

# Calling the Shots

By Midnight Shadow



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# Chapter 1-1

## Calling the Shots

Twilight poked her assistant gently with a hoof, "Spike, Spike! Wake up, lazy bones!" she giggled at his recalcitrance and redoubled her efforts. Eventually he opened one eye and stared at her for a moment before speaking.

"Aww, Twi! You promised me today would be my day off!"

"I know, I'm sorry, but...I thought you might like to go somewhere *extra special* today?" her voice was silken, laden with hope and promise.

"Somewhere special?"

"Very."

"Oh boy...will there be candy?"

"I'm quite sure there will, Spike."

"Is it the beach? I love the beach...the sand on my scales, the sea under my claws...did I ever tell you I'm part water serpent on my father's side?"

Twilight giggled, "Only *every* time we go to the beach."

"Oh boy oh boy! It *is* the beach!"

"Not quite, but it's even *more* fun!"

Spike sat up, yawning and stretching, "What could *possibly* be more fun than the beach?"

"Well you'll just have to get up, get ready and come help me prepare for our trip downstairs, won't you?"

"Is it a long trip?" Spike whined, he liked the 'being places' of travelling, but hated the 'getting there' part.

"It won't be too long a trip Spike, I'm getting a carriage from the princess, specially for us."

"A carriage? Are we going to Canterlot?" Spike was all but buzzing with excitement now.

Twilight kept a poker face, "That would be telling. Now come downstairs, I need your help with something..."

Twilight retreated downstairs, busying herself in the kitchen. Spike bounded down the stairs two at a time calling, "When are we going?"

"Oh, very soon, when you're ready."

"I'm ready now!"

"You're *almost* ready...oh drat Spike, can you help? I've dropped a book under the sofa, can you go get it for me?"

"Anything for you, Twilight!" Spike bounded into the living room and scooted under the sofa, "I don't see any...wait...what's..."

SNAP!

The trap shut with an audible finality which sunk Spike's heart. It was winched out from under the sofa by Twilight. He stared up at her, heartbroken, "Twilight?"

"This is for your own good, do you remember what happened a few weeks ago?"

"My...my birthday?"

"Yes, Spike, you're seven now - and it's time."

"No...no! *Anything* but that!"

"I'm sorry, you simply *have* to get your shots."

"NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"

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Twilight trotted out of the library with a box in her mouth. The box was swinging to and fro as if there was something *very angry* inside it. This was, in fact, the truth - Spike the baby dragon was inside and he was spitting with rage.

"Twilight! You let me out! This isn't fair! You promised me candy!"

"You'll get a lollypop, *after* the shots!"

"You said this was *better* than the beach!" a claw waved itself out of the box, pointing accusingly at the unicorn

"It is! We're going to the art museum afterwards." said Twilight, putting the box down and securing it tightly.

"*Twwwiiiiigghhhttt*, that's not better than the beach!" Spike moaned, feeling well and truly put out. Or put *in* as the case may be.

"Yes it is," said the unicorn primly, stepping into the waiting pegasus-powered chariot and signalling for the team to take off for their destination, "it's mind expanding and just the sort of mental stimulation a growing dragon needs."

A few minutes of silence went past as they gained altitude, before a plaintive voice was heard from inside the steel-reinforced kitty-carrier, "...are we there yet?"

"We'll get there when we get there Spike," sighed Twilight, watching the clouds streak by.

"...I need to goooooo!"

"You should've thought of that before we left, young dragon."

"How was I supposed to know you'd...you'd...you'd dragon-nap me and stuff me in a box! You're so mean! I'm telling Celestia on you!"

"That's not going to work, Spike, you need your shots and that's that! Now hush and enjoy the scenery."

"That's easy for you to say," grumbled the dragon, "I can't see anything from in here."

Twilight felt rather pleased with herself. She'd escaped without any blood-loss this time.

"...are we there yet?"

*On the other hoof, she thought to herself, this could be a very long trip...*

\*\*\*

The veterinary surgeon's shop in Trottingham was clean, white, anti-septic. There were quite a few ponies with various animals - owls, badgers, snakes...

"Twiiiiiiigghhhttt....can't you let me out?" whined Spike

"No, Spike, I don't want to have to call the city animal catchers again, honestly, I can barely show my muzzle here from last time. No, you're simply going to have to-"

"Spike Sparkle! Spike Sparkle! Your turn!" came a voice over a scratchy intercom.

"Oh, great! That's us! My little Spikey is getting his shots, I'm so glad!"

"My last name's not Sparkle!"

"Oh Spike, my brave little dragon, it's just a courtesy. Come on, in we go. You like Nurse Redheart, you said she reminded you of Rarity."

The nurse was thorough and took advantage of the magical restraints offered for such a dangerous creature as a dragon. Several unicorns were on hoof for the dragon she was examining, holding him in the air helplessly. He wasn't given a chance to bite, even though he kept protesting that he wouldn't. Twilight would never let him get over what had happened when he had been having his first set of shots; at the tender age of six months, armed with nothing but the first few sharp baby-teeth a dragon gets, he'd managed to eat his way through half the building and most of the furniture.

It had only been with a special commendation from Celestia that she'd been allowed to keep him unmuzzled and off a leash for this repeat visit.

"Now then, this won't hurt a bit..." said the nurse coolly, pulling out a needle. Using magic, it was aimed at his soft underhide and jabbed in.

"Yeeeow!" shouted Spike, jetting a huge spurt of green flame across the room and blasting one of his 'handlers' with full force.

\*\*\*

Princess Celestia was in her private quarters watching her scrying orb. Her favourite soap opera 'Neeiiiggghbours' was on and Bouncer had gotten lost. She sniffed, wiping a tear away, he was such a brave dog...

There was a puff of green smoke and a loud yell, and a four-legged equine form dropped from the sky and landed in front of the princess. Celestia blinked, then looked at her calendar. A big red circle had been put around the day's date and one word, 'Spike', was written above it. She sighed. Every time. She looked back at the show in annoyance.

"Out of the way, I can't see the orb with your big butt blocking my view!" Celestia waved a hoof impatiently, trying to see the picture, "Send the guards for more popcorn and pull up a cushion. You might as well wait, I'm not budging 'til it's over."

The unicorn turned white, which was quite a feat as he'd been green a few moments earlier, and dipped his head, "Y-yes your majesty!"

"Shh! It's the best bit!"

\*\*\*

Spike was nursing his backside and sucking on a forty-eight caret diamond lollypop. It crunched as he scowled at Twilight. Today had *not* been fun. It was barely noon and he'd had enough.

"I want to go home." he grumped, chewing the diamond loudly in protest.

"In a minute, Spike, you're one of the few dragons they have around these parts and they want to make sure you're up to date on everything."

"If they stick me again, they'd better be up to date on their insurance policies."

"Oh Spike..." said Twilight, giggling.

Nurse Redheart fussed over the documentation, "You know, we're running a special today on spaying or neutering pets, only forty bits when taken in conjunction with vaccination!"

"Hey!" yelled Spike.

"No, no, that won't be necessary, thank you." said Twilight.

"Are you sure? As they reach a certain age you may find your pet's behaviour changes a little...are you finding him moody?" the nurse was reading from a checklist, clearly flustered over her special assignment.

"Twiii!" complained Spike, "I'm right here you know! I'm not a pet!"

"Hmm..." considered Twilight.

"He might be having...urges..."

"Well there *is* his thing for Ra-" Twilight began.

"*Twiiiiii!*" moaned the dragon with a 'please don't talk about that' look on his face.

"Maybe even aggressive?"

"If you come near me you'll need a new pair of hooves, lady!" Spike crossed his arms and blew green smoke.

"Now you mention it..." Twilight tapped her chin with a hoof.

\*\*\*

Spike was sullen and silent as they walked through Trottingham. The cone around his neck made it hard to see and his backside was aching something fierce.

"You don't have to make me wear this anymore you know."

"You tried to bite nurse Redheart, even *after* you promised you wouldn't!"

"She tried to..."

"She was taking your temperature!"

Spike growled, "*She doesn't even know what my temperature should be!*"

Spike hated walking, but right now he hated *sitting* even more. He was a very sulky dragon and feeling extra specially unappreciated. All his work in her library, and Twilight had to betray his trust in her promises...for a trip to the doctors.

"Why are we walking home, anyway? We can't possibly walk all the way way home."

"Oh, Spike, we've got just one stop left."

“The art museum was boring enough!” he moaned, throwing back his head to the sky and shaking little fists. “Please don’t make me go anywhere else educational,” he shuddered.

“Oh we’re not going anywhere ‘educational’, I promise.”

Spike started to worry and idly kicked a few stones, dust bouncing up in little whirling devils as he passed. The paved streets of Trottingham had given way to what was essentially a dirt track leading to who-knew-what in the middle of nowhere. The last time she’d been shy about the destination had led to nurse jabs-a-lot. He whimpered and stopped in the middle of the road, “I’m not going a step further. Why’d we have to walk all this way anyhow? where are we *going*?”

Twilight turned and picked him up with her mouth before putting him down again a few feet further along, “Silly, we’re already there.”

She bent down and kissed the baby dragon on the head and removed the cone in one swift motion, “Cheer up champ, I did promise you a day at the beach. And candy.”

Spike blinked, and suddenly he was in heaven. She’d led him to an old strip mine, stuffed with otherwise useless gems, just ripe for a dragon to dig up and eat. A pristine lake, glistening and clear to swim in. Exciting dark caves to explore. With the sun shining down heartily, he thought maybe he would forgive Twilight for tricking him. Maybe. He was determined to get his own back, though. As he ran down to the lakeside, shouting happily and splashing in the surf, he was also busy planning...she would need to visit the dentist soon.



