

Memories of Days Long Past

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Table of Contents:

Prologue	3
Session 1	13
Session 2	25
Session 3	41
Session 4	54
Intermission 1	67
Session 5	80
Session 6	93
Session 7	106
Session 8-1	121
Session 8-2	136
Session 9	144
Session 10	159
Session 11	167
Intermission 2	187
Intermission 3	202
Session 12	214
Session 13	230
Session 14	243
Session 15	259
Session 16	273
Session 17	287
Session 18-1	300
Session 18-2	317
Intermission 4	330
Session 19	346
Session 20	361
Session 21	375
Session 22	389
Session 23	403
Session 24	417
Session Final	427

Prologue

Static constantly distorted the area, making it almost impossible to clearly grasp the situation. From what she could make out, the area was crumbling down, and she was screaming across a crevice, desperately trying to relay a final message to the ponies on the other side. However, the static buzzed harshly in her ears, making her own words almost indiscernible.

“... rry... I’m... rry... sa... elf...”

She felt incredibly uncomfortable, having no knowledge of what she herself was saying. It was like she was a separate consciousness who was only a bystander to the events unfolding before her eyes. She was herself yet somepony else at the same time. It was unpleasant, but she had to maintain this strange connection. It was incredibly important to her that she does.

“... ia... Luna... Ele... mony... ath...”

The consciousness perked at the fragmented phrases. Luna? As in Princess Luna? She cursed the unrelenting static for preventing her from having a full perspective of the situation.

She thought she heard two other voices yelling from across the crevice, but the static muffled the words and it took all of her willpower just to identify the fact that someone was responding to her. Apparently the words had a profound effect on her, as her eyes were beginning to mist, but she had no clue as to why. All the while the static interference grew, and she could feel her connection growing weaker and weaker as time passed. She was about to give up on this connection as a lost cause, when suddenly—

The static cleared for just a moment, revealing the smiling face of the indigo-dyed pony that doubled as her body. As a single tear streamed down her face, she spoke a single crystal clear phrase.

“We can’t fight this fate. So save this world for us, will you?”

The consciousness suddenly felt the connection snap, and the hazy surroundings instantly blurred into nothingness. The wall of static was now pressing on all sides of her nonexistent body, and a harsh buzzing sound pierced her eardrums. She felt like she was suffocating, and if she didn't get out of this void soon, it felt like her spirit would be snuffed out of existence. She desperately searched through her memory to remember the emergency escape spell, and when she did, she quickly set about casting it.

The static began to recede, and bit by bit, her consciousness began to settle down. She began to slowly regain the feeling in her hooves, and soon enough the familiar sights of her room entered her vision.

As soon as she was certain of the complete reconnection of her consciousness, Twilight Sparkle instantly collapsed on the floor. "Spike? Spiiiiiiiiike?" She moaned. "Could you carry me to my bed please? I have a massive headache..."

The baby dragon poked his head into Twilight's room. "Geez Twi, why can't you do that yourself? You're only a few feet from your bed after all..."

"Spiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiike!" The unicorn whined.

Spike sighed and gave into Twilight's order. He grudgingly dragged her onto her bed, where she instantly passed out. "Sheesh, not even a word of thanks..." Spike muttered as he left the room, leaving the pony to rest.

--

Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity were gathered outside of the library, watching a certain orange earth pony pace back and forth irritably.

"Where is that gosh darned stripey-maned pegasus?!" Applejack exclaimed. "She was s'posed ta be here ten minutes ago like everypony else!"

"U-um, maybe she's busy with work... or something..." Fluttershy squeaked, trying to come up with a reason as to why Rainbow Dash was late.

"Work? Are ya pullin' mah tail, Fluttershy?" Applejack threw her hooves up in the air. "That pegasus gets less work done than a filly durin' naptime!"

“Oh, oh! I remember naptime!” Pinkie Pie was jumping around excitedly for no actual reason. “It was all sleepy and dreamy and full of candy! Except when I had candy I couldn’t get to sleepy! So that means no dreamy! And no dreamy means no—”

“Don’t be so hard on Fluttershy, darling.” Rarity said to Applejack, completely ignoring Pinkie’s randomness. “Just because Rainbow Dash is such an unrefined pony for being late doesn’t mean you have to take out your frustrations on poor little Fluttershy here. Isn’t that right, Fluttershy?”

Fluttershy smiled shyly at Rarity. “U-um... yes.”

Applejack sighed. “Well ah apologize fer snappin’ at ya, sugarcube, but whenever that darn pegasus pony doesn’t show up when she’s supposed ta, ah always feel so—”

A rainbow blue blur suddenly whizzed past Applejack, stylishly braking in front of the group of ponies. “Somepony call for the amazing Rainbow Dash?” The pegasus pony said triumphantly.

Applejack facehooved. “Amazing?’ More like amazingly late! What took ya so long!?”

“Oh... heh heh.” Rainbow Dash let out a nervous laugh. “I woke up a little late from my nap is all, no big deal.”

“Sure it’s no big deal if ya do it once.” Applejack commented dryly. “But when ya do it *again* and *again* and *again* and *again*—”

“And a dream within a dream within a dream within a dream is totally like Inception!” Pinkie Pie cut in energetically. The other four ponies gave a strange and confused look to Pinkie Pie. “What?” Pinkie said, shrugging. “It totally is!”

Rainbow Dash shook her head, trying to rid herself of Pinkie Pie’s random comment. “A-anyways, what’s so important that we all gotta meet up here anyways?”

“Are you seriously asking that question, darling?” Rarity asked, tilting her head. “Don’t tell me you’ve been so preoccupied with your *silly* flight practice that you haven’t noticed!”

“*Silly?!* ” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “I’ve been working my flank off to get into the Wonderbolts!”

“And I, as you so elegantly put it, ‘have been working my flank off’ too on a large order for Hoity Toity!” Rarity scoffed. “And yet even with my busy career I *still* know what’s been going on. *You* were probably napping the entire time.”

“So what if I was?!” Rainbow Dash shouted. Rarity snickered, causing Rainbow Dash to quickly notice her mistake. “I-I mean, uh, BLAH!” The blue pegasus crossed her hooves and glared at Rarity. “Since you know so much about everything going on in Ponyville, why don’t you fill me in on what’s going on? Or are you worried that I might *sleep* through your explanation?”

“Oh *nonsense!*” Rarity waved her hoof at Rainbow Dash’s comment. “There’s no *way* anypony would fall asleep while *I’m* talking! That’s *preposterous!*” Rarity laughed haughtily while the other three ponies plus Pinkie Pie gave her a disbelieving stare. Rarity noticed the stares plus Pinkie Pie, and instantly toned down her haughtiness a few levels. “Well, um, you see Dashiekins,” The blue pegasus winced at the overly sugary nickname. “Our dear Twilight Sparkle has locked herself in the library and nopony has seen her in *ages!* Why, I am just head over heels in *worry* for the poor mare! Just *think* of how her mane must look after being deprived of natural light saturation, simply *dreadful!*”

“... anypony else want to explain?” Rainbow Dash asked, putting aside Rarity’s overly dramatic explanation.

Pinkie Pie perked up instantly. “WeeIIIIIIIIIIII—”

“Anypony that’s *not* about to break out into song?” Rainbow Dash added.

“Oh fooie-patooie!” Pinkie huffed.

“Um, I suggested we visit her since she hasn’t been out in a couple days.” Fluttershy mumbled. “Twilight’s probably hard at work studying, and, uh, I thought it would be nice if we all greeted her and let her take a break. You know, if it’s okay.”

“Just *studying?*” Rainbow Dash sighed. “Does that unicorn ever do anything other than study when she’s not hanging with us?”

“Um... no.” Fluttershy answered timidly.

Rainbow Dash facehooved.

“Whatever’s keepin’ her inside must be big though.” Applejack commented. “She got some delivery in the mail a couple o’ days back, and she hasn’t left the library since!”

“She’s just a workaholic.” Rainbow Dash yawned. “Since I’m here, maybe she’ll let me borrow her bed...”

“GAH I CAN’T TAKE IT!” Pinkie Pie suddenly burst out from her extended silence. “I HAVE TO SING THE SONG I MADE FOR TWILIGHT!” The other ponies grimaced as Pinkie Pie took a deep breath.

“Here we go again...” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes.

Pinkie started to sing. *“Oh Twilight Twilight Twiiiiiiiiiiighhht, you always study so haarrrrddd! Oh Twilight Twilight Twiiiiiiiiiiiiiighhht, you don’t even send us a caaarrrrddd! You study all day but you don’t come out to play and now your friends stand in your yaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrdd!”*

“Oh Celestia, what is with all this noise?!” Twilight threw open her front door, glaring at the source of the noise.

“Oh hi Twilight!” Pinkie said, oblivious to Twilight’s look. “Didja hear my song? Didja, didja?”

“Yes, Pinkie. I heard your song.” Twilight sighed. “Now what’s this all about anyways? What’s everypony doing here?”

“Y’see, sugarcube.” Applejack explained. “Fluttershy here was worried ‘bout ya since ya’ve been locked up inside this here library fer the past couple o’ days. Ain’t that right, Fluttershy?”

The yellow pegasus nodded timidly. “Um... yes.” Fluttershy’s shy smile melted away the annoyed look on Twilight’s face.

Twilight Sparkle sighed. “It can’t be helped I guess. Why don’t you all come inside and I’ll serve you all some tea?” The other ponies nodded and gladly stepped inside the library. “SPIIIIIIIIIIIKE! YOU AWAKE?” Twilight called. “I NEED YOU TO MAKE SOME TEA!”

“Alright, alright!! I’m right here!” Spike called out from under a pile of books. “You could add a please at the end though...”

"Please Spike." Twilight smiled as Spike dug himself out of the books and made his way to the kitchen.

"Oh Twilight! You look simply dreadful!" Rarity exclaimed as the ponies settled down.

"I do?" Twilight asked. She quickly examined her looks. "I don't really see anything off about me... although I guess I haven't really brushed my mane in a while..."

"Oh no no *no*! That simply won't do, darling!" Rarity trotted over to Twilight and started to brush her hair. "Now don't worry dearie, Rarity's going to fix everything up for you!"

"Wait, where did you get that brush?" Twilight asked.

"Oh you silly girl." Rarity chuckled. "I wouldn't be caught dead without at least a hairbrush on me!"

"All this froo-froo aside," Applejack cut in. "What've ya been up ta, Twilight? From the looks of things, ah'd say some crazy nights o' studyin'."

Twilight giggled nervously at the mess of books around the library. "Is it really that obvious?"

Everypony nodded. "Yep."

"Well... maybe if Spike did a better job cleaning then it wouldn't be... speaking of which." Twilight raised her voice. "SPIKE! SPIIIIKE! HOW'S THAT TEA COMING ALONG?"

"Fine, fine!!" Spike called out from the kitchen. "You're such a slave driver, Twilight! Geez..." The dragon came out of the kitchen with a tray of tea and an annoyed look on his face. "Here's your tea Twilight. And here's yours Rarity!" Spike's tone instantly perked up when serving Rarity her tea.

"Why thank you Spike!" Rarity complimented.

"Anytime Rarity..." Spike said dreamily.

"Ahem!" Twilight cleared her throat. "I think that's all we need for now, Spike. Thanks for all the hard work!"

Spike frowned. "Yeah, yeah, you're welcome Twilight. I'm going to take a nap..." The dragon yawned and dragged himself to Twilight's room, leaving the ponies to converse by themselves.

"So what's so important that you gotta spend all this time studying for?" Rainbow Dash asked, getting straight to the point.

"Oh, well..." Twilight suddenly beamed from being able to talk about her studies. "You see, I was delivered some really interesting books the other day, and I just *had* to do some research on their contents! At first, I thought it was a load of manure, but it's actually pretty amazing stuff!"

"And what is this amazin' stuff exactly?" Applejack asked.

"Well..." Twilight took a deep breath. "It's a book that's instructs how to access the memory of a pony's deoxyribonucleic acid by utilizing an ancient spell that's designed to dissect the inner workings of the electronic impulses that run through our cells! It's especially interesting because it operates on the proposed theory that memories are locked within our DNA, which many ponies of academia tend to look upon skeptically. I must admit, while I read the books I was pretty skeptical too, but through a test run I was able to access part of my ancestor's memory! If you told me before today that there was a spell that allows a pony to examine the inner workings of their very cells, I'd call them crazy! Especially since the idea of tiny particles composing the systems of everypony and everything is a relatively new study! It's amazing how the ancients already knew these things that we're only discovering today! It's neat stuff!!"

"... you lost me at 'It's a book.'" Rainbow Dash commented. "Anypony understand a word she just said?"

"Oooh! Oooh! I did!!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. For some reason, nopony really was surprised at this.

"Mind explainin' it fer us plain folk ta understand?" Applejack asked.

"Sure!!" Pinkie said before Twilight could get a word in. "It's a magical magic spell that lets you go into the past!! But not actually into the past, because that will cause all sorts of nasty paradoxies!"

"... you lost me again." Rainbow Dash admitted. "One more time in simpler terms?"

"It lets you see the past!" Twilight Sparkle answered before Pinkie Pie could answer for her. "It's really cool, since you experience it like you're actually there!"

"Well that's definitely interesting and all." Rarity commented, putting the finishing touches on Twilight's mane. "But I don't really see how this is so important that you have to neglect your poor mane for it!"

"Gotta agree with her." Applejack said. "Not really with the mane part though."

"Same here." Rainbow Dash added.

"... ditto." Fluttershy squeaked.

"It makes perfect sense to me!" Pinkie exclaimed.

The other four confused ponies shot a glance to Pinkie Pie.

"What?"

Twilight cleared her throat. "Well girls, you see, I can use this spell to observe the past *before Celestia's reign!*"

A look of understanding slowly dawned over everypony's face.

"B-but isn't that the hidden history?" Fluttershy stuttered. "I-I thought it was hidden for a reason!"

Twilight shrugged. "It's not really hidden, it's just that nopony really kept any records of history until after the fall of Princess Luna. Anything before the tale of the Mare in the Moon can barely even be found! And Celestia just laughs and says I don't need to concern myself with ancient history whenever I ask her." Twilight pouted.

"So basically, this is one huge glorified study trip?" Rainbow Dash asked bluntly. The other ponies glared at the pegasus. "What?! I'm sure you all were thinking that too!"

"Well... kinda, yeah." Twilight admitted. "But don't you girls think it's interesting? Being able to live out a history that nopony knows about? It's exciting just thinking about it! And besides," Twilight looked at each of her friends. "Aren't you curious what your ancestors might've been like?"

“Oooh! Oooh! I am! I am!” Pinkie bounced.

“... maybe a little.” Fluttershy admitted.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack just looked at each other and shrugged. Applejack answered for the both of them. “Ah guess, sugarcube.”

Twilight Sparkle beamed at her friends. “Okay then! So why don’t we get ready to dive into the past?”

“Hold up a minute!” Applejack exclaimed. “Ya sure this spell is safe?”

“Of course, Applejack!” Twilight exclaimed. “The way this spell works is that your consciousness is transplanted into your ancestor, and you’re able to move them around based on your will! Isn’t that cool?”

“... but wouldn’t that make it not a memory anymore?” Fluttershy asked.

“Well, it would still be a memory.” Twilight explained. “While you have some control over your ancestor’s actions, you won’t be able to speak through them and the spell will adjust the setting in case you go too much against the memory. I guess you could call it... ‘desynchronization’ if you step too far outside the bounds of the memory. Though I don’t think that’ll happen too often.”

“It sounds pretty complicated.” Rainbow Dash commented. “We’ll just take your word for it, okay?”

“Oooh! Oooh!” Pinkie Pie bounced. “Would we be assassins in our memories? Going to go fight the Templars and save the world from solar flare aliens?”

“... uhh, I don’t think so, Pinkie.” Twilight said, confused. What were Templars anyways?

“Hold up another minute, sugarcube!” Applejack interrupted. “If we go through with this, how long’ll we be out of it?”

“Well the books said time will travel differently for each of us, depending on the events our ancestors are going through...” Twilight explained. “So while it may seem like we’re in there for a long time, in reality only a couple minutes would have passed!”

“... well, as long as ah can get back to the farm to get some work on later on.” Applejack smiled. “Alright, sugarcube. Guess we’re in.”

“You bet!” Rainbow Dash punched the air. “I hope my ancestor kicks as much flank as I do!”

“Which is hardly any, sweetheart.” Rarity chuckled. “I know that *my* ancestor will be as fabulous as I am!”

“I hope mine’s... nice.” Fluttershy commented.

Twilight smiled. She thought that it’s nice to be able to share such an educational experience with her closest friends. “Alright girls, I’m going to cast the spell now!” She concentrated her magic the way she read in the book and performed the necessary protection spells. Last time she was kicked out it was because she was in a corrupted memory, but she figured if she cast the spell to place them at the beginning of their ancestor’s lives... then it can build up properly to the corrupted memory and play it properly. And if that doesn’t work, then they’d just have to call it a day!

The magic washed over the six ponies and put them all in a dreamlike state, transferring their consciousnesses to the faraway time, long before Celestia’s rule...

To a past that would completely change the course of their futures forever.

Session 1

It was a strange feeling, being aware during the moment of your birth.

The very instant Twilight's consciousness settled down into the past life of her ancestor, she was greeted by the incredibly... bizarre feeling of coming out of her mother's womb. Her eyes were unable to adjust to the harsh light of the outside world at first, but gradually they became accustomed to her surroundings. However, Twilight Sparkle could do little to manipulate the newborn foal's body, as it was instinctively flailing around and crying the way newborns often did. Her ears could hear nothing but the sound of her own crying, and her eyes have not yet developed enough to properly interpret the world around her. She only had access to the most basic of senses, touch and smell.

As soon as Twilight deduced these details, her incessant crying suddenly halted. She could feel herself being transferred into the hooves of who she presumed to be her mother, judging by her warm scent and loving touch.

"Congratulations!" Said the nurse pony after handing the foal to her mother. "It's a filly!"

Twilight looked up to the mare who was holding her, just barely able to discern a smile upon her face. It was an incredibly warm and loving smile, and just knowing it was there calmed Twilight down immensely. She reached up and tried to grab her mother's smile, the way a newborn would, and her mother giggled feebly at her attempts.

Wait. Something was wrong. The newborn wouldn't have noticed at all, but Twilight immediately sensed the trouble. There was something about the way this mare was holding her child... something about how she was trembling while she was holding her... and the weakness in her smile...

It hit Twilight almost immediately. She instinctively tried to cast a spell that might avert the upcoming tragedy, but her failure reminded her that she was nothing but an observer in this memory. It was impossible to change what has already occurred.

"Oh, Goddess no!" The nurse pony cried. "She's hemorrhaging!!"

Chaos was erupting around the newborn foal as the medical staff tried to save her mother. From what Twilight could tell, medical magic hadn't evolved enough to make the necessary spells available to save the foal's mother from her fate.

Yet despite that, a strange calm surrounded the mare and her foal. The mare knew she was dying, and that her death was unavoidable, yet she continued to smile warmly at her offspring.

"You're a beautiful unicorn." The mare croaked. "This wonderful shade of indigo... I'm sure you'll grow to be as lovely as your mother one day."

"Don't speak, save your energy!" One of the nurse ponies called out. "I swear, we *will* save you! We will!!!"

All the mare did in response was to smile weakly at her caretakers. "I appreciate the effort... but I can feel it... My fate's already been sealed." She turned back to her child, who was completely oblivious of her mother's weakening state. "My only regret is that I won't be able to see my little one grow up."

"There must be something we can do—"

The nurse pony's voice was halted by the mare's expression. There was no fear, no agony on the face of the dying mother, only a small hint of sadness hidden in her beaming smile.

"She's a beautiful child, isn't she?" The mare muttered, her strength beginning to give out. "Such a wonderful shade of indigo... almost like the night... and such sparkling eyes..." She strained to kiss her child on her forehead. "Midnight Star. I think that's a beautiful name for such a beautiful child. A shining star to light up the dark midnight..."

The mare was interrupted by a harsh fit of coughing. The nurse ponies got ready to leap to her aid, but the head nurse lifted up a hoof. "There's nothing more we can do." She said tiredly. "Just... let her go out the way she wants..."

The other nurse ponies hesitated. They gave one last long look at the dying mare.

"Midnight Star..." The mare muttered to herself. "May the Goddess bestow a blessed life upon you... my dear, dear child..."

The light in the mare's eyes went out, signifying the departure of her soul from this world. The nurse ponies solemnly separated Midnight from her mother, causing the foal to begin crying. The nurse gave a questioning look to the head.

"Just... take her to the nursery." The head nurse said. "We'll... figure out what to do with her later..."

The other nurse nodded and took Midnight away from the delivery room. The last sight the newborn saw before leaving the room was a blanket being folded over her mother, whose eyes would never see the light of day again.

The nurse pony laid Midnight Star down into a small crib alongside all the other foals that were born that day. Being born only a few short moments ago, Midnight had no idea of the cruel fate that was bestowed upon her mother, but Twilight Sparkle did.

"I'm sorry..." Twilight said, trying to relay her sentiments to the main occupant of her body. Twilight didn't know what to expect upon diving into her ancestor's memories, but it certainly wasn't this. Such an event was painful for anypony, but to be so young and have your mother taken away...

Twilight sighed. No pony said history had to be pretty. And this sort of thing used to happen all the time, until breakthroughs in medical magic found a way to save the dying mother... but such breakthroughs had yet to happen. The nurse ponies of this era tried everything they could to save Midnight's mother, but everything wasn't good enough...

Twilight's thoughts briefly turned to her friends. What if they had to experience something like this too? She didn't mean for any of them to go through anything sad... it was meant to be a wholly educational experience! Surely Twilight would be willing to weather misfortune for the sake of education, but her friends... Twilight tried to reach out to their consciousnesses, but her probing mind felt nothing. It appears she couldn't communicate with her friends while attached to Midnight's body.

"Yes. Yes, she's right here." A nurse pony led two extravagantly dressed earth ponies, one a stallion and the other a mare, into the room, interrupting Twilight's train of thought. Twilight judged from their attire that they were of the highest class, possibly even royalty.

The stallion examined Midnight's physique. "Hmm... a healthy baby unicorn, huh? And this was Vega's child, correct?" The nurse pony tilted her head in confirmation. "Such a shame she had to die... isn't that right, Ambrosia?"

The mare nodded in agreement. "Such a shame she had to go out the way she did, Themis. She was a valuable friend... if only she listened to your advice."

"Yeah..." Themis bowed his head solemnly. "If only she aborted that child like I told her to."

Twilight froze up at Themis's words. Aborted?

"Oh?" The nurse pony tilted her head curiously. "If you don't mind me asking, sir... why did you ask her to have the child aborted?"

The stallion sighed. "Vega... never wanted to have a child. The only reason she got pregnant was because—"

Ambrosia held up her hoof. "That's enough, dear. We don't want to go around spreading the story, just think of what it'd do to poor Vega's reputation!" She turned to the nurse. "I'm terribly sorry, but the reasons why are confidential. I do so hope you understand..." Ambrosia gazed sadly at the child. "And to think, she decided to go on with the birth, even though..."

"The Quota?" The nurse inquired.

Themis and Ambrosia winced at the nurse's words. "Yes... the Quota... although since Vega has passed away there's no real need to uphold it anymore in this case..."

Quota? What's that? Twilight willed for the other ponies to continue talking about it, but it appeared that they had said enough of the subject, frustrating Twilight.

"Anyways," Themis cleared his throat. "Ambrosia and I will be taking this young filly under our care and protection. It's the least we could do for our old friend."

"Is that so... well, just sign the papers and I can hand her off to you." The nurse pony rummaged through a file and brought out a stack of adoption papers.

Themis clicked a pen and began filling out the form with his mouth. Before he finished signing off on the papers, he paused and turned to the nurse. "Erm... does this child have a name?"

“Oh...” The nurse pony gazed sadly at the foal. “Her name’s... Midnight Star, if I recall correctly. Poor Vega spent her last words naming her... she even gave her a blessing of the Goddess.”

Ambrosia nuzzled the foal in the crib. “Using the last of her strength to name and baptize her child... that’s definitely Vega alright...”

Themis finished filling out the papers and stamped his hoofprint on it. “There, that should take care of the legalities, right?” The nurse nodded. “Well, we should take her home then.” The stallion moved next to Ambrosia and gazed down upon the child. Midnight swung her hooves at them, innocently trying to grab their smiles.

“Don’t worry...” Ambrosia cooed. “You’ll be well taken care of...” The nurse pony attached the crib to the mare’s hindquarters, allowing her to pull the crib along with her.

Themis sighed. “Hopefully the servants will raise her properly... we’ve already got our hands full with two of our own, after all.”

“Not to worry, dear.” Ambrosia reassured. “I trained them myself, I’m sure they’ll raise young Midnight to be a wonderful mare.” She smiled warmly at the oblivious foal. “And besides...”

“Celestia and Luna will grow up having somepony around their age to play with! Isn’t that wonderful?”

What?

Themis and Ambrosia made their way out of the nursery. The nurse bowed deeply behind them. “It’s always a pleasure to have His and Her Highnesses in our facilities.”

What? What?

The walls suddenly deconstructed, leaving a blank white void in its stead. Static distortions were scattered about the void, but unlike before, they were relatively controlled and unobtrusive. Twilight Sparkle found herself floating among this void, trying to piece together what she just heard and saw.

Celestia? Luna? Are they saying that Midnight Star, Twilight’s ancestor, had an incredibly close connection to the two Princesses? If so, why didn’t Princess Celestia inform her about this connection before? Twilight gritted her teeth. There were so many

things she didn't know about the past... like who is this "Goddess?" And what was with that "Quota" thing they were talking about...?

Twilight Sparkle's thirst for knowledge compelled her to dig further for this truth. She felt as if there was a lot more than what she just experienced... especially since she only experienced her own birth. Twilight could tell there was a lot more to Midnight Star's life. Much, much more...

Not to mention one huge thing that disturbed her the most about the past. It was a small thing, something that took a long time for her to notice with her underdeveloped vision. And even when she did notice, Twilight wasn't consciously aware of it until the moment the room deconstructed itself. The observation just nested in the back of her mind until then, giving her an incredibly uncomfortable feeling that she couldn't quite put her hoof on...

Because for everypony Twilight Sparkle laid her eyes on, one small but incredibly detrimental feature was missing. A feature so significant, Twilight didn't understand why it took her so long to realize it in the first place...

The single feature that is most important to a pony's identity was absent, for upon everypony's flanks... was nothing. From what Twilight Sparkle could tell, nopony in the past possessed a cutie mark.

Her settings suddenly began reconstructing itself. Out of nowhere walls and fixtures quickly sprung up from the void, making it seem like the white void never even existed in the first place.

Twilight found herself in a vast library, idly skimming through a book. Except it wasn't her hooves that flipped the pages, it was Midnight Star's. It seemed that the jump through the void skipped through the many years of Midnight's childhood, for she was now already a young mare, fresh out of fillyhood. As soon as Twilight's consciousness began to settle down in Midnight's body, she could feel the gaps in her memories being filled.

Midnight lived a privileged life from what she could tell. Much like Twilight Sparkle herself, she was raised by the royal family and was brought up surrounded by books. Twilight would even go as far as to say that she and Midnight's childhoods were pretty much the same! Although Midnight didn't seem to have a dragon assistant like Twilight did... and the subject matter of her books was completely different.

Instead of the books on magic that Twilight was used to reading, Midnight was reading a book about some Goddess. The text only listed various procedures in regards to the Goddess, such as how to pay proper tribute, how to say prayers to her, how to abide by her mandates...

"Hey Midnight, are you still studying?"

The young unicorn quickly turned around and saw an earth colt dressed in incredibly formal attire. The colt trotted up to Midnight and shut the book she was reading, much to Twilight Sparkle's displeasure.

"Jeeves! That's not fair!" Midnight complained.

"You know you have an incredibly important appointment with your mother and father today." Jeeves said, ignoring Midnight's protests. "Besides, you've studied enough, spending all night buried in those books..."

Midnight sighed. "I suppose... but when I'm studying, it just feels like the world melts away..."

"Yes, yes," Jeeves brushed off the unicorn's comment. "We all know how easily you get into your studying. But now's not the time for that. Come on, make yourself presentable so we can meet up with His and Her Highnesses."

Midnight grudgingly closed all the books around her and shoved them all into a neat little stack. "Do you mind putting these all away for me while I get ready, Jeeves?"

"That is my job after all, milady." The colt bowed deeply and began organizing the books.

Midnight trotted into a back room and shut the door. Honestly, why did she have to go to all these appointments all the time? She hadn't been able to get in a full day of studying for a while now...

As the unicorn trotted past a mirror, Twilight got her first full look of her body. Midnight grew into a fine mare, her coat a beautiful deep indigo. The way her mane was frazzled reminded Twilight of the many nights she spent awake studying, and once it was tidied up Twilight imagined that it would look exactly like her mane. She should've expected that her ancestor would look so similar to herself.

Midnight knocked on one of her cabinets, and a strange mechanical device burst out of it, surprising Twilight. There were many fixtures attached to this device, and it appeared to be a self-grooming machine. Twilight Sparkle didn't know they had this kind of technology in this era.

The unicorn yawned and placed her hooves on the machine. She began to manipulate a set of simple sticks, and the fixtures took input from Midnight's commands and brushed her hair for her. After a few moments, Midnight's mane was all neat and tidy.

Twilight Sparkle was astounded at the level of technology Midnight possessed. It was the same type of device earth ponies and pegasi in the present used to brush their manes when nopony else was around to help them, since they couldn't use magic like unicorns could to do it themselves... but why did Midnight have to use such a device? Couldn't she use magic to do it herself?

Midnight burst out of the backroom before Twilight could ponder over this anymore. "Alright Jeeves, let's go."

Miraculously, the library was already all tidied up. Why couldn't Spike be as efficient as this Jeeves pony?

Jeeves bowed and led Midnight outside of the library, and into a magnificent hall. It reminded Twilight of the halls back in Princess Celestia's castle, with the way the drapes hung beautifully over the pillars alongside the guards stationed at every entrance.

And speaking of Princess Celestia...

Two young ponies dashed up to Midnight. Twilight instantly recognized them as much younger versions of Princess Celestia and Luna. However...

They weren't alicorns anymore.

Gone were their brilliant wings and shining horns. In place of the magnificence Twilight was used to seeing was nothing but two playful mares, only slightly older than Midnight Star.

Luna was the first to reach Midnight, tackling her and giving her a hug. "Midnight!" Luna exclaimed. "You're alive!"

“Of course I am, silly.” Midnight smiled. “A little studying never killed anypony.”

“A little?” Celestia giggled. “Why, if the amount of studying you do is a little I would hate to see what a lot would be.”

The three young mares laughed at their small exchange. Jeeves cleared his throat and interrupted their banter.

“Girls, I’m afraid you can’t play with Midnight today,” Jeeves said, separating Luna from the mentioned unicorn. “She has incredibly important business to attend to with His and Her Highnesses.”

Luna sadly looked up into Midnight’s eyes. “Aww... you can’t play with us today?”

Midnight shook her head sadly. “Sorry Luna, but I can’t really be any later for this appointment than I already am. Celestia?” She turned to the white-coated pony. “You understand, right?”

Celestia nodded. “I know that it isn’t wise to keep mother and father waiting. Go on, Midnight, Luna and I can play for a while without you.”

“Boo!” Luna pouted. “Big Sister Celestia isn’t as fun as you, Midnight!”

“Now Luna,” Jeeves chided. “Don’t look down on your older sis—hey, come back here!!”

Luna ran off from the group of ponies, sticking her tongue out at them. “Boo on you, Jeeves!” She ran off into the courtyard, happily prancing around as a filly normally would.

“That Luna...” Celestia sighed. “She’s already a mare but she still acts like such a child...” She turned to Midnight. “Well, good luck with your business with our parents. Hopefully they won’t pile any of their silly requests on you.” Celestia pranced off into the courtyard to join her sister. “Hey, Luna! Don’t run off outside the gates!!”

Midnight Star smiled at her two sisters. “Well Jeeves, let’s go. Don’t want to keep them waiting anymore, right?”

The older pony nodded. “If you’d step right this way, milady...”

The two ponies walked across the hall and entered the audience room, where Themis and Ambrosia were waiting. Jeeves and Midnight bowed, with the former stepping outside of the room after exchanging the standard pleasantries.

“Midnight Star, you may stand.” The sole guard in the room spoke. Midnight complied and faced her parents.

Ambrosia smiled. “Good morning, Midnight. I’ve heard you’ve been studying all night again?”

Midnight grinned sheepishly. “Well... uh... yeah, pretty much.”

The two elder ponies laughed at Midnight’s remark. “It’s good to see that Celestia’s and Luna’s future advisor keeps up with her studies!” Themis laughed.

Midnight smiled awkwardly. She wasn’t used to thinking about Celestia’s and Luna’s future position of the Queens of this land, and she was even less used to thinking of how she’ll have to be their advisor. “Y-yes...” Midnight stuttered. “So what is the reason you called for me today?”

“Oh Midnight, can’t your mother and father just call you in for a simple chat?” Themis questioned.

“Well... no.” The unicorn admitted. “Not to be disrespectful, but you never call me in unless you have a reason.”

Themis sighed. “That may be... alright then, let’s cut directly to the chase.” He and Ambrosia stood up and trotted over to Midnight. “Listen... you already know full well what your position in this family is, right?”

Midnight nodded sadly. “Yes... you took me under your hoof when I was just a foal...”

Themis continued. “And you remember that Celestia and Luna possess completely separate futures away from you, right?”

“As mandated by the Goddess’s prophecy...” Midnight said softly. “Celestia and Luna will one day ascend to the heavens and govern these lands...”

“So therefore you don’t need to be reminded of your duties towards those two, right?”

“Yes father.” The unicorn bowed her head. “I am to protect them and be their advisor until the Day of Ascension.”

“And you remember the reason as to why the Day of Ascension is so important, right?”

Midnight nodded once again. “To free our lands and to allow us to discard the Quota.”

“Good.”

Themis and Ambrosia gave their adopted daughter an impromptu hug. Midnight was caught off guard for a moment, but she quickly relaxed.

“We love you too, Midnight.” Ambrosia whispered. “Even if we devote most of our attentions to your two sisters... you still hold a place in our hearts.”

“I know mother.” Midnight replied. “And I’m thankful too for you for bringing me in.”

The three ponies parted from their embrace. Themis cleared his throat. “Now, for the reason why I called you here. I’m sure you’ve been hard at work studying for your future position as Princess Celestia’s and Princess Luna’s advisor, but I must ask... do you think all this book studying will give you all the tools you need to be a successful advisor?”

Midnight pondered the question for a moment. “I think it would. I learn so much about the Goddess as well as the current state of society from them...”

“But does it give you experience, Midnight?”

Themis’s question threw Midnight off her train of thought. “Experience? Uhh... I think so?”

The stallion shook his head. “That’s what I thought. Listen, Midnight, in order for you to be truly ready for the position as their advisor, you need to have experience.”

“Experience with what?” Midnight questioned.

“Experience with intermingling with the general population.” Themis explained. “You must learn how they think, how they live, how they interact. Being locked up in the library all day is good for strict information, but it definitely won’t give you the experience

to work with others. Not to mention the only other ponies you talk to besides us are Celestia and Luna!”

“... what are you getting at?” The unicorn asked hesitantly.

“What your father’s trying to say, dear.” Ambrosia cut in. “Is that we’re sending you outside for a little while.”

“Wait... you’re sending me out there?!” Midnight bit her lip. She’s never been outside of the castle before, and to be suddenly sent into the outside world? Madness!

“Don’t worry, Midnight, the village we’re sending you to is relatively safe.” Ambrosia reassured. “At worst a Collection is held there, but you don’t have to worry too much about that. Records say it doesn’t happen very often.”

“B-but... but!” Midnight sighed. “... fine. Where are you sending me?”

Themis smiled. “Down south of the castle lies a small village the locals call Ponyville. All we want you to do there is interact with the populace a little, learn about relationships, broaden your horizons—”

“In short, Midnight.” Ambrosia interrupted. “We want you to make some friends.”

Twilight Sparkle felt a strange feeling of déjà vu creep up on her.

Session 2

“You hafta go away, sis?”

Princess Luna looked up sadly at Midnight Star as the unicorn loaded her few belongings onto the carriage. Midnight tried to avoid her sister’s gaze, for Luna’s sad expressions always broke her heart. But Luna was just too adorable to ignore, and the unicorn found herself embracing her sister before her gaze could make Midnight feel any worse than she already did.

“Yeah Luna, I’m sorry.” Midnight apologized. “Mother and father are the ones who are sending me away, so I can’t really do much to go against them.”

“They’re just being a couple of mean meanie-faces!” Luna pouted.

Celestia trotted next to Luna and pulled her apart from Midnight. “Now Luna, don’t talk about our parents that way. Don’t forget that you’re the older sister here, and you should be setting Midnight an example.”

“It’s only by a few more days!” Luna whined. “Midnight’s more like the older sister than me...”

“Now now, enough of that.” Celestia scolded. “Besides, it’s not like Midnight’s going to go away forever, is she?”

“No I’m not.” Midnight smiled and nuzzled Luna lovingly. “Be a good girl for me while I’m gone, okay? I’ll be sure to write often!”

Luna frowned and stuck her tongue out at Midnight. “You better!” She turned tail and ran back into the castle, shutting the door behind her.

Celestia sighed. “That girl... I’m starting to think she’ll never grow up...” She turned to Midnight. “You have everything you need? Parchment? Books? Food?”

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Midnight said. "Our parents arranged everything; I'll be staying in Ponyville's library and once I arrive a pony will be there to assist me. And stop worrying so much about Luna, she should have fun while she still can."

"Well... I can't really object to that..." Celestia bit her lip. "After all, once our training for the Day of Ascension officially begins..."

Midnight held up her hoof. "That's not exactly the last thing I want to talk with my sister about before I go."

"Well... I suppose your right. But aren't preparations for that day the reason you're being sent to Ponyville?" Celestia questioned.

Midnight nodded. "As your and Luna's future advisor, I have to be well versed in every bit of knowledge that'll be useful for the Day. And unfortunately... I also have to gain the trust and support of other ponies before I'm really qualified to serve you two..."

Celestia giggled. "Oh look at you, so antsy about having to make friends. It's really not that nerve-wracking, you shy filly."

Midnight blushed. "H-hey! I'm not a filly anymore! A-and I'm not shy! I just... would rather spend my time reading than making friends is all..."

"Sure it is, my dear, dear Midnight." Celestia teased. "After all, those books sure do get lonely whenever you're not around."

"Exac—wait!!"

Celestia laughed at Midnight's slip-up. "Really, dear, I think it's good that you get to have this opportunity. Why, I myself would like to go down to Ponyville to make some friends if it wasn't for my position. It gets so lonely and stifling inside the castle sometimes..."

"But at least you have Luna, right?"

The castle door suddenly flung open at the mention of Luna's name and the aforementioned pony spilled out, falling flat on the ground. "Owwies..."

Celestia chuckled. "I suppose that's right, I'll always have Luna. After all, we share the same future. Isn't that right, my dear little sister?"

Luna quickly picked herself back up and glanced nervously at the two other ponies. "I-I wasn't eavesdropping or anything!" She cried, not hearing Celestia's question. "I-I just... umm..."

Midnight smiled and patted her sister's head. "I'm sure, Luna." The unicorn turned around and stepped into the carriage. "Well, I guess I have to go now. I have a schedule to keep!"

"Have a fun trip!" Celestia smiled. "Hope you make a lot of friends!"

"Yeah... right." In all honesty, Midnight dreaded the thought. However, it was her duty to learn about friendship, so regardless of her personal feelings on the matter she had to put them aside and try to make some friends. "Alright gentlecolts, go on!"

The two stallions attached to the carriage gave a brisk nod and began pulling the carriage away from the castle. Midnight gave one last look at the castle and her two sisters.

"Be safe, Midnight Star!" Celestia brightly called out while Luna hid behind her flank, trying not to let anypony see her cry.

Midnight chuckled and gave a wave of her hoof back. "I will! Take care!"

--

Twilight Sparkle was immensely confused about the setting of her ancestor's life. While she did have access to Midnight's memories, the memories she was most interested in seemed to be locked. For example, Twilight could remember with perfect clarity the many times when Midnight played with Celestia and Luna and other sorts of fun events, but she couldn't remember anything about this Day of Ascension thing.

It was exasperating. Midnight read and studied many books about every important thing that was mentioned so far: the Day of Ascension, the Goddess, the Quota, and the Collection. So Midnight was fully aware of what those things were. But for some reason, Twilight could only access the fact that "Midnight Star has knowledge of these topics," yet couldn't access what she wanted to know the most about, namely the actual knowledge of those topics.

It was like Midnight's psyche kept the knowledge locked up so she would never have to think about it.

Twilight thought on it a moment. Nah, it was probably a glitch with the spell or something. Knowledge seemed to be the focal point of Midnight's life, so it wouldn't make any sense at all to lock up what she loved most in the back of her mind. If anypony invaded Twilight's mind, she was sure they'd be bombarded with all sorts of "interesting" facts that were stored up in her head!

Well... so far the experience wasn't all bad. Seeing Celestia and Luna around her age was incredibly amusing. And there's no way Twilight could've imagined how cute Luna used to be. She wondered how such a cute mare could ever become somepony like Nightmare Moon...

Twilight looked outside of the carriage window with Midnight's eyes. She usually let the unicorn go on auto-pilot, but Twilight sometimes took control when she wanted a better look around. It appeared that as long as nothing too important was going on, Twilight could freely take control of Midnight's body and look around, but that was about the extent of what she could do. She couldn't get Midnight to talk or make her do anything too out of character, which was fine since her character was very similar to Twilight's.

The carriage was getting closer towards Ponyville, and from what Twilight could see, it had a very similar layout to the Ponyville in the present, except for the fact that this Ponyville was smaller and its buildings were made of weaker materials than in the present day. She wondered... do none of the ponies in Ponyville have cutie marks too? Ever since she rooted herself to Midnight's consciousness, Twilight hadn't seen a single pony with a cutie mark. The missing cutie marks, alongside one other fact, were the key differences between the past and the present...

The other fact was that Twilight Sparkle noticed an absence of magic. Midnight has never cast a single spell, and Twilight couldn't make her cast a spell either. Twilight first attributed this to the possibility that it would be out of Midnight's character to frequently cast magic, after all some unicorns would rather not use magic and live like an earth pony. However, when she noticed that the few unicorns in the castle failed to cast a spell of any sort... Twilight's suspicions grew.

Maybe she was just overthinking things. Since the royal family was all earth ponies, the unicorns in the castle might be holding back their magic out of respect. Twilight would have to collect more data before she could make any real assumptions.

Luckily, the carriage passed through the border of Ponyville as she thought this, and Midnight Star stepped out, allowing Twilight Sparkle to gather more information about her ancestor's society.

--

A pink colored earth pony was hopping merrily through the streets of Ponyville. It was a beautiful day for a party, but she couldn't dream up a reason to throw one at the moment. Thinking the fresh air would provide her with the inspiration for an excuse to throw a party, she decided to excuse herself from the bakery she worked at to bounce around the village a bit.

Hmm... what would be a good reason for a party? No pony had a birthday today... she already threw a weather party two days ago... Skyline would get mad at her if she used her as an excuse again... hmm...

"Hey there, Pastel!" An orange-dyed earth pony wearing a ten-gallon hat over her blonde mane trotted up to the pink pony. "Shouldn't ya be workin' at yer bakery right now?"

Pastel Lollipop stopped bouncing and turned towards the orange pony. "Oh hey there, Cinnamon! I went on a breakie break since it's a slowie slow day today! And why are you in town? Shouldn't you be out in the farm growing all those tastylicious apples?"

"Ain't much use in growin' them if ah ain't gonna sell 'em." Cinnamon gestured towards the wheelbarrow of apples attached to her flank. "The family sent me ta the market a bit earlier than 'em so ah can set up shop."

Pastel sniffed the apples, causing a bright smile to light up on her face. "Ooh! Ooh! Are these your special super-duper apple cinnamon apples?"

"Why, mah name's not Apple Cinnamon fer nothin'!" The orange pony boasted. "Why don't ya go ahead and take one o' them, Pastel. Ya are a good friend o' mine after all."

"Why that's super-duper nice of you, Cinnamon!" Pastel took an apple from Cinnamon's cart and took a long, slow bite. "Mmm, juicy!"

Cinnamon chuckled. "Ya say the same thing every time ya eat one of mah apples. Ah'm surprised you haven't made apple cupcakes with 'em yet."

Pastel's eyes lit up. "Idea! Idea!" She wrapped a hoof around Cinnamon and extended her other hoof as if she trying to show the other pony something. "Just think Cinnamon, apple cupcakes, everywhere... it'll be an apple cupcake party!!"

"Ya'll are so random sometimes, Pastel." Cinnamon smiled.

Pastel didn't appear to hear Cinnamon's comment, and instead, pointed at something headed into town. "What's that, Cinnamon?" Her happy demeanor faded away for a moment. "It's not... a Collection, is it?"

Cinnamon stepped in front of Pastel as if she was trying to shield her and squinted at the incoming object. "Hmm... settle down, Pastel. Ah don't think it is, it looks like it's jus' a carriage pulled by some ponyfolk."

"B-but... sometimes ponies are the ones who carry out the Collection." Pastel whispered, her voice trembling.

"Don't worry 'bout it, Pastel." Cinnamon said. "If it is a Collection... me and Skyline'll send 'em packin' back where they came from! We ain't gonna let them tear apart Ponyville!"

Pastel looked reassured at Cinnamon's declaration, but Cinnamon knew she was only putting up a front. If a Collection really did happen... she knew there would be no way anypony would be able to stop it.

As the carriage got closer, Cinnamon prepared herself to have to take Pastel and run away, but as it got clearer...

Cinnamon relaxed a little. "Why look, Pastel, they're wearin' the royal armor. They must be from the castle!"

Pastel's energy came flowing back into her. "From the castle! Does this mean we're going to have super-special guests? Oh no, I don't even have a party prepared for them!!" Pastel dashed off in some random direction, leaving Cinnamon by herself.

Cinnamon sighed. "That pony..." She turned towards the incoming carriage. It appeared to be heading for the center of Ponyville. "Hmm... maybe ah can sell 'em some apples before they go..."

--

Midnight stepped outside of the carriage, taking in the sights of the small village around her. It was... nice. It certainly didn't carry the same air of finesse she was used to, but Ponyville wasn't the castle, so it was understandable.

The unicorn turned to the two stallions and bowed her head. "Thank you gentlecolts for bringing me out here."

"No problem, milady, just doin' our jobs." They bid Midnight adieu and left to return to the castle.

Well then... Midnight remembered that her caretaker was supposed to meet her around the village square...

"Well good day ta ya, ma'am!"

An unfamiliar earth pony walked up over to Midnight with a cart of apples attached to her flank. Midnight grimaced. Was this the pony who was supposed to be looking after her?

"Uh... hi." Midnight said awkwardly. "Are you... uh..." What was her name supposed to be again? Aly... Ana... Ame... "Amethyst?"

"Amethyst? Do ah look like that silly froo-froo unicorn ta ya? The name's Cinnamon, Apple Cinnamon." The earth pony grabbed Midnight's hoof and started shaking it furiously. "It's mighty fine to meet ya, lady!"

"L-lady?!" Midnight could hardly keep up with how this pony was shaking her hoof. "My name is Midnight Star!"

"Uh, Midnight, ya can stop shakin' yer hoof now."

Cinnamon already let go of her hoof a few moments ago, but she was still shaking it up and down frantically. Embarrassed, Midnight put her hoof down.

Cinnamon chuckled. "Gotta say, yer a funny one, Midnight. Say, where'd that carriage of yers go?"

