully slip her snout under Trixie, getting the unconscious pony onto her back. Fluttershy carefully began picking her way past the quiet, staring ponies.

"I'm heading back to the hotel," Fluttershy announced, her voice hollow and dead. Without looking back, she set off down the street as fast as she could manage. No pony moved to follow her. It was Applejack who spoke up first. The farm pony had been entirely quiet so far.

"What's she on about?" Applejack asked, speaking slowly and articulating every word very carefully. It sounded odd with her usual drawl. "Rainbow Dash? What's up, sugarcube?"

"I thought we were okay," Dash said, swallowing. Her eyes were on the rapidly shrinking form of Fluttershy disappearing in the distance. "She *said* we were *okay*!"

Rainbow Dash took off and looked like she was about to chase after Fluttershy. She barely made it off the ground before Applejack had her tail in her mouth and yanked her back down to the ground, giving the frustrated and annoyed pegasus a determined shake of her head.

"Um, Dashie, perhaps you'd better leave her alone for a little while," Pinkie suggested, walking over to nuzzle the pegasus. "You mentioned something happened at flight school?"

"I seem to recall you saying something like that earlier, Rainbow Dash. You had a spat?" Rarity asked.

Twilight, as the only one who sat on the full story, felt her heart sink a little. Should she have spoken up sooner? She had sworn to secrecy on the subject, but it wasn't the first time she'd been forced to watch friends tear each other apart over secrets like this.

"I told you," Dash said, neither retreating from Pinkie's affectionate attention nor reciprocating it. "It's no big deal. I used to feel bad about leaving her at flight school, but she's spent the entire journey so far trying to convince me to stop worrying about it." The pegasus looked around at all her friends. "The second I actually listen and believe her when she says she's okay, this happens. Scratch that, I don't even know *what* the hay happened!"

"Left her?" Rarity repeated, her eyes narrowing. "What do you mean 'left her'? You went to flight school together, right?"

"Uh yeah. Thought she'd told you? It's not like it's a secret. Well, I guess I haven't told anypony, but, um," Rainbow Dash shrugged. "I kind of left mid-semester during the last year, yeah, and I didn't come back."

Rarity mouth hung open in a very unladylike fashion. Her voice was a whisper, disbelieving. "She never said. Fluttershy only told me you went to flight school together, and that you helped her a lot. She admired you, looked up to you. Trusted you, and..." she trailed off, her mouth working wordlessly.

"I was just trying to help her," Dash said, defensively. "I don't know why she'd lie to you though. I mean, that's just silly. Like I said, it's not a secret!"

"You *idiot!*" Rarity shot. "She was being nice again, as always! Did she ever tell you what happened to her parents? Have you ever met them?" Dash shook her head, uncomprehending.

Twilight suddenly felt a little sick. The bookish unicorn didn't want to carry even the smallest secret any more. "Fluttershy told me about flight school, too. Right after we left," Twilight admitted. "She... said she didn't want Dash to beat herself up over it, but it's clear she's been bottling it up. What happened?"

"Her father *left* her! When she was a little filly, her father abandoned Fluttershy and her mother," Rarity explained, resting a hoof on her forehead. "You did the worst thing you could possibly have done! How the moon could you think you were *helping*?!" Rarity yelled, the anger in her voice staggering the multi-hued pegasus.

"I-" Dash began, her face a mask of absolute terror. "I didn't know! She never told me! I... how was I supposed to know? I just wanted her to stand on her own four hooves and not be so dependent on me!"

Rarity sighed and deflated a little, all her fury spent. She sat down heavily on the sidewalk, shaking her head. "I don't know. I'm sorry for yelling at you, Rainbow Dash. Of course you couldn't have known. If you did, you never would have done it."

"Never mind that! What do I *do*?" Dash asked, clearly on the verge of panic. She looked back and forth between all her friends present.

"Whatever *we* are going to do 'bout it," Applejack said, stressing the plural. "It begins with going to find Fluttershy and Trixie, and Ah'd suggest we get right on that."

Chapter 16

Despite the short distance back to the hotel, it felt like a positively endless journey to Twilight. Four sets of hooves and a steady pair of wingbeats, the sounds of a city just waking up as the sun cleared the horizon – everything seemed muted to the purple unicorn and it felt like they were galloping through water. They had found Trixie, but she might be dead, and Fluttershy had kept quiet about this for how long, now?

When they arrived at the entrance to the hotel, the door was open, and Winter Sun stood in the lobby. The pale-maned pegasus looked frightened, and there was still no sight of Luna.

"Um, guys, what's going on? Should I go call for an ambulance cart? Fluttershy just headed up to your rooms with some poor mare on her back." Winter said, watching the five ponies enter and only barely slow down at all as they thundered into the lobby.

"Stairs," Twilight said, pointing to nearby staircase before turning to Winter Sun. "I think we got a handle on it. If you see Luna, please tell her to hurry."

Winter merely nodded and stood rooted to the spot as Twilight followed the others upstairs. Rarity briefly checked the tag on the key she'd carried in her tail, and the ponies spilled into the hallway of the second floor. Firefly-globes brightly illuminated the hall, but the floor was being re-carpeted. Applejack led the way as they picked a path across the bare wooden boards, weaving between carpet rolls and tools. Rainbow Dash was the first to spot an open door down the hall and was gone before the remaining ponies had time to even speak up.

Twilight and the others slowed down to a walk as if by an unspoken agreement, softening their hoof-falls. It was a quiet quartet of ponies that rounded the corner and crept into the darkened room. The only light present was what Celestia's rising sun could sneak in through the heavy curtains, and it was hard to make out any details in the gloom. A pony lay unmoving on the bed, and another, presumably Fluttershy, sat by the side

of the same bed facing away from them. Rainbow Dash stood just inside by the door, and the entire room reeked. It smelled like an outhouse mixed with an extra helping of decay.

"How is she?" Twilight asked. Though she'd made her voice as quiet as she could, it still felt too loud. Her eyes were slowly adjusting to the darkness, and she could see Fluttershy's supplies scattered all over the bed and floor both.

"She's not doing too well," Fluttershy said, her voice unsteady. "She's barely breathing, and I think-" Fluttershy choked up. "I think she meant it. I think she really is dying, but I don't know what. I don't know *why*."

"What's wrong with her?" Twilight asked, shuffling a little closer to the bed still and peering over at Trixie. Though it was hard to see any details in the dark, it was clear that the unicorn was utterly filthy. Her mane and coat were a mess, and she looked so frail that Twilight feared merely looking at her would break her. Her chest barely moved at all, and the thin, wheezing sound of her breath was almost inaudible.

"She has lice, she's underfed, and I need to clean some minor scabs and bruises, not to mention clean the rest of her," Fluttershy said, still sitting with her back turned. "But... I have no idea what's killing her. Whatever it is, I think she's given up on fighting it."

Twilight bit her lower lip. She had seen ponies in hospitals before, but the sight was downright pathetic and frightening. "Still think we shouldn't have come?" she asked, shooting Applejack a glance. It was a horribly unfair thing to say, and she instantly wished she could take it back.

The apple farmer shook her head slowly, taking it in stride. "Ah ain't never once asked to see anypony like this, Twi', and if we can help her, we should. But how?"

"We wait for Luna," Twilight replied, hoping beyond hope that she was right and that Luna could somehow help. Even so, it was not a happy thought, to condemn them all to sit here and wait as Trixie suffered.

Rainbow Dash took a step towards Fluttershy. The yellow mare cringed at the sound of the single hoof-step, and Dash instantly halted.

Twilight knew Dash was desperate for answers, but the brash and colorful pegasus seemed hesitant.

A month ago, Twilight might have felt that she shouldn't be here right now, that it was inappropriate. Earlier, she might have been tempted to turn around and let Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash sort things out between themselves. Part of her brain still believed that she was not involved and should leave, but the argument didn't even have the power to make her hesitate the barest bit. They were closer now. Never before had she so keenly felt the bonds that tied them together as she did that moment when she realized this.

"I'm sorry, Rainbow Dash," Fluttershy muttered, her voice hoarse. "If you never want to see me again, I understand. I'll leave you alone and never speak to you again if you want."

"Why the hay would I want that?" Rainbow Dash groaned in exasperation. "I just want you to tell me why you didn't let me know."

"I'm sorry, I really am, I should have told you, but when you had left, it was too late," the yellow pegasus said in a pained whisper. "And it would just have made you sad if I told you later, it wouldn't have *helped*."

"It would have helped you in getting it off your chest, you idiot," Dash said, scratching the side of her eye with a hoof. "I- I know we're different, but you can't bottle this stuff up!"

"I just didn't want to hurt you!" Fluttershy cried, turning around. Her face was partially hidden by her mane. "I don't want you to-"

"Me? This isn't about *me*!" Rainbow Dash shouted, averting her gaze and swallowing before continuing in a softer tone. "I left you because I thought I was helping you, making you a stronger pony. It was-" she paused, drawing a deep, shuddering breath. "It was *stupid*. It was the dumbest thing I've done in my entire life. And I've done a lot of stupid crap."

Fluttershy's head tilted down as she stared at the ground intently. "You didn't know, I should have told you sooner, but it wasn't your fault."

"Oh for buck's sake Fluttershy," Dash muttered through clenched teeth. The colorful pegasus pony crossed the short distance between them, sitting down right in front of her distraught friend. "Hit me."

Fluttershy, who sat on her haunches, wiped her eyes with one hoof, and gently nudged Rainbow Dash on the shoulder with the other.

"I said *hit* me, Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash repeated.

"I don't want to," Fluttershy muttered. "I don't want to hurt you. Sorry."

Dash leaned in closer, and Twilight wondered if she should step in. The blue pegasus mare's voice was a low growl. "Fluttershy, you are going to *hit* me, and if you don't, I swear by the clouds above that I am going grab your hoof and do it myself!"

The timid yellow mare shook as she slowly raised a hoof up. It looked as if though she would break down, and Rainbow Dash seemed on the verge of making good on her threat before Fluttershy finally did it. The meek pegasus turned her head away, clenched her eyes shut, and smacked her solidly across the muzzle. The blow sent Dash reeling, and she fell to the floor.

Fluttershy opened her eyes again to look upon her fallen friend, and for a second it looked as if though she might strike her again. Her hoof was raised for a fraction of a second before she withdrew, scrabbling away from Rainbow Dash as if she were on fire, upending a nightstand in the process.

"Why did you make me *do* that?!" Fluttershy cried, her face streaked with tears. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Rainbow Dash slowly got back up and tentatively touched her snout with a hoof. It came away bloody, and the pegasus sniffled. Despite all this, Dash was wearing the beginnings of a smile. "You didn't say sorry."

"Why would- oh my goodness, I am so sorry," Fluttershy cringed. She looked like she wanted to run over to help Rainbow Dash, but she ended up curling into a ball on the spot. "I'm so sorry, oh my goodness, I'm so sorry, please, why did you do that, why did I do that?"

"Because you don't *need* to say sorry for every little thing! You're afraid of hurting anypony all the time, and in the end, you're the one who ends up hurt. You can't kill me with the truth, Fluttershy," Rainbow Dash said, slowly approaching the quivering heap of pony in front of her. Fluttershy fearfully withdrew from her touch, but Dash was insistent and cornered her against the wall and the bed, leaving her nowhere to run. Dash reached out and lightly poked her on the shoulder.

"There. We're even," Rainbow Dash declared, turning around to face Twilight and the others, suddenly a little nervous. "Um, guys, please tell me I'm not wrong here."

Twilight shook her head and walked over to sit by the two pegasi, the others following. Rarity scooped up Fluttershy's head and began running a hoof through her mane, humming quietly. Applejack removed her hat and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Pinkie hugged Rainbow Dash close, wordlessly supportive.

"She's right, darling," Rarity whispered to Fluttershy. "Even if her methods are a bit crude," she quickly added, tossing the bleeding Rainbow Dash a glance. The blue pegasus pony did not appear repentant in the slightest, content to hold Pinkie close and look at Fluttershy.

"Ah ain't ever heard of nopony dying because of the truth, sugarcube," Applejack said, sighing at the pegasus in question. "It's all fine and dandy that you're the nicest pony Ah know, and we love you for who you are, but if you hurt yourself, you're hurting us, too. Give us some credit, sugar. Trust that we can take it, yeah?"

Pinkie Pie gently disentangled herself from Rainbow Dash and leaned down to nuzzle Fluttershy's neck. "Silly filly, get up and give me a hug. It's all okay," she said, smiling. When the yellow mare failed to respond other than clenching her eyes shut even harder, Pinkie frowned. "Fluttershy?"

"It's not okay," Fluttershy sobbed, inconsolable. "I'm just a liar, and you are all going to hate me, because I only told you part of it."

Twilight puffed out her cheeks and exhaled slowly, speaking up before Rainbow Dash could make a comment, the brash pegasus looking

well and truly exasperated now. "Fluttershy, we're all friends. It's alright. We'll get through this, and none of us are going to leave you no matter what." There was a round of quiet but heartfelt agreements from everypony at this.

"And I said I'm sorry," Dash muttered, swallowing. "I don't know if I can ever make it up to you, but I am going to try."

"It's not that," Fluttershy said, trying to bury her face in her own tail. "I never told you why I went looking for you. I- I never told..."

"Oh come on Fluttershy, just say it," Rainbow Dash implored. "I'm trying to be nice here."

Fluttershy looked up at Rainbow Dash with wide, fearful eyes, trying to steel herself. The pegasus mare sniffled once, and nodded. "I'm happy for you and Pinkie, I really am, I just don't want to be alone. I never want to be alone again. Ever since you helped me at flight school, protected me..." she began, and Twilight could swear she felt her own heart drop and come to rest somewhere next to one of her hindhooves as she caught on.

Fluttershy whimpered. "When you left, there was a hole in me somewhere, and it hurts so much I can't breathe sometimes. I don't know, I'm so sorry, but I can't stop thinking..."

"Oh, Fluttershy," Rarity breathed, cradling Fluttershy's head and closing her eyes as she nosed her mane.

"Ah," Rainbow Dash said, puffing out her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Fluttershy muttered. "I told you you'd hate me. It's not your problem," she said, shakily getting up on her feet and trying to push past the gathered ponies, making for the door. She was stopped by Rainbow Dash who put her hooves on her shoulders and pushed her down to the ground again.

"For pony's sake, Fluttershy I don't *hate* you!" Dash said, looking a little bewildered herself. "And we're friends! That makes your problems my problems, okay?" The pegasus sat down on her rump, sighing. "If I can do *anything*, I will."

Fluttershy shrunk back and made herself very small. "Please don't worry about me, I'm sorry I ever said something. I just, I want somepony to hold me, sometimes."

"I'm here for you, Fluttershy, I just-" Dash said, nervously scratching the back of her neck. "I just need some time to think." The rainbow-maned pegasus bit her lower lip and glanced over at Pinkie Pie.

"What's there to think about?" Pinkie Pie asked. The pink pony tilted her head inquisitively at Dash, moving a little closer to the two pegasi. She was smiling broadly, and a ray of light that snuck between the curtains fell right on her face.

"But-" Dash began. She looked like she expected Pinkie Pie to interrupt her, but the pink earth pony mare simply smiled and waited as Dash worked her mouth, trying to form a sentence or even a word at all. Fluttershy was back to hiding in Rarity's lap and peering up at the two.

"Okay, I give up. *What?*" Rainbow Dash asked. "I don't know what to think, ponies go off to think all the time! Thinking, I can do it, too. I don't know what to think about this."

"You're going to think but you don't know what to think?" Pinkie Pie snorted and giggled, and the pegasus looked indignant at this.

"There's nothing funny about it!" Dash exclaimed, and Fluttershy cringed.

Pinkie Pie frowned thoughtfully. "No, you're right. It's not funny. It's really sweet and if I can borrow one of your favoritest of words, Dashie, it's *awesome*, isn't it?" She beamed and gave a hazardous little bounce in the tight confines of the clustered ponies. "Fluttershy is sweet on you!"

"Yes!" Rainbow Dash yelled. "And I don't know what to do! What has gotten *into* you, Pinkie? You're as random as ever, but this *isn't* funny any more!"

Pinkie crossed her hooves. "But you *like* Fluttershy," she stated, as blunt as a caber to the face. "You've told me you think she's cute as a

button, and I think that's saying a lot, because you don't usually like buttons."

Rainbow Dash blushed and shrugged, but she still looked more angry than anything else. She quickly glanced at the other pegasus who still lay silent. "Yes, of course I do! I *like* all of my friends! But there's kind of one little detail you're forgetting!"

"Uh-huh?" Pinkie asked.

"You!" Dash cried. "The fact that I love you, you stupid, silly filly! I don't know if I'm *in love* with Fluttershy because it doesn't matter. Because I have you!"

Pinkie Pie shrugged, her optimism utterly unshakable. Her curly mane rustled as she abjectly refuted Dash's words. "And I love you too, Dashie, but I just don't see why that matters! If you have room for Fluttershy in your little heart, and I know you do, then I do, too. Why can't it be that simple? I know some of the best cookie recipes are the simplest ones."

Dash was speechless as she tried to take it all in. The pegasus held up a hoof, pointing at Pinkie Pie, and let it drop without a sound. She turned around and looked at Fluttershy, who instantly looked away, muttering "*I'm sorry, I'm sorry,*" over and over again.

"It's just... not that simple," Rainbow Dash said, her voice weak. "I- don't even know how that would work. How would that work? What are you even suggesting?"

"Oh I don't have any idea at all," Pinkie admitted, giggling. "But come on, what's the worst that can happen? For a brave supersonic pony who's going to be the best Wonderbolt ever, you're a very silly chicken sometimes!"

"I am not scared!" Rainbow Dash protested, but she deflated instantly, not rising to the bait. Dash turned back to Fluttershy and looked just as lost as the butter-colored mare herself. "Fluttershy, please, listen. I don't know how this works. I don't *know*, but... I don't want you to ever feel like you have to be alone. We're here for you. *I'm* here for you, so, uh. Just

bear with me," she paused and looked back at Pinkie Pie, who looked content. "Bear with *us*?"

Fluttershy's head barely moved. It was the tiniest of nods Twilight had ever seen, but her hopeful eyes told the tale far more clearly than any words possibly could have. It took Pinkie Pie approximately a quarter of a second to scoop up Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash both in a hug.

"Um, Pinkie, can we please, maybe calm down a little?" Fluttershy squeaked. "And I'm sorry, but I can't seem to... breathe," she added, wheezing.

"Pinkie!" Dash added, and the earth pony finally let go of the pegasi, giving them a mock pout.

"Aw fine, but you're loco in the coco if you think you're getting away from hugs in the long run, I tell you!" she said.

"I'm sorry for being so much trouble," Fluttershy said, still struggling to meet anypony's gaze. "And thank you. I don't want to get in the way."

"Okay, seriously, Fluttershy, stop apologizing, and I don't even know what you're thanking anypony for," Dash said, though she was smiling as she puffed out her cheeks and sighed. "Step one, no more 'sorry'."

"Sorry," Fluttershy muttered, but she smiled right back as she accepted a hug from Rarity, who whispered something about this all being '*terrifically modern*'.

"Ah swear," Applejack muttered. "T'aint how we do it back on the farm, that's for sure." The apple farmer swallowed. She must've gotten something in her eye, given how she was scratching at it.

Twilight wiped her snout, which had taken to dripping with some liquid for a reason she certainly couldn't comprehend. She was about to make a comment on her own when she thought she heard something. The purple unicorn held a hoof up to her mouth and hushed the assembled ponies all, perking up an ear. Indeed, once they were all quiet, they could hear rapid hoof-falls, something coming up the stairs at a gallop and then thundering

down the hall. Rarity reached out and touched a globe on the wall by the nightstand to better illuminate the room.

"Luna?" Twilight called, and indeed, the princess burst into the room a second later, glancing about. She was met with hopeful and relieved looks. Before she even thought about what she was doing, Twilight had ran over to lean against Luna's neck, sighing in relief.

The princess glanced down at the purple unicorn and paused for a second, breaking into an appreciative smile as Twilight blushed and withdrew. Luna's eyes quickly found Trixie on the bed, and she approached very quietly. It was, in fact, *too* quiet.

"Has she... stopped breathing?" Twilight asked, feeling very cold all of a sudden.

Fluttershy gasped and leaned over the bed, listening carefully. She put a hoof to Trixie's neck and put an ear to her mouth. "No, no, no no no no," the pegasus began muttering, pouring over to the supplies she had scattered all about the place. "Roseroot salve maybe? Wibblereed paste? Tea with- I, no, no no!"

Twilight was rooted to the spot, staring at the lifeless unicorn pony. She had never before watched anypony die, and she desperately hoped that she still didn't have to. Her attention automatically locked on to Luna, who stood absolutely still surveying the scene. "Luna, can't you do anything? Can you fix it? You have to fix it!" she pleaded.

"It is not in my place to bring life or death to anypony, Twilight Sparkle," Luna said, closing her eyes. "I am sorry. It is not my gift to grant or revoke."

"So you can do it," Rarity said, watching Fluttershy madly dash back and forth, uselessly tossing her herbs and remedies all over the place. "But you won't."

Twilight blinked back tears. "What's the point of having power when you can't use it for good?" she asked. "What's the bucking *point*? If you can fix stuff, but you don't?"

"The kind of power that comes with great responsibility," Luna said, very quietly. The princess had removed any trace of emotion in her voice with mechanical precision. "The kind of power that is kept to a set of greater rules for the good of all."

"Is this about destiny and prophecy? Even you can't know everything that will happen!" Twilight pleaded. "No pony will know!"

"Some pony will," Luna said. "The rules were laid down for a reason, and there can be no exceptions. That is simply how it has to be."

"Even when it's your own damn fault?"

Applejack's words froze the entire room. Even Fluttershy stopped, one hoof deep in her saddlebags, to look at the apple farmer. Applejack had put her hat back on, and was looking straight at Luna. The princess turned to look back at her, and though she looked almost bored, Twilight knew that it was just practiced neutrality that belied turmoil beneath. The purple unicorn knew the princess' subtle tells by now. The way she was breathing. Her stance.