# Chapter 2-1

## Teething Problems

The shadow paused just inside the purple equine's bedroom, barely opening the door enough to sneak in. His target was asleep, snoring lightly. Like smoke he moved, a soft pitter-patter of claws across the wooden floor to her side. Fishing an object out of an unseen pocket - a thin ring, coloured a dull green but almost black in the half-light - he placed it carefully, ever so carefully, over the tip of her horn where it fastened itself securely and seemed to vanish. To finish the job the figure pulled out a tiny little paint-pot and a fine brush, which he used to apply spots of black paint to her horn. Standing back for a moment to gaze upon his masterpiece, he nodded once and then he was gone.

Twilight Sparkle awoke, yawned. Staggering out of bed she looked in the mirror; Her hair was a mess! *Bedmane, ugh*, she thought to herself, *is there any curse so foul?* Her hair was so messy she could barely see her horn. She picked up a hairbrush with her ma-...

She frowned.

She *picked up* a hairbrush...

No matter how hard she tried, the stubborn thing refused to rise off the dresser.

"Uh oh," she said to herself, "this can't be good...where's my magic? I can't use my magic! Spike! *Spike!*"

It took only a few moments for her ever-helpful, number-one assistant to appear at her frantic calling, "What's wrong, Twilight?" he asked curiously from the doorway.

"I don't know!" she all but wailed, "My magic's not working! I can't do...I can't do *anything* at all!"

"Oh my, that sounds serious! We'd better get you to a doctor!"

"No!" she said, "No! You know I hate doctors!"

"Well alright," said Spike, picking an ear with his claw, "if you say so. Let's go downstairs, I'll make you a nice cup of tea and we can look for answers."

Spike ran out and down to the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. Twilight followed a minute or two later, after she'd managed to turn the knob.

Spike was in the kitchen, standing on a stool with a pinafore tied around his waist adjusting a teapot. When he was happy with it, he took a deep breath and exhaled steadily on it until it whistled. He was getting better at this! Celestia had made use of free kettles of boiling water on several occasions, much to Spike's chagrin, and he was glad she didn't keep having to posting them back anymore.

Spike made the tea; tealeaves in the pot, add the boiling water and let it brew. Pour the milk into the cup first and finally add one lump of sugar. Just the way she liked it. It looked like Twilight *needed* the cuppa too. She was getting frantic. He tried to soothe her, "I'm sure this is only a temporary thing, Twilight - maybe some poison joke?"

"But...but...I haven't been anywhere *near* Zecora's cottage in weeks!"

"Then you should feel ashamed of yourself, leaving that Zebra-pony all by herself!" Spike chided, setting the cup before her.

"She's been busy with that new assistant of hers and...and why am I talking about *that*? I'm having a crisis here! A unicorn without magic is like...is like..."

"A dragon without fire?" replied Spike, pouring the tea through a strainer.

"Right! Or...or..."

The front door slammed open, and a hyper-active pink pony bounded through.

"Oooh!" she said, "Is this a guessing game? I love guessing games...is it like a muffin without hotsauce?"

"Eeew!" said Twilight, remembering.

"Kinda," said Spike to Pinkie Pie, "Twilight's lost her magic."

"Ohhhh, that sounds serious. She should see a doctor." Pinkie stopped bouncing around the room and walked - walked! Now Twilight *knew* it was serious - to the table where the purple unicorn was sitting, trying her best to drink her tea without picking it up by using the magic which had seemingly deserted her.

"I know, right? But she won't!"

"Have you told her about Horn Rot?" asked Pinkie, staring at Spike, and then glancing at Twilight. She leaned in and whispered, "I heard it's a terrible disease! Just terrible! First you wake up with Bed-mane...then you

notice your horn's got spots on it...and *then* you've got no magic...and then..."

"And then what?" whispered Spike, just a little too loud.

Pinkie drew her hoof down her forehead and made a "ssskkkrrrrt!" noise, "then your horn just...falls off! And you're an earth pony. *Foreverrrrrrr!*"

"Forever?" asked Spike, clapping his paws over his mouth.

Pinkie nodded solemnly to Spike, "For-EVER!" before they both turned to stare at the unicorn, who by now was shaking with fear.

Twilight burst into tears, "You've just got to help me Pinkie! I don't know what to do!"

"Oh I wouldn't worry, Twilight, as long as you didn't wake up with spots on your horn and bed-mane *too* then it's probably just a...a thing."

Twilight burst into fresh tears.

"Oooohhhh, you mean the hair isn't a fashion statement?"

Twilight was frantic now. She'd not been able to find *anything* in her library about the dreaded horn rot, it hadn't helped that Spike could only take a single book out at a time, but he was obviously trying his best. He was such a wonderful assistant, she mourned, how would he cope when...when...

"Twilight, give it up! We've got to go, you heard what Pinkie said!"

"Yeah! What I said!" Pinkie was trying to help, which consisted of her emptying the fridge in search of cakes or cake-making materials which may somehow cure horn rot.

Twilight stopped and hung her head, "I give in, we've got to get to a doctor!"

"I'll get the hackamores and the tack," said Spike, and dashed off down to the basement.

"Wait, what?" shouted Twilight.

"Oooh yes, he'd better. Horn rot can make you blind. And crazy."

"Crazy? And blind?"

"Uhuh! Loco in the coco, Twilight, especially in an advanced form such as yours!"

"How do you know I've got an advanced form!" she wailed, dashing to a mirror.

Pinkie followed and pointed with a hoof, "First is bedmane, then spotty horn, then comes loss of magic...and then...you start foaming at the mouth!"

Twilight looked, and surely enough there were flecks of green foam on her lips. She started wailing again, spraying the mirror. As she'd frantically been plying her hoof through her hair, she'd noticed...*the spots!*

"But don't worry, I'm sure we'll get to the doctors before your hooves go numb."

Twilight looked down at her hooves, a worried expression on her face, "How can I tell if my hooves have gone numb?"

"You can't!" Pinkie giggled, "You won't be able to feel them, silly! How are you supposed to tell?"

More wailing was her only answer to the rhetorical question.

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Twilight sniffled as she was led through Ponyville, Pinkie bouncing beside her, keeping up the random chatter. Spike rode on her back, keeping a good hold of the reigns, just in case. She was already planning what to do incase the worst happened. She would give her library to Spike, her faithful assistant. She would bequeth her worldly possessions to the sick and needy, although Applejack would have her summer saddle - she sniffled, Applejack had always loved that saddle. Maybe it would remind them of her when she was gone. What she wouldn't give to hear that voice one more...

"Howdy partners, where're y'all goin' on such a fine day?" called Applejack, joining Pinkie.

"Oh, nowhere special." said Spike.

"With Twilight gussied up like that? Looks a mite special tah me!"

"Applejack, I'm sure she just wants an excuse to look pretty, dear." said another familiar voice, as a pristine white unicorn with gorgeous purple mane and tail slotted herself on the other side of the pair, "Don't you worry yourself about such things. Beauty comes naturally to a girl like Twilight, especially when she's been taking tips from *moi*."

"Rarity!" cried Twilight, "Don't come any closer, I've got the dreaded horn rot!"

"Oh my, that sounds simply frightful! Allow me to escort you to...wherever it is you're going. I simply *cannot* abandon a friend in such a time of need."

"A time of need?" asked yet another voice, a timid one this time, which belonged to a yellow and equally timid looking pegasus, "Oh my! I can't let Twilight go without help!"

"You're all," Twilight sniffled, "you're all so good to me, a doomed unicorn...what would I do without you? If only Rainbow Dash was here...I'm not long for this world, I can tell! My hooves have gone numb now!"

"Hehe, that's jus' from walkin'," said Applejack...and then she clammed up. Something didn't sound right, thought Twilight...this was all too...

"Hey gang! Where're you all..." a blue pegasus with stunning rainbow mane and tail flitted into view, conveniently.

"Rainbow Dash! Just the pony we wanted to see..."

*That does it*, thought Twilight, *something is up*. She stopped in the middle of the track, "I don't have horn rot, do I?"

"Eh...hehe...why'd you say that?" asked Applejack, grinning broadly, eyes flicking side to side for backup.

"It's worse than that, isn't it? There's no such thing as horn rot at all, is there?"

"There...there might be..."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Twilight, "where are we going? Come to think of it, Spike, you seem to know *exactly* where you're leading me..."

"It...it's the dentists, Twilight," said Spike, "I've been watching you chew. You try to hide it, but you wince every time you chew one of Applejack's apple fritters."

"I HATE DENTISTS!" shouted Twilight.

"I'm sorry, this is for your own good-" said Spike.

"THAT'S IT! GET OFF!" Twilight bucked a few times, Spike held on grimly.

"Tw-i-li-ight you-ou a-re for-get-ting some-thing!"

She stopped, snorting, "And what pray tell is that?"

"You're forgetting you don't have any magic. And..." he added quickly.

"And?"

"And girls, grab her! Rarity NOW!"

Twilight felt her friends close in to stop her from escaping, and a sudden zap behind her ear. It...it felt kinda nice. She staggered slightly, seeing stars.

"Oh you guys...why'd you...why'd you do that?"

"She's still talkin', is she supposed t'still be talkin'?"

"Uh I dunno...zap her again, Rarity."

There was another pleasant shock behind her ears, and suddenly the whole day felt just *wonderful*. She loved the ground that came up to meet her and she loved the trees and she loved the sky that swam into view as she lay down on her side and she loved her buddies and she loved Spike and wasn't the whole world just *awesome*?

She slumped to the ground, sighing happily.

When she came to, she was propped up on a bale of hay and somepony had a large metallic rasp shoved halfway up her muzzle. For some reason this struck her as exceedingly funny. A light blue coloured young filly unicorn with a dark-blue and almost-white striped tail and mane was concentrating very hard on the task at hand and the rasp was going up and down and swooshing all about - it tickled her teeth and she giggled heartily.

"Miss Twilight...please stop that...oh dear...can some pony get me a speculum? Yes, that's the one - just like that, tighten it just a tad..." the running commentary was kept up as Colgate - junior dentist extraordinaire - did her work on maintaining Twilight's dental hygiene. To combat the giggling, a strange metal contraption was fastened to Twilight's mouth that kept it open at a good distance, and with a few more practiced twists of the rasp, the spurs and spikes that had formed over the last six months were filed away to smoothness.