"They went back to the castle." Midnight explained.

“Aw shucks! Ah was hopin’ ta sell ‘em some of my specialty cinnamon apples! They’re plum delicious if ah do say so mahself. Here!” Cinnamon pulled out an apple and handed it to Midnight. “Take one, on the house!”

“Uh... thanks, but no thanks.” Midnight pushed the apple away. “I’m sorry, but I already ate before I got here...”

Cinnamon frowned. “Well... ah ain’t gonna force ya. But maybe sometime ya’ll can come over ta my farm and we can have lunch together! Mah family’ll be mighty kind ta ya!”

“Um, sure...” Midnight was being carried away by this pony’s great energy. “Oh, so do you know this ‘Amethyst’ pony?”

Cinnamon shrugged. “She and ah are friends.” Midnight winced at the word. “But we ain’t really all that close, after all ah like ta get down and dirty while she’s all sparkly and froo-froo. Why? Ya need a makeover from her or somethin’?”

“Well... you see...”

“Oh, *darling!*” A purple-maned white unicorn came quickly trotting up to the two ponies. “I am so sorry for being late! I was so caught up in my work that I failed to keep track of time! There was this stitch that just *refused* to cooperate with me... Cinnamon?” The unicorn noticed the earth pony for the first time. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Jus’ shootin’ the breeze with Midnight Star here.” Cinnamon shrugged. “What about you, Amethyst? Ah’m guessin’ yer the one who’s s’posed ta be greetin’ her then?”

“Well, why of *course!* Naturally they would want Ponyville’s most fashionable pony to greet *royalty!*” Amethyst exclaimed.

“Royalty?” Cinnamon gave Midnight a quick look over. “Ah mean no disrespect ta ya, Midnight, but ya don’t really look like royalty ta me.”

“Cinnamon!!” Amethyst quickly forced Cinnamon’s head down while she bowed deeply towards Midnight. “Please excuse Cinnamon’s *incredibly* rude comment! I don’t know what came over her, poor dear must be catching a fever!”

“Ya know ah’m not sick, Ame!” Cinnamon protested.

"Hush, you silly pony!" Amethyst hissed.

"Silly pony?!" Cinnamon put her hoof down. "Why, ah am *not* a silly pony!!"

Midnight chuckled at the two ponies' exchange. "It's alright, I don't really consider myself royalty anyways."

"Why, but you're King Themis's and Queen Ambrosia's daughter, are you not?" Amethyst asked, confused.

"*Adopted* daughter." Midnight corrected. "The real royalty is Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. I'm just here to assist them."

"Oh... well, you're still connected to the royal family." Amethyst trotted up next to Midnight. "Don't worry, dear, I can give you a makeover that'll make you shine even brighter than the stars!"

"Uh... no thanks." Midnight pushed Amethyst away from her before she could attack her mane. "Actually, I'd just like to get some rest. It was a long ride and I'd like to see where I'll be staying."

"Well the library is just this way then." Amethyst said, disappointed. "But you do want me to give you a makeover in the future, do you not?"

"Uh..." Midnight hesitated. Amethyst was giving her an incredibly pleading look, and she could hardly say no to that! "... I guess."

Amethyst instantly brightened up. "Brilliant! Alrighty then, the sooner we get to the library the sooner you can rest up and I can give you a makeover!"

"Now hold up there, sugarcube!" Cinnamon stepped in front of Amethyst. "Midnight here promised ta have lunch with mah family later! So that'll have ta come before yer makeover!"

"Oh Cinnamon!" Amethyst laughed. "If you want a makeover too you can just say so!"

"What? Why would ah wanna look all froo-froo and girly like you?"

"*Because*, Cinnamon. You *are* a mare, aren't you? At least, you're more of a mare than..."

"Look out below!!" A blue pegasus pony suddenly came crashing down in front of them.

Amethyst groaned. "Skyline..."

The red-mared pegasus brushed herself off. "Huh? Oh hey Ame, Cinnamon. What's shakin'?"

"What's 'shakin' is that we have a guest here in Ponyville." Amethyst scoffed.

The pegasus went over to Midnight and examined her. "Oh hey, haven't seen you around here before. What's up?"

"S-Skyline!" Another pegasus pony ran up to the group. This pony had a yellow coat and a pink mane. "Y-you know you shouldn't be flying up high in the air... it's not allowed..."

"Stop being such a worrywart all the time, Lily." Skyline said, annoyed. "It's not like there's anypony around to punish me for breaking the rules!"

Lily squeaked. "B-but..."

"So anyways, what's your name again?" Skyline asked Midnight, ignoring Lily's objection.

"Midnight Star." Seriously, she was getting kind of tired of having to go through introductions every five minutes. "And by the way, I'm from the castle, so *technically* I can punish you for flying..."

"Wait what? You're kidding me, right?" Skyline bit her lip.

Midnight responded. "Nope."

Skyline sighed. "Ah well, I lived a good life." She held out her hooves expecting Midnight to cuff her. "At least I went out doing what I love!!"

"... settle down." Midnight chuckled. "I'm not going to arrest you. I've never seen a pegasus fly before, after all."

“Oh really?” Skyline instantly dropped the theatrics. “I guess my awesome skills won you over! You’re pretty cool, Midnight.”

Midnight shrugged. “I guess.” Skyline didn’t really do anything but crash in front of the group after all.

“U-umm...” Lily tried to speak up.

“Oh hey, I don’t think you gave a proper introduction yet.” Midnight turned to the yellow pegasus. “I’m Midnight Star. And you?”

squeak

Midnight tilted her head. “... excuse me?”

“Oh, this here is Lily Blossom.” Cinnamon explained. “She’s a shy li’l feller. Can hardly even speak ‘round strangers.”

squeak

“Don’t worry, she’ll warm up ta ya eventually.”

Midnight pretended to yawn. She had enough introductions for one day. “Well... it was nice meeting you all, but I *really* need to get some rest. So if you’d all excuse me.”

“Come on, Midnight, at least let us walk you there.” Skyline said. “I don’t really want to ditch a new friend so soon after meeting her after all!”

Midnight twitched at the word ‘friend’ again. “Uhh... well...”

“... please?” Lily finally spoke up to say something to Midnight.

“Ugh... fine.” The other ponies lit up at Midnight’s agreement.

“Alright then, darling, the library’s just this way!” Amethyst led the group of ponies down the road to the library.

While they were walking, the ponies kept asking Midnight questions about life in the castle. Midnight gave really brief answers to all of these questions, and ended up talking about her two sisters more than anything else. About how Celestia was the grown

responsible one and how Luna was still like the little filly that still needed to be taken care of. It was much easier to talk about lighthearted topics rather than the heavy ones like Midnight's studies.

When the large tree came into view, Midnight felt incredibly relieved that she didn't have to spend more time talking to the other ponies. They were nice and all, but all Midnight really wanted at the moment was some peace and quiet.

"Well thank you all for accompanying me here. I really appreciate it" Midnight bowed to the other ponies. The unicorn pushed open the entrance to the library. Finally she could get some rest and relaxation...

"SURPRISE!!!"

... what now?

An eruption of streamers and laughter erupted as soon as the door opened. Midnight was caught off guard and could do nothing but stare at the sight in front of her. The library was filled with balloons and ribbons and other extravagant decorations.

"Welcome to your party!" A pink earth pony bounced up to Midnight and the others. "It's very very super duper nice to meet you! I'm Pastel Lollipop!"

"Uh... hi Pastel. I'm Midnight Star." The unicorn's eyes couldn't keep up with how fast Pastel was bouncing around.

Cinnamon chuckled. "So this is where ya ran off ta, Pastel. Settin' up a party fer this here guest."

"No silly, the party was already prepared before!" Pastel explained while hopping around Midnight. "But it was just a normal plain-ol' party before! This is a mega-ultra special occasion, so I had to make this party mega-ultra special too! After all, we don't get many new friends in Ponyville!!"

Midnight twitched. "Friends?"

"Yeah silly!" Pastel beamed. "Friends! I already know we're going to be super-duper ultra-mega fantabulous spectacular friends!!"

Midnight Star sighed. It looks like she won't be getting that rest and relaxation for a while. Oh well, might as well mingle with the population a little bit more. That is her job right now after all...

"Don't be so frownie frown!" Pastel said to Midnight. "If the guest of honor is all frownie, then this party will be all downie! So turn that frown upside down!!"

Midnight let off a small smile. Pastel's air was kind of infectious.

"And stop being such a silly filly, Twilight! You need to have fun too!"

"Huh?"

The space around Midnight instantly began deconstructing itself. However, instead of completely disappearing into the white void, it condensed itself into a small screen in the middle of the whiteness.

Twilight Sparkle stood in the void, confused. Somehow she was kicked out of Midnight's body... yet she could still feel herself attached to her.

"Why so confused, Twilight?"

The purple unicorn turned around and saw Pinkie Pie bouncing around in the void. "W-what are you doing here, Pinkie?!"

"Visiting you, duh!!" Pinkie poked Twilight's nose. "Toot! You're it!"

"What—Pinkie! How did you get here? And why couldn't I find you before?!"

"Because your ancestor wasn't close to our ancestors, silly!" Pinkie pointed to the window that showed Midnight and the other ponies. "See! See! I'm right there!" She pointed to Pastel Lollipop.

"But how did you know?"

Pinkie Pie shrugged. "I started a twitchin'! That's how!"

That was Twilight's signal to stop asking. Some things were not meant to be explained. Well, maybe since Pinkie Pie's here, Twilight could bring the others into this space... it was worth a shot.

Twilight Sparkle concentrated her magic and reached out to the other ponies. Unlike last time, she felt their presences, held back by some thin invisible wall. She concentrated on tearing apart that wall, and she could feel the wall rip as easily as a hot knife to butter.

The other four ponies came tumbling into the void.

“What happened?! Who’s attacking?!” Rainbow Dash was looking around frantically, obviously just as confused as Twilight was when she was ripped out of Midnight’s body.

“Why if it ain’t Twilight!” Applejack trotted over to her and gave her a hug. “Feels like it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah... how’s everything going?” Twilight asked.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “It’s not that great. Apparently pegasi aren’t allowed to fly in the past.”

“... why?”

“Heck if I know!” Rainbow Dash complained. “Apparently it’s just not allowed!”

“And my ancestor doesn’t use magic to sew!” Rarity exclaimed. “Sure, we have some small bit of magic to work with, but it takes teams of ponies to get anything done! It’s horrible!”

“Wait... why’s that?” Twilight inquired.

“Unicorns in the past barely have enough magic to lift a spool of yarn, dear.” Rarity explained. “We have to use all sorts of contraptions to attach just a simple button! Although I do have to admit it is sort of fun to create things in this sort of old fashioned way...”

“Hmm... interesting.” Twilight pondered over this information. So pegasi aren’t allowed in the air and unicorns barely have a fraction of the magical strength they have today... “Applejack, Fluttershy, what about you two? Anything weird in your lives?”

Applejack shrugged. "Not really, sugarcube. Run a farm and got mah hat and everythin'. Only difference is that the family's much smaller and we don't got as much land to plant on, but that makes sense."

"... not really. I still take care of animals." Fluttershy mumbled.

"Hmm... do you all know anything about this 'Goddess' or a 'Quota' or a 'Collection'?" Twilight asked. "Oh, and a 'Day of Ascension'"

"Apparently everypony is supposed to pray to this Goddess person every night." Rainbow Dash answered. "Although my ancestor's pretty cool, since she doesn't bother following the rules all the time."

"Ah don't know what the Collection is," Applejack said. "But apparently it's somethin' everypony's afraid of. But ah do know that the Day of Ascension thingy is fer Celestia and Luna, and it's s'posed ta be the most important day or somethin'"

Twilight crossed her hooves. So far nopony told her anything she didn't know or infer. "And does anypony know anything about this Quota thing?" The other ponies shook their heads. Twilight clicked her tongue. There were still so many unanswered questions...

"Hey, hey Twilight!" Pinkie Pie bounced. "Can you stop being all thinky-winky and enjoy yourself? There's a party going on!!"

Twilight Sparkle sighed and smiled. "I guess you're right, Pinkie. Everything will probably explain itself later on... So what do you all say?" Twilight turned to each of her friends. "Wanna stick around to see if you can teach me the magic of friendship again?"

"O' course, sugarcube!"

"You bet, Twi!"

"Yup yep yeppers!"

"Why of course, darling!"

"... sure."

Twilight grinned. It looked like everypony was having fun so far, and that none of them experienced anything like Twilight did at the beginning. It'll be fun to experience the adventures their ancestors have experienced. After all, learning's always more fun with friends, right?

What could possibly go wrong?

Session 3

Midnight Star collapsed in her bed after a long day of partying. Or to be more accurate, a long day of trying to avoid everypony's attempts to get her partying. Midnight just wasn't used to the amount of energy the ponies in Ponyville possessed. It was like the time somepony gave Princess Luna one too many cupcakes before bedtime... except ten times more energetic.

"Hey Midnight, whatcha doooooin'?" Pastel Lollipop hopped into Midnight's room, much to the unicorn's displeasure. "The party isn't over, silly! We still have to play pin the tail on the ponyyyy and then eat caaaaake and then open preseeeeeeents and then—"

"Sorry, Pastel, but I'm just kinda tired." Midnight groaned. "I've already partied with you guys the entire afternoon... now that the sun's set I just want to get some rest... you understand, right?"

Pastel shrugged. "Well... if you're really that tired wired then I guess it's okay. But it's no fun to have a super awesome party without the guest of honor!"

"Look, I really appreciate the party, but I'm just not that type of pony." Midnight sighed. "I'm the type of mare who likes quiet nights doing quiet things. Like reading! If you threw a reading party then I could probably get more into it."

"A reading party?" Pastel tilted her head. "But all the books we have are icky boring ones about the Goddess and all that other edumacational stuff. There's nothing fun about that!"

"I live for that 'edumacational' stuff, Pastel." Midnight snapped. "So I guess I'm no fun either."

Pastel frowned. "That's not what I meant, Midnight! I—"

Midnight waved her hoof. "If you don't mind, I kinda wanna get some rest right now..."

Pastel pouted. "Alrighty then, Midnight... but you promise to have fun with us again tomorrow, right? Right? We wanna play with you lots more..."

“Sure, sure.” Midnight said tiredly.

“Umm... okie dokie, then!” Pastel turned to leave the room. “Even if you’re being all grumpy wumpy right now, you’re still my friend, Midnight!”

“Wha—”

“Bye bye!!” Pastel dashed out before Midnight could get another word out.

What was with all these ponies and wanting to make friends with her? Surely they couldn’t be that friendly to strangers...

Midnight buried her head in her pillow. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to make new friends... it’s just that she didn’t know how to. She lived her entire life in the castle, surrounded by aloof guards and servants. The only real type of interaction she had was with Luna and Celestia, so it was somewhat natural for her to be such a shut-in.

The indigo unicorn sighed. They probably only wanted to be her friends because of her connection to the royal family. She couldn’t really see any other reason for them to want to get close to her. After all, Midnight wasn’t especially beautiful or talented. She was just a socially inept bookworm.

She closed her eyes and tried to drift off to sleep. It would be nice to make some real friends, but she didn’t think she’d be making any in Ponyville.

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When the sun rose the next morning, Midnight Star found herself wanting to stay in bed. She dreaded the prospect of having to mingle in with the population, but it was her job so it’s not like she had a choice. Maybe after a few more minutes...

A loud knock sounded from the front door. Midnight groaned. Who could be looking for her this early in the morning? She tried to block out the sound of the knocking, but it wouldn’t cease. Sighing, Midnight dragged herself out of bed and went to answer the door.

“Coming! Don’t get your saddle all up in a bunch...” Midnight yawned and opened the door.

“Oh *Midnight* how *are* you doing?” Amethyst, Ponyville’s local fashionista pony, brazenly let herself into the library. “It looks like Pastel neglected to clean up after herself last night. Sometimes I don’t know *what* to do with that pony...”

“Um, Amethyst?” Midnight spoke up.

“Oh *please* darling, no need to be so formal. Call me Ame! That’s what *all* my friends call me! Oh!” Amethyst grimaced after nearly stepping on a discarded cupcake from the other day. “It’s so filthy! I need to give that Pastel a good talking to after I help you clean this mess up!”

“Uh... I’ll just call you Amethyst for now.” Midnight looked confusedly at the other unicorn. “What are you doing here anyways?”

“Did you forget, Midnight? I’m supposed to be your escort around town during your stay in Ponyville!” Amethyst reminded her as she started tidying up the area. “Why, when I got the letter from Queen Ambrosia herself I nearly fainted! Just imagine, getting a letter from *royalty*! Although I guess since she’s your mother you get to see her everyday! Oh no, this *can’t* do. Do you know where the broom is around here?”

Midnight opened her mouth to correct Amethyst about Ambrosia being her mother. “Um—”

“Oh, what am I thinking, you just moved in yesterday! How *could* you know where the broom is?” Midnight tried to raise a hoof to interrupt Amethyst’s torrent of words, but the white unicorn just kept on talking. “No worries, my dear, it shan’t be that hard to find! It’s probably just in the utility closet... and here it is!” Amethyst brought out the broom and began cleaning up the mess with it. “I’ll have this place cleaned up for you in a jiffy, Midnight! It’s the *least* I can do for a new friend!”

“Waitwaitwait!” Midnight finally managed to speak up over Amethyst.

“Why, what’s wrong dear? Are you hungry? Oh I *knew* I should’ve picked up a sandwich for you to snack on while I was on my way here...”

“No, that’s not it!” Midnight shook her head. She couldn’t keep up with the pace of this pony! “I didn’t ask you to clean this place up!”

“But why would you need to *ask* dear?” Amethyst laughed and threw her hoof around Midnight’s shoulder. “The beauty of having such a generous friend such as *moi* is that

you can depend on me to help you without asking! Isn't that what friends are for, after all?"

Midnight pushed Amethyst away. "That's the thing, I don't think we're friends yet!"

Amethyst laughed at Midnight's accusation. "Oh that's just *silly*! Of *course* we're friends!"

"No, we're not." Midnight said flatly.

Amethyst put down her broom before giving Midnight a quizzical look. "You're being *serious*, dear? Oh my... I guess it must be a culture shock for you after coming from a place such as the castle after all..." The white unicorn trotted over to Midnight and patted her on the shoulder. "No worries darling, take your time to get used to the atmosphere. It's practically tradition in Ponyville to be as friendly to one another as possible, so if we come off as overbearing to you it's only because we want you to feel welcome."

Amethyst picked the broom back up and began tidying up the library once again. "Now don't worry about me, Midnight Star, I'll have this library cleaned up in a jiffy! Why don't you go out and get a bit more used to Ponyville? I'm sure the fresh air will do wonders for your mood. Oh, but before you go you *must* fix up that bed-head of yours! It's simply *atrocious*!"

Midnight blushed at having her messy mane be pointed out. "Uhh... sure." She went back into her room and began brushing her hair with the contraption she brought with her from the castle.

For some reason, she still found it hard to believe that these ponies were being genuine. Midnight just didn't think anypony could be that friendly to a complete stranger unless they wanted something...

"Oh, Midnight, there's a bakery where you can get a bite to eat in the village square!" Amethyst said to her as she stepped out of her room. "And... uh, if you don't mind, please come by my boutique later on so we can give yourself a proper makeover like I promised I'd do. Toodles!"

"Yeah... toodles." Midnight shut the door behind her. She just couldn't really get into the friendly atmosphere of Ponyville for some reason.

As she walked through the streets on her way to the bakery to get some breakfast, the random ponies Midnight passed by on the streets all greeted her 'good morning.' She didn't bother questioning how they knew her name, so she just gave a half-hearted wave and a 'good morning' back. Ponyville was a relatively small village, so it wasn't surprising that somepony they've never seen before would be the newcomer everypony was talking about.

After who knows how many random greetings, Midnight finally found herself in front of the bakery. She sighed. Finally she could get something to eat...

Midnight pushed open the door. "Welcome to Sugar Cane Corner!" A familiar voice shouted cheerfully. "Would you like to try some of today's special, Apple Cupcakes?"

"... Pastel?"

The pink earth pony jumped up and down excitedly. "Ooh! Hi Midnight! I hope you're feeling all cheery and wonderful and funderful this morning!"

Midnight sighed. Just her luck that she had to run into Pastel this early in the morning. "Hello Pastel, you work here?"

The hyperactive pony nodded. "Uh-huh! I'm an apprentice baker here! So what can I get you this morning? Would you like to try our Apple Cupcakes? Oopsie, I already asked that!"

"Just... sure. Why not." Midnight couldn't deal with so much energy in the morning.

"Whoopie! One Apple Cupcake coming right up!" Pastel quickly disappeared behind the counter and came bouncing out with a tray of cupcakes.

Midnight took a cupcake from the tray. "So how many bits?"

"Oh you silly, you don't have to pay for this one!" Pastel giggled. "Everypony's first baked good is on the house! Courtesy of Pastel Lollipop!"

How do they stay in business if they frequently give away their goods? Midnight sighed again. It's not like it was really her problem...

She took a bite of the cupcake. She wasn't expecting it... but it was actually pretty good. More than good in fact, it was the best cupcake she had in ages! Something about the way the apple flavor mixes in with the icing just meshed well with her tastebuds.

"You look like you like it, Midnight!" Pastel said, bouncing.

Midnight hesitated. She didn't really want to encourage more of Pastel's hyperactive behavior... but the cupcake was really good! "It's... alright." The unicorn muttered.

"Whee! Midnight likes it!!" Pastel bounced around excitedly around Midnight. "We made these cupcakes using Cinnamon's special recipe, so it's like you're praising both of us!!"

Midnight just smiled awkwardly in response.

Pastel tilted her head. "Are you still being a grouchy grouchy-pants, Midnight? It's not good to start off the day all pouty-wouty!"

The unicorn didn't know how to respond. If she straight out stated how she felt it wouldn't be fair to Pastel who just gave her a free cupcake...

"... am I annoying you, Midnight?" Pastel asked sadly, breaking the awkward silence. "I know I can be all in-your-facey sometimes... but I just wanna make you smile."

"N-no, of course not!!" Midnight said hurriedly. Seeing Pastel sad was incredibly uncomfortable considering how peppy she normally was. "I'm just not having such a great morning, that's all!"

"You're lying." Pastel put the tray of cupcakes aside and looked directly into Midnight's eyes. "If you don't want me around Midnight, I can stop... I don't want to make you unhappy during your stay in Ponyville."

"No, that's not it!!" Midnight felt incredibly guilty for causing Pastel's shift in mood. "I just... look, I'm sorry Pastel. I didn't mean to snap at you last night, I was just really tired and I didn't want to deal with anypony! It's not you, it's me!"

"That line is so overused, Midnight." Pastel pointed out.

"I... guess." Midnight smiled awkwardly. "Look... I'm just not used to everypony being so friendly all the time. Your personality is just kinda... overwhelming, that's all. If you tone it down a bit, I'm sure we could be... uh..."

“Friends?” Pastel finished.

Midnight twitched. “Yeah, sure, friends...”

Pastel let out a soft giggle. “It’s alright, Midnight, you’ll warm up to us eventually!”

“I... guess.” No matter how kind the other ponies were being to her... Midnight still couldn’t open herself completely to them. She just couldn’t trust other ponies so easily...

“Hey Pastel, where ya want this here bushel o’ apples?” Cinnamon suddenly came bursting into the bakery, breaking Midnight away from her thoughts.

“Oh, just in the back Cinnamon!” Pastel said, back to her incredibly energetic self. She turned to Midnight. “Well, I hafta go back to work now! Later you silly filly!” The pink earth pony hopped back into the bakery’s kitchen.

“Why ah didn’t see ya there, Midnight!” Cinnamon called out after depositing her apples. “How’s yer first mornin’ in Ponyville treatin’ ya?”

Of all the ponies Midnight met so far, Cinnamon seemed the most normal of them all. If there was anypony she’d get along with first, it’d be Apple Cinnamon.

“It’s... okay.” Midnight pretended to yawn. “I’m still pretty tired so I’m a bit out of it...”

“She’s just being a shy filly!” Pastel called out from the kitchen.

“What—no I’m not!!” Midnight cried back.

Cinnamon chuckled. “It’s alright, sugarcube. Ah didn’t expect ya ta be all sugar and rainbows straight off the bat.” The orange earth pony glanced at the clock on the bakery wall. “Oh, well ya jus’ look at the time! Sorry ‘bout this sugarcube, but ah can’t spend time with ya in town right now.”

“Oh no, that’s fine!” Midnight said. She wanted to get back to the library so she could check out some of the books there.

“But ah just feel so plum bad fer leavin’ ya without company!” Cinnamon exclaimed.

“That’s fine, I have Amethyst.”

“That just makes me feel worse! Leavin’ ya with that froo-froo pony all day! I know!” Cinnamon clopped her hooves together. “Why don’t ya have lunch with me and the family? Ya said ya’d dine with us yesterday after all!”

“Um, uh...” Midnight Star didn’t really want too, but she did promise Cinnamon that she would... “Oh... alright.” Midnight finally agreed.

Cinnamon grinned and led Midnight by the hoof outside of the bakery towards her farm. “That’s great, Midnight! Yer gonna have a plum great time with mah family! Why, there’s Granny Apple, Apple Fritter, Apple Turnover, li’l Apple Sundae, Red Delicious...”

Midnight just nodded her head at Cinnamon’s listing of her family tree. It made her head spin to even try to remember half of their names!

“... and Caramel Apple! And that’s the entire Apple family!!” Cinnamon grinned at Midnight.

“Uhh... that’s a pretty large family you have there, Cinnamon.” Midnight commented.

“You betcha! We need lot’s o’ hooves to run the farm, so we’re allowed to have such a large family tree, in case yer wonderin’ how we got around the Quota.” Cinnamon said proudly. “Although, li’l Apple Sundae’s jus’ a filly, so she’s too young ta help out ‘round the farm.”

“It must be nice to have such a large family.” Midnight looked down sadly at her hooves.

“... now what’s wrong, sugarcube? Why ya look so down?”

“Oh, no reason!” Midnight said quickly, trying to hide her sad expression. This wasn’t the time or place to lament over her family issues.

“Well if ya say so, Midnight.” Cinnamon shrugged. “Anyways, the farm’s jus’ right over this here hill! Once we get past it, ya’ll be in our apple orchar—”

When the two ponies stepped over the hill, Cinnamon froze. “Where’s is everypony?!” Cinnamon shouted. She trotted down the hill.

“H-hey, wait!!” Midnight tried to catch up to the earth pony, but her hooves were nowhere near as fast as Cinnamon’s.

“Hey, Red Delicious! Apple Fritter!! Where are ya’ll!?” The orange earth pony stopped for a moment to look around.

“Cinnamon, what’s going on?” Midnight said as soon as she caught up.

“Oh, sorry fer leavin’ ya Midnight. It’s just that everypony should be out on the fields workin’ right now!” Cinnamon shouted to the empty air. “Seriously, we ain’t got no time to waste playin’ silly games when harvest season’s jus’ around the corner!!”

“Hey Cinnamon, keep it down!!”

Two pegasus ponies came flying in and stopped in front of Midnight and Cinnamon.

“Skyline? Lily? What’re ya’ll doin’ on my farm?” Cinnamon asked, confused.

“Shhh!” Lily hissed. “Oh... I’m sorry. Um, everypony’s hiding...”

“What?” Cinnamon tilted her head. “What do ya’ll mean they’re hidin’? Why would they be hidin’ when it’s the busiest time of the year!?”

“I told ya to keep it down, Cinnamon!” Skyline whispered.

Midnight spoke up. “Umm... excuse me, what’s going on?”

“Oh, Midnight...” Lily squeaked. “U-um... you see... uh, there’s, well...”

“There’s trouble.” Skyline finished. “You see... there’s a pack of wolves that look like they’re on their way to Ponyville.”

Midnight and Cinnamon gasped in shock. “How d’ya know this?” Cinnamon asked in hushed tones.

“Well... I was doing my morning flight routines like usual and Lily was trying to stop me again, like usual.” Skyline explained. “And while I was up in the air I saw them. They were coming in from the east, and it looked like a pretty large pack...”

“We told your family to go hide, Cinnamon.” Lily mumbled. “I’m sorry for interrupting your farm’s work, but if those wolves are headed to Ponyville, they’d go for your family first...”

“Ah don’t see why they would!!” Cinnamon exclaimed. “Our family ain’t done nothin’ wrong!!”

Skyline plugged her hoof into the earth pony’s mouth. “Cool it, Cinnamon!” She hissed. “Look, Lily and I have to go warn the other ponies in town, so you and Midnight go hide with the rest of the Apple family, alright?”

“... fine.” Cinnamon muttered. “Ah don’t like hidin’, but I s’pose that’s the only thing ah can do right now...”

Skyline nodded and took off into Ponyville, with Lily following behind.

Cinnamon sighed. “C’mon Midnight, let’s go. Sorry this had ta happen when ya just got here...” The earth pony started quickly trotting towards the Apple family barn. “Y’see, somethin’ like this hasn’t ever happened in mah lifetime, but ah’ve heard stories ‘bout this happenin’ before.”

“I know about what’s going on, Cinnamon.” Midnight said. “I wish I didn’t though.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Yer s’posed ta be our princesses’ advisor in the future, ‘course ya’d know.” Cinnamon pulled back a rope near the barn and a hidden door popped up in front of them. “Here’s our apple cellar, the family should be hidin’ in there.”

Midnight nodded and followed Cinnamon into the cellar.

“Cinnamon! There you are!!” A small filly ran over to Cinnamon and gave her a quick hug. “I was so worried!” She cried.

“Don’t fret so much, Sundae.” Cinnamon grumbled. “This right here is Sundae, mah younger sis. Sundae, this right here’s Midnight, the newcomer ah’ve told ya’ll about.”

Sundae gave Midnight a shy look. “N-nice ta meet’cha.”

“That’s enough with the introductions! Quick, get in!” An older stallion ushered Midnight and Cinnamon into the cellar, shutting the door behind them.

“This here’s Fritter, Midnight.” Cinnamon explained. “He’s the overprotective older brother.”

“Now Cinnamon,” Fritter reprimanded, “Ah’m just lookin’ out fer mah kin, alright?”

“Ah know that, Fritter.” Cinnamon turned to Midnight. “Since yer here, might as well introduce ya ta the rest of the family.”

Midnight and the other ponies in the cellar exchanged quick introductions. When the introductions were finished, Fritter turned to Midnight Star.

“Since yer from the castle and all, mind explainin’ ta us why there’s wolves comin’ into Ponyville?” Fritter inquired.

Midnight hesitated. “I-I don’t know... they shouldn’t be allowed in our nation’s borders...”

“Now see here!” Fritter interrupted. “Ah may not be one of them higher-educated ponies, but are ya tryin’ ta tell me that us ponyfolk have the strength ta keep out wolves from our nation?”

Midnight bit her lip. “Hey Fritter, go easy on the gal, would ya?” Cinnamon cut in.

“This is a crisis, Cinnamon.” Fritter said. “Ah ain’t got no time fer niceties.”

“W-well... we made a treaty.” Midnight explained.

“So yer sayin’ ya have enough manpower ta fend off our natural predators?” Fritter pushed. “We don’t live in a kind world, lady! It may be all cushie and junk inside of yer li’l castle, but out here in tiny villages like this we ain’t got the kind o’ protection you do!!”

“Fritter, shut it!” Cinnamon shouted. She turned to Midnight. “Now c’mon sugarcube, just calmly explain what mah hotheaded brother wants ta know.”

Midnight gulped. “U-umm... the wolf nation and our nation came to an agreement...” The unicorn explained cautiously. “You see... um, generations ago, our past King and Queen made a pact with the wolf nations... and well, uh... we got them to agree to leave us alone for the most part.”

“Leave us alone?” Fritter scoffed. “Than what d’ya call that li’l Quota then?”

Midnight winced. “It was the only way we could attain peace—”

“Peace?!” Fritter laughed bitterly. “If ya’ll had the strength ya say ya have, why not go ta war and kill all those wolf scum?”

“Fritter!!” Cinnamon stomped her hoof down. “Ya need ta calm down right now. Yer scarin’ Sundae!” Sure enough, the small filly was hiding behind her older sister from her brother’s fierceness.

Fritter sighed. “Look lady—er, Midnight. Normally, ah wouldn’t be so hard-pressed ta grill ya. Heck, ah’d be welcomin’ ya with open arms. But this here is a crisis, so ah want ta know everythin’ ah can in order ta protect mah family.

“... the Goddess stepped in to help us.” Midnight mumbled.

Fritter’s ears perked. “What was that, now?”

Midnight bit her lip. “When the past King and Queen made that treaty... the Goddess stepped in and mediated the negotiations. That’s why we celebrate her, because she brought peace to our nations.”

“How does that stop them wolf folk from invadin’ our borders though?” Fritter continued to press.

“... the Goddess gave us a weapon.” Midnight whispered. “A weapon we could only use in the direst of circumstances.”

“What is this weapon then?!”

“... it’s confidential.” Midnight answered.

Fritter glared fiercely at the unicorn. “What was that?”

“It’s confidential.” Midnight repeated. “Under no circumstances am I allowed to tell anypony about what it is. I’m sorry.”

“... tch.” Fritter clicked his tongue. “Fine, whatever. Keep yer darn secrets.” The stallion slinked off into the crowd of other ponies.

Midnight slumped down. She couldn’t believe any of this was happening. Wolves? Coming to Ponyville? And so suddenly too... she wasn’t prepared for any of this.

Midnight bit back a few bitter tears thinking about what she said about the Goddess's weapon.

There was no such device. In truth, the Goddess only provided a method to keep the wolves out of the pony nation... a horrible, horrible method that was only to be enacted when there was no hope left...

"Are ya'll alright, ma'am?" Little Sundae nuzzled Midnight in an effort to cheer her up.

"Don't mind Fritter, Midnight." Cinnamon said. "He's just a hothead who's tryin' ta protect his family, that's all. The rest of us wouldn't push ya like that."

Midnight smiled sadly. It helped just a little to know that she wasn't alone...

Suddenly, a harsh pounding noise sounded on the entrance to the cellar. The Apple family collectively held their breaths, and Sundae hid fearfully behind Cinnamon's flank. Midnight could hear the hinges on the door getting weaker. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Midnight gulped. She vainly hoped that the door would stay intact.

Such a thing wouldn't happen.

The door burst open, letting in the harsh sunlight that stung everypony's eyes that were used to the dark. A shrill scream pierced the air as some of the ponies began to panic. Cinnamon tried her hardest to shield her little sister from the light.

"SHUT UP IN HERE!!" A booming voice yelled, slamming harshly against the battered door. The ponies tried to contain their fear in order to not provoke their assailant. Once Midnight's eyes got more used to the light, she squinted at the light and saw a trio of wolves looming over the cellar, evil smiles on their faces. The leader of the trio spoke up.

"Guess what, ponies? It's time for a Collection."

Session 4

To Applejack, her family was the most important thing in the world to her. However, when she was still a filly with no cutie mark, she put the same value in her family that everypony usually did.

Egocentric, selfish, and inconsiderate of her parents and family's needs. Applejack hated to work on the farm. She hated having to work in the fields, she hated kissing up to her parents to get what she wanted, and she hated having to go to school to get an education she'd barely use. The only reason Applejack wanted to grow up was to escape the farm and live a fun life in the city.

A rebellious filly, her older brother Big Macintosh always did his best to keep her out of trouble. Applejack didn't know better after all, Big Mac knew that lots of ponies her age think the same way. It was only a phase, he thought, a phase that would pass once Applejack grows out of fillyhood...

Applejack's parents were usually too busy with managing the farm to give her any real attention, so Big Macintosh put it on himself to give his little sister all the attention she needed. Perhaps that was a flaw in his judgment, since his actions only distanced Applejack from her parents even more.

It wasn't that her parents didn't love her. To them, Applejack was their precious little girl, and even though Applebloom was well on her way to being born, Applejack would always hold a large place in their hearts. It pained them how Applejack seemed to grow farther and farther away from them, but no matter what they tried, work got in the way, causing their attempts to grow closer to their child to backfire.

Of course, the Apple family had their moments together. When Applebloom was born, Applejack looked on in awe in wonder. She was excited to have a little sister, and the loving gaze in her eyes softened her parent's worries. But that gaze was reserved only for Big Macintosh and Applebloom, and it never seemed to turn in the direction of mom and dad. It pained them greatly to never feel that warm look from their daughter, to never really experience the love Applejack held for her brother and sister.

And then came the day Applejack discovered her cutie mark.

It happened shortly after Applebloom's birth, only a few days as a matter of fact. Applejack was playing in the orchards while her parents and Big Macintosh were tending the farm. Of course, Applejack was supposed to be working too, but playing hooky was much more fun than having to plant seeds and whatnot. Normally Big Macintosh would scold her for shirking her responsibilities, but looking back... he was glad she wasn't around.

Because she was off playing in the orchards, Applejack didn't have to see the accident.

It was a quick accident, almost laughable because of how it happened. While Big Macintosh was heading back to the barn to pick up some supplies, his parents were working on a nearby hill. For some reason, they left the plow on top of the hill with the brakes off...

No pony really knew exactly why the accident happened, the Apple family always took great care when operating the equipment. But the result was certain. When Big Macintosh returned to the fields, he found his parents dead, buried under an overturned plow.

Ponyville held its first impromptu funeral in ages. Accidents like this were typically unheard of in Equestria. For a pony to pass away before their proper time... and two ponies even. Rumors spread throughout Ponyville. Why did they neglect to keep an eye on their equipment? Why didn't they get out of the way? Surely they would've seen it before it hit them, right? There were even some incredibly nasty rumors that it was a suicide, but those were quickly shut down. The Apples were great ponies, and it would be in bad taste to spread such distasteful rumors.

However, those rumors reached Applejack's ears, and soon enough, Applejack began blaming herself for her parent's death. Was it because she wished for them to go away? Because she only wanted to live with her precious brother and sister? They say a pony never knows what she's got until it's gone, and this was exactly what Applejack was beginning to understand.

Now that they were gone forever, Applejack discovered just how much she loved her parents. She began to regret her selfish pettiness, and began to wish for some way to make them proud of their daughter. Some way to make it up to them for everything she neglected to do up until their departure.

So Applejack began to work. She began to work harder than she ever had before. She began to work in order to keep the Apple family legacy going, to show her appreciation for everything her parents ever tried to teach her.

And she was good at what she did. Applejack had the greenest hoof anypony in the Apple family ever did know. Her special talent in farming had Big Mac decide to step back and let Applejack be the head of Sweet Apple Acres.

It was then she got her cutie mark. Three apples to signify her talent in growing apples.

Applejack regretted not showing her honest appreciation for her parents while they were still around, so she poured all that regret into bettering life for her and her family. She wanted to do everything in her power to allow the Apple family to prosper, and to bring happiness to them.

For Applejack thought that if she was honest to her feelings, good fortune would definitely follow.

So when Applejack merged with Cinnamon's consciousness... she instantly emphasized with her ancestor. Cinnamon went through similar experience, having to take care of the family at such a young age after her parents mysteriously disappeared. Cinnamon held the same love for her kin as Applejack did, and Applejack respected her ancestor greatly for it. They were one and the same as far as Applejack was concerned, and she took pleasure in experiencing the same happiness and hardship that Cinnamon did.

It was only natural that Applejack reacted the way she did.

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After the wolves bust down the cellar door, they forced the Apple family to march towards the village square. Sundae stayed behind Cinnamon's flank, unsuccessfully trying to stay out of sight.

"W-what're they gonna do with us big sis?" Sundae whispered.

Cinnamon grimaced. "Ah... we're gonna be fine, li'l sis."

"Y-ya promise, Cinnamon?"

“Hey!” One of the wolves keeping the family in line yelled at the filly. “Keep it down back there!!”

Sundae trembled behind Cinnamon, who gently nuzzled her younger sister in an attempt to comfort her. “Ah promise, Sundae.” Cinnamon whispered. “Ah’m not gonna let anything happen ta ya.”

Fritter looked over his sisters from behind them. “Hey, shut it you two, it’ll be bad if they hear ya again!” He hissed.

Cinnamon shot her brother an annoyed look then sighed. He may be a hothead, but he knows what he’s talking about.

Midnight tried to keep a low profile in the line-up. If by some chance any of the wolves recognized who she was... it could spell trouble for the rest of her family. Why was there a Collection going on in the first place? If these wolves came from the east... then the Collection should’ve been happening in Coltsdale...

“Alright ponies, line up!” The leader of the pack growled. It looked like all of Ponyville was lined up in the village square, fearfully trying to avoid the gazes of their assailants. Midnight and the Apple family did as they were told, and joined the crowd of ponies.

“There you are Midnight!” Amethyst hissed from the midst of the crowd, beckoning her and Cinnamon towards her. “I was so worried... thank goodness you’re alright...”

“Yeah, I’m okay...” Midnight whispered back. “But we’re in a pretty bad situation... is that Pastel?”

On the ground behind Amethyst was Pastel Lollipop, hunching over on the ground and trying to hide herself from the wolves. Lily Blossom was trying to comfort her, patting her mane and whispering calming words in her ear. Seeing the normally happy Pastel in this state really made the situation all the more real to Midnight Star.

“It is.” Skyline responded, stealthily merging into their group. “Pastel’s always been incredibly afraid of wolves... she used to live in another village, you see? And a Collection took away her parents...”

“Oh... I’m so sorry Pastel...” Midnight said. However, Pastel didn’t hear her words, as she tried to block out everything in her frightened state.

“Alright, you ponies!!” The leader of the pack barked. “Stand up straight so I can see ya!”

Midnight quickly straightened her posture along with everypony else. However, Pastel was still cowering on the ground behind her.

“C-come on Pastel...” Lily whispered. “Y-you have to get up... if you don’t you’ll draw attention to yourself from the wolves...”

Pastel quickly stiffened and stood up. Midnight could clearly see the look of fear on her face. It unnerved her more than anything else that was going on at the moment.

“As you can plainly tell, us wolves from the Eastern Territories are carrying out a Collection here in Ponyville!” The leader barked. “You ponies have been lucky, as a Collection has not been held here in Ponyville for almost twenty-five years now!”

“So why now, then?!” A colt called out from the crowd. “Why do you tyrants have to come here now?!”

The ponies around him shuffled away from him. A mare frantically pulled on his hoof. “D-darling, don’t speak up—eek!!”

One of the wolves walked up to the colt and slashed his face. The mare quickly put her hoof to the injury as if she could alleviate the colt’s pain. “O-Oh my gosh, you’re bleeding! S-Somepony get a first—”

The wolf who slashed the colt’s face flexed his claws, causing the mare to shut her mouth immediately.

The colt spat at the ground in front of his attacker. “You think I’m scared of you?” He yelled furiously. “You think you can use violence to get your way all the time?! Well I have news for you!! You’re not going to keep me down just by clawing at my face!! It’s going to take a lot more than that to—”

The wolf dug his claws into the colt’s neck. “Hey, you see this here? You see my claws around your little neck?” The wolf growled. “I’m *this* close to puncturing your skin, little pony. You wanna test me? You wanna see how long you last after you start bleeding out like the pathetic wretch you are?” The colt’s bravery suddenly vanished. His hooves began trembling at the prospect of his death.

“That’s what I thought.” The wolf snickered. “All talk and no action, as expected from a spineless pony like you.” The wolf relaxed his grip, allowing the colt to take a deep sigh from relief.

A claw suddenly sliced through the colt’s chest. Red blood sprung forth and stained the ground.

“DARLING!!” The mare screamed and tried to stop the colt from bleeding. “Darling... darling!! No, no... NO!!”

“I didn’t kill him.” The wolf grinned. “Yet.” He gestured towards two of his comrades, who lifted up the colt and the mare.

“No... NO! What are you doing!?” The mare shouted. “Get your paws off me, I SAID GET THEM OFF!!”

The wolf carrying the mare threw her down to the ground and stomped on her face, knocking her unconscious.

The leader of the pack smirked. “Thank you for the volunteers, Ponyville. But I’m afraid the Quota hasn’t been met yet.” The leader began pompously pacing back and forth, as if he was a king giving a speech to his subjects. “You know Ponyville, you should be thankful that we haven’t performed a Collection here in ages. We’ve let your little village live in peace and harmony for almost a full twenty-five years, you know...? So you shouldn’t be ungrateful to us for coming here now, that’s just the natural order of things.” His eyes glanced over Midnight and the others, causing them to wince. “Hmm... I guess since we haven’t graced you ponies with our presence in such a long while, you might have forgotten why we hold these Collections.” He clapped his paws. “Very well, I guess I have to educate you mongrels!

“You see, it’s fairly simple. There’s this little thing called the food chain, alright? I’m sure even the tiniest of you ponies know about the food chain. Of course, you ponies are herbivores so there’s no reason for you all to think about it that much. But you see, the entire world isn’t made up of herbivores, no, it’s run by carnivores—meat-eaters—you see?” He ran a claw through Cinnamon’s mane, causing her to shiver in disgust.

“And us wolves, we eat meat. So where do we get this meat from? Why, from places like this of course! See, we have a neat little system in place called the Quota in order to keep our populations stable. If the population of you ponies gets too large, we take a bunch of you and have you for dinner. But on the other hand, if our population gets too

large and yours too small, we end up dying from famine, and that's no good. That's why the Quota is such a wonderful thing; it keeps the world in balance!!"

The leader stepped back into the center of the crowd, laughing maniacally. "And there's no getting rid of it either! If it wasn't us wolves, then it'd be bears! Or tigers! Or dragons!! Or who knows what else!! But you ponies have us as your predators, so you don't have to worry about a pack of griffons swooping in and slaughtering you lot, no, us wolves are a fair population."

"If you're so fair." Midnight said, daring to speak up. "How come you're here and not in Coltsdale? You're from the Eastern Territories, right? So your Collections are limited to there..."

The wolf grinned. "Oh, looks like we have a pony who knows her politics. I didn't expect that in such a backwater village such as this." He bared his fangs. "You see... Coltsdale gave us a little... incentive to overlook their town this month. Nothing big of course... just a nice little payment to encourage us to accidentally pass over their town. But that's enough talk."

He flexed his claws and looked over the crowd of ponies in front of him. "We still need at least one more of you ponies before we fulfill the Quota. Any volunteers? Any? No? Well then..." He flicked his paws towards Midnight and her group. "The little one. Take her."

A wolf swooped down towards the group and swiped little Apple Sundae from behind Cinnamon's protection, bringing her to the center of the crowd.

"Ahhh!! Cinnamon!! Fritter!!! Help meeeeeeee!!!" Sundae screeched. She flailed around in the wolf's grasp.

The leader chuckled. "Since you older ponies work so hard to grow the vegetation that goes so well as our side-dishes, we're going to go easy on you and take a pony that's of no value to you all."

Something snapped in Cinnamon. "Ah'm not gonna let ya'll take my sister!!" She tried to dash forward, but Skyline bit her tail and held her in place.

"Don't do it, Cinnamon!" Skyline hissed. "You'll only get yourself killed!!"

Cinnamon tried to break free from Skyline's hold. "Ah can't leave her ta die, Skyline!! She's mah kin!!"

"I'm not going to let my friend throw her life away!!"

Cinnamon struggled to break away, but her strength left her at Skyline's words. She was right... Cinnamon could do nothing to save Sundae... the last vestiges of common sense within her told her that much. As much as her heart wanted her to leap in to save Sundae, Cinnamon knew that it was all helpless.

But that wouldn't stop Applejack from trying.

Applejack exerted the full force of her will into taking control of Cinnamon's body. She pushed aside Cinnamon's wavering consciousness and filled it with her own, strong one. There was absolutely no way Applejack would just stand by and let one of her kin die, even if it was in the past!