"Even when it is my own *damn* fault, Applejack," Luna said, heavily.

"Ah s'pose when you've done all you've done, it's easy to let one more slip the net," Applejack nodded.

Twilight's eyes bulged. "Applejack! You can't- I, you-" she looked back and forth between the princess and Applejack. The air in between the two looked about ready to burst into flames from the sheer menace of the gaze Luna gave the orange earth pony.

Applejack, for her part, shook her head dismissively and sat down. She outright ignored the larger alicorn, turning to Twilight instead. "Ah'm sorry Twi, but Ah look at Trixie, and Ah can't but help think what it'd be like if she were kin," Applejack muttered. "Might be it's easy for a simple earth pony like me t'say this, but Ah know Ah'd move mountains to protect my own. And if bein' a princess is all about thinkin' everypony is your kin, well."

Luna spread her wings and shook them asynchronously before refolding them, and moved a little on the spot. The princess was fidgeting, and the entire room held its collective breath.

"Oh buck it", Princess Luna spat, approaching the bed in a few long strides. Her horn began glowing with the color of pure molten silver, the radiance filling the room and growing ever brighter. Just as Twilight felt her eyes begin to hurt, the silver that sheathed the princess' horn was laced with a darker magic. The painful luminescence was tempered with more and more of this black presence. The way the silver and black danced about reminded Twilight a little of when Pinkie used her toffee machine to make multicolored candy. She gave a nervous chuckle at herself for even thinking it, and felt a reassuring hoof on her side from somepony a moment later.

The light and darkness playing with each other was accompanied by a rustle of wind. The absurdity of a sudden indoors wind was comparatively low at this point, but it was a little disconcerting to watch as Luna's mane started blowing every which way, caught in a miniature hurricane. The bedsheets billowed and would probably have flown off if not for Trixie's body.

In a flash, it was over. The light disappeared, the wind cut off instantly, and Trixie coughed. Were it not for that last little detail, it would all have been very underwhelming. Fluttershy leapt atop the bed and leaned in close, immediately setting about checking up on Trixie.

"I nearly made it a full year," Luna remarked, pursing her lips. "I am sure Celly will be proud." The princess sounded decidedly sour. Twilight was just about to ask what Luna had meant when the light dimmed a little for a few seconds. This wouldn't have been that worrisome if the light-globe that Rarity had turned on earlier hadn't winked out when Luna had begun her spell. The only light in the room was the sunlight.

It was the very sun itself that had blinked.

"Okay," Twilight said, her mouth suddenly dry. "Something tells me that wasn't just me spontaneously contracting narcolepsy without noticing. What the hay was that?"

"That," Luna said, wincing. "Would be my dear sister." She sat down on her haunches in the middle of the room and closed her eyes. Her horn glowed softly once more in a brief glimmer, and her voice was quiet when she spoke again. "She is near."

Twilight opened her mouth to reply, but she was cut off by a thunderous crash as the entire building *shook*. The last remaining pieces of decor in the room, those brave paintings and vases that had held up against romping ponies and Luna's spell, finally gave up. Pictures fell off the walls and Fluttershy nearly toppled off the bed. Rainbow Dash had to steady Pinkie Pie to keep her from falling over Rarity. Six sets of eyes instantly looked to Luna for an explanation.

"*Luna! Sister!*" came a desperate roar from down the hall. Twilight recognized the voice instantly, but the raw emotion in it was utterly incompatible with who she thought the speaker was. The hoof-falls that raced down the hall came unnaturally fast, an almost constant roar. When Celestia rounded the corner, one of her wings tore down part of the wall. At least, Twilight had thought it was Celestia, but she wasn't quite sure any more.

The princess entering the room *looked* the same as ever, the brilliant white alicorn with her multicolored pastel mane standing tall and proud, but her eyes were panicked and her stance alert, almost martial. Twilight had rarely seen Celestia's poise broken, but the goddess in front of her looked terrified.

Luna instantly got up and walked over to lean against her. Celestia pulled back a little and her horn glowed briefly with a brilliant light, but the second Luna touched her, she let it fade, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Luna, what have you *done*? You are alright! Oh thank goodness, I thought..." Celestia said, closing her eyes and savoring the contact with her little sister. She murmured something unintelligible and was quiet.

"I am sorry," Luna muttered. "I would have let you know ahead of time, but time was of the essence. And besides, you would have said no."

"I would have," Celestia said, pulling back to look down at Luna, a trace of anger creeping into her voice and expression both. "You broke the covenant."

"So I did," Luna nodded. The two princesses seemed entirely oblivious to their audience. "Because I believe I am strong enough now to know that an exception can reinforce and prove the need for a rule rather than break it."

Princess Celestia shook her head and gave her little sister a smile. "I think we had better discuss the logic of this later, but all the same, you know I trust you."

"I am not entirely convinced you should," Luna chuckled and returned the smile with a wan grin of her own. "I am going to tell the proprietress of the hotel that nothing is amiss. I will be right back."

"Ah, yes, I suppose the treasury will have to cover this," Celestia muttered to herself as Luna slipped out the door. She shook her head and looked over at Twilight and her friends, suddenly smiling as brightly and royally as only she could.

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student. Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash too. It is good to see you all again," Celestia said, walking over to cross necks with Twilight briefly before drawing back.

"Uh, hello, princess. How are you?" Twilight managed.

"Hi!" Pinkie chirped, as the only other pony to find her tongue.

"I expect Luna will give you the details," Celestia said. "I feared something terrible had happened, and never before have I been this glad to be wrong. I should get back to the banquet I was attending, though probably in a less, ah, violent manner." The princess glanced at the newly and irregularly enlarged door.

"Oh," Twilight said, too dazed to even try to make sense of this. "Well, that's nice. Um, have a nice trip?"

"Bye Celestia!" Pinkie said, waving. "It was nice seeing you!"

The sun princess chuckled and nodded, taking two steps towards the door before pausing. She looked over her shoulder at Twilight, and the purple unicorn had no idea what she was looking for. For her part, Twilight was only just now trying to categorize the recent events, forming it all into questions to be asked in order. She wondered how much Luna would tell this time, and which parts she'd omit in the ever-frustrating, ever-fascinating process of trying to haul secrets out of the goddess.

Whatever Celestia looked for, she apparently found it. She turned around again, and leaned in close to the stunned Twilight. She let her horn brush against Twilight's with a little zap that was invisible to the naked eye before whispering seven small words in her ear. "Hide it well. You will save us."

"Whuh-" Twilight stammered. "I- um, would you like the latest friendship reports now, princess? I have them right in my bags here, er, somewhere." She glanced around the room. "It's... probably under a fallen bookcase or something."

"That's quite alright, Twilight. I'm really sorry for being in such a rush, too. I will come visit you all in Ponyville sometime soon, but duty calls." The princess sounded sincere in her apology and nodded to them, receiving a full round of bows in return as she made her exit.

"The stairs are down here," they heard Luna say out in the hallway. "If you want to try the door instead of the wall, that is." Celestia chuckled, and the two sisters traded words for a few minutes, too low to hear. At length, Luna re-entered the room, levitating a large tub of steaming water and a set of towels.

"The covenant she refers to," she began immediately, setting the tub down next to the bed and hovering the towels in front of Fluttershy. "Is the agreement that we came to after my return. In fact, it is my agreement to keep to the rules Celestia made for herself after my, ah, banishment. A list of limitations. Do-nots, as it were. Celestia swore off most forms of alicorn magic that was out of reach for unicorns after the events a thousand years ago."

Fluttershy gratefully accepted the towels and set to the unflattering but necessary task of cleaning Trixie with great care. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie began collecting the scattered medical supplies for her as Rarity set to tidying the room and Applejack put furniture back in place. Twilight did not even register that she was probably being terribly unhelpful, her attention all on Luna.

"Celly is a lot better at it than me, I guess, since she has not slipped once in a thousand years, and I did not last a single year, but I do not think I regret it. I suppose she feared a..." she struggled to find the right word. "A relapse."

"A re-what?" Applejack asked.

"That it would happen all over again," Luna said, mending the glass of a shattered picture and hanging it back in place.

"But we defeated the Nightmare," Rainbow Dash protested, handing Fluttershy a jar, which she accepted with a faint blush. "Bucked her right back to the moon!"

Luna closed her eyes and shook her head from side to side. "No, there is no distinction. I love my sister, and I appreciate how much care she has taken to try to take the blame from my shoulders, but Nightmare Moon is no separate entity. At best, if I were to be kind, I would call it... a notion. A disease of the mind."

Twilight moved over to sit next to Luna. Perhaps the princess would think it an absurd and condescending gesture, but it felt like the right thing to do at that moment. Luna leaned a little on Twilight, and the purple unicorn leaned back.

"The story as told is largely right, though. No lies, only omissions. I do not know when jealousy seized a hold of me to the point where I could no longer see how wrong I was, but it is a very mundane and common flaw, no? Emotions can make ponies do the silliest of things," Luna said, smiling at the six ponies who were scattered around the room, receiving a few sheepish nods in return. "It is just a terribly dangerous thing when it happens to somepony with a lot of power at her hoof tips. Thus, the covenant,"

"Ah'm sorry if Ah made you do something you oughtn't have done," Applejack said, shoving a cupboard back in place with her hindhooves.

"The choice has always been mine. I do not believe in apologies, here. The choice to be an idiot a thousand years ago was mine. The same is true for leaving my relics insufficiently guarded. Thus, similarly, so was the decision to break my promise to Celly and bring back Trixie."

Twilight looked over at the bed where Trixie was receiving Fluttershy's tender ministrations. The unicorn was still sickly thin, but she seemed to be breathing easy, and Fluttershy had done a good job cleaning and dressing her wounds. She was still red, though, and that little detail would never stop causing Twilight some confusion.

"What *did* you do to Trixie?" Twilight asked, furrowing her brows.

Luna shrugged. "I brought her back. Oddly enough, I think it was easier this way, because whatever touching the Star Hammer did to her, I doubt I could have fixed it. The damage caused is as permanent as any wound, but Fluttershy should be able to deal with that. When she passed, re-igniting the spark was child's play. Right now, she is alive and well."

"Trixie objects to the use of 'well' to describe her state," the red unicorn mare groaned, her eyes cracking open a tiny bit. She tried to get up, but Fluttershy held her down with a gentle hoof.

"You need to rest," Fluttershy whispered. "Please go back to sleep."

"No, Trixie *needs* to get out of here," Trixie muttered, struggling feebly and tossing her head back and forth. "Trixie does not owe you anything, please let *go*!"

"Rainbow Dash, can you please help me?" Fluttershy asked, her voice rising a little in panic. Dash quickly obliged, flying over to the other side of bed and putting her hooves down on Trixie's shoulders.

"Please," Trixie begged, trashing as much as her limited mobility allowed. Her eyes were red and rimmed with tears. "Please let Trixie go. It burns, help! Trixie didn't mean to touch it! Help me!"

"She's delirious," Fluttershy sighed. "Can somepony get me the slumber root?"

Pinkie Pie silently handed Fluttershy a small brown bottle, which the pegasus quickly opened and held under Trixie's snout. With Rainbow Dash's help in holding her still, Trixie couldn't avoid breathing it in. The frenzied trashing slowly subsided and her voice died down, bit by bit, until all that could be heard was a soft and healthy snoring. The yellow pegasus quickly put the stopper back on the bottle.

"Thank you," Fluttershy said, yawning. "I, um. She's clean, and I'm a little tired, so I thought I'd maybe take a little nap, but I don't want to leave her by herself. I thought I'd sleep here, but..." the pegasus' voice dropped.

"I'll keep you company, I don't mind," Rainbow Dash said, shrugging. "And I guess I could really do with a nap myself." She stifled a yawn of her own. "When was the last time we slept anyway?"

"I'll stay too!" Pinkie said cheerily. "Of course you're not going to be alone, silly little Fluttershy! I mean, if you *want* to be alone, you can of course ask, but I'm not going to Pinkie Pie swear that I'll say yes!" she giggled.

Fluttershy smiled thankfully at the pair of them, and the poor pegasus must've been running on fumes and pure duty for the last hours, Twilight thought, because the second she knew she wouldn't wake up alone, she simply closed her eyes and lay down next to Trixie, asleep within seconds.

"It is just as well, actually. I do not think you will have a lot of choice," Luna remarked, smiling at the sight of the sleeping pegasus. "This is really the only remaining furnished room in the hotel at the moment."

"I thought we were given two keys?" Twilight asked. "Isn't there another room?"

"I said remaining," Luna repeated. "The other room is down one a half walls at the moment, after Celly's arrival. She did apologize to Winter Sun, and Winter Sun herself asked me to apologize to you in turn. She said

she really should have expected something like this to happen and prepared at least two spare rooms."

Twilight just shook her head as she took her turn with the yawn that seemed to pass around the room. "Well, we've got this place cleaned up well enough, and the carpets are soft, so I'll take the floor since the bed is a little small."

"Looks like we have precious little choice. It will have to do," Rarity admitted, levitating a pillow down from the foot-end of the bed and making herself comfortable. "I think I shall retire for the night, as well. Ah, well, retire for the morning, I suppose," she corrected herself.

"Ah've had worse," Applejack chuckled as she headed over to the door. "Ah'll head down and say sorry to Winter herself before Ah tuck in, though. It's only proper."

"I will join you, I think, and see about making arrangements for some proper food for when you wake. As I understand it, the kitchen is not yet complete here," Luna announced. "Are you planning on sleeping, Twilight?"

Twilight nodded, and Luna smiled. The purple unicorn knew full well what she was getting at, and indeed, the princess' horn was softly glowing as she approached the spot Twilight had picked out next to the bed. Only then did she remember Celestia's words.

Tentatively, as subtly as she could, Twilight focused inwards. It was a little harder without closing her eyes beforehand, but then, she was hardly new to this. Even so, she couldn't repress a gasp at what she found.

"Is something the matter, Twilight?" Luna asked. The princess had stopped in front of her, a single brow raised.

"No, sorry, I just, I'm really tired," Twilight said, smiling and faking a yawn.

The princess merely nodded at this and leaned forwards, the tips of their horns meeting for a brief, electric moment. Twilight instantly felt stuffy and muted, as if her magic was a set of teeth forced to chew on cotton. It was remarkable how it felt familiar yet different every single night. Was

Luna varying the specifics of the spell every night to prevent her from breaking it?

Twilight cradled the gift Celestia had given her, hid it in her mind. Soon, Luna's spell would be put to the test.

Chapter 17

The second Luna and Applejack left the room, Twilight let out a breath she didn't realize she had been holding. She had done her best to hide Celestia's gift from Luna when the night princess touched her mind to cast her spell. Luna had apparently not sensed what Twilight held hidden within her own magic. Twilight carefully unwrapped the foreign presence in her mind. The mote of magic was searing bright, almost uncomfortably hot inside her.

In the past weeks, she had been forced to re-learn much of what she thought she knew of magic. How Celestia had imparted some of her essence to Twilight, the purple unicorn had no idea, just like she had no clue what this sun-touched presence truly was. She didn't need to know, though, because she thought she knew its purpose. Celestia knew what Twilight was doing, and she was trying to help.

While she was to all outward appearances asleep just like the ponies around her, Twilight was as alert as ever, her heart beating fast. Adrenaline was coursing through her veins as she quickly formed a plan. She had to assume Luna would know when the spell broke. Failing that, she would probably know when and if she managed to slip into the dream. The princess would be well prepared, even if she didn't expect this. Being thousands of years old did not mesh well with being sloppy.

Finally ready, Twilight tested the limits of her magic's prison. As always, a small surge of panic had to be quenched when she realized how trapped she was. She envisioned herself naked in a small cell with cold iron walls. Strong walls she'd thrown herself against before until she was broken and could do no more. Luna's presence was everywhere, but knowing her jailer so well only made it feel worse, now.

Twilight's magic availed her nothing, as she had expected. She strained against Luna's spell, and found no purchase, her essence scattering against the boundaries set by Luna. It was like trying to tickle her way through a stone floor with a feather, except there wasn't even any dust

to stir. Trying to call upon the moon with her limited understanding of how it worked yielded no results either. She simply could not reach out.

Tentatively, Twilight embraced the sun mote. Lost inside herself, the unicorn prodded the essence separated from its creator. Slowly, the bright little ephemeral non-object unravelled before her and suffused her with its warmth. It was pleasant at first, but soon it was all Twilight could do not to scream as she felt like she was on fire. She forced herself to steady her breathing, a suddenly very real and physical pain threatening to break her concentration.

On impulse, as if guided by a hoof not her own, Twilight once more reached out and met the spell woven around her with her own mind and magic both. For the briefest of moments, Twilight Sparkle dared imagine that Celestia herself watched her, that the princess wanted for her to succeed. Whether it was this wraith of Celestia that urged her faithful student on, or if it was the spark itself, Twilight could not tell, but Luna's magic suddenly seemed a lot simpler.

Twilight realized now how Luna's spell worked. Why wouldn't she? It was just a construct made of moon-stuff and magic. It melted before her as she touched it, and the fire that burned within her cooled as it did, its purpose fulfilled.

Thus freed, Twilight did not so much as pause to open her eyes or look around. A rush of magic flooded to her horn, and she instantly put it all to use. She dimly heard the thrum of a magic buildup in the air as she threw every ounce of her power into supercharging a simple spell she knew well. A magical lullaby, a slumber spell of immense power. Without hesitation, even as she heard rapid hoofsteps approach, she directed the spell straight at herself, shocking herself to sleep. She prayed she would dream, for the first time embracing the vision that she had spent so many nights trying to stave off and avoid. That little detail made all the difference.

Far above, the starry sky. Twilight lay on the ground and looked up between the clouds to gaze upon a myriad of constellations, all of which she recognized. She could pick out Orion and Ursa Major, The Four Hooves and the The Progenitor all. High in the sky the moon hung proud

and large, larger than she had ever seen it before. It seemed an endless expanse of pale white and grey, and Twilight instinctively tried to pull back further, to put it into proper perspective, but the earth beneath her was unyielding. It was no trick of the mind. The moon was monstrously large.

The clouds, she realized next, were not merely random. Hanging in the sky was a massive cloud city easily half again the size of Cloudsdale. Curved arches and the tops of tall buildings were all she could see from down here, being almost directly below the centre of the flying city. There were no rainbows flowing down from on high, no waterfalls. No noise, and no pegasi. The city above seemed dead and deserted.

Twilight slowly stood up. She was in a small garden, a treeless park in the middle of a square. It was overgrown and unkempt as if nopony had tended to it for months. Ahead of her, the city of Crepuscin stretched out in every direction as far as her eyes could see. Rows upon rows of beautiful houses and gardens interspersed with larger buildings here and there. It was all in stone, and every single structure seemed to have been created with loving attention to detail, with exaggerated care. The unnaturally bright moonlight played across rooftops and hedges, unlit streetlamps and trees all, creating sharp shadows. Still, no sight of anypony.

In the distance, at the end of a long and straight road from the park, one building stood apart from the rest. It was a silhouette that Twilight had seen many times before. Tall spires dominated the skyline, each of a different height and shape. The many towers of the royal palace of Crepuscin loomed over the rest of the city, stark and imposing in the night, and Twilight felt a pull. Without knowing why or how, the purple unicorn got up and started walking down the quiet street.

"Welcome to my lullaby," a voice said. A shadow coalesced into Luna's form at her side in the blink of an eye, the voice unbroken. "Welcome to my memory, my dream, my burden and my secret. Welcome to what I eat and breathe, you idiotic, lovable, misguided *fool*."

"Hello, Luna," Twilight said, as she kept walking, forcing herself to stay calm. The princess grudgingly fell in step with her to keep up. "I'm sorry, but since you haven't already, I assume you don't have the power to stop me, and I really have to do this."

"Not here, but I expect you will be out of my mane within seconds", Luna said with a shrug. "I am sorry too that you felt you had to try to do this, but there will have to be consequences."

"I am not a schoolfilly," Twilight said, feeling a flush creep up on her face. "This isn't you catching me red-hoofed with my snout in the cookie jar. I'm not doing this because of some misguided sense of curiosity. I'm doing this for *you*."

Luna crinkled her snout in distaste. "It matters none. You will be gone soon enough."

Twilight's heart beat a little faster, but she kept moving. The palace wasn't too far off, but she'd begun to notice that all around her, bits of the city were missing. A tree in a garden might have the middle of a branch missing. A house might lack a wall. It wasn't the result of damage or wear and tear. Rather, some pieces of the city were simply not there, trailing off into shadow and nothingness.

"You sound very sure of yourself, but I feel just fine," Twilight protested. "If you're the real Luna, and you can't oust me from here, what am I missing?"

"It is *a* me, not *the* me," Luna said, sighing. "I guess there is little harm in telling you this at least, but I am surprised you have not figured it out yourself. I cannot spend every waking hour watching this memory. It would distract me."

"So you only spend the nights here? Aren't you awake now?" Twilight asked, curious despite the gravity of the situation.

"I send part of myself into the dream. I watch it, and then I return. This is every bit as much me as the me on the outside," Luna said, smiling almost companionably. "Until this memory finishes, the outside me is not even aware of what is going on in here."

"Ah," Twilight said, swallowing and upping her pace a little. It was hard not to feel nervous when she knew she was on a timer. "So you're probably trying to wake me up right now."

"That is my first impulse, so I suspect I am. I would ask you to simply stop and wake up, surrender, if you will, but I suspect you will not listen," Luna said, adding a little chuckle at the end. The princess peered skywards. "In fact, I wonder what is taking me so long."

"I'm trying to help," Twilight said. "Why can't you see that?"

"I do not want your help," Luna said, her voice suddenly cold. "Why can *you* not realize that? Besides, you do not even know what you are doing, what you think you will find. How can you say you are trying to help? How can you pretend this is not just curiosity and your thirst for knowledge coming to the fore?"

"I don't know what I'll find, but I know that I *hope* to find something that will help me convince you that this is wrong," Twilight implored, looking up at the alicorn. "I have hope. Of course I want to understand, but only because I want to help."

"So you are chasing a vague notion based on nothing. And here I thought *I* was the goddess of prophecies," Luna said, rolling her eyes.