"Whelp, I think that's it - though next time you should really consider getting my boss to treat her, I'm just a junior dentist...and I'm pretty sure you don't need quite that much anaesthetic."

"Ah, we'd like to, sugarcube - no offence - but last time Twilight got her choppers seen to, your boss hopped away feelin' distinctly *green* after."

"What do you mean? Was he sick?"

"Nope, can't say he was. He was the most healthiest frog I ever did set eyes on. He got better, but he won't come near Twilight with his toolset o'teethy torture nomore."

Colgate giggled, "He must have gotten better. Wish I'd seen that." she squinted, looking up into the drooling maw of the zapped-silly unicorn.

"You'd better make yerself scarce a'fore Twi snaps out of it of you'll see it fer yerself, missy."

"No worry about that guys, you zapped her pretty good." she looked around, smiling, "Take her home, Spike. Let her rest and try to make sure she eats more shoots and leaves in the future. That'll keep her teeth in better condition. Too much fancy grain doesn't do a pony's teeth any favours."

"I'll keep that in mind doc. Thanks for helping me out, guys!"

"T'ain't nothin' sugah." said Applejack with a hearty laugh, "I did it fer the look on the ol' gals face, ah tell you whut!"

"I'm gonna remember this for ages! Best. Prank. Ever! Nice one Pinkie Pie!" said Rainbow Dash, giving Pinkie a brohoof. Even Fluttershy giggled demurely behind a hoof.

"I thought the foaming sugar in her tea was the *piece de resistance*, I have to say." said Rarity - the lot of them save Pinkie had been holed up outside the entire time looking in through a window and trying very hard not to giggle.

Pinkie beamed, "I have to give it to my main dragon, Spike, for the inhibit-a-whatsit - and for the paint job!"

"Priceless!" agreed Rainbow.

"It's on loan from the Princess, it's made of enchanted jade and sky-iron - blends in and interferes with a unicorn's natural magical talent. They're not easy to come by, you can guess why. You have no idea how hard this was to put together. Especially...this." Spike beamed, and brought out of the same place as he'd stowed the strange green ring - it was a camera, a magically-enchanted device to paint a picture of whatever it was pointed at automagically. They were growing relatively common, but it was still something he'd had little exposure to. Practicing for this in secret had been *hard* but it was going to be worth it...

"Let me just set this up over *here* and Rainbow, get Twi' pointing towards it...everyone crowd in! Ready? Setting the timer..."

Spike ran over to the group and they grinned like idiots whilst Twilight plastered her goofiest derpy-eyed expression all over the canvas. Many more pictures were taken that day with Twilight in compromising - yet harmless - situations. The trip back was pretty quick, but they had a little time for "side projects". Spike collected them all together as he wrote a quick note to the princess and added the copies like he'd promised. Blowing dragon-smoke at the instamagic camera and the evidence, he sent it on it's way.

Twilight was exhausted, it had been such a fun day! The sun had been shining and the little birdies tweeting and the candy-floss clouds floating by had seemed sooo happy...in fact she'd felt like *she* was floating the entire time....

"I luth you guyth," she giggled, somehow finding herself being wrapped up in bed, yawning.

"I know you do Twi," said Spike, giggling also.

"My theeth theel thunneth...wath happenth?"

"Oh don't you worry Twilight, you'll find out in the morning..." said Spike, removing the inhibitor last of all. It would come in useful again one day, but for now he sent it back to the princess with a swift burst of green dragon-fire. That final task done, he patted Twilight's head gently and left the room. She'd be mad in the morning, but it had been *totally* worth it.



# Chapter 3-1:

## Up in the Air, Part 1

“Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, for real Twilight?” asked Spike, hopping from foot to foot, “You're not kidding?!”

“I'm not! We're going on a trip with the princesses!” squealed Twilight happily, bouncing around the library like Pinkie on a chocolate high, “Yes! Yes yes yes yes yes yes!”

“And we're really going to the Leviathania, to the Draconic Realm, right to the capitol?”

“Yes! We are indeed!”

Spike stopped mid-hop and looked up, frowning at Twilight, “Promise you're not going to trick me in any way, shape or form?”

“After what you did last time when *you* tricked *me* at the dentists? No!”

“No you don't promise or no you won't trick me?”

Twilight laughed, “I promise this is no trick Spike. We're going to D'long Kerk! To the Draconic Capitol City! Now, it's a business trip and you're my assistant, so you're going to have to promise to be on your very best behaviour at all times. I want you to know I asked Celestia *very* nicely to let you come too and she was delighted to extend the invitation to both of us - so be sure to behave!”

“I will Twilight!” Spike's eyes were shining and he clasped his forepaws together, with a look of adoration for the purple unicorn on his features.

“No setting things on fire. No eating the furniture...”

“That was just that one time! They said it was a three-piece sweet!”

“Suite, different spelling...I was so embarrassed.”

“Oh boy,” said Spike, ignoring Twilight's rolling eyeballs, “I'm going home!”

Twilight's head jerked around and she looked at Spike, her ears drooping and tail dragging as she smiled weakly, “I...I thought this was your home, Spike.”

“I'm going to go eat real draconic rubies, and get a proper sand-bath and I'm gonna chat with the *lady dragons* and...” Spike stopped his monologue about everything he'd do and see when he got there as he finally noticed Twilight's forlorn, hurt expression. He looked up at his

teacher and friend and sighed, "That's not what I mean, Twilight. It's just..." he put his paws together and rubbed them, bashfully, "I'm a dragon in a land of ponies. I've never really been around other dragons – at least not ones that weren't trying to eat me or set Equestria on fire. It'll be nice to mingle with my own kind for once."

"I'm...happy for you, Spike." said Twilight finally, with a nod, nuzzling her number one assistant fondly. She stopped, mid-appreciation, and her ears perked up, "Oh! I've got so much packing to do! Spike!"

Spike pouted.

"*Now* Spike!"

He sighed, "Coming, Twilight."

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Twilight yawned as she moved through the empty streets of Greater Canterlot on her way to the airport. The princesses had decided to catch the early-morning flight to the Draconic Realm, which meant Twilight had to travel *even earlier*.

Truth be told, it was the *only* flight. On her back were two hefty panniers and a sleepy baby dragon. Oh *his* back was a rucksack, and she happened to know his blankie had been hidden at the bottom along with Teddy.

She was pulling a small cart with more suitcases on it – inside these were all the formal attire she and Spike had been instructed to bring. Ponies didn't tend to wear much in the way of clothing, but when they did, it took up plenty of space.

She'd boarded the four-pegasus chariot the previous night from Ponyville to make sure she got there in time. Somehow, despite the fact there was only the one stop between Canterlot and Ponyville, her luggage - which had travelled in a separate chariot - had been diverted to Hoofington. Several hours of waiting later and she'd given up and gone to the donut shop to drown her sorrows in sugar-coated light pastry. Several hours after *that*, she'd taken back her old room at Canterlot Castle. Her luggage had travelled to Stalliongrad - without her.

She was pretty sure she didn't like traveling.

\*\*\*

The sun rose over the newly-constructed airport just north of Canterlot, up in the Mountains of the Moon. The paint was still wet on a few

of the benches – this had already given several ponies a new colour scheme and cutie-mark. Twilight had seen the warning signs so she'd been saved the embarrassment of being turned into a multi-coloured zebra wannabe. Zecora could pull off stripes, Twilight didn't think they suited her.

Twilight yawned again and came to a halt, stretching awkwardly, joints popping, "Wake up Spike, we're here."

"Huh? Wha'? Mommy?"

Twilight giggled, "No Spike, we're at the airport. You've got to get ready to identify yourself."

"But...I already know who I am." Spike was tired, "Can't I introduce myself instead?"

"I mean you have to show them you're you!"

"Well who *e*/se would I be? You're not making much sense, Twilight..."

The arguing carried on right the way to the check-in desk which was ponied by an officious-looking earth-pony with an ink-stamp as a cutie-mark. A single velvet rope and three bollards stood in front of it. Twilight trotted up to the desk, "Hi, I'm Twilight Sparkle, traveling to the Leviathania on the seven-thirty?"

"Tickets please." said the earth-pony in a friendly manner. She smiled winningly.

"Oh, yes, right." Twilight fished them out of her panniers and presented them to the attendant, who scanned them with what appeared to be a practiced eye.

"These aren't first class, you have to go to the economy-class desk."

"But..." Twilight looked around, "this is the *only* desk!"

"You have to queue there," said the attendant, pointing three feet behind Twilight and two feet left.

"But..."

"Next please!" said the attendant, and looked behind Twilight, ignoring her.

The purple unicorn frowned. She was *quite* sure she hated traveling.

Twilight pulled her wagon back around in a complicated circle and approached the check-in desk from the correct side of the ropes.

"Next! Next please!" said the attendant impatiently.

Twilight gritted her teeth and spoke through them with a very, very bright smile, "Twilight Sparkle, plus one, for D'long Kerk on the seven-thirty."

"Ah, nice to see you this morning, Miss Sparkle, how was your trip so far?"

"Just..." an eye twitched, "just perfect, thank you."

"Any luggage?" the mare asked.

Twilight looked behind her, *really* tempted to say 'no' but she choked it back, "Yes. Plenty."

"Any liquids, explosives, poisons, weapons, magic charms, totems, sleeping spells, curses or hexes?"

"I...er...do spell books count? I plan to do a little light reading on the way..."

The attendant blinked, "Section forty-two *clearly* prohibits..."

"And...I'm a unicorn. I think my horn counts as a weapon *and* a magic charm...and I'm quite sure I'm capable of creating sleeping spells, curses *and* hexes."

The attendant trembled slightly. This hadn't been in the manual. They'd been quite clear about these things, and yet...and yet...

"**SECURITY!**"

Twilight face-hoofed. She *really disliked* traveling.