Applejack broke free from Skyline's hold. "Sorry sugarcube, but ah'm gonna save mah sister!!" Applejack dashed towards the wolves with Cinnamon's body, and unleashed a powerful kick on the wolf who was holding Sundae captive. The wolf was flung off to the side, and Applejack stepped in front of Sundae to protect her.

"Don't worry, Sundae!" Applejack shouted. "Yer big sis is gonna save ya! After all, ah promised! And a member of the Apple family never goes back on her promises!!"

"Cinnamon!" Sundae squealed. "Cinnamon... you...*hic*... you...!!"

DESYNCHRONIZATION.

The world around Applejack melted away, and she suddenly found herself back in Skyline's grip. "What—!?"

"I'm not going to let my friend throw her life away!!" Skyline shouted again.

What just happened?

"C-Cinnamon! F-Fritter!! H-help meeeeeeee!!" Sundae cried.

Applejack shook away her confusion. She needed to save Sundae. Applejack once again broke free from Skyline's grip, and once again kicked away the wolf that was holding Sundae.

"Ah'm here sis!" Applejack cried. "Ah'm gonna save ya!"

DESYNCHRONIZATION.

For the third time, Applejack found herself back in Skyline's hold.

"I'm not going to let my friend throw her life away!!"

Why was this happening?

"C-Cinnamon! F-Fritter!! H-help meeeeeeee!!"

Why couldn't she save her?

"Ah'm comin' Sundae! Ah'm comin'!!"

DESYNCHRONIZATION.

"I'm not going to let my friend throw her life away!!"

Applejack bit back her bitter tears. "And ah... ah told ya, ah'm not gonna let a member of the Apple family die!!" She once again broke away from Skyline.

DESYNCHRONIZATION.

"I'm not going to let my friend—"

"SHUT UP!!" Applejack bellowed, tears falling from her eyes. "J-jus' shut up!!" She broke away from Skyline again. "A-ah'm gonna save ya, Sundae... ah'm gonna save ya!!"

DESYNCHRONIZATION.

"DARN IT!!" Applejack crumpled down to the ground, crying her eyes out. "Darn it... why can't ah do anythin'? Why..."

"I'm not going to let... Cinnamon..." Skyline let go of Cinnamon's tail. "I'm sorry..."

"C-Cinnamon! F-Fritter!! H-help meeeeeeee!!"

Cinnamon bit her lip as the bitter tears ran down her face. "Sundae... ah'm so sorry... ah'm so, so sorry..."

"LIKE HELL I'D LET YA'LL TAKE MY SISTER." Fritter jumped out of the crowd and tried to attack the wolves, but unlike when Applejack tried to do it, the wolves were swift and avoided Fritter's kick. By sheer overwhelming number, the wolves managed to overcome Fritter's attempts to rescue his sister. "Sundae!" Fritter called out. "SUNDAE!!"

"Big brother!!" Sundae responded. "Big brother..."

The leader of the pack stepped in front of Fritter. "I was expecting something like this to happen." He lifted Fritter's face to make eye contact with him. "I'm so glad you decided to volunteer to be made an example of." He turned to the rest of the ponies. "Ponies of Ponyville! I would like to show to you all what happens when you don't cooperate with your side of the Quota! Boys! Get him ready!!"

The wolves restraining Fritter pulled his hooves in opposite directions, exposing his underbelly.

Applejack shivered. No more. She didn't want to see any more of this. It was too painful, being unable to do anything.

The leader slowly unsheathed his claws, holding them out for everypony to see. He had a malicious grin on his face.

No more. She didn't want to see this.

He brought his claw close to Fritter's belly and smiled. "This is what happens to ponies who don't cooperate."

No more. She wanted it all to stop.

"NOOOOOOO!!" Sundae's and Cinnamon's screams echoed together. The wolf began digging his claws into Fritter... groans of agony emitting from Fritter's mouth...

Please, just make it stop. Please.

Cinnamon shut her eyes, but she could still hear her brother's cries of pain. She could still hear the sound of tearing flesh.

Make it stop.

Fritter's breath turned ragged as blood sputtered from his mouth. He used the last of his strength to turn to Cinnamon and give her one last smile.

"Ah love ya sis... so live on fer me and Sundae both, okay?"

"AH SAID MAKE IT STOP!!"

Applejack's yell caused everything to collapse upon itself. The world of her ancestors receded back into nothingness, and the white void clouded her vision. When the fog cleared, she found herself back in the library of present day Ponyville.

Twilight Sparkle and the other ponies were shivering from the shock of what they just witnessed. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, and Rarity had a faraway expression as if their minds were still in the past. Fluttershy was openly sobbing on the floor, trying to push away the images of what she just saw.

"That's... that's enough..." Applejack collapsed, sobbing. "No more, Twilight, ah don't wanna see anymore..."

Twilight Sparkle shut the spellbook. "I'm... I'm sorry... I should have cast the disconnection spell but... my mind was frozen... I couldn't do anything..." She shook her head, but the images wouldn't disappear from her mind. "I'm sorry Applejack, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for any of you to have to have to experience something like that..."

"It was like... it was like they took away Big Mac and Applebloom..." Applejack mumbled. "They took away mah family... they... they were gonna kill 'em..."

"THOSE WOLVES!" Rainbow Dash angrily pounded on the ground. "How could anything so... so... *horrible* ever exist?! We couldn't do anything!! We... we couldn't stop it... did you see it?! Did you see what they did!?" The pegasus cried out frantically. "They tore open his... and that mare... THEY DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO DESERVE SOMETHING LIKE THAT."

“Rainbow Dash... stop it... please...” Fluttershy sobbed. “I don’t want—I don’t want to think about—*hic*—I... I don’t...”

Rarity put her hoof around Fluttershy. “None of us want to...” She turned to Twilight. “Darling, I know you didn’t mean for this... and it was purely educational but...”

“You shouldn’t do this anymore.” Pinkie said flatly. “It’s too... icky... and sad... I don’t want to have to experience something so grossly again... I—I can’t even giggle at something like this...”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, if the past is so horrible, I don’t even want to speak of it anymore.” Twilight placed the book into one of the bookshelves. “There. I’ll... never open it again...”

“It’s for the best, darling.” Rarity said. “I... I think we should all go home and get some rest now... just look at poor Fluttershy, she’s so broken up...”

“Ah’m... gonna head home too, sugarcube.” Applejack mumbled. “Not ta mean any disrespect of anythin’, but...”

Twilight shook her head. “You don’t need to say anything. I understand. All of us should go get some rest.”

The other ponies nodded and started to make their way outside. Everypony except Rainbow Dash.

“Is that all?” Rainbow Dash asked, her voice shaking. “We’re just going to shut the book and never speak of the past again? We’re not even gonna see if we get to kick the crap out of those wolves?!”

“No we’re not.” Applejack said firmly. “Why does it matter anyways? It doesn’t have anything ta do with our lives now...”

Rainbow Dash grimaced. “Twilight!”

The purple unicorn hesitated. “I... no, Rainbow Dash. It’s... it’s not worth it if I have to make my friends go through something like that...”

“... fine.” Rainbow Dash grumbled. “Whatever, I’m going to catch some z’s...”

The ponies said their goodbyes to Twilight Sparkle, and went on their ways back home. Twilight Sparkle sighed.

“... what happened, Twilight?” Spike timidly stepped out from Twilight’s bedroom. “You all looked kinda out of it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now Spike.” Twilight murmured. “I just wanna get some rest for now...”

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“Are you sure it was such a good idea to send her that book now, sis?”

Celestia and Luna were sitting by the fireside in their private chambers in Canterlot. It was dusk, the only time when the two sisters could freely intermingle with each other without disrupting the sun/moon cycle.

Celestia warmly nuzzled her sister to ease her worries. “To be honest... I’m worried that it might be too much for them to handle... but it must be done.” The elder alicorn silently gazed outside the window and down to the faraway Ponyville.

Luna sighed. “Couldn’t it wait a few more years though? I’m not very comfortable with the gambit you’re trying to pull off...”

Celestia chuckled. “The last time I tried something like this, Twilight and her friends saved you, did they not?”

The younger alicorn blushed. “I-I guess... but...”

“Don’t think too much about whether they can handle it or not. I have great trust in Twilight Sparkle and her companions. Besides... it doesn’t matter if they can handle it... because...” Celestia gazed over Ponyville, past the Everfree Forest, into lands far away from the boundaries of Equestria.

“They must.”

Intermission 1

“Are you feeling any better, darling?”

Rarity and Fluttershy were now in Fluttershy’s hut. Ever since they left the library, Fluttershy had been crying nonstop. She couldn’t stop thinking about how Fritter died, how the wolves used their claws to...

Fluttershy hiccupped. “... s-sorry, Rarity. B-but... *sob*”

Rarity gave the pegasus pony a loving hug. She couldn’t erase what she saw from her mind either. The scene just repeatedly played over and over again in her head, it seemed impossible to get rid of it.

“It’s alright if you need to cry, Fluttershy.” Rarity comforted. “A sight like that is absolutely dreadful to anypony after all... somepony as sensitive as you shouldn’t even have been *near* something like that...” Rarity’s body gave an involuntary shiver. “I... I must admit I’m pretty shaken up by it too...”

Fluttershy tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, but was ultimately unsuccessful. “I-I know but... *sob*... I-I just can’t stop-*hic*-thinking about how... how...”

“That’s enough, dear.” The unicorn plopped herself down on Fluttershy’s couch. “I have an idea, why don’t we have a sleepover? It’ll be lots of fun, and it’ll take our minds off of this whole thing...”

“O-oh no, I couldn’t!” Fluttershy sobbed. “I-If you sleep over... who will-*hic*-who will look after your shop?”

“It’s fine, Fluttershy!” Rarity forced a smile. “I doubt the boutique will get many customers today... not to mention this whole ordeal has sapped any creativity that might have gone into any dresses I make. No, it’ll be better for the both of us if we stick together for the night! Wouldn’t you like my company?”

Fluttershy bit her lip. “W-well... I’d like the company, but...”

"Then it's settled!!" Rarity exclaimed. "I will be sleeping over here tonight! No nasty nightmares will be plaguing you, my dear Fluttershy! Madame Rarity will drive them away with a fabulous night of makeovers!"

Fluttershy chuckled. "Thanks Rarity..."

"Don't thank me, Fluttershy." Rarity said, waving her hoof up and down. "I've been looking for an excuse to sleepover again with you again anyways! Just *imagine* all the fun we're going to have tonight! It will definitely make us forget all about what happened!"

The pegasus's small smile faded away. "Yeah... forget..."

Rarity sighed and pulled Fluttershy into another tight hug. "Dear dear Fluttershy, I don't think it's healthy to dwell so much on that... just imagine what all this stress will do to your complexion..."

"... you're right, Rarity." Fluttershy nuzzled her best friend affectionately. "If I'm so sad, I won't be able to take care of all the animals..."

"Exactly!" Rarity grinned. "Who else can take care of the animals but you, Lily?"

Fluttershy froze. "Um... what? D-did I hear you right, Rarity?"

"Hmm, did I say something strange?" Rarity tilted her head. "I only said that you were the only one who could take care of the animals, Fluttershy."

"... oh." Fluttershy let out a sigh of relief. "For a second there, I thought you called me Lily, Amethyst."

It was Rarity's turn to freeze up. "D-did you just call me Amethyst...?"

"N-no!" A look of worry spread over Fluttershy's face. "... m-maybe we were in the past too long... our minds are all muddled up..."

"Y-yes, you're right, Fluttershy!" Rarity laughed nervously. "Maybe we do need some rest after all... I'm sure we'll be all nice and refreshed after a little nap..."

The pegasus and unicorn walked upstairs into Fluttershy's room. "O-oh, I forgot that I didn't have an extra bed..."

Rarity chuckled. "Are you saying you're afraid to sleep next to me? My dear, you have *nothing* to be ashamed of! We slept together last time too! Besides... it's not like I'm Rainbow Dash or anything!"

Fluttershy giggled. "Oh Rarity... you shouldn't gossip about your friends like that, it isn't nice!"

"You agreed with me last time though!" Rarity pointed out. "Poor Rainbow Dash is just afraid to admit that she's a filly-fo—"

"That's enough already!" Fluttershy playfully tapped Rarity's shoulder. "It's always so strange to think about Rainbow Dash that way..."

"I guess we have to drop this conversation. And I was so looking forward to telling you how Rainbow Dash has a crush on Applejack..."

"Wait what?" Fluttershy's ears perked up. "Since when?"

Rarity chuckled. "Just a little playful banter, darling. Coming to bed?"

Fluttershy blushed. "You know I'm uncomfortable with those kinds of jokes..."

"I know, but you're so cute whenever you're frazzled like that!" Rarity smiled. "So coming, darling?"

"I... guess." Fluttershy shyly snuggled under the covers alongside Rarity, and the two of them faced each other in bed. "Hey Rarity...?" Fluttershy mumbled. "Thank you..."

"I'd do anything to help out my friends." Rarity responded. "Especially you, Fluttershy. Now let's get some rest before we get pimples from all this stress, okay?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Okay..."

The two ponies shut their eyes. It was a bit early to go to sleep, but Luna's night was already starting, so they might as well get some shut eye.

However, Fluttershy had a hard time getting to sleep. "... hey, Rarity?"

"What is it Fluttershy?" Rarity replied.

“... I know this is a weird question, but... can I hold you?”

Rarity couldn't help but chuckle at Fluttershy's timid request. “Why of course, dear. If you need to know that I'm right here next to you while you sleep, go ahead and do whatever you please!”

Fluttershy nodded, and scooted over next to Rarity, giving her a soft hug. The two friends drifted off to sleep in that position, taking comfort that they wouldn't be alone while they enter the land of dreams. They yawned lazily as the waking world began to drift away.

“... goodnight, Amethyst.”

“... goodnight, Lily.”

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Kcccchhhhhhhh

“Hey! Hey mom! Are ya listening? Are ya listening?!”

A light pink colored mare laughed at the small filly's abundant amount of energy. “Go ahead, Pastel.” She laughed. “Let mommy see your routine.”

Pastel Lollipop let out a huge grin and began bouncing around excitedly. “Okie dokie pony!” She inhaled a deep breath. “*Oh when you stumble and take a faaaaalll, and you think you lost it aaaaaaalll, you have your mom right there so there's no fear because... um, because...*”

Kccccchhhhhhhhhhhhhh

The mare chuckled. “Oh Pastel, do you need some help coming up with the last few words of your song?”

“Ooh, yes! Yes!” Pastel hopped around her mother. “My mommy will come up with something super fantabulous for sure!!”

Kccchh... Kccccccccccccchhhhhhhh

“Now now, don’t get too excited. After all, your old mother here has nothing on your ability to make others laugh, Pastel.” The mare put a hoof to her chin in thought. “Hmm... would it be alright if I changed up the last line a little?”

Pastel nodded happily. “Whatever mommy wants to do!!”

“Alright then, let’s see... *you have your mother here to play, so there’s no fear to say?*”

“That’s awesofantabulicious!” Pastel exclaimed. “I’m so happy to have such a fun mommy like you!” Pastel squished her face into a silly expression. “Why wub woo wunches!!”

Pastel’s mother laughed and embraced her child. “I love you too, Pastel! You’re a wonderful child...”

KCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

“DARLING NO!!”

The lifeless body of the stallion crumpled to the floor, staining his surroundings crimson. As much as the mare cried out, it was too late. The last vestiges of life had already been drained from her husband.

“Daddy... daddy!!” Pastel cried out from behind her mother. “T-this is a prank, right dad?! Y-you’re okay, right dad?!!”

“GYAHAHAHA!” The wolf laughed maniacally as he wiped the blood from his claws. “We’re gonna eat tonight, boys!!” The other two wolves in the trio laughed alongside their leader. Pastel’s mother tried her best to shield her daughter from the sight of her father’s body.

“Daddy... daddy...” Pastel sobbed. “-W-when you st-stumble and take a-a fall... *sob*... a-and you think you’ve lost it all... *hic*...”

“Is that pony singing?” One of the wolves asked. “Ha! What a time for a kid like that to be singing! Hey kid, yer father’s dead! Dead!! How d’ya feel about that?!”

Pastel began to sob harder, trying to block out the wolves’ jeering. “Y-you have your m-mother here to play... s-so... so... eek!!” The leader of the pack threw a stool at Pastel, but her mother protected her and took the blow. “M-mommy!!”

“Don’t you dare try to lay a paw on my child...” Pastel’s mother muttered.

“Ehhhhh, what was that?” A wolf jeered. “For a second there I thought you were trying to stand up for yourself? That’d be—”

Pastel’s mother kicked the stool at the wolf, the force strong enough to shatter the stool into splinters on contact with the wolf’s head. He collapsed down to the ground, unconscious, his head bleeding from the brutal blow.

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO TOUCH MY CHILD!!” Pastel’s mother flew into action at the wolves. However, the only reason the last blow connected was because the wolves’ guard was down. Now that it was up, Pastel’s mother failed to land any strikes due to the wolves’ superior agility.

The leader of the pack swiftly dodged Pastel’s mother and quickly slashed her straight down the middle with his claws, causing a cloud of blood to spurt from the mare’s wound.

“MOMMY!!” Pastel cried.

“... run Pastel. My dear, dear child... leave your mother here...”

“B-but—” One of the two wolves delivered a swift kick to the filly, sending her flying into the wall. Pastel gasped from the severity of the pain, clouding her vision. She struggled to keep her eyes open, wanting to keep her mother in her line of sight. She believed that as long as her mother was there, everything would be fine.

“Hold it!” The leader barked. “There’s no point killing the filly, she’s too small make a decent meal. Two’s more than enough for our small pack.”

The other wolf shrugged. “Whatever you say, boss.” He backed away from Pastel.

“Besides...” The leader grinned. “It’ll be more fun to see how she reacts to us tearing her mother to pieces... wouldn’t it be nice of us to leave a part of her mother behind? Like an ear? Or a hoof? I never really liked the hooves anyways, too bony...”

“... why?” Pastel’s mother coughed. “Our village isn’t even scheduled to have a Collection...”

“Oh, this isn’t an official Collection.” The leader explained. “Me and my two companions are gourmets, so we like to dine on ponies every night if we can! We’re not like the other wolves that follow the rules or whatever...”

“... violating the treaty?” The mare laughed bitterly. “Heh... the Goddess will have your heads for this...”

“You ponies and your Goddess.” The leader spat. “Haven’t you wondered? If your Goddess is supposed to be so wonderful, why does she allow wolves like us to exist? Is your family a bunch of sinners that deserve a punishment like this?”

Pastel’s mother chuckled. “Wolves like you don’t understand... I may not be alive to see it, but my daughter will be there for the Day of Ascension... the day where we ponies get to enjoy watching slime like you burn...”

The head wolf shoved his claw in the mare’s mouth and ripped her tongue out. “That’s enough out of you.” The two wolves descended on the mare.

Pastel let out a voiceless scream as she watched the two wolves torture and murder her mother. It was a memory that would be etched in the back of her memories forever, even after she recovered and was able to laugh again. When she moved away to Ponyville, the memory stayed with her, surfacing to her mind whenever a Collection was mentioned...

“Pinkie Pie? Do you have those cupcakes done yet?”

Pinkie shook her head, the voice breaking her from her strange trance. “Huh? Mrs. Cake? Oh no, I’m super duper sorry, my mind’s being all spacey!”

Mrs. Cake frowned, worried. “Are you alright Pinkie? You don’t seem to be your cheerful Pinkie Pie self today...”

“Don’t worry Mrs. Cake! I’m fine!” Pinkie lied. She didn’t want anypony to worry about her.

“... you can stop for the night, Pinkie.” Mrs. Cake responded. “It’s about time to close up shop anyways. I’ll finish preparing the dough for tomorrow’s sales, so you go on to bed, okay?”

“Oh no, I can’t do that Mrs. Cake!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. “I’d be super guilty if I made you do all the work yourself!”

“It’s no trouble at all, Pinkie.” Mrs. Cake said. “Your health is more important than sales, so why don’t you go now and get some rest.” Pinkie Pie raised her hoof in objection. “Now. It’s an order, Pinkie.”

Pinkie frowned. “Oh fine. But I’m so sorry for spacing out so much today...” Mrs. Cake just nodded in response, and Pinkie took that as her signal to leave the kitchen.

Pinkie Pie just couldn’t shake the visions from her head. For some reason, the memory of Pastel’s parent’s murders was repressed until the Collection in Ponyville happened. After Twilight stopped the spell and everypony went home... Pinkie experienced random visions of the past. It was like the spell was never fully halted and some small magic inside of her kept her connected to the past.

The pink earth pony sighed. That was no good; she couldn’t be her normal Pinkie Pie self if she was seeing such depressing visions all the time! It was almost like something was tugging at her heart, trying to drag her back to the past...

She collapsed in her bed. It would do no good to keep thinking about all this. The images were horrifying, but thankfully the gory details were usually blurred for some reason, preventing Pinkie from having to experience the full horror of the visions. She wasn’t as deeply connected either, only watching the scenes play out as a bystander and not as Pastel Lollipop herself...

Pinkie closed her eyes and fell asleep. Maybe she’d feel better in the morning.

--

“Ya alright, sis?” Applebloom asked. “Ya seem pretty outta it after ya came home from Twilight’s place...”

Applejack tiredly patted the filly on her head. “Ain’t nothin’ ta worry about.” Applejack lied. “Yer big sis is jus’ real tired from work t’day...”

“But you’ve been giving me and Big Mac such weird looks!” Applebloom pointed out. “S’ like ya were seein’ ghosts or somethin’!”

“Heh... yeah, seeing ghosts...”

For some reason, the loss of Fritter and Sundae in the past felt to Applejack as if she lost Big Macintosh and Applebloom in the present. Applejack almost broke down crying when she returned home and saw the two, but her pride prevented her from revealing her feelings.

"Yer weird, sis." Applebloom shrugged and finally left the older pony alone. Applejack watched her little sister leave her room.

That feeling of helplessness... she never wanted to feel it again. For a pony like her, not being able to do anything was the worst torture of all. The past couldn't be changed but...

"Darn it!!" Applejack slammed her hoof down on her bed. She vividly remembered how helpless she was. How she was only able to watch her family get torn apart while she stood at the sidelines, just letting it all happen...

"We're not even gonna see if we get to kick the crap out of those wolves?!"

Rainbow Dash's words echoed in Applejack's head. Of course she wanted to see punishment for those wolves... she never wished punishment on any living being more than she did now. But she was just so afraid. Afraid of having to go through that feeling of helplessness again. Afraid of having to experience losing something dear to her again.

Applejack buried her head in her pillow. She just wanted to stop thinking about the past; it wasn't any of her business after all. What happened, happened, and there's no point in diving in the past. Nothing there could be of any real use to anypony in the present...

"... don't worry 'bout it Midnight. Ah don't blame ya at all..."

Applejack blinked. For a moment she thought she heard a voice in her head. The day's events must've really taken a toll on her, she better get some rest before she goes crazy...

--

"What the heck are you doing this time at night?" Spike asked.

Twilight Sparkle was flipping through the spellbook she used to dive into the past. She tried to get some rest after her friends left... but her hunger for knowledge compelled her to continue reliving the past.

"... nothing, Spike." Twilight finally said. "Just go back to bed, okay? Little dragons like you need their sleep, don't they?"

"Don't tease me, Twilight." Spike frowned. "Are you looking through that spellbook again? Sheesh, you must've looked through it a thousand times already..."

"Only twenty-two times, Spike." Twilight corrected. "And... for some reason the book's different."

"What d'ya mean, Twilgiht?" Spike asked.

"When I first read through this book, there were a multitude of blank pages." The unicorn explained. "But now, after diving into the past with my friends, some of those blank pages has been filled up with what we experienced... it's like it's writing a novel of what we saw."

Spike sighed. "I thought that you didn't want to know about the past anymore. I thought it wasn't worth it since it was so dark..."

"I don't want to make my friends experience things like that." Twilight said flatly. "I'm perfectly fine sacrificing my innocence and cheery disposition in the pursuit of true knowledge. Although I'm sure I can handle myself well enough that these trips to the past won't have too much of a lasting effect on my psyche..."

"You lost me Twilight." Spike yawned. "Well... I can't stop you once you get like this... whatever, I'm going to bed. See you in the morning."

"Oh wait, before you go Spike, do you mind making me a pot of tea? I think it's going to be a long night for me."

Spike grumbled. "Get it yourself... I'm bushed..." He staggered back into Twilight's room to continue his sleep.

Twilight shrugged and went back to examining the spellbook. She was quickly interrupted by a knock at her door. "Ugh, what now? It's open, just come in!"

The door flung open, and Rainbow Dash flew into the room. "TWILIGHT!!" She tackled the unicorn and pinned her to the ground.

"Rainbow Dash—what're you—"

"You're going into the past again, aren't you?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Don't bother trying to worm your way out of this, I see the book on your desk!"

Twilight pushed the pegasus pony off of her and brushed the dust out of her mane. "Geez, you didn't have to tackle me..." She muttered.

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Dash said. "So are you going to do it?"

Twilight tilted her head. "Do what?"

"You know, jump into the past!" Rainbow Dash put up her hooves and pretended to punch some invisible assailant. "I want to see those wolves get what's coming to them for doing that to Cinnamon's family!"

Twilight Sparkle frowned. "... what?"

"Ugh, do I hafta spell it out for you?" The pegasus got up in Twilight's personal space. "I want in! Let me go with you so I can dish out some justice on those jerks!"

The unicorn pushed Dash away. "No Rainbow Dash. There's no reason to even believe that those wolves will get any punishment for what they did... for all we know it only gets worse from where we stopped."

"Pshh, why wouldn't justice be served?" Rainbow Dash asked. "There's a Goddess or whatever, right? Like Celestia? I know Princess Celestia wouldn't let something bad like that happen, so the Goddess should fix things up, shouldn't she?"

"... not necessarily." Twilight explained. "I don't even know if this Goddess actually exists..."

"Ugh, stop being such a worrywart, Twilight!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "I'm sure everything will work out fine in the end!"

“THIS IS NOT A GAME RAINBOW DASH!!” The blue pegasus recoiled from Twilight’s sudden outburst. “Listen Dash... I know you mean well, but I don’t want you or any of my friends to have to see something so horrible ever again...”

“But you’re going into the past!!” Rainbow Dash argued. “Doesn’t that mean that you might have to see that stuff?”

“It’s fine if it’s me.” Twilight said quietly.

Rainbow Dash frowned. “So you’re saying that it’s totally fine if you’re messed up, as long as the rest of us are totally fine?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Twilight stated.

“Like your friends would be fine with that!!” Dash yelled. “Look Twilight, we’re just as worried about you as you are about us, and there’s no way I’m just going to sit back and let my friend go into dangerous territory by herself!”

Twilight was touched by Rainbow Dash’s gesture of friendship, but she still shook her head. “I want to avoid any unnecessary casualties if I can... besides, it’s not like anything permanent will happen to me if I go by myself. When I come back, I’ll still be good ol’ Twilight Sparkle.”

“Exactly.” Rainbow Dash smiled triumphantly.

“... what exactly?”

“‘When I come back, I’ll still be good ol’ Twilight Sparkle.’ That applies to me too!!” Dash pointed out.

Twilight facehooved. “Gah, don’t use my own logic against me!”

“Why not?” Dash frowned. “If I go in with you, I’ll still be myself when I come out. I’m making my own choice to follow you despite anything bad we might see in there, so can’t you respect my choice and let me in?”

Twilight Sparkle let out a deep sigh. “... fine. But only because you’re so persistent.”

“Awesome!” Rainbow Dash clopped her hooves together. “So are we going now? Are we?”

“... I guess.” Twilight opened up the spellbook. “You sure you want to go with me, Rainbow Dash? I don’t think it’ll be pretty...”

“Tch, I already told you, Twilight!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “Now stop messing around and do it already!”

Twilight smiled. To be honest, she was apprehensive of jumping in the past by herself. Now that she knew that she wouldn’t be alone in her journey... it lifted some of the burden she felt on her back.

Twilight Sparkle began to concentrate her magic. Before she cast the spell, her thoughts turned to her friends. She hoped they were alright... they were probably all sleeping right now anyways. She’d feel absolutely awful if they experienced nightmares because of what they saw...

“Cast it already, Twilight!” Rainbow Dash said impatiently.

“Alright, alright!” Twilight chanted the spell in her mind and felt the magic wash over her consciousness. As the library began to fade away, she saw Rainbow Dash have the same drowsy expression on her face as her consciousness began to drift away too.

Together, they stepped back into the past, where their ancestors’ stories were waiting for them.

Session 5

Midnight Star kicked open the door to the library and promptly shut it upon entry. Amethyst did an incredibly good job cleaning up the place, but Midnight ceased to notice the neatness of her surroundings. All she wanted to do right now was to block the rest of the world from her thoughts, to give herself the time she needed to repress what she just saw.

She plopped herself down on her bed. Why did something like this have to happen upon her arrival to Ponyville? King Themis and Queen Ambrosia assured her that there was no plausible chance of a Collection occurring... but it seemed fate decided to interfere and overturn their predictions. Midnight sighed and turned upwards, as if she was looking past the ceiling, past the stars...

"Oh sacred Goddess..." She whispered. "As your humble servant I call upon you..."

It was at times like these that a pony was supposed to pray to the Goddess. To pray for the safe passing of the ones who were lost to the Collection. The communication with the Goddess allowed the renewal of faith in a pony's spirit, a crutch to allow a pony to continue living despite the pain the world constantly inflicts. Without the Goddess's blessing, it was believed that the ponies would lose their protection, and be cast directly into the jaws of their predators. Simply put, it was the ponies' belief in the Goddess that allowed them to continue living.

Midnight solemnly clopped her hooves together and finished off the last line of her prayer.

"Quid sit futurum cras, fuge quaerere. Non omnis moriar."

As the last line left her lips, she felt a numbing sensation travel through her body. She could feel the Goddess's magic wash over her, cleansing Midnight's soul of its sin and regret. The burden of the previous events began to lighten, as the gruesome details began to blur and fade away from her memory. After a few moments, Midnight could no longer vividly picture the scene that transpired. It wasn't like the spell completely wiped her memory; it only softened it and made it more bearable to stomach.

It was a strange sort of magic that the prayer invoked. Midnight once read that magic existed inside everypony, but it was impossible to manifest without the assistance of the Goddess. This prayer allowed for the Goddess to pull out the latent magic needed to heal the pony's spirit.

As soon as she felt the magic leave her body, Midnight collapsed on her bed. She did nothing but listen to the silence of Ponyville. Everypony was probably saying their prayers too, it was custom to do so after a Collection after all...

Midnight felt her consciousness drift away. Prayers always inflicted a strange trancelike state after invoking them, and this time was no different. The unicorn began to slowly drift off to sleep, allowing the sweet comfort of dreams to overtake her...

--

Midnight awoke to the harsh sound of knocking in the morning. She struggled to get herself out of bed to answer the door, her drowsiness refusing to leave. "Ugh... I'm coming!" The unicorn called out. Times like these she wished she could have some assistant to do stuff like this for her...

She opened the door, and saw an unfamiliar pegasus pony in front of her. "Can I help you?" Midnight asked.

"Yeah." The pegasus rummaged through his saddlebags and pulled out a scroll. "I got a letter for you. It's from the castle, arrived a few minutes ago."

"Oh... thanks." Midnight took the scroll from the messenger pony and undid the seal.

"..."

The pegasus's stare sent a shiver up Midnight's spine. "... can I help you with anything else?"

"... no. That's all." He shot Midnight one last look and promptly departed, leaving the unicorn by herself.

"Okay..." Midnight opened up the scroll and was greeted by the familiar ornate handwriting of Princess Celestia.

Dear Midnight Star,

Luna and I heard about the Collection down in Ponyville. We were absolutely horrified when the news reached the castle. I do hope that you're safe and sound, and that those wolves didn't do anything to you. Goodness knows what we'd do if anything happened to you...

Mother and father have asked us to send you their worries and apologies as well. They also wanted me to tell you how the Collection was completely unexpected, and how they are looking into the matter. We may not be able to do anything to punish the wolves for their sudden assault on Ponyville, but rest assured we can punish the corrupt few who pushed their misfortunes and responsibilities onto another village.

Luna wants to say something to you too, so I'm passing it to her now.

The handwriting became somewhat messier at this point, reflecting Luna's distinct messy style.

Oh Midnight I hope your okay! I really miss you, you know. Umm... what else can I write here... I'm hoping you can come back home after this! I don't think I can spend another day with Celly by herself! She's soooooooo boringggg! And there's nothing to do around here without you! And... um... I don't really know what else I can write... I hope everypony in Ponyville is treating you nicely! And... um...

The style shifted back into Celestia's more formal tone.

I'm afraid dear Luna's at a loss for words. There's not much else I we need to say to you, only that our love and prayers are with you. I hope mother and father will let you come home after this event, I feel you need to recuperate back at home where you belong. I'll send another letter once mother and father agree to bring you home.

*May you have the Goddess's eternal blessing,
Princess Celestia, Princess Luna*

Right under this, a hastily scribbled note was attached.

*I'm sorry Midnight. They want you to stay in Ponyville. I don't know what they're thinking, but I'll try my best to convince them otherwise.
-Celestia*

The correspondence from her sisters was nice, but Midnight really didn't want to stay in Ponyville anymore. She just wanted to get some rest and relaxation at home...

Midnight sighed. She supposed there was no helping it. If she was to stay in Ponyville for now, she might as well enjoy it the best she can. And what better way to start off the day than with some breakfast?

The unicorn stepped out of the library and headed to Sugar Cane Corner. Since they offered a free first pastry every day, Midnight might as well save herself some bits.

The unicorn left the library and began trotting to the bakery. She noticed that most of Ponyville was already awake, albeit downcast from the Collection. None of the ponies greeted her good morning like they did yesterday, but Midnight decided not to pay too much attention to the fact. It was only natural that everypony wouldn't be chipper the day after a Collection.

Midnight pushed open the door to Sugar Cane Corner. "Hello? Pastel? You in here?"

Strangely enough, the pink earth pony was nowhere to be seen. In her place was an older pony, most likely the proprietor of the bakery.

"I'm sorry, Pastel's taking the day off." The pony said. "I'm Mr. Toffee, the owner of this business."

"Oh... nice to meet you." Midnight browsed the shelves for something to eat. "Well... um, may I have a croissant? Those look good."

"Certainly." Mr. Toffee quickly got one a croissant from the shelf and placed it a small bag. "That will be 12 bits."

"12... wait," Midnight tilted her head in confusion. "I thought the first baked good of each day was free?"

"Erm, did Pastel tell you that? Well... uh, the offer's only available early in the morning, when we're still setting up shop." The stallion coughed. "I apologize for the misunderstanding, but you'll have to pay 12 bits."

"Okay... this is a business after all..." Midnight rummaged through her saddlebags and brought out a mouthful of bits. "There. I hope that's enough."

Mr. Toffee quickly counted the money. "Hmm... yes, that's enough." He pushed back a few coins towards Midnight. "There's your change, ma'am. Have a nice day."

Midnight picked up the bag with the croissant and placed it in her bag. "You too, sir." She moved over to leave when...

"Oy, Mr. Toffee!" Skyline threw open the door before Midnight could leave, catching the unicorn by surprise. "Can I get an apple cupcake? I don't think I used up my free pastry yet! I need another one for Cinnamon too!"

"Oh, Skyline! Uhh..." Mr. Toffee glanced nervously at Midnight.

The unicorn stared at the stallion in curiosity for a moment before it dawned on her. She awkwardly began to back away.

"Oh hey Midnight." Skyline said, oblivious of the mood that befell the bakery. "Here to get your free breakfast?"

"... I was just leaving." Midnight mumbled. She pushed open the door and ran out before Skyline could get out another word.

"Is she alright?" Skyline asked Mr. Toffee.

The bakery owner sighed. "It's nothing, Skyline... so two apple cupcakes, was it? Right away."

--

Midnight could suddenly feel the prodding eyes of everypony upon her upon leaving the bakery. She didn't notice it earlier, but after the way Mr. Toffee treated her... it was obvious. The way everypony's eyes no longer contained the sparkle of curiosity and friendship that they held the day before. The way they abstained from greeting Midnight this morning that completely clashed with the previously cordial atmosphere of Ponyville.

They now looked upon Midnight with contempt.

As she traversed the streets of Ponyville to get back to the library, everypony avoided making eye contact the best they could. Whenever Midnight darted her eyes around,

the other ponies quickly averted their gazes in an attempt to hide the fact that they were staring at her.

Midnight was so preoccupied with their gazes that she accidentally bumped into somepony. She stumbled and quickly turned to the pony she ran into, a young earth-dyed colt, and apologized profusely.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you!" Midnight said, quickly bowing her head. "Are you alright? I really didn't mean to knock into you like that!"

The colt brushed himself and turned to Midnight. "No, I wasn't paying attention, it's my f—" The colt suddenly froze upon recognizing Midnight. His apologetic manner suddenly shifted into rage. "You!!"

Midnight recoiled from the colt's sudden shout. "Y-yes? C-can I help you?"

The colt kicked Midnight, knocking her onto the ground. "It's your fault that the Collection happened! It's your fault it's your fault it's your fault!!"

With each accusation, the colt landed another blow on the unicorn. Midnight was so shocked that she couldn't quickly react to the situation. Each blow the colt laid on her was thrown sloppily, and didn't really do that much damage to Midnight at all. But the psychological damage of having somepony randomly attack her kept her from throwing him off.

What made it worse was that a small crowd had gathered around the scuffle. Yet no pony was doing anything to help Midnight. It was like they felt that she deserved what she was getting.

"S-stop it!!" Midnight was on the verge of tears as she yelled this, but the colt refused to take any notice of her objection.

"You led those wolves here!" He yelled frantically. "Everything was fine before you came along!! Bring them back! Bring them back!!"

"H-HEY!!"

Midnight could feel the colt being quickly lifted off of her, but her mind took a few moments to register the fact that she was unpinned.

“Let me go! I SAID LET ME GO!!” The colt was struggling frantically to get past his assailant.

“L-Lily, i-is that you?” Midnight asked, finally recognizing the pony who rescued her.

Lily Blossom nodded before diverting her attention back to the colt. “I-I’m sorry, but violence is wrong! What do you think you’re doing attacking poor Midnight like that?”

“It’s her fault...” The colt muttered, still trying to break free from Lily’s hold. “IT’S HER FAULT MY PARENTS ARE GONE!!”

Midnight finally understood why this colt attacked her. His parents must’ve been the stallion and mare that were taken during the Collection... She started to back away from the colt, feeling as if the words he was saying really were true. That it really was her fault.

“I-I said calm down!! Ah—!!” The colt finally broke away from Lily, knocking her to the ground. However, this time, one of the stallions who was watching restrained the colt before he got to Midnight.

“Hey! That’s far enough!!” He yelled “Lily didn’t do anything wrong to you!!”

That was the last straw. The ponies in Ponyville didn’t care about Midnight at all. They saw her as an interesting newcomer when she first arrived, but now they blamed the Collection on her arrival. After all, no Collection happened in almost twenty-five years, so since one happened almost immediately after Midnight arrived...

She couldn’t take it anymore. Midnight turned tail and ran. Ran away from the crowd that looked down on her very existence.

“H-hey, Midnight!!”

Whoever called out her name, Midnight didn’t even hear. She just wanted to get away. To go back home where she knew that there were ponies who cared about her. To escape the sight of everypony who blamed her.

She threw open the library door and quickly shut it behind her. Midnight couldn’t stand another pair of prying eyes lingering on her for another second longer. She sighed and laid her saddlebags aside as the adrenaline left her body. The croissant in her bags briefly crossed her mind for a moment, but she lost her appetite from what happened.

"Midnight? What are you doing looking so frazzled like that?"

The unicorn jumped. She didn't notice that somepony else was in the room with her. Amethyst was standing in front of Midnight, giving her a quizzical look.

"Oh... it's you Amethyst..." Midnight muttered.

"Why of course it's me, darling!" The other unicorn exclaimed. "I *am* supposed to take care of you during your stay in Ponyville after all! Is something the matter dear? You don't look so good."

Midnight bit her lip. The only reason Amethyst was acting concerned was because it was her job to be. She was probably like everypony else, wanting nothing but for her to leave Ponyville. "I'm fine... don't worry about it."

"My dear, you do *not* look fine." Amethyst stated. "Just look at your mane, it's so *tangled*! And look at your coat, simply *filthy*! There's no way somepony in such a state could be fine!" She put a hoof around Midnight. "Now tell me darling, what's wrong?"

Midnight quickly pushed the other unicorn's hoof away from her. The last thing she wanted was Amethyst's false pity. "I told you I'm fine! Now if you would just leave me alone for a bit..."

"You are *not* fine." Amethyst stated again. "I know what fine looks like, and rest assured, you do not look fine at all."

"J-Just, shut up!!" Midnight screamed. "Go away!! I don't want you in here, get it?!"

Amethyst was taken aback by Midnight's outburst. "Midnight dear... what's wrong? Surely there must be something I can do to make you feel better..."

"I told you, you can get out!!" Midnight shouted. "I-I can't stand it! The way everypony's looking at me! The way they hate me!!"

"Hate?" Amethyst tilted her head. "Why, I don't see how anypony could hate you, Midnight Star."

"I know you're just trying to comfort me because it's your job!" Midnight spat. "Admit it, you hate me just like everypony else! You blame me for the Collection!!"

“How dare you accuse me of something as petty as that!?” Amethyst finally yelled back. “If there’s one thing I don’t appreciate, it’s false accusations! Have I ever done anything to make you even *think* that I’ve held something against you?”

Midnight tried her best to hold back her tears. She knew her accusations were baseless, but the words just spilled out of her. “I-I...”

Amethyst bit her lip. “I’m sorry darling... I didn’t mean to yell at you. But I just hate it when people accuse me of something I’m not...” The white unicorn once again put a hoof on Midnight’s shoulder. “Listen dear, I’m not going to push you anymore if you don’t want me to. But believe me when I say I really do believe that we can be friends.”

Midnight tiredly gazed at Amethyst in response. She didn’t want any friends. She just wanted to be left alone...

The entrance to the library was thrown open once again, and Lily Blossom quickly made her way into the room. She stopped upon seeing Amethyst and Midnight.

“Oh... I’m sorry, was I interrupting something?” Lily asked shyly.

Amethyst shook her head. “No Lily, it’s quite alright. Midnight here’s just feeling a bit down, you see?”

“Oh... I know...” Lily timidly trotted up to Midnight. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you sooner Midnight... you must be so shocked...”

“Earlier?” Amethyst hesitated as she turned to Midnight.

“... I was attacked by somepony.” Midnight admitted to the other unicorn. “A young colt. He blamed me for the Collection...”

“Well that’s just unreasonable!” Amethyst exclaimed. “I don’t see why he would attack you based on such an assumption, the nerve of that charlatan!”

“... the other two ponies that were taken away yesterday were his parents.” Lily mumbled. “I feel so sorry for him... left all by himself...”

“Oh...” Amethyst regretted her earlier comment. “Well that’s still no excuse to harm young Midnight here!”

“... nopony came to help me.” Midnight muttered. “They... just looked at me as if I deserved it...”

“They’re just being judgmental meanies!” Lily exclaimed. “Oh, I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to yell like that...” She gave Midnight an affectionate nuzzle. “Midnight... please don’t hate him for what he did. He’s only a colt...”

“I wasn’t planning to.” Midnight sighed. “I just wanna go home...”

“So soon?” Amethyst asked. “Well, I can see why you’d want to leave after what happened, but didn’t you want to come here in the first place? It’d be great if we could clear up this misunderstanding and you can stay here like you planned.”

“... the king and queen are the ones who sent me here.” Midnight mumbled. “It’s supposed to be training for becoming Princess Celestia’s and Princess Luna’s advisor... and they want me to stay in Ponyville despite what just happened...”

Amethyst frowned. “Isn’t that a tad unreasonable? You should have a final say on what to do with your life, not them. Even if they are the King and Queen.”

“... I can’t.” Midnight said softly.

“What are you muttering about now, Midnight?” Amethyst asked.

“O-oh, nothing!” Midnight bit her lip before continuing. “It’s just... you see, I’m being raised for the specific purpose of becoming the Princesses’ advisor, so I can properly guide them on the Day of Ascension. That’s the day all we ponies live for, right? The day we’re all looking forward to?”

“Yeah, I guess...” Amethyst said reluctantly.

“So I can’t shirk my responsibilities and let everypony down, can I?” Midnight asked. “If I do, Princess Celestia and Luna can’t lead us to paradise.”

Amethyst sighed. “Oh, I guess. But you’re happiness is important, isn’t it?”

Midnight smiled awkwardly. “Y-yeah! The Day of Ascension will make everypony happy...” Her voice trailed off midsentence.

“Um, Midnight?” Lily mumbled. “Are you okay?”

“Huh?” Midnight snapped back to reality. “Y-yeah... I think I’m fine now...” She smiled at the two ponies in front of her. “I know I’ve been kind of distant but... thank you two. I forgot why I was sent here... to make some friends.”

Lily smiled brightly. “Oh Midnight, I’m so glad that you think of us as your friends!”

However, Amethyst was a bit thrown off by the random admission of friendship “... I still think you’re hiding something from us, darling.” She muttered. Midnight opened her mouth to object, but Amethyst held up a hoof. “Wait, I’m not going to press you any further. What’s important to us right now is that you’re happy, isn’t that right, Lily?”

“... um, yes.” Lily bowed her head shyly.

“Whatever you don’t want us to know is your business.” Amethyst continued. “And I’m sure you have your reasons for hiding whatever it is you’re hiding. But believe me when I say this,” A soft smile emerged. “Lily and I mean it when we say we’re your friends. So don’t undermine that, okay?”

Midnight hesitated. “... okay.”

Amethyst nodded. “Good. Now, I don’t believe you’ve eaten breakfast have you? If you’d like, Lily and I could fix you a little something up quickly, so—”

Knock knock.

The quick knock on the door interrupted Amethyst’s offer. The white unicorn frowned.

“I’ll get it!” Lily said. She trotted over to the door and opened it up. “Hello? Oh, Cinnamon! Can I help you?”

Midnight grimaced and tried to make herself smaller as the blonde pony entered the library. Cinnamon saw her at once and began to briskly trot over to her.

Amethyst felt that something was off. She quickly stepped in-between Midnight and Cinnamon before the latter could get to the former.

“Hey, what’re ya doin’, Ame?” Cinnamon asked, annoyed. “Git outta mah way, will ya? Ah’ve got important business ta take care of!”

Skyline came zipping into the library, knocking over Lily. "Oh, sorry Lily!" She landed right next to the earth pony and harshly pulled her tail. "Yo Cinnamon, what d'you think you're doing?!"

"Shut it, Skyline!" Cinnamon shouted. "Ah told ya ah'm not gonna back down on this!"

"What is going on?!" Amethyst yelled. "I demand for you to explain yourself, Cinnamon!"

"None-a yer business, Ame!" Cinnamon tried to get around the unicorn, but Amethyst was determined to not letting her pass. Cinnamon stomped a hoof in frustration. "Would ya jus' git outta mah way?!"

"Not until you explain to me what you want with Midnight!" Amethyst responded.

"Listen Cinnamon," Skyline interrupted. "I know much this whole Collection thing's affected you, but you need to cool down now!"

"H-hey...?" Lily tried to interject. "W-what's going on...? Why do you look so scary, Cinnamon...?"

"She's gone crazy!" Skyline yelped. "Seriously, the stupidest idea got in her head and now I'm trying to stop her from doing something she'll regret!!"

"Ah don't care if ah've gone crazy!!" Cinnamon retorted. "Now lookit here, Ame, yer mah friend an' all, but if ya don't git outta mah way, ah'm gonna hafta make you!"