"Here's my prophecy for you," Twilight huffed. "You are going to keep being unreasonable, and I am going to be snarky, this is all going to be unpleasant, and I am *still* going to get up to the top of that tower."

The princess sighed. There was a short silence as more houses passed by. Rows upon rows of individualized, beautiful houses with lovely gardens and decorations in odd styles Twilight had never seen before all passed by.

"You are right," Luna finally said. "No sense in making this unpleasant. You will be gone soon enough, and I would hate to bring only vitriol back to my body. I can answer some simple questions if you have them."

Twilight dared smile at the princess now, and nodded. "Why are parts missing?"

"Because all we see here is what my memory contains, and despite having visited this place continually ever since, I cannot learn something

new from a memory," Luna said, glancing over at a corner section of a fence.

"Continually," Twilight repeated. She was almost afraid to ask. "You've re-lived this memory how many times? Do you even know?"

"No," Luna admitted, reciting the truth with as much emotion as one may read a tax report. "I stopped counting at around fifteen million, but I could do the math if you gave me a moment."

Twilight shivered and swallowed. Despite Luna's invitation to ask questions, regardless of Twilight's desire to try to be non-confrontational, she couldn't fathom how the princess could be so clinical and obviously self-contradictory.

"You just said yourself that you can't learn anything from a memory," Twilight muttered. "Why do you do this?"

Luna pursed her lips and thought for a second before she spoke. "It is inaccurate to say you cannot learn from a memory. You learn from reflection. I hope you will wake soon, but I will say this – some things are bigger, Twilight. Bigger than me and you."

The princess paused. She looked straight ahead as she spoke up again, adding "Not that there is much of a me and you, now, when you betray my trust like this."

Twilight felt as if though she had been stabbed through the heart with those last words, but she forced herself to keep moving still. The implications threatened to burst the delicate bubble that Twilight had created to contain her feelings ever since Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash had opened her to the possibility that there might be something more between Twilight and Luna. She had deliberately never asked herself what Luna might possibly think on the subject.

Twilight desperately wanted to just hide these thoughts away until this grim business was all done with, and now, it seemed that it might not even matter. Twilight was seized by an urge to just lie down and give up on everything, robbed of meaning, but she refused to stop. She was doing this

for Luna, she had said. If she meant it, then she would keep to her task. And so she did.

They approached the courtyard mere minutes later, a large plaza with colorful mosaic tiles depicting scenes that must have been ancient even then, impossibly old and utterly unknown to Twilight. The intricate tilework seemed at odds with the simple stonework of the surrounding towers and the main palace building ahead. In front of the palace, the plaza was occupied by a crowd of ponies, the first signs of life Twilight had seen since she entered the memory. Hundreds of grim-faced ponies stood in a loose approximation of a military formation, all looking straight up towards the top of the tallest tower of the palace, almost expectant. nopony said a word, and the gates to the palace were closed.

"And these are the ancestors of the ponies in Grey Hollows?" Twilight asked, surveying the assembled ponies.

Luna nodded. "Those few who survived. The rest are about the city somewhere, I imagine."

Twilight ascended the stairs to the palace proper, halting before the huge wooden doors. They were carved with the likeness of Celestia on one door, Luna on the other, painted and kept in perfect repair. She experimentally pushed against the door with a hoof, and went right through it, almost falling over. Apparently, memories weren't terribly solid construction materials.

"Twilight Sparkle, can I persuade you to stop this madness?" Luna asked quietly as she followed Twilight. The unicorn pony was picking her way through the ancient and deserted castle, rapidly ascending every staircase she could find. Her world became a blur of tapestries, windows and beautiful statuettes.

"I don't think so," Twilight said, scanning the area and locating a small spiral staircase at the end of a carpeted hallway. She knew she had to get to the top of the tower, pulled by an invisible string. "I mean, I guess the Luna on the outside is having some trouble, and you can't do anything, can you? I'm sorry. You can always try threatening me."

Luna did not appear to find this even a little amusing. "Twilight, you do not understand what you are doing. Trust me on this."

"I can't trust you when I don't understand you, and I can't understand when you don't explain," Twilight said, feeling like she was repeating herself. She was galloping up the narrow spiraling stairs as fast as she could. The stairs felt positively endless, and her muscles ached. "But I already told you, this isn't for me, it's for you."

"You are misguided-" Luna began angrily, but Twilight cut her off.

"And you can't accept that you have the capacity to be wrong!" Twilight snapped. "You are so busy doing what's best for everypony, and perhaps you usually *do* know what's best for others, but something that has you torturing yourself like this clearly says you don't have a clue what's best for *you*!"

Twilight finally reached the top of the stairs, alighting upon the top of the tower. The flat area was almost as large as than the ground floor of the library, but it felt pathetically small this high up in the air. It was hard not to think back to Luna's words on the topic of the ancient city of Crepuscin. Her description given in the Hollows was very fitting. The city truly did seem to stretch on forever around them, and the cloud city above was almost close enough to touch. She could hear the wind, but she did not feel it, a rather creepy side effect of being in a memory, the unicorn supposed.

At the other side of the roof, opposite the staircase, stood Nightmare Moon. It was impossible to think of the black mare as anything but. The silver-armored alicorn was only vaguely reminiscent of Luna herself, and when she had the two of them so close to each other, it was impossible to see how they could be the same pony. Nightmare Moon stood still at the edge of the tower, her ethereal mane and tail trailing the stuff of shadows on the ghostly wind of the memory.

"And you say that was you?" Twilight asked, shaking her head.

"Is me," Luna corrected, a pained look crossing her face. It spoke volumes of her feelings on the matter if it hurt her after having seen it so many times. Constantly for over a thousand years, no less.

"What is she doing?" Twilight asked, walking a little closer to Nightmare. When the princess made no reply, Twilight sighed. "What is the point of trying to hide it now? I'm going to watch this anyway."

"What *I* am doing," Luna said, forcing the words out. "Is waiting for my sister to show up. I have interrupted the order, brought night over day, finally. At this point, I am so far gone that my sister can no longer hold back. She has to perform her duty."

"Duty?" Twilight echoed, turning around.

The night goddess had sat down on her haunches and tears rimmed her eyes. Her voice was hard even as she wiped her face with a wing, trying to compose herself. "I am not afraid of what you may think of *me*, Twilight. This is not a secret I keep for myself," she looked up towards the darkened sky. "Think me as vile as you will and must, but wake up. Please, *wake up*, Twilight Sparkle. I *beg* you. If you have any love for me, you will *wake up*!"

Twilight gaped. For a second, she almost did try to wake herself up. The raw emotion displayed by the princess wrenched her heart, tore at her. "*I'm sorry*," she heard herself say, sitting down and following Luna's eyes. Nightmare Moon mimicked their actions as if she could see them, three sets of eyes turned skywards.

There was a brief flash. A glimmer of light pierced the veil of the night, a radiant shaft of bright sunlight that near blinded Twilight. From the horizon a ball of light approached, trailed by a myriad of pastel hues, blues, greens and pink among them. The memory of Nightmare Moon turned on the spot, and no sooner had she faced the center of the tower's floor than the luminescent orb crashed to the ground in the exact spot she was looking at. The tower shook ominously.

"*Luna*," Celestia said, her voice booming, and Twilight froze. There was precious little of the Celestia that Twilight knew in the painfully radiant sun goddess stood before her. Golden armor covered her head, wings and hooves, and her eyes were a pure molten gold radiating menace that was made twice as sharp because she would never have expected this from her beloved mentor.

Over Celestia's head, caught in her psychic grip, a golden spear hovered. Its shape and form was almost shockingly mundane if not for the bright gleam, but if there was anger in Celestia's eyes, the spear screamed with killing intent, a constant soundless wail that prophesied her doom. Her mind tried telling her that the very idea that an object could have a will was absurd, but Twilight's breath left her as her eyes met the tip of the spear. She was suddenly certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that she would die.

Only when she felt Luna's presence next to her did her lungs remember her function. The ghostly princess could not touch her, but seeing something familiar in the corner of her eye helped.

"My dear sister," Nightmare Moon sneered. "How nice of you to come visit."

"Stop this madness at once," Celestia commanded. She spread her wings and tilted them upwards, forming around herself a beautiful feathered halo as she slowly approached her sister.

Nightmare Moon, for Twilight still could not think of it as Luna, held her ground. With a dark flash of umbral magic, the dark princess summoned forth an orb of darkness at her side. As Twilight watched, what began as a point of darkness sucked in all light around it and became an absurd un-light, casting Nightmare Moon's face not into shadow, but into an utter, impossible blackness that pained Twilight's eyes.

"That would be the Star Hammer," Luna commented, looking away. Her voice was thin, pleading. "Please, Twilight, wake up. You do not want to see this."

Twilight barely even heard her, her attention torn between the powers at play.

"You think I will follow Orion? You think to send me to the grave?" Nightmare Moon crooned, grinning madly. "The world does not need or want the moon, sister. I have nothing to lose, but you have everything."

Celestia stopped her advance and shook her head. The sun princess' every move was mechanical and uncompromising. "If you look beyond your

own snout, you will see hundreds of ponies who are ready to die to prove you wrong tonight. You simply refuse to see them. Your eyes are sightless, blind!" Her voice rolled across the roof of the tower like thunder.

Nightmare Moon laughed hysterically, shaking her head with exaggerated movement as if she was trying to tear herself apart. "Blind? *Blind?* I see more clearly than I ever have before! I see that you are just waiting for an excuse to drive the Sun Spear through my heart because you want everything to yourself! No need to have to cater to little sister and her annoying whims!"

"Do not hate me," Celestia said. Twilight thought she appeared saddened by her sister's words, but it was hard to read her expression with her eyes being solid orbs.

"Too late for that," Nightmare spat, baring her teeth. "Now kill me if you think you can, if you dare. It will give you so much pleasure to complete the set, I should think. Strike me down and become the perfect tyrant you have always wished to be."

"Forgive me, I am weak," Celestia muttered. From her eyes, golden tears dripped, sizzling against the stone when it impacted. With a soft glimmer of magic, Celestia jammed her spear into the ground, where it stuck, its bloodlust denied.

"What are you doing?" Nightmare Moon asked, raising the orb over her head. All that could be seen of her face was her cat-like irises. The rest was cast into the unnatural shadow that ate all light. "Surrendering? Ha! Do not think I am going to-"

Celestia's horn flared brightly. With a pop of displaced air, a stone sphere with a crudely chiseled triangle appeared in the air above her. Twilight instantly recognized it as one of the globes that they had thought were the real elements of harmony when they fought Nightmare Moon a year ago, except the triangle here had color. The simple geometrical figure glowed a soft yellow.

"What-" Nightmare Moon said in utter disbelief. "No. *No!*"

Another pop. A sphere adorned with a brightly glowing orange rhombus appeared next to the triangle-bearing sphere. Nightmare Moon instantly launched the Star Hammer towards Celestia, the orb trailing darkness as it sped up, only to impact with a crash against a bright yellow shield Celestia erected last minute with a pulse from her horn.

"No! No! Don't you dare! No!" Nightmare Moon screamed as she battered the orb against the shield to no effect. With every strike, the tower shook.

Pop. A red diamond sphere joined them

"Not them! Anything but them! How *dare* you?! Is nothing sacred to you? I will kill you! *I will kill you, sister!*" Nightmare roared, breathing heavily and retracting the useless orb. The dark mare breathed heavily, sounding lost and confused, suddenly. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"So there is still some love left in your heart," Celestia said, molten tears flowing freely from her eyes as she worked her spell. "That makes this much harder for me to do. I will save you, sister. Please, have faith," she said, her voice wavering. "Believe in me."

Pop. Green octagon sphere.

"I will not *let* you!" Nightmare snarled, raising the orb. "I will destroy this world before I let you do this. You betrayed them! Give them back!"

"Do what you must," Celestia said, her voice serene yet infinitely sad. "They gave them freely because they love you, Luna."

Nightmare Moon screamed, a loud, primal and wordless noise that came from the bottom of her very being. Her eyes were wild as the corrupt and maddened mare reared up on her hindlegs, her forehooves sheathed in umbral magic. A second later, she brought them crashing down again with cataclysmic force.

Twilight's ears were ringing painfully, and she couldn't see. Her head was throbbing, and all was grey. Eventually, the unicorn realized what she saw was smoke, or rather, pulverized stone was obscuring her vision. As her hearing slowly returned, she could hear an ominous and distant rumble

that went on without end. It sounded like a dozen earthquakes, avalanches and landslides all at once. Slowly getting her bearings, Twilight looked down and saw that she was hovering mid air. Rather, she was standing on nothing at all.

Nearby, unmoved and unfazed, Celestia calmly flapped her wings and hovered inside her protective shell. A fifth orb had joined the other four, a blue rectangle adorning its face. Nightmare Moon hovered close by, too, the Star Hammer swirling about her.

Below them, the city of Crepuscin lay in ruins. Almost every single building was reduced to rubble, and as Twilight watched, huge chunks of the city came loose, split apart at the seams, to grind against each other, covering the entire scene in a layer of dust like a thick fog. The clouds above had dispersed, every single brick and stone tumbling to the ground. The cloud city had simply ceased to exist.

Wild magic spat forth from the cracks, some places erupting as gouts of flame while other areas were getting covered in rampant plant growth, huge vines snaking across the city. All the while, everything was slowly sinking into the ground. Not a single pony could be seen below. The only buildings that still stood were the towers of the palace, though the courtyard underneath them was obscured.

"I carry the deaths of your madness with me, they are my failing!" Celestia yelled, her voice cutting through the cacophony like a blade. "They are the wage of my failure to kill you, they are my burden!"

Nightmare Moon gave no indication she had heard. The mare was looking down at the city below, her horn utter-dark as she wrought destruction upon Crepuscin. An entire section of the city disintegrated in a particularly vicious burst of magic.

Pop. A purple star sphere appeared, the sixth and final element.

"I will not let them remember you like this. *Believe* in me," Celestia said, her horn flaring up with the full radiance of the sun. When she called upon her magic now, each of the orbs brightened as well, and color streamed fourth from each of the spheres.

Everything froze. The destruction of Crepuscin halted, buildings obscenely posed mid-collapse. Celestia was unmoving, her face frozen in a rictus of sadness and pain. Nightmare Moon had turned her head, eyes wide with fear as she looked at the sun princess. Nothing moved, and there was not a single sound. The memory had played itself out yet again.

"In a few minutes, the memory will begin anew, and I will go back, taking with me all we have seen and done here, as I do every time it restarts," Luna said. She was looking at Twilight and shaking her head slowly, her eyes red. "You have ruined everything. I was trying to protect my *sister*," the princess said, sighing deeply.

"You arrogantly think to come in here and 'fix' something," Luna spat, her anger growing. "If I let myself forget, I run the risk of this happening anew. I run the risk of forcing Celly to do this again. It nearly killed her to banish me, and I will *not* see her suffer like this once more. I will perform the duty she could not, before I let this happen again. But it will not happen again, because I am going to learn from the past."

Luna's voice grew louder and louder as she rounded on Twilight. "Who do you think you *are*, Twilight Sparkle? Who are you to come here and offer forgiveness? How arrogant are you to think a foal like you could understand? I do not know how you managed to slip in here, but I have half a mind to burn every last scrap of magic out of you when you wake!" The princess hissed.

"Celestia," Twilight said, simply. She shrank back from Luna's angry barrage, hurt, and it was all she could think to say.

"My sister is half the reason I am doing this in the first place!" Luna yelled. "But since you like your secrets so much, let me give them all to you while we are so well underway."

"My sister's duty? Do you remember when I talked to you so long ago about the burden that comes with eternal life? What do you think happens when an eternal goes mad and does not end itself?" Luna narrowed her eyes and thrust her snout at Twilight. "To whom do you think the burden of ending them falls? Who do you think carries the weight of being the executioner? How many eternal lives do you think the Sun Spear has ended?"

Twilight closed her eyes and shook.

"The elements? Why did I weep for them? The elements grant you long life. Eternal life, in fact, if you so desire and learn how to control them. Did you think you were the first bearers? No. There were those before you, and they were beloved of my sister and I," Luna said, blinking back tears. "We loved them, both of us, we loved each and every one of them. To stop me, they gave up their elements and granted their power to Celestia! They turned mortal again, for me!"

"And before you ask, sure, why the moon not, let us talk about Orion, too." Luna shook. "He was the paragon saint of the griffins. What you saw? The mountain range and the pyre at Orion's breath? That is his *grave* after Celestia did what she must. The constellation of Orion is my homage to him, as are many of constellations in the night sky."

"Any *other* questions, Twilight?" Luna snarled, looking like she would up and hit Twilight on the snout. "Since we are having such a nice chat."

Twilight's gut clenched, and she could not hold back the tears any more. She wept, head hanging low as tears fell freely down to lose themselves in the time-lost madness of the city below. She did not weep for lost innocence. Knowing these things made her stronger. She did not weep for the dead, for they could not be helped. She did not weep for the nature of the elements of harmony, nor for the fate of the eternals.

Twilight wept for the hardships Celestia and Luna had to endure and suffer. Without thinking, she reached out to try to embrace the ghostly Luna, falling flat against the invisible, non-existent floor they stood on. Luna looked down at her with a sneer of distaste, and Twilight did not even bother getting back up again.

"No," Twilight managed between racking sobs. "You don't get it at all. Celestia *sent* me."

Luna stared, her mouth open in a wordless question.

"You wondered how I managed to get in?" Twilight sniffled. "Celestia helped! *Celestia* helped. If it is like you say," she shook her head and wiped

her tears. "If- if there is something to me, if there is a purpose to my name, why can't it be this? Why can't you let me help you? You say Celestia has forgiven you, and that you have forgiven her, but you refuse to forgive yourself because you're afraid?"

"You're so afraid of becoming Nightmare Moon again, you fear the same will happen again? You're right, it won't if you keep this up. You're never going to become her again because you're *still* broken! Celestia clearly believes in you, I believe in you, but you don't give yourself a chance!" Twilight cried. "You're not a timed bomb! You even said it yourself, the key is to dare to *live* if you don't want to go mad. This isn't living!"

For once, Luna had no scathing reply. The princess looked surprised at first, then lost, looking down at Twilight. When finally she found words to utter, she looked frightened, and her voice was a hoarse whisper. "I think I may have forgotten how to live, Twilight," she said. "And I do not know if I can forget this even if I tried."

"*Try*", Twilight begged. "Try. Because I can't stand to see you like this. Please. Let me help. Let everypony help. You don't even have to *ask*, just let us in."

Luna averted her eyes from Twilight's gaze, sounding pained. "Why do you do this, Twilight? Why do you persist? Any sane pony would leave me well enough alone, but you persist. You just dive in deeper and deeper," she said. "All of you, but you most of all. I do not deserve this."

"Somepony suggested that it might be love," Twilight gave a helpless shrug and a nervous little burst of laughter. She didn't even know what she was saying anymore. "I don't know. I just want to help. I've been trying to tell you."

Luna rubbed her forehead with a hoof and sighed before nodding briskly. "Say I believe you. Say I trust you and agree with you and Celly for a second. What do I do? What do we do?"

Being asked for advice by a goddess in such a frank manner was more than a little intimidating. Twilight paused to think, but she was interrupted by Luna before she could reply.

"Actually, the memory is beginning anew. I will be gone soon. I will wake you," Luna said hurriedly.

"Oh, I put myself to sleep with a spell," Twilight said, smiling. "I can just cancel it, I think. I haven't really tried. Hang on-" the unicorn muttered, searching for that intangible thread of magic that she'd tied to herself and severing it.

Twilight awoke instantly. She still felt tired, and her eyes were crusty, but she was awake, staring up at what appeared to be Applejack's belly. The apple farmer stood across Twilight's supine body in a broad stance. Twilight suddenly realized that she felt very cold. The room was freezing.

As she struggled to scramble out from under Applejack, trying to stand, she realized she was trapped in a veritable jungle of hooves and legs. Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie all stood over and around her, every one of them facing the door, and the few faces she could see were grimly determined.

By the door stood Luna herself. The moon princess' wings were spread, impossibly large, curving along the walls and roof in a threatening display. Her horn glowed, bathing the room in unnatural light, and frost-smoke emanated from her body. It reminded Twilight all too much of a certain outburst back in the town of Grey Hollows, except this time, nopony looked frightened in the least. The princess held no power over them.

"I will not say this again. You will step aside this very moment, or I will not be held accountable for what I do," Luna said in a low voice.

"You ain't touchin' her," Applejack snapped.

"Take back black snooty and give us Lunie!" Pinkie Pie yelled.
"Meanie-pants!"

"We're not scared," Rainbow Dash snorted.

"You do not-" Luna began, but she suddenly paused. Twilight watched as the princess' pupils shrank to pinpricks, her mind no doubt catching up to everything that had gone on inside the memory.

The princess sat down on the ground with exaggerated care and slowness. Step by step, she folded her wings and looked down at the ground, shamefaced. "I was wrong," she breathed. "All this time."

Luna sought Twilight's eyes, and found them as the bookish unicorn got up on her hooves. The ponies who had surrounded her were all surprised and pleased to see her up again.

"Twilight, I can end the memory, but how can I *forget*?" Luna asked.

Twilight smiled as confidently as she could. "You don't. You get closure. We go into the Everfree forest."

Chapter 18

"Closure," Luna repeated, as if tasting the word. "You want me to go back to the Everfree forest, to the, ah, site of the event." Luna stated, not quite as a question. The princess raised a brow in Twilight's general direction.

"*What* event? No pony's going anywhere until you tell us what the hay's going on!" Rainbow Dash protested. Five confused ponies stood still at the opposite end of the room from the princess. "I don't know whether to buck Luna, or, well, whatever!" the frustrated pegasus complained to a murmur of general assent.

"Rainbow Dash. All of you. Please, forgive me," Luna said, smiling at them with a mixture of fear and hope. "If you wish to know, I will tell you, but these are thoughts I have carried with me for a thousand years." She dropped her eyes. "I wish only to leave it behind now, if I can. You ask to share my burden, and you may regret it."