\*\*\*

"Oh don't worry my dear," said Celestia with a chuckle as she escorted Twilight through the airport away from Security and back to Spike, "Miss Orderly Porter was just doing her job."

"They locked me up! They were going to set fire to my *books!*"

"Just being thorough!"

"They called me a national security hazard!"

"That was a bit off, I do have to say. Come come, it's all been sorted out. We'll be getting on the void-ship soon."

The princess trotted off to further organize their passage, mingle with the commoners, kiss foals and generally be a princess. Twilight left to get her panniers back before some over-zealous officials 'neutralized' them.

Twilight's main set of luggage had been stowed in the hold and they'd left her with the carry-ons. Spike jumped up from the uncomfortable seat where he'd been kicking his heels, shouldered his rucksack and hopped up on Twilight's back. He yawned, it was infectious and Twilight yawned. They

approached the security gate, the official behind it tried to stifle the yawn that was still fighting for supremacy of his muzzle.

Spike eyed the structure suspiciously, "That's a security gate?"

"Why yes, Spike, you have to go through it to get on the void-ship."

"It's not very secure," said Spike, hopping off Twilight's back and trotting up to it. He walked around it in a circle, causing concerned glares from a couple of pegasus guards. It was a free-standing structure like a door-frame. Without a door. It didn't seem to do much but go 'beep'.

"Spike, sweetie? Please stop that..." said Twilight, smiling brightly at the guards, "*Spike!*"

"Oh alright." said Spike. He came back through the illustrious portal the wrong way. It made a long, loud, insulted-sounding 'beeeeeep!'.

Twilight face-hoofed. She *hated* traveling.

"Okay short-stuff, put your carry-on luggage through the scanner. Do you have any metal or runic equipment on you? No?" asked a security guard-pony.

Spike shook his head, "Does it look like I have pockets?"

The small dragon unshouldered the bag and put it in the tray. The pegasus guard pushed it through to an open-ended box where a bored-looking unicorn examined it with his magic, horn glowing briefly. Spike looked at the tray with his bag on it, expectantly.

"It's clean." said the unicorn finally. Spike took it out of the runed box and hopped through the gate with it.

"You're supposed to..." the guard sighed, his hoof pointed to a sign that read '*please collect luggage AFTER progressing through the security gate*'. He sighed, feeling completely ignored, "Go on then, move along...your turn next, toots."

Twilight put her bags on the tray using her magic, and the bored unicorn repeated the maneuver.

"Have you got any metal or runic equipment on you?" repeated the guard.

Twilight lifted her front hoof, "How about these?" she said as she showed her horse-shoes.

The guard blinked, "Can you take them off?"

"Can...can I take off the metal horse-shoes which are *nailed securely to my hooves*? No, no I can't."

The guard looked at Twilight. Twilight looked at the guard.

"*SECURITY!*"

\*\*\*

"Come come, Twilight, it could happen to anypony," said Celestia, mollifying the distraught unicorn as they trotted together towards the ship. Twilight was once more a free unicorn, without the threat of a lengthy stay in a cell, or of being banished, or of being locked up in a place where she was banished to.

"They put me in jail! Again! They all but called me a terrorist!" wailed Twilight, half wishing the ground would open up and swallow her, half wishing the ground would open up and swallow *them*.

Twilight *really* hated traveling.

The docking-gate and passport-control point was a simple desk set in front of the gang-plank to the strange ship behind it. Twilight had never seen anything like it, and wondered how long it had taken to build. Normal ships floated on water. Airships floated in the air. This was...something else. It was a void-ship, built to travel between Realms. The void-ship was a mix of sweeping curves and arches, and solid blocky compartments. It reminded her of a painting by a famous artist who drew impossible structures. It looked something like the ships that ponies used to travel upon the Equestrian Mane...and something like a bird that had exploded.

The docking-gate, in contrast, was boringly ordinary. It was ponied by a familiar-looking official. She was passing Celestia and Luna onboard with great deference for the living embodiments of Day and Night.

Spike hopped off his suddenly-recalcitrant ride and fished out his passport from wherever he kept things like that. Twilight blinked, she still didn't know how he did it, and didn't really want to. The passport was a scroll with a picture of Spike himself on it. Twilight turned white as she realised he'd had used picture taken of him sporting a number twenty-five moustache. She held her breath for the inevitable hue and cry, but none came. Surprisingly they let him onboard. Twilight was next. She trotted up to the desk and presented her ticket. The official scanned it, "you're not in first class..."

Twilight hung her head, and turned around, walking the three feet back and two feet left again, before approaching the same desk from the other side of the rope, "Why did you let Spike through then?"

"It's our company policy to make the trips of the young, old or infirm as pleasant as possible," said Orderly, primly, "are we going to be having any further trouble from you?"

Twilight sighed, "No, no. Here. Here's my ticket."

"Hmm, your ticket is in order. Where's your passport?"

"But...but...I..." Twilight's heart sank, how could she have forgotten it? Did Spike take it? She'd completely forgotten her own documents whilst worrying about Spike's.

"Passport, please." the stewardess repeated, bright smile never wavering.

"Oh no...oh no, I packed it! It's in the hold!"

Orderly Porter looked at Twilight. Twilight grinned hopefully. Now she *knew* she hated traveling.

"SECURI-"

"What seems to be the problem here?" asked Celestia smoothly, appearing almost silently behind the female steward. Twilight opened her eyes carefully, expecting once more to be swarmed by winged guards in uniform.

"This...this trouble-maker claims her passport is in the hold!"

"Can't you fetch it?" asked Celestia mildly.

The official pouted, "It's against company policy-"

"What if she had another passport?" suggested Celestia in a warm, friendly voice.

Twilight blinked, Orderly Porter screwed up her muzzle and scowled at Twilight, "It would have to be in the registered format..."

Celestia's horn glowed and a parchment appeared in mid-air. On it was written 'PASSPORT' followed by various details about Twilight Sparkle.

"It would have to have a current picture." sulked the official. A picture of Twilight, looking like she wished the ground would swallow her up, appeared.

"...And it would have to be dated appropriately and signed by the Passport Authority."

"I believe I am the passport authority." said Celestia with a smile, as she signed it, dated it and rolled it up to pass to Twilight. The purple unicorn gingerly held it out to Orderly Porter. The earth-pony scowled as she double and triple-checked all the details before hoofing it back.

"You may go through."

*Maybe,* thought Twilight with a smug grin, *I could get used to traveling after all.*

\*\*\*

The void-ship didn't exactly fly. It didn't exactly float. Instead, it drifted between dimensions from realm to realm. The inside was decked out in a curious mix of functional stowage for luggage and uncomfortable slow torture for passengers. Twilight and Spike had been given a Family Stall as Twilight had long since been named somewhere by the bureaucracy of Equestria as legal guardian of the scaly bundle of trouble. Twilight grumbled at the inadequacy of the quarters; she could barely turn around, had her backside jammed up against the rear wall if she wanted to reach the salt-lick and to top it off the water-trough was tepid. The complementary hay was stale and Spike was convinced the gems were inferior-grade glass.

Twilight fought with the harness. Despite her magic, she just *couldn't* get it to fit properly. It said, in smug lettering, 'one size fits all'. It lied.

The dragon wasn't faring much better. Despite this being a Family Stall, there was no harnesses that seemed to fit him either. He sat sulking in a bridle that Twilight had adjusted as best she could. They'd been sternly warned that safety equipment had to be worn at all times, but especially for take-off and landing. She'd gone through the safety checklist. Twice.

*"This is your Captain speaking,"* said a friendly voice over the intercom, *"Please keep your stall-ropes fastened on your halters at all time until I've turned off the safety-torch and pay attention to the safety demonstration."*

Twilight raised an eyebrow as a bored-looking pegasus trotted up the aisle that led throughout the ship. Somewhere back up the way the attendant had come were the princesses' stalls.

The pegasus steward cleared his throat, "Thank you for traveling with *Celestial Lines*. We are sure this safety briefing will be useful and may save your life - or at least not prolong your suffering in the event of an emergency. Should the binding spells on this ship fail, it will be consumed by the Ravenous Dark and cease to exist within a scant few minutes. At this time it may be worthwhile for you to sit quietly and contemplate the meaning of your life and make peace with yourself before your existence is wiped from the face of this and all realities..."

"*Twí?*" whispered Spike as the pegasus droned on, pointing out exits they couldn't see, that wouldn't be much use in the netherworld between realms, and more safety equipment they weren't allowed to touch that didn't seem to help much until they were safely on the ground anyway.



"What?" she whispered back, not taking her eyes off the wildy-gesticulating pegasus as he mimed death by asphyxiation.

"If we're going to die, why do they make us wear these halter-ropes? I'm not even a pony, it doesn't fit!"

"I...I don't know, Spike, but I'd rather not get in trouble!"

"If I may continue..." glared the attendant, realizing his most important duty of delivering the safety briefing was not only being ignored but interrupted. "Thank you...as I was saying, this class three-nineteen void-ship is fully equipped with an integrated audio-visual entertainment system which will be showing the inflight movie shortly. Attendants will be visiting you soon to serve you meals, drinks and a variety of snacks. Please wait until the captain has extinguished the safety-torch to remove your halters, and remember that all passengers must be firmly strapped in for take-off *and* landing, with all feeding troughs and water-bowls stowed in the upright position. Thank you."

"Well," said Twilight without a hint of irony, "I certainly feel safer."

Take-off - there were scant few other words for it - was smooth with only the strangely sickening lurch as the flight spells engaged for indication. The safety-torch was extinguished and Spike shrugged himself out of the halter which hadn't exactly fitted him in the first place,

*"This is your Captain speaking," said the same friendly voice over the intercom, "We are now traveling at a height of thirty thousand memes and at a rate of five hundred daydreams an hour. We should be at our destination in approximately...twelve hours relative time. If you look to your left, you can see the Great Grey Expanse, the void of everlasting nothing and the final destination for all lost souls. If you look to your right, you can also see the Great Grey Expanse, source of everlasting chaos, primeval font of creation and the final devouring maw of unreality. There is no temperature outside as we are not flying in atmosphere at present. Since I have extinguished the safety torches, please feel free to move about the ship but do keep the aisles clear as they will be the only possible exit-route in the event of an emergency situation which doesn't immediately cause complete and utter annihilation."*

The pair opened the door to their joint family stall and went in search of the princesses.