"Oh yeah?" Amethyst stomped her hoof. "I'd like to see you try!"

"WAIT!!" Midnight shouted. The other ponies paused and waited to see what Midnight had to say. She gulped and turned to the frenetic earth pony. "Cinnamon... what do you want with me?"

Apple Cinnamon let out a sad sigh and looked Midnight Star directly in the eye. "Listen Midnight... about the Collection... ah know what everypony's sayin' about it. But don't worry 'bout it Midnight. Ah don't blame ya at all." She put a hoof on Midnight's shoulder to emphasize her words.

Skyline let out a sigh of relief. "Phew, you're not going to say what you were going to do after all."

Cinnamon gave a sad chuckle in response. "Sorry, but ah don't really got any other choice." She turned to Midnight. "Listen sugarcube, forgive me fer what ah'm about ta do."

Skyline froze. "Oh no, you're not telling me you're seriously about to—"

Thump.

The hoof that was placed on Midnight's shoulder suddenly twisted and found its way into her gut. A dizzying sensation overtook Midnight as she collapsed onto the floor, her stomach about to empty its contents. She was lucky she didn't eat that croissant.

From faraway, she could hear Amethyst's and Lily's frantic yells as she felt herself be lifted up. There was a lot of commotion going on... Midnight thought she saw Skyline tackle Amethyst, but she felt that couldn't be sure of anything in her state...

Wind suddenly started blowing by her. From what she could tell, she was being taken away, but to where, she couldn't say. A small voice whispered its way into Midnight's ear...

"Sorry 'bout this, but it's the only way."

With those words, Midnight felt her consciousness drift away into nothingness.

Session 6

Sundae's abduction left Cinnamon absolutely crushed. The wolves left Ponyville shortly after they made an example of Fritter, taking Sundae alongside the other stallion and mare away with them. While most of the crowd dispersed quickly afterwards, Cinnamon was still reeling from shock.

"Hey... are you alright, Cinnamon?" Lily asked.

The pegasus's words barely registered in Cinnamon's mind. She couldn't stop thinking about how those wolves tore Fritter apart...

Cinnamon reeled, trying to keep herself from vomiting. The images were still fresh in her mind, threatening to tear apart her sanity.

"Hey, Cinnamon?" An elder member of the Apple family approached the frozen earth pony. "We're gonna be headin' back to the farm. Ya comin' with us?"

"... that it?" Cinnamon responded blankly. "Fritter and Sundae are gone and that's all ya have ta say?"

The elder pony smacked Cinnamon across the head. "Don't talk ta yer elders like that! Believe me when ah say that it's not worth it ta dwell on what goes on in Collections!"

Midnight tried to intervene, but Skyline held her back. "Hey... why don't we all go home? This is between Cinnamon and her family..." The unicorn hesitated, but decided to follow Skyline's advice. She made her way back to the library, while Amethyst helped Pastel up and went on her way to bring her home. Skyline gave one last look at her friend before slowly gliding away from her, leaving Cinnamon and the rest of the Apples alone in the village square.

"See now, Cinnamon?" The elder asked. "Everypony else is headed home, so let's go, alright?"

"... there's no way ah'm gonna jus' let this go."

“What was that, Cinnamon?” The elder looked down sternly upon the orange pony.

“There’s no way ah’m gonna jus’ let this go!!” Cinnamon yelled. “Ah don’t see how ya can either! Fritter and Sundae were jus’ taken away from us! Are ya so heartless that ya jus’ wanna forget about them and go about or merry lives?!”

The elder hit Cinnamon once again. “Ah told ya not ta talk to yer elders like that!”

“Ah’ll talk ta my elders however ah darn well please!” Cinnamon huffed. “Listen here, Fritter might be dead, but Sundae’s still gotta chance!”

For a third time, Cinnamon was struck again. “Don’t ya be talkin’ as if Sundae has a chance!” The elder shouted tearfully. “If ya go chargin’ at them wolves in an attempt ta rescue Sundae, the only thing you’ll get accomplished is gettin’ yer life taken away from ya!”

“Ya don’t know until ya try!!”

“AH HAVE TRIED!!” Cinnamon quieted down after the elder’s outburst. “Ah have... a long time ago...” He stared off into the distance. “Listen here, Cinnamon. Ah’ve lived long enough ta know at least one thing. Sometimes ya jus’ can’t be fightin’ what’s goin’ on around ya. Ya just gotta let things happen as they happen, y’see?”

“... ah don’t like the idea of havin’ fate decide things fer me.” Cinnamon replied. “Ya can keep yer advice, ah’m not givin’ up.”

The elder pony threw his hooves up in the air. “Ferget it, there’s no arguin’ with this one. Stubborn as a mule.” He gestured to the rest of the Apple family. “Alright, jus’ leave Cinnamon by herself. She’ll get some common sense in her soon enough.”

The Apple family made their way out of the village square, leaving Cinnamon all by her lonesome. Some of the members were hesitant to leave Cinnamon by herself, but eventually everypony went away.

Cinnamon kicked angrily at the air. “DANGIT!!” She called to nopony in particular. “Why’d somethin’ like this hafta happen...”

“I’m sorry, Cinnamon.” Skyline came gliding down next to the earth pony. “I saw the whole thing. I wouldn’t leave you hangin’ after all...”

“Ah knew, Skyline. Yer always stickin’ yer nose into business that ain’t yers after all...”

Skyline chuckled. “You know me best after all.” The two ponies stood in silence for a couple moments. “Hey Cinnamon...” Skyline said. “You do know I always got your back, right?”

Cinnamon nodded. “Yeah, ya’ve told me somethin’ similar before. Why ya bringin’ it up?”

“Well... if you wanted to go rescue Sundae, I want you to know that I’ll help you out in whatever way I can.” Skyline pumped her hoof. “After all, that old fart doesn’t know anything! Maybe his old bones can’t do a rescue vision, but fresh young ponies like us can tackle anything, right?”

“... ya know Skyline, I really ‘preciate it.” Cinnamon nuzzled her best friend. “But ah gotta tell ya somethin’, ah don’t think brute force would really work on them wolves... if it did, then we would’ve just laid out a whoopin’ on ‘em durin’ their Collection.”

Skyline frowned. “Well what do you propose we do?”

“Ah’ll think o’ somethin’, sugarcube.” Cinnamon assured. “Actually, ah might already have an idea...”

“Ooh, what is it?” Skyline asked enthusiastically.

“... ah need a bit more time to think about it.” Cinnamon told her. “If we’re gonna be doin’ somethin’ as risky as this, ah gotta make sure ah think things through properly...”

“Well I trust you, Cinnamon.” Skyline held up her hoof.

Cinnamon chuckled and smacked her hoof against Skyline’s. “Ya know Skyline... yer a great friend.”

“Yeah yeah, tell me something I don’t know!” Skyline laughed.

“Heh heh...” Cinnamon gazed off into the distance. “Ya know, the world’s come crashin’ down on us, and here we are, laughin’.”

Skyline grinned. “I know, we must be crazy, huh?”

“Jus’ a bit.” Cinnamon stretched out her hooves. “Ah jus’ can’t sit still and cry like a li’l filly when there’re things that need ta be done. And neither can you. Prob’ly why were such great friends.”

“You know it!” Skyline agreed. “So... do you mind letting me in on some details now? I don’t think I can exactly wait until morning...”

Cinnamon guiltily hoofed at the ground. “Well... ta be honest... it’s kinda risky... and it kinda involves trickin’ our friends...”

--

“IF YA’LL TRY TA FOLLOW ME, AH’LL KILL HER RIGHT NOW!!”

Cinnamon had the unconscious Midnight in her grasp, and was backing away towards the library entrance. The other ponies looked on in horror, and Skyline was still hesitating to go along with the plan. Cinnamon shot a look to her, forcing Skyline to regain her composure.

Amethyst and Lily were at a loss as to what to do. “What in the Goddess’s name are you doing, Cinnamon!?” Amethyst shrieked.

Cinnamon felt bad for tricking them in such a way, but it was necessary to keep them safe. In order for this plan to work, it’s important to make everypony think they were genuine in their intentions. Cinnamon took a deep breath before revealing her purpose for kidnapping Midnight.

“Ah’m gonna trade her fer Sundae.”

“W-what are you talking about?” Lily squeaked. “Y-you don’t know what they’re going to do to her!”

“Ah don’t care what they do ta her.” Cinnamon said, trying to play the part. “All ah want is mah sister back.” She kicked open the door. “Now none of ya follow me. Ah’m goin’ ta places where ya’ll best be stayin’ out of. If ya’ll follow me, ah’ll... uh, ah’ll kill Midnight on the spot!” She galloped away from the library with Midnight on her back.

Lily moved to follow her, but Skyline held up a hoof to stop them. “You guys stay here, I’m the only pony fast enough to catch up to her!”

“B-but, Skyline!” Lily objected.

Skyline dramatically raised up a hoof. “It’s no use trying to argue against me, Lily! Every second is another second that Cinnamon’s using to get further away from Ponyville!” She opened up her wings, making sure everypony inside and out of the library would notice. “Don’t worry Midnight!” She boomed. “I’m coming to save you!!”

“Hold it right there, Skyline!” Amethyst bit back on Skyline’s tail, preventing her from flying off. “There’s something fishy going on here... You tell me what’s going on with Cinnamon right now.”

“W-what?” Skyline stuttered. “Obviously she’s lost her mind! And I need to catch her, so let go of me!!”

Amethyst gave Skyline a stern look. “I know Cinnamon just as well as you do, Skyline, and I know that she’d never pull off something like this. So tell me. Right. Now.”

Skyline nervously bit her lip. If there was one thing she was afraid of, it was being chewed out by Amethyst. “Listen... this is just something we’ve gotta do, okay, Ame? So... just play along for now. It has to be as convincing as possible. And uh,” She gestured towards Lily. “Lily can’t act, so don’t tell her anything just yet.”

Amethyst frowned, and let out a small sigh. “Very well... if you must...” She put a hoof to her head. “Oh Skyline, please go and catch her!” Amethyst bellowed overdramatically. “You’re the only pony who can save poor Midnight! Just think about what poor Princess Celestia and Princess Luna would do if harm were to befall her!”

Skyline showed a small smile to Amethyst. “Thanks, Ame.” She rose up and spread her wings once again. “Hear me, Ponyville! I will bring back Cinnamon and Midnight, whatever it takes!!” She flew off in Cinnamon’s direction, leaving everypony around the library to view the scene in bewilderment.

“Oh...” Lily paced back and forth nervously. “I do hope they’ll be okay... goodness, what’s come over Cinnamon, doing this to poor Midnight...”

Amethyst was about to tell Lily that Skyline and Cinnamon apparently staged all this, but she then noticed all the eyes and ears of Ponyville were open to the situation occurring at the moment. She tiredly shook her head. She could tell Lily about it later.

--

Skyline finally caught up to Cinnamon on the far outskirts of Ponyville, where Cinnamon was looking over Midnight's unconscious body. "Geez, I think we were laying out the ham pretty thick there." Skyline commented.

Cinnamon shrugged. "The bigger the show, the more likely it is ta catch the attention of everypony." She looked back in the direction of Ponyville. "Ya know... now that ah think of it, ah don't see why ah didn't think o' tellin' Amethyst about our plan. I can see why we wouldn't tell Lily or Pastel, but Ame's a mighty fine actress."

"You tell me, you're the one who had the night to think about it." Skyline kicked back her hooves. "Besides, I was still pretty on the fence about this whole plan until you actually carried it out. I mean, look!" The pegasus held her hooves out towards Midnight. "You seriously knocked her out!"

"It couldn't be helped!" Cinnamon exclaimed. "Look, ah feel kinda guilty 'bout it too, but ah don't know if Midnight'd go along with our crazy plan. This was the quickest way after all."

Skyline shrugged. "Whatever you say. By the way, Amethyst figured it out before I chased after you. She's too sly to be tricked by such amateur actors like us two."

"Nothin' gets past that pony, huh?" Cinnamon chuckled. "Ah guess ya didn't need ta leave her the note then, didja?"

"All that preparation for nothing!" Skyline whined. "Those secret directions! Those neat little puzzles! Ugh, such a waste of time!"

"Well we did get ta stretch out our grey matter a bit." Cinnamon shrugged. "Anyways, enough about them li'l diversions, ah think it's about time we get goin'. If we stick around here any longer the Apple family might come lookin' fer me."

"Yeah... about that..." Skyline hesitated. "Isn't that a bit much? Leaving without saying a word to them? They'll think you're a criminal for doing this after all!"

Cinnamon bit her lip. "It's fer the best... if they were in on it, then things will quickly go down south if we fail. With the way we've done things, worst case scenario is only that the two of us'll go down."

"And not Midnight?" Skyline asked.

Cinnamon pondered over the question for a moment. "... that's the worst worst case scenario. That all three o' us go down." The earth pony bent down and straightened up a loose piece of hair on Midnight's mane. "Ah have no intention of puttin' Midnight in any actual danger."

"Ironical you say that after knocking her out." Skyline joked.

"Shut up, Skyline!" Cinnamon laughed. "C'mon, enough chitter chatter. Let's get goin'."

"Aye aye, boss!" Skyline saluted mockingly. The two ponies began trotting off towards the east, on the path to rescuing Apple Sundae.

--

Midnight felt as if she was gliding with the way the ground was flying away beneath her. It was strange, waking up to this sensation, and even stranger still when she recalled what happened before she lost consciousness.

The ground suddenly stopped flowing away beneath her. "Oh look," A voice said. "It looks like our little princess is awake."

Midnight quickly threw herself off of her kidnapper's back, steeling herself for combat. Midnight has read self-defense books before as part of her training, as somepony close to the royal family would need to know how to protect herself. But she never thought she'd actually have to use the skills she learned from reading!

How did it go again in "The Egghead's Guide to Self-Defense?" Uh, brace her hooves, point your horn out menacingly, be ready to run away screaming at the earliest opportunity...

"... um, sugarcube? What're ya doin'?"

"Kidnapper!!" Midnight squealed. "Stay away, I know how to use this thing!!" She waved her head back and forth as if she forgot that unicorn horns did little for actual self-defense... it was only for posturing, really.

Skyline appeared from what seemed like nowhere and put her hoof around Midnight. "Whip your mane back and forth, whip your mane back and forth. Seriously, Midnight, what're you doing?"

The unicorn quickly backed away from the pegasus. "S-Skyline, you're in league with her too?!"

"Well duh," Skyline said, sticking her tongue out. "Cinnamon's my best gal after all."

"Now Midnight." Cinnamon said cautiously. "I want ya ta calm down a minute and listen ta me..." She slowly reached over to Midnight to try to calm her down."

"Oh my Goddess!" Midnight screeched. "RAPE! RAPE!!"

Cinnamon blushed at the accusation of rape. "W-what are ya talkin' about?! Ah ain't no filly-fooler!"

"That's what my book said a sexual deviant would say to me!" Midnight said frantically. "It also said if that if somepony tried to touch my private place, I need to call an adult!"

"This is just getting ridiculous." Skyline commented. "What are ya Midnight, a filly?"

"Fer goodness sakes just calm down, Midnight!!" Cinnamon stomped her hoof. "We ain't gonna do anythin' to ya!!"

Midnight finally broke out of her hysterics. "O-oh... yeah... s-sorry... it's kind of surprising, you know? Waking up after being..." She suddenly stiffened and brought back up her guard, this time minus the hysterics. "Cinnamon, what did you do to me? And how long was I out."

"Erm... about three hours..."

"THREE HOURS?!" Midnight shouted.

"Uh, yeah..." Cinnamon shuffled her hooves sheepishly. "Ah'm sorry fer knockin' ya out, Midnight, but ah had ta do it."

Midnight took a second to calm herself down again. She exhaled a deep breath. "... go on."

"Well... ya see..." Cinnamon explained to Midnight to the best of her ability what her plan was. As Cinnamon went on, Midnight's expression softened and she let her guard

down, but by the end of Cinnamon's explanation Midnight was shaking her head in annoyance.

"That's your plan? Seriously?" Midnight facehoofed. "Have you even considered what might happen if you actually pull it off and get Sundae away from the wolves?"

"O' course ah have!" Cinnamon exclaimed. "That's why we had ta put on a show! If we get captured and killed, then Ponyville can say they've got nothin' ta do with it! It's ta keep them all safe!"

"I have to admit," Skyline interjected. "I was pretty impressed by how well thought out her plan was."

"No offense, Skyline, but that's because you're not the smartest girl around." Midnight commented sarcastically.

Skyline raised a hoof to object, but paused. "Eh, I'll give you that much."

"Look, it sounds all well and good on paper, but listen to it for a second. You're going to offer me as a trade to get those wolves to show you where Sundae is, and when they do you sneak them out right under their noses? Seriously? Why would I ever agree to something like that?!"

"Hey, Skyline and ah are pretty darn tough ponies." Cinnamon defended. "Yer not gonna be in any actual danger, 'cause we're doin' this trade in a public area." The earth pony reached into her saddlebags and pulled out a map of the area. "See here, ah reckon them wolves will eventually hafta pass through one of 'em border towns on their way back ta wolf territory. And that's where we'll carry out my plan."

Cinnamon pointed to the largest dot on the map. "Ye see this town right here? Ah've heard from the merchants that come around Ponyville every so often that this here town has its own set o' rules. Ah'm sure ya know this, comin' from the castle, but the law there ain' determined by ponies or wolves, naw, it's controlled by griffons."

"Griffons. Seriously?" Midnight groaned. "Don't you know that griffons are an even bigger threat than wolves?! The only reason they don't go around eating ponies like wolves do all the time is because they consider us to be low-class product!"

"And that's where I come in!" Skyline boasted. "You don't know this, Midnight, but I'm actually pretty good friends with a griffon."

“... seriously?” Midnight asked disbelievingly.

“Heck yeah!” Skyline pumped her hoof. “She’s one of the merchants who frequent Ponyville, and she’s pretty darn cool! We have races in the sky all the time! Uh, where nopony can see, of course.” Skyline added after seeing Midnight’s expression. “She mostly eats berries, so we don’t have to worry about her trying to eat us. She told me she’s usually in that border town around this time of year, so all I gotta do is find her and she’ll watch our backs.”

“She’s sorta an outcast though.” Cinnamon said. “So we can’t rely on her too much in a tough spot... she can make sure we’ll be okay as long as we don’t draw attention to ourselves. But once we do, all bets are off. But don’t worry, she’ll be able to keep at least one o’ us safe.”

“One of us...?” Midnight questioned.

“Yeah, you Midnight.” Cinnamon sympathetically put her hoof on Midnight’s shoulder. For a moment, Midnight thought she was going to knock her out again, but she refrained from throwing the earth pony off of her. “Y’see... ah don’t really wanna drag ya into this mess... but ah hafta, ya see? Wolves won’t cause a scene in griffon territory unless they got a reason, so even if they see ya they won’t be able ta lay a paw on ya...”

“But you kidnapped me.” Midnight pointed out. “How can I even trust you when you do something like that?”

“Look Midnight, yer free ta leave and go back ta Ponyville.” Cinnamon stated. “But listen here, if ah had ta take the time ta convince and explain things ta ya, there would be no way we’d be able ta catch up ta them! Ah had ta take ya the way ah did! And... yer mah only chance ah have at seein’ li’l Sundae alive again...”

The sad expression on Cinnamon’s face caused Midnight to soften up a bit. She sighed. “Listen... I still think your idea is stupid. And I don’t think anything good will come of this. Even if the wolves are convinced that Ponyville had nothing to do with this, is something happens to me His and Her Highnesses will punish somepony. And Ponyville will be the first on their list.”

Cinnamon grimaced. She obviously didn’t think about how the royals would punish Ponyville for allowing Midnight to be put in danger.

“But...” Midnight continued in a softer tone. “I... kind of see why you’re doing this. Sundae’s your little sister, and if there’s a chance that you can save her... well, I’m sure I’d go against all odds to save Luna or Celestia too...” She sighed. “As long as you promise nothing will happen to me... I’ll go along with your crazy plan.”

Cinnamon and Skyline high-hoofed each other. “Alright!!” Skyline exclaimed. “Good to have you on-board, Midnight!”

“Yeah... thanks.” Cinnamon smiled. “You don’t know how much it means ta me by agreein’ to tag along with us...”

“Don’t thank me.” Midnight replied. “I... actually don’t really want to go back to Ponyville either.”

“Oh... right...” Cinnamon shook her head. “Listen Midnight... ah want ya to know that ah was genuine when ah said ah didn’t hold nothin’ against ya...”

Midnight held up her hoof to stop Cinnamon. “I know, I can tell how genuine you are right now. You don’t seem like the type of pony who’d be a good liar.”

“Or an actor.” Skyline cut in. “You do know that you tripped over your lines on your way out, right Cinnamon?”

The earth pony blushed. “That don’t matter!” She exclaimed. “Lily’s never been able ta notice bad actin’!”

“And Amethyst would notice it right away.” Skyline followed up. “Face it, Cinnamon, you suck as both a liar and an actor.”

“Why—jus’ shut it, Skyline.”

The pegasus pony snickered, and Midnight chuckled a bit too at their interaction.

“Oh, and Midnight?” Skyline asked. “What was with that shaking your mane back and forth thing? It was silly.”

It was the unicorn’s turn to blush. “I-It was self-defense!!”

“Right, a lame dance move was self-defense.”

“J-just shut it, Skyline!!”

Skyline and Cinnamon laughed at Midnight, and soon enough, Midnight was laughing too. The evening air was filled with their laughter.

The three ponies laughter was interrupted by a growling from Midnight’s stomach. “Oh dear... I never ate breakfast...”

“No worries, sugarcube, ah gotcha covered.” Cinnamon rummaged through her saddlebags once again and brought out a cupcake with green icing. “One apple cupcake, comin’ right up!”

Midnight ravenously devoured the cupcake, feeling relieved after finally having something in her stomach.

Skyline chuckled. “You know, Midnight... I think we can be good friends.”

“Ah agree with her, sugarcube.” Cinnamon said. “Ah know things are kinda harsh right now... but it doesn’t hafta be if yer with friends. And you’ll be stuck with us anyways, so might as well have a bit o’ fun while yer here!”

“... you kidnapped me and you’re going to hold me for ransom.” Midnight said sarcastically. “Sure I’ll be your friend, I’m best friends with anypony who kidnaps me!”

“Geez, didn’t know you were into *that* sorta thing, Midnight.” Skyline commented.

Midnight couldn’t help it, she burst into laughter once again. Cinnamon took a second to get the joke, but once she did, she joined the unicorn in laughing.

“A-alright, alright!” Cinnamon shouted through her laughter. “W-we’ve gotta get goin’ now! We still got a lotta ground ta cover before we reach griffon territory! Let’s go!” The earth pony began dashing off.

“H-hey! No fair!!” Skyline began to glide to catch up to her.

Midnight chuckled. First Amethyst and Lily, then Skyline and Cinnamon... it might not be that bad to have friends if it was like this.

“Don’t you need your hostage?!” Midnight called out after them, running along to catch up as they headed towards griffon territory.

Session 7

A week has already passed since the Collection in Ponyville, and life had pretty much already gone back to normal. The daily rhythms of life were in line again, and when asked about those who were taken by the Collection, nopony even gave any signs of knowing them. But there was still a certain weariness in everypony's eyes, as if they were always on edge, always waiting for something else to strike Ponyville.

Those most affected by the Collection showed signs of grief, of course. The colt of the stallion and mare who were taken was sent away to his relatives in a faraway town, and the Apple family wasn't seen at market as often as they were used to, although that could be attributed to the absence of two of their best farmhands, Fritter and Cinnamon.

However, when one visited the Apple family farm, they gave no signs of the fact that three of their youngest members were now missing. It was like they wanted to forget everything about Sundae and Fritter. When asked about Cinnamon, the elderly head just spat and denied her relation with the Apple family. They were ashamed of the spectacle Cinnamon put on before her departure, and wanted nothing to do with the pony who could potentially ruin the Apple family. If the royal family came looking for somepony to punish, the Apple family was determined that it not be them.

Yet strangely enough, no retribution came for Ponyville or the Apple family from the castle in response to Midnight Star's kidnapping. While Midnight was unwelcome in Ponyville, she was still a regal visitor, and her safety should have been prioritized over everything else. When news reached the castle about her kidnapping, everypony expected some kind of punishment to be inflicted on their tiny village, yet nothing ever came. Did something happen to the mailpony that was supposed to deliver the news? That couldn't be the case, because she returned safely to Ponyville after her short trip to the castle.

Could it be... the royal family sent Midnight to Ponyville to be rid of her? That would explain the lack of response. As time passed the rumor that Midnight was supposed to be banished from the castle spread through Ponyville, and soon enough everypony treated this rumor as fact.

But like all rumors and gossip, this explanation died out relatively quickly. Thoughts of the missing Cinnamon and Midnight barely crossed the minds of anypony anymore. As far as they were concerned, Midnight was the cause of the Collection and Cinnamon only brought shame to Ponyville for her actions. And as for Skyline, everypony was just glad not to have somepony constantly violating flying regulations. She was always seen as a troublemaker anyways, consorting with the likes of griffons during Merchant Week. Skyline didn't even do anything to contribute to Ponyville's economy and lifestyle, so who cared if she was gone? That was just one less pony who could bring trouble to Ponyville.

There were only three ponies who cared and worried about the missing trio. Three ponies who genuinely cared for them, and were disgusted at the rest of Ponyville for their sudden denial of their existences. They were waiting for their safe return, certain that they'd come back safely. After all, that's what friends did, right?

However... somepony else came to Ponyville before the trio and stood before the three... somepony with a simple request...

A request that would set in motion the wheels that spun the futures of everypony involved.

--

It was evening time, and Pastel Lollipop was getting ready to close up shop. She recovered from her shock and stupor only a few days after the Collection, and was back to her normal hyperactive self once again.

Mr. and Mrs. Toffee stepped out from the kitchen. "Pastel? Are you sure you don't want us to close up? You did say you had an appointment to keep with your friends..."

Pastel rapidly shook her head. "No no nope! I've gotta work super duper hard to make up for the time that I spent all mokey-wokey!"

Mrs. Toffee hesitated. "Are you sure...?"

"Absapositutely!" Pastel said enthusiastically.

The Toffees sighed. There was no stopping this pony once she put her mind to something. "Alright then," Mr. Toffee said, "We'll go turn in then. Be sure to make sure you lock up properly before you head out, okay?"

Pastel nodded. "Okie dokie artipony!"

The Toffees smiled and headed back upstairs. It was amazing to them how fast Pastel could bounce back from her trauma. They heard that it took her months to get out of her stupor... especially since they couldn't get her to pray or anything...

Pastel's smile faded away as soon as the Toffees were out of sight. She silently resumed her work cleaning up the shop, trying to keep her mind from wandering back to the vivid details of what she saw that day...

Two knocks on the bakery door. Amethyst and Lily were outside of the bakery, trying to get Pastel's attention. The pink earth pony's smile returned, just a bit, at the sight of her friends. "Coming!" She cried out as she bounced over to unlock the door.

"Hi Pastel..." Lily mumbled. "I hope you're doing oka—ah!!"

The earth pony jumped on top of Lily, knocking her over in a large hug. "Of course I'm okay you silly willy!" Pastel exclaimed. "I have my super wonderful funderful friends around, how can I not be okay?"

Amethyst smiled. "It's good to know you're so energetic whenever we come by. It'd be nice if you could show that energy around everypony else though... none of that faux energy you've been showing everypony else after the Collection."

Pastel's smile faded a bit. It was true that after the Collection, she threw on a false smile to keep everypony from worrying about her, but the smile she wore around her friends was not false. Pastel shook her head and faced her friends with a bright grin on her face.

"Hold on a bit so I can finish cleaning up, okay?" Pastel said. "Don't worry it'll only be a couple more super short minutes!"

"P-Pastel...?" Lily mumbled. "Um... if you don't mind, can we help you?"

"That's a brilliant idea!" Amethyst followed up.

"Oh no, I can't ask my friends to help me with my job!" Pastel exclaimed. "You two should just sit tight and let Pastel do the work!"

Amethyst chuckled. "Of course you can't ask us, we're happy to oblige ourselves! Isn't that right, Lily?"

The pegasus pony nodded shyly.

"You girls..."

"Not another word!" Amethyst began straightening up the shelves and packing up the untouched goods. "The sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be done!"

Pastel giggled. "Well if you say so then! Let's goooooooooo!!!"

--

When the three ponies finished closing up shop, they headed out into the village. It was a typical evening in Ponyville, with cordial exchanges of "Hello" and "Good evening" being thrown about occasionally by the random passerby. They were headed for what was reputedly considered the most peaceful place in Ponyville, Lily's house.

Lily's household was placed on the outskirts of Ponyville, barely even considered to be inside of Ponyville's borders. For the longest time, Lily's family had been the animal caretakers for Ponyville, nursing injured animals and doing anything they could to nurture nature. Lily lived alone now however, her parents passed away shortly after Lily became a mare. It was a peaceful passing, Lily's parents gave birth to her when they were already past their prime, and Lily knew that their passing was the natural course of nature. Her parents lived a good long life taking care of the animals, and Lily planned to follow their footsteps as closely as possible as the most altruistic pony in Ponyville.

The three ponies climbed the hill that overlooked Ponyville to reach Lily Blossom's house. The peaceful atmosphere did wonders to relax them; the sweet smell of the grass and serene petals of flowers blowing in the wind. It was a beautiful place, and it felt like the worries of anypony who took in its majesty would just melt away.

Upon reaching the top of the hill, Lily stepped ahead of her two friends. "Umm... if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to go check on a couple injured birds really quickly..."

"You do whatever you need to do, darling." Amethyst said, waving her hoof around. "Pastel and I will just relax and watch the sun set while you're busy."

"Ooh! I like sunsets!" Pastel exclaimed. "They're all pretty and warm and orange and—"

“Yes, yes,” Amethyst interrupted. “We all know what sunsets look like, Pastel.”

The pink pony frowned and then shrugged. Not even the tranquil scenery was peaceful enough to calm Pastel down.

Lily giggled. “Well... I’ll only be a moment...” She quickly glided behind her house to check on the animals.

Amethyst smiled and turned to Pastel. The earth pony was rolling happily on the ground, as if she didn’t have a care in the world. The unicorn sighed. “Oh Pastel, you are so random sometimes...”

“Hee hee!” Pastel laughed as she continued to roll around. “Only to make things extra fun!”

“Sometimes it’s fun just to kick back your hooves and relax, darling.” Amethyst sat back on the grass and stretched her hooves out. “Mmm... this view is absolutely delightful!”

The unicorn admired how beautiful the sunset was at Lily’s house. The way the colors of the sunset just blended in together... orange, red, blue, pink... it was simply marvelous how nature could form such splendor without the hand of some unseen force. Amethyst believed that not even the Goddess could produce this kind of beauty.

“Umm... I’m back.” Lily came gliding back to the two ponies, gingerly folding her wings as she landed next to them.

“Oh Lily!” Pastel smiled. “You’re just in time for the most super duper spectacular special sunset ever!”

“... you say that about every sunset, Pastel.” Amethyst commented.

Pastel blew a raspberry at the unicorn, causing the three of them laughed together merrily. Lily kneeled onto the ground and relaxed her body to join Amethyst and Pastel.

The three of them just watched the sunset for a few moments. They let the sight of the falling sun preoccupy them, watching the day fade away to night as it always did. As the last few rays of light disappeared beyond the horizon, Amethyst spoke up and broke the silence.

“... is it lonely here without Skyline?”

Lily blushed. “U-um... well... I uh...” She took a deep breath. “yes.”

Pastel giggled. “No need to be so shy Lily!” She poked the pegasus playfully. “You’ve been living with her for such a very very long time now! Of course it’d be lonely without that energetic little pony!”

“Kettle calling the pot...” Amethyst muttered.

Lily smiled shyly. When she was but a filly, her parents, being the kind ponies they are, took in a small orphan who wandered into the outskirts of Ponyville. This orphan was Skyline. From what Lily gleaned from whispers in her parent’s room, Skyline was apparently abandoned by her parents a mile or two away from Ponyville. Being a filly, Skyline did what her parents told her to do and walked in the direction of Ponyville, not even aware of the fact that she was abandoned.

As the years passed, Skyline assimilated into the Blossom family, and she was officially given their surname, Skyline Blossom. Lily always saw Skyline as the little sister, although there was no evidence to prove Lily was older than her at all. Because of this, she was always overprotective of Skyline, trying her best to keep her out of trouble. Of course, Lily’s attempts were never successful, as Skyline was quite the rebel. Even after their parents’ passing, Lily and Skyline kept their older/younger sister dynamic up until this day.

“You okay silly?” Pastel asked, breaking Lily from her recollections. “Is there somepony watching us? Is there? Is there? Ooh! Is it the Goddess?”

“Huh? Oh...” Lily shook her head. “No... I was just thinking...” She stared off into the sky. The stars were already starting to twinkle in the sky. “... I hope they’re okay...”

Amethyst pulled Lily into a hug. “Don’t worry dear, I’m sure they’ll be okay.” She softly petted the timid pegasus. “Skyline and Cinnamon are the toughest ponies we know, remember? They’ll definitely come home safely with Midnight...”

“No fair, let me in!!” Pastel jumped on the two ponies, causing all three of them to collapse on the ground. The force of Pastel’s tackle caused them to start rolling down the hill, and when they hit the bottom, a cloud of dust burst from the impact.

“Oh my Goddess!!” Amethyst cried. “Dirt! So much dirt!! Eww, get it off, get it off!!”

Pastel burst out laughing and Lily quietly giggled along with her. "Oh Ame!" Pastel exclaimed. "It's only a little dirt! It never hurt anypony anywhere!"

"Are you *daft*?!" Amethyst lamented. "Dirt never hurt anypony? Why, I can hear my follicles crying right now! I can only imagine what this dirt will do to my beauty if I don't do anything about it soon!! Oh Lily, *please* tell me you have a washroom I can use!"

Lily tried to stifle her laughter. "O-oh... um, i-it's...*snicker*... um..."

"Spit it out, pony!" Amethyst shivered. "Oh no, oh *dear*! I can feel the impurities entering my pores! It's absolutely dreadful!!"

Amethyst's continued theatrics only made it harder for the other two ponies to stop laughing. Lily tried her hardest to stop, and raised a hoof towards her house. "I-It's the s-second door on the l-left..." She couldn't hold it in anymore. Her soft giggling streamed out of her mouth, causing Amethyst to blush furiously.

"Well then, laugh at my misfortunes!" Amethyst turned her nose up into the air. "You'll come crying back to me once you realize how messy your manes are! Hmph!" The unicorn haughtily trotted back up the hill and into Lily's house. The interior was to be expected from Lily, filled with nature's touch yet strangely clean. There were a couple injured rabbits in the corner inside a cozy looking basket, sleeping peacefully. A small smile surfaced to Amethyst's face. She's never met another pony as kind as Lily...

Amethyst followed Lily's directions and found the washroom. She quickly started the water flow and allowed the water to wash the dirt off of her. She instantly felt a lot more relaxed as she felt herself become cleaner. Sure she always made out her aversion to anything dirty to be a lot more dramatic than it needs to be, but she truly felt uncomfortable whenever she wasn't clean.

As soon as she felt the last of the dirt wash off from her body, she quickly shut off the water. She didn't want to waste Lily's resources after all. Amethyst dried herself off and turned to see her reflection in the mirror. She chuckled. Even when she didn't style her mane she still looked fabulous in her eyes.

"Hmm... I wonder where Lily's brush is..." Amethyst began rummaging through Lily's cabinets in search of a brush. "No... no... no... ooh, that's some nice shampoo... no... no..." She paused.

She found a brush however... she finally noticed something about the contents of the drawers. None of them were products that looked like they belonged to Lily. The color and scent of each of the items she found did not match Lily's tastes at all. The brush was blue, the shampoo wasn't feminine enough, there were athletic products all over the place...

Amethyst suddenly felt guilty about rummaging through Lily's bathroom. She silently closed the drawers without bothering to brush her hair and left the room.

Everything in there seemed to belong to Skyline, not Lily. Amethyst didn't know much about the Blossom household, but she was sure that Lily barely made any money at all taking care of animals. Not to mention Skyline didn't hold a steady job at all in favor of improving her athletics. They wouldn't have enough money to spend on that many goods...

Lily was so kind. So, so very kind. Amethyst briefly wondered if Skyline appreciated everything Lily does for her, but she quickly discarded that line of thought. No matter how aloof Skyline may seem, Amethyst knew she loved her surrogate sister.

The unicorn had a slight smile as she headed down the hill to rejoin the other two. She was refreshed after cleaning up, and a warmth had spread inside her from witnessing her friend's thoughtfulness. If only everypony had even a fraction of Lily's love and kindness...

A voice spoke out from behind Amethyst. "Excuse me..."

The unicorn jumped and yelled a squeal of surprise. Her startled yelp echoed across the hill, and Pastel and Lily quickly galloped up to see what was the matter.

"A-Ame! A-are you alright?" Lily called out.

Amethyst brushed off the pegasus's worry. "I-It's fine... I was just startled was all. No need to worry, darling."

Pastel instantly started bouncing around the stranger. "Oh, who are you! Haven't seen you around here! Where are you from? Can I throw a party for you?"

The stranger ignored the hyperactive pony. "... is this Ponyville?" The stranger asked, his voice quiet and subdued.

Lily and Amethyst looked upon the stranger with suspicion. And they had good reason too; he was suspiciously wrapped in a large black cloak that sheathed his entire body. They couldn't even see his face since it was hidden behind a hood.

"Yes it is!" Pastel bellowed, completely oblivious of her friends' suspicion. "Why? Are you here for a visit?"

"... not really." He muttered. "I'm just looking for somepony... she's supposed to have arrived here about a week ago? Her name's Midnight Star."

The unicorn's name set off bells in Amethyst's head. She immediately took the initiative and stepped out in front of Lily. "I'm sorry, but the pony you're looking for is not here."

The stranger chuckled. "Is that so? Hmm... mind telling me why you're being so defensive, miss?"

"Oh, no reason." Amethyst said haughtily. "I'm sure it's perfectly normal to be defensive whenever a stranger randomly comes intruding into our village looking for a member of royalty. Especially when he's dressed as suspiciously as that."

"You have quite the attitude, miss." The stranger said. "But I suppose you're right... I do come off as a tad suspicious with my hood up like this..." He pulled back his hood, revealing a tired and stern expression and a unicorn horn. However, Amethyst and Lily relaxed a bit, for his eyes did not look like ones that belonged to somepony intending harm. No, they twinkled in amusement and kindness, allowing the ponies to feel as if they could let their guard down.

"You're mane's all frazzly!" Pastel exclaimed, pointing out the disheveled condition of the stranger's mane.

"Oh my..." Amethyst reeled after hearing Pastel's observation. "She's right! Those follicles must be screaming right now! Don't worry, I'll fix it up, free of charge! Now let's hurry to my boutique before the damage becomes permanent!"

The stranger chuckled again. "Aren't you quick to change your tone, miss?"

"There's no time to be suspicious when somepony's needs assistance!" Amethyst exclaimed. "My stars, what have you been *doing* to your poor mane?"

“... nothing really.” The stranger held up a hoof. “Stop worrying about my mane miss. I’m a traveler, I don’t even have time to properly wash myself.”

“Not even enough time to *wash*?!” Amethyst looked like she was about to pass out.

The stranger grimaced. “Alright, *alright*! I’ll clean myself up.” He closed his eyes and began to concentrate. A light began to sprout at the tip of his horn, and it soon began to evolve into a large glow, surprising the other ponies. In the night sky, its luminance engulfed the area, blinding the others. When it cleared, the spot where a ragged stranger once stood was instead a well-groomed and handsome stranger. The three unicorns stared in shock. He chuckled at their expressions. “I guess you’ve never witnessed magic before.”

Pastel was the first to break out of her stupor. “WOAH! That was super duper SUPER AWESOME!!” She began to frantically bounce around the stranger. “It’s all shiny and sparkly and warmly and it was just SO COOL!”

Amethyst’s eye began to twitch. “T-that was... magic? B-but... how? Why? What? How? Err? Magic? Wait...”

Lily just blinked in response.

The stranger grinned as his horn began to glow once again. Soon enough, an aura emitted from it and engulfed Pastel, which caused her to levitate in mid-air.

“OHMYGOSHI’MFLYING!!” Pastel began swinging her hooves around excitedly. The stranger used his magic to swing her around in a couple circles before placing her back on the ground. “Can we do it again? Can we? Can we?”

“Maybe some other time.” The stranger put the hood over his head to cover his horn.

“W-wait!” Amethyst sputtered. “W-who exactly are you? A messenger of the Goddess?”

The merriment left the stranger’s expression at the mention of the Goddess. “No, I’m not.” He responded harshly. He quickly remedied his expression after seeing how his sudden mood change startled the ponies, showing off a sly smile. “My name’s Deneb.”

“Oh...” Amethyst shuffled her hooves around nervously. “My name’s Amethyst. The shy one who doesn’t talk is Lily, and the hyper one is—”

"I'm Pastel Lollipop!" Pastel exclaimed. Amethyst shot her a look for interrupting her introductions.

"It's nice to meet you all." Deneb said. "Now if we would all go back to my original question now that we're all nice and comfortable with each other... would you mind telling me where Miss Midnight Star is?"

The three ponies hesitated at the question.

"... is something wrong?" Deneb asked.

"Well..." Amethyst started.

"She's sorta got kidnapped!" Pastel followed up. Lily and Amethyst glared at her. "What?"

"Kidnapped you say?" Deneb frowned. "Hmm... this could be bad..."

"Well... that's not exactly it, sir." Lily mumbled, finally speaking up.

"Brilliant! The pegasus has a voice!" Deneb exclaimed.

"Eep!" Lily curled up behind Amethyst. "I-I..."

Deneb knelt down. "I'm sorry dear, Lily was it?" He bowed. "I apologize for startling you. Now would you care to explain what exactly happened to young Midnight?"

Pastel and Amethyst shot looks at each other, wondering if they should tell Deneb the truth. Their eyes both ended up resting on Lily, waiting for her to make the decision.

"... I feel like I can trust him." Lily finally said. "Well... it's kinda a long story... so I'm sorry in advance..."

--

"I see... that's what happened." Deneb let out a large groan and collapsed in the grass, kicking back his hooves. "What trouble this is..."

"I'm sorry..." Lily squeaked. She was the one who relayed the tale of everything that happened in Ponyville since Midnight's arrival. The Collection, Midnight's ostracization, the staged kidnapping... everything that happened.

Deneb sighed. "No need to apologize, dear. I just can't believe all that happened in such a short time. But if you don't mind me asking, how do you remember so much?"

Amethyst tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you pray to the Goddess?" Deneb asked quizzically. "In my experience, after Collections ponies tend to pray to the Goddess to alleviate their pain. It smudges the details of horrific events like Collections so you can continue living life normally. All the other ponies in Ponyville seem to have prayed from what you told me, what with the way they're carrying on like everything normal and whatnot..."

"... um..." Amethyst hesitated. "Don't tell anypony this but... I don't ever really pray to the Goddess."

Deneb's ears perked up. "Say again?"

"... I don't either." Lily admitted.

Pastel shrugged. "I was never taught the prayer thingy."

"... is that so?" A small smile played on Deneb's lips. "Interesting, interesting... do you mind telling me why you don't perform the prayer?"

Amethyst shuffled her hooves. "Well, I might be branded a heretic for this, but I personally don't believe in a quick solution to hardship." She explained. "I always believed that hard work is the best method for success after all!"

"... my parents taught me to look to nature for comfort." Lily mumbled. "So they never actually taught me the prayer..."

Pastel had a faraway look in her eyes. "... when I was a filly, my parents were taken away from me in a Collection." She muttered. "I... guess I was in too much of a stupor to even notice the doctors and stuff trying to get me to pray..."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry for asking." Deneb said to Pastel, although he couldn't fully get rid of the twinkle in his eyes.

“Why does this matter?” Amethyst asked. “What’s it to you if we pray to the Goddess or not?”

“Oh, nothing.” Deneb chuckled. “I just think it’s quite rare to find ponies such as you who haven’t yet explored a connection with the Goddess. Quite rare indeed. Hmhm...” He smiled slyly at the three ponies. “Well, since you ponies made the decision to trust me with the truth, so it’s only fair that I return the favor and tell you why I’m looking for Midnight.” His head disappeared beneath his travelling cloak for a moment, and when it came out he revealed a pendant around his neck.

The three ponies were mesmerized by the pendant. “Wow!” Pastel exclaimed. “It’s so shiny and neat!”

The pendant was emitting some sort of ethereal light, similar to the light that emerged when Deneb casted a spell. Its strange glow captured the three ponies’ eyes, they couldn’t tear themselves away by its mysterious beauty.

“Alright that’s enough.” Deneb’s voice snapped the three ponies back to reality. “It’s not good to stare at this too long. You might just lose your mind.”

“M-m-my mind?!” Lily whimpered fearfully.

“It’s only a joke! Partially...” Deneb muttered the last part under his breath. He hid the pendant back in his cloak so the others couldn’t stare at it any longer. “You see, I need to deliver this pendant to Midnight Star, and it is of the upmost importance that I do.”

“What is it?” Pastel asked curiously.

“... I apologize, but I can’t really tell you the pendant’s explicit purpose.” Deneb sighed. “The only thing I can tell you is that it is essential for the preservation of our world.”

“The preservation of our world?” Amethyst parroted. “That sounds pretty serious...”

“Well the world isn’t a small thing, miss.” Deneb joked. “But seriously, this pendant needs to get to Midnight as soon as possible.”

“Um, why don’t you just wait until they return?” Lily mumbled. “I’m sure they’ll be back soon...”

“... I can't really stay here for long.” Deneb explained. “You see, if I stay in any one place for more than twenty-four hours there will be trouble.”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?” Pastel bounced. “Is it like ‘throwing a party but you have no balloons kind’ of trouble? Or like ‘baking a batch of cupcakes and not having any icing’ kind of trouble?”

Deneb chuckled. “As delicious as that kind of trouble sounds, it's a lot worse. You see...” He dropped down his voice a few volumes. “I'm being hunted.”

Lily reeled back in fear. “H-h-hunted? B-by what?”

“Alas, I cannot tell you.” Deneb sighed. “I can do magic. That's reason enough for others to want my head. But you ponies... you can deliver the pendant to Midnight for me.” A light emitted from under his hood and he lifted the pendant up from around his neck using his magic. He quickly conjured a pouch from his saddlebags to place the pendant in before the ponies could be mesmerized by its glow again. He levitated the pouch towards Lily. “Here, why don't you take it? You seem like you'd be less tempted to take a peek at it.” He winked at Amethyst.

“Err.” Amethyst blushed.

Pastel frowned. “Wait a waitie minute! Does this mean you have to go already? Aww, I wanted to fly around again!”

The stallion smiled at Pastel. “I'm afraid so. Your company has been pleasurable I must admit. I didn't expect to find some untainted ponies in a town so close to the castle...”

Amethyst tilted her head. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, was I thinking out loud again? Silly me.” He playfully bopped his head. “Now Miss Lily, this pendant is incredibly important for the future of ponykind, you hear? I'm putting a lot of trust in you to safeguard it until it gets to Midnight, okay?”

Lily timidly nodded. “O-okay... b-but what do I tell Midnight?”

Deneb thought for a moment. “Well, I was going to tell her a story when I met her... a story that's meant for her ears and her ears only. So as much as I like you ponies, I can't relay this story to you for her to hear. It's private, you see?”

The three ponies nodded, not really understanding what he meant.

Deneb chuckled. "Hmm... it's no worry, I'm sure my path will cross with hers eventually. I'll just save the story until that day. However... oh yes, I think this will do." He cleared his throat and pointed to the sky. The three ponies followed his hoof and tried to see what he was pointing at. Three shining stars that shone brighter than any stars around it.