"Perhaps sharing it might help?" Twilight asked, mirroring the princess' smile as she slowly walked over to stand by her side. The other lucent ponies, tired as though they all were, nodded in unison while Trixie slept on.

"You may be right," Luna admitted, still looking a little nervous about the way the majority of the ponies were looking at her. "I think we are all tired and hungry though. Can I ask that you see about procuring some food, first? I do not want to impose upon Winter Sun further, and I think I spotted a Neighponese take-out across the street. If it possible, I would like to have a few words with Twilight in private."

"Leave you alone with Twilight?" Rainbow Dash asked, narrowing her eyes. "How do we know you haven't cast some sort of spell on her, huh? And how do we know you won't, even if you haven't? What's going *on*?"

"I, ah, perhaps some of us could stay?" Rarity suggested. It was obvious and understandable that they were a bit apprehensive, Twilight

figured. They had not seen what she had seen. Luna must seem like a complete madpony to them, all wrathful at first, then apologetic the very next second.

Luna swallowed and looked away. "Perhaps you are correct. After all this, I have no right-"

"Come on girls, let's go," Applejack commanded just as Twilight was sucking in breath to explain. The orange earth pony prodded the most reluctant of them on the flank, though to little effect. "Git' moving, Ah know Ah'm hungry!"

"Applejack?" Twilight asked, not quite sure what the real question was until after she had said it. She'd not expected Applejack to leap to Luna's defense.

Applejack appeared to understand, and took no offense. She was getting a few surprised looks from the others, though, and looked a little defensive. "Might be that it took me while, yeah. Maybe Ah'm sorry it took Luna helping Trixie to see it, but Ah trust her. And Ah don't see why you don't, too." The farmpony looked around at her friends, none of which would meet her gaze, now.

"Don't see how anypony with cruel intentions can go against the wishes of her own sister to save a, um, distant relative?" Applejack continued, shaking her head a little at the thought. "Ah don't rightly know, but Ah can tell a rotten apple from one that's good eatin', and- oh horsefeathers," she groaned. "What Ah'm saying is, Twi's got a handle on this. Let's just get moving girls."

"Our apologies, princess," Rarity muttered as the ponies began filing out of the room past Luna and Twilight. Fluttershy threw a last, worried glance at Trixie, but the sleeping unicorn did not appear to be suffering any more.

"No," Luna said. "Do not apologize, even in jest. But thank you." The princess locked eyes with Applejack as she passed, and smiled gratefully until they had left, leaving Twilight alone with her once again.

"What do we tell them?" Luna asked, taking a few steps towards the bed and peering at the sleeping unicorn atop it. "How much would you have me tell your friends?"

Twilight walked past the princess and hopped onto the bed, turning to face her with an implacable smile. "My friends? You mean your friends. Our friends," she said. "How many times do you need to be reminded?"

"At least once more, it seems," Luna admitted with a half-hearted chuckle.

"As long as you tell them the truth about the elements," Twilight said. "I- were you serious? Will we..." her breath caught in her throat. It felt ridiculous to speak so frankly of such momentous things, and the room felt bare. Insufficient. This was not a conversation to be held in a half-ruined hotel room.

"Eternal life?" Twilight asked, at length. "Immortality?"

"I hope I have not given the impression that I am in the habit of lying or exaggerating," Luna said. "It is a possibility. An option, if you will. And yes, I will tell them." The moon princess gave a short, barking laughter as she shook her head.

"It is ridiculous, is it not? This memory. If I had told Celestia of it, perhaps..." the princess muttered, her voice petering out.

"You didn't tell her," Twilight said, disbelieving. "She- Celestia didn't know you carried the memory. Oh that's just brilliant."

Luna scoffed. "Yes, well, if you had any illusions regarding me being perfect, I hope they are well and truly shattered now."

"I'm sorry," the purple unicorn stammered, uncertain whether the bile was directed at her or at Luna herself, but she didn't like either option very much. "I just, oh my gosh. How did Celestia find out? She *knew*, she helped me!"

"Celestia is a brilliant strategist and a notorious schemer, Twilight," Luna said as she climbed onto the bed herself. Space was a little limited,

but the foot-end fit her and Twilight nicely as they sat together. "She rarely acts on impulse. She must have learned more than I thought in our conversations from the fort and Belltown."

The princess snorted, adding almost as an afterthought; "Perhaps I wanted her to know. I do not rightly recall everything I wrote to her, but she must have gleaned something. I know for a fact that despite her taking over my duties for now, she could not enter the dream. I would have suspected you of tattling, had you not been surprised at the admission just now. I do not think you are quite that brilliant a liar, at any rate."

Twilight blushed a little at that and shrugged. "Well, I'm glad she realized."

"As am I," Luna said.

The following silence was almost comfortable, but it was hard to rest with so many questions up in the air still. It was almost poetic that as they sat there in each others' company, they were facing the ruined doorway. It was a subtle but potent reminder.

"I'm sorry. I betrayed your trust, just like you said – in there," Twilight sighed. It had to be said, though she didn't know if she would like whatever came of bringing it up. Of all the words traded inside the memory, of all the rebukes and threats, that bit was what stuck with her. Everything else could be excused, but not that. Never that.

"Do you regret it?" Luna calmly queried.

"No," Twilight answered, instantly. She didn't even have to think. "That would be absurd."

"Why not?" Luna asked.

The princess was looking over at Twilight, and only now did the unicorn realize how close they were. They sat side to side, and their legs were touching, as were their flanks. Luna's eyes were regarding Twilight with apparent impassivity, but the bookish pony knew far better. She had no desire to ever play poker with Luna.

"Because it was the right thing to do," Twilight said, trying to affect nonchalance. Her shrug rubbed her hindleg against Luna's and she winced.

The princess did not seem to notice, tilting her head a little. "Are you aware of what a horribly illogical atrocity it is to justify something with nothing but itself?"

Twilight huffed. "Don't be difficult. I was trying to help. If you can do something ridiculous for anypony," she said, flicking her head back at Trixie. "Why the hay can't I?"

Luna appeared to consider this for a long time, her eyes never leaving Twilight. Perhaps it would have been unnerving if Twilight hadn't been a little cranky. She had no idea why Luna was being so difficult when it was in fact very simple.

It was simple, wasn't it? It had been simple before, at the very least. Twilight had had a goal, a mountain to climb. She'd always told herself that trying to sort out this mess came first, before she'd consider a very big question. Now she stood at the top of the mountain, and it quickly became apparent that it wasn't the tallest peak.

If no other parts of her little metaphor worked, one thing was for sure; Twilight realized that she had a very long way to fall if she slipped. She had something to lose. The princess had said something in there, inside the dream, that suggested that maybe, perhaps...

"What are we?" Twilight asked, finally voicing that elusive question. "And if you're going to say 'ponies', I *will* cry."

Luna smiled and shook with soundless laughter. "I did not know I had given you cause to think me a prankster, and I am not trying to be obtuse here."

"That is the most brilliant non-answer I could ever have imagined," Twilight admitted, rolling her eyes, eliciting another little laugh from Luna.

"I had my own answer when you broke my trust. When you confirmed that you have no regrets, that answer was reinforced. I want you to answer

your own question, though. Or rather, what do you want for us to be? What is the 'us', Twilight Sparkle?" Luna asked, suddenly serious.

Twilight's stomach clenched. It took her a second for her to convince herself that she was in fact not going to throw up. She had blown it the very second she realized what "it" was. The purple unicorn forced herself to answer, though she could not keep the disappointment from her voice as she fell from the top of the mountain.

"Nothing, apparently," she said, unsteadily getting up on her hooves. "I'm sorry for thinking-"

"Twilight," Luna said, her voice bordering on stern. The princess extended a wing over Twilight's back and gently pushed the bewildered unicorn back down. "Say no more, I do not wish to see you like this!"

"You said you had your answer," Twilight muttered, unable to meet Luna's gaze. The princess' wing stayed where it was, draped over her. It was uncomfortably hot.

"Yes. I have my answer. I know what I think of the element of magic, of she who was strong enough to unite the other elements and stand up to me. Brave enough to face down a thousand years of bitterness wielding something you still only barely understand," Luna explained.

"More than that, I have seen the Twilight behind that element. The pony who recognized that the bitterness left... wounds," Luna said, sighing. "The unicorn who was too stupid and stubborn to leave me well enough alone even on a direct order."

Twilight forced herself to give Luna a quick glance when she said no more. The princess was looking at her, and it made her heart skip a beat. She found no words. She dared hope.

"What are we?" Luna repeated after a long moment, her smile fading. "I do not know, Twilight Sparkle, but you are your own pony, and you can tell me what you want. For my part, I know that I would be a fool not to love you for what you have done for me. But at the same time, you have to remember the goal of this journey, for me."

"You're a princess," Twilight said, nodding, voice dead as she opened the floodgates of logic and reason. "And you have your duties. Celestia has ruled alone for a full millenium, and you want to raise the moon again. Open your own court. Help rule the principality."

"I must," Luna nodded once, mechanically, and it looked like it pained her to do even that. "But before I do that, I wish to set things right. She has managed without me for a thousand years. I am certain she can manage for another few days or weeks, or however long. You have not yet told me your plan."

Twilight felt wretched. She didn't know why, but she'd always had a vague notion that the impossibilities surrounding the situation would somehow fall away when the truth was out. She dared think the word 'love' was involved, but this was nothing like the novels she'd read. Was this the end of the road, then? The princess looked just about as displeased as Twilight felt, and she had no idea how to interpret that. She forced herself to answer the question before she became unable to think of nothing else.

"Well, I don't *know* if it'll work, but perhaps you just need to go back there. Trying to avoid it and refusing to acknowledge that it happened out here in the real world, all the while indulging yourself in a memory like that?" Twilight shrugged. "That's kind of backwards."

"I, ah. The memory, yes," Luna said, licking her lips.

"You haven't ended it yet," Twilight accused, feeling very weary.

"No. I suppose I am letting it run one more time," the princess admitted, and Twilight slowly got up, slipping out from under her wing at that. The unicorn pony hopped down onto the floor and walked towards the door.

"You are leaving?" Luna asked.

"I am going to start walking towards Canterlot. I am going to find Celestia and tell her to buck you in the head," Twilight muttered tiredly.

There was a soft glow from behind Twilight, followed by a muted flash. She felt something poke at a connection in the back of her mind that

she'd never before known was there. It felt like somepony slapped her on the back of the head.

"You've made your point. It is gone," came the princess' voice from behind her, oddly quiet and almost vulnerable. "Will you come with me to the ruins of Crepuscin, or will I walk alone?"

Twilight wanted to shake her head. She wanted to be a big fat hypocrite and refuse to help now that she knew the princess was beyond her reach. More than anything, she wanted to go home to Ponyville with some of her heart intact, thankful that she'd never said those magical three words to Luna. If she just kept refusing to think about it, it might go away.

Twilight nodded. "Of course," she heard herself say, but the words were empty. She was almost thankful when she heard the noise of hoofsteps coming down the hallway, accompanied by animated chatter. She forced herself to adopt an expression resembling normalcy, whatever normal was these days. It probably looked absurd.

"Right! Morning slumber party with Neighponese takeout time!" Pinkie Pie declared as the five ponies entered the room, shedding the disposable saddlebags she wore. It smelled divine, and while she didn't really feel hungry any more, Twilight accepted a plastic plate of lotus spring rolls.

"So," Applejack said, sitting down in the middle of the floor, right next to Twilight. "We're downstairs talkin' to Winter, who by the way is hiding under the sofa downstairs and dearly hopes she never has to play host for us again-"

"Anyway, so you and Ah, Luna," Applejack began anew, leaning on Twilight. "We're downstairs talking to Winter, and you suddenly bolt off like you've seen a ghost. Ah take off after you, and you're yelling at Twi', though she's asleep."

Luna, still atop the bed, nodded and did not interrupt.

"So Ah ask you what's up, and you're not very forthcoming about anything much, and Ah tell you to get away from her, and from there, things pretty much go downhill faster'n for a sapling in a storm," the farmpony

said, sounding neither angry nor confused. She was simply reciting facts. "And then, Twi' wakes up, and you're back to bein' yourself. Why?"

Rainbow Dash nodded vigorously along with every word Applejack said, only pausing to stick her snout into her spiced rice. She'd sat down next to Fluttershy and Pinkie on Twilight's other side, and was listening with rapt attention.

"We're all aware that it's all tied to the sleep deprivation issues Twilight had earlier," Rarity added. It was obvious that Pinkie and Rainbow had not let on what they knew, for which Twilight was thankful.

"It is not so much related to Twilight as it is to me," Luna began, levitating over a helping of leaves and rice proffered by Pinkie. "Or rather, it was not, up until recently. Listen well, for I hope this is the last time I have to tell this tale."

Luna told them everything. She re-told her memory with precision and skill that was the unenviable result of having lived it and replayed it in her mind millions of times. The memory was as much part of her as anything else. Luna was herself, Luna was the moon, and Luna was the memory of her lowest moment all. She shared this part of her with them, and looking at her friends' faces, Twilight was glad that she had entered the darkness of Luna's mind alone.

It was hard to understand how they could listen so passively to what triggered images in Twilight's head. While Luna told them of Celestia's role, of the Sun Spear, Pinkie Pie calmly offered a hoof-full of rice to a smiling Fluttershy. Twilight cringed, remembering the insatiable, screaming hunger of the horrible weapon. Rarity merely shook her head at the destruction of Crepuscin. To her, it was a tragic and unnecessary event of the past. Twilight had not just seen it, she had been there, and it still weighed on her. She still wondered what became of the hundreds of ponies in the square below the tower as Crepuscin ended.

To the others, it was a story. To Twilight, it felt like a real event. Looking at Princess Luna, the purple unicorn had to wonder what kind of pony could make this part of her daily routine. The madness of Nightmare Moon after her release was not quite so hard to grasp, suddenly.

One thing, though, caught their attention. When Luna concluded her tale, it was Pinkie Pie who spoke up first. "Hang on, so, we live *forever*?" she asked, curious and shocked past the point of even smiling.

"Forever," Rainbow Dash repeated experimentally, as if the word was foreign to her.

"Yes, about that," Luna said, sighing. "It is one of the many potential powers of the elements, yes, but it is not a power that belongs to you. It can be taken away, too."

"What happened to the previous bearers?" Rarity asked fearfully.

Luna closed her eyes and was quiet for a moment before she replied. Twilight had gathered it would be a sore spot. Celestia's words inside the memory still echoed in her own mind, too. *They gave them freely because they love you, Luna.*

"Nothing," the princess said. "I asked Celestia. It was... the first thing I asked her when we got back to the palace. She told me they had lived full and healthy lives until the day they passed, most of them leaving behind families of their own. Perhaps she lied to me, but there is no intrinsic harm in losing the spark of the element itself. Worse by far is to lose sight of who you are. That is the real danger, what you should truly fear," Luna warned. "But then, that goes for everypony. We all lose our way sometimes. Myself included."

The princess levitated the leftovers onto the floor, apparently satiated, and her expression hardened. "I trust you will not take offense at my words, but I think both my sister and I would have liked to keep this from you for a little bit longer."

"If you don't mind me asking, um, why?" Fluttershy asked.

"Because it is not an easy decision to make, even if you can go back on it," Luna replied, positively grim.

Once again, the conversation Twilight'd had with Luna regarding eternity sprung to mind. It felt like so long ago, now, that evening in the fields of Breezavale. Where the others looked confused by the notion that

there could be drawbacks, that anypony could ever turn down such an offer, Twilight entertained no illusions about the glory of eternity. At least, not if it was something one had to face alone.

Twilight huffed and jammed a lotus roll in her mouth, as if she could shut her own brain up.

"Regardless, it is not an immediate issue," Luna said. "And I think we are nearing ways end. I suspect we shall see about finding a way home, soon."

"What about Trixie?" Fluttershy asked. The yellow pegasus got to her feet and walked over to stand by the bed, followed closely by Pinkie Pie. Pinkie had used Fluttershy's back as a table while they ate, spilling rice all over her. The pink earth pony was hard at work trying to get all the sticky rice out of her coat, and Fluttershy didn't seem to mind.

"Ah yes. She has been awake for the past half hour or so," Luna said affably, turning around. "What about you, Trixie? Where do you go from here?"

Indeed, when she was called out, Trixie's eyes popped open. She seemed alert enough, despite her condition, though her expression was one of suspicion. The showmare frowned at Luna.

"Trixie would ask why you do this," the red unicorn mare said, her voice rusty, a far cry from her usual high-pitched and boastful declarations. "But you're clearly trying to save everypony out of the kindness out of your heart." The words were spoken with a mixture of sarcasm and disdain that made Twilight's hackles rise. The purple unicorn's eyes narrowed, but the bedridden mare's sneer was unbroken.

"Trixie has... *heard* things," she said. "Things that she would not have believed half a year ago. Things Trixie would rather not have heard." Her voice wavered a little bit as she returned the question. "But what the *hay* is Trixie supposed to do?"

"You don't have your magic back," Twilight said, feeling numb.

"Trixie tried," she replied, voice strained. She closed her eyes as if concentrating, but nothing happened. Her horn did not so much as shimmer. "Nothing! Not a spark!" she cried.

"Definitely not the Great and Powerful any more," Rainbow Dash muttered humorlessly, earning a few glares.

"It is as I said, though I do not know if you were awake at the time. The damage has been done. For what it is worth, I am sorry you had to suffer due to my negligence," Luna said, frowning. "I am afraid I can not break the rules a second time. Not for this."

"Can not," Twilight repeated. She knew it was more a question if "*will not*", but nopony else appeared to want to press the issue. Trixie, however, was not thus inhibited.

"*Suffer?*" Trixie shrieked, and Fluttershy moved a little closer, as if ready to hold her down again. The livid mare calmed down quickly, lowering her voice to a murmur that crackled with the embers of anger. "Trixie is powerless, her magic *gone*, why bother 'saving' me at all? Just let me die."

Twilight dropped her eyes. She heard Fluttershy make a noise halfway between a gasp and a sob. Did Trixie truly still wish she was gone? Did they do the right thing?

"Why'd ya do it?" Applejack asked. The apple farmer approached the sullen red unicorn, steady and composed. Twilight knew she burned with a desire to know, and it showed as she cut through the mood in the room with an edge of no-nonsense. "Your family. What happened?"

"What does Trixie's past matter if there's no future?" Trixie muttered, but Applejack was undaunted, standing at the side of the bed.

"It matters to me. What happened?" Applejack implored.

"Trixie does not owe you anything," the red unicorn scoffed, though she was blinking rapidly and trying to shift away from the orange earth pony.

"You owe us your *life*," Applejack hissed, leaning in so close that their snouts were almost touching. "And you will tell me."

"Applejack!" Fluttershy squeaked, scrabbling onto the bed on the opposite side and pushing her back with her head. Luna herself looked taken aback and ready to intervene. "She's still weak, please don't do that!" the yellow pegasus said.

"Trixie is not *weak*," Trixie snarled, pushing them both back with quivering hooves. "And Trixie owes you *nothing*. I do not want this life! But fine, you will have your story, your explanation."

"You don't have to," Fluttershy protested. "Applejack is just, um, tired. Please, you have to rest."

"If you wish to make yourself useful to Trixie, pegasus, go find Trixie something to eat," Trixie snorted. Fluttershy nodded and headed for the door, halting Dash with an imploring look. The blue pegasus pony looked about to fly over attack Trixie for her words, but nodded reluctantly.

"Trixie's parents are nobility," she began. "Nobles, but lesser nobles. They never approved of Trixie's choices. Trixie wanted to tell stories, but there is no room for fanciful tales and 'lies' in that house. When Trixie told her parents what she wanted to do, they refused her to go to advanced magic schools. Took her home from school the very same day."

"Homeschooling then? Truly?" Rarity asked, receiving a bitter nod from Trixie.

"Trixie's teachers had said she had talent. That she could one day be the very best, perhaps," Trixie said, her lower jaw trembling. "The best," she repeated, spitting the word out as if it pained her.

"Trixie left for a time. She entranced the commoners," she continued, rubbing her eyes. "Dazzled the stupid ponies with her stories and what little magic she knew. And it worked. They *loved* the Great and Powerful Trixie."

The broken red unicorn grimaced with bittersweet pride at the memory. "But when she came home all she got was scorn and hatred. Mother... *hit* Trixie. And Trixie struck back," she drew a sharp breath

through clenched teeth. "Trixie realized that she had to find her own life, and left again, for good this time. She- I. I never knew what happened to her."

Applejack shook her head sluggishly from side to side as she slipped down from the bed. "T'aint right. No pony should hate their foals. Just like no pony should hate their parents. S'all wrong."

"Trixie is *not* sorry," Trixie said, trying to disguise a snuffle as a disdainful sniff. "And doesn't even want to know."

"Why d'you lie? A course you want to know," Applejack scoffed.

"You are from Hoofington, yes?" Luna asked.

Trixie, taken aback by the question, shifted her attention to Luna and nodded mutely.

"If it had been fatal and magical in nature, it would have been listed in the event log for magical altercations," Luna said, shrugging. "I read all eighty-eight volumes, and if memory serves, nothing of note has happened in Hoofington since a rather unfortunate accident involving a trio of unicorn colts fifty years hence."

"You can't know-" Trixie stammered. "You don't-"

"I am quite sure, but I will find out for certain and tell you," Luna said. "Whether you like it or not."

Fluttershy returned, carrying a bowl of soup on her back wedged between her wings. With Rarity's help, they got the bowl safely onto the nightstand next to Trixie, who gave it a glance and a snort, as if the soup had offended her.

"It does not matter," the red unicorn muttered. "Trixie still has nowhere to go."

Twilight scratched her horn and sighed, trying to think of how to solve this. How could any pony be so lost? Why would she have done without her own magic? It was an unimaginable situation. She drew a total blank.

"Ah thought you hated your magic," Applejack said, scrunching up her face.

"Well, thinking you've killed somepony tends to have that effect!" Trixie snapped, but Twilight snagged on Applejack's words.

"But it's not about the magic, is it?" Twilight chanced. "It's about the story. And you're a fantastic storyteller."