On the way, they passed the facilities - which already had a queue - and a cheery looking device marked 'Emergency Personnel Disintegrator

Unit - For Use In Case Of Terminal Reality Dysfunction'. Twilight noted with a sigh the big red sign hung around it that said simply 'OUT OF ORDER'.

Twilight found her quarry in First Class. When the attendant refused to allow them entry, Celestia herself shooed the attendant out the way, "This is my faithful pupil Twilight Sparkle and she should be traveling First Class too, off you go now."

The attendant glowered at Twilight, but stood aside. Twilight blushed as Spike leaped straight in to the luxurious facilities and started chomping on the precious gems in snack-bowls. These were the real deal, they even served strange bubbly liquid in crystal glasses! Spike wasn't sure why, he threw the liquid away and savoured the flavour of real lead crystal.

"My dear pupil, for the flight back I will personally make sure you are accorded all rights and privileges possible, the same as myself and Luna."

"Oh it's no trouble, Princess." stammered Twilight as she stepped carefully into the quarters.

"Indeed it isn't. I won't have a repeat of these sorts of problems. It's not becoming. Isn't that right, Luna?" Celestia turned to her younger sister, who was completely engrossed in a pile of papers and an odd device of wires and beads. Luna fiddled with it making *clack clack clack* noises as she shifted beads about.

"Luna! did you even listen to a word...*honestly!* I said you could bring some light entertainment for the trip! What do you call this?" the sun princess stamped a hoof angrily.

"It's..." Luna looked up, eyes unfocused for a moment, "it's my light entertainment..."

"It looks like the Canterlot tax code. And an abacus. Put it away!"

"No! Abacus is mine! He comes everywhere with me." Luna defensively pulled the device closer, hugging it while glaring at her sister.

"He?" asked Twilight, realising as she closed the gap between the two princesses that she was intruding on the personal space of the usually-reclusive younger sister.

"Er...*it*. It's a very useful and...and *fun* tool," blurted the lunar princess, her ears splaying back nervously as she was confronted with her older sister's pupil.

"Reforming the tax code is *not* entertaining!" snorted Celestia.

"It is too! Have you tried it?"

"I..." Celestia scowled at her younger sister, "Put it away!"

"Well alright," sulked Luna, "but I'm keeping Abacus. He doesn't like the dark." she pushed a few beads across experimentally, *clack clack*

*clack*, before she realised what she'd said, "I mean...I don't want to lose him. It. Under the seats."

Celestia watched her sister carefully for a few seconds as the dark blue winged unicorn started flicking beads again with an intent look of concentration on her muzzle. "...Are you reforming the tax code *in your head?*"

"I...might be." replied Luna with a sniff, still flicking beads.

"Are you...are you using *magic* to scribe the changes?"

Luna was silent, staring fixedly at the abacus and defiantly flicking the beads from one side to the other as her horn glowed in fits and spurts.

"Oh-my-gosh-the-movie's-on-look-at-that!" said Twilight, sputtering as she hoofed the runed remote, eyes flicking from sister to sister as each puffed up to start yelling at the other - a scrying orb fired into life and started blaring out moving pictures and sound.

Celestia turned her head and scowled, watching as 'Die Herd 2 - Derp Harder' came on. There was an odd cacophony of noise as Luna set her abacus upon a smaller pillow.

"Luna, dear," asked Celestia in a patient maternal tone, "just *what* are you doing? Are you playing with Abacus again? You know it's just a...a toy."

"Abacus is not a toy! He..." Luna bit her lip, blushing, "I don't want to lose him. It. Under the seats I mean, like I said, earlier."

Luna resolutely adjusted the tool carefully, as if it were watching the show.

"Aba...oh good grief. Fine. If we're going to play this..." Celestia stood up and went to her carry-on bag and extricated a blue soft-toy from it's depths. She carried it reverently in her mouth and sat it on an adjacent pillow, making sure to seat it just right so the little blue stuffed winged unicorn was watching the orb.

Luna's eyes lit up, "You *did* keep it! Even *after* I came back!"

"Yes, well...it gets cold at night," said Celestia with a similar sniff to her little sister's, "Little Luna keeps me warm."

Twilight buried her head in her hooves as she pretended to be a part of the upholstery. Spike rushed back to their stall and returned a few moments later with a well-worn dog-eared cuddly pony of his own which he sat on the floor between Little Luna and Abacus. Celestia lifted it onto the pillow next to her own toy. Spike giggled into his paws as Celestia turned to watch the movie, blushing hotly.

Twilight fixed her eyes on the movie too. Not having such a contraption in her library, it was a new experience for her. Usually such devices were used for remote viewing of real ponies, events and places. Seeing the eventual crash-landing of a class three-nineteen voidship play out in high-definition colour and sound was more than a little unnerving.

“Uh, Princess?” she asked.

“Sshhh!” hissed Celestia, hoofing popcorn into her muzzle.

“I just wanted to ask...do these things...crash often?”

“Why no, dear, they’re the safest way of travelling. Now do hush up, this is the best bit.”

“Well okay, if you’re-” began Twilight. Unfortunately, she was interrupted by the ship bucking beneath her hooves and the safety-torch being re-lit.

“*Sorry passengers, we seem to have hit a bit of memetic turbulence so buckle up!*” reported the ever-cheery Captain’s voice over the intercom.

Twilight whimpered, chewing away at her hooves as she listened carefully to every *twang* and *clunk* of the ship fighting through the storm whilst the ship on-screen came apart in a riotous set of showy explosions.

Twilight was coming to the conclusion that travel really wasn’t all it had cracked up to be.

Eventually she slept. She woke up at some point to a cup of something resembling coffee, after which she was corralled back to her stall along with Spike for final approach. The dragon found himself being strapped into what they termed a foal-seat, and admonished sternly about how he should have said if the standard-issue halters didn’t fit. It was the most impractical creation he had seen; made for a pony foal, it lifted him at least a foot off the ground in a whole-body harness that went tight around his upper and lower torso and left his tail, legs and paws dangling. It was on a boom of sorts - which the stewardess reminded had to be stowed and secured for landing - that allowed for the easy feeding of baby and infant ponies.

“At this time, we’ll be serving the last snack before realm-fall. Would you or the little one be needing anything?” asked the steward with a snort, twitching her ears inquisitively.

“Well I’m hungry.” said Spike. Twilight shook her head.

“Alright, I’ll be right back...”

The steward returned a few minutes later with a large bottle held in her mouth which she put down next to Twilight before shutting and bolting the door with an ominous finality.

"What...is *that*?" asked Spike, pointing with his tail.

"I think that's your snack." said Twilight, giggling.

"Don't tell me...company policy?"

Twilight rolled her eyes, "They do like doing things by the book."

"Sounds like somepony I know." sulked Spike, eyeing it as he made a decision, "Well? It's getting cold, and I'm hungry!"

\*\*\*

Twilight stepped off the ship on unsteady legs, blinking in sudden sunlight under a baking hot sun. She walked down the gang-plank with a dozing dragon on her back, taking her first few hoof-steps in a new world. Sizing up the border-control desk she was determined not to make the same mistake as before. She followed the signs for 'economy' and 'foreign travellers' and waited in the relatively short queue behind a host of strangely-dressed and stranger-shaped creatures. Some walked on four legs, some six, some even walked on two and had strange pink skin that looked highly unsuitable for such a climate.

As she stood tapping her hooves and humming to herself, it took her a few moments to realize that the impatient voice calling, "Hey! You there! Sir!" was a dragon trying to get the attention of not her, but Spike.

She nudged Spike awake with her nose, "Looks like they want to give you the special treatment."

Spike blinked, yawned, stretched, and turned to look at the source of the voice, "What do you want?" he called.

"Sir, you're in the wrong queue! Draconic nationals and their steeds are welcome in the express lane - your two attendants are already cleared for livestock entry!"

"Livest-" began Twilight, turning bright red, "Oh no...oh no no no, she's going to send me to the moon...or put me in jail *on* the moon..."

"I'm sure it's fine," said Spike, "this is my country. Leave this to me. Hi-ho Twilight!"

"You don't get to *hi-ho Twilight* me just because we're..."

"Sir, if you're having trouble with your steed after the trip, we can have Animal Welfare administer a sedative?" suggested the helpful check-in dragon.

"No, no," said Spike savouring the reversal of fortunes, "that won't be necessary. She'll be alright. *Won't she?*"

Twilight grumbled darkly but behaved, walking through the odd maze of ropes and bollards to stand before the express dignitary check-in desk.

“Okay sir, just make your mark here, here and here...good...sign for your steed, you’ll have to pay attention to the city ordinances listed in this short document, and you’re good to go. Your two other animals were already cleared by Animal Control and are stabled on the other side. We’ll have your luggage unloaded and you can hitch up shortly - just ask any of our attendants for help. Have a nice day, and may I take this opportunity to welcome you to the Draconic Realm!”

Spike dug his heels into Twilight who turned her head just enough to glare at him. He gave a nervous grin and flicked his eyes to the steward. Twilight rolled her eyes and trotted primly past.

It was going to be a *long* trip.

# Chapter 3-2

## The Business Trip

### Dragon About

One thing Twilight knew, without the shadow of a doubt, was that it was hot. The dry air wafted through her bangs and took with it any trace of cooler climes, leaving only dust and grit. The sun was hot in Leviathania. The streets were hotter. Both glowed with a fierce intensity that hurt to look at.

She'd been warned about the flies. She hadn't listened. Haywood was perched on her forehead now, cleaning himself off after his last meal and she'd given up trying to chase him away. He'd appeared soon after leaving the terminal building crying, "Hey! Hey! Monster-lady! You got any dung?"