"The Summer Triangle is always looking out for her." Deneb said quietly. "And the Elements will show her the way."

Session 8-1

The border town of Gyren was always considered to be an odd place for a population of griffons to settle in. It was located outside of griffon territory, right in-between pony and wolven territory, where the greenery of the lands began to give way to desertification, and the horizon of the east stretched out to a long desert expanse. Further down southeast was the mountain range of Arkhaven, which no pony nor wolf dared to venture into, for it was the place where dragons were known to dwell.

Not much else was known to ponykind about the geography of the area. No pony who has gone past the desert and into wolven territory had been able to return to describe the lands. It was unknown if there was anything past Arkhaven, and towards the far west and south was a large uncultivated forest, dubbed the Everfree Forest by explorers who were brave enough to venture in only to come out telling tales of strange creatures such as manticores and cockatrices.

Griffons did not interact with ponyfolk much, or with any species for that matter. They lived in the far north, past the largely uncultivated lands and fields, past the northern oceans which the pony explorers failed to overcome.

Since griffons were omnivorous, they were able to live off of vegetarian diets, although most liked to take a modest portion of the wolves' Collections whenever the craving arose. Thankfully enough, only the bourgeois of the griffons frequently took part in the consumption of meat.

Being such an isolated species, the decision to create Gyren was always a strange curiosity. Built on an area that lacked any real resources, there was no real reason for the town's founders to settle in that place. For its first few years in existence, Gyren was nothing but a town hall and a post office, with a total population of four. However, on its seventh birthday, when its founders were just about ready to give up hope and book it back to griffon territory, a lone griffon stumbled across the town and realized the potential Gyren held. This griffon was a merchant, therefore he made Gyren into a merchant town.

The high mobility of flight that griffons possessed made them the ideal species to transport goods across the lands, allowing them to hold a monopoly of the skies. It was

because of this monopoly that pegasus ponies were not allowed to freely fly in the sky. The flight capabilities of pegasi in this time were vastly below griffons, and the sky was considered “griffon territory,” meaning if an unsuspecting pegasus pony was caught flying in the air, they were considered free game. And with the difference in ability, they were as good as dead.

However, the sky was mostly used as a transportation system for griffons to solicit their goods to many towns across the world, not as an all-you-can-eat buffet. They had simple rules: if you don't cross them, they won't cross you. This rule was generally well kept, with pegasus ponies keeping to low altitudes, and with griffons peacefully bartering their wares.

As for every merchant system, a central hub had to be constructed. Without one, the system could easily descend into chaos, with griffons tearing at each others' throats due to thefts and false advertising. A centralized system allowed for the standardization of prices and the guaranteed authenticity of products, preventing much headaches and bloodshed from having to occur.

The border town of Gyren was the perfect place to centralize the griffon's merchant guild. Its location right between the ponies and wolves made it easier for griffons to travel between the territories to sell. The large desert could easily be traversed using flight, and transactions in the town itself could easily be handled. Ponies and wolves alike could freely trade their wares to contribute to the prosperity of the town, although they couldn't hope to sell in other towns before the griffons could reach them. They had to settle for selling their wares to the griffon merchants at reasonable profitable prices for the griffons to sell elsewhere and hope they weren't being taken advantage of.

There was a single flaw in Gyren's ideal system. The only wolves that usually traversed over the desert were official Collection teams. Those wolves weren't coming to Gyren to trade or sightsee; they only used it as an outpost to resupply before heading back into the harsh desert landscape. The merchant's guild couldn't hope to trade with Collection wolves, as the only products they had were ponies to be eaten, and that kind of sale couldn't be done publicly without offending the ponies whose alliance to the guild was already shaky. No, for such a trade to be made the wolves in question had to be willing to bend the Quota and make a trade under the table...

As a consequence of the lack of wolven traffic, the main traders in Gyren were griffons and ponies. Generally, griffons had a distaste for working with a species they considered below them, but there existed a small handful of griffons who took likings to ponies and traded with them freely.

One of these griffons was especially friendly with a certain pegasus pony from Ponyville. She was one of the leading merchants in the guild with an incredible sense for business, a sense that many of her peers were jealous of. Her friendly attitude towards ponyfolk in general gave her competition a reason to slander and decry her, but not a single word could be spoken against her ability as a merchant. Ironically enough, it was probably her ability to make friends with ponies that contributed the most to her success.

This griffon's name was Revy, and she was the key figure needed to save Apple Sundae.

--

The journey to Gyren took a total of three days for Skyline, Cinnamon, and Midnight to make. By the time they reached the border of the town, the third day was already about to pass, as the sun was beginning to make its way past the dusty horizon.

As the three ponies dashed for the gate, a griffon suddenly unfurled her wings and kept the ponies from passing. "Halt!" the griffon cried. "State your business here in Gyren."

Skyline turned to her two friends. "Hey, no worries, let me handle this." She cleared her throat and trotted up to the gate guard. "What's up my griffon? How's being a guard workin' out for ya?"

The guard did nothing but remain stoic. "State your business, ponies."

"Geez," Skyline frowned. "Not really one for conversation, are you?"

"State your business, ponies." The guard said once again. "Before I decide to use you three to sharpen my claws."

Cinnamon and Midnight grimaced, but Skyline continued to talk, ignoring the guard's threat. "I don't think you can get many customers with that tone. You should try being a little more friendly. Like Revy!"

The guard's demeanor showed slight signs of relaxing at the mention of Revy's name, yet he continued to hold his stoic expression. "Here to see Revy, you say? Typical that some *ponies* would want to see her..." He closed his wings and held out a talon. "Here's how it works here, give me those saddlebags for inspection." The Cinnamon and

Skyline complied and handed over their saddlebags without a word. The guard gave a quick look through them before passing them back to the ponies. "Alright, if you plan to trade then purchase a license at the guild. Otherwise just be sure not to cause any trouble." The griffon whistled. "Open the gate! Three coming in!!"

At the sound of the whistle, the large gate that accounted for the entrance into Gyren began to open up. As soon as a small gap was formed, the guard ushered the three ponies in quickly. The gate quickly shut behind them, marking their official entrance into Gyren.

Midnight stared in awe. The level of activity in the town was completely unlike anything she saw in Ponyville or even in the castle! The streets were crowded with griffons and ponies scrambling to make purchases, merchants were loudly bellowing discounts and deals to attract customers, and the entire town was filled with energy and motion. Midnight turned and saw Skyline with the same expression, but when she turned to Cinnamon, her expression was not one of wonder.

"H-how are we s'posed ta find those wolves in this crowd!" Cinnamon exclaimed.

Skyline broke away from her trance and turned to the earth pony. "Hey, no worries, my girl Revy has connections all over this place. She'll be able to find those wolves no problem!"

Midnight stared quizzically at Skyline. "... uh, so how are we supposed to find this 'Revy' then?"

Skyline froze awkwardly. "Oh, uh... haven't really thought about it. I guess I can fly around to look for her—"

"Are ya crazy?!" Cinnamon interrupted. "It might be all fine and dandy ta fly around Ponyville, but this here place has griffons all over! The moment ya get into their airspace yer gonna get torn apart!"

"Oh yeah." Skyline frowned. "Forgot."

Midnight shook her head. "Are you sure that this plan's going to work?"

Cinnamon opened her mouth to answer, but a griffon pushed the three down and forced his way past them. "Hey you stupid ponies!" The griffon shouted. "Get out of the way, you're blocking traffic!!"

The three ponies looked at each other. "We'll talk later." Cinnamon said. "First let's find someplace to rest our hooves and get things together. Know any inns 'round here, Skyline?"

Skyline shrugged. "This is my first time here, so not really."

"Ugh." Midnight slapped herself on her forehead. "Let's just try to find one before we get trampled by this crowd, okay? And try to stay together!"

Cinnamon and Skyline nodded in agreement, and the three of them began to make their way through the dense crowd in search of an inn. The gate into Gyren seemed to directly lead into the Merchant's District, as the trio could not take a step without being assaulted by a griffon trying to sell some useless knick-knack or some pony trying to sell a third-rate apple.

Cinnamon snorted. "No way we'd let a bad apple like that get through our sights..."

As they somehow squeezed their way deeper into the town, the crowd began to disperse and become slightly more manageable. The inner parts of the Merchant's District had more booths that sold more objects of value instead of cheap items and perishables at the front. Midnight caught sight of a vendor selling a multitude of books, but Skyline pulled her aside before she could take a look.

"We're not here to shop..." Skyline muttered.

The three continued searching when they realized that there were probably no inns in the Merchant District, and if there were, they would probably be either extremely expensive or completely full. Or both.

They trudged outside of the Merchant District into the Residential District. The majority of the buildings in this area were directly owned by the guild for the use of its stationed members, however, there were a few inns scattered about.

The ponies had no luck in finding shelter. The first inn they came across was already completely full. The second inn they came across was griffon-only and refused to serve them. The third inn was... strangely enough, a brothel. Needless to say, it seemed to them that they would never find a decent place to stay at.

The trio sighed and collapsed onto the ground tiredly. The moon had already risen and they could still hear sounds of sales being made back in the Merchant's District.

Skyline spoke up. "... you know, that brothel had some pretty decent rates."

Cinnamon burst out laughing, and Midnight, not catching the joke, frowned. "I am not staying at a brothel. There is absolutely no way I would ever even set hoof in one."

Skyline snickered. "What? Afraid you'll get germs or something, Midnight?"

"Yeah, I am!" Midnight responded. "It's just so... icky. I don't agree with ponies who give away their chastity like that, not to mention there's probably griffons in there too. Griffons! In a brothel! Doing... whatever it is you do in a brothel!"

"I think it's called 'sex,' Midnight." Skyline said, trying to stifle her laughter. Midnight blushed deep scarlet. "You know Midnight, for a pony who's a know-it-all, you sure don't know it all!"

"... t-that was a horrible pun." Midnight commented, trying to hide her blushing. "A-and I know what *that* is, thank you very much! I just feel... uh, dirty, saying that word."

"Why Midnight, ah didn't think ya'd be so innocent!" Cinnamon laughed. "Maybe we need ta take ya into that there brothel after all so ya can learn a thing or two."

Midnight shook her head furiously. "Oh nononononononono! I know all about the weird stuff that goes on in there! I read it in my books, how in brothels they take you up into a room and then they touch you in strange places and then use their tongues to—"

"W-woah there, sugarcube!" Cinnamon interrupted, blushing. "We don't need ta know the details! Sheesh! What kinda books you've been readin'?"

Midnight blushed even deeper. "U-um... j-just e-educational reading material..."

Skyline's eyes softened and she gently put a hoof on Midnight's shoulder as if she wanted to comfort her. "It's okay Midnight... you can be a closet pervert if you want to."

Midnight frantically shook Skyline off. "Oh nononononononono!! I'm definitely not, I repeat, not, a pervert!"

“Sure you’re not.” Skyline said. “And I’m sure those books you read are educational too, *if you know what I mean.*”

“T-they’re just romance novels, that’s all!” Midnight exclaimed.

“Oh, ah know what yer talkin’ about, Midnight.” Cinnamon said. “Amethyst reads those too, think she calls ‘em ‘ee-row-teh-ka’ or something’? She’s always laughin’ at how silly this Primrose feller is.”

“But I like Primrose...” Midnight mumbled.

“What was that, Midnight?” Skyline teased. “Did I hear you just say that you like a trashy romance novelist?”

“She is not trashy!!” Midnight quickly covered her mouth.

Skyline snickered. “Suuuuuuureeee. Whatever you say, Midnight.”

“You... you...!!” Midnight bit her lip angrily. “YOU FILLYFOOLER!”

“WHAT?!” Skyline stomped her hoof down. “I am *not* a fillyfooler!”

“And I do not read erotica!” Midnight countered.

“W-what?!” Skyline stuttered. “Yeah you do! It’s obvious you do!!”

“Then *you*, my dear Skyline, are a fillyfooler!” Midnight stuck her tongue out. “If I am to be branded a pervert, then you will be branded a fillyfooler. It’s only fair after all.”

“That’s not fair at all!” Skyline objected.

“Oh yeah?” Midnight grinned evilly. “O-oh Skyline~” She moaned. “N-not here~~”

Schwing.

Skyline’s wings suddenly popped up. Embarrassed, the pegasus quickly tried to push them down, causing Midnight to burst into laughter. Skyline gritted her teeth together. “It. Is. ON!” She jumped on top of Midnight. “YEAH! I’LL SHOW YOU WHO’S A FILLYFOOLER!”

“Yeah?!” Midnight spat back. “Then I’ll show you who’s a closet pervert!!”

“ANGRY SEX TIME?”

“ANGRY SEX TIME.”

The two ponies grappled each other for a moment, but they suddenly burst into hysterics, giggling uncontrollably.

“Uh... are ya’ll okay?” Cinnamon asked worriedly.

“O-of course we’re okay!!” Skyline said in-between her laughter. “W-we’re just... oh my gosh I can’t stop laughing!”

Midnight tried to stifle her laughter. “I-I’m fine... my sides hurt from too much laughing... pfffft! Hahahahahahaa!!”

“Well... if ya’ll say so... but ya’ll are makin’ a scene.” Cinnamon pointed out. And sure enough, a small crowd of ponies and griffons were gathered around the trio, wondering what all the noise is about.

“O-oh... oh my...” Midnight tried her best to regain her composure.

“Nothing to see here, folks!” Skyline shouted. “Just a couple of friends joking around is all!”

Midnight frowned. “We weren’t going to have angry sex? Aww...”

Skyline burst back into laughter. “Man Midnight, I can’t believe you’re still going on with this joke!”

“It’s not a joke.” Midnight said flatly.

Skyline froze. “U-uh...”

“Gotcha!!” Midnight fell to the ground in hysterics. “Oh my Goddess... I’ve never laughed so much in my life...”

Cinnamon chuckled. “She did getcha there, Sky.”

Skyline puffed her cheeks out. "I'll get you back for this, Midnight! You're messing around with Ponyville's greatest prankster after all!"

"More like Ponyville's greatest fillyfooler." Midnight giggled.

"... Ponyville?"

An unfamiliar voice spoke out to the ponies. The trio froze. In their merriment they forgot for a moment exactly where they were.

Gyren not only had ponies and griffons, but wolves too.

Specifically, the wolves that performed the Collection in Ponyville.

The trio collectively gulped as they saw the crowd begin to disperse. Midnight mentally slapped herself. She lost herself while joking around with Skyline. She should've paid more attention to what she was doing. Midnight looked at Cinnamon. From the expression on the earth pony's face, she was thinking the same thing too.

However, Skyline...

Skyline was smiling.

A lone griffon pushed her way through the gap in the crowd. The first thing Midnight noticed was the bright scarlet scarf around her neck. The second was the bemused twinkle in her eye.

"It's been a while, Skyline." The griffon said. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, Revy." Skyline grinned. "Just getting comfortable with my new friend here."

Revy chuckled. "Don't think I've seen her last time I came to Ponyville. She just get there or something?"

"Um... pardon me fer interruptin'." Cinnamon interjected. "But ah don't think this is the best place fer us ta talk."

"You're right. Uh... Cinnamon, right?" The earth pony nodded to Revy. "Okay, I guess we can chat at my place then. Me and Skyline got a lot of catching up to do, ain't that right?" She held up a curled up talon.

Skyline bumped it with a hoof. "You betcha!"

--

Cinnamon untied her saddlebags and plopped herself down on the bed that Revy provided them. "Phew, fer a moment there ah thought that them wolves were about ta get us! Good thing that was Skyline's friend right? What're the chances? Hopefully Skyline will get done chatting with her soon..."

Midnight gave a tired nod and plopped down onto her bed. Now that she can finally rest, she realized how sore her hooves were from all that walking. "Geez... I can't believe how weird I was back there..."

"Weird?" Cinnamon flipped over on her bed to face Midnight. "Well ah didn't think ya'd play 'round like that with Skyline, but ah don't really see why that's weird."

"You don't get it." Midnight gave Cinnamon a tired look. "I admit that I do skim the occasional romance novel, but in the castle that kind of idleness was looked down upon..."

"Idleness?" Cinnamon parroted. "But yer readin'. Now ah don't really read that much, but ah'm pretty sure that readin' always works yer brain no matter what."

Midnight groaned. "You just don't get it..."

"Then explain." Cinnamon said firmly. "Lookie here, sugarcube, we've been travelin' the last three day together as friends, right?"

"Two and a half days." Midnight corrected. "I was unconscious for the first half."

"Ya know what ah'm talkin' about!" Cinnamon exclaimed.

Midnight giggled. "I'm sorry..." She turned to look away from Cinnamon. "You know... I never really joked around like this when I lived in the castle."

"Coulda fooled me." Cinnamon commented.

Midnight looked outside of the window and at the night sky. "... I never really had any fun in the castle, you know that?"

Cinnamon said nothing. She decided she should just let Midnight confide in her.

"I mean... I had Celestia and Luna... but..." Midnight's eyes scanned through the stars in the sky. "Celestia's really uptight, you know? And Luna's too innocent to joke around like that with her... it's just, I don't think I've noticed how I've never had somepony I could be myself with."

"You have me now." Cinnamon said. "And Skyline. And Amethyst and Lily and Pastel back in Ponyville."

"I know that." Midnight mumbled. "But... I don't really have any friends. I like Celestia and Luna but they're my sisters. I don't really act the same way around them than with other ponies..." Midnight's eyes focused on a single bright star. "I'm... scared." She whispered. "I-I don't know how to feel about having friends... I mean, what are friends anyways? With Celestia and Luna I know when they have to leave, but how do I know how long you guys will stay with me? What if you disappear tomorrow? What if—"

"Stop worryin', Midnight." Cinnamon interrupted. "We ain't goin' anywhere. You can count on that."

Midnight tore herself away from the star and turned back to Cinnamon. "I guess... sorry for dumping my feelings on you."

Cinnamon chuckled. "Ain't that what friends are for."

Midnight showed a small smile. "I guess you're right."

"O' course ah am!" Cinnamon bumped her hoof against her chest proudly. "Ah ain't one fer tellin' lies!" Midnight giggled. "By the way... what was that about Celestia and Luna?"

Midnight froze. "W-what about Celestia and Luna?"

"That thing you said about when they hafta leave or somethin'." Cinnamon clarified.

“O-oh... that.” Midnight bit her lip. “U-umm... the Day of Ascension obviously!” She was in a rush to get the words out. “If they’re going to join the Goddess, they can’t really stay with little old me, can they?”

Cinnamon frowned, but she decided not to press the question. “Well... why don’tcha tell me ‘bout the Princesses? Ah’ve always wondered what they were like.”

Midnight perked up again at the question. “They’re wonderful! I said Celestia’s a bit uptight sometimes, but that’s because she has to take the role of the big sister! She has to take care of both of us after all. And Luna’s the cutest pony you’ll ever meet, she’s so innocent and adorable!”

Cinnamon smiled and nodded as Midnight went on describing the two Princesses. She could tell from Midnight’s tone that she loved them deeply. Midnight just looked so happy talking about them. Cinnamon chuckled. “Well ya’ll must be real happy bein’ born into the royal family and all.”

Midnight’s expression hardened a bit. “I... wasn’t born into the royal family.” She muttered.

“I—wait, what?” Cinnamon tilted her head.

“It’s no big deal.” Midnight said softly. “I was adopted into the royal family, you see? The Princesses aren’t my real sisters, and the King and Queen aren’t my real parents.”

Cinnamon was silent for a moment. “... well ah’ll be. Here everypony was thinkin’ ya came from the King’s loins. Sorry ‘bout that misunderstandin’.”

Midnight shook her head. “No, it’s fine.” The unicorn’s gaze drifted towards the stars again.

“Say... if ya don’t mind me askin’.” Cinnamon said hesitantly. “What happened ta yer real parents?”

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you. It’s not really a happy story though.” Midnight glanced at Cinnamon and saw her nod. She turned back to the stars.

“Apparently, my mother was raped.”

Cinnamon was instantly sorry she asked. "A-ah'm sorry, Midnight... i-if ya don't wanna talk about it, ya don't have to."

Midnight shook her head. "I'm fine talking about it. It was before I was born after all." She took a deep breath.

"King Themis and Queen Ambrosia were the ones who told me what happened when I was a filly. You know me, curious to know everything, so I pestered them until they caved in and decided to tell me the truth. I kind of regretted it afterwards, but the pursuit of knowledge is never easy." Midnight paused. "His and Her Highnesses told me they were childhood friends of my mother, and that's how they knew each other. My mother grew farther apart from His and Her Highnesses as time went on, but they still stayed in contact with each other.

Midnight paused again. "She apparently had these two friends, two stallions, and the three of them were supposedly incredibly close. I don't know the two stallion's names, but I knew they were both unicorns, like my mother. They were friends for a long time, and apparently one of them was in love with my mother. One night, when those two were alone, they got drunk and he decided to tell my mother his feelings for her.

"My mother turned him down, and in a fit of drunken rage, he raped her.

"The King and Queen didn't detail it much further than that, and I'm grateful. My mother got pregnant with me that night, and that stallion was never heard from again. He didn't even apologize to my mother..."

Midnight's voice quieted down to a whisper. "Her other friend left her shortly after that too. They left her alone... they were supposed to be her best friends, and one raped her and the other abandoned her..."

Cinnamon reached over to the unicorn. "Midnight..."

"I was scared of having friends for the longest time because of that." Midnight whispered. "I thought 'What if I end up like my mother?'"

"A-ah won't do anythin' like that." Cinnamon said firmly. "None o' us would *ever* do somethin' horrible like that ta ya Midnight."

Midnight smiled. "Thanks, but I'm not really scared like I was when I was a filly. When I grew into a mare that fear sort of just went away. But I was still apprehensive about making friends..."

"Anyways, to finish my story, having nopony else to turn to, my mother went to King Themis and Queen Ambrosia. And... well..." Midnight hesitated.

Cinnamon tilted her head. "What is it, sugarcube?"

Midnight bit her lip. "... she wanted to abort me."

Cinnamon reeled back. "Ah keep askin' ya the dumbest things."

"No, no, I already told you it's fine. My story's almost done anyways." Midnight took another deep breath.

"Well... for some reason, my mother gave up on that a few weeks later. Queen Ambrosia said that as soon as my mother realized that a living being was growing inside of her, she completely discarded the idea of aborting me. So I grew in her womb until it was time for me to come out, and then... well... she died giving birth. And then I was taken in by the royal family."

Cinnamon looked sadly at Midnight. "Ah'm so sorry 'bout all that..."

"You don't need to apologize." Midnight focused her gaze on that one single star once again. "I just wish I can find my father and give him a piece of my mind... but that's probably never going to happen. All I have to go by is the name of their little group..."

"If ya don't mind, and ah'm sorry fer my constant questions even when ah know ah should stop askin' them, but," Cinnamon coughed. "What was that name?"

Midnight muttered something incoherent under her breath.

"What was that, sugarcube?"

"Did you know my mother shares a name with one of the constellations in the sky?" Midnight suddenly said.

Cinnamon was caught off guard by the question. "Uh, why no, ah didn't. Um, what's that got ta do with anythin' again?"

“Come over here a second, Cinnamon.” Midnight gestured Cinnamon to move over to the window, and the earth pony complied. Midnight pointed a hoof at the sky. “Do you see that star there? The one that’s shining brighter than most of the others?”

Cinnamon squinted. “Yeah, ah think I do.”

“And do you see the two other stars near it? They’re about the same in brightness.”

“Ah think.” Cinnamon turned back to Midnight. “Ah still don’t get it though.”

“... I once read in a book something very interesting.” Midnight said softly. “There’s no fact to back up what I read, but...” She took a breath. Her voice was beginning to shake.

“I believe that when we die, we become part of the heavens and watch over our loved ones in the form of a star.”

Cinnamon was quiet. It finally dawned on her what Midnight was trying to tell her.

A single tear rolled down the unicorn’s face.

“My mother’s name is Vega, and she’s a part of the Summer Triangle.”

Session 8-2

“So... are you a fillyfooler?”

Rainbow Dash instantly recoiled at Twilight Sparkle's sudden question. Back in their ancestor's world, Revy had just met up with the trio, and they were currently en route to Revy's residence. Usually the two ponies were so immersed in the past that they didn't bother communicating with each other, but the awkward conversation between Midnight and Skyline persuaded Twilight to recede from her ancestor's mind to have a little “chat” with Rainbow Dash.

It took a few moments before Rainbow Dash registered the fact she was thrown back into the endless white void. One second she was Skyline and the next she was suddenly herself again. It was a strange experience to say the least.

It took her another moment to fully register Twilight's question.

Rainbow Dash blushed. “N-no! Of course not! There's no way I'd be a fillyfooler!” she stammered.

“Uh-huh...” Twilight didn't look like she believed Rainbow Dash.

The blue pegasus fumed. “Well what about you? Do *you* read trashy romance novels like your ancestor?”

“Occasionally, otherwise I wouldn't be able properly categorize the library.” Twilight nonchalantly shrugged. “Besides, I don't think it's really a big deal. I once read that everypony has these strange urges that has to be met every once in a while! And the homosexuality rate of Equestria according to Coltsey was—”

“Yeah, yeah, you read books and stuff! I get it!” Rainbow Dash interrupted. “I'm as straight as an arrow, so stop asking!”

“But I once read in a book that fillyfoolers tended to exhibit—”

“*Straight.* End of conversation.”

Twilight frowned. "Well... if you say so." The unicorn turned back towards the small window connecting her with her ancestor. It appeared that they were still walking towards Revy's place. Skyline was busy talking to the griffon making small talk while Midnight and Cinnamon trudged behind, not really saying a single word. With a curiosity similar to Twilight's own, Midnight's eyes were surveying her surroundings, taking in the structure and landscape of Gyren. For a brief moment, her eyes met Cinnamon's and—

A chill suddenly ran down her spine.

"... say, Rainbow Dash?"

"I AM NOT A FILLYFOOLER GOSH!"

Twilight recoiled from Rainbow Dash's sudden interjection. "I wasn't going to ask that! Geez..."

The pegasus grinned sheepishly. "Oh... what is it then, Twilight?"

"Do you feel like somepony's... watching us?" Twilight's eyes darted around the endless white void. "I thought I felt something a moment ago..."

"What're you talking about?" Rainbow Dash scoffed. "Your spell is only affecting the two of us right now, isn't it? How could there be anypony else here?"

"I don't know Dash, but... it feels like something's off." Twilight started taking tentative steps around the void. "It's like there's somepony here that we can see. Like there's some sort of... I don't know, a wall or something between us. Do you get what I'm saying, Rainbow Dash?"

"Not a clue." Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Maybe you're just getting tired from having this spell on for so long. Wanna take a break?"

Twilight shook her head. "No, no, I don't think I'm tired. I feel as energetic as ever!" She gave Rainbow Dash a goofy looking grin causing the pegasus to shoot her an odd look. "Eheh heh..." Twilight let out a nervous chuckle before turning back to the portal to the past. "Still... I can't shake off that strange feeling that somepony's watching us."

"You're paranoid, Twilight." The blue pegasus grinned and gave Twilight a quick pat on the back. "Stop worrying so much, seriously!"

Twilight sighed and shook her head again. "I guess you're right. I'm just a bit anxious is all. Let's just take a break for a bit and talk about something else, okay Rainbow Dash?"

"Sure, I'm game for anything!"

Twilight grinned. "So... about you being a fillyfooler..."

"UGH." Rainbow Dash threw her hooves up in the air. "I. AM. NOT. A. FILLYFOOLER!"

The purple unicorn giggled. "I know Rainbow Dash, I just like to tease you."

"You're worse than Rarity, I swear..." Dash muttered.

The grin faded from Twilight's expression at the mention of Rarity's name. "Do you think they're alright?"

"Who's alright? Oh, wait, Rarity, right." Rainbow Dash scratched her mane. "I dunno what to say Twilight, that was some pretty bad stuff we went through. I mean, even *me*, Rainbow Dash, the bravest and most awesome pony in Equestria, was shaken up pretty good by that Collection thing."

"Yeah... I'm surprised we're not still down about it..." Twilight frowned. "... isn't that wrong?"

"Isn't what wrong, Twilight?"

"That we were joking around about you being a fillyfooler when we witnessed a pony get torn to shreds just hours before."

Rainbow Dash stomped. "I TOLD YOU I'M NOT A..." She paused. "... wait, you're right. This is kinda weird. Maybe we don't feel so bad because our ancestors don't. Not to mention we've been running on that trail to Gyren for like three whole days."

"Three days isn't enough to get over something like that." Twilight said flatly. "It's just... for some reason I can't even clearly recall the details of what happened..."

"Really? I can remember it just fine."

Twilight's head shot up at Rainbow Dash's response. "What? You can remember it?"

“Well something like that isn’t really that easy to forget you know.” Rainbow Dash said. “Besides, isn’t everything that happened so far being written down in that weird spellbook thing you’re using for this? If your memory becomes a bit fuzzy you can just read that.”

“I guess so...” The unicorn sighed. “I’m being a worrywart again. Sorry.”

“It’s totally cool, Twi.” Rainbow Dash replied. “If you didn’t worry then you wouldn’t be everypony’s favorite egghead.”

Twilight frowned. “I don’t really like being called an egghead you know...”

“And I don’t like being called a fillyfooler.” Rainbow Dash stuck her tongue out.

“An eye for an eye, huh?” Twilight quietly turned back to Midnight’s point of view. She was watching Skyline and Revy continue to talk to each other happily, as if they had not a care in the world. “Say Rainbow Dash? If you can remember the Collection so clearly, does that mean Skyline does too?”

The blue pegasus shrugged. “I guess.”

“So why does she seem so unfazed?”

“Hmm...” Rainbow Dash put a hoof to her head in deep thought. “Well, I guess it’s just not really in her character to be stuck on things that have to happen.”

Twilight tilted her head. “Pardon?”

Rainbow Dash sighed. “Let’s put it this way, when we all grow old we eventually have to die, don’t we?”

Twilight winced. “U-um... I guess. But what does that have to do with—”

The rainbow-maned pegasus held up a hoof to interrupt Twilight. “Yo, let me finish!” She cleared her throat. “Look... if one of us dies of old age, would you waste your time moping around about it?”

“Well of course!” Twilight protested. “I’d be devastated if any one of my friends had to leave me!”

“Even if you knew well ahead of time that we were about to die?” Rainbow Dash continued to question. “Do you think you can fight something like old age, Twi?”

“... well, I suppose not.” Twilight admitted. “As much as I’d hate to admit it, death is inevitable for everypony.”

“There you go then.” Rainbow Dash said. “Collections are apparently like old age in the past. It’s something that can’t be avoided, so why bother feeling down about it?”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Twilight objected. “Getting taken away to be eaten by wolves is not the same thing as—”

“So do you think we can do anything to stop it?!” Rainbow Dash suddenly shouted. Twilight Sparkle shrunk at the pegasus’s outburst. Rainbow Dash shook her head. “Sorry Twilight... but aren’t you supposed to be the smart one? What do you think would happen if Skyline or Cinnamon managed to beat up those wolves in Ponyville and get out unscathed?”

Twilight thought back to the reservoirs of knowledge within her ancestor. For some reason, Midnight, avoided thinking about the Collection, the Goddess, and the Day of Ascension whenever she could, so she could only glean a few tidbits of information about those subjects. She thought back to Midnight’s flowing consciousness during the Collection.

A weapon that was not a weapon.

A treaty mandated by the Goddess.

The Quota.

The pieces fell in one by one, shining a clear light on the answer to Rainbow Dash’s question. Twilight bit her lip. “... we’d be violating the Quota, wouldn’t we? And by extension the treaty?”

“What do you think happens if the treaty is violated?”

Twilight shrunk down even further. It was a result that she didn’t even want to fathom. Something that the unicorn had only ever seen in fiction. Something the unicorn would never even think possible in the present. She timidly spoke up to answer.

“... war.”

Rainbow Dash nodded grimly.

“But... wouldn’t this rescue mission be violating the treaty then?” Twilight asked.

“Kinda.” Rainbow Dash said quietly. “The thing is; Cinnamon did this in a way that only she would be punished for it. Since they’re not in Ponyville anymore, Cinnamon can say she and Skyline acted by themselves, so nopony else would have to get hurt if things go south.”

“Geez Rainbow Dash... when did you get so knowledgeable about this?”

The pegasus shrugged. “Skyline’s been thinking about this for a while now, ever since Cinnamon first came up with this crazy idea.” She paused. “To answer your original question... Skyline has a goal in front of her that she needs to accomplish, and she won’t be able to get to that goal without putting the past behind her right away. Just like there’s no point in stopping something that’s unstoppable, there’s no point in getting down about something she couldn’t avoid.”

“... I don’t like that.” Twilight said quietly. “Just rolling over and letting fate dictate a pony’s path like she’s some kind of puppet... I don’t like it.”

“I never said I liked it either.” Rainbow Dash replied. “But this is how Skyline feels, and because I’ve been attached to her I kinda understand where she’s coming from. She’s not going to mope around and feel sorry for herself when there’s something that needs to be done.” Rainbow Dash’s gaze slightly shifted to the side. “... which is more than I can say for myself...” She muttered.

“Huh? Did you say something, Rainbow Dash?”

The pegasus shook her head. “It’s... it’s nothing.”

“Well if you say so...” Twilight looked back once again to the past. Their group had finally made it to Revy’s place, and they were pushing their way in. Her gaze fell on Cinnamon once more. “Do you think Cinnamon feels the same way about this as Skyline? I mean, why she’s not down about seeing her brother killed...”

Rainbow Dash sighed. "I can't really say, Twi, I'm not Cinnamon. But..." She paused. "If she's anything like Applejack, then... I guess she doesn't want her friends to worry about her. It's like that time during applebucking season, she tried her hardest to keep us from finding out about her problem until it was too late."

"Stubborn like Applejack, huh..." Twilight muttered.

"Yeah, she is." Rainbow Dash agreed. "But Skyline knows what's up. That's why she's trying her hardest to reunite Cinnamon with her sister, because if she doesn't..." Her voice trailed off.

Twilight tentatively spoke up. "If she doesn't what?"

The pegasus shook her head. "I don't know, Twi. She might just break. The clear-cut goal of saving Sundae is probably the only thing keeping her spirits up right now."

A flash of static.

Back in the past, Twilight could see Midnight and Cinnamon say goodnight to Skyline and Revy. It appeared that they were going to split up for a while.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "I guess I'll have to see you later, Twilight. Who knows, maybe Cinnamon will open up a bit to Midnight. I don't think it'll be good if she keeps this up..."

"You have fun with Gilda then." Twilight joked in an attempt to lighten the heavy mood that settled over the two ponies.

The pegasus smiled. "Nah, I don't think Revy's that much like Gilda. Revy seems a lot more cool-headed."

The burst of static filled the void again. Midnight and Cinnamon were heading up the stairs to their rooms while Skyline and Revy were making their way into the parlor directly opposite of the stairs. Twilight could feel the connection between her and Rainbow Dash's spaces beginning to thin.

"I guess I'll see you later then, Rainbow Dash." Twilight waved a hoof at her friend.

The pegasus gave a mocking salute. "Whatever you say, Twi."

Snap.

The connection keeping Twilight's and Rainbow Dash's worlds together broke, and they lost sight of each other. Twilight Sparkle sighed. It was just her, Midnight, and Cinnamon now...

A shiver reverberated up her spine again. Twilight nervously looked around at the white space. For some reason... she still felt like there was somepony with her...

She gulped. Hopefully she was just being paranoid, like Rainbow Dash said. Surely that was it.

Twilight calmed her mind down and settled back into Midnight's consciousness. Upon returning, Midnight saw Cinnamon untying her saddlebags and plopping herself down on the bed that Revy provided for the two ponies.

Session 9

Skyline and Revy entered the griffon's parlor. The pegasus quickly made herself at home and snugly settled herself in Revy's largest couch. It was obviously meant for the owner of the property, but Skyline ignored this obvious fact and allowed herself to relax.

Revy raised a talon in objection. "Uh, Skyline? You do know that's *my* seat, right?"

"What Revy?" The pegasus buried her head in the pillow cushions on the side of the couch. "I can't hear you over the softness of these pillows!"

Revy shook her head. "Get up, dork!" She pushed Skyline off the couch and forcibly took her rightful place upon her throne.

Skyline rubbed her head. "That kinda hurt you know!"

Revy smirked. "Tough love baby, tough love."

"Whatever man." Skyline muttered. The pegasus picked herself up and dragged herself over to the smaller couch, the one that was meant for guests such as her.

As soon as the Skyline settled herself into a comfortable position, she turned to Revy and clopped her hooves together. She adjusted her tone to a more formal one before speaking. "It's about time we talk business."

Revy frowned. "You sure you don't wanna shoot the breeze some more? There's some awesome wind currents up north, ya know. We can pull off some pretty sweet—"

Skyline held up a hoof. "Sorry Revs, but this is kinda urgent."

The griffon sighed. "Very well then... let's talk. Tell me what's up."

Skyline cleared her throat and began to relay to Revy the tale of her journey to Gyren. She told the griffon every detail, starting with Midnight's arrival from the castle, the Collection that set them off on this journey, all the way until Revy caught the three of them fooling around in the middle of the Residential District.

Upon finishing the story, Skyline gave Revy an expectant look. The griffon's eyes were closed, her head cradled within her talons, deep in thought.

"Well...?" Skyline asked tentatively. "Are you gonna help us?"

Revy frowned. "You come all the way here on a dangerous mission like this and you screw around out in the open? Seriously?" She groaned and slapped her forehead. "You're lucky Collection packs staying over at the Ambassador in the Merchant's District, otherwise you might be dead by now! Heck, you're lucky I live so close to where you were, otherwise some pony-hating griffon would've taken you three underground!"

"I'm sorry, sorry! Sheesh!" Skyline threw her hooves up in the air. "Sleep deprivation kinda screws up your judgment, you know? We barely got any sleep to make up the distance between us and those wolves!"

"No excuse, Skyline." Revy sighed. "You could be dead right now. Think on that for a moment, will ya?"

The pegasus grimaced. "... fine. Whatever. What's happened, happened. No need to be stuck on that now." She kicked her hooves back and reclined in the couch. "So tell me Revy, you gonna help us?"

Revy said nothing. She leaned forward in her chair and rested her head on her talons and let out a deep sigh. "Listen Skyline..." She finally said. "You know you're my best bud, right?"

"Of course!" The pegasus exclaimed. "Why else would I be asking you something like this?"

The griffon let out another sigh and reclined back in her chair. She turned her gaze up to the ceiling and stared for a while. "Let me get this straight." Revy said slowly. "You're going to do a trade with the wolves. Midnight for Sundae, correct?"

Skyline nodded. "Yeah, but we're not actually going to let Midnight be taken by them."

"And you're going to do it in a public area?" Revy continued. "Probably in a bar or something so those wolves can't cause any trouble?"

"Yeah, that's right." Skyline tilted her head. "Why?"

“... do you even know if Sundae’s still alive?” Revy asked.

Skyline dug her hoof into the couch. “I’d rather not think about what’d happen if she wasn’t.”

“What would happen then?” Revy pushed. “Would you just go back home to Ponyville like nothing ever happened?” Skyline made no response. “That not it? Don’t tell me you’re going to pick a fight with those wolves.”

“... if I have to.” Skyline quietly admitted.

Revy slammed her claw down. “Like hell you would! The instant you raise a hoof against them is the instant your neck would be sliced off!!”

“And if I do nothing, Cinnamon will!!” Skyline objected angrily.

“So what about Midnight? You gonna make her watch her newfound friends get chopped to bits?” Revy aggressively stood up from her chair. “You gonna make her watch your maimed bodies thrown around the street like a couple of pathetic ragdolls?!”

“Of course not!!” Skyline leapt of the chair and stomped her hoof in front of Revy. “That’s why we need your help.” The pegasus’s voice began to shake. “If things... if things go bad, you need to be there and take Midnight back to Ponyville.”

Revy glared at Skyline and stalked back to her chair. She sat down angrily and lifted a talon to point at the pegasus. “You and your friend Cinnamon are real morons, you know that?” Skyline was about to object, but Revy cut her off. “What a genius plan! What could possibly go wrong? That what you’re thinking?”

“No!” Skyline shook her head. “We thought this through! If things go south then the only ponies that’ll get hurt are me and Cinnamon!”

“... heh.” Revy began to chuckle, and the chuckles turned into laughter. “Hahahahaha!!” Skyline looked confusedly at the griffon. “HA!” She suddenly slammed her talon down on the table. “That’s exactly it, Skyline. ‘The only ponies that’ll get hurt are me and Cinnamon!’”

She struck the pegasus harshly across the face, sending Skyline sprawling across the floor. “You idiot!! You think I’d be okay with helping you two idiots commit suicide!?”

Skyline spat at the ground and rubbed the spot where she was hit. "What're you talking about? Suicide? This is a rescue mission!"

"A rescue mission my ass!!" Revy grabbed Skyline by the neck and pulled her up to meet her eyes. "Now you listen here, Skyline. No matter how I look at your little plan I can't see anything but suicide written all over it. Trying to haggle with wolves over a Collection? That's bull!"

Skyline tore herself away from the griffon. "Yeah? What do you know, Revy?"

Revy furiously gestured to the red scarf she wore around her neck. "You see this thing here? This here's an emblem signifying everything I've worked for to get where I am today. This scarf is only given to griffons of exemplary skill and ability, something that can only be gotten through tens of thousands of deals. So believe me when I say there's not a chance in hell this deal would fly."

"... you won't know until you try." Skyline muttered.

The griffon forcibly grabbed Skyline once again. "What'd you say, *pony*?"

The pegasus slapped Revy's talons away from her. "You heard what I said, Revy! I'm not gonna back down on this plan!"

"You think you know more about bartering than a professional merchant?" Revy questioned. "You think you can pull off a deal like this?!"

Skyline gave a firm nod. "I can."

"Ugh!!" Revy threw her talons up in the air and threw herself back down in her chair, burying her face within her talons. When she finally spoke up again, the anger was gone from her voice, instead replaced with a quiet, pleading tone. "Why are you so set on doing this, Skyline?"

"Cinnamon needs me." The pegasus answered quietly. "If I'm not there for her, nopony is. I'm loyal to my friends."

"Then why can't you be loyal to me and stop this, Skyline?" Revy looked up at the pegasus, revealing the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

Skyline took a step back and turned away from the griffon to avoid her tear-stained gaze. "I... need to do this, Revy." She turned her downcast eyes back up to meet the griffon's. "If there's even a single chance that this plan would work, even if it's one in a million... I wanna take it."

"You're a fool, Skyline." Revy muttered.

"Yeah, I've been told that before."

Revy sighed. "Is Cinnamon really that important to you? Important enough for you to risk your life?"

"All of my friends are worth risking my life for." Skyline walked up towards Revy and put a hoof on her shoulder. "You too, Revy."

The griffon did nothing to push Skyline away from her. "You know... if you die, then your friends will miss you... I'll miss you."

Skyline gave a soft chuckle. "I guess I'm just going to have to not die then. Easy."

Revy pulled Skyline into a tight hug. The pegasus did nothing in response except to return the griffon's embrace.

When they separated, Skyline looked firmly into Revy's eyes. "So are you going to help us, Revy?"

The griffon in question sighed. "I don't really know, Sky. I need some more time to think about this."

Skyline shook her head. "No worries, Rev, just sleep on it. I'm sure you'll make the right choice." The pegasus turned to head outside of the parlor. "I'm going to go get some zzz's before we carry out our plan tomorrow, so talk to us in the morning, okay? Later."

Revy held out a talon. "Skyline, wait!"

The pegasus turned around. "What is it, Revy?"

"If... if I say no..." Revy said hesitantly. "What'll you guys do?"

"I really hope you don't." Skyline mumbled. "If you refuse, we'll probably do it anyways. There's no stopping us when we've already gotten this far."

Revy sighed. "You're not leaving me here with much of a choice, are you?"

"I guess not." Skyline chuckled guiltily. "I'm sorry for pushing you into this, but we really need you. Just... sleep on it, okay?"

"... alright." The griffon muttered.

"Cool." Skyline pretended to yawn. "Well, I'm getting kinda tired, so night, Revs." She began to walk out of the parlor and towards the guest room where Cinnamon and Midnight were.

Revy called after the pegasus tiredly. "Night..."

--

Midnight's head perked up when Skyline entered the room. She quickly roused herself out of bed, and saw Cinnamon do the same. The two of them both looked at Skyline expectantly.

Skyline looked back at the two of them, confused. "What?"

Cinnamon spoke up first. "We heard ya'll yellin' downstairs. 'S everythin' alright?"

"Oh, that." Skyline shrugged. "Revy's just stubborn, I'm sure she'll come around."

"That sounded like some pretty heavy arguing to me." Midnight commented, concerned. "Are you sure everything's alright?"

Skyline waved her hoof around lazily to reassure the unicorn. "No worries, I know how she works. She'll act all tough and everything at first, but she'll eventually accept it. And..." She paused. "It's not like I really gave her much of a choice..." Skyline said guiltily.

"Well get some rest, Skyline." Midnight told her. "We'll need it for tomorrow if we're going to pull it off."

“Yeah...” Skyline’s voice trailed off. She dropped off her saddlebags and headed over to her bed. “Wait... there’s only two beds here!” Skyline frowned. “What kind of joke is this?”

Midnight giggled. “Well, Skyline... my offer from before is still open.”

The pegasus sighed. “You know Midnight, there’s a thing called taking a joke too far. Have you heard of it?”

The unicorn smiled. “I know, but you seem kinda down, so I wanted to cheer you up a bit.”

“Heh, you’re alright Midnight. You’re alright.” Skyline trotted over towards her bed.

Midnight recoiled at the approaching pegasus. “Whoa there, I didn’t say you could actually sleep next to me!”

Skyline frowned. “Why not?”

“I might get fillyfooler germs all over me.” Midnight chuckled.

Skyline rolled her eyes. “Ha ha very funny.” She said sarcastically. “Hey Cinnamon, scoot over a bit. Miss Immature over here’s afraid I’m infected with something.” Midnight stuck her tongue out at Skyline as the pegasus trotted over to Cinnamon’s bed.

Cinnamon made room for Skyline and let the pegasus settle in next to her. Skyline yawned. “Man, today’s been a long day...”

“Yer tellin’ me, partner.” Cinnamon nodded. “Goin’ round this city lookin’ fer a place to sleep sure takes the energy outta a pony.”

“You said it.” Skyline replied.

“Alright everypony, let’s get some sleep.” Cinnamon yawned. “We’ve gotta big day t’morrow...” Skyline and Cinnamon closed their eyes, and let the sweet blanket of sleep wrap around them.

...

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...?

Skyline and Cinnamon could hear whispers coming from the other side of the room. The two of them groggily sat up to find the source of the noise.

Cinnamon spoke up to identify the whispers. "... Midnight?" The unicorn across the room jumped at her name. "What're ya doin'?"

Midnight grinned sheepishly. "O-oh... um... what does it look like I'm doing?" She glanced nervously at the two other ponies, waiting for them to nod their head and respond to her. When they didn't, Midnight frowned and told the two what she was doing.

"I'm praying."

Cinnamon and Skyline shot uneasy looks at each other. They've forgotten for a moment exactly who Midnight Star was.

Cinnamon cleared her throat. "W-well... it's mighty good of ya ta be payin' yer respects ta the Goddess."

Midnight gave a confused look to Cinnamon. "What're you talking about? I don't see what's so special about me praying... everypony does it after all." Skyline and Cinnamon smiled nervously. "... they do, right?"

"Uh, look, Midnight." Skyline stuttered in her attempt to talk her way out of the situation. "Me and Cinnamon, um... you see, we're not exactly... uh..."