Trixie looked over at Twilight for the first time since she woke up, and the purple unicorn was taken aback by just how much hatred that there was in those sunken eyes. The showmare shrugged dismissively and leaned over to give the soup an experimental sip, much to Fluttershy's delight.

Twilight was undeterred. "We've been chasing you for weeks, Trixie. Or rather, we've been chasing Phoenix. Do you even know what you've left in your wake? Do you know what they are saying?"

Having sipped the soup and apparently found it to her liking, Trixie drank greedily. It began innocently enough, but she soon had her entire head down the soup bowl. She looked about to lick it clean when she realized everypony was looking at her in silence. The red unicorn sat up in the bed and looked at Twilight expectantly. Twilight crossed her hooves in a show of defiance. She could be difficult, too.

"Fine!" Trixie spat. "Tell Trixie. What were they saying?"

"Every single one of them were spellbound. You touched hearts and minds *without* your magic," Twilight said, and she did not have to fake the passion that crept into her voice. "I couldn't wait to hear what happened next, and all I had to go by was second-hoof fragments. It wasn't just trying to find a callous and confused mare. I wanted to know."

The venom in Trixie's gaze was tampered somewhat by confusion. Rarity rushed to fill the gap.

"What Twilight says is true. Lady Argent in Belltown even remarked upon it. You were a sensation, from how she told it," the fashionista said, smiling.

"The story about the ursa major and everything, it wasn't half bad either," Rainbow Dash added, shrugging. "I mean, being an ass to everypony aside."

"If the road's your home, Ah don't see why you can't do that no more," Applejack said with a shrug. "But that Argent lass seemed mighty impressed indeed. Perhaps the princess here can pull a few strings with her if she can't give you your magic back?" The farmpony glanced up at the princess.

"I most certainly could," Luna agreed, but Trixie held up a shaky forehoof, blinking back tears.

"Trixie. Does not owe you. *Anything*," she said, sounding like she was trying to convince herself more than anypony else. "She will do this herself if she wishes."

"I have not, and will never ask for anything in return, Trixie," Luna calmly explained. "But I am certain a strong and independent mare like yourself only needs to be made aware of her options, yes."

This seemed to placate Trixie somewhat, and she nodded.

"One thing I will give you, though, and whether you see it as a request or permission, that is up to you," the princess said locking eyes with the red unicorn. "I know you have heard all we have said. You are one of very few ponies who know a very unpleasant few truths that nested in a web of secrets between my sister and I."

"I would ask that you tell the story," Luna said. "Spin your craft however you wish, but do not lie. If you wish to use the story, you will not lie by omission, but embellish if you must. Tell the true story of the banishment. If you have questions, ask me. Do not be afraid to send me a letter."

Trixie stared, stunned. Honest amazement was plain on her face for a precious few seconds before she re-assumed her casual superior sneer. "Perhaps Trixie will. However she sees fit."

Luna, apparently satisfied, nodded and turned to the other ponies scattered around the room. "I suggest we leave Trixie alone for now, and let her have the room. We have one final matter to discuss. Shall we perhaps retire to the lobby?"

"I suppose," Twilight said, giving Trixie one last glance. The showmare was looking right back at her, still angry. It hurt Twilight, not just because it was unpleasant to be the target of so much hate, but because she had done nothing to deserve it.

The seven ponies left Trixie alone in the room and silently marched, single file, down to the lobby. The reception room was as they had left it, sofas and clean stone tile floor, with Winter Sun sitting in one of the sofas. The white, pale-maned pegasus did not look happy.

"You can have your stinking hotel back!" Winter cried, pointing an accusatory hoof. "Last one, okay, that was fine. Angry mobs is kind of a new thing for me, I'll give you that, so I'll chalk that up to a learning experience."

Luna looked decidedly sheepish as Winter Sun went on. "The exploding walls up on second floor? That's also fine! Because you know what? That's old news, that happened way back when I was co-owner of The Last Ditch Effort, a nice little inn over in Coltland. Happens all the time! The fact that it was a visit from the other princess was a nice touch, though the guards didn't seem terribly impressed by that."

"I'll cover that-" Luna muttered.

"But I want to know what the *buck* happened up there that made every single glass in my kitchen freeze, crack and *explode!*" Winter shrieked. "And I want to know why that warranted half of you bolting out on a snack run! No, actually don't tell me. Just take your damned hotel back!"

The only sound was Winter Sun's labored breathing as she stared at the princess. Luna coughed, and Pinkie bounced over to hug Winter Sun, by way of nothing.

"I-" Winter Sun sputtered, deflating and closing her eyes, hugging Pinkie Pie back. "I'm sorry, oh my goodness, princess I, I did not mean to

yell, please don't hate me. I'm just, I'm a little stressed. This is all a bit much. This is not my usual brand of crazy. Forgive me, and I don't actually want to give you back the hotel, or, well, if you want it back, it's yours, but I don't *want* to. I just need to take up a second loan, I think, and-

"We have been more of an inconvenience than I thought we would be," Luna interrupted her. "And I will cover all the expenses and more. The finances should not be a problem, but I am afraid I am going to have to ask another favor."

It looked as if what little life was left in Winter Sun died as she let go of Pinkie Pie and sat down on her rump. "Uh-huh. Of course," she said, her voice unsteady. "How may I be of service?"

"Up in the remaining room," Luna began.

"What's left of it," Rainbow Dash interjected, causing Winter's lower lip to tremble.

"There's a hurt and weak mare who will probably refuse professional medical aid," the princess continued.

"A rude mare with an ego that puts Rainbow Dash to shame," Rarity said, rolling her eyes. Winter sighed.

"Hey!" Dash called, though it was hard to tell whether she was more indignant at the obvious insult, or the fact that Trixie bested her in something.

"I would like for you to see to it that she does not lack for anything. I will have the council provide all the bits you will need, but she should be recovering at a rapid pace. Just feed her and keep her company sometime," Luna concluded.

"I guess I can do that", Winter muttered.

"Do you think she'll even want company?" Twilight asked.

"She will not, but she needs it," the princess said. "She is a very clever pony, and tremendously strong to have come so far, but she has suffered, and I will say again that nopony does well alone."

"Her speech mannerisms," Rarity noted, her voice sad. "It's a defense, a way to distance herself from things and from others."

"Quite so," Luna agreed. "But I am fairly certain she will be okay. I will keep an eye on her, just to be sure. For now, though, we should find someplace else to sleep for the night, what with the state of the hotel here. In case we do not meet again soon, Winter Sun, I would like to say farewell."

"Sleep sounds wonderful," Fluttershy said, yawning. "Thank you for the, um, well, rooms, Winter Sun. I hope to see you again."

"Yeah," Winter muttered. "About that, can we try one of you at a time, next time, and see if perhaps at least some of my business survives? I haven't even *opened* yet!"

Chapter 19

Twilight slept until the early hours of morning the next day. The sleepy unicorn did not immediately open her eyes when she woke. She lay entirely still for a while, simply listening to the sounds of the city. Outside the open window, Clopenhagen was gearing up for a new and busy weekday, entirely unimpressed by her woes. Carts rolled by with an uncaring clatter of wheels on cobblestones. Ponies conversed and shouted, oblivious to Twilight's turmoil.

The pensive unicorn pony snapped fully awake and gave a mighty snort. When had she become so inconsolably morose? It was ridiculous in the extreme. Twilight rubbed her eyes and rolled out of bed to stand, trying to be quiet about it. She had no desire to wake anypony else, though she was a little surprised that she was the first to rise. Well, except Luna. Of course. The princess was nowhere to be seen. The fact that Twilight woke unhindered by Luna's spell, her magic at her beck and call, it all seemed like a very meager consolation now.

Twilight had to resist the urge to slap herself on the face to keep from succumbing to the gloom that threatened to overtake her. She wanted nothing more than to laugh it off, but somehow, she didn't think one of Pinkie Pie's giggles could dispel the cold lump that Luna's admission had left in her gut. She looked over at the relentlessly optimistic earth pony where she lay and wondered how she did it, how she always found the strength to smile.

Pinkie Pie lay nestled up against one of Fluttershy's sides, opposite of Rainbow Dash. The pink party pony somehow managed to grin broadly at life itself even as she slept, and Twilight decided that she would draw strength from her. That was what friends did, right? They supported each other, sometimes even without words. Friends *inspired* each other and Pinkie Pie was just that; an inspiration.

As were they all. They had come a long way in the past weeks, an awful long way in a very short time, Twilight thought. She walked between the beds that the Clopenhagen Plaza had arranged for them. The relatively

small room had three such beds, one of which was decidedly not native to the suite. This raised the interesting question of whether or not the hotel carried spare beds, or if they'd robbed other rooms to accommodate them.

Fluttershy looked so peaceful as she slept, surrounded by two of her best friends. Twilight knew how much it had taken out of the quiet and shy pegasus to speak what she considered her darkest secrets. The bookish unicorn let her eyes wander over to Rainbow Dash, who even in her sleep seemed to vibrate with unspent energy. She was her old self again, unburdened and as loud as ever together with Pinkie, but Twilight knew they would ensure that Fluttershy had a place to be. They all had each other, all six of them.

Twilight resolved to visit Fluttershy's cottage soon after she got home. She didn't spend nearly enough time with her. Perhaps she'd see about taking the hot air balloon up to Rainbow Dash's house one day, too? That would surprise her. The mental image of a flabbergasted Rainbow Dash alone was enough of a reason for Twilight to promise herself to do just that.

On the other bed, side by side, lay Rarity and Applejack. As ever, the two were contrasts, despite how well they got along these days. The white unicorn lay on her back, perfectly still. It was probably just wishful thinking and her own mood, but Twilight imagined she could feel the fashionista's strength just by looking at her. Twilight had meant every word she'd said to her. Rarity was stronger and more independent than anypony had a right to be, even if she needed a nudge to realize this. Twilight could only hope to one day be half as strong, just like she wished she was as brave as Rainbow.

And then there was Applejack. Twilight regarded the farmpony who lay in a tangle of sheets that was an unintentional yet complete revolt against the neatness regime of Rarity opposite of her. She was a rock, implacable and dependable. Yet yesterday, she had moved. To Applejack, finally, Luna was a friend. Just like Twilight was to Luna. Friends. The thought sent a lance of pain through her.

Exasperated with her unruly mind, Twilight sat down between the two of the beds occupied by her friends, her eyes drawn to the third, empty bed. At some point, Applejack stirred, the earth pony's body attuned to the rising of Celestia's sun after so many years of tending the farm. Twilight

noticed Applejack hopping off the bed to stand at her side, but did not move.

"You okay there, sugar?" Applejack asked, yawning.

"No," Twilight said, looking over at her and trying to smile. "But I will be, I think."

The door to the room creaked, and Luna quietly entered, trying not to disturb the still-sleeping ponies. She smiled at Twilight and Applejack, but the latter of the two did not so much as look up. Applejack was still fixed on Twilight, the very image of neutrality.

"She hurt you?" the orange earth pony asked. Twilight's ears burned a little. Luna could clearly hear them, and the princess looked a little discomfited all of a sudden.

The answer was of course not an easy one. If anything, Twilight blamed herself for getting her hopes up. It hurt, but it was probably her own fault.

"No," Twilight quietly muttered, hoping to avoid a scene. Applejack's gaze had a way to unnerve her even though she knew her friend only wanted what was best for her. In fact, perhaps it was *because* she knew Applejack wanted what was best for her. Twilight was getting a sneaking suspicion that what *she* wanted was decidedly not good for herself. Applejack nodded and leaned in to nuzzle Twilight, saying no more.

Luna cleared her throat. "I just came back from the city council's offices," she told Applejack. "I have arranged for transport home for the five of you by sky chariot tonight, but if you wish to stay in the city for a little longer, you may contact Dappled Blossom of the royal relations office."

The farmpony shrugged, looking at Twilight and Luna both. "Y'all are going through with this then? You sure you don't want me or anypony else to with? Ain't like Ah expect you'll be in trouble, but you say the word now, y'hear."

Twilight felt a sudden surge of affection for Applejack. She knew how much her friend must be aching to return to Sweet Apple Acres, and an

offer or a promise made by Applejack was always sincere. She shook her head and smiled. "No, I'll be fine. *We'll* be fine. Back home before you know it, right?"

"If you say so, Twi'," Applejack returned, clearly more confident in Twilight than the purple unicorn herself. "You thinkin' of leaving right now?"

"Expediency is something I would appreciate, but I do not feel I am in a position to ask or demand anything of you at this point," Luna admitted with a self-deprecating snort. Before Twilight could call her out on that, she raised a hoof to forestall any comments. "Let us eat breakfast in the cafeteria downstairs and take it from there?"

Twilight nodded. "Breakfast, and then I'm good to go," she said, resolved. A sudden, childish impulse urged her to glare at Luna as she spoke her last words, but she ignored it. "I just want this to be over, too."

After rousing their friends from slumber and waiting the obligatory five minutes while certain more fashion-conscious elements of the gang gussied up, they all headed downstairs together. The Clopenhagen Plaza was a beautiful and grand hotel where every hallway was decorated with the same care - and budget - that others might use for a study. Twilight had hardly been in a position to appreciate the grandeur last night, so the effect of waking up in the most most luxurious hotel in Clopenhagen was quite staggering.

The cafeteria was no different. Beautiful yet uncomfortably cold stone floors played host to ornately carved tables and the softest of pillows for seating. Many of the patrons of the hotel were already having their breakfast, and the soft noises of muted conversation mixed with the occasional soft *tink* of glassware on stone enveloped them.

After a brief conversation with a waiter who had a hard time reconciling a meeting with royalty with the posh air he was no doubt paid to affect, they were seated at a long table made for eight. Luna took a seat at one end, and Twilight repressed an impish impulse to take the other end seat. For the second time in fifteen minutes, she wanted to slap herself across the face. How could she have been so stupid? And why was she being such a foal about it?

"Aw, the party is over already?" Pinkie Pie asked when they had all visited the buffet and the table was a mess of empty plates. The ponies all looked a little saddened at Luna and Twilight's explanation that they would be parting ways. Ever the first to speak, Pinkie was pouting.

"You are free to stay in Clopenhagen for as long as you wish," Luna said, repeating what she had told Applejack earlier. "The hotel room is paid for, but if Twilight agrees, I would like to make for the Everfree as soon as possible."

"It's awfully sudden, no?" Rarity added, arching a brow as she levitated a napkin to dab at the corners of her mouth.

"Perhaps," the princess agreed, pushing an errant plate a little further in the table. It was an almost distressingly mundane gesture coming from her. "I do not remember if I told you, but I have always known my goal with this journey to be resuming my duties. You were my primary focus, of course, but it is something I knew that would wait for me at the end. I am, ah, eager to get there."

"S'not unreasonable, considerin' all you've done," Applejack said, thumping her chest, eliciting a burp that earned a glare from Rarity. "Pardon."

"Hey, I thought you fixed the whole dream, memory, whatever," Rainbow Dash protested. "Aren't you okay now? I mean, you look fine."

Luna gave Dash a half-smile. "To speak plain, yes, I could probably raise the Moon in my current state. I have always had the ability to do so, and while I am relieved, it still feels, ah, unfinished. Going back to Canterlot as it is, it would not feel right. I want to make sure nopony else makes the mistake Trixie did."

"The ponies in Grey Hollows," Fluttershy muttered quietly.

"Yes, well, there is that, too," Luna sighed. "I suppose. Them and what they represent. I would head straight for the Hollows, but I am not sure the problem is one that can be solved quite so directly, nor so quickly."

Twilight felt a pang of pain at the sadness in Luna's voice. The princess would never show any emotion in public, but she could swear she felt it all the same. "Right, well, um," Twilight said, unsure how to begin. "I guess we should be going. You guys tell Spike that I'll be right home, okay?"

"Can do," Applejack chuckled, but she suddenly looked a bit uncertain, looking at the others arrayed around the table. "Er, we are heading home first thing in the evenin', right?"

"As much as I'd like to stay and see the sights, as they say, I am positively brimming with ideas I want to put into practice," Rarity replied. "And I do miss Sweetie Belle," she added quietly.

Fluttershy nodded, hanging her head. "I think I would like to go home, too, please. Angel must miss me so much, and with winter coming, the poor little animals need me."

Pinkie gave a short-lived little pout as she glanced out the large glass windows onto the street beyond with its many wonders. It took her all of two seconds to break into a grin as she nodded. "I haven't had a chance to bake for so long, we should totally head home so I can throw us a welcome home party!"

"You can't-" Rainbow Dash began, but she caught herself and shook her head. "Of course you can have a welcome home party for yourself, what was I thinking? Yeah, sure, let's head home, whatever," she agreed with a shrug. "I don't remember if I told the rest of the weather patrol that I was going on this trip, so I guess they're pretty mad or something."

"Shall we?" Luna asked, getting up on her hooves, stretching.

Twilight got up and went around the table, offering each of her friends a hug each before she stepped up to Luna's side. "I expect Ponyville will still be standing when I get home," she said, grinning. "I'll miss you guys."

"Oh, off with you. We'll see you soon enough, darling," Rarity said with a smile and a shake of her head. The others waved and offered parting words, but it was harder than Twilight had thought to turn away and follow Luna towards the lobby. After so much time together, shouldn't she

be looking forward to some time away from her friends? Perhaps even want some time alone? She felt none of that. Twilight missed them the second she and Luna rounded a corner, her five friends lost from view.

"You all share a very special connection," Luna said, as if she could read her mind. The princess turned a sharp right as they hit the lobby, making for a large and opulent staircase. It took a second for Twilight to catch up. She had been heading for the door.

"That's friendship, right?" Twilight asked as she followed. "Where are we going?"

"It is friendship and more. If you think it is normal to be this close after having known each other for such a short time, then you are quite the idealist," Luna grinned. "Not that there is anything wrong with that. It is in fact an enviable trait."

"Wait, you are saying this is another effect of the elements?" Twilight asked, the inquisitive majority of her brain blindly latching on to the scent of distilled knowledge.

"Oh goodness, no," Luna said, glancing over her back to fix Twilight with a serious look. "I am not going to diminish what you all have by suggesting it is the work of the elements of harmony. Never. The elements came last. Your connection first."

"Oh," Twilight said, not quite sure how to take that. "Where are we going, though? These are the stairs up, you know. It's probably among the top three most inefficient routes to the Everfree forest."

"I read your report on how you all got your cutie marks, too," Luna said, her voice distant. "It reminds me that some forms of magic are forever beyond the grasp of even us sisters. Chance and love. They can never be reproduced or fooled."

"Uh huh," Twilight said, a little louder now. "Mind telling me where we are going?"

"Oh, the roof," the princess said. "Naturally."

"Naturally," Twilight repeated, rolling her eyes at the oddly distracted goddess' back. "My real question was 'why are we going to the roof', possibly with an added 'when I thought we were heading to the Everfree'."

Luna stopped, turned, and tilted her head. "Did you think we were going to walk all the way there, Twilight? Granted, the Everfree is not too far away, being directly between us and Ponyville, but it is a journey of a week or more on hoof."

Twilight opened her mouth and caught a snarky comment before she could voice it, moderating herself somewhat. Regular mild annoyance would have to do. "I guess we're not doing that, then, but I'd love to know what you've planned."

"Magic, of course," Luna said with a shrug before resuming her ascent up the apparently endless staircase.

"Of course," Twilight muttered. Luna glanced back at her once again, this time looking either hurt, disappointed, or a mixture of both.

"I am... sorry, I was not trying to be difficult, I simply thought it was obvious, given that we are only two, now," Luna said, and Twilight swallowed, feeling terrible all of a sudden for her tone.

"I didn't mean-" Twilight stammered. Her back was tingling unpleasantly. She had hurt the princess again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound angry."

"I-" Luna tried, but whatever she meant to say, it died in her throat. The princess nodded and focused on the stairs, one step at a time, and Twilight did the same. In the cloying and confused silence, their ascent became an almost timeless thing, and Twilight was tempted to think it had in fact been mere seconds, muddled by their little exchange.

She had been wrong, she realized.

When they had entered the Clopenhagen Plaza last morning, every single pony in the entourage had been exhausted. Rainbow Dash had practically collapsed in the street, and Fluttershy insisted that they let her carry the exhausted pegasus. Twilight had only noted that the building had

been tall, set on finding a bed and disappearing to a dark corner of her mind.

The Plaza was the tallest building in all of Clopenhagen. There had been a lot of stairs. Sure enough, Twilight had lived in Canterlot, a cityscape built in the face of the mountain, but it was hard not to appreciate the view here. The purple unicorn trotted up to the edge of the flat and unassuming roof, scanning the hundreds of tall buildings that warred for the second prize in the "Clopenhagen's Tallest Building" competition. Past the city and the farms that surrounded the city again, the golden plains and verdant forests of southwestern Equestria spread out in all their glory. Lake Joy dominated the view to the southeast, and far to the south, tall and stark mountains rested. Princess Luna's gaze was fixed on something on the very edge of Twilight's vision to the northeast. A splotch of dark green.

"The Everfree?" Twilight asked, craning her neck as if it would help her see better.

"In all its glory, yes," Luna said, frowning. "You can teleport by memory as well as vision, correct? I believe Celestia said your technique was not quite perfect for long distances."

The frankness and the business-like tone made Twilight stiffen a little. "I guess, only short distances by vision though," she said, trying not to sound too defensive.

"Not good enough then," Luna muttered, still staring into the distance. She was squinting, now. "I was thinking to show you where to go, somehow, but we will have to use an alternate method, then. Magical wings, perhaps? You have mastered at least one spell for it, no?"

"Yes, but I, ah," Twilight hesitated. "I never used it on myself."

Luna turned and looked at Twilight as if seeing her for the first time since they got up on the roof of the building. She looked driven. Determined. The princess nodded. "Very well then, get on my back."

Twilight stared as the princess turned her back, lowered herself to the ground and spread her wings all in short order. She could not move for the life of her.

"What is the matter?" Luna asked. Did she sound impatient?

"I- I can't *ride* you!" Twilight protested. "That doesn't even, just- no!"

"Oh come now," the princess snorted. "Is it worse than disobeying a direct, royal order?"