"What?" she'd asked, momentarily stunned at the half-foot-long abomination hovering in front of her.

"Dung. I said have you got any dung?"

"I... uh... no? Leave us alone! And I'm a unicorn, not a monster!" She moved to go past him.

"Hey lady, I've got three thousand mouths to feed! You're gonna make my wife and kids starve? What sort of monster are you?"

"Still a unicorn! Ugh! Get lost!" She swatted at him with her tail, "Go home!"

"Go home to three thousand screaming kids and the wife? You really *are* a monster!"

Twilight sighed, "What do you want?"

"It's not so much what you can do for me, but what I can do for *you*. I'm a guide, the best in the city. Haywood's the name. Haywood D'Jaboozarf at your service." It - presumably he - lifted an appendage for Twilight to shake.

She stared at it and raised an eyebrow, "We can find our way quite easily all by ourselves, thank you very much."

As she said this, Spike hiccuped. There was a brief flash of green and a sound not unlike the crackle of paper being incinerated, "I'll just... pop inside and get another map." said the dragon with a weary sigh.

Twilight slowly checked over the princesses, the wagon and her dragon-assistant, who was once again climbing up into the seat, "Do you know where I can find... are we in the right place? Ooh, this gives me a chance... where's that phrase book?"

The unicorn searched through the luggage for a small, worn booklet, lifting it up with her magic and flipping through the pages. She cleared her throat as she pronounced, awkwardly, "I want D'Long Kerk."

Haywood's wings snapped straight and he almost fell out of the sky, "Ahem, you mean... ah... yeah, that's here. For a moment there..."

"What?" asked Twilight, peering back and forth between the book at the creature.

"Well, the tourists... yeah... you're probably... yeah. Just watch the pronunciation there, Miss. You're in the right place, no fear."

Twilight blinked, people certainly were *odd* sometimes. Twilight turned back to the fly, who grinned hopefully. She felt like strangling him with her tail, but he did seem, well, *cheap* to maintain. Besides, it was going to take more than a tail-swat to remove him and there were a million more waiting in the wings. Some of them a lot *less* polite, as hard as that was to believe.

"Okay, Haywood, you're on. Lead us to our hotel. And no funny business - I may be a vegetarian but Spike isn't."

"I am at your service, madame!"

\*\*\*

Whilst Spike sat in driver's seat of the wagon, holding the reins, it was really the unicorn who was in charge. Spike had cracked them *once* with a cry of "Hiya!" but Twilight had threatened to tie him up in them and leave him there overnight if he did it again. After that he'd been sulking for the last hour as the wagon rolled through dusty street after dusty street.

The wooden contraption which held the luggage was hitched to Twilight, who was pulling it in very bad grace. As they traipsed through the boiling, mad city, Twilight was rapidly growing tired of the populace who were alternatively trying to sell the unicorn something, buy her, feed her, or some mixture of the three. It would have been an eye-opener of a cultural experience if it hadn't been offset by the arguing of the two other equines, the alicorn princesses, tied with ropes to the back of the wagon.

*Clack clack clack* came from the general direction of a smaller blue winged unicorn, followed by the clatter of something wooden covered with



beads falling to the ground. There was a shriek, "Abacus! Abacus! Speak to me! Tia how *could* you! You'll hurt... you'll break it!"

"It was an accident, my dear sister! Just stretching my wings!" replied the elder, a white winged unicorn with a regal countenance.

There was another shriek, this one a different timbre and resonance, "My... my mane! Do you have *any* idea how long it takes me each morning to clean, brush and enchant it to flow in the wind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry big sis, my hoof slipped..."

There was a meaty *thunk*, followed by a feathery *slap*, followed by the grunts and squeals of the two slapping hooves, wings and tails at each other.

Twilight grit her teeth before stopping in her tracks, craning her head back and shouting, "For goodness sake cut it out! I've been listening to this for the last half hour and I have had *enough*! So help me I will have you *both* muzzled if I hear another peep out of either of you! Don't make me come back there!"

Twilight stood, breathing heavily in the sudden silence as the street itself paused. Celestia and Luna froze, mid-ruckus, and sheepishly arranged themselves. Abacus vanished into the back of the wagon. Celestia smirked at Luna, but dropped it when she caught sight of Twilight's beady glare and the furious glow of her horn. The purple unicorn snorted, pawed the ground once in warning, and turned back to the fly, "Our hotel. Where. Now."

"Don't get your fetlocks in a tangle, we're almost there."

"Are you... are you sure? I'm not finding this street on the map..." asked Spike, indicating an intricate, detailed drawing. There was a soft tearing noise as his claws penetrated the paper. He scowled in frustration.

"Well you didn't want to stop and ask for directions, and Haywood here says he knows the way."

"Haywood D'Jaboozarf, city guide extraordinaire, has *never* left a mark, er, I mean a customer, hanging." replied the fly.

"And you'd better not try it, Bub," snorted Spike, screwing up the map into an angry ball and incinerating it, "or I'll squish you." The baby dragon turned to the unicorn and instantly his tough-guy voice was replaced by a wheedling moan, "When're we gonna get there Twi? I'm *tired* and *hungry* and it's *hot* and I haven't had *anything* to eat for *hours*!"

"Spike, it's been an hour tops, and all you have to do is sit there! The last quartz candy-stick is under the seat, you can snack on that."

"Easy for you to say, it's not past your naptime. Are we there yet?"

"No."

Spike sat for a few moments, "How about now?"

"No."

"...Now?"

"*Spike!*"

The dragon grumbled sullenly, picking up a large crystal from behind his seat right where Twilight had said it would be and crunching on it. He almost slipped off, hiccuping, when Twilight came to a sudden halt.

"The hotel! we're here!"

\*\*\*

The buildings were mostly made of sandstone, yellow and brown, with a large pool in which were lounging several very large green, red and bronze coloured dragons. There were no gates, no fences. The paved slabs just gave way to what appeared to be granite and palm trees. Hosts of six-winged bird-like creatures sunned themselves on the rocks and called to each other, nipping at scales on their underbellies. Other smaller dragons lounged in hollows, puffing on elaborate water-pipes and conversing in the lilting sing-song of Draconic.

"This is so exciting!" said Twilight, hopping up and down, "I can't wait to see our rooms!"

She was led through the complex to a covered shed where the wagon was unhitched by attendant draconic creatures with four legs and two extra limbs on the upright portions of their bodies, "We will stow your luggage sir, not to be worry." one of them hissed in broken Equestrian to Spike.

"I will be to taking your steeds to their accomodation."

"Oh goody!" said Twilight as she shrugged out of the halter, "I cant wait to see my bed and the view and the room and the facilities... oh I hope it's got a shower! I bet it does, I bet the princess has got us top notch rooms with everything and this is going to be so much fun! I'm going to have a swim and get a nice cool drink and then I'm going to curl up and read a good book and relax and..."

She was led further into the covered area and shown through a small door into an alcove with what appeared to be straw on the floor. The door was bolted behind her.

Twilight's right eye twitched, once. She'd had a long day. An... eventful trip. All she wanted now was a nice, calm, quiet place to relax in. She resolved to have a few words with the manager. Pony to... dragon.

Calm, cool, collected words. Logical discourse. Things, she resolved, would be subtly but surely be *improved*.

\*\*\*

"Twi..." asked Spike, as he watched the staff scurrying about putting out the last of the fires.

"Yes Spike?" replied Twilight in a sing-song voice as she lounged in the otherwise-vacant pool.

"I don't want to question my best friend, but don't you think that was a bit excessive?"

"Spike, dear, my darling best-ever most-appreciated number one assistant... when have I *ever* been excessive?"

"You set the stable on fire."

"I... redecorated. Incendiarily."

"You *blew up* the lobby."

"Just... just a little remodeling. They now have a wonderful skylight."

"They're missing the roof! And did you *really* have to eat the ledger?"

"I was showing some *slight* displeasure at that point, perhaps."

"And I don't think they've yet coaxed the concierge down from that tree nor will they ever get the stain out of the carpet..."

"Oh Spike, don't be so... so..." Twilight waved a hoof, "everything worked out for the best! They upgraded us to the ambassadorial suite for free, after all!"

"After you threatened to run the manager through and string his intestines up like party favours."

Twilight twitched, "*They put me in the stable and gave me straw to eat!*"

"But... you like straw!"

"IT WAS THE WAY THEY DID IT!" she shouted. Several members of staff dived for cover and at least two made benedictorial signs to some invisible sky-being. Twilight clopped her hooves together in the universal sign for service. Lots were drawn and the unlucky dragon was sent with a silver platter heaped high with green plants and a selection of fruits and vegetables. He quivered silently as Twilight picked over it and floated a few pieces in front of her thoughtfully, "I shall write a letter of apology. Tomorrow. First thing."

Spike rolled his eyes and pulled another gem from the pile heaped next to where he was sunning himself. He rubbed it to a shine on his bulging belly, before popping it in his mouth and chewing.

\*\*\*

Twilight threw open the doors to her balcony with a triumphant push of her forehooves and strode out into the morning sun. She breathed deeply. The charred woodsmoke aroma of burning hotel offset the other exotic scents in the air. She looked down at the princesses and studied their outfits. The first thing that came to mind were the beads. Everything they wore was covered in beads and sequins and gold and silver loops. It looked like a glitter factory had exploded next to a rope factory and had taken out the fabric store next door. When they moved, they clattered and clashed like an army of bangles on the run.

"Wow..." said Spike, poking his head through the railings.

"I'll say," said Twilight, "glad I don't have to wear something like that."

Spike grinned sheepishly at the floor before looking up at Twilight, twirling a claw, "Umm... about that..."