"We don't really do the whole prayer thing." Cinnamon admitted.

Midnight frowned. "What? Why not? Isn't it something everypony's supposed to be doing?"

Cinnamon hesitated. "Well... yeah... but..."

"Everypony does pray to the Goddess." Skyline jumped in, trying to help Cinnamon. "Everypony... but um, us."

Midnight gave a concerned look to the two ponies. "Excuse me?"

"I don't really do the whole prayer thing." Skyline told Midnight. "It sorta cramps my style, you know?"

"And ah usually collapse right into bed because o' work ta be spendin' mah time prayin'." Cinnamon added. "Ah know we're s'posed ta be payin' our respects ta the Goddess, but..."

"You two... don't pray?" Midnight gave worried glances to Skyline and Cinnamon. "Oh no... ohnonononono... this is not good..."

"What's wrong, Midnight?" Skyline asked. "Why do you look so flustered?"

"You two aren't praying!" Midnight said, panicking. "If you don't pray then you two aren't receiving the Goddess's blessing!"

Skyline chuckled, trying to brush off Midnight's concerns. "We don't need no Goddess's blessing to—"

"Don't say that!!" Midnight said fearfully. "If you don't properly pay your respects, the Goddess will..." The unicorn gulped.

"... will what, sugarcube?" Cinnamon tentatively asked.

Midnight shook her head. "My mentors back in the castle always told me that if a pony didn't do her prayers every night then the Goddess would punish her."

"With what?" Skyline inquired.

Midnight shivered. "They say that if you don't pray, your soul will become clouded with sin, and your heart will become as black as night."

Skyline snorted. "... that's it? Seriously?" Against her will, she started giggling.

"Stop it!" Midnight objected. "This is serious!"

"Yeah right, Midnight." Skyline laughed.

The unicorn puffed out her cheeks. "Listen, my teachers told me that—"

"Um, Midnight?" Cinnamon interrupted. "Pardon me fer cuttin' in, but me and Skyline haven't said a prayer fer as long as we can remember."

"W-what?" Cinnamon's revelation left Midnight feeling incredibly confused. "B-but, wait. If you haven't prayed then—huh?" The unicorn kneaded her forehead with her hooves. "If you don't pray then you end up the scum of society!"

"That obviously hasn't happened to us." Skyline commented. "I think Cinnamon and I haven't turned out to be evil ponies or anything like that. Neither have Pastel, Lily, or Ame for that matter."

"W-wait... you're saying they don't pray either?" Midnight stuttered.

"Darn tootin'." Cinnamon shrugged. "Look Midnight, ah don't know how it goes up there in the castle, but down here some of us don't have the luxury ta pray all the time."

"But you don't understand!" Midnight protested. "If you don't say your prayers than Celestia and Luna won't—" She suddenly became aware of what she was saying, and shut her mouth close.

"Celestia and Luna what...?" Skyline asked.

The unicorn shook her head. "Um... you see, if there aren't enough prayers to the Goddess before the Day of Ascension, uh..." Midnight gritted her teeth. "There won't be enough power for Celestia and Luna!"

Cinnamon frowned. "Are ya lyin' ta us, sugarcube?"

"No, no!" Midnight furiously shook her head. "I'm being one-hundred percent honest when I say that prayers are absolutely necessary for the Day of Ascension!"

"... if you say so, sugarcube." Cinnamon yawned. "Anyways, ah'm sure that there's more than enough ponies sayin' their prayers that the Goddess won't mind four or five o' them. Do whatcha want Midnight, jus' keep it quiet. Me and Skyline are headin' back ta sleep." She collapsed onto her pillow.

"Yeah, night Midnight. Don't let the Goddess strike you with lightning or whatever." Skyline followed suit and went back down.

Midnight frowned. She couldn't see why Skyline and Cinnamon weren't taking her seriously. King Themis and Queen Ambrosia always told her how important prayers were in order for the future to pass...

She sighed. Maybe a handful of ponies not saying their prayers wasn't too bad. It's not like she could really say anything to persuade the two other ponies to start praying every night.

And... if she told them the real reason why they needed to pray, then they would outright refuse to cooperate.

Midnight looked out to the stars again. Back up to the Summer Triangle. Alongside her prayers to the Goddess... she had one more prayer to make.

"Mother... if you're listening." Midnight said softly. "Tomorrow... I'm about to do something crazy alongside my two new friends. It really is a crazy idea, and I don't think I could see myself going along with them a week ago, but..."

"There's something about the two of them that just draws me towards them. I don't know what it is, but it's there." Midnight paused. "Mother... please ensure our safety tomorrow. I don't really ask much of you, but this is something incredibly important. Please, help us carry through this ridiculous plan..."

Midnight closed her eyes and felt the night breeze flow across her. She could feel the silky moonlight envelop her body as she concentrated on the memory of her mother. At once, she could feel her perspective shift outside of her body, and into the night sky. She was suddenly a part of the heavens, looking down upon the lands. Below her was Gyren with its bustling streets, and she could see the vast desert lands stretch beneath her across the east.

And beside Midnight was a body of stars arranged in a particular formation. There were no details that could be made out from her form. However, Midnight knew who she was. She met her every night after she prayed to the Goddess.

Alongside Midnight was her mother.

"Please, keep us safe." The unicorn whispered to the mound of stars.

Vega smiled softly and bowed her head. Her starry horn came in contact with Midnight's and the younger unicorn could feel a warm feeling envelop her body.

Midnight opened her eyes. She was back in Revy's guestroom, her eyes reflecting the night sky. She smiled.

The unicorn rested her head upon her pillow, the last ebbs of warmth flowing outside of her body.

--

The sun rose over the desert landscape, bathing the land with its light. Slivers of sunlight made its way inside the trio's room, shining harshly on the ponies' eyes. Slowly, they aroused themselves from their sleep, feeling their consciousnesses return to them.

The three of them made eye contact with each other. Skyline was the first to speak. "Is everypony ready?"

Midnight shook the tiredness away and nodded. Cinnamon did the same. Skyline gave a curt nod in response. The three ponies walked out of the guestroom and down the stairs, where Revy was waiting.

The griffon was wide awake, sitting in her chair. It looked like she didn't get a wink of sleep the night before. Skyline stepped up to confront her.

"Are you with us, Revy?" Skyline asked firmly. The griffon said nothing in response. "You do know that we're doing this with or without you, right?"

"... how would you know where to find the wolves without me?" Revy finally said, her voice cracking from staying up all night.

"You told me." Skyline answered. "The Ambassador Inn at the Merchant's District."

"I guess I did, huh..." Revy's voice trailed off.

"Hey, are ya'll okay?" Cinnamon asked the griffon.

Revy turned to the earth pony. "Cinnamon, can you tell me something?"

Cinnamon tilted her head in confusion. "Well ah don't see why not."

Revy stared firmly into Cinnamon's eyes. She said her words very slowly and carefully. "If you can't rescue Sundae, what're you going to do."

Skyline took a step forward. "Revy—"

Cinnamon bit Skyline's tail, pulling her back. "It's not a problem, sugarcube. Ah can answer her question." Skyline grimaced and took a step back, allowing Cinnamon to take point. The earth pony returned Revy's gaze.

"If ah can't rescue Sundae, then ah'm gonna go down fightin'."

Midnight took a step forward. "What are you talking about Cinnamon?" The unicorn asked, concerned. "If you take on those wolves, you'll die!"

"Ah know." Cinnamon said quietly. "But if ah don't take on those wolves, ah'll feel like a coward fer jus' sittin' back and watchin' everything happen."

"I thought you'd say something like that." Revy sighed and turned to Midnight. "And you, Midnight was it? Are you totally fine with going along with this crazy plan of theirs?"

Midnight bit her lip. "To tell you the truth... not really." Cinnamon and Skyline looked at Midnight in shock. "But." Midnight smiled at the two ponies. "But... now, I want to help them. I'm the only reason why this plan even has a shot of success after all."

"Don't you have a duty to perform?" Revy asked. "It's not like you're some random pony that the world won't bat an eyelash at when you're gone."

The unicorn showed Revy a small smile. "But I won't be gone. You'll be there to make sure I stay around, won't you?"

"Egh." Revy winced. "Geez... I guess there's no talking you ponies out of this, is there?"

Skyline grinned. "Nope. Not a single chance."

Revy sighed. "Oh well... I guess I can't do anything to persuade you guys..."

Midnight beamed. "That's great! So we have your support after all! Well, I guess the first thing we need to do is—"

Huh?

Midnight suddenly found herself blown away by a gust of wind. Her hooves were no longer on the ground, and she could feel something constricting her body. The neat interior of the parlor was now suddenly in disarray, and Midnight felt something cold and sharp being held against her back.

Before anypony could even blink, Midnight Star had found herself held captive by Revy.

Skyline stomped angrily towards the griffon. "What the heck do you think you're doing?!"

"I can't talk you out of this, Skyline!" Revy yelled. "That's why I'm gonna force you to stop!" She held out the struggling unicorn in her talons. "You need this here to carry out your plan, right? So if you don't have her, you can't do anything!"

"Why you—" Skyline tried to jump at Revy, but the griffon was too fast for her. Revy quickly dodged and busted out of her window.

Midnight kicked her hooves around. "L-let go of me!"

"Do you really want me to?" Revy asked menacingly. The griffon had flown up higher than Midnight would be able to survive if she was dropped down. The height made the unicorn dizzy.

"Get back here!" Skyline spread her wings and was about to take off after Revy, but Cinnamon held her back by the tail. "Cinnamon? What're you doing?!"

"If ya fly out there then you'll be torn apart!" Cinnamon shouted. "Ponies can't fly 'round these parts, remember?!"

"Tch!" Skyline slammed her hooves on the windowsill. "Revy! Come back here right now!!"

Revy shook her head. "I'm sorry, Skyline, but I'm doing this for your own good." She gestured towards Midnight. "If you don't have this pony right here, then you're forced to go home and continue living your everyday lives!"

"Didn't you hear?" Skyline argued back. "If we can't rescue Sundae then Cinnamon will—"

“You won’t let her throw her life away, will you Skyline!?” Revy shouted. “I know you’re not stupid enough to go try something with zero chance of success!”

“I—” Skyline clenched her teeth and struck the windowsill once again. “DAMMIT! REVY, COME BACK HERE!!”

Revy shot Skyline a sad smile. “I’m sorry Skyline, but I’m not about to let my friend throw her life away on some stupid plan.”

With those words, the griffon spread her wings and flew away as fast as she could, leaving Skyline and Cinnamon without a plan, and without a hope of rescuing Sundae.

Session 10

Revy soared through the sky in the early hours of the morning. Gyren was just beginning to rustle itself awake, the sketchy merchants of the night packing up their wares while wholesale merchants were just beginning to set up shop for the day. The streets were mostly deserted with the exception of the occasional drunk griffon floundering about in an attempt to return home, so it was relatively easy for Revy to stay out of sight so nobody would question why she had a unicorn in her grasp.

As soon as Revy felt like Cinnamon and Skyline wouldn't be able to follow her trail, she began to descend into a deserted back-alley. Noticing the decrease in altitude, Midnight began to struggle in an attempt to get free.

"H-hey, what do you think you're doing?!" Revy hissed at her captive. Midnight ignored her captor's protests and continued to shake herself free. "Would you stop—hey, are you listening?! I said sto—UGH!" Revy, annoyed at the unicorn's effort to break free, threw Midnight away from her, catching the unicorn by surprise. Thankfully, the fall wasn't that great, and Midnight stumbled onto the ground with only a few bruises and scratches.

Revy folded her wings and landed in front of Midnight. The unicorn backed away from her but found herself cornered with a brick wall in her path. "W-what are you doing?!" Midnight exclaimed. "I thought you were Skyline's friend!"

"I am Skyline's friend!!" Revy roared. Midnight cowered at the griffon's angry yell, and Revy, noticing the unicorn's fear, let out a tired sigh. "Look... I'm doing this for her own good. Without you around there's no way they'd be able to carry out their plan."

"So you're fine with just letting Sundae die?!" Midnight protested. "Don't you know how crushed Cinnamon would be? How angry Skyline would be at not being able to do anything to help her? If you let Sundae just die, then the two of them would—"

"Do you think I don't know how they'd feel?" Revy interrupted. "Do you think I don't know that empty feeling that'll stick to them after this? That I don't know the depths of the despair they'll end up going through? I know perfectly well how they'd feel if they couldn't save Sundae."

Midnight paused. "Then... why did you kidnap me?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Revy looked Midnight directly in the eye. "I'd rather they'd be depressed for years than be dead forever." She stomped her claws in the ground. "Can't you see that this mission of theirs is suicide?"

"It's not suicide!" Midnight shouted. "Their plan has a chance of working!"

"You'd have a better chance at finding a needle in a haystack!" Revy countered. "Look, you may think you know how the world works with all your book-smarts you got in that cushy little castle of yours, but I know how reality really is. Those wolves aren't going to sit on their paws and listen to your proposition like polite little dogs! The moment they see an opening they will tear you apart!"

Midnight stuttered trying to refute Revy's argument. "B-but if it's in a public place—"

"As if that means anything!" Revy said angrily. "You're thinking that the treaty would keep you protected in public, but all those wolves have to do is provoke you and the moment you lay a hoof on them BAM." She traced a line over her throat. "They can maim you in the name of self defense." Midnight timidly raised a hoof to object. "And if you're thinking that none of you would raise a hoof against them," Revy continued before Midnight could get a word out, "Remember that you have two hotheads just itching for some payback. I'm sure those wolves would be able to find the right button to push to provoke them."

Midnight bit her lip, trying to find a way to argue against the griffon's logic. "I... I...!" The unicorn sighed and kicked at the ground. "You're right..."

Revy's gaze softened after hearing Midnight's resignation. "It's fine... I'm sure you were blinded by their faith in that stupid plan of theirs."

"I should've noticed how easily our plan would fail." Midnight muttered to herself. "How am I supposed to advise the Princesses if I can't see the facts?"

"You're just soft." Revy muttered. "You need more experience in life. Enough to see how messed-up reality truly is."

Midnight collapsed to the ground, burying her head in her hooves. "But still... I don't want to let Sundae just die..."

"It's simple numbers." Revy said softly. "One dead pony is better than four." Midnight winced at how nonchalantly the griffon made that statement. Revy crouched to meet Midnight's eyes.

"Look, I know it sounds harsh, but if you're going to make something of yourself out in this world then you need to be able to face the facts. You ponies are near the bottom of the food-chain. Heck, if the Goddess didn't favor you ponies over every other species then you'd all probably be wiped out by now."

"The Goddess huh...?" Midnight let out a bitter laugh. "I know this would probably be strange coming from me, but sometimes I wonder if She really is looking out for us." The unicorn turned her eyes to the morning sky. "If She's as benevolent as everypony at the castle says... then why do we have to go through Collections all the time? It's not like I've lost faith in Her but... I just get to thinking sometimes."

"Heh, at least you have something you can have faith in." Revy said, clapping Midnight on the back to cheer her up. "Us griffons can only live off our wits and instincts. If something horrible happens to one of us, then we just have to deal with it. None of that insta-relief thing you ponies have with your prayers."

Midnight recoiled. "H-how do you know about that?"

"I make a lot of deals with ponies." Revy explained. "You can't form a mutual bond of trust with your client without sharing a bit of culture. Most of my colleagues probably know nothing about your weird prayer thing. Griffons usually despise ponies after all."

Midnight was still tense. "W-what else do you know about the Goddess...?"

"Not much aside from a few bits and pieces." Revy answered. "She supposedly came down to this world over a thousand years ago to establish the system we have today by creating all the laws and treaties we abide by. Really though, from my point of view, she only came down to help you ponies. Wolves can get by on their brutality and griffons like to keep to themselves, so you ponies are the only ones who really needed the Goddess's power."

"Is that it...?" Midnight asked tentatively.

"Yeah, only those in power ever really know anything about anything. Why?" Revy tilted her head. "Is there something wrong?"

Midnight quickly shook her head. "N-no reason! I'm just curious..."

"Is that it?" Revy asked. "Well, if you ask me, I think your whole belief system is a little bogus. Any record of the Goddess can only be found in our ancient treaties, and for all we know, it wasn't a Goddess at all that presided over the negotiations. It could've been some powerful being that's long dead. I don't even know why the wolves don't just ignore the treaty and storm your territory."

"Yeah... hehe..." Midnight let out a nervous laugh. She knew exactly what was keeping the wolves from invading their territory.

Revy shook her head. "Anyways... I'm glad you see my point. With you away from Skyline and Cinnamon, they won't get themselves into trouble." The griffon gazed back in the direction of her home. "Those wolves will be on their way back to their lands tomorrow morning..." she muttered. "We just have to keep you away from your friends until then..."

Midnight nodded. As much as she wanted to save Sundae... it was true that it was a hopeless endeavor. She just hoped that her new friends would be able to accept the loss...

"... Revy? That you?" The two in the alleyway perked their ears at the new voice. At the entrance to the alleyway was another griffon with a red scarf wrapped around her neck. She took a few steps to get closer to the two, and frowned once she identified the other griffon. "Revy! It is you! What are you doing in this alley?"

"Oh, hey. What's up Aili?" Revy greeted. She turned to Midnight. "Don't worry, she's one of my friends." Revy whispered. "We make deliveries with each other every once in a while, so she's cool."

"Not much." Aili looked behind the other griffon. "Is that a pony you have with you? Huh, I guess that rumor wasn't true then..."

"What rumor?" Revy asked. "What're you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter." Aili shrugged. "She's right there with you, so obviously that story's fake... wait." She frowned. "That pony's not blue, is she? And she's not a pegasus either..."

A strange feeling crept up over Revy. "Spit it out Aili. What's going on?"

"I didn't think you had any other close pony friends either." Aili continued, not hearing Revy. "You should pick your friends a bit better you know, I don't really have a problem with it but if everyone hears about how you have another pony friend your reputation will—"

"Stop screwing around and tell me already!" Revy shouted impatiently.

Aili recoiled in surprise. "Alright, alright!! Geez..." She cleared her throat. "I heard that your pony friend... uh, Fryline or something?"

"Skyline." Revy corrected. "Go on."

"Yeah, Skyline." Aili paused. "Well, apparently she's in the middle of the Merchant's District right now, drawing all sorts of attention to herself along with this one other orange pony. I don't know what the heck they're doing, but that orange pony did have a pretty sweet hat. I wouldn't mind—Revy? You okay? You don't look so good."

Aili was right. The color had drained out of Revy's face, reflecting the deathly fear that crept up over her body. "She couldn't be..." Revy muttered. "No, she's can't be that stupid..."

The other griffon shot a concerned look at Revy. "Do you need to get some rest or something? Maybe it was that bad seafood we ate last night..."

Revy frantically placed her claws on her friend's shoulders and began to shake her. "How was Skyline drawing attention to herself? What is she doing?!"

"Hey, hey!! Geez!!" Aili pushed Revy away from her. "Calm down, Revs... Fryline and that hat pony were apparently shouting for some wolves or something... must have a death wish or something, I don't know."

A horrible feeling rose up from Revy's stomach. "... Midnight, we have to go."

The unicorn gulped. "A-are they really...?"

"... Hey? What's up with you two?" Aili asked. "It looks like you're about to be sick..."

Revy suddenly unfurled her wings and took Midnight under her grip once again. She lifted herself up into the air and began to fly as fast as she could to the Merchant's District.

"H-hey!! Where are you going?!" Aili called after them. "Revy? Revy!?"

--

Skyline couldn't stop Cinnamon, no matter how hard she tried. The earth pony wouldn't listen to rhyme or reason; she was only concerned about getting her little sister back. After the two ponies simmered down after Midnight's kidnapping, something changed within Cinnamon.

All the thought and care that went into her plan, wasted. Without Midnight, Cinnamon knew that there was no chance of saving Sundae. She even knew that the odds were against them to begin with, but at least with Midnight, they had a somewhat realistic shot at rescuing Sundae.

The realization that it was now impossible to save Sundae broke something inside of Cinnamon. For the earth pony, the only reason why she was able to remain cheerful was the fact that she had a goal that needed to be attained, and she wanted to greet her little sister with a smile once they were reunited.

Now, the possibility of success has been reduced to zero, and alongside it, the fragile cheerful disposition Cinnamon's been trying to keep up the past few days.

It felt like there was nothing left inside of her. Cinnamon had the rest of the Apple family, but most of them were just relatives that only visited on certain occasions. Normally, she only lived with her brother and sister, Fritter and Sundae.

But now Fritter was dead, and Sundae was soon to follow.

Cinnamon refused to accept this. She refused to just stand down and allow her little sister to be sent off to the slaughterhouse when she was so close to rescuing her. The probability of success may have been zero, but Cinnamon believed that she could increase that amount, if only by a fraction.

It was a false belief, and Cinnamon knew that. She knew that she was marching off to her death right this moment, yet for some reason, she didn't care. If she had to choose between life alone or death with her loved one, her decision was clear.

Not even Skyline's voice could get through to her. "What about Midnight?!" The pegasus yelled. "And what about the others back in Ponyville?! Lily, Amethyst, Pastel, are you just gonna leave them behind?!"

"Don't worry, Skyline." Cinnamon said flatly. "Ah ain't gonna die... ah'm gonna save Sundae and head back home with her..."

"You idiot!" Skyline shouted. "This is suicide!!"

"So what?!" Cinnamon snapped back. "It's not like we have a place ta go back to! If we head on back to Ponyville after this, we won't be able ta stay! And ya knew this when ya decided to come along with me!"

Skyline was taken aback. It was true. Even if their original plan had worked and they managed to sneak Sundae right under their noses, if they returned to Ponyville with her then a target would be painted over their village. The key part of the plan aside from Midnight was that Cinnamon and Skyline acted on their own. If they acted independently then any accusations of violating the treaty would fall onto them, and Ponyville would be spared the brunt of the punishment breaking the treaty entails.

The moment they had stepped out of Ponyville, the they'd lost any right they had to call the small village their home.

Skyline gritted her teeth. "But still! If you die, then what will I have to tell the others? Do you really want me to be the one who makes Lily cry?!"

"She'll cry if we come back without Sundae too." Cinnamon muttered. "Ah have ta try... who knows, maybe a miracle will happen..." The earth pony pushed her way past Skyline and began to make her way towards the Merchant's District.

"Wait, Cinnamon, DARN IT!" Skyline huffed and stomped her hoof. "If you're going to do something crazy like this, then I'm coming with you!"

Cinnamon smiled. "Are ya sure about that sugarcube? Ah ain't askin' ya ta risk yer life any more than ya have already."

"I'm not going to just let you march off to your execution." Skyline said quietly. "If I come along... it might raise our chances a little. Even if it's such a small raise that our

probability is pretty much still zero, if I can help you survive, it'll be worth sticking my neck out for you. Besides," She smiled. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Cinnamon chuckled. "We two here are some silly ponies, ain't we?"

"You got that right, Cinnamon." Skyline responded.

The two ponies made their way into the Merchant's District to carry out their gambit. It was still early but business was beginning to pick up. Merchants lined the streets, filling the air with noise. However, Cinnamon and Skyline could hear nothing but their own frantically beating hearts.

The two ponies took a deep breath and prepared to put their lives on the line.

"WOLVES! HEY COLLECTION WOLVES!!" The two of them called out. "WE KNOW YOU'RE HERE, SO COME OUT ALREADY!!"

Session 11

Revy flew over the Merchant's District, scanning the streets for Skyline and Cinnamon. "Can you find them?" Midnight shouted, trying to get herself heard over the wind.

"I'm looking, I'm looking!!" Revy called back. She frantically examined the streets for a glimpse of the two ponies. The crowds haven't begun to form yet, so why was Revy having such a hard time finding them?

"Hey, over there!!" Midnight yelled. She gestured with her head towards a crowd that was gathering at the far end of the district.

"I got it!!" Revy spread her wings and dived towards the crowd. As they neared the crowd, she caught sight of a blue and an orange pony in the center. "It's them! I think we can stop them before anything bad happens!"

"What're you going to do?" Midnight called out.

"Probably just knock them out and keep 'em down for a while!" Revy answered. "That way they won't be able to pull off any stupid tricks like thi—crap!!"

"What is it Re—" Midnight stopped midsentence upon catching what the griffon saw. "Oh dear."

--

"I heard somepony's looking for us?" Three of the wolves involved in Ponyville's Collection were pushing their way towards Cinnamon and Skyline. The two ponies tensed up and raised their guards. The leader of the pack took a step forward. "You two look familiar. Where did I see you two before...?"

"You took my sister." Cinnamon said coldly, her voice shaking. "Ah want her back."

"Sister? Uhh... oh yeah!" The wolf grinned upon remembering. "You're related to that filly we took in Ponyville, aren't you?"

“Damn straight ah am!!” Cinnamon yelled angrily. “And ya’ll have better not harmed a single hair on her head!”

“Oh don’t worry, we wouldn’t damage our products.” The wolf chuckled. “We pride ourselves in our work after all. If we damage our products too badly then our pack’s reputation would be sunk.”

Cinnamon gritted her teeth. She could feel the blood boiling inside of her.

“Although I’m surprised you came all this way to see her.” The wolf said. “We don’t usually get ponies following us. They’re usually smart enough to stay away and move on with their pathetic lives. If you wanted to come with us you should’ve just said so, we’d be glad to take volunteers. Like your brother—oh wait. We killed him.” He smirked. “Sorry about that, it was probably a pain to clean up, wasn’t it?”

Cinnamon’s temper was about to explode, but Skyline stepped forward before she could do anything. “Listen, wolf. We wanna make a deal with you.”

“What’re ya talkin’ about?” Cinnamon hissed. “We don’t got Midnight here ta barter with!”

“It’s all we got!” Skyline whispered back. “Do you have any other ideas?”

Cinnamon grimaced and shook her head. “You do the talkin’ then, Sky. Ah don’t think ah can negotiate with those... monsters.”

“You said you had a deal?” The wolf said. “Stop whispering and tell me what it is. Oh, and I have a name by the way, it’s Fang. I thought you might want to know who’ll have the pleasure of skinning that filly alive later on.”

Cinnamon was about to jump at him, but Skyline stood in her way. “Look, I’ve got a pretty sweet deal to make with you, so you better listen up.”

Fang chuckled. “Go ahead. Shoot.”

“You see...” Skyline said slowly. “We’d like to trade somepony for Sundae...”

“A trade?!” Fang burst out laughing. “Are you serious? Wow, I didn’t know you ponies had it in you to sacrifice one of your own like that. So what’s it gonna be then? Filly for

pegasus? Or is the mare with the hat going to step up? I could use a new hat by the way, mine's getting pretty worn out."

"Neither of us!" Skyline shouted.

"Oh? Then who?" Fang scratched his head. "Unless you've got an invisible pony with you, I don't see what other trade you can make.

"We're not stupid." Skyline said. "If we just brought her here, then you'd snatch her up right away without giving Sundae back to us."

"Heh." Fang snorted. "Well who is this pony then? What makes her so great that I should bother digging that filly up from her cage?"

Skyline smirked. "You might've heard of her. Her name is—Midnight?!" The pegasus caught sight of the unicorn in the crowd, alongside Revy.

"Midnight?" Fang parroted. "So we have a name, big deal. How's this make me wanna trade?"

"Er, she's a very important pony in our society!" Skyline stuttered, trying to recover from unexpectedly seeing the unicorn again. Maybe there was actually a shot for this to work. "You see," Skyline continued, "She is royalty!"

"Royalty?" Fang said disbelievingly. "I don't really care much for your society, but I'm pretty sure your royalty was Treemis, Hambersa, Celeslia, and Luna or something. None of those names come close to sounding like Midnight."

Skyline was starting to sweat. "That's because... uh..."

"That's because I'm going to be the Princesses' advisor in the future."

The wolves and the crowd shifted their gaze to the new actor in this twisted play. Midnight took a step forward to distinguish herself. "I am Midnight Star, and I am the adopted daughter of King Themis and Queen Ambrosia." The unicorn looked back at Revy, who remained undistinguished in the crowd. Midnight didn't really know what she was doing, but it was the only way that things could possibly turn out alright.

"I remember you!" Fang exclaimed. "You're that pony who actually knew a bit about politics! So you're 'royalty' huh?"

Midnight timidly nodded. "I-I'm a key player in the upcoming Day of Ascension." The unicorn stuttered, trying to sell herself. "I-I'm sure I'm much more valuable than a filly like Sundae!"

"The Day of Ascension! Seriously? Seriously! Hmhmhm... ahahahahahah!!" Fang burst into maniacal laughter. Midnight and the other ponies were taken aback. "So you ponies actually believe in that bull, do you?" Fang questioned, smirking. "Don't you know? If there was any reason to believe that the Day of Ascension was anything more than an old folktale, then us wolves would have already taken all steps needed to stop it!" He stomped his paw down hard into the ground, causing the ponies to recoil.

"The Goddess left this world a long time ago." Fang growled. "She abandoned all Her subjects and left them on this world to rot."

"That's not true..." Midnight muttered.

"It is true!!" Fang shouted. "If the Goddess was really still around, then why does she let these Collections take place? Wouldn't she try to make the world some idealistic fantasy where everyone and everything lives in peace and co-existence? Hell, she probably never existed in the first place!!"

Midnight recoiled, remembering her earlier conversation with Revy. How she doubted the benevolence of the Goddess.

Yet... she didn't doubt her existence. As a fact, Midnight knew the Goddess 'existed'.

There was no need to correct the wolves though. "Maybe you're right." Midnight lied. "But I'm still a member of the royal family. Think about how valuable I am, you could hold me for a heavy ransom if you wanted to. The King and Queen would go to great lengths to get me back."

"That's only if what you say is true, and you are connected to the royal family." Fang growled. "Show me proof."

"Only if you show me proof that Sundae's still alive." Midnight countered.

Fang bared his teeth. "Watch yourself, pony. I can rip you to shreds at any moment." He gestured to the two wolves behind him. "You two, fetch the cage."

"B-but boss, are ya really gonna negotiate with these ponies?" One of the wolves asked.

Fang struck the wolf across the face. "Just follow my orders, you mutt!!" The two wolves hurriedly pushed past the crowd to retrieve the cage Sundae was kept in. He turned to Midnight. "I'll play your little game, but for now, go stand over with the other two ponies."

Midnight cautiously made her way towards Cinnamon and Skyline. When she arrived next to them, Skyline spoke to her in hushed tones. "Where's Revy? Did she let you go or something?"

"She's in the crowd, watching us." Midnight answered. "But what do you think you're doing? Calling out those wolves when you don't even have a plan anymore? Are you two crazy?"

"Ah want Sundae back." Cinnamon whispered. "And ah'll get her back even if it kills me."

"Hey!" Fang yelled. "Stop that whispering and face me!" The three ponies jumped and hurriedly complied with the wolf's demand. "That's better." Fang smirked. "My subordinates should be back with your sister any moment now... ah, there they are."

The crowd quickly separated to allow for the two wolves to reenter the circle, dragging behind them a large cage.

"C-Cinnamon!!" A voice yelled out from the cage.

"Sundae!!" Cinnamon ran over to the cage to meet her little sister. They held each other's hooves through the metal bars of the cage, as if they had to confirm the fact that the both of them were really together.

"Cinnamon... ah thought ah'd never see ya again..." Sundae sobbed.

"Don't worry I'll sis, ah'm here ta get you out of here!" Cinnamon said reassuringly.

"What about us?" A weak voice called out from the corner of the cage. Cinnamon turned and saw the other two ponies who were taken during the Collection. The stallion was wrapped in bloody bandages and the mare held him in her arms, trying to comfort him. "Are you going to save us too?" She asked.

Cinnamon hesitated. She was so caught up in rescuing Sundae that she completely forgot about the other two ponies. "Ah..."

"That's enough." Fang said coldly. He gestured for the two wolves to pull Cinnamon away from the cage.

"C-Cinnamon!" Sundae cried out as their hooves disconnected from each other.
"Cinnamon!!"

Cinnamon's heart ached to watch her sister cry the way she did. "Don't worry sis... you'll be outta there in a jiffy."

"D-do ya promise?" Sundae asked, tears running down her face.

Cinnamon nodded. "Ah promise."

"Isn't this cute?" Fang said, disgusted. "Stop it with this sappy crap and show me proof that this Midnight is really who she says she is."

Midnight Star nodded and took a step forward. "The only way I can prove my identity is by telling you a piece of information that nopony outside of the royal family would know."

Fang chuckled. "It'd have to be something us wolves would know too. Otherwise you could be making it all up."

"... How long have you been in the Collection business?" Midnight asked quietly.

"Long enough to have been around the block a few times." Fang answered cryptically.

Midnight chose her words carefully. "So... I'm assuming you have connections with the higher-ups in your nation then? You do hold a position of responsibility after all."

"I've been in contact with them. I don't see why that... oh. Heh, well ain't this interesting." Fang smirked. "I suppose you're going to tell me what this 'secret weapon' you ponies have then?"

Cinnamon and Skyline looked at Midnight. The unicorn ignored their curious gazes and nodded.

"If you tell me what it is, I guess I'd have to believe that you're a member of the royal family. Only those in the highest of positions know what that weapon is!"

"Uh... what weapon, boss?" One of the subordinate wolves asked.

Fang shot him a disgusted look. "Claw your way up to where I am one day, and maybe you'll find out." He turned back to Midnight. "So why don't you tell me what this weapon is then? If you really are a member of the royal family that is."

Midnight nodded and walked over to the wolf. Fang lowered his head for the unicorn to whisper to him the identity of the secret weapon. She said it as quietly as possible to make sure no one else would be able to discern her words.

"_____."

Fang's eyes lit up. "Oh hoh, I guess you're the real deal then!"

Midnight took a step back, her eyes downcast. She ignored the way Skyline and Cinnamon looked at her, confused. No matter what happens, Midnight hoped she would never have to reveal the identity of the secret weapon to her friends.

Fang clapped his paws together. "Negotiations are open then!" He turned to Cinnamon. "You just wanted your sister, didn't you?"

Cinnamon hesitated. "I... uh..."

"We want all of them!" Skyline said fiercely. "Not just Sundae, but the mare and stallion too!"

Fang frowned. "If we give you three for one, then we'd be failing to meet the Quota."

"But I'm worth more than three, aren't I?" Midnight asked.

"Yeah, but we'd rather not have to go back and collect more ponies... ah!" Fang's eyes lit up. "How about this, you only get two of them."

The mare in the cage had a horrified expression. She knew that Cinnamon would definitely retrieve Sundae, meaning that she had to be separated from her lover.

"That ain't fair!" Cinnamon stomped. "Why can't we have all o' them!?"

"My bosses would be more... forgiving if I was only one short. Even if I brought them a prize such as little Midnight here." Fang smirked. "Besides, I think it'll be a good experience for you if you had to decide who lives and who dies."

Cinnamon hoofed at the ground in anger. Skyline gave her a pat on the back. "Listen Cinnamon," the pegasus whispered, "All we need to do is get them to open that cage. Once they do, we can grab Sundae and the other two and make a dash for it."

"Are ya sure that griffon of yers will come in ta help us?" Cinnamon hissed. "She already betrayed ya once before!"

"She... she was just looking out for me." Skyline muttered. "I'm sure she'll swoop down and save us when she has to."

"Well ponies?" Fang said impatiently. "I'm waiting."

Cinnamon turned to the mare in the cage. The mare looked back at her. "Listen..." The mare said. "I don't care about my life. Just save my husband, okay?"

The earth pony examined the wounded stallion. His breathing was heavy and it looked like he was about to kick the bucket at any moment. Cinnamon bit her lip. Even if they could make a run for it, there was no way the stallion would be able to keep up with them.

Cinnamon sighed and turned to the wolf. "Ah want my sister and the mare." She said quietly.

The mare had a panicked expression on her face. "Wait, what are you doing?! Don't take me, take my husband!"

One of the wolves opened the cage. Sundae came leaping out and jumped on top of her sister. "Cinnamon..." she sobbed. "Thank you... thank you..."

The earth pony gave her sister a reassuring pat on the head, but the screams from inside of the cage kept her from feeling relieved.

"LET ME GO!!" The mare screamed. "I don't want—I DON'T WANT TO BE SET FREE!" The two wolves were forcing her out of the cage. The mare's hooves reached towards her husband, frantically trying to take him with her.

Cinnamon passed Sundae to Midnight and turned to Skyline. The pegasus gave a single, slow nod.

Time appeared to slow down as they leapt into action. The two ponies dashed towards the cage as the wolves were just about to exit out of it with the mare, throwing their full weight into kicking the two wolves in the head. The surprise attack caught the wolves off guard, and the heavy blows to their heads sent them spiraling into the cage, unconscious.

"I'll take this side, you take the other!!" Skyline shouted. The two ponies lifted up the stallion from the floor, and made a break to the outside. As they entered the sunlight, however, Fang stood in front of them, blocking their way.

"I thought you'd try to pull something like this." Fang smirked. "I'll have you know that now that you've inflicted damage upon my subordinates, you lost any of the protection you may have had under the treaty." He unsheathed his claws. "Anything I'll do to you, I did in the name of self-defense."

"As if we'd sit around and let you kill us!" Skyline shouted. "Midnight, Sundae, RUN!!" Everypony attempted to make a break for it, and the circle of griffons around them dispersed, amused at the spectacle that was going on in front of them.

"Isn't that cute?" Fang chuckled. "They think they can escape." He let out a shrill whistle. "Show yourself boys!!"

When Fang sent his two subordinates to fetch the cage, every wolf in the pack came along with them. The wolves suddenly seemed to appear from everywhere—from the alleyways, from the crowds, even from the merchant booths. The griffons quickly began to disperse into the sky after seeing the wolves appear, not wanting to get caught up in the bloodbath that was sure to follow.

The ponies were surrounded. Wolves blocked all their paths, and the sky was filled with griffons enjoying the show. If Skyline were to take flight right now, the griffons would just knock her back down to continue the entertainment.

The ponies huddled together as the circle of wolves began to close in on them. The mare unsuccessfully shielded the stallion from the wolves sight, and Skyline, Cinnamon, and Midnight stood around the two other ponies and Sundae in an effort to protect them.

"This plan went down south pretty quick, didn't it?" Skyline commented.

"Sure would be great if Revy'd come swoopin' in right about now, wouldn't it?" Cinnamon said.

"S-sis...?" Sundae stuttered. "Are we gonna make it outta here okay?"

Cinnamon smiled at her sister. Even if they were going to die, she was glad she got to be reunited with Sundae before that time. "O' course we are." Cinnamon lied. "Me and Skyline here are gonna beat up all these bad wolves."

"Beat all of us up?" Fang mocked. "Sure, why not? And while we're at it, why don't I clean your hooves and let you escape before we get our asses handed to us?"

The three ponies stood their ground as the circle of wolves continued to slowly close in on them. "Hey Midnight?" Cinnamon said. "Take care of Sundae, will ya?"

"What are you saying?!" Midnight objected. "You'll be there to take care of her yourself after this!"

Cinnamon chuckled. "It's nice of ya to be all optimistic, but ah don't think we can get out o' this one unharmed." She turned to Skyline. "Ya sure Revy's gonna come for us?"

Skyline nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure. She's just waiting for the right moment."

"Ah gotcha." The earth pony turned back to Midnight. "When Revy comes to save ya'll... make sure ya break the news gently ta Lily and the others when ya get back ta Ponyville. Promise?"

Midnight stayed silent. To agree to that promise would be the same thing as admitting Skyline and Cinnamon were about to die. She wanted to hold off accepting that fact until she absolutely had to.

"Done with your last words?" Fang barked. "I'm sure you've had enough time to say your goodbyes and everything. Don't worry, we won't kill you now, no, we'll keep you alive until we get home so we can slowly roast you. It'll be great! Well, not for you ponies obviously, but... you get the point." He smirked at the group of ponies and raised a claw. "All right, get 'em boys!!"

The circle of wolves all pounced at the same moment. Sundae and the mare shut their eyes, and Midnight, Skyline, and Cinnamon steeled themselves to fight.

The harsh sound of bones breaking suddenly echoed through the air. Something suddenly came swooping down from the sky, driving its talons straight through the skulls of the two wolves closest to the ponies. The wolves weren't even given the time to register the fact that their heads were caving in on them.

Revy kept her claws firmly grasped on the dead wolves, and flung them around in a circle, knocking the other wolves away with the momentum. As soon as the wolves were pushed back, Revy released the dead carcasses and threw them at the wolves, knocking a couple of them over.

Fang looked at Revy in surprise, noticing the red scarf around her neck. "A griffon? And not just a regular one, but a griffon of status?"

"Damn straight I'm a griffon." Revy spat, using the ground to wipe the blood off her talons. "Got a problem with that?"

Fang chuckled. "Well, I never thought I'd see the day when a proud griffon such as yourself would try to save a group of ponies.

"Guess you see something new every day then." Revy muttered.

"Revy!" Skyline shouted. "It's about time, I was getting a little antsy!"

The griffon struck Skyline across the face. "You idiot! What do you think you're doing!?"

Skyline glared at Revy. "Saving Sundae of course."

Revy shook her head. "Ugh, of all the—" She paused. The wolves were already back up on their paws and were brushing the dust off. They did not look happy. "I'll chew you out later Skyline." Revy muttered. "For now, you all should run."

"Change of plans, boys." Fang growled. "Kill the griffon first. Then we'll take those ponies." The wolves smirked. It wasn't often that they had the opportunity to tear a griffon apart.

"I'll distract them." Revy hissed. "Just run, okay?"

“There’s like twenty of them Revs!” Skyline objected. “There’s no way you’d be able to—”

“If I can’t take them on, then you sure as hell can’t, Skyline!” Revy stomped.

Skyline bit her lip. “You better come outta this alive, Revy! Come on guys!!” Skyline and Cinnamon lifted up the stallion, and the group of ponies began to make their escape.

“Keep those ponies from escaping!” Fang barked. “And make sure that griffon doesn’t go airborne!!”

Revy moved to keep the wolves from pursuing the ponies. She spread her wings to intercept them, and swiped at the wolves with her talons. Now that the wolves had their guards up, they were agile enough not to let any of Revy’s attacks connect with them. It was a single griffon against twenty wolves, yet somehow Revy managed to stand her ground against them.

Five of the wolves managed to get past the griffon and were making a mad dash towards the ponies. “Like hell I’d let you!!” Revy screeched, turning around and boosting herself ahead of them with her wings. She attempted to make a swipe at those wolves, but she felt something hit her back.

As she lifted off, one of the wolves pounced on top of her, digging their claws deep in her back.

“You want a ride, you mutt?!” Revy shouted. “I’ll give you a ride!” She leaped up into the air and drove her back straight into the ground. She heard a satisfying cracking sound as she felt the wolf’s claws leave her. Revy quickly regained her form before any of the wolves can strike her underside, and knocked away two wolves who were about to pounce on her.

The five wolves ahead of her were beginning to close the distance between them and the ponies. Behind Revy were eleven or twelve more of them, but the griffon’s top priority was the five wolves closing in on the ponies. She lifted off and glided towards those wolves, ignoring the gaping wound in her back. Revy swiped at the wolves, managing to strike through one of them. The wolf tripped over himself, the pain from his slashed back preventing him from keeping his balance.

The two of the other four wolves continued to chase the ponies while the others engaged Revy in combat. They swiftly jumped at the griffon simultaneously, attempting

to land a blow on her with their claws. Revy skillfully sidestepped the wolves, but she wasn't quick enough to completely escape harm. One of the wolves managed to clip her wing, leaving a large cut.

Revy bit back to endure the pain and grabbed one of the wolves, smashing him into the other wolf. It wasn't enough to kill them, but it was enough to keep them from chasing the ponies. She quickly tried to lift off to catch the other wolves, but the gash in her wing prevented her from taking flight. Cursing, she broke off and started sprinting towards the wolves. She was about to catch up to them when—

“Revy! Behind you!!”

The griffon was momentarily distracted by the warning. “Aili? What—”

She suddenly felt something sharp cut through her flesh in multiple places. The mass of wolves behind her managed to catch up to her, and they all leapt upon her at once. Their claws all dug deep inside her flesh, and the pain almost knocked Revy unconscious.

Struggling, she tried to shake off the wolves. “G-get off me!” She coughed out blood. She could feel the wolves digging even deeper into her body, inflicting what'll end up being fatal wounds. Despite this, she continued to struggle. “I... I have to make sure they escape...” Revy said weakly.

“I don't know why you're willing to give up your life to save some ponies.” Fang commented, leisurely walking up to Revy. He gestured to the wolves. “That's enough, I want to keep her alive for just a bit longer.

Revy could feel the claws exit out of her body. Fresh blood flowed out of the numerous gaping holes that perforated through her flesh. “A wolf like you wouldn't understand...” she muttered.

“I probably won't.” Fang shrugged. “Even though you killed some of my subordinate, I must say it was entertaining. It's not like I can't get more fodder like them anyways.”

Revy spat blood at the wolf. “You're despicable.”

Fang chuckled. “I probably am. It's all in good fun regardless of how you think of me.”

“Revy!!” Aili came flying down to the injured griffon.

The wolves moved to stop her, but Fang held them back. "Don't. She's done nothing to harm us. Yet."

"Heh..." Revy coughed. "I blame you for this, Aili. Just saying."

Aili bit back her tears. "This is no time to joke around, Revy!!" She angrily turned to Fang. "Why?! Why did you do this to her?!"

"She killed some of our own." Fang said coldly. "She had it coming to her."

Aili clenched her talons. "Hey, Aili?" Revy mumbled. "Do me a favor, and get outta here."

"W-what?" Aili asked, her voice shaking. "W-what are you saying, Revy?"

"There's no point in you sticking around to watch me die." Revy said quietly. "I don't think I can recover from something like this."

Aili tried to object. "But—"

"JUST GO!!" Revy exploded. Aili recoiled, tears beginning to cloud her eyes. "Just go..." Revy repeated. "You have a life to live. Mine's over."

"... fine." Aili mumbled, trying to keep herself from crying. She lifted herself off from the ground and gave Revy one last look. "I hate you for making me do this, Revy."

Revy chuckled. "I hate you too." She smiled. "Be safe, okay?"

Aili nodded and flew away from her dying friend. Fang smirked. "Isn't that noble of you? Pushing away your friend like that?"

"Griffons don't like long goodbyes." Revy muttered. "If one of us dies, we just shrug and move on."

"But wasn't that a little cold of you?" Fang asked. "Just pushing her away like that?"

"I have nothing else to say to scum like you." Revy said flatly.

Fang chuckled. "Very well then. But you'll be able to see your pony friends once more before you die. Don't worry about that. And what do you know." He smirked. "Here they come already."

The ponies were being herded back towards Fang and Revy. Skyline and Cinnamon's eyes were darting around, looking for an opening to escape, while Midnight was trying her best to comfort Sundae. The mare and the stallion were at the back, the stallion being carried by a pair of wolves.

Skyline's eyes widened in fear as soon as she saw Revy. "Oh no!" She dashed towards the griffon. "Revs, are you okay?!"

"Do I look okay to you, dweeb?" Revy coughed. "So... you guys couldn't get away. I knew this plan wasn't going to work..."

The other ponies looked down dejectedly. There was no way to escape anymore. They were surrounded on all sides and nobody was coming to save them.

Midnight spoke up to try and save their hopeless situation. "H-hey... is that deal still open? You can just take me and—"

"Ha, I never planned to go along with your deal in the first place!" Fang laughed. "I was just waiting for you ponies to pull a stunt like that so we could take you all in. The griffon was admittedly unplanned for, but it all worked out for me in the end."

Midnight and the other ponies shrunk.

"Although..." Fang smirked. "I don't mind letting those two older ponies get away from us."

The mare's ears perked up. "R-really? You're going to let us go?"

"Sure, why not?" Fang chuckled. "Younger meat is better after all. You can just take your mate or whatever and go."