"No! Wait, yes! Yes it is!" Twilight said, her ears and cheeks burning. There were a million ways in which this was wrong, and one way in which it was right while being even *more* wrong.

Luna did not move, still lying on the ground, expectant. "Twilight, if you have no desire to accompany me, say so that I may teleport there this very moment and stop wasting my time. Otherwise, get on my back."

It was true. The princess could no doubt simply teleport there in less than a second. She would have a myriad of other ways in which to make the distance to the forest a complete non-issue, yet here she lay, ready to carry Twilight on her back. It was terribly confusing, but Twilight slowly realized that this must mean that if nothing else, the princess would really like for her to come. If they were truly friends, then she owed Luna this.

Reluctantly, Twilight walked over and climbed atop Luna's back. It was a terribly awkward affair that involved more scrambling and shuffling than she'd have liked, but she eventually managed to get aboard, wrapping her forehooves around Luna's neck. It was a slightly uncomfortable position, and a tremendously uncomfortable *situation*. At the same time, it was so terribly, horribly fantastic. She almost didn't dare breathe because she would smell Luna's mane.

"Hold on tight," Luna said. Twilight nodded, and a second later, all of her thoughts were left back on the ground along with her stomach and other assorted bits that Twilight was certain were essential to her function. The princess launched herself off the ground with a hop and a series of strong hoofbeats. Twilight gripped Luna so tightly she worried she might be choking her.

"Oh my gosh," Twilight breathed. She didn't quite understand why she was surprised. G-force and acceleration was absurdly simple,

conceptually, but experiencing it all first-hand was quite a different affair. The sky chariot rides she'd taken were nothing. The griffin rides felt like leisurely strolls in comparison to this mad dash. It felt like her mane and tail would simply fall off, both standing out straight behind her. The wind roared in her ears and she pinned them flat against her skull.

The hairs of Luna's mane played with her face. One quick glance below them was enough to convince Twilight to shut her eyes tight. It was an irrational and stupid impulse, but not only was Clopenhagen gone, the detail was fast fading from the world below. She had flown before, and she knew she was safe, but she couldn't convince her brain. The logical-minded unicorn hated every moment of this defeat. She feared that if she opened her eyes again, she might see the curvature of the planet.

Foregoing her vision, of course, was a horrible mistake, yet one she was loath to undo. Suddenly she was made keenly aware of how her body felt against Luna's. She lay almost entirely flat across Luna's back, pressed down by the wind. Twilight could feel the muscles used with each and every wingbeat against her. When she realized this, she couldn't stop herself. She became aware of each and every point of contact between herself and Luna, from the way her neck strained against her forelegs to the stretch of skin against her own underbelly.

From there, the mental leap to what had happened that one night in the mill was a short one. Rather, to what had almost happened. She flitted back and forth between every memory of her and Luna in the past month. *"I would be a fool not to love you for what you have done for me,"* the princess had said yesterday. It was very close to outright saying those three words. Three words she had always been taught were magical. Words that were supposed to be absolute. It was an admission or an allusion to it, but yet again, it refused to be that simple.

The word "duty", though, did seem absolute. It was conclusive. It was easy to admit something to herself now that she knew it was impossible. She might love Luna. It was just made a complete non-issue because duty was Luna's goal, and always had been. Who was she to argue with an immortal goddess who had celestial objects to shift about? A curiously stubborn bookish unicorn who stuck her snout where it didn't belong?

Flap. Flap. Flap. Strong and steady wingbeats rolled the bases of Luna's wings against the sides of Twilight's belly. The wind had died down at some point, but Twilight kept her eyes shut. It was getting cold. She tried burying her head in Luna's mane to shut her own thoughts, but it was about as useful as taking a snow bath to cure a common cold.

A mere unicorn filly too afraid to say what she wanted. Was that all she was? Was that all she aspired to be? A tiny nagging voice in her head was asking questions, and she thought it sounded a little like Rainbow Dash. They were of course her own words, Rainbow would never use a word like 'aspire', but the sentiment was simple and *brave*. Twilight did not have a whole lot to lose, so she passed the time with one of her favorite activities.

Planning.

Twilight had eventually worked up the courage to peek down at the landscapes that drifted by far below, and she almost hated herself for not doing so sooner. She wondered what she had missed. Luna drifted almost lazily now, barely working her wings any more. The air was noticeably thinner, and the world below was an almost shapeless mass of colors. Equestria seemed small compared to the sky above. Twilight imagined she could reach up and touch the sun.

It was impossible to gauge their speed this far up, but it was barely past mid-day when the darkly verdant blob that was the Everfree ceased to be a dark green patch far below and began dominating the landscape below. While the Everfree wasn't terribly large as far as forests went, it was made twice as intimidating given how rapidly it was approaching now. Twilight held on tightly as Luna set the angle of their descent.

Luna wasn't heading over it. She was going to land at the very edge. Any protests or questions Twilight might have had were made useless by the roar of the wind which had returned with renewed force. The ground hurtled towards them, and the rush was unlike anything Twilight had ever felt before. Her heart pounded and she dared not even blink, frozen. She was grinning.

Suddenly, Luna arrested her descent. The force nearly made Twilight fall off the princess' back, but she quickly scrabbled back on, steadied by a burst of telekinesis. With an impossibly ginger landing entirely at war with the rest of the flight, Luna alighted on the ground in the shadow of that mythical forest that seemed dark and foreboding even in daylight.

Twilight slid off Luna's back shakily and almost fell over, her legs numb. She was still feeling cold, and dearly wished she had brought her cloak. Cloak and saddlebags both were back in Clopenhagen with her friends right now because Luna had assured her that they would need nothing. Twilight found herself disagreeing vehemently with that right now.

"Are you alright?" Luna asked, brow raised in concern for the unicorn who was trotting around trying to restore life to her limbs.

"Why here?" Twilight asked, her horn shimmering to life as she cast a simple warmth spell. The blast of hot air was woefully insufficient.

"I, ah. I could have flown to the castle, I suppose," Luna admitted with a glance at the forest. "But it would not have felt quite right."

"Oh," was all Twilight managed. It made sense. To Luna, this was not a forest. It was the effects of her actions a thousand years ago. It was, Twilight thought with a shudder, a massive graveyard.

"Sorry, I should have realized," Twilight muttered. Luna made no reply, taking a few experimental steps towards the unnaturally sudden treeline. The purple unicorn refused to let herself go soft now, though. She had made a plan, and she intended to follow it. "Are you a fool?" Twilight asked.

"No," Luna said. The princess turned and regarded her with a long stare, her face partially in the shadow of a tall tree. "No, I am not."

The fact that the princess did not even ask what Twilight was referring to was encouraging. Did this mean Luna had been thinking about the exact same thing? If so, why hadn't she spoken up about it? One answer, two questions. It was pretty much the norm. Luna slipped in under the canopy of the Everfree, and Twilight followed on an invisible tether.

"I love you, Twilight Sparkle," Luna suddenly said. The words were said with an almost callous lack of passion. Twilight felt only surprise, and very little else except disappointment at how casually the words were treated. "I love you, and I will not cheapen what I feel for you by lying and pretending it is nothing more than that which I feel for each and every one of my subjects. It does not change the fact that my sister needs me, however."

"Why can't you do both? Why do you have to choose between me and her?" Twilight asked, trying very hard to be rational about this. Her plan, her imagined conversation tree for this exchange had fallen by the wayside in less than twenty seconds.

"Because Celly has ruled alone for a thousand years, Twilight," Luna calmly explained as she picked her way between the darkened trees and the slimy undergrowth. "I have a lot to catch up on. Please understand that I do not feel any less for you because of this"

Twilight laughed. It sounded ugly even to her own ears, and none of it was because of the eerie and unnatural echo it acquired thanks to the Everfree. Suddenly, this reminded Twilight all that much more of a terribly poorly written romance novel Rarity had lent her.

"That's a terrible excuse or a lie, and I don't know which," Twilight accused.

Luna made no reply, eyes straight ahead. The anger Twilight had worked up left her the next time she exhaled, and a pit grew in her stomach. Her earlier resolve to try to force an answer from Luna faded. She'd thought she could try to pin the princess with arguments or logic, that there was a declaration of love to be found inside of Luna somewhere. She'd found the words, but they were empty. It was hard not to despair.

"So it is me, then. It *is* an excuse, because there is something wrong with me," the purple unicorn muttered.

Luna stopped, hanging her head. The princess' mane fell and hid her face as she began whispering to herself, and Twilight strained her ears to listen. "*How many more times*", she heard the princess say in a quavering voice.

"I'm sorry," Twilight said. She had no idea what she was apologizing for, but she meant it.

"No," the princess declared in a steely voice. She was still obscured by her hair, unmoving. "You will not apologize. You will *believe* me when I say I love you, Twilight Sparkle. You will believe me and trust me."

Twilight took a step back. There was no dark power at work here. No magic. Luna did not even sound angry, only frustrated beyond belief.

"Most of all, you will let me fail this once. You will let me take it upon my own shoulders and blame *me* for the fact that I am simply not strong enough. Not this time," the princess spat. Without waiting for a reply, she set off down the narrow path they'd found, moving at a brisk trot. The Everfree had never quite seemed so harmless as it did right now, with Luna in it.

It was impossible for Twilight to leave it at that. She followed, quickly catching up and cutting through ferns and bushes to trot at the princess' side. "It's about the elements," Twilight guessed. Once she had said it, without even looking at Luna, she knew it was true. It fit. "It's about the previous bearers of the elements."

"Twilight, what will it take for you to let me have a shred of dignity left?" Luna asked. Her voice was strained, so forcibly neutral that Twilight suddenly felt a tingle of fear. No mute threat hid behind the tone, but Twilight was once again afraid for Luna, not of her. Her neck prickled unpleasantly as the princess went on.

"What do I have to say to you to make you leave it alone? What must I do to have a single piece of me to myself? If it is begging, I will do that. I will stop here and get down on my knees in the muddy ground begging you if you so desire. Say the word."

"I..." Twilight began, dumbstruck. She knew the answer, and she knew she meant it, but the words felt weak. It ceased to be an explanation and became a pathetic excuse for tormenting a pony she thought she might love. "I just want you to be okay."

"I am okay enough, Twilight," Luna retorted. "Please. Will you leave it? Can I ask that you ask no more questions about this? I will answer any other question, I promise. I *am* grateful to have you along. I owe you a debt that can never be repaid, and I am anxious to be done here, but if you persist in asking me this, I will take you home and do this myself."

It was the calm with which the words were said that convinced Twilight. She did not doubt the princess would make good on her threat. However curious she was, Twilight forced herself to nod, digging up a pair of well-worn words to go with the sinking feeling that seized her. "I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it," Luna said, though it sounded like a formality more than an earnest statement. "We should be at the castle in a few hours at this pace."

The southwestern reaches of the Everfree forest was exactly the same as the northeastern, Ponyville-facing parts of the forest, it turned out. That is to say, it was completely the same in that nothing was the same. It was utterly unpredictable and behaved in a way no forest had a right to behave. The fact that the word "behave" was used with regards to a forest was of course only scratching the surface of the problem.

It was all too easy to assume that such things became trivialities when the pony you travelled with had a horn and wings both. Luna, however, was not entirely immune to getting lost, sidetracked, and on one notable occasion, falling into natural ditches. All the while, Luna insisted she followed a pull that could not be fooled. Even so, it would have to be an interesting way of looking of things to count off "a few hours" and arrive at the castle in the dead of night. It must have been past midnight when the pair stood at the edge of a ravine looking at the scattered ruins in the distance. Below, a thick fog shrouded the bottom of the drop, if there even was solid ground to be found anywhere beneath at all. The moon was waxing, unhelpfully muted.

"So," Twilight said, looking around. She knew there was a rickety bridge at the other side, but here, no such luxury was to be found. Looking at the area with the knowledge of what happened here, the signs were obvious and terrifying both. The very earth had torn itself asunder.

"I think we take wing again, here," Luna said, lying down and spreading her wings.

"Ah, I can blink across," Twilight protested. Did Luna truly think so little of her abilities?

"We are not going over, we are going down," Luna explained. "Celestia's unit sealed up the entrance Trixie used. No sense in wasting their efforts. There is another way in nearby."

"How do you know that?" Twilight asked as she reluctantly clambered atop Luna.

"Because I listen," Luna replied with a level of crypticism that Twilight thought she'd shed long ago. The princess trotted up to the edge and spread her wings, simply letting herself glide down into the depths below without fear or hesitation. The fog greedily swallowed them up, and Twilight held on as tightly as she dared.

They flew blind for no more than a few seconds before Luna's hooves clattered against stone, landing. Twilight still had a hard time making out details, but it was obvious they had landed in the mouth of a cave embedded in the side of the ravine. Luna walked on before Twilight could even dismount, something for which the unicorn was grateful. All was grey and black still.

They walked like this for long minutes, the fog gradually thinning. Twilight could see the cave walls now. They seemed odd, with weird formations at almost perfectly regular intervals.

She understood why, suddenly. Twilight knew why the floor was so even, too. The fog dispersed a little more just as the princess halted and let her slide off her back. "Welcome home, Luna," the princess muttered joylessly to herself, lighting up the scene with her horn.

Chapter 20

The ancient ruins of Crepuscin surrounded them. The earth had swallowed the carcass of the metropolis whole, streets entombed in almost pristine condition. What Twilight had thought stone formations were in fact the crumbling houses of the street they walked. Low overhead, barely clearing the rooftops of the residences, the earth sagged down, pierced in places by the roots of great trees above. Luna's horn flared a little brighter, adding detail to the ghastly and timeless scene.

It was all too easy to believe that she was back in the memory. When Twilight closed her eyes, she could imagine the earthen roof above disappearing, giving way to the clear night sky. Here, the air did not move. The ground was covered in dust and spattered with dry soil - nothing stirred. Equestria had forgotten this place, and the Everfree was not about to remind anypony.

"There is a lesson to be learned here about power, Twilight," Luna said, surveying the caved-in houses that surrounded them in the claustrophobic streetscape. If Twilight saw in this place what she remembered of a borrowed memory, she couldn't imagine what the princess felt right now. This had been her home for how long?

"This way," Luna suddenly added, as if she only just now noticed something. The princess set off down the road, kicking up dust as she galloped. Twilight, who was half-way through formulating a reply, followed.

The pace Luna set was gruelling. She glanced back at Twilight every now and then to make sure that the unicorn was following, but she did not seem to notice or care how hard she was pushing the bookish mare. Twilight was in far better shape now than she had ever been in her life, but she was still no athlete. Rows upon rows of houses in various states of decay rushed by in a blur. They passed by gardens of moss, fungi and other odd lightless plants that had seized entire quarters of the city in their webs.

No words were said, but that was just fine. Twilight barely had the spare energy to think, much less speak. Their only company was their own rapid hoofbeats which triggered an odd susurrus echoing into infinity. It was almost too appropriate that Twilight worked herself into a lather dashing after the princess possessed, yet again without an explanation. The only difference was that this time it was rather more physical than the usual scene. Her legs hurt and her muscles burned.

It was impossible to tell for how long they thus galloped through the cobbled streets. Often, they were forced to go around whole city-blocks when they encountered a section that had collapsed. The underground forests barred passage twice as often as that again. Luna's horn glowed a silver-blue light as she led them through the twists and turns of the ruins, causing shadows to dance madly in her wake. Twilight could have sworn Luna continually upped her pace, forcing Twilight to do the same. She did not want to be left behind. Not here.

Luna skidded to a halt in front of a wall. A cracked and broken stone wall barred their way, stretching out to either side, followed by the road. The princess did not elect to go in either of the directions offered by the T-junction, pausing on the spot.

Twilight was heaving for breath and gradually slowed her pace, trotting in wide circles around the area. She had read somewhere that you were supposed to do that when you had been for a run, something about the muscles, but it just felt stupid. Nevertheless, she trusted what she'd read more than her own impulse to lay down and die on the spot.

"Here," Luna said as if the wall was their goal.

Twilight slowly came to a stop near Luna, taking huge gulps of air. "Here," she said. "It's a really neat wall. I like it. Good stone."

Luna's horn glimmered briefly in response. The entire cave shuddered as a great *crack* sounded. Twilight flattened her ears and winced at the painfully loud echo that reverberated for a long time afterwards. The wall had split down the middle before being pulled apart like a pair of curtains. Stone curtains. It was a wonder that the cave had not come crashing down upon them.

"Uh, we could've gone around?" Twilight commented, giving the wall a second look. She was surprised she didn't realize it before, but this was quite clearly the outer wall of the palace. If Luna's memory served her right, then...

"I mean, the gates should be around the corner, right?" she elaborated, glancing left, then right. It was hard to say which of the two was the right way, considering the low-hanging roof.

"They would be, yes," Luna agreed, dismissing Twilight's words entirely. The princess disappeared inside the hole in the wall that she had made, bringing her light with her. Twilight did not even think to simply create a light of her own, instead scurrying to follow.

It was not just a hole, Twilight soon realized, but a tunnel. Luna had pierced the outer wall and whatever lay behind it, landing them in the interior of a building. The dusty and faded stone that made up the walls in here was not the marble Twilight had come to expect of architecture where royalty was concerned. Every surface was a dark, almost pitch-black stone that retained an odd lustre, shining despite the layers of dust.

A spiral staircase nearby was the only surviving element in the room save for a large stone desk by the entrance and a set of great stone doors, presumably leading to the courtyard. Everything else had long since turned to nothing and been scattered about the room as dust.

"My tower," Luna commented, tentatively approaching the staircase that pierced the room going both up and down.

"You're heading for the Star Hammer?" Twilight guessed. "You said it was... part of you?"

"We are, and it is," Luna said, beginning her descent, Twilight right behind her. "It is calling out to me."

"You mean you are calling out to you," Twilight commented, suppressing a snort at the absurdity of the situation, even as curiosity drove her on. "How does that even work, anyway? Being in two places at once? Or, with the memory, three?"

Luna chuckled. Though the mirth was tinged with the obvious nervousness, it was the first non-gloomy noise Twilight had heard since they had entered this forsaken place. "I will be happy to explain another time, but this is really not the place for debates on simulacra and related concepts, Twilight. Suffice it to say the memory contained a me, and the Star Hammer is the same, but, hm. Separate. Disjointed."

Twilight nodded at this, though she took precious little home from the answer except the promise. The staircase shortly terminated in a dark hallway made from the same dark stone that glittered in the glow of Luna's horn. It was almost like walking in a tunnel made of millions of little stars.

When she managed to tear her eyes off the almost hypnotic sight, Twilight noticed that the dust here was disturbed. It didn't take a very skilled tracker to see that somepony had walked down this hall before them. Trixie had come here.

They passed by multiple sets of doors, each in the ubiquitous stone type that Twilight had never before seen, every single one of them closed, and to a one, passed by with complete disinterest by the princess. Before long, they stood at the end of the hallway, facing a set of double doors. Yet again with the star-speckled stone, but this time, painted with stylized images of Luna herself. On each of the two doors, an angular and majestic Luna reared up, wings spread and horn aglow. Yellow runes were plastered all over the door, clashing rather catastrophically with the artwork.

"Solid wardwork," Luna muttered appreciatively before a quick pulse of her horn tore the doors open with a loud grating of stone on stone. The runes winked out without a sound, admitting the two ponies to Luna's study.

"You *really* had a gloomy taste in decór," Twilight said, channeling Rarity as she surveyed the room. She wasn't exactly one to spend much time contemplating interior decoration, and sure, the library had pretty much come fully furnished, but this was absurd. "What happened here? Is this Trixie's fault?"

Aside from the piles of pulp she presumed had once been bookcases, the room was a mess of shelves, tables and workbenches spread about seemingly at random. More than half of them were toppled or

broken, stone furniture simply torn apart. Odd objects were scattered about the room. Here, sheets of some odd metal. Over there, a trio of vials with oddly colored liquids that had somehow not shattered. Was that an abacus propped up on a pillow?

"Touch *nothing*, Twilight Sparkle," Luna said, grim. "These are the final hours of my madness. I do not think I can even tell you what half of this is, any more."

Twilight nodded mutely, staying very close to Luna as she picked her way through the detritus in the room. Her goal quickly became apparent. Hovering over a pedestal against the far wall, an eerily familiar orb rested. *Waited*. Twilight could feel it pull on the edges of her mind even as she looked at it. The purple unicorn was only vaguely aware that the princess had halted, but she kept walking.

Something shattered under her hoof. She kept walking still. A voice called out to her, but she ignored it. In the inky blackness of the orb, deep within the Star Hammer, something familiar drew her closer. It was no siren song with malicious intent. Twilight knew this. It was an earnest and pure call.

Another step. An insistent and fearful call that was blocked out. The Star Hammer soundlessly screamed for her to seize it. Wailed and begged for her attention. Urged for her to touch it. Contrary to what she had thought, it did not offer her power. It offered only itself. This wasn't some irrational urge. She was in control, was she not?

Yet another step. She almost stumbled against something, but caught herself. The voice was louder, but it was mere sound. Twilight was far removed from whatever realm sound existed on, now. Just as she recognized exactly what it was that waited for her at the core of that blackened orb, just as she was about to reach out with her magic, she was snapped back to reality when the world literally turned up-side down.

Twilight Sparkle dangled by one of her hindhooves in Luna's telekinetic grip. The princess regarded her with a combination of sympathy and disappointment. "I had thought you strong enough to resist the lure that comes with objects of power. I suppose we should have taken precautions after all. Do you understand my words? Are you quite yourself?"

Twilight nodded, an awkward motion given the way she hung. The princess instantly righted her and gently put her down on the ground again, though she put herself between Twilight and the Star Hammer, attention absorbed by the orb, now.

The Star Hammer was Luna, and she was it, she had said. At least on some level, that terrible weapon was the princess. Perhaps Trixie had been snared by what she thought she could do with the orb. Perhaps the unlucky and ambitious unicorn mare had stumbled in here and seen in the orb a way to elevate herself above others. A path to power.

That was not the tale the orb told Twilight.

"You didn't lie," Twilight muttered.