\*\*\*

Twilight walked warily through the baking streets towards their unknown destination. Behind her she pulled the wagon, now emptied of the majority of their luggage and filled only with a myriad of gifts for persons unknown. In what passed for the lobby of what was left of the hotel, they'd dressed her up in one of her more flashier saddles, keeping as much distance as they could between her horn and hooves and any sensitive body parts, and the straps chafed. She was wearing a getup that she could only describe as *ridiculous*. Her hooves hurt, the wagon was heavy, Spike was digging his heels in at every opportunity and Celestia was being mean to Luna who was doing her best to wind up her older sister - and succeeding.

Celestia had made Twilight bring three sets of tack, and had admonished her for being difficult about getting along with local mores and customs. The sun princess herself and her younger sister both looked resplendent in their shining, ostentatious, lightly-armored harnesses. They were respectively made of what appeared to be red gold, and a silvery platinum. Each were bedecked in an armada of frilly lacework and furious filigree that Twilight was forced to label '*chichi*', to use a word Rarity had thrown at her on more than one occasion. The straps appeared to be fine hemp, with silvery buckles and clasps that exploded in a shower of cleats and belts. What *really* chapped her horn was the bridle... and the bit. She

chewed the metal bar lodged firmly in her muzzle angrily; it made her drool and she *really* didn't like it.

As they wandered once more through the hot streets, through the throng of dragons hawking wares, smoking hookahs or eating and drinking, Twilight attempted to revel in the atmosphere. The very air was alive with a thousand voices calling, singing, shouting, conversing in languages she couldn't understand. Strange, lizard-like animals ran between their feet on four, six or more legs, or flapped their way through the maze of twisting passages.

"Wh're 're ve g'ng?" mumbled Twilight, pulling her head about and slurping at the rivulets that were dripping onto the sandstone road.

"Where are we going?" asked Celestia rhetorically, unhampered orally since she was wearing a simple - if ornate - bridle and was tied to the wagon with her sister. Luna was sulking about having to pack her hoofheld device in Twilight's wagon. Celestia twitched an ear with mirth and looking at her favourite pupil, "Why, we're going to see my old friend Quincy for a quick social chat and a spot of light lunch."

"I th't oo s'd th's w's b's'n'ss" spat Twilight, scowling.

"Of course it's business, *very important* business - but we can hardly be impatient and rude guests! Quincy is a stickler for entertaining his guests. It won't be long now, just up the road, then you can get out of those things and into something a lot more comfortable, like the saddle Rarity designed for you in the white and gold trim with red and purple gems - very fetching indeed!"

Twilight kept her thoughts on where the saddle in the white with gold trim could be put as Spike held on to the thankfully well-cushioned item for dear life.

Twilight trounced her way through the streets, glowering, "Ex'plain 'oo 'ee a'ain..."

"You're my steed, it's... traditional. It's all in the guide. I thought you'd have read it!"

Twilight spat out the bit with great difficulty. It wedged itself above her nose, painfully, "Was the guide the small glossy publication they hid under my pillow?"

"It was indeed. I thought you loved books."

"Not before breakfast. Besides, it has all sorts of crazy stuff in it - it states the dragon emperor and his sons are responsible for raising the sun and the moon. Everypony knows it's Celestia and Luna who do that!"

"Actually... that's not quite right," piped up Haywood, "you're in Leviathania now."

Twilight raised an eyebrow, and Spike nodded, "They don't raise the sun, moon *or* the stars in this realm. Or their own, when they're on holiday. It's why you're so... so..."

Twilight glowered at the dragon for a moment. He gesticulated, carrying on quickly, "It's why *they're* so... so..."

Twilight stopped dead in her tracks and eyed the two princesses, who were once again making faces at each other, "Wait, so... do they... wait... how's the sun and moon getting raised back home?"

\*\*\*

"Pinkie," asked Rarity, staring out through the castle window with a thoughtful expression on her muzzle.

"Yes Rarity, my bestest ever friend who's in this room right now?" replied the bubbly pink pony, prancing about as she flapped her wings and crossed her eyes trying to get a good look at the large horn protruding from her forehead.

"Is the sun... supposed to have a big smiley face on it?"

"Well I thought 'why should the sun be the same old boring glowy ball every day' and then I thought 'wouldn't it be *just swell* if it were happier' and so I made it a huge happy glowy smiley face!"

"Pinkie," sighed Rarity, "you are the temporary ruler of the Sun and co-ruler of Equestria. Must you redecorate *everything*?"

"Oooohhh, that's a brilliant idea! Herald! Attend your party princess!" Pinkie stomped a hoof imperiously

An impeccably-dressed unicorn with greying mane - it had been dark green earlier that day, but Pinkie had a certain *effect* when in full party mode - approached the thrones wearily, "Yes milady?"

"You know what this castle needs? Streamers! And balloons!"

"Streamers?"

"Who's the princess around here?"

"You are, oh mighty pink princess of parties and practically perfect pony. Streamers it is." he sighed. He'd had to memorize a new title approximately once every fifteen minutes since three in the morning.

"And one more thing. I declare this day *muffin day*. If ponies do not consume at least one muffin per meal, they will be punished!"

"Punished milady? I don't think we have enough room in the dungeo-"

"Yes! They will be punished by being ordered to eat a muffin!" Pinkie stamped her hoof with a definite finality. The unicorn scurried off to do the princess' bidding.

Rarity rolled her eyes. It was going to be a long day... maybe she could persuade Pinkie to get an early night. That, or feed her enough cake to get her to pass out. Tonight she was going to have a meteor shower - in all the colours of the rainbow - and planned for the galaxies to shine like diamonds. She fluttered her wings and settled herself primly into the Throne of Night. The only way this could be better was if she had some company. She narrowed her eyes. *Perfect*, she thought to herself with a smirk. Revenge was going to be *delicious*, "Summon Prince Blueblood!"

\*\*\*

"*Pinkie?*" hissed Twilight, scattering both Haywood and Spike with her burning glare, as she once again moved through the city, stomping hooves so angrily that they sparked.

"Don't look at me! It was the princesses' idea!" Spike made several warding-off motions with his paws. Twilight glowered.

"Hey, toots, can't be all bad. This Pinkie sounds like a real doll!"

"Toots me one more time and I'll..."

"You'd make my three thousand kids orphans, and my wife a widow?"

"Do you *really* have three thousand kids?" asked Spike, "Sounds a bit much."

Haywood flapped his wings quicker, and momentarily shot a few feet up in the air nervously, "Weelll... no. Only two and a half thousand."

Spike blinked, "Oh, that's alright then. How do flies... anyway?"

"Aaaaand moving on!" interrupted Twilight quickly, "Princess! Celestia I mean! Just which way are we supposed to be going?"

\*\*\*

They entered the courtyard of the largest single building she'd ever seen, bar Canterlot castle, through the largest set of iron gates she'd ever seen bar *none*. She glanced about herself anxiously as the gates swung shut with the sort of clanging finality she thought never to experience. All around were dragons, big and small, but every single one was female. They lounged in pools, sunned themselves on hot rocks and spoke in low rumbling whispers that rose the hackles on her neck. Twilight flicked her tail at the buzzing flies that bit with furious intensity upon the succulent and

altogether softer flanks of the equines. Spike seemed unconcerned and unfazed by all but the decor.

“Wow, us dragons certainly know how to build big, don’t we!”

“Mi-ni-mi-ni-miii” twittered Twilight under her breath, furious that the guards had made sure she was ‘properly attired’ and had replaced the bit. All the solid wall of heat and dust was doing to her was frizzing her mane and since they’d made her eat the damned bit again, her teeth were starting to ache and the drool was returning, “Theeth dwagonth... wath ‘ey ‘ooiin’ ‘ere?” Twilight managed to ask.

“Oh, these are all the wives of the emperor. He has a harem. Dragons live such a long time you see, often the agreements and treaties they make expire long before they do.” explained Haywood.

“An’? Whath ‘at gotha thoo with ith?” dribbled Twilight.

“Alliances are often sealed with marriage, Twilight, and divorce is such a messy procedure they don’t tend to bother. Come on, this way. Spike, tell the butler who you are, he’ll show us to Quincy.” interrupted Celestia.

The white alicorn pointed with a wing down the long sweeping courtyard to the main doors of the palace where two dragons stood at attention like statues. Spike hopped off the cart he was nominally driving and scampered up to the guards. They peered down at him sternly.

“Spike... of Equestria. To see,” he looked back at Celestia, Luna and Twilight, before turning back to the two guards and wringing his paws together, “to see Quincy.”

The dragons looked at each other and raised an eye-ridge. Finally, one of them said in a grating deep voice, “Walk this way, young master.”

Spike blinked, “I suppose I could, but Twilight and the girls may have more of a problem.”

The draconic guard blinked back, and hissed, “Just follow me.”

The group were led inside the spacious stone structure. Arches and crenelation disappeared off into the upper reaches and strange skittering noises were heard as unseen creatures fled the presence of the intruders. The hoofsteps of the ponies was soon the only thing to break the suddenly oppressive silence.

“Through there,” croaked the guard, and pointed at a heavy wooden door set with blackened metal hinges and framework. He bowed and slipped off, fluttering wings nervously. Spike blinked again, now he was actually *here*, in the Draconic Realm, the thought of meeting a real dragon - meaning a dragon who had seen the dawn of ages long past, who had trod



upon the world when it was young - was daunting. It wasn't the noise, which was a low rumble, a hackle-raising resounding growl from some great maw. It wasn't the distinct smell of brimstone wafting through the cavernous hallway. It was the sheer size of the room.

Dragons like Spike - young, with only a handful of summers under their wings - were small. As dragons grew older, they grew *bigger*. Some dragons... some dragons were like Celestia. They just carried on growing older. And with every year they added more tonnage to their scaly frames. Draconic Emperors... these were the seldom-seen behemoths of legend, mysteries even amongst other dragons.

Fearfully, Spike reached up a fist to tap on the heavy door. He briefly entertained the idea that his meek knocking would go unheard and unanswered, and they'd all be able to go home, but the door swung open before his claws had so much as brushed the surface. He led his three charges through the door, leading Twilight by the reigns to help maneuver the cart.