The mare hurriedly lifted up the stallion the best she could and tried to get away. Midnight and the others looked after her, wishing the wolves would let them go too.

As soon as the two ponies got out of earshot, Fang leaned over to one of his subordinates and whispered something in his ear. The wolf grinned. "Gladly, boss."

The ponies and Revy looked quizzically at what the wolf was doing. He sauntered over to one of the booths on the side of the road, one of the few that were still open, as most of the other merchants abandoned their booths to avoid the rampaging wolves. He smacked down a couple coins onto the counter.

“Do you have any crossbows in stock?” The wolf asked the griffon.

The ponies looked on in fear as the merchant passed a loaded crossbow to the wolf. “You can’t...” Midnight said, her voice shaking. “You said you’d let them go!!”

Fang grinned. “I did let them go. They’re no longer our hostages anymore.” The other wolf positioned the crossbow and prepared to fire.

“They’re just targets now.”

The wolf pulled the trigger, and a bolt landed directly in the back of the mare’s skull, causing her to crumple to the ground.

The ponies averted their eyes as the wolf launched a second bolt, killing the stallion. They were afraid of what was going to come next.

“Now for the griffon.” Fang said nonchalantly. He laid a claw over Revy’s throat.

“Revy!!” Skyline called out. She tried to tackle Fang, but one of the wolves kept the pegasus from attacking. Fang looked upon the pegasus with an expression of bemusement.

Revy smiled a bloody smile at her friend. “Do me a favor, Sky. Give them hell when I’m gone.”

Skyline’s body shivered. “R-Revy... I...”

Schluck.

Fang drove his claw through Revy’s neck, killing her instantly. Blood sprayed across the ground, and Skyline and the others looked upon the sight with horror and revulsion.

“You... YOU MONSTER!!” Skyline cried out madly. “YOU KILLED HER!! YOU KILLED REVY!! I—oof!” The wolf keeping her restrained landed a swift blow to her stomach, causing Skyline to reel back in pain.

Fang laughed. “You know what? We only need three ponies to fulfill our quota. No need for a fourth wheel.” He clicked his claws together. “How about I go ahead and skin you alive? Come on, it’ll be fun.” Fang stepped closer to the pegasus pony.

Two wolves held Skyline down. The pegasus struggled against their grasps, trying her hardest to break free. Fang grinned and placed a claw over Skyline’s stomach. “How about I do this like I did to that orange pony’s brother, shall I?” He pushed the claw forward, and Skyline could feel the small puncture being made in her skin.

An uncontrollable fear swept over Skyline. “No... NO!!” She shook and struggled and tried to break free, but to no avail. “LET GO OF ME!! LET GO!!!”

Fang smirked. “I can tell this is going to be fun. I haven’t even really done anything to you yet.”

Skyline’s frightened screams quickly turned into frightened sobs. “I... I don’t want to die...”

A strange sensation washed over Midnight. The sight of Skyline sobbing in fear shifted something inside of her brain. One moment, it felt like she could barely breathe from the terror and the next... it felt like she was no longer in control of her body.

Time slowed down for Midnight. She felt her body spring into action before her mind could register what she was doing. It was like she was acting off of complete instinct. The world in front of her passed by in slow motion as her body dashed forward and knocked itself into one of the wolves restraining Skyline. She thought she could hear Fang yell something angrily after that, but in this strange state she couldn’t discern what it was. All she knew was that her actions will keep Skyline alive for just a bit longer.

The same couldn’t be said for Midnight Star.

When the world restored itself to its original state, she found a claw shoved directly into her chest. Blood poured out of the wound, and Midnight could feel herself becoming lightheaded. Her eyes met with the owner of the claw, and saw the anger in Fang’s eyes.

When the wolf realized what he just did, he quickly removed his claw from Midnight's body. "Dammit!! What did you make me do?!" He shouted angrily at the unicorn.

Midnight herself didn't know what just happened. While she pushed the wolves away from Skyline, Fang accidentally ended up gouging the unicorn instead.

Blood gurgled up Midnight's throat. Fang was in a rage for stabbing his asset, but Midnight ceased to notice even that. She barely noticed the world around her anymore. Sundae's sobs, Skyline staring at her in shock, Cinnamon's distraught cries. Midnight didn't notice any of it.

Was this what it was like to die?

Tears welled up in Midnight's eyes as she felt the life ebb out of her. There was still so much she had to do, she couldn't die here!

Celestia... Luna... Midnight would regret leaving them alone. She regretted never being able to play with Luna, never being able to talk with Celestia. Everything that she won't be able to do after she died, she regretted it.

Midnight felt the darkness of death wash over her consciousness. Is this it? Is this really it?

The end.

--

Oh... is that the light at the end of the tunnel that everypony says you see when you die? It feels like such a warm, comforting light.

It's so comforting. That light. So warm and so nice. The way it's all around me. The way it's inside of me. It feels so nice. Like I can sleep forever.

Wait... why is this light still growing? It doesn't feel so nice anymore. It feels like I'm burning. It feels like I'm boiling. I don't like this light anymore. Make it go away.

It keeps growing stronger. Why is it like this? Why does it continue to burn me? Why won't it go away?

It hurts. Make it stop. I don't want this. Why do I feel this way? Death should be painless. I thought it was an eternal sleep. It hurts.

I'm breaking. My body is tearing itself apart. What's happening? Why does it hurt so much? It won't stop. It just grows more powerful.

I hate it. This feeling. I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it. Why is death so painful? Is this even death? Or am I alive? What's going on?

I miss my friends. I miss them all. I miss Celestia. I miss Luna. I miss Skyline. I miss Cinnamon. I miss Lily. I miss Pastel. I miss Amethyst.

SYSTEM ERROR.

I miss Spike. I miss Rainbow Dash. I miss Applejack. I miss Fluttershy. I miss Pinkie Pie. I miss Rarity.

Spike? Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Fluttershy? Pinkie Pie? Rarity? Who are they?

...

Who am I?

I'm Midnight Star.

I'm Twilight Sparkle.

Midnight Sparkle?

Twilight Star?

I don't know.

SYSTEM ERROR. ENERGY RESERVES DANGEROUSLY LOW.

What's going on?

Why won't that light go away?

Why does it hurt so much?

Why don't I know who I am?

Why can't I just die already?

Why why why why?

**SYSTEM ERROR. PLEASE TERMINATE SPELL NOW TO PRESERVE
CONSCIOUSNESS.**

*I'm so lonely. I want my friends. I want to go home. I want the pain to go away. I want
that light to go away. Why won't it go away?*

SYSTEM ERROR. SHUTTING DOWN. EMERGENCY DISCONNECTION INITIATED.

*Just stop everything. Just end everything. I don't want anything anymore. I just want
everything to stop. It hurts. It hurts so much and I don't know what's going on and I don't
know who I am and why is this light still here and why don't I know who I am and why
don't I—*

SYSTEM ERROR. EMERGENCY DISCONNECTION FAILED.

I'm tired. I want to go to bed. I want to be told that I'm okay. I want to know who I am.

...

I want to know who I am.

SOULSPACE DISCONNECTED.

Intermission 2

Rainbow Dash was greeted by the harsh rays of sunlight leaking through the windows of the library. As she picked herself up from the library floor, she struggled to rid herself of the haziness that clouded her mind.

“Ugh... what time is it...?” Rainbow Dash muttered to herself, rubbing her head. All of a sudden, the memories of what happened came flooding back to her.

“Midnight!” She shouted. “You—wait...” She shook her head and finally registered her surroundings. She was no longer Skyline, but herself again, back in present day Ponyville.

Rainbow Dash groaned and collapsed back onto the floor, trying to sort her memories. They were in Gyren... and those wolves...

The pegasus suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She remembered the sensation of Fang’s claws getting ready to pierce her body. It was horrible, that feeling you get when you think you’re about to die. But then Midnight saved her. She pushed Skyline aside and Fang ended up sticking her instead...

And then... what happened after that? Rainbow Dash struggled to recollect the details of the event. All of a sudden there was this huge burst of light that engulfed everything, and then...

Blackness. Rainbow Dash couldn’t recall anything past that. She sighed and shook her head. Who cares anymore? Rainbow Dash considered herself a pretty tough pony, but she drew the line at almost being killed. She never wanted to feel that scared ever again.

The pegasus groggily picked herself up from the floor. She surveyed the library, looking for Twilight Sparkle. “Hey Twi?” Rainbow Dash called out. “Where are you?”

There was no response. Rainbow Dash groaned. She was probably still asleep, that was what she got for staying up all night all the time. The pegasus caught sight of

something purple buried underneath a stack of books. They were probably on top of her all night. "There you are Twilight, wake up already!"

Twilight didn't stir. Sighing, Rainbow Dash trotted over to the unconscious unicorn to wake her up. Dash pushed off some of the books on top of Twilight and started shaking her to wake her up. "C'mon Twilight, wake up already. It's morning, see?"

Still, the unicorn refused to awaken. Getting frustrated, Rainbow Dash began to shake her a bit harder. "Helloooo? Anypony in there? Wake up already Twi!!" Twilight's eyes remained shut. The pegasus tried shaking her harder. "YO TWILIGHT WAKE UP ALREADY!!"

Nothing. No matter how hard Rainbow Dash shook her, Twilight Sparkle would not wake up. An ominous feeling washed over the pegasus, and she slowly stopped shaking the unicorn.

"Hey Twi, you're just playing around, right?" Rainbow Dash asked timidly. "Trying to prank Ponyville's greatest prankster?" No response. "Alright, alright, you got me Twilight. I've been pranked, okay? You got me! Now would you just wake up?" Silence.

Rainbow Dash slowly backed away from the unconscious unicorn. "Uhh... Spike?" She called out. "Spike! Are you awake?! Get in here!"

Annoyed, Spike tiredly dragged his feet outside of Twilight's room. "What do you want, Twi—Rainbow Dash? What're you doing here so early?"

The pegasus ignored the dragon's inquiry and gestured towards Twilight. "I can't wake her up!" Rainbow Dash said, panicking.

"Is that it?" Spike grumbled. "Twilight's a pretty deep sleeper after an all-nighter. It's no big deal."

Rainbow Dash relaxed. "Oh, really? Is that it? Phew..."

"Don't worry, I know exactly how to wake her up." Spike cracked his knuckles and walked up next to Twilight. "Ahem. Oh Twiiiiiiigghhhtt~ Guess who's making your favorite sunflower paaaaancaaaakes~"

The unicorn didn't stir.

"That didn't work?" Spike frowned. "I'm making some daisy danishes too~"

Still asleep.

"Huh. She must be tired." Spike muttered. "Well, I guess I have to pull out the big guns." He took in a deep breath. "HEY TWILIGHT IS THAT PRINCESS CELESTIA AT YOUR FRONT DOOR RIGHT NOW? I THINK SHE WANTS TO SEE YOU!"

Nothing.

Spike grimaced. "Wow, that usually always works. She must be really tired." The dragon turned back to Rainbow Dash. "You never told me what you were doing here you know."

Rainbow Dash didn't answer. Instead, she was gazing at the unconscious unicorn with a look of fear in her eyes. There was a single thought that circulated through her mind.

If Midnight died in the past, how would that affect Twilight in the present?

"You alright, Rainbow Dash?" Spike asked. "You don't look so good."

"Spike, write to Princess Celestia." Rainbow Dash ordered. "Tell her she needs to come to Ponyville. Now."

Spike frowned. "Why? I don't see what the big deal is, Twilight's probably got hit with a sleeping spell or something."

"Just do it Spike!" Rainbow Dash shouted.

"Alright, alright!! Geez..." Spike grumbled as he took out a piece of parchment and a quill. "What do you want me to tell her? That Twilight doesn't want to wake up?"

"Exactly that." Rainbow Dash said. Spike shrugged and quickly scribbled down a short message on the parchment before rolling it up and sending it to Celestia. As soon as the smoke left the window, Spike suddenly felt something stirring in his stomach. He burped and Celestia's response levitated in front of him.

"Wow, that was quick." Spike said, surprised. He unrolled the parchment and read its contents. Slowly, a look of shock dawned on the baby dragon's face.

"What is it, Spike?!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

“Uhh... let me read it... ahem.” Spike cleared his throat before vocalizing the contents of the letter.

Dear Spike,

The matter which you informed me of is something of grave concern. I do believe the pegasus named Rainbow Dash is with you? I apologize for being so direct, but tell her to gather up all her other friends and rendezvous in front of the library in an hour. I will be there waiting for her to arrive.

-Princess Celestia

“I don’t get why this is so urgent that Princess Celestia would have to come here.” Spike said after finishing the letter. “Isn’t Twilight just tired?”

Rainbow Dash shook her head. “I wish it was something as simple as that.” She spread her wings. “Spike, wait here for Princess Celestia while I go and get the others, okay?” The pegasus lifted off and flew as fast as she could outside of the door.

“Hey! Heeyyy!!” Spike called after her. “I don’t even get a single explanation? Seriously? Geez...”

--

Pinkie Pie awoke to the sound of a light tapping on her door. “Pinkie? Are you awake? It’s me, Mrs. Cake.” The pink earth pony yawned and dragged herself out of bed. Normally she’d be bouncing all over the place as soon as she woke up, but for some reason it felt like she just had one of the longest sleeps ever.

“Coming Mrs. Cake!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, trying to regain some of her peppiness that was lost overnight. She rapidly shook her head to get rid of the sleepies before opening the door to greet Mrs. Cake. “Gooooooooood morning!” Pinkie said, smiling brightly.

Mrs. Cake let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank goodness you look like you’re back to normal again.”

“Normal?” Pinkie tilted her head in confusion. “Why wouldn’t I be my regular old Pinkie Pie self?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mrs. Cake said, giving a concerned look to Pinkie. “You just seemed so out of it last night. It worried me and my husband.”

“Ooooooh that!” Pinkie let off a wide smile. “No worries, I was just feeling some bubbly wubblies in my tumblies!”

“Is that all?” Mrs. Cake asked.

“Mhm!” Pinkie started to bounce around, feeling her usual energy return to her. “You know, I don’t know why, but it seems like last night was so long ago! Like it was a week or something!”

Mrs. Cake chuckled. She was used to the pink pony’s random comments. Yet... it still seemed that some of the spring was missing in Pinkie’s step. The older pony got an idea. “Why don’t you take the day off Pinkie?”

“I can’t do that!” Pinkie exclaimed. “I already took last night off! Not to mention that I didn’t work at all last week! If I don’t work today then I won’t be able to pay the rent to you Mrs. Cake!”

Mrs. Cake shook her head. “Don’t worry about the money for the rent, Pinkie. Your health is more important to us than money.”

Pinkie frowned. “Are you super duper absolutler sure?”

“Of course, Pinkie Pie!” Mrs. Cake smiled. “I have a feeling today’s going to be a slow day in business anyways. A young mare like you shouldn’t be indoors doing nothing all day, you should be out having fun!”

“Well...” Pinkie hesitated. “Are you supey doopy posilutely absomooty fantabuloofy—”

“Just go Pinkie!” Mrs. Cake chuckled. “Don’t worry and have fun with your friends!”

“Well okaaaaaaaayyy, if you say so Mrs. Cake!” Pinkie Pie gave the older pony a hug before prancing down the stairs.

Mrs. Cake looked upon Pinkie as she left the room. “That pony...” She said, shaking her head. “She can be so random sometimes.”

--

Pinkie Pie exited Sugar Cube Corner and took a breath of the fresh Ponyville air. It's funny, the air seemed fresher than she remembered it to be. And cleaner too. But nothing should've changed overnight in Ponyville...

Pinkie shook her head and started bouncing around. Maybe she was just being silly again. The long sleep must've made a mumbly jumbly in her head!

The earth pony thought of who to bother first thing in the morning. Her first thought was Rainbow Dash, but she already played around with her the other day... she hasn't visiting Twilight in the morning for a while! But... for some reason, Pinkie wanted to avoid going to the library. She felt that if she went over there, all those icky squicky memories would resurface to her mind. Pinkie didn't want to think about that stuff anymore.

Pinkie would visit Rarity if she didn't remember what happened the last time she interrupted the unicorn's sleep. Rarity was in the middle of a sewing marathon for Hoity Toity, and when Pinkie interrupted her work, the unicorn just blew up on her. Sure, Rarity apologized afterwards, but she was scary when she lacked sleep.

Applejack... Pinkie felt that she should give Applejack some more time alone to collect herself. The orange pony had her family around her now after all, and Pinkie felt as if she'd be a third wheel if she dropped by Sweet Apple Acres.

So that only left one pony to visit. Pinkie smiled. Fluttershy was always kind about receiving her in the morning, even if the yellow pegasus kept making subtle hints for Pinkie to go away. And maybe Pinkie could help Fluttershy feed Angel Bunny! The little rascal always refused to easily cooperate with Fluttershy after all!

"It's settled then!" Pinkie said to nopony in particular. "I'm going to go visit Lily!!"

She paused. Wait. Lily? She meant Fluttershy, right? Pinkie Pie shook her head. She must still be all sleepy. Pinkie remembered dreaming something about Lily but it was just that. A dream. Right?

"To Fluttershy's cottage it is then!" Pinkie exclaimed once again to nopony in particular. She began to bounce her way towards the outskirts of Ponyville, when she heard a shrill voice call out to her.

“Pinkie Pie! Wait up!!” Rainbow Dash came diving towards the pink pony, forcing Pinkie to quickly leap out of the way before Rainbow crashed into her. The pegasus slid her hooves over the ground, braking to a halt, and turned to face Pinkie.

“Good morning, Dashie!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, happy to see the rainbow-maned pegasus. “I was just going to L—Fluttershy’s place! Wanna come?”

“There’s no time for that! Wait, nevermind. We do have to go there!” Rainbow Dash tripped over her words, trying to get her thoughts in order.

“Make up your mind, Dashie!” Pinkie said, smiling. “Do you wanna see Fluttershy or not?”

“I do! But no! Agh!” Rainbow Dash quickly shook her head. “Look Pinkie, Twilight’s in trouble!”

“Trouble?” Pinkie tilted her head. “Why’s Twilight in trouble?”

“I don’t know!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed. “Just—look, head over to the library and Princess Celestia will be here to explain everything. I hope.”

“The Princess?!” Pinkie gasped. “She’s coming to Ponyville and I don’t have a party prepared!”

“This isn’t the time for parties!” Rainbow Dash yelled. “Just take your flank over to the library, alright? I need to go fetch the others!!”

The blue pegasus quickly took off before Pinkie could get another word out. “Hey Dashie? Daaaashieeee~?” The earth pony frowned. “Well fine then. I’ll just get Spike to tell me what’s going on!”

--

Applejack sprung awake, panting and shivering. She just had the worst nightmare of her entire life. The orange pony dragged herself out of bed and looked at herself in the mirror. Her mane was disheveled and she was sweating. Applejack sighed.

It was a strange nightmare. Most of it didn’t even feel like a nightmare, just like she was running for days on end. And then... something horrifying happened... but she couldn’t vividly recall what it was.

Applejack noticed the sun outside her window. It was that late already? She overslept! Applejack quickly threw on her hat and leaped out of her room.

“Hey sis, it’s about time ya woke up.” Applebloom was sitting in the dining room, waiting to greet her older sister. “Ah made ya some breakfast. Although ah don’t think cookin’s exactly my cutie mark...” Applebloom gave a shy smile in regards to the burnt toast on the table.

Poor Applebloom, she can’t even make toast right. Applejack smiled. For some reason, the sight of her little sister calmed her heart. It was like she was just glad to see her safe.

“You okay, sis?” Applebloom asked, tilting her head. “Ya look like yer drunk or somethin’.”

Applejack frowned. “Now sis, what’d ah tell ya ‘bout alcohol?”

Applebloom groaned. “Ah’m not a big enough pony ta be talkin’ bout it or drinkin’ it. Yeah yeah.” The filly waved her hoof around. “But ah gotta say, that’s the best way ta describe how ya look right now.”

“Why you—don’t make fun of yer older sister’s face!” Applejack playfully pounced on Applebloom, and the filly responded by swiftly avoiding her sister’s clutches.

“Now now, Applejack!” Applebloom giggled. “You know what Big Mac says ‘bout playin’ at the table!”

“Oh yeah?” Applejack grinned. “We should take this outside then! Jus’ you an’ me, rustlin’ it up!”

“I’d love ta, sis!” Applebloom said excitedly. “It’s been ages since we’ve romped around together... wait.” The filly frowned. “Ah’m sorry sis, ah promised that ah’d hang out with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle today. Scoots said we’re gonna try bein’ circus performers!”

Applejack chuckled. “That’s fine, sugarcube. Ah need ta help Big Mac on the fields anyways.”

“About that...” Applebloom said slowly. “Big Macintosh told me ta tell ya to take the day off today.”

“What?” Applejack narrowed her eyes. “What’s that stallion gettin’ at? Tellin’ me somethin’ like that...”

Applebloom shrugged. “You were really outta it yesterday. Me an’ Big Mac were worried ‘bout you. Mostly Big Mac though. Ah wasn’t really worried!” Applebloom said bashfully, trying to hide her concern.

“Oh... that.” Applejack bit her lip. It was true that she wasn’t in the best of states yesterday... seeing something like that kinda dampened her spirits. “Ah’m fine now.” Applejack said, smiling. “Ah had a little nightmare las’ night, but seein’ yer smilin’ face this mornin’ cheered me up!”

Applebloom blushed. “Don’t be sayin’ things like that, Applejack!” She squealed. “Ah ain’t used ta you bein’ all mushy like that.”

Applejack chuckled. “Just sayin’ the truth, I’il sis. Now why don’t ya go an’ play with yer friends while ah eat this uh... get some breakfast prepared.”

Applebloom stuck her tongue out. “It ain’t that bad, sis! Jus’ a l’il burnt is all! See?” She picked up one of the pieces of burnt toast and it instantly crumbled from her touch. “Okay... a lot burnt.” Applebloom mumbled.

Applejack smiled. “It’s okay Applebloom, you just ain’t meant ta be a cook. Now why don’t ya try bein’ a circus performer with yer friends. I’m sure ya’ll will have fun doin’ that.”

“Okay then, sis!” Applebloom exclaimed, trotting out of the house. “And don’t even try workin’ today! You’d hurt Big Mac’s feelin’s if ya turn down his generosity!”

“All right, Applebloom!” Applejack called out after her. “Have fun with yer friends!” The filly left the house, leaving Applejack alone with burnt toast and orange juice.

Applejack threw away the burnt foods. “Ah don’t even get how ya’d burn orange juice...” The earth pony muttered to herself.

A knock on the door. Applejack looked up at the sound of the noise. “You forget somethin’ Applebloom?”

"I'm not Applebloom!" A voice called out. "Just open the door and let me in, okay?!"

"Rainbow Dash?" Applejack frowned. She opened the door to see the rainbow-maned pegasus. "What in tarnation are ya doin' over here this early in the mornin'? Yer usually up in some tree sleepin' right now."

"It's an emergency!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "There's something wrong with Twilight!"

"Twilight?" Applejack parroted. "Why? What happened ta—wait." The orange earth pony glared at Rainbow Dash. "*Somepony* didn't make Twilight do that spell again, did she?"

Rainbow Dash glanced guiltily at the floor. "I... uh..."

"Why Rainbow Dash." Applejack said, firmly stomping her hoof on the ground. "Of all the—why in the world would ya want ta go back to somethin' like that anyways?!"

"That's not important!" Rainbow Dash shouted, trying to shift the guilt away from her. "Besides, Twilight would've cast the spell again anyways without me!" Applejack opened her mouth to interject, but Rainbow Dash quickly kept talking to keep her quiet. "Just look, you need to go to the library. Now. Princess Celestia will be here soon and we need everypony there!"

"Princess—what kinda mess did you get Twilight into?!" Applejack huffed.

"Why does it have to be my fault?!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "Ugh, whatever, just head over there! I need to go get Rarity and Fluttershy!" The pegasus flew off before Applejack could reprimand her any further.

Applejack sighed. "Guess ah won't be gettin' any rest today..."

--

Fluttershy woke up with a pair of hooves tightly embracing her body. Or to be more accurate, Fluttershy woke up *because* a pair of hooves was tightly embracing her body. It made the pegasus incredibly uncomfortable, she wasn't used to physical contact first thing in the morning. She was so distraught she felt like she could scream!

"... eee."

The drowsiness cleared away from Fluttershy's head, and she remembered that she fell asleep in Rarity's hooves the night before. Sure, it was nice falling asleep like that, but waking up to it was an entirely different story.

"U-Um... Rarity?" Fluttershy mumbled. "A-are you awake yet...?"

"Oh Francesco you animal..." Rarity muttered in her sleep. "Eheh... my word... you should really... zzz..."

Francesco? Who in Celestia's name was Francesco? Fluttershy tried to edge away from the sleeping unicorn, but Rarity refused to let her go.

"Don't go sweetie..." Rarity mumbled. "The night's just... zzz..."

"Um, Rarity?" Fluttershy squeaked, trying to free herself from Rarity's grasp. "Wake up. Please. You're being weird."

"Oh nooooo~" Rarity moaned as she tightened her grip on Fluttershy. "Darliing~ I... zz..."

Fluttershy had enough of this weirdness. She took in a deep breath. "RARITY!"

The sudden burst of noise from the pegasus startled Rarity awake, causing the unicorn to jump up and fall off from the bed. She quickly raised her head and started darting her eyes around. "Whowhatwhere?!" She shook her head. "Oh... good morning Fluttershy. My goodness, you *startled* me darling!"

"... you talk in your sleep." Fluttershy mumbled.

"I what?" Rarity tilted her head. "Ohohohoo~ Silly Fluttershy." The unicorn said bashfully. "Whatever are you talking about?"

Fluttershy kicked at the ground, embarrassed. "... who's Francesco?"

Rarity blushed a deep scarlet. "O-oh... that. Um, it's just a character in a novel, that's all. No need to think too hard on that my dear Fluttershy." Rarity gave a wide smile, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“... I know you like those kinds of novels.” Fluttershy mumbled. “But when you start... um, touching me and... uh, making weird... um, noises... in your sleep... I think that’s a sign for you to stop. That is, um, if you’re okay with that of course...”

“Oh dear.” Rarity got down on her knees and clopped her hooves together, bowing her head. “*Please* forgive me Fluttershy~! I must’ve made you feel so uncomfortable!”

“It’s... um, okay.” Fluttershy squeaked.

“It is most definitely not!” Rarity said theatrically. “My word, if I woke up to somepony touching me... I might not really mind. But *you* Fluttershy. By Celestia’s mane, *you* are a fragile little flower and I feel *absolutely horrible* for doing something like that to you.”

“No, really Rarity, it’s okay.” Fluttershy mumbled, feeling uncomfortable. “Could you please stop bowing? It’s really strange...”

“How else am I supposed to show how deeply ashamed I am for my actions, darling?” Rarity asked incredulously. “Simply saying ‘I’m sorry’ simply cannot do!”

“I’m sorry is perfectly fine!” Fluttershy assured the unicorn. “But... um, bowing your head is a little... much.”

Rarity frowned. “I suppose it is, but histrionics is sort of my thing to do, darling! If I didn’t I wouldn’t be *moi*!”

“And I’d be eating breakfast by now...” Fluttershy muttered to herself.

“What was that, dear?”

“O-oh, nothing!” Fluttershy said hurriedly. “A-anyways, it’s not something you need to be apologizing for...” The pegasus blushed. “A-actually... it felt... nice.”

Rarity tilted her head. “Say wha?”

Fluttershy shook her head. “N-nothing! J-just... never do it again... okay?”

The unicorn shrugged. “Whatever you say darling. Now why don’t I make you a sunflower sandwich to make up for this whole thing? Is that okay with you?”

“Oh, sure Rarity!” Fluttershy exclaimed, relieved that this whole awkward conversation was over.

Rarity beamed and the two ponies trotted downstairs into Fluttershy’s kitchen. “I must say though, Fluttershy.” Rarity said. “It was the strangest dream I had last night!”

“O-oh... really?” Fluttershy mentally groaned. She really hoped that this conversation wouldn’t be dragged back down to where it was earlier.

“Why yes!” Rarity continued. “I dreamed that I was that Amethyst pony again!” Fluttershy’s ears perked up. “It was so strange.” Rarity went on. “It felt like I was sleeping for an entire week! Can you believe that? But it wasn’t actually a week, it was more like a few days, because I can’t even *remember* what happened in the majority of that week! One second and it suddenly felt like seven days have past!”

Fluttershy tried to cut in, but Rarity didn’t hear her over her rant. “And there was this pony with such a fashion disaster of a mane! My word, it was absolutely *atrocious*! And that smell! Ugh, if there was anypony who needed a visit to a spa, it was that pony for sure! Although once he cleaned himself up he was somewhat handsome... and he had this most peculiar pendant with him too... Then all of that melted away and I found myself in the arms of my beloved Francesco...”

“W-wait!!” Fluttershy squealed before Rarity could get any further. “I-I had the same dream too!”

Rarity frowned. “You dreamt of Francesco too? And you said I had a problem...”

Fluttershy shook her head. “N-no! Not that! About that pony with the pendant! Except I was Lily and not Amethyst...”

“Well that’s odd.” Rarity said. “Do you suppose—”

A loud knock on the door interrupted the two ponies’ conversation, causing them to jump. “Oh no, who can be visiting at this time of day!” Rarity exclaimed. “Get the door Fluttershy, nopony else can see me before I’ve tidied up my mane!”

Fluttershy rolled her eyes and trotted over to open the door. As soon as she did, Rainbow Dash came bursting in. “Fluttershy! I—” She caught sight of Rarity.

“Oh... Rainbow Dash.” The unicorn calmed down from her fashion crisis. “Thank goodness it was just you and nopony important.”

“Nopony important!? Why I... ugh, nevermind.” Rainbow Dash shook her head. “I panicked when you weren’t at Carousel Boutique! What’re you doing at Fluttershy’s?”

“I could very well ask you the same thing, Rainbow Dash.” Rarity said haughtily. “Honestly, inquiring about a *lady’s* business before explaining why you’re here. That’s just *rude!*”

Rainbow Dash slapped her head. “Whatever, Rarity. I don’t care why you’re here. What I *do* care about is that Twilight’s in trouble!!”

“Trouble?!” Fluttershy repeated, concerned. “Oh dear, oh dear, what’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know!” Rainbow Dash admitted. “But you we need to get to the library right now!”

“Right now?” Rarity hesitated. “I know this is urgent... but may I please just have a single moment to tidy myself up?”

“We don’t have a moment!” Rainbow Dash shouted. “Princess Celestia will be here any minute!”

“Princess Celestia!?” Rarity exclaimed. “My stars, that’s even *more* of a reason to tidy myself up—RAINBOW DASH WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

The pegasus ignored Rarity’s protests about her appearance and lifted her up into the air. “No time, let’s go Fluttershy!” Rainbow Dash zoomed out of the cottage towards the library with Rarity squealing in her hooves.

Fluttershy hesitated before leaving her cottage. “U-um... Angel Bunny?”

The small white rabbit popped his head out from under a blanket on the couch. He gave Fluttershy a look as if to say, “Why the heck are you bothering me so early in the morning?”

“Oh good, you’re there.” Fluttershy said, oblivious of Angel’s death stare. “I need to step out for a while, so would you do me a favor and feed the animals for me?”

Angel groaned and gave Fluttershy a half-hearted thumbs up as if to say, "Fine, whatever. But you owe me a basket-load of carrots for making me do your job."

Fluttershy smiled. "Oh, thank you Angel Bunny, I'm so glad that you're around."

"Fluttershy?!" Rainbow Dash was back at the cottage with Rarity flailing around in her hooves. "What's taking you so long?!"

"O-oh, coming Rainbow Dash!" She lifted off and left the cottage to go to the library with the other two ponies.

Angel Bunny sighed and shook his head as if to say, "I've got nothin' but ponies in my life, and every one of them is trouble."

Intermission 3

The other ponies were grilling Spike for information when Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Fluttershy came flying in. Rainbow Dash quickly dropped Rarity down, and Fluttershy landed gracefully next to the unicorn.

“Um... Rarity?” Fluttershy said timidly. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t look at meeeee~” Rarity whined. “I’m hideousssss~”

“... ah think she’s fine.” Applejack said, snickering. The earth pony turned to Rainbow Dash. “Anyways, all we heard was that Twilight’s havin’ a hard time wakin’ up. Where’s the crisis in that?”

Rainbow Dash hesitated. “Well...”

“Oh lookie!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, interrupting Rainbow Dash. “I think that’s the Princess’s chariot up there!!”

“Ack!” Rarity squeaked and cowered behind Fluttershy. “Hide me!”

The Princess’s chariot landed in front of the five ponies, and Celestia gracefully stepped outside of her vehicle. The group of ponies and Spike bowed before the Princess. “Hello everypony.” Celestia said softly. “I see you have all gathered here like I requested.”

Pinkie Pie was the first to speak up. “Oh hi there Celestia!” She exclaimed unreservedly. “What’s going on that you have to be here in Ponyville yourself?”

Celestia chuckled. “Always so straightforward, Pinkie.” She cleared her throat. “Well then... let’s get down to business...” The princess looked over her shoulder.

“Luna, it’s okay to come out now.”

The five ponies stiffened. They haven’t seen nor heard anything about Princess Luna since the whole Nightmare Moon spectacle. The smaller alicorn shyly stepped out from behind Celestia and bowed to the ponies.

“H-hello there... um...” Luna hesitated. “I... I apologize for what happened on the Summer Sun Celebration.”

“Do you?” Rainbow Dash said with hostility in her voice.

“Quiet down, Dash!” Applejack hissed.

“I-It’s fine!” Luna exclaimed. “It’s understandable that everypony would hate me after everything I did... but I want you all to know that I’m not Nightmare Moon anymore, and I never will be.”

“How can you be so sure?” Rainbow Dash asked. “I bet you didn’t think you’d become like Nightmare Moon in the past either!”

Luna recoiled from Rainbow Dash’s harsh words. “I-I was... immature then. And—”

“That’s enough, Luna.” Celestia murmured.

The younger alicorn turned to her sister. “But Celly! I have to—”

“You don’t have to do anything.” Celestia said harshly. “We’re not here for you to apologize to everypony. That kind of thing can come later, *after* they understand.”

“Uh, ah hope ya don’t mind me interruptin’ Yer Highness.” Applejack interjected. “But after we understand what?”

Celestia ignored Applejack’s question and gestured to the two guards who pulled her chariot. “You two can return to the castle. Luna and I can return home ourselves.”

The two guards gave a curt salute and flew back off to Canterlot. Celestia turned back to the group of ponies in front of her. “Let us go inside of the library, it would not be wise to discuss things in the open.” The princess didn’t wait for the ponies’ response and marched forward into the library. Luna timidly followed behind.

The group of ponies gave quizzical looks at each other and followed the two Princesses into the library. Spike shut the door behind them.

Celestia and Luna were examining Twilight. Their horns were lit up, signifying the magic that was flowing out of them and into Twilight.

“Well?” Spike said. “Could somepony explain to me what’s going on now? Isn’t Twilight just sleeping?”

“Ah think we’d all like ta know that, Spike.” Applejack muttered.

The light faded away from the alicorns’ horns and they turned to face the group of ponies. “First thing first,” Celestia said, “Rarity? What are you doing cowering behind Fluttershy like that?”

The unicorn, embarrassed, stepped away from behind Fluttershy. “U-um... it’s nothing Your Highness... I’m just not in the right state to greet royalty at the moment...”

“This isn’t that time to worry about something like that, Rarity.” Celestia said sternly. The unicorn shrunk away. Celestia turned to her sister. “Luna, tell everypony what needs to be told, and *only* what needs to be told.”

Luna recoiled from his sister’s harsh gaze. “Y-yes Celly... um...” She turned to address the group of ponies.

“Twilight Sparkle’s soul has been disconnected from her body.”

The ponies spoke simultaneously. “WHAT?!”

Luna shrunk from their collective yells. “U-um...” She gulped. “T-there apparently wasn’t enough magic fueling the Dive, so the influx of power from the Awakening just sort of shorted out...” Luna stopped when she noticed that none of the ponies were following what she was saying.

“Dive?” Rainbow Dash repeated.

“Awakening?” Rarity asked.

“Party?” The ponies all glared at Pinkie Pie. “What? I was just trying to lighten the mood a little...”

“O-oh...” Luna shuffled her hooves nervously. “W-well... ‘Dives’ are the official name for this spell... because you’re diving into the past, you know? And the Awakening is... um...”

“Something you have to find out for yourself.” Celestia said quietly.

Applejack angrily stomped her hoof. “Now excuse me from bein’ rude, but why are ya hidin’ things from us Yer Highness? Ah don’t think this is the time ta be keepin’ secrets.”

Celestia shook her head. “There are some things that others can’t just explain to you. Sometimes it’s necessary to experience things yourself.”

“Now pardon my language, but ah think that’s just a load of manure!” Applejack exclaimed. “You obviously know a lot more than yer lettin’ on about what’s happenin’ ta Twilight, and ah’m not just gonna sit here and—”

“STOP IT!!”

The sudden yell caused all the ponies to stop and turn to the source. Luna was shaking, her lips quivering from forcing her usually softspoken personality to yell.

“Please don’t accuse Celly of anything...” Luna said, her voice cracking. “She’s... she’s just trying her best... a-and...”

Celestia held up a hoof. “That’s enough, Luna. There’s no need for you to defend me.”

Luna bit her lip. “B-but Celly—”

“Enough.” Celestia ordered tonelessly.

The younger alicorn bowed her head, biting back her tears. “Y-yes sister...”

“What’s going on here?” Rainbow Dash asked. “I know you’re royalty and you’ve got your secrets, but could at least let us know what’s happening?”

Celestia solemnly faced the group of ponies. “In order for all of you to fully understand exactly what’s happening to Twilight, you first need to understand the nature of magic.”

“The nature of magic?” Rarity parroted. “Why? It’s the same thing as a pegasus’s wings or an earth pony’s connection with the land, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no.” Celestia said. “You see... a pegasus’s ability to fly is because of this force called magic, and so is an earth pony’s connection with the land. Magic isn’t really as straightforward as everypony makes it out to be.”

"T-then what is it then...?" Fluttershy asked.

"Magic has another name." Celestia said quietly. "Energy."

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Like an energy drink?"

Celestia nodded. "Something like that." She cleared her throat. "I'm assuming you ponies know absolutely nothing about the atomic structure, am I correct?" The other ponies just gave her a blank stare. "Thought so." Celestia continued. "To put it in layman's terms, everypony and everything in this universe is made up of tiny particles. I, Luna, and all of you are nothing but incredibly tiny objects that are connected together to form the sum of its parts."

Rainbow Dash hurriedly waved her hooves back and forth. "Hold up hold up hold up! What's with all this science-y technobabble you're spewing out at us?"

Celestia sighed. "This is what happens when we only teach advanced magic theory at Canterlot University..." She turned to Rainbow Dash. "Do you understand the concept that everything's made up of particles?"

The pegasus gave a tentative nod. "Kinda..."

"That's all you need to know for now." Celestia continued. "Anyways, these particles are in constant motion, creating the phenomenon known as energy. Now, what magic truly is, is the conscious manipulation of this energy.

"There exists a law in this universe known as the Law of Conservation. Simply put, you can't create something from nothing, you can only convert things into different shapes."

"Hey wait!" Spike interrupted. "Twilight's able to make a moustache appear out of thin air for me, isn't she?"

"That's a conversion." Celestia explained. "What Twilight Sparkle did was manipulate the energy around you in order to convert it to the shape of a moustache. Converting energy into matter is highly advanced magic, and only a few unicorns like Twilight Sparkle are able to successfully pull it off.

"Anyways, I'm getting off-topic. What's important to understand is that magic is only the manipulation of energy, and therefore, the ability to manipulate the structure of the

universe. I can see that some of you are lost at the moment.” Celestia said to Rainbow Dash. The pegasus fumed but kept quiet. “Perhaps a demonstration is necessary... Luna?”

The younger alicorn’s ears perked up. “Huh? O-oh... sorry, I was tuning out your voice... I didn’t really want to hear this whole spiel again...”

Celestia chuckled. “It’s fine. I’m asking you if you would be okay if I demonstrated the concept of particle manipulation.”

Luna grimaced. “Ugh... only if it doesn’t take too long...”

“Excellent.” Celestia smiled at the ponies. “Watch this.” She concentrated her magic to the tip of her horn. Soon, a brilliant light shone, filling up the room, and a beam of light struck Luna.

In the alicorn’s place was now a potted plant.

The ponies stared at this spectacle in disbelief. “W-what did you do to her?!” Fluttershy squeaked.

“Isn’t it obvious? I turned her into a plant.” Celestia giggled. The ponies looked horrified at this. “Now now, don’t worry, I can turn her back.” Celestia assured. “I’m just showing you all how it is possible to turn one thing into something completely different. Even if that thing is alive.” Another burst of light emitted from Celestia’s horn, and the potted plant was transformed back into Luna.

Princess Luna coughed. “I hate being a plant...” She muttered to herself.

“This is interesting and all.” Rarity said. “But I don’t see how this relates to our predicament with Twilight Sparkle.”

“I was just about to get to that, Rarity.” Celestia spoke. “It’s incredibly important that you understand these concepts.

“Now... ask yourself this question. If you can turn a living object into something non-living, is it possible to turn a non-living object into something living?” Celestia paused. “Here’s the answer; it’s impossible. Inside every living entity is a ‘soul’ or a ‘consciousness’ and without it, we wouldn’t be alive.

“As to where souls come from and where they go after death... that’s a question that’ll never be fully answered. However, we can speculate. I personally believe there is a plane of existence that exists in a place which we cannot consciously perceive. Inside this plane is where every living soul of the past, present, and future resides.

“I call it the collective unconsciousness. The idea of the collective unconsciousness has been around since our first ancestors, although it was referred to as heaven or hell. In the end, it’s all the same thing. When we are born, our souls descend to us from this collective unconsciousness, and when we die, our souls return from whence it came. It sort of falls into the idea of reincarnation, doesn’t it Luna?”

Luna grimaced. “Yeah... reincarnation...”

“But...” Rainbow Dash interrupted. “I still don’t see how all of this philosophical crap relates to what’s going on now.”

Celestia chuckled. “I apologize, but there’s one last concept I have to introduce before I make it clear. The concept of time.

“I’m sure you’re all familiar with what time is. You can all tell when the hours pass and how you all age. But the important thing is not what time is, but how time works. And the entire concept of time can be wrapped up into a single phrase.

“Time is energy.

“Ponies growing older, plant-life sprouting up from the ground, all the processes of time are nothing more than a result of energy. I told you all that energy is the constant motion of particles, and these particles create the tangible structures you all see every day. What I didn’t tell you, is that each of these particles have a limit on how much energy they can hold.

“This is the phenomenon known as age. The particles that compose a pony’s being quickly gathers up as much energy as they can as fast as they can, explaining the rapid growth of a filly. When the particles reach their maximum threshold for energy, a few years after adolescence, then the particles slowly deteriorate. I can go more in-depth with this by going over the regeneration of particles, but that’d be unnecessary. What’s important is that the reason a pony dies is because their particles lose the ability to contain the energy necessary to continue life’s processes.

“This is taken further when you apply magic to it. Take Luna and I for example, the only reason we seem immortal is because the particles in our bodies are capable of storing vast amounts of energy, allowing us to cast incredibly powerful magic, such as raising the sun and the moon. If a normal pony were to try those spells, their particles would run out of energy in an instant, causing them to die. Luna and I don’t age because of all the energy we possess.

“To sum this all up, time is nothing but a process of energy.”

Pinkie Pie nodded enthusiastically. “I get it Princess Celestia!”

The other ponies and Spike just grimaced. “Um... I think we get the gist of it.” Rarity said. “But... if you’re saying time is just energy, then doesn’t that mean time doesn’t exist? An illusion? Then how are we... uh, diving into the past?”

“Time being a process of energy doesn’t necessarily mean that time doesn’t exist.” Celestia explained. “There is this concept known as dimensions... but this is neither the time nor the place for me to discuss that with you. Instead, let me clarify something about that spell. There are two explanations for exactly how it works:

“First, the Diving spell allows you to do is dive into the collective unconsciousness and create a simulation of the environment based on your ancestor’s memory. That white void you find yourself in when you dive is the collective unconsciousness that your mind interprets for your sight. It’s impossible to comprehend anything else besides a white void in that plane. Second, you are actually travelling across time and are reliving the actual events as they happen.

“Most scholars of magic as well as I lean more towards the first explanation, simply because the second leaves the timestream open for all sorts of paradoxes.

“This is how it relates to Twilight’s situation.” Celestia paused. “If we go by the Law of Conservation, when you dive into the plane of collective unconsciousness, your souls can’t simultaneously exist in your body and in that plane at the same time. You literally disconnect yourself from your body.

“If we go by the theory that everything is made of particles, then that includes your soul as well. The soul is nearly impossible to affect in any way, so in order to change its state to allow entry into the collective unconsciousness, powerful magic is needed.

“And finally, by going along with our concept of time and energy, in order to cast such a spell, vast quantities of magic are necessary for it to be safely cast.” Celestia paused once again. “Twilight Sparkle was by herself when she cast the spell, wasn’t she?”

Rainbow Dash timidly raised a hoof. “Uh... I was with her.”

“Anypony else?” Celestia asked. None of the other ponies responded. “Then this is the reason why Twilight is the way she is right now.” The alicorn had a faraway expression in her eyes, as if she was remembering something from her past.

“Some event happened in the memory that caused a huge influx of magic to occur.” Celestia said quietly. “Twilight didn’t have enough magical power to stabilize the situation in order to keep her soul from being overloaded. Now she’s lost in the collective unconsciousness.”

Shadows of despair fell over everypony’s expressions. “D-does that mean Twilight is...” Fluttershy gulped. “D-dead?”

Luna spoke up to answer Fluttershy. “Not exactly. Her soul should still be completely intact and contained within the space of her ancestor’s memory. It’s just... Midnight’s soul is also floating inside of the collective unconsciousness at that moment...”

“Wait.” Rainbow Dash interrupted. “You and Celestia were around back then too. Why don’t you two just tell us what’s going to happen then?”

“Remember what I said about how some things have to be experienced?” Celestia reminded the pegasus. “However, I’ll assure you of one thing, if you all dive back into the past once more, history will allow the restoration of Midnight’s soul, and alongside it Twilight’s.”

“But what if the same thing happens to us?!” Applejack objected.

“It won’t.” Celestia whispered. “As long as all of you go.”

“B-but only Rarity has magical power...” Fluttershy mumbled.

“You forgot what I said about energy.” Celestia said. “Magic is energy, and all of you have that within yourselves. A specific brand of energy to be precise.”

The ponies looked at Celestia in confusion for a moment, an expression most of them held for a while, when realization dawned upon them.

“Oh... that.” Fluttershy mumbled.

Celestia smiled. “Yes. That.”

Rainbow Dash pumped her hooves. “Well then, what’re we waiting for? We need to save Twilight, don’t we?” The other ponies nodded in agreement.

“W-well... if you’re all ready,” Luna said, “Please gather in a circle so I can cast the spell for all of you.” The ponies did as Luna said, and the alicorn concentrated her magic in order to send them into the collective unconsciousness.

A brilliant light engulfed the five ponies, and when the light dispersed, the five of them were on the floor, as if they were asleep.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Spike asked. “Am I supposed to just sit here and—ulp!”

Celestia sent a quick burst of magic at the dragon, knocking him unconscious. Luna looked up at her sister. “Was that really necessary?”

“It was.” Celestia turned to her sister. “I believe you have some complaints you want to bring up with me?”

Luna grimaced. “Well... aside from that boring explanation...” She glanced at the unconscious ponies. “Why couldn’t you just retrieve Twilight’s soul? I know the two of us together have more than enough power to—”

“They needed a reason to go back into their ancestor’s memories.” Celestia said quietly.