"I rarely do," Luna said absentmindedly. Her horn shimmered as the orb floated from its home above the pedestal to hover at her side. The Star Hammer seemed a lot less threatening all of a sudden, an almost inconsequential little ball of darkness where it before throbbed with potency.

Twilight had felt the pull inside the orb, the desire that the princess felt. A burning urge to be with her. To be close. If the Star Hammer was Luna as surely as the princess before her, then that washed away any doubt Twilight had. The princess' affection was genuine. What was missing? Did it come down to that one item of the past that Twilight had promised she would leave alone? Would it end like this, with another stupid little secret?

The light level in the room increased. It took a moment before Twilight recognized this wasn't because Luna had brightened the glow of her horn, but simply because a source of darkness had disappeared. The orb was gone.

"Where-" Twilight blinked. "The Star Hammer? Where did it go?"

Luna looked like she'd swallowed a bug. She worked her lips and frowned before answering. "It is with me, safe, no longer made manifest. You never asked where Celestia keeps the Sun Spear, did you?"

Was it just her imagination, or did Luna look a little taller? Her eyes must be playing tricks on her, she decided. Luna made for the door, and Twilight followed, a little uneasy now. "I just assumed she kept it safe. You mean to say she has it inside of her?"

"It is not even an 'it' at all when it has no form, considering it is part of her, just like with me," Luna explained, waiting for Twilight outside the room. Twilight hesitated at the threshold.

"But, wait. The Sun Spear is *part* of Celestia, too?" Twilight protested, thinking back to that one part of the memory that, above all, she wished to forget. "I... don't understand, there's nothing of that in her. I don't see it."

Luna pursed her lips in thought, furrowing her brow. The statement gave the princess pause. Had Twilight implied something she did not fully understand herself? She had no idea what was going on in the goddess' mind. It became obvious that she would get no answer, though.

"Um, what are you going to do with the rest of the stuff in here?" Twilight asked, changing the subject and glancing behind her as she left the room. "It can't all be horrible mind-shattering secrets and pain, right? Are you going to destroy it all?"

"Purge it," Luna muttered, making it sound like a disagreement. As if the words "*purge*" and "*destroy*" were qualitatively different. The second Twilight had exited, she slammed the doors shut with a burst of telekinesis.

"Right, deal with your study, check," Twilight said, crossing that item out. Her imaginary checklist only had two items on it, but it was the principle of the thing. The next item was a little vague, though. *Closure*.

"Yes," Luna said, unmoving.

"You don't want to go through the courtyard," Twilight said,

"No," the princess confirmed, sighing.

"Which probably means it's exactly what we should do," the unicorn replied. It was only logical, and it seemed they both knew it. Their path was rapidly narrowing, and everything seemed to point in one direction.

Luna looked over at her, and Twilight could swear the princess was wordlessly begging her for succor. The goddess so burdened with the past pleaded Twilight to let her go, like a foal who did not want to eat her broccoli. When she spoke, her voice was strained.

"Lead the way."

Without hesitation, Twilight nodded and did just that. She walked in front and started moving, simple as that. If that little gesture was what the princess needed for strength now, she would of course provide. She heard Luna follow, and it was both humbling and terrifying.

Twilight desperately wanted to fill the air with small talk, but she had no idea what to say. She almost started laughing just at the thought of commenting on the weather. When nothing had been said by either of them by the time they ascended the stairs and returned to the main room of Luna's old tower, there was little hope left for either of them starting anything remotely like a casual conversation.

Casting her eyes around the unsurprisingly unchanged room, Twilight trotted up to the massive set of stone doors that dominated one of the walls. If her understanding of the area was even remotely correct, these would open onto the main plaza of the palace courtyard. Her horn lit as she gripped them with her telekinesis.

The courtyard. Where hundreds of ponies had stood silent vigil over Luna's madness. The courtyard where the most loyal of subjects had waited in mute protest. The courtyard where the last citizens of Crepuscin had come despite knowing they walked to their deaths.

Suddenly, the task felt too big for Twilight. She let her magic fade. She had stood atop that tower and watched the city crumble. Twilight had bore witness to the resolve and bravery of these ponies. As it stood, their fate was unknown. Twilight could fool herself into thinking that as long as she didn't know, it was okay. The smoke and ash that hid whatever transpired down here could just as easily have covered their escape, right?

Twilight peered over her shoulder. She had half expected that when she faltered, Luna would pick up where she left off. The princess didn't break open the doors and boldly stride out into the open to face whatever lay beyond. She did not direct the full power of a goddess against her obstacles when Twilight hesitated.

Princess Luna stood entirely still and mute. Her eyes were clenched shut, and she shook. Twilight knew then that if she did not do this now, it would never be done. Feeling more like an executioner than a saviour, Twilight once again gripped the doors with her mind, surrounding them with a purple glow before she gave them a yank. The doors barely moved, shrieking and groaning as they resisted her efforts. She tugged at them, her horn brightening as she intensified her efforts. The doors moved by a hoof or two with a deafening and reluctant rumble.

Twilight gritted her teeth. The entire room lit up as she *tore* at the doors with all her might, and for a precious few seconds, the intense light from her horn made the chamber come alive. For a fleeting moment, Luna's tower lived again, stonework brightly illuminated and twinkling with innumerable stars in an enchantingly beautiful scene.

The effect was quickly broken when the doors both fell inwards. Twilight gave a startled yell and jumped back as the two massive slabs of dark stone toppled to the ground, their hinges warped and undone. When the dust kicked up by their fall finally settled, Twilight saw that neither of the doors showed so much as a single crack.

Twilight did not wait to see if Luna would begin moving of her own accord. The unicorn walked around the fallen doors and slipped outside, hoping against hope for something, though she didn't know what.

Whatever it was she had been hoping for, she was pretty sure this wasn't it. Of course the loyal ponies hadn't escaped. It did not matter if they *could* have gotten away. She had seen their determination as she passed them by. They did not even try to run. They had died as they stood. Twilight felt her breath leave her as she exited the building and stepped into the eerily familiar courtyard.

The cave ceiling was a little higher here, but the earth still greedily hugged the ruins. In places, the spires were toppled, but other buildings simply stabbed upwards, disappearing into the earth, Luna's own tower among them. These were mere afterthoughts compared to the scene before her, though. Twilight almost hated herself and her innate curiosity as she brightened the area bit by bit, revealing more of the scene.

Bones. Shattered bones where pieces of crumbling towers had come raining down on them. Pulverized bones where boulder-sized chunks of the palace had hit. Charred and blackened bone that defied explanation, and perhaps most terrifying of all, full skeletons that showed no signs of damage. It was as if some of them had simply lay down and died on the spot.

Twilight sat down heavily. It was getting hard to feel anything at this point, but she had room for a portion of "tired". She was utterly unable to tear her eyes off the tens of thousands of bones scattered around the sunken plaza.

"I always wondered," came a voice at her side. It was Luna, of course, the princess having sidled up to her silent as a spectre. Her voice was a haunted whisper. "And now I know. Am I supposed to feel better?"

Having no answer for that, and indeed asking herself the very same question, Twilight remained quiet. The princess moved past her and entered the knee-high forest of bones. The purple unicorn got up and made to follow, but something caught her attention at the corner of her vision. Something metal shone back at her in the glow of her horn.

Twilight gently seized the object with her magic and levitated it over to look at it. It was a bent and worn star insignia like the ones used by the royal guard. The hoof-sized piece of flat metal did not resemble any of the disciplines of the current guard, though. She idly turned it around, entranced by how it still shone despite having waited here for a millennium. Her joy was short-lived, though. A frustrated sigh caught her attention.

At first, Luna had been careful, respectfully avoiding stepping on any of the remnants that littered the square. When Twilight looked up, she saw Luna's hoof had caught between two bones. The princess sighed and tried

reversing her step, but the bones, brittle with age, snapped. Luna's eyes widened in terror.

"No," she mouthed, jaw slack. Twilight began making her way over to her, but even as she did so, Luna's astonishment melted away and reformed as a vicious anger.

"You *idiots*," Luna hissed, bringing her hoof down with force, scattering the bones of the offending skeleton. "You stubborn-" another stomp. A small shock wave scattered a half-dozen skeletons. "Loathsome-" both hooves now. There was magic in the impact. Bones flew everywhere. "*Idiots!*" Luna concluded with a roar and a leap into the air. When she landed, it was with a boom that cleared a good portion of the plaza, knocking Twilight flat on her back.

Bones rained back down to the ground in a morbid shower that seemed to go on forever. When the last of the bones had settled, all was quiet. Twilight collected the guard insignia she'd dropped and tried to get up on her hooves, but her left hindleg stung when she attempted to move it. Twilight groaned and strained to see what was wrong. Pain shot through her side.

"Oh you must be joking," Luna muttered from somewhere nearby, her voice quickly rising. "Twilight, lay still!"

Uncomprehending, Twilight tried again to get up, finding that she absolutely could not. She yelped in pain and obliged the princess, feeling the beginnings of fear take root. "Luna, what's wrong with me?"

"You fell-" Luna began, immediately correcting herself. "I tossed you onto a bone, it seems. You have a rib bone sticking out of your flank. There is... quite a bit of blood."

"Oh," Twilight said, trying to keep her breathing steady. That would explain a lot, including the slickness of the ground where she lay. And the pain. And the immobility. "Is that all?" she chuckled nervously, grinning. "Here I thought it was something *bad*."

The princess did not seem similarly amused. Twilight was seized by Luna's magic for the second time in what she assumed was the same day,

summarily lifted up in the air. She gritted her teeth and sucked in breath as her hurt leg shifted. The pitter-patter of the blood dripping freely onto the ground made her a little uneasy.

"That was dumb," Luna muttered, trotting back towards the tower from where they had come, levitating the unicorn close by her side all the while. For her part, Twilight was gripping the guard insignia in her psychic grip as tight as she could.

"Coming here?" Twilight asked, feeling a little odd being carried around like this. "And where are we going? Is this going to be a thing, me asking where we are going?"

"I was referring to me going on a foalish rampage, actually," Luna said with a smile that did not reach her eyes. "And to answer your other question, we are going to my bedchambers."

Twilight did not believe her ears for even one moment, even as Luna wound past the fallen doors and made for the staircase. "Uh-huh, and after that, we're going to stop by the Moon for hayfries, yes?"

"If you want. It is the least I could do," Luna agreed.

Of all the moments for Luna to grow a sense of humor, Twilight thought with no small amount of frustration. The princess had to levitate her at a bit of an angle to get her up the stairs, and Twilight found herself facing the princess in the process.

"That was incredibly stupid," Luna repeated, grimacing. Their snouts were not even two hoofbreadths apart.

"Yeah, well, it happens," Twilight said, trying to shrug and succeeding in very little except shifting her leg again. She winced. "Make it a double portion of hayfries and we're even."

Luna puffed out her cheeks and closed her eyes for a second. It did not seem to impact her ability to maneuver as she got off the stairs at the next landing. They were apparently heading towards a large door at the end of a short hallway that had survived the destruction relatively intact.

"You weren't even joking," Twilight said, staring. "Your bedroom."

"You are hurt, long distance teleportation in your state is inadvisable at best, and just about every object in my bedchambers was so heavily ensorcelled thanks to my paranoia that it is most likely entirely intact," Luna rattled off. "So no, I was not joking."

"It just seems a little forward, is all," Twilight giggled. The pain wasn't quite so bad any more, really. "Rarity always said that you should wait until at *least* the second date."

Luna upped her pace noticeably, stealing a quick glance at the crimson trail that they were leaving behind. "Okay, you are getting delirious. This is not good. Healing was never my *forté*." It sounded like she was talking to herself more than Twilight. "If this gets any worse, I am going to take you straight to Celly."

The door at the end of the hallway opened, and Luna took them both inside. She had not been wrong when she suggested it might be "intact." The large bedroom could have been part of any castle or mansion in Canterlot if not for the fact that where it could once have been described as "airy", it was now more "earthy". The considerable amount of windows the room had once sported were all shattered, soil and stone having poured in. A good portion of the room was still serviceable, though. Twilight was gently laid down on a huge bed covered in dark silks.

Twilight coughed, twice, each time sending a dull pain through her body, originating from that damnable hindleg. She could see now that a large bone was sticking out from it, just below her cutie mark.

"I am going to remove the bone and then close the wound," Luna said, her horn softly glowing as she locked eyes with Twilight. "This might hurt a bit. Are you ready?"

"Hey, if you do a bad job, it's not like you can't just bring me back, right?" Twilight chuckled, grinning hugely.

"Do not even *joke* about that," Luna muttered angrily, yanking the bone out with sudden ferocity.

The purple unicorn's eyes bulged as the world around her exploded in a barrage of blinding lights. The pain was too intense to even begin to voice, and she lay gasping for breath, only vaguely aware that the princess was still working. With painstaking slowness, everything calmed down. The shattering pain became a sting, which in turn crept back down to being a throb. Twilight lay unmoving on her side still. She was tired. So very tired.

At some point, Luna's face filled her vision. That beautiful face, that lovely blue mane, those bright blue eyes, all marred by a frown. Why couldn't she simply smile more often? She was so pretty when she smiled. Twilight sniffled. Her nose was running, but she couldn't even be bothered to bring a hoof up to her snout.

"Yet still you do not hate me. Why is that?" Luna asked. It was a sincere question. "I still hurt you in so many ways. You have done all you said you would do and more besides, I have rewarded you with pain, yet here you are, *smiling*."

Twilight had not noticed the smile creep up on her face. It surprised herself, in fact. She had never before felt quite so lucid. Perhaps it took some severe blood loss and pain to see the truth sometimes. "Because it's what you want," Twilight said. "You want me to hate you. It's the easy way out."

"But you're trying to do it with the truth," Twilight muttered, shaking her head a little. It was an awkward movement that rubbed her face uncomfortably against the dusty covers of the bed. "You're trying to drive me away by showing me who you really are, but you know, it's all quite silly."

Luna's face lost all expression, her mouth half open. It was not the practiced neutrality of the mask that she so often donned. The princess seemed at a loss for words, but she was listening. That was a start.

"I used to be afraid of you. I told myself I left that behind long ago, but I think that was a lie, I don't know," Twilight croaked. It was finally making sense. "I'd be stupid to not be afraid of you. You're terrifying, sometimes, but that's not going to scare me off. I think you are afraid of me, sometimes, too."

"I never really answered the question, you know. What we are. What I want," Twilight said, blinking to try to clear the fog that was covering her eyes. "You know the real answer, but I never told you. We sort of never got back to the subject, huh?"

"Don't," Luna whispered, but she did not move from her spot. She sat perfectly still, staring back at Twilight.

Twilight giggled. She must look patently ridiculous. She was pretty sure he had snot hanging from her nose, she was bleeding, dishevelled and covered in dust besides. "I think, Princess Luna, that I may in fact love you too, and there's not a damn thing you can do about that."

Luna shut her eyes and flinched. It was as if the words hurt her.

This would be the part where Luna kissed her, but the princess sat still. Twilight did not have the energy left to mount an appropriately disappointed reaction to it all. She aimed for a shrug, but nothing really moved. "Oh well," she said, closing her eyes. "Oh- I also found this," she began to say, but her words were lost even to herself.

The bed was soft, but unruly, Twilight thought. The only praise she could give was that it moved in a consistent and predictable fashion. The world smelled of dust, and her leg hurt. She wondered if her friends were okay. She thought of Luna, and it hurt worse than her leg. She fell asleep again.

Twilight was flying. She had no idea how or why but her entire body was floating in the air, and it felt wonderful. Her leg still hurt and it still smelled of dust. Something was making an annoying rhythmic noise. Hooves on metal? She was flying. Her hooves couldn't make noise when she was flying. It didn't make sense, so she went to sleep.

It was cold. Twilight thought she sneezed, but was hard to tell because her body felt so numb. Despite this, something warm moved under her, and it was the most pleasurable feeling in the world. It reminded her of something else that had happened recently, or at least, she thought it had been recently. It smelled cold, and her leg still hurt.

The bed was still, warm and soft. Something brushed against her lips, leaving behind a taste that Twilight could not describe, but it was pleasant. Her entire body tingled and a familiar smell lingered, but it was not enough. She didn't give a damn about her leg any more. She tried to wake up, but it was no use. She got halfway through a protest before she was dragged under, asleep again.

Twilight opened her eyes. She had no idea what time it was. She had no idea what day it was. She knew she was in her own bed. That alone was enough to make her want to tear up; the realization that she lay under her own covers in her own bed back at the Ponyville library. The safe familiarity of every single little detail down to the texture of the fabric of her duvet.

At the foot of the bed, Spike stirred and woke up. The second she saw him, and he realized she was awake and alert, the purple baby dragon launched himself at her. Spike hugged her neck as tightly as he could. He was standing on her bad leg with one of her feet. Twilight didn't care, hugging him back.

Applejack lay curled up on the guest bed, asleep atop the covers. Twilight took a moment to collect herself, staring up at the ceiling as she gave Spike a final squeeze. At length, she put a forehoof on his shoulder so she could look her assistant in the eye. It was all she could do to keep her voice from quavering. She did not know for how much longer she could hold in everything that welled up inside her.

"Spike, would you take a letter please?"

Chapter 21

Luna ripped through the night air at a pace that would have shredded a mortal body, wings sizzling with raw magic. She could easily have teleported back to Canterlot instead, of course. In the blink of an eye, she could have willed herself to her chambers, but that was the easy path. *You want me to hate you*, a familiar voice said in her head. *It's the easy way out*, she had said. *I may in fact love you too, and there's not a damn thing you can do about that.*

Twilight had been right in that, so Luna did the only thing she *could* do. Something she thought she would never do again. She'd fled with her tail between her legs. The shame burned the very core of her being. She wasn't like this. She had changed. But how? Who the hay was she now?

If she had changed, though, she was not the only one. For every iota of anger she aimed at herself, she had a veritable trough of hatred for her sister right now. She needed answers, and she needed them now.

The distant shadow of Canterlot upon the mountain grew to meet her. The graceful spires and waterfalls of the city gained detail in the space of seconds. The night princess slowed her speed to a more mundane level, aiming for a certain window set in the back wall of the palace. Where the vast majority of the massive building's windows and portals glowed with bright lights through the entire night, this one was a faint glimmer in a sea of suns. Luna alighted upon the tiny balcony and stood before the curtains that led to Celestia's evening study.

Luna shook. She didn't want to be angry. She hated it. Terrible things happened when she was angry, and she was so very, very afraid, but right now, she couldn't help it. Her hooves led a life of their own, carrying her inside the room when she wasn't ready. She would never be ready for this. An image of Canterlot torn from the mountain and crumbling played in her mind.

Celestia sat in front of the fireplace reading a letter. The rest of the room hid in shadow not only for lack of light other than the crackling fire,

but because her splendor drew the eye, as always. Luna loved her sister. He resolve almost failed when she saw the sun princess. Her will to fight nearly broke, but she clung to the memory of what she had realized. What she had learned.

She could never trust her big sister again.

Celestia had not acknowledged her presence, but Luna knew that her sister had felt her the second she entered the room. They could both wait like this for hours until the fire turned to embers, until the embers died. Perhaps they could simply wait together in silence until the mountain itself eroded away, ceasing to be.

"You came unarmed!" Luna suddenly blurted, incredulous. "I broke the covenant, you thought I was lost once again, and you came *unarmed*!"

"Hello, sister," Celestia said, half-turning and facing Luna. She was as calm as ever, though she looked a little confused. "I am glad to see you, but why are you here?"

"I am here," Luna spat, her voice dripping with venom, "because you came to face me unarmed! You thought I was a maddened beast, yet you showed up without the Sun Spear! You do not even have it any more, do you?" she accused, advancing upon her sister.

"I do not," Celestia said, shrugging. "Why do you think I hid when you returned from your banishment?"

Though it was what she had suspected, the basis of her anger, Luna felt like she had been bucked in the gut. The anger was replaced by a cold fear. A chill the likes of which she had not felt since the first years of her banishment. When she thought she would be alone forever.

Luna stopped. She no longer trusted her legs to carry her forward. She stood a small distance away from Celestia. The fear mixed with desperation, and she tasted bile in her mouth.

"If you are not ready to do what you must, then what happens next time? Where is the Sun Spear? *Why*?" Luna whispered.

Celestia slowly rose to stand before she replied. She still held the very same letter she had been reading in her telekinetic grip, and her lustrous mane partially hid her face. "You needed a reminder, not murder. You will see its grave if you watch the sunrise tomorrow. How could you expect me to ever look at it again when I could have killed you that night?"

"Maybe you should have," Luna said, casting her eyes to the ground as her big sister approached. "Now we do not know what happens next time. I did not deserve a second chance when none of the others got one."

"There will be no next time," Celestia said, calmly. "We are relics of harder times, you and I, but we alone remain. I have been a beast of war, but if I can change and adjust, then so can you. Things have *changed*, Lulu."

Luna swallowed at the use of her pet name. So many happy moments were tied to it, but it felt like a different pony had experienced them. "I am weak, 'Tia," she protested feebly.

"No, you are stronger than anypony or anyone else. You came *back* from the threshold of oblivion," Celestia said, sighing. "Do you remember when Lupus broke that poor chief's leg in the third age?"

Luna smiled a little despite herself. "Of course. Poor Lupus, I think he never quite forgave himself."

Celestia returned the smile, and the room seemed a little brighter for it. "Perhaps not, but do you remember afterwards? The chief insisted on letting it heal by itself. He would not accept our help."

Not quite understanding where she was going with this, Luna shrugged. Celestia indicated the mound of pillows in front of the fireplace, returning to lay down in her favorite spot. Luna reluctantly lay down at her side, curious.

"The bone regrew crooked. He had to break it again to make it grow right," Celestia finished, simply.

"You are suggesting I've grown crooked," the moon princess said.

"No!" Celestia exclaimed, giving her a brief look of horror before she rolled her eyes. She tapped Luna's head with a forehoof, making the smaller princess wince. "I am saying you are only now getting better! Good grief, Lulu, you can be dense sometimes."