Behind them, the door slammed shut. Titanic torches burst into spitting flame along the walls, barely illuminating a heap of treasure that quite probably qualified as a minor mountain. Something large squatted on it, scales gleaming in the flickering light. A deep, throaty roaring rumbling noise filled the cavern and an even deeper voice called out, "WHO DARES DISTURB MY SLUMBER! SPEAK NOW, MORTALS OR FEEL THE FLESH RIPPED FROM YOUR BONES! THE BLOOD BOILED IN YOUR VEINS! THE-"

"Quincy!" called out Celestia, covering her muzzle with a hoof and laughing as Twilight quietly christened the doormat.

"WHO DARES ADDRESS QUETZLCOATL THUS? LORD OF ALL COSMOS, BRINGER OF LIGHT, RULER OF ALL LEVIATHANIA, MASTER OF-"

Twilight quivered as the thunderous voice reverberated around the titanic room, causing masonry to fall crashing to the ground off in the darkness. She christened the mat some more. It was, she reflected in what had to be her last few moments of life, well and truly christened.

"Oh Quincy you showoff! It's me! Us! Tia and Luna!"

"Tia? Luna?" asked the voice, having lost most of its reverberating malice but almost none of the volume. A gigantic toothed maw emerged from the gloom, eyes like diamonds, teeth like buzzsaws, scales like daggers. Twilight idly wondered quite how much she weighed now since

having entered the room. “Oh it *is* you! Tia and Luna! My favourite little ponies! It’s been so long... how long has it been? A thousand years? Two?”

“More like five, Quincy,” said Celestia, her eyes shining, as a gigantic claw snaked down and snatched her and her sister up. The massive visage rubbed the two seemingly-diminutive figures against its snout, enormous eyes closed in happiness.

“*That*,” hissed Twilight to Spike, “is *Quincy*?”

“That’s Quetzlcoat! That’s the god-emperor of all Leviathania!” squeaked Spike.

“And he’s cuddling the princesses!” hissed Twilight.

“And what,” asked a voice that could obliterate concrete at thirty paces, “do we have here? Spike, is that you? My you’ve grown! You were just an egg last time we... well last time I saw you! Come give your Uncle Quincy a hug!”

“Uncle?” choked Twilight, looking down at Spike, who looked back up at the unicorn and shrugged, as a mammoth claw plucked the pair of them into the air. Twilight swore her ears popped at the change in altitude.

“*Uncle*?” Twilight repeated, in between having her internal organs rearranged via application of giant draconic face to flank.

“Oh my yes, Spike, you *are* growing up to be a handsome young dragon. You’ll be perfect as my replacement. My delinquent sons are *entirely* useless and...”

“What, *what*?” asked both Spike and Twilight together.

“Didn’t you know? This is your pre-pre-coronation-party semi-official pre-introduction pre-recognition quasi-informal get-together where I announce my intention to have you as my eventual successor to the throne and my title of god-emperor of all Leviathania. Are my two steeds being lax in their education of my nephew and his Celestial Steed?”

Twilight was still trying to get her tongue around the formalities involved when her brain caught up and sheepishly, metaphorically, tapped her on the shoulder, “Did you say *Celestial Steed*?”

“Indeed! And my nephew could hardly have chosen a better mare at that! Wonderful teeth, my dear, simply wonderful. One mustn’t look a gift-horse in the mouth but I think we can make an exception as you’re a pony...”

The behemoth lifted Twilight up between colossal thumb and fore-finger and examined the equine, “Yes, yes, good coloration, bone-structure, excellent breeding hips... You’ll want to brood this one out as soon as she’s of a receptive age, Spike my boy, don’t want to lose a chance like this. Only

comes once every thousand years or so... I lucked out with my own pair, a fine lineage they've produced! Famous across the realms!"

"Good bone structure? Receptive age? Broodmare? What am I? Some sort of glorified *pet*?!" Twilight's voice got louder and louder until her horn lit up and her mane seemed to catch fire. Rather than drop her, which probably wouldn't have ended well for the unicorn mare, the emperor chuckled throatily and turned the literally smouldering equine all around before putting her down gently and patting her head, "Weren't you told? The emperor is allowed companions, uh... wait, I believe the term is-"

Twilight fumed at the collection of diphthongs and syllables that followed. According to her phrase book she discovered, before her furious gaze turned it to ash, the phrase the emperor had used stood for 'hobby' as much as 'pet'.

"We will have *words*, Spike." hissed Twilight. The baby dragon gulped, waving his paws about.

"I-it's not my f-fault, it's a custom! I'm a dragon, Twilight, I'm going to live for a *long* time. We've got to have something to occupy our time!"

"That doesn't mean raising your very own herd of Twilight Sparkles!"

"It kind of does..." squeaked the dragon.

"Oh my, I certainly hope so, you're perfect for a Celestial Steed. The thaumic discharge is taking hold already, haven't you noticed?"

"Thaumic dis-whatnow?" asked Twilight, blinking.

"Here, let me... illuminate you." the dragon chuckled, as he snuffed out the lights. For a moment there was darkness, and then an ethereal kaleidoscope of stars and colours whirled across the muted features of the room. Twilight turned her head to catch a glimpse of their source, but was unable. As she turned her head, the lights danced. It took her a few moments to realize that it was her *mane*. Her mane was... glowing, with stars, galaxies and boiling plasma clouds.

"So many wonders," said the dragon-emperor, teasing a tear from his eyes, "I hereby proclaim Spike to be my intended future replacement god-emperor of all Leviathania! And the unicorn known as Twilight Sparkle to be his Celestial Steed! So let it be!"

The dragon roared loud enough to burst eardrums, and the torches flickered in to being once more. Very, very slowly, Twilight Sparkle collapsed first onto her haunches. Her mane glowed. She peered at it, using a hoof to pull the strands around into her vision. The stars and galaxies dancing on the walls were contained within her magnificent mane. It was, all said and done, rather more than she could cope with.

With a single raised eyebrow as her hoof fell to the floor and her bangs flopped back into position, she fainted dead away.

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Twilight opened her eyes groggily. A pink dragon with green spines swam into view, "Spike? Oh Spike! I had the weirdest dream... you were there..."

A white unicorn with pink mane came into view. It took Twilight a few seconds to realise that this 'unicorn' had wings, "Celestia? You were there too... why do you have a pink mane? and you were there too Luna!"

Luna nodded her head, smiling.

"Oh it was such a strange dream, I dreamt we went to the dragon realm and there was this... this *fly* and he could talk..."

"Hey Toots!" chimed in Haywood, buzzing into view.

Twilight closed her eyes again and sighed heavily, dropping her head back to the ground, "If I wish hard enough, you'll all vanish! I'll wake up in my sane bed, in my sane library where my sane friends are... oh dear Celestia, they're still raising the sun and moon!"

\*\*\*

Pinkie giggled. She raised her hooves and smartly tapped them together with a *clop-clop* noise. Darkness befell the throne room. She tapped them together again, *clop-clop*, the light came back. On, off, on, off... it was so easy!

"Pinkie, dear," asked a very strained Rarity, putting a forehoof between her friend's hooves, "Could you *please* stop turning the sun on and off?"

"But..."

"No, Pinkie... up in the morning and down at night is enough, I believe. Now, we have a state function to attend and I want you on your *best* behaviour. Unless that ghastly Blueblood *does* decide to show up in his new royally-appointed clown-outfit, at which point you may make him do the Pony Pokey to your little heart's content."

"Really, Rarity? For real?"

"Oh, I *insist*, Pinkie! I believe I will second your royal decree for it to be the national anthem, and appoint him royal anthem singer. *And* dancer."

The ballroom was... festive. It was bedecked in ten thousand sets of streamers, each one more gaudy than the last, with so many balloons it was a sea of latex. A bouncy castle had been ordered from somewhere and was enthusiastically being used by Princess Pinkie and a few of the braver courtiers wishing to curry favour with one of the new princesses of Equestria, and a few of the younger pages who were just plain enjoying themselves. Princess Rarity, with her immaculately coiffed mane, iridescent horn and pristine pinion-feathers, entered the ballroom. The crowd hushed. It was the stars; white diamonds, blue sapphires and red rubies set into her mane completed the picture. She flung her mane back *just so*, catching the light perfectly. There were gasps as the Equestrian Anthem played, perfectly timed to match her graceful walk. She spread her wings and bowed, forelegs set forwards, before raising up imperiously and bestowing her royal gaze upon her subjects. They took the hint, falling to their knees in supplication.

*It's good to be the princess*, thought Rarity to herself with a secret smile. Looking up she saw a furtive figure attempting, for once, to appear as insignificant as possible.

"Ah, *prince* Blueblood, please won't you join us?" intoned Rarity. There was a quiet, strangled noise like a pony caught with his hoof in the cookie-jar, and Blueblood stood up slowly, appearing from behind the banisters of the upper balcony. His ensemble was... unique. Fake antlers adorned his noble brow. Yellow bows festooned his regal mane. Bells tinkled merrily in his fabulous tail. Large, squeaky boots that honked joyfully with each step were on his hooves and, topping it all off, was a *very* frilly and *very* pink tutu. He stepped as officiously as he could down the long stairway.

There was a soft *clop-clop* noise that barely reverberated around the room. It would never have been heard at all if not for the hush that fell at the prince's appearance, despite the giggling. The lights went out suddenly, plunging the ballroom into complete darkness. There was a cacophony of honks, tinkling bells, cries of pain and the unmistakably meaty, solid sounds of a pony repeatably bouncing off marble. A very short while later, the sun came back on to reveal that the bottom of the stairs had grown a roughly pony-shaped lump festooned with wildly situation-inappropriate and in places gender-inappropriate clothing. Not that the rest of the courtiers would mention anything. Not even those who *weren't* giggling solidly behind their hooves. Pinkie was bouncing innocently on the bouncy castle. Rarity smiled. It was going to be a *very* fun function.