Luna cringed at the gentle rebuke, but forced herself to think about it as Celestia patiently regarded her. Perhaps Celestia was right, then. Maybe it was that simple. Let go of her fears and try to adjust like she had. There were no wars to be fought any more. No more terrors. She had fought herself and come out victorious. She had seen that the ponies of Equestria did not all hate her. With time, they may all come to love the night, perhaps? Time was the one thing she did have.

"You are right," Luna said. The words were simple, but liberating. The way Celestia lit up when she said it made her twice as happy about having admitted it. Of *course* Celestia was right. Not that Celestia was the only pony who had taught her things lately.

It was as if somepony had suddenly poured ink in her bathwater. Luna's smile wavered.

"I can open the court again," she went on, trying to sound as pleased as she should about the whole deal. "Resume my duties where I left off. I will go to the administration office first thing in the morning, in fact!"

Celestia *stared* at her, and Luna instinctively drew back, fearing another clout on the head. What she got was a gentle hoof cupping her chin, lifting her head up and forcing Luna to look at her.

"Lulu, stop playing around. You said yourself that this does not feel like home to you. To the Moon with your duties. I have kept the peace for this long. I will manage for as long as I have to, and you can raise the Moon from anywhere." Celestia shook her head, smiling. "I have to ask you again, why are you *here*?"

Luna looked away. She didn't want to break away from Celestia's touch, but the night princess' eyes were fastened upon the dancing flames of the nearby fireplace. "I am not sure, but think I ruined it," she muttered. "I ran away like a foal, 'Tia."

Celestia let go of her, and instead leaned in to give Luna a hug. Everything else dissolved around the two of them, and for a short instant, the night princess felt at peace again. Warm. When her big sister broke the embrace, some of her touch seemed to linger.

"You did not ruin it, but if this is what you want? If this is what you need? Then yes, you made a mistake," the sun goddess said, her tone gentle. "But we all make mistakes, do we not? You know what ponies do when they make mistakes."

Luna swallowed and nodded, terrified but hopeful at the same time. "I must make amends. But how?"

Celestia laughed and nuzzled Luna affectionately. "I think an apology is a good start, no? Go to her, Lulu. Go to Twilight, and do not dare come back before you have told her you are sorry. In fact, I will order the guard to chase you off if you show your face here again before next week."

Standing up to leave her sister's company then was the hardest thing Luna had ever done, but every step was easier than the last. The balcony beckoned her, and the night sky was eager to welcome her back home. *Her* night sky. She paused before the curtains.

"The letter is from Twilight, is it not?" Luna asked, smiling at her sister who still lay in front of the fireplace.

"It is," Celestia nodded. "And no, you can't read it. Shoo, Lulu. Get going!"

"Thank you," the younger princess stammered, feeling a lump form in her throat.

"For goodness' sake," Celestia laughed. "Thank *Twilight*, not me! Thank her for both of us!"

Luna disappeared into the night without another word.

Epilogue

The snow had finally stopped. Rainbow Dash had been kind enough to pull some strings and create for them a clear night in the middle of the snowiest parts of winter. The weather patrol liked getting ahead on their snow quota, but Dash had more than enough clout with them to arrange for a cloud-free night; the real challenge had been finding enough pegasi to clear the sky.

Thankfully, Rainbow Dash had a solution for that, too. For the last half hour, all the youngest and freshest wings in Ponyville had zipped across the sky tearing into the offending clouds, every single one of them marked with awesome warpaint, courtesy of the Dash.

Twilight would have been cold if not for the blanket she shared with Luna. The couple sat on a bench they had dragged onto the biggest of the balconies the library sported, looking up at the night sky. It was an almost absurd sight. The sky-dome was entirely black and lightless, not a single star visible.

"Are you sure nopony will mind?" Twilight asked, glancing over at the princess. She knew the princess didn't really need her share of the blanket. She also knew neither of them liked getting bogged down with such minutiae. Twilight scooted a little closer.

"Oh, I am certain they will," Luna said, grinning. "But tonight is ours. Celestia thought this was a good idea, too, being thorough the first time. Ready?"

"Mhm!" Twilight nodded, levitating up her notepad and her quill. She could hear her friends back inside the library, catching a snippet of some argument between Applejack and Rainbow Dash. Some things would never change. Twilight closed the balcony door with a telekinetic nudge.

"Let us see if I remember this, then." Luna muttered whilst her horn took on a soft glow. It looked like any other magic, any other simple spell cast by a unicorn, but the soft and invisible tug inside of Twilight told her it

was different. The unicorn mare barely managed to tear her eyes off the princess in time to watch the sky. She looked lovely when the silver light illuminated her mane. More than this, the princess seemed content, and that made her beautiful.

Far above, the inky blackness gained its first lights. Seven stars lit up all at once. They did little to brighten the unnaturally dark night by themselves, but they provided a contrast and a beginning. "The Progenitor, first, marking the beginning," Luna narrated. "First to form and the first to fall, aeons later."

"What do I call it? The first era?" Twilight asked, staring at the blank paper that begged her to fill it.

"It is your book, Twilight," Luna said with a smile, leaning affectionately on Twilight. They closed their eyes in tandem, enjoying the closeness for a second. "You label it as you see fit. Now, next after came Sagittarius..."

"Well, sorry, if that's all there's to it," Applejack admitted, nudging her hat further back on her head in a subconscious gesture of embarrassment. She had gotten a little carried away. "Ah don't mind, of course. Didn' mean ta yell. Just thought you were gonna ask for a pot of gold or whatever."

Rainbow Dash nodded gruffly. Either the flush of her anger hadn't quite left her, or she was blushing. Perhaps both. To everypony's relief, the tension in the room dispersed as quickly as it had mounted. Spike came creeping back out of the kitchen into the common room of the library.

"Yeah, well," Dash muttered. "We're cool. So, uh, wanna get right on that, Pinks? I hate waiting around."

"Okie-dokie-lokie, Dashie!" Pinkie Pie chirped, following the rainbow-maned pegasus up the stairs, glowing a brighter pink than ever before. She was almost painfully cheerful. In fact, she had been aglow for the entire night as they celebrated the three-month anniversary of Twilight and Luna getting together.

Of course, Applejack thought, every party Pinkie threw was the best party ever, but there was something special about tonight for sure. Now she knew why and what, and it was really quite surprising she hadn't figured it out before.

"If that's all there's to it", Rarity repeated from over by the punch bowl. "Where is your sense of romance, Applejack? I swear."

Applejack's cheeks tingled as she nodded. "Yeah, well, t'aint a done thing yet, gotta start thinkin' about the gift, anyhow."

Rarity's complaint didn't bother her much, and any pain she might have felt at having misjudged one of her friends was quickly replaced by a solid and pleasant feeling of contentment. They were all past petty quarrels and misunderstandings. If her friends had been trees, they would hardly even have swayed in the wind any longer, and it made her both happy and proud.

Besides, she wasn't often wrong. Today, they celebrated that it was three months since she had been proven right about Luna, and that knowledge was precious. To her, to Twilight, and to all of them. Applejack glanced up at Pinkie and Dash as they disappeared from view.

Rarity refilled her glass and sipped it daintily before putting it down on the table. Pinkie Pie really had outdone herself this time in the sense that for once, she had listened to reason and gone light on the streamers and banners. It was possible to describe the room as a festive library rather than a catastrophic combination of colors and cuisine. Applejack looked deep in thought, so she instead elected to approach Fluttershy.

The yellow pegasus had hid during the brief argument between Applejack and Rainbow Dash, and was only just now crawling back out from under the table. Rarity offered her a hoof, which Fluttershy gratefully accepted. In her defense, Fluttershy was smiling lopsidedly, presumably at herself.

"Are you quite alright, dear?" Rarity asked.

"Oh, thank you Rarity, I'm fine," Fluttershy said, looking a little hesitant. They hadn't had the time to talk much so far this evening. "Um, how are you? I'm so sorry I missed our last spa date."

"Well, Rainbow Dash told me you were busy with the animals, so I got the message, you've nothing to worry about," Rarity said, dismissing the issue before grinning hugely. "Turns out that the winter cloak collection is selling very well. The cloak designs are popular enough in the northern parts of Equestria that I am getting requests for versions in other fabrics for casual wear in the bigger cities. I think it might be the next big thing!"

"Oh Rarity," Fluttershy smiled. "That sounds really wonderful. You must be very happy."

Rarity smiled back, nodding at her friend. "I am," she said. It wasn't so simple as being back home in Ponyville with Sweetie Belle and all her friends. It wasn't just the beauty of getting results for all her creative efforts. It was the immense feeling of freedom. The knowledge that her dreams were here own, whatever she chose to dream of.

"I am," Rarity repeated, sincerely.

Fluttershy smiled as she listened to Rarity speak. She was happy for her friend, and it felt like her heart might just leap out of her chest. She glanced about trying to find Rainbow Dash or Pinkie Pie, seized by an impulse to share her happiness with them, but they had left. Fluttershy felt a twinge of sadness.

Months ago, she would have panicked. Weeks ago, she would've at the very least been *scared*, but today, she only felt a little sad that two of her friends were missing. They had always been so very understanding and nice to her, and Rainbow Dash had taken great care to be patient with her when she needed them the most.

For the first month, she had stayed with Rainbow Dash in her cloud home, but she felt better now. Stronger. The pair had told her what they planned today well in advance, of course, and perhaps they had waited

until now because they thought she was ready. She did not know how she could ever repay them.

The truth was, Fluttershy didn't *need* them any longer. She loved them both with all of her heart, just as she did Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Luna and all her other friends, but her bed no longer felt so cold and lonely any more. The thought of going home alone no longer frightened her as much. She knew that she would never lose Rainbow Dash or any of the others, ever again. Fluttershy knew that they would be there when she woke up.

The next obstacle was overcoming the guilt of having ever doubted them. That one, she could manage on her own. She knew she would win the battle.

"Me too," Fluttershy said.

Pinkie Pie bounced up the stairs, but the spring in her step was nothing compared to the leaps her heart was making. She felt more alive than she ever had before. The colors were more vivid and the sounds sharper, more clear. She nipped at Rainbow Dash's mane as they made for the balcony door. It looked so *tasty*.

"Augh, hey, *Pinkie!*" Dash cried, laughing. The pegasus tried to affect Rarity's speech, grinning back at the pink pony. "You are messing up my *concours!*"

"I think it's 'coiffure', you silly filly," Pinkie Pie giggled and stole another nip.

Dash snorted and shrugged, tentatively approaching the balcony door. "I hope they're not doing something dirty out there now," she said. It sounded like it was exactly what she was hoping for.

"Nuh-uh," Pinkie said. "My shoulder isn't wobbly. It's safe."

Rainbow Dash stopped, staring at her with a mixture of awe and fear. "Oh no, *tell me* you are joking, there's not a Pinkie sense for that, is there?"

Pinkie just smirked.

Fluttershy was okay. Rainbow Dash was okay. Rarity, Applejack, Twilight and Luna; everypony was okay. She loved Dashie, and Dashie loved her. It almost hurt to think about how happy she was. Only almost. Nothing hurt in her heart any more. The party was just getting started, and tonight, they were kicking it up a notch.

Rainbow Dash took a deep breath. She hoped nopony noticed how nervous she was. Of course, she was the Dash, she didn't actually *really* get nervous, and if she did, Pinkie Pie usually squashed those worries with a glance. The problem right now was that it was in part *because* of Pinkie that she was nervous in the first place. Theoretically, of course. She wasn't really nervous.

She nudged the door open, trying to look nonchalant and cool. The effect was somewhat ruined by Pinkie's continued nipping at her mane, but she would never complain about that. Twilight and Luna both turned to look at the pair as she and Pinkie stepped onto the balcony. Snow crunched underhoof, and the clear air stung deliciously in her nose. She would have to go for a flight later. Perhaps she'd take Pinkie with her again. Pinkie loved that. She loved the way she could make Pinkie happy.

"Hey guys, what's up?" Twilight asked. She was wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by papers and inks. If she minded the interruption, she gave no indication. The princess said nothing, smiling at Rainbow Dash.

"I know you said you were busy, but, uh," Dash began, scratching the back of her head. "I kinda came to collect on a promise, and since tonight is, uh, special, we thought why the hell not?"

"What promise?" Twilight asked, a little confused. For the first time, Rainbow Dash noticed the almost featureless sky above them, lit up by only a handful of stars. It looked really creepy.

"I believe she refers to before we left," Luna said with a hum. The princess frowned, puzzled, and it unnerved Rainbow Dash a little. "I will

make good on my promise, but I am not certain I can promise I will not think less of you for this."

"Come on, come on, ask her!" Pinkie whined, nudging Dash on the rump with her snout. Twilight and Luna both looked severely nonplussed now.

"Fine!" Dash groaned. "Me and Pinks, we kind of. Weddings are super lame, but you're like, a princess, so... Can't you like, make it official somehow?"

Twilight gasped and grinned hugely. She shot out of the blanket like an arrow to hug the two of them. Rainbow Dash struggled to elaborate, eyes still on the princess even as she put a foreleg around Twilight. "Like, I don't know, write it on a piece of paper and hide it in an office or whatever it is you do?"

"We're totally having a party though!" Pinkie clarified, giggling and hugging her two friends. "But you can't dance in a wedding dress, and besides, Rarity would probably get angry if we tried to make a rave wedding or something."

The princess smiled serenely and nodded. "I will be more than happy to oblige, no matter what you decide on, even if it is a 'rave wedding' in Castle Canterlot itself."

When the door had closed, Twilight quickly slipped back in under the blanket. Rainbow and Pinkie Pie had assured them that they should go back to 'whatever they were doing' since the others already knew.

"You have no idea what a rave really is, do you?" Twilight asked, giggling.

"Oh," Luna said, brow furrowed. "Did I just say yes to something very, ah, inconvenient?"

Twilight laughed and shook her head, gathering up all the notes she had taken on the constellations and their history. "Never mind. Probably

not," she said, trying to get back into it. "Where were we? Vulpecula, was it?"

The princess said nothing, looking up at the partially lit sky, lost in thought. It happened sometimes, but less often with each passing week. Twilight knew better than to let the princess drift off like this, though. She leaned over ever so slowly and rubbed her snout against the goddess' neck. Luna responded immediately by craning over her to kiss the back of Twilight's head and nose her mane.

"Sorry," Luna muttered. "Would you like to continue this some other day?"

Twilight took a deep breath, relishing Luna's presence. It didn't really matter what the question was at this point. She would have said yes to anything. "Sure, but won't it be a little inconvenient? I thought tonight was a one-time thing."

"We have all the time in the world, Twilight," Luna murmured into Twilight's mane.

They sat like that for long minutes, no words passing between them, neither of them willing to break the contact. Twilight thought she heard the balcony door go up once, but it quickly shut again. The smell and feel of Luna became her world.

At length, Luna drew back, giving Twilight an odd look. "At least, we may have all the time in the world," she said. It took Twilight a second to realize what the princess referred to. The unicorn shrugged, snuggling closer to Luna again.

"You will have to decide at some point," the princess said. "Eternal life, I mean. Perhaps the six of you are qualified to decide, after all you have seen and learned. I think, were you to ask me and Celestia now, we would tell you how."

Twilight shrugged again, smiling.

"Or perhaps not?" the princess asked. "You confuse me. I would think you, of all ponies, would appreciate what a barbed collar immortality is."

"I don't see how having the option can ever be worse than not having the option," Twilight said, following a simple logic. "Unless you are, as Pinkie Pie would say, a total grumpypants."

The princess looked about to protest, but paused, letting out the breath she'd drawn unused.

"Besides, it's not like we have to decide tonight," Twilight concluded, bunching all her notes into a single sheaf which she bundled with her books. She left the comforting warmth of the blanket and made for the door, holding it open for the princess.

"You are, once again, correct," Luna admitted, unable to keep from smiling.

"Did you ever hear from Trixie again?" Twilight asked once they were well inside their bedroom, the cold of the winter left behind. "I've been meaning to ask."

Luna grinned. "I suppose the announcement is due in a few days at any rate, but rumor has it that Lady Argent of Belltown is organizing a series of plays based on a story by a certain unicorn showmare become playwright," she said.

"Trixie? A playwright?" Twilight raised a brow.

"Oh no. Not Trixie. The Great and *Powerful* Trixie," Luna corrected her, deadpan.

"Oh wow," Twilight giggled. "That's great though!"

"Mm," Luna agreed. "I was toying with the idea of asking Celly whether or not we could make another exception for her, but I have changed my mind. Lady Argent tells me that she seems happy without her magic."

Twilight nodded, halting at the top of the stairs. She could hear her friends talking down in the main room, but there was one more question

that she had avoided asking. The princess seemed in a good enough mood, though, so she risked it.

"The old insignia," she said. "I found something down in the ruins-"

"I took it," Luna said. "And I sent it, along with a letter, to the Hollows. I do not think I am quite ready to go back there, yet."

"All the time in the world," Twilight said with a chipper smile as she repeated the princess' own words.

"-rave wedding in *Canterlot!*" came Pinkie Pie's voice from below. "We should totally invite Princess Longleap too! *Three* princesses, guys!"

~~~ The End ~~~

# Credits

## Special Extraordinary Super-Thanks!

### Ocean Breeze.

You, brony, are a rock without which this fic would've had less rocks. No, seriously. Knowing your reader count can never go below 1 is an absurd motivator, and your feedback has been appreciated so much - all those nights where you've stayed up a little longer just to read, if only so I could go to bed with a pat on the back? Done me a solid, you have. But you know, I think you'll be hard pressed to top the pic you did for this fic. Going "sure" and sitting up through the night at a moment's notice like that, it's just stupid as hell. And I love you for it.

Check this guy out, 'cause he does awesome art! But you saw the pic on EqD, so you probably know that already. He also loves pony plot.

Cormacolindor.

It sucks that you don't do anything artsy-fartsy and that I can't link to anything as thanks, because you've made Applejack and Rainbow Dash check their flanks to make sure you didn't steal their cutie marks. A few mails and a tentative query from me, and here you are, trying to surpass me on hours spent working on this fic. You weren't kidding, sir. Loyalty and hard work. Thank you for every mail where we've discussed the fic. Thank you for every gruelling hour spent finding stupid typos that I missed.

We have, at this point, exchanged over two hundred and twenty emails in under three weeks. That's insane, in case you wondered. This is why FiM is awesome: The magic of friendship.

### Kits

You're just silly, you know that? You probably don't even realize how much you taught me during the period where you went above and beyond the call of duty. Pre-readers are supposed to be busy creatures - and I know you are - but the close feedback you provided during the first six

chapters were immensely helpful to me. Of course I have probably peed all over those lessons in everything *after* chapter six, but I like to think I learned a lot. If nothing else, I look at the first draft for Building Bridges, and then at the final version of Within and Without, and I'm thinking you're to blame for much of this. When the world ends in romance novels written by me, you're to blame.

Kits also does both art and stories, and is awesome. You should be ashamed if you didn't know this and haven't read his fics, but you'll be forgiven if you check him out now!

### Author's Notes

First, thank you for reading. If you have read this entire thing, then I salute you. A special extra little thanks to those who have read this before it completed and added their comments on EqD or mailed me; I could *not* have written this without feedback and encouragement along the way. I feel like such a broken record saying this, but it's true.

So yes, I have no idea where all these words came from. A little over a month ago I had an idea for an adventure fic that involved finding the truth about what happened to three villains who had been varying degrees of douche to our beloved little ponies. That was the main focus for about as long as it took me to write the prologue.

Apparently, I ended up with something like a psychological drama romance novel. This is not to say I made it up as I went along, but the focus shifted. At one point I was toying with the idea of cutting three of the mane cast out of the fic. I am so very glad I didn't.

I never felt like I had much choice in anything, though. I made one or two decisions that I knew people might dislike, but trying to change those things felt like going upstream. From the moment I conceived this idea and up until this moment, it's never been a question of "what happens". At worst, it's been "how does this happen?"

This month has been a blur. During the middle three weeks, I spent between 6 and 10 hours a *day* on this. You may make comments on my sanity at this, but fact is, I've enjoyed every single damn moment. Now that I'm done? I can't wait to write about something else.



-Cloudy Skies

(Feel free to drop me a [mail](#) or a note on [deviantArt](#) to say you hate me for Trixie or felt that Twi and Luna should totally have bonked or something. I get so happy whenever I get mail!)

*Silk Net loved his job sometimes. When he had discovered that his special talent was making sure everypony was well taken care of, most of his friends had thought him destined to become a nurse. Not that there was anything wrong with being a nurse! He simply did not see himself in a job where he had to deal with such unpleasantness, was all.*

*Today, Silk Net was returning to his office after a month-long vacation that he had decided to take on a whim. It was one of the many benefits of being high up in Equestrian Insurance Co., and one of the reasons he loved his job. He nodded to his assistant as he passed her desk by, opening his office door with a shimmer of magic.*

*“Two cases for you on your desk, sir,” she said, looking up from her work.*

*Silk Net paused. “I thought I told you to transfer all cases to Deadbolt and Scales while I was gone.”*

*“I did,” she said, indignant. “Twice, in fact. They were referred to back to you specifically because of the, um, circumstances. And the subject.”*

*A vague yet terrible feeling passed through the insurance agent’s entire body. It was as if a shiver had called in a favor from its big brother. Silk Net strode into his office and found two innocent-looking brown folders resting on his mahogany desk. He opened them both and peered at the cover papers. He already knew what name he’d find.*

*Winter Sun, P.E 1001, Fall - Insurance Claim - Grey Hollows Inn.*

*Riot.*

*Possible fire.*

*Hostile territory. (I looked it up, there’s a clause for that from year 605.)*

*(P.s: I think the inn may still be standing, but really, it’s a bit like that time in Grazewich if you remember, back in ‘997. -Winter)*

*Winter Sun, P.E 1001, Fall - Insurance Claim - Clopenhagen Grand Hotel.*

*Extreme exterior damage. (Seriously, you should see this, the wall is missing!)*

*Major interior damage.*

*(P.s: Hey Silk, does emotional damage count too? Princess Luna said it did. -Winter)*

*Silk Net's head hit his desk. Sometimes, he really hated his job.*

*(Thank you for reading the credits!)*