“Couldn’t we have found some other reason?” Luna asked. “I really, really don’t want to make Twilight suffer in the collective unconsciousness... you know what it’s like, Celly.”

Celestia shook her head, trying not to recall certain memories. “It hurts me too, Luna, leaving Twilight the way she is. But it has to be done.”

“I don’t like it.” Luna muttered. “I don’t like it at all.”

"I don't like it either." Celestia admitted. "But if they don't relive the past then they won't have the experience they need. They have a choice they need to make, Luna, and I don't want them to make it without knowing everything."

Celestia began to concentrate her magic. "I'm going to head back to the castle now to prepare for things. Luna, you stay here so you can greet them all when they wake up."

"Oka—" Celestia disappeared in a flash of light, leaving Luna by herself. The alicorn frowned. "Geez... just teleporting like that..." She sighed and looked around the library. "Maybe there's a table I can sleep on somewhere or something..."

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Author's Note:

Hello, this is nukeiffum here, sometimes known as muffiekun or whatever you'd like to call me. I was thinking a little about the pseudo-scientific exposition I stuck in this Session, and realized that some people would have a hard time understanding the concepts I introduced. I'm not trying to undermine anypony's intelligence here, but much like the mane cast during Celestia's explanation, some people may be left confused. I'm sure that in order to fully understand the concepts I presented, it would take a lot more thought than the Average Joe would like to spend on a silly little fanfiction about ponies such as this.

What I wish to point out is that it is not necessary to fully understand the abstract concepts presented in this Session. As long as you get the basic gist of the collective unconsciousness, you're frosty. All this stuff about time and particles (or cells as the rest of the world commonly refers to them) is just an extended tangent used to flesh out the "How?" of the matter.

I believe there are three parts necessary to create a proper scenario and world. The "What?" the "How?" and the "Why?" The large pseudo-scientific tangent Celestia went on does an excellent job of the "How?" but overall, the "How?" is incredibly insignificant in the big picture. What really matters is the "What?": that is the fact that Twilight's soul is missing from her body and the "Why?": because it provides the motivation for the mane cast to leap back into the fray. There are probably also many other "What?"s that the "How?" in this Intermission explains, but as I said before, it is largely insignificant in the overall scheme of things. Especially in a WIP story such as this, where some ideas may be foreshadowed only to be dropped later on. Not that I do any of that, of course.

>____>

Anyways, that's all I have to say. I just want to reassure everypony that in the case my pseudo-scientific rambling flies over your head, it would not impact any future

enjoyment of the story whatsoever. It's just a neat little tangent I wanted to include to explain things instead of just saying "it's magic, I ain't gotta explain shit."

An apple drops to the ground, but you don't need to know the constant acceleration of 9.8 meters per second squared then factoring in air resistance in order to know that it's falling.

Think of it that way when it comes to magic in this story.

That's enough rambling from me. All that empty white space from after Luna's table comment has been filled, and I've said what I've wanted to say. Hope everypony continues to enjoy this long tale!

Session 12

It didn't seem real, what was happening right now.

There, right in front of Skyline, Midnight had taken the claw that was meant for the pegasus. Skyline remained on the ground, looking upon the unicorn in shock.

Midnight was never supposed to be in any danger. She was meant to be the bait that'd lure the wolves into bringing out Sundae, the bait that would have been pulled away the moment the fish began to bite. Yet this happened.

They planned for Revy to come swooping in and take Midnight and Sundae away the moment trouble came about. But in all the excitement the details took a backseat to adrenaline, leading to the tragedy that was taking place right in front of Skyline's eyes.

Blood spurted from the hole in the unicorn's chest when Fang pulled out his claws. "Dammit!!" the wolf yelled at the unicorn. "What'd you make me do!?"

Skyline could do nothing but stare in shock as Midnight collapsed upon the ground, quickly staining the ground around her a deep crimson. It was just a hole. A deep, dark hole that seemed to stretch out to eternity. Skyline wanted to avert her eyes away, but for some reason she couldn't. Her eyes were glued to the sight of the dying unicorn, the seemingly endless torrent of blood continuing to pour out of her, the pained expression on her face, the light fading away from—

"MIDNIGHT!!" Cinnamon cried out, breaking Skyline out of her trance. The earth pony's muscles tensed to run and pick up Midnight to bring her to a doctor on the off-chance that she could be saved, but at the same time she had to stand her ground. Apple Sundae was hiding behind Cinnamon, crying her eyes out. Cinnamon knew that the moment she leapt to Midnight's side, Sundae would be left wide open to the wolves. The earth pony couldn't make the choice between abandoning her friend or abandoning her sister.

Fang was seething with rage; he had just fatally injured the single most valuable asset he has ever held in his paws. He was yelling out unintelligible phrases that the ponies couldn't even make out over their own despair.

This was it. Now there was nothing left but for the wolves to leap upon them and tear them apart under Fang's orders. Chances were, he was going to mutilate them in the most grotesque ways possible while still keeping them alive in order to release his anger. A peaceful death was an impossibility for the ponies.

Skyline and Cinnamon's eyes locked with Midnight's. Her breathing grew more ragged and shallow, tears streaming down her face from having to struggle against death. The pain she was going through looked excruciating, and the two ponies wanted nothing more than to end Midnight's suffering this instant. No pony should ever have to suffer the way Midnight was, the two ponies thought. No pony deserved such a death.

The blood flowing out of Midnight's wound began to slow down, as if there was nothing else left inside of her. Her unstable breathing fell to nothing but a whisper, and the light from her eyes slowly faded away. However, she managed to communicate a single phrase to the two ponies. A single phrase that communicated everything Midnight was feeling at the moment.

"I don't want to die."

There was no going back to Ponyville to say goodbye to the other ponies. Lily, Amethyst, and Pastel would all go on living their lives continuously waiting for the day the three ponies would return home safely with Sundae. The day that would never come. Not anymore.

Midnight's body fell limp, and along with it, any vision of a peaceful future for Skyline and Cinnamon. It felt like the end of everything. None of them will ever see Ponyville again. They will never hear Lily's kind and comforting voice, never be given another one of Amethyst's hoof-stitched dresses or laugh at another one of Pastel's parties. It felt like it was the end. The end of everything.

But it was only the beginning.

The moment Midnight's body went limp, something strange happened. A shockwave of energy pulsated through the ground, through every living being that stood in the vicinity. Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae all stood upright, as if a strong electrical current had just passed through them.

The wolves suddenly stood up on edge as well, feeling the shockwave pass through them. Fang bared his teeth. "What the hell was that?" He growled. Nobody around him

responded, causing the wolf to angrily stomp at the ground. “Fine! Don’t answer me!! Who cares what that was anyways... you!” He pointed towards one of his subordinates. “Take that dead pony and get her outta my sights! I don’t want to have one of my failures staring me in the face!”

The wolf in question quickly snapped to attention to follow his boss’s orders. He scampered over to pick up Midnight with his claws to dispose of her—

A violent burst of light blinded those in the vicinity. When their vision returned the wolf was gone, and in his place was nothing more than a pile of ashes.

A brilliant aura encased Midnight’s body, causing her to levitate off the ground. The light emitting from this aura blinded any who attempted to look directly at it, as if she was a divine being that mortals had no right to look upon. The glow concentrated itself around the hole in Midnight’s chest, and if anybody was able to see through the light, they would see her flesh and sinew begin to repair itself.

Midnight suddenly let out a pained gasp. She was alive again, her spirit just narrowly recovered from the threshold of death. However, even though she was breathing again, it didn’t seem like she had any control over her body.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!” Midnight let out a shrill scream. Light was pouring out of her eyes, the aura around her lost its stable shape and began to shift into chaos. Midnight no longer appeared to be engulfed in a holy light—it was now a raging inferno.

The all-consuming flame didn’t harm the unicorn, or at least not as much as her immediate surroundings. The ground around her calcified and turned to glass before melting again, the process repeating multiple times, each successive cycle slowly thickening it until it was an opaque sheet of white. Cinnamon, Skyline and Sundae retreated, their manes singed and noses assailed by the smell of ionized ozone; whatever the fire was, it seemed to care not for friend or foe.

Nor did it differentiate between a corpse and its environment. Skyline’s body stiffened up as she noticed the destruction slowly creep towards Revy, the scent of death permeating the air around her corpse as the heat accelerated her decomposition. The pegasus acted before she could even think.

“Skyline!” Cinnamon yelped. “What’re ya doin?!”

The pegasus didn't hear her. Skyline was completely focused on Revy, weaving around the flames of energy flickering around Midnight, around the corpses of the wolves who were too stupid to move away from the unicorn. She could feel the heat sign her mane as she sped around Midnight, screeching to a halt as soon as she reached Revy's corpse.

Skyline didn't know why she sped to Revy. She knew that the griffon was already dead. Yet for some reason, Skyline couldn't just stand by and watch her corpse burn to ashes. The pegasus wanted to give her a proper burial, not an impromptu cremation. Skyline tried to lift up Revy's corpse, ignoring the burning scent of decay, but the griffon was too heavy for Skyline to easily lift up.

"Skyline!" Cinnamon shouted over the chaos, "Behind you!!"

The pegasus reflexively dropped Revy's corpse and sidestepped before a large claw came crashing down where she was just moments before. Fang was standing there, a manic expression in his eyes. He removed his claw from the ground and quickly swiped at Skyline again.

"Woah!!" Skyline swiftly managed to dodge the wolf's second attack. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"What does it look like!?" Fang spat out. "I'm trying to kill all of you!!" All traces of sanity seemed to have left him, leaving nothing but a snarling beast in its wake. He made another swipe at Skyline's head, forcing the pegasus to back closer towards the swirling vortex of chaos that was Midnight. If Skyline didn't go on the offensive soon, then she'd be disintegrated by Midnight's aura.

Bracing herself, Skyline galloped straight towards Fang. "So you wanna make it easy for me, huh!?" Fang prepared to jam his claws straight into Skyline, but the pegasus fainted and lifted up off the ground, driving her back hooves into the wolf as she propelled herself towards Revy.

Fang grunted and quickly picked himself back up, ignoring the throbbing pain in his head. "Why you—GET OVER HERE SO I CAN—"

The wolf suddenly howled in pain. A wave of energy sputtered from the flames, whipping its way through Fang's hind legs. Where two perfectly functioning appendages once stood was now nothing but two bloody stumps. The aura cut straight through

Fang's flesh and bone, searing off his legs in a way that made it look like they never existed in the first place.

Fang tried to bite back the pain and used his front legs to start dragging himself away from Midnight and towards Skyline. "I'M NOT GONNA DIE HERE!!" He spat out. "I'M GONNA LIVE ON OR DRAG ALL OF YOU DOWN TO HELL WITH ME!!"

The mass of energy surrounding Midnight continued to diffuse around her, encroaching upon Fang's body. He let out a pained scream as his lower half begun to burn away. His body twitched as he tried to claw his way to safety, but there was no escape for the wolf anymore. "Argh... heh..." With the last of his breath, Fang let out a single dry laugh. "I never thought a pony would be the one to kill me..." He relaxed his muscles and allowed the blanket of death to wrap around him.

As soon as Fang died, his remaining subordinates scattered. They didn't want to be around anymore now that their leader was dead. Now, there was nothing stopping the ponies from making a quick escape and returning back home to Ponyville.

However, none of the ponies made a run for it. All three of them were hesitant to leave Midnight behind amidst all this chaos.

"Midnight!!" Skyline called out into the vortex as soon as she finished dragging Revy's corpse to a safe enough distance. "Midnight! It's okay, you can stop!! He's dead now, there's no way he can hurt us!!"

Skyline's words weren't able to penetrate the maelstrom that surrounded the unicorn. In fact, even though the threat was gone, it only continued to grow.

"Skyline!!" Cinnamon called out from across the area. "Ah don't think we can do anything ta stop her!!"

"There has to be a way!!" Skyline shouted back. "I'm not going to ditch her after our plan almost got her killed! There's gotta be a way to get her back! There has to be!!"

"... there is."

An unfamiliar earth pony suddenly stepped out of the shadows of an alleyway and into the street. Her coat was pure white and her mane had a rainbow tint to it. Behind her, another earth pony followed, her coat and mane the color of the night sky.

The two earth ponies strode past Skyline before the pegasus could ask them any questions. They were headed straight towards the maelstrom. "Hey, what're you doing?!" Skyline yelled. "If you go over there you'll be killed!!"

They ignored her, and continued straight towards Midnight. As they neared the edge of the chaos, Skyline averted her eyes to avoid seeing the two get torn apart.

Yet somehow... nothing happened. The two ponies crossed over into the cataclysm with no trouble, passing through the barrier that would've normally disintegrated them with nothing but slight grimaces on their faces. They pushed forward through the chaos and approached the eye of the storm, Midnight.

"... Hey sis, how's it going? It's me, Celestia." The white earth pony smiled sadly and put a hoof on Midnight's shoulder. "Can you hear me?" She paused. "... you probably can't. But you can sense us, can't you?"

Midnight made no sign of acknowledging the two ponies' presence. The darker pony hesitantly grabbed Midnight's hoof. "H-hey... s-sis? It's me... Luna..." The unicorn still had no response. Luna winced. Small cuts were beginning to form over her small body. "M-Midnight... p-please calm down..." Luna hiccupped, enduring the pain. "P-please... I don't like seeing you like this..."

Midnight didn't even twitch at Luna's sobs. It seemed like nothing was going to get through to her. Celestia turned to her little sister. "... Luna, there's no other choice."

Luna bit her lip. "W-we have to...?" Celestia nodded in response. Luna gulped. "O-okay..."

Cinnamon, Skyline, and Sundae stood agape at what happened next. The maelstrom around Midnight began to concentrate itself towards the center, with streaks of different colors mixing itself into the spiral. Those streaks of color were emitting from Celestia and Luna, who situated themselves around Midnight, and were concentrating incredibly hard on what they were doing.

In an instant, the maelstrom exploded, releasing brilliant flashes of light into the air. Red, green, blue, yellow... the ponies could see almost every color being emitted from the shockwave that dispersed through the sky.

And in the middle of all of it, was Midnight, Luna, and Celestia. The unicorn came crashing down back onto the ground, and the two earth ponies exhaustedly collapsed along with her. Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae quickly galloped towards the three.

“Hey! What the heck just happened?!” Skyline exclaimed.

Celestia was the first to pick herself off the ground. She held an incredibly tired expression on her face, as if she had just ran a marathon. “... astral projection.” She gasped. “It’s what... ugh...”

Cinnamon quickly leapt forward to support Celestia before she could fall back onto the ground. “Ya alright, miss?”

“... I’m fine.” Celestia shook her head and tried to regain her senses. “A-anyways... things should be fine now...”

Now that the danger had passed, griffons were beginning to hesitantly make their way back into the street. The area was a mess, merchants booths were toppled over, produce was strewn all over the place, and rotting corpses were scattered about.

“Hey!” A new voice called out. “Everyone get out of here!! This is confidential business!!” The few griffons who were still trying to see what was going on quickly flew away as a small group of ponies arrived in the street. There was an entourage of pegasi in armor, sporting a crossbow and sword across their backs, and they were surrounded by a single regal looking earth pony.

Skyline and Cinnamon looked suspiciously at the newcomers. They crowded around the weakened ponies, as if they were trying to protect them. “Who are you?” Skyline questioned.

“Who am I?” The earth pony let out a harsh laugh. “The better question to ask is this: Who are you to kidnap my daughter?”

“Daughter?” Skyline and Cinnamon said together. Suddenly, it dawned on them.

King Themis pushed past the two shocked ponies and nuzzled Celestia. “Good job, Celestia.” He murmured.

“Wait... Celestia?” Cinnamon grimaced. “As in Princess Celestia? And does that mean that’s Princess Luna?!”

“Yes, yes, quiet down!” Themis barked. He turned back to his daughter. “So how is she? Did it happen?”

“... it’s done.” Celestia said quietly. “It should be there now.”

“Hey.” Skyline spoke up. “I know you’re royalty and all, but could you tell us what’s going on around here?”

Themis turned around and looked Skyline right in the eye. “Guards, subdue them.”

The pegasi quickly bit the hilts of their swords and drew them out, positioning the edges to lay right against the three ponies’ necks. Sundae squealed and hid behind her sister.

“What is the meanin’ of this?!” Cinnamon exclaimed angrily.

“You kidnapped Midnight.” Themis stated. “Isn’t that more than enough reason to take you ponies captive?”

“It wasn’t a kidnapping!” Skyline objected. “We explained to her the situation and—”

“SILENCE!” Themis shouted. “Do you expect me to believe that Midnight would—”

“Stop it.” Luna quietly shuffled herself up off the ground and looked at each of the ponies around her, finally resting her eyes on her father. “I... I don’t like lies...”

Themis grimaced. “Luna... there’s no reason for them to know. It’s hard enough to clean everything up as it is, and—”

“You’d have to wipe their memories completely, don’t you?” Luna said softly. “Most of the griffons here have no attachment to Midnight so it’d be easy to edit their memories... but these three are close to her, so you won’t be able to do that, will you?”

“Luna.” Celestia hissed. “Stop talking!”

Themis held up a hoof towards Celestia. “Let your sister talk. It seems like she has a better solution to this entire fiasco. Well Luna, let’s hear it.”

Princess Luna shyly glanced at Skyline and Cinnamon. “... I say we tell them everything.”

“Luna!” Celestia exclaimed. “You can’t be serious!”

“I am.” Luna continued. “I believe that they really care about Midnight... otherwise they would have run away the moment they were able to...”

“Wait,” Cinnamon cut in. “What’s goin’ on? Wipin’ memories? And how’d ya’ll know that we stuck around as long as we could?”

The King stood in silence for a moment. He glanced at Luna, into her pleading eyes, and sighed. “We were watching you the entire time.” Themis admitted quietly. “Ever since you three left Ponyville, we kept a pegasus on you to keep an eye on Midnight.”

A cold feeling swept over Skyline. “You... were watching us?” Skyline said, her voice shaking. “You... you had somepony watching us the entire time and... AND YOU JUST LET THIS HAPPEN!?” Skyline attempted to leap towards Themis, but the guards kept her restrained. “WHY DIDN’T YOU DO ANYTHING?!” Skyline cried. “IF YOU DID SOMETHING THEN REVY WOULDN’T BE—ulp!”

One of the guards landed a quick blow to Skyline’s stomach, forcing her to shut up. Themis shook his head. “It was necessary. A couple of outcast ponies wouldn’t have that much impact on the treaty, but if the royal guard interfered with the Collection...”

“Do you think I care?” Skyline wheezed, shaking the tears from her eyes. “Because you guys didn’t do anything... Revy’s... Revy’s...” Her voice faltered and faded away.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Themis muttered. “I truly am. But it was a necessary casualty.”

“A NECESSARY—erk!” The guard tightened his grip around Skyline before she could finish her outburst.

“... Luna wants me to tell you what’s going on.” Themis said quietly. “As much as I don’t want to... I’m trusting her judgment. You there, over here.” Themis gestured towards Cinnamon. “Take a look at Midnight. Do you see anything different about her? Anything at all.”

Cinnamon hesitantly took a look at Midnight, with Sundae timidly hiding behind her. “Ah don’t really see anything... wait.” Cinnamon frowned. “Was that there before? That thing right there on her flank.”

Cinnamon pointed towards what she saw—the outline of a six-point star on Midnight's flank. It had an incredibly faded color, and one had to look hard in order to even notice it. "What is it?" Cinnamon asked.

"It's called a Destiny Mark." Celestia explained. "It's something that only appears on the flank of a pony of great magical ability. Only a few ponies have ever possessed one... five in the past few decades to be exact." She pointed towards Midnight's flank. "You see how it's so faded? Destiny Marks only become pronounced once a pony's purpose is fulfilled. For example... take me and Luna." She gestured towards her sister. "We both have one of them, but they're only just circles right now. They won't fully appear until after the Day of Ascension."

"I still don't understand." Skyline muttered. "Why did you just sit back and let everything happen the way you did?"

Celestia hesitated. "We... we had to do it. In order for a Destiny Mark to appear... well..."

"Y-you have to die."

Skyline and Cinnamon turned to Luna, who quietly spoke that statement. "What d'ya mean ya hafta die?" Cinnamon questioned.

"I-it's a spiritual thing." Luna said flatly, a blank expression on her face. "I-In order to have magic flow through you... you have to... um, open your soul up to the Goddess... and..." Luna's voice began to shake. "A-and... the only real way to o-open yourself up... i-is t-to—"

"That's enough, Luna." Celestia muttered. "You don't have to remember."

Luna shook her head and calmed down. "I-I'm sorry. A-anyways, an Awakening can only happen during a near-death experience... and father wouldn't let us go while those wolves were still around so..."

"If I sent them while there were still wolves." Themis spoke. "Then we would be in a major violation of the treaty. As it stands now, the infringement can be easily fixed by increasing the Quota for the month."

Skyline bit her lip. "You're saying that you're just going to send more ponies to their deaths? I—"

"We have to!!" Themis shouted. "It's either some of us or all of us. As the king, I don't like it anymore than you do. But it's all for the greater good." His eyes turned towards the ground. "It's always been for the greater good..."

Skyline snorted. "I don't like it. You may be my king, but I don't like you at all."

"You don't have to like me." Themis muttered. "You only have to trust me." The king quietly turned to Midnight and examined her body. The unicorn was unconscious, but the steady rhythm of her breathing let everypony know that she was still alive.

"She's going to be like this for a while." Themis commented. "Her body needs to adjust itself to her Awakening, and in the worst case it'll be quite some time before she wakes up."

"How much time?" Cinnamon asked hesitantly.

Themis closed his eyes in thought. "For Celestia... she regained consciousness in a week. But it took Luna an entire month to get back on her hooves. It depends on the pony. With such an... extravagant Awakening, Midnight will probably be out for a while." He gestured to the guards, and a pair of them hoisted Midnight up. "We're going to take her back to the castle." He turned towards Luna. "Since you're the one who suggested that we tell them the truth, they will be your responsibility. Alright?"

Luna gave a curt nod. "Yes father."

"And Celestia," Themis said. "I'm trusting you to clean up before you leave Gyren."

"Of course, father." Celestia bowed.

"Very well then. Guards!" The pegasi snapped to attention. "We're heading home. Let's go!" The procession of royalty marched outside of the town, leaving the other ponies behind.

Celestia let out a deep sigh. "Alright, you three." She pointed towards Cinnamon, Skyline, and Sundae. "Get behind Luna. You don't want to be standing out in the open with what I'm about to do." The three ponies reluctantly did as Celestia said and stood behind Luna. "Okay..." She inhaled and exhaled a deep breath. "Luna, you start."

Luna nodded and twisted her face in concentration. A strange light began to emit from her, not too different from the light that first exuded out of Midnight. Slowly, an inky blue aura began to surround Luna, refining itself into the shape of a pegasus. However, the aura also had another part to its form, the pointed horn of a unicorn.

Luna spread her wings. The offset of energy that flowed off of her was different from the chaos that surrounded Midnight. This energy was warmer, more controlled. Her wings extended over the three ponies behind her, forming a barrier around them.

Soon after, Celestia did the same thing. A brilliant glow surrounded her, taking the form of an alicorn like Luna. Except the light that radiated from her possessed none of the darkness Luna had, but instead was a ebullient white.

Celestia levitated off the ground, and spread her wings as far as she could. As she beat her wings, shockwaves of energy emitted from it, dispersing across Gyren. It seemed like her wings spread all across the town, coming into contact with everyone in the town.

After a few moments, the aura dispersed around Celestia, and she collapsed onto the ground. Luna erased her barrier and tiredly clutched at her heart.

"Are you okay?" Sundae asked quietly, tugging at Luna's tail.

Luna smiled at the filly. "I-I'm fine... using any kind of magic just takes a lot out of the both of us..."

"Magic?" Skyline parroted. "Can somepony just explain what just happened?"

Celestia dragged herself over to the group of ponies. "I just cast a spell that erased the memories of anyone who witnessed the events that transpired here today."

"You erased their memories?!" Cinnamon exclaimed, shocked. "How d'ya even do something like that?!"

"With a lot of effort." Luna said tiredly. "And it's not really like we erased everything... just the parts that revolve around Midnight."

"It's a complicated process." Celestia explained. "But removing one or two details about something somebody has no attachment to about isn't too hard. They'd probably forget the details of what happened here by themselves, thinking it was just some kind of natural disaster that happened here. But we had to cast the spell just to make sure. As

for the scorch marks on the earth, their minds will come up with some sort of explanation.” She collapsed back onto the ground. “Still... it’s really exhausting.”

“That reminds me.” Skyline commented. “How were you able to stop Midnight? You shouldn’t have been able to get past that barrier around her...”

“Our bodies are more resilient to magic.” Luna said quietly. “To somepony or wolf that had never been exposed to magic before... their bodies wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“But yer earth ponies.” Cinnamon pointed out. “Only unicorns can do any sorta magic, even if the best they can do are cheap parlor tricks.”

“... we have something called an astral body.” Luna explained. “We project our souls and energy into this body, and using it we’re able to channel magic. That’s what you saw earlier when we cast that spell.”

“That’s enough explanations.” Celestia said curtly. “You may have decided to trust them, Luna, but that doesn’t mean you have to tell them all of our secrets.”

Luna winced. “But—”

“Enough, Luna.” Celestia turned to the three ponies. “Listen... as Midnight’s sister, I’m glad that she’s made some friends who care about her, but that doesn’t mean that you get to know everything.”

“Why not?” Skyline asked.

“... there are some things better left in the dark.” Celestia said quietly. “Haven’t you ever heard the old saying: ‘Ignorance is bliss’?” She shook her head. “Anyways, what’s more important is that we discuss what you three are going to do now. Some of those wolves escaped, and they know your faces.”

“... we can’t go back to Ponyville, can we?” Cinnamon muttered softly. “Ah kinda knew we weren’t goin’ back... but to hear it straight out...”

“That’s why you three are going to stay in the castle with us.” Celestia told them. The three ponies looked up to Celestia, shocked. “You’ll be there to greet Midnight when she wakes up. You *are* her friends after all, aren’t you?”

"But it's not just us!" Skyline cried out. "Midnight has other friends too... back in Ponyville."

"Does she?" Luna mumbled. "Celestia, we should bring them too."

Celestia sighed. "Luna... do you know how hard it is to desert your home?"

Luna tilted her head, confused. "Um, no, but—"

"Cinnamon and Skyline here have no choice but to leave their homes." Celestia said quietly. "But Midnight's other friends in Ponyville... do you really want to tear them away from their everyday lives?"

Luna winced. "I... I guess not..."

"Then it's settled." Celestia stated. "We're going back to the castle with these three, and these three only. Understood?"

"Hold on a minute!" Skyline exclaimed. "We can't just leave them behind! We have to at least let them know that we're okay!!"

Celestia sighed once more. "I don't have time to take a detour, and I don't feel comfortable letting you three out of my sight."

"Then I can go with them!" Luna offered. "If I'm there, then I can make sure that they don't tell anypony anything, right?"

"You're even worse at keeping secrets..." Celestia muttered.

"C'mon, jus' fer a couple o' hours!" Cinnamon pleaded. "We won't show our faces to anypony else, so jus' let us at least say goodbye to our friends!"

Celestia thought in silence for a moment. "... ugh, fine. But only for a short while. Let them know you're okay and then say goodbye." She turned to Luna. "I'm trusting you not to say anything unnecessary. Be mature for once and keep silent."

Luna winced. "I'm not that immature..."

"Let's go then." Celestia turned to walk away.

"W-wait a moment!" Skyline spoke up. "We can't go yet!!"

Celestia turned back to the pegasus. "And why can't we go now?"

Skyline glanced over toward's Revy's corpse. "There's... there's something I have to do first."

Celestia sighed. "Alright, you do what you have to do. I'm going to head straight back to the castle and I'm expecting you all to arrive not long after I do, okay?" Celestia began to walk away from the ponies. "Father should have left some guards outside Gyren's gates, so have them escort you once you finish your business. Farewell for now." Celestia galloped towards the gates of Gyren, leaving the other ponies behind.

--

"Are ya sure this is all ya need ta do?" Cinnamon asked Skyline as she piled on the last mound of dirt onto the ground. After Celestia left, they took Revy's corpse to a local cemetery to bury her. Thankfully the coroner didn't ask too many questions and let them have a decent plot of land once Luna bribed him with a sizable amount of bits.

"It's not like Revy was jus' some random griffon," Cinnamon continued. "She has friends in the Merchant's Guild who'd want ta attend her funeral, and—"

"This is enough." Skyline said quietly. "Revy was never a griffon who liked attention. And she didn't really have too many friends aside from me... a funeral like this is enough."

"Are ya alright, Sky?" Sundae asked timidly. "Yer cryin'."

"O-oh... I am, aren't I?" Skyline wiped the tears from her eyes, but they wouldn't stop flowing. "It's funny... I just never thought Revy would have died so soon... it seemed like she'd live forever, that griffon." She tried to suppress her sobs, but it was futile. "Now that I buried her... I realized that I'll never see her again..."

"Skyline?" Luna entered the cemetery, holding a red scarf in her mouth. "I got it cleaned for you like you asked."

The sight of Revy's scarf struck a chord of finality in Skyline's heart. The pegasus completely broke down, letting out a torrent of emotion that adrenaline and anger had held back all this time. She took the scarf from Luna, crying profusely the entire time.

The other three ponies solemnly bowed their heads. When Skyline's sobs quieted down after some moments, Cinnamon spoke up. "Ah think we should all say a few words in tribute ta her. Ah'd think she'd like that." All the ponies nodded.

"Um..." Luna hesitated. "I didn't really know you, but you were a great friend to Skyline, and I can feel her loss as if you were my own friend too... thank you for bravely giving up your life, and I'm sorry that I couldn't do anything to help sooner..."

"Thank you for saving me." Sundae mumbled. "Ah... um, ah don't think ah'd be alive without ya, so... thanks."

"Ah'm sorry fer not trustin' in ya." Cinnamon said. "Lookin' back on it... ya only did what ya did because ya cared about us. We were bein' reckless, and you were cool-headed enough ta try and stop us from killin' ourselves... ah apologize, Revy. Ah hope ya rest in peace."

The three ponies turned to Skyline. The pegasus wiped her tears away. "I don't need to say anything." Skyline said, smiling sadly. "She already knows how I feel about her." Skyline raised a hoof and gently pounded it over Revy's grave, as if she was pounding Revy's fist. "That's enough crying from me... Revy'd just laugh if she saw me moping around."

"... it's time to go now." Luna said quietly. "If we don't go soon, we won't have enough time to stop by Ponyville."

Skyline wiped the last of her tears away. "Yeah, you're right. Let's go."

The group of ponies left the cemetery one by one. Skyline was the last to leave. She gave one final look towards the griffon's grave.

"Goodbye Revy. Even if you're gone, I'll keep moving forward with everything I've got. Because I know that's what you'd want me to do. Because I know that you're still with me, watching me."

Skyline wrapped the crimson scarf around her neck and dashed away from the cemetery, leaving behind nothing more than a few tears and an abundance of happy memories.

Session 13

“Umm... Amethyst?” Lily asked quietly, blushing. “What are you, um, doing...?”

“Oh just hold still and sit quietly.” Amethyst said, smiling at her friend’s shy reaction. “I know you’ll like it. After all... this is something special that I’m doing only for you... I don’t normally offer up my services without charging.”

Lily gulped. “B-but... I... eek!” Lily Blossom jumped at Amethyst’s touch. “Oh! W-what are you... ahh!”

“Stop squealing, Lily!” Amethyst giggled. “Honestly, you act as if this is the first time I’ve ever done this to you!”

“B-but, no matter how often you do this, it always feels kinda... um... weird...” Lily blushed. “I-I mean, w-we shouldn’t be doing this anyways... Pastel’s sleeping upstairs, and if she sees us—mmph!!”

Amethyst shoved a carrot into the pegasus’s mouth. “Go chew on that for a while and stop worrying!” Amethyst cried. “If Pastel walks in on us... well, I’ll just have to give her this treatment too. Even though it takes so much effort just to satisfy you, Lily!”

Lily blushed. “O-ohf, don’t fay it like fhat!” She exclaimed, her mouth full of the carrot. The pegasus took a quick nibble from it and dropped it down on the table next to her before talking again. “Y-you make me sound like I’m so... so... um...”

“Hard to please?” Amethyst offered. “Honestly darling, you *are*! Last time we did this we went on for *hours* and *hours* and you still weren’t satisfied!” Lily’s face blushed an even deeper shade of scarlet upon remembering that particular event.

“Oh, don’t be shy about it,” Amethyst continued. “You *did* manage to come out one-hundred-and-ten percent satisfied after that! Of course, nopony could get my special treatment and come out unsatisfied. That’d just be simply *mortifying* for my self-esteem!” The unicorn gently ran her hoof across Lily’s flank. “Hmm... my word Lily, did you get thinner? I think you did! You simply *must* inform me of your diet, no matter what kind of diet I go on I seldom lose more than a couple millimeters.”

Lily frantically shook her head. "I-I didn't go on any diet at all!"

"Oh don't be so *modest!*" Amethyst laughed. "If I was as beautiful as *you* were Lily, then I'd be happy to be complemented at any time!"

"B-but Ame!" Lily stuttered. "You *are* beautiful!"

"I know, darling. I know." Amethyst said. "Anyways, stop squirming around and let me finish! You have no *idea* how lucky you are to have a friend with benefits such as *mine!*"

Lily opened her mouth to object, but she decided not to and shut it closed. Sometimes she just had to let Amethyst do whatever she wanted with her body, no matter how uncomfortable it made her. Besides... as much as she squirmed and stuttered and objected, the way Amethyst handled her was... nice.

"I think this much will suffice." Amethyst finally said. "Do you still have that sewing kit that I gave you a couple months ago? Oh, what am I saying, of *course* you do, Lily, you never throw anything that I give you away!"

Lily relaxed her body, letting all the tension it held while Amethyst was examining her fade away. "Um... yes." She pointed to the cabinets next to the sofa. "T-they're in there."

Amethyst elegantly trotted towards the cabinets and pulled out a large box with her mouth. She happily went back to Lily and plopped the box neatly down in front of the pegasus. "Now dear, now that I'm done taking your measurements, what sort of dress would you like me to design for you?"

Lily quietly bowed her head. "U-um, I don't know, a-anything you'd like to make I guess..."

Amethyst frowned. "Now Lily, we'll never finish before Pastel wakes up if we go on like we did last time! Honestly, I don't know how other ponies made dresses for you before I came around if you could barely keep still when I take your measurements!"

"... I've known you since I was a filly, Amethyst." Lily mumbled.

"Details, details!" Amethyst cried, brushing off Lily's comment. "So tell me darling, how may I please you today?"

“W-well... if you insist...” Lily’s voice trailed off as her mind wandered off in thought. “I-if you don’t really mind... I think I’d like a—”

“GOOOOOOOOOD MORRRRRRRRRNING EVERYPONY!!”

Pastel Lollipop came excitedly crashing down the stairs, completely destroying any sort of atmosphere the two other ponies had together while Pastel was sleeping.

Amethyst sighed and closed the sewing kit. “I guess we’ll have to brainstorm about this some other time, Lily.”

Lily gave a shy smile. “It’s okay, I don’t mind.”

“What’s everypony talking about? Huh? Huh?” Pastel asked, bouncing around the two. “Are you two talking about last night? No fair! I wanted to talk about it too!!”

The night before, a strange visitor named Deneb passed through Ponyville in search of Midnight Star. Unable to find Midnight, he entrusted Lily with a pendant and a cryptic message, before suddenly galloping off into the night, as if he was never there to begin with.

“What an odd fellow he was...” Amethyst muttered. “Why, he could do magic! If I could do magic like that, I would be able to create so many new dresses with such intricate designs! Oh, what I wouldn’t *give* to fully explore my artistic sense!”

“I wanted to fly again!” Pastel exclaimed. “Go all ‘ZOOM ZOOM’ then be all like ‘VRRROOOOMM!’ And then everypony would be like ‘WOAH SHE’S FLYING’ and I’d be all like ‘WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!’ Oh! Oh!! And then maybe I can go into space and scream ‘SPAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACE!!’ to everypony!”

“He was... nice.” Lily mumbled.

“Really though, since we’re on the subject,” Amethyst said, “Did you ever take a second look at that pendant he gave you Lily?”

The pegasus frowned. “Deneb told me not to take it out of the pouch...”

“Oh, I know what he told us Lily.” Amethyst slowly positioned herself next to Lily. “But I doubt anything really bad would happen if we just took another peak...” The unicorn gazed seductively into the yellow pony’s eyes.

Pastel quizzically tilted her head. “Amethyst, why are you making bedroom eyes at Lily?”

Amethyst did a double take. “B-bedroom eyes!? A-as if *I’d* be doing such a thing in order to seduce Lily into letting us see the pendant again! No way! Not me!!”

Lily chuckled. “It’s fine Ame... I wouldn’t let you see the pendant even if you were trying to seduce me.”

“W-what?!” Tears began to well up in the corners of Amethyst’s eyes. “A-are you saying I’m ugly? T-that I’m so ugly that I can’t even win over my best friend with my looks? That nopony would even flutter an eyelash when I stare longingly at them? I... *sob*... I...!!”

“Here comes the waaaahmbulance!” Pastel exclaimed excitedly. “Choo choooooooooo!!”

Amethyst frowned, any traces of sadness suddenly disappearing from her expression. “Oh you just had to ruin it, didn’t you Pastel?”

Pastel playfully stuck her tongue out. “Awww, I was looking forward to hearing you whine again!”

“Well *excuse me*, Pastel!” Amethyst turned her nose up into the air. “I am so glad that my pain and misfortune provides you with so much entertainment!”

“You’re welcome!!” Pastel cried, oblivious to the unicorn’s sarcasm.

Amethyst sighed. “Well... that’s enough fooling around for one morning. Lily,” She turned and bowed gracefully to the pegasus. “I respect your decision and won’t push you any further, so please accept my humble apologies for trying to seduce you.”

“I KNEW IT!!” Pastel exclaimed. “I KNEW YOU WERE A FILLYFOOLER AMETHYST!!” The earth pony squee’d in excitement. “Ooh, ooh!! I wanna throw you a ‘Coming Out’ party!! It’ll be so cool! We’ll have balloons and streamers and cake and presents and I’ll even find some nice mares so you can—”

Amethyst angrily stomped her hoof onto the ground. "Oooohh... I'LL FILLY FOOL YOU, PASTEL LOLLIPOP! COME HERE!!"

Pastel laughed as she swiftly dodged the unicorn. Amethyst fumed and tried to chase Pastel, around Lily's house in an attempt to catch the pink earth pony. Lily giggled to herself as she watched the chase. It was never a dull moment with friends like these.

A chime rang out through Lily's house, causing the Pastel to suddenly stop moving. Amethyst, not expecting the sudden halt, crashed into the earth pony, sending herself sprawling onto the floor.

Amethyst picked herself up while rubbing the sore spot on her head. "Pastel...? Why did you suddenly stop like that?"

"It's 7 o' clock!" Pastel exclaimed. "Mr. and Mrs. Toffee will be opening up to the bakery soon, and I gotta be there to help them set up shop!"

"Do you have to go now?" Lily asked sadly. "I thought the three of us could have breakfast before you go... eek!"

Pastel pulled Lily and Amethyst into a tight hug. "Don't worry about that, just drop by the bakery later and I'll fix you two up with a delicious Pastel breakfast!"

The two ponies released themselves from Pastel's embrace and turned to the pink earth pony. "Well... I guess that would be fine too..." Lily mumbled.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it, Pastel." Amethyst commented. "We'll be sure to visit you in about an hour, so be sure to fix us up something nice!"

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pastel exclaimed. The earth pony bounced towards the door and opened it to let herself out. "Well I'll see you girls later!"

The two ponies waved as Pastel hopped towards her job. Amethyst cleared her throat to break the silence. "Well then, Lily... how about we go back to what we were doing earlier?"

Lily gave a shy smile. "W-well... I guess some French haute couture would be nice..."

--

The morning shift always belonged to Pastel Lollipop. The Toffees saw it fit to have Pastel's cheerful disposition greet the customers in the morning, as opposed to the more sullen disposition that rears itself up with age. It was a smart business decision as well, since they saw that customers were more likely to return to a place that lifted their mood. Although the Toffees ran the only real bakery in the village, so it's not like the residents of Ponyville had much choice in where to purchase pastries.

Pastel gave a tired yawn as she stood at the kiosk. Even if she had to wake up early for the morning shift every day, she wasn't really a morning pony. Especially since she spent all night last night talking to Lily and Amethyst about Deneb and his pendant. The pendant had such a strange effect on the ponies, when they were exposed to it they felt like they had the potential to do anything...

Pastel sighed. She would've liked to have another look at that pendant, but Deneb told them to never bring it out of the pouch until they give it to Midnight. As much as she wanted to take a peek at it, Pastel wasn't a pony who liked to break the rules. Besides, even if she wanted to, she knew nothing would be able to persuade Lily to divulge the contents of that pouch.

"I wanna fly again..." Pastel mumbled absentmindedly. It was such a pleasant feeling, flying was. It was like Pastel was no longer tied to the earth, and she could go anywhere she wanted to go. Nothing held her back, and nothing stood in her way. No wonder Skyline was always so willing to bend the rules and fly around whenever she can, it was an addicting feeling.

A small tinkle resounded through the bakery. Pastel instantly stood at attention, ready to greet the customer. "Welcome to Sugar Cane Corner!" Pastel exclaimed. "Today we have a special on apple cupcakes, would you like to try some?"

"Umm... apple cupcakes?"

Pastel frowned at the unfamiliar voice. A stranger just wandered through town yesterday, and there's already another new pony the next morning? When did Ponyville become such a popular tourist spot?

The earth pony looked at the new customer. She possessed a grayish-purple coat and a light blue mane, colors that Pastel had never seen on a pony before. Her appearance gave off an atmosphere of elegance, and the shy expression on her face complimented her beauty.

But only one thought crossed through Pastel's mind upon seeing this new pony.

"OMIGOSH YOU'RE SO CUTE!" Pastel hopped over the counter and crashed into the pony, knocking her to the ground in a tight hug.

"U-uhm..." She struggled to break free from Pastel's grip. "W-what?"

"Who are you and how come I've never seen you before?" Pastel exclaimed excitedly. "And how did you get your mane so nice and pretty like that?"

"P-please... let go..." The pony muttered.

Pastel quickly noticed that her hooves were beginning to suffocate the mare, and coyly let go of her. "Eheh... sorry about that. I'm just sooooo enthusiastic about meeting new ponies!"

"I can tell..." The pony muttered under her breath.

"So my name is Pastel! Pastel Lollipop!" Pastel said, introducing herself. "I help run Sugar Cane Corner, my favorite color is pink, and I love to party! What about you?"

The mare was lost in Pastel's rapid dialogue. "Well... my name is Luna, and I—"

"LUNA?!" Pastel interjected. "That's such a cool name! It's like you were named after the moon or something!"

"I kinda was..." Luna mumbled. "But that's not important, um—"

"I wish I could be named after the moon too!" Pastel went on, not hearing Luna's quiet voice. "But I just got stuck with the name Pastel! Seriously, I can't do anything cool with that name! But with a name like Luna then when people ask me what my name is I can point at the moon! And then they'll be all confuzzled and then I can laugh then tell them my actual name! It's like a prank but it's not a prank because if it was a prank then it wouldn't be—"

"I know what a prank is!!" Luna interrupted. "But that's not the point, I—"

"Of course you know what a prank is!" Pastel laughed. "It'd be silly if you didn't know what a prank is! Oh! I remember this one prank I pulled on a friend where I got some balloons and some streamers and—"

“ALPHABETICAL MOON FRISBEES!” Luna shouted a random comment in order to get Pastel to stop talking. She found that yelling nonsense was usually a good way to grab a pony’s attention, and she was right. Pastel had stopped talking, and instead was giving Luna a quizzical look.

“Alphabetical... what?” Pastel asked, confused.

Luna sighed. “I don’t know what that is either. But you said your name was Pastel, right?”

Pastel rapidly nodded her head. “That’s meeee! But really, what are alphabetical moon frisbees?”

Luna shrugged. “Uhh... they’re like frisbees on the moon... except alphabetical? Wait...” Luna put a hoof on her mouth, wondering why she got off track again.

“That doesn’t make any sense, silly!” Pastel giggled. “If anything it should be an alphabet on the moon that throws frisbees!”

“That makes even less sense!” Luna pointed out. “Alphabetical moon frisbees would be just like regular frisbees except you’d be tossing them around on the moon! And they’d have... letters or something printed on the top! Like there’d be an ‘A’ and then a ‘B’ and then a... ack! What am I talking about?!”

“You’re silly, Luna.” Pastel laughed. “Playing frisbee on the moon... that’s ridonkulous!”

Luna opened her mouth to object when the bakery entrance was thrown open once again. “Oh Pastelllllll~ We’re hereeeeeee~” Amethyst called out in a singsong voice.

“Shh!” Lily hissed. “Pastel has a customer...”

Luna turned to the two newcomers, grateful that she didn’t have to be alone in dealing with the pink earth pony any longer. “Hi,” Luna said quietly, “Are you um... Lily and Amethyst?”

Lily ducked her head after hearing her name spoken by a complete stranger, and Amethyst took a step forward as if to protect her. “Possibly.” The unicorn answered. “But I do believe it is polite to introduce yourself first before asking for our names.”

“Awww, don’t be so mean!” Pastel exclaimed. “This here is Luna, and she and I are already bestest best friends!”

The hostility instantly dissipated from Amethyst’s expression and was replaced by one of shock. “L-Luna...? Y-you mean, *the* Luna?”

Luna nodded while Pastel just gave Amethyst a confused look. “*The* Luna? Why the ‘the’?”

Amethyst quickly galloped over to Pastel and forced her head down. “Don’t mind her, Princess!” Amethyst said quickly. “Poor little Pastel here simply does not know how to act around royalty!” The unicorn gave a deep bow, and Lily followed suit.

Luna grimaced uncomfortably. “U-um... please, don’t bow down to me, I don’t really like it when ponies do that...”

“Oh but we *must*!” Amethyst insisted. “After all, you *are* royalty, and it’d be incredibly ill-mannered of us not to follow the proper decorum!”

Luna frowned. “No seriously. Stop.”

Lily hesitantly followed Luna’s command, but Amethyst kept her and Pastel’s heads down. “I simply cannot!” Amethyst exclaimed. “If I did so then how else would I express my gratitude to be in your royal presence?”

Luna narrowed her eyes. “Keep your head down.” She muttered. “See what happens.”

“Beg your pardon, you royal majesty?” Amethyst said thickly, her head kept close to the floor.

Annoyed, Luna took one of the apple cupcakes from off the display counter. She promptly smeared it all over Amethyst, getting her mane dirty with cupcake crumbs and icing.

Amethyst suddenly picked up her head and looked upon Luna in horror. “Y-you... what did you do to my beautiful mane?!”

Luna gave a small snicker at Amethyst’s reaction. “I told you to stop bowing, didn’t I?”

Amethyst fumed. “Oooohh... stay calm Amethyst, don’t yell at royalty...”

Luna gave another frown. “How about we play a game? If you keep giving me special treatment then I keep putting cupcakes in your mane. Is that okay?”

“THAT IS NOT OKAY!” Amethyst yelled. She quickly shut her mouth closed with one of her hooves. “I-I mean... such behavior is not really fitting for a princess such as youse—”

Splat. Another cupcake found itself smeared all over Amethyst.

“Oops, sorry, my hooves slipped.” Luna giggled. “You were saying?”

Amethyst bit back her anger. She took a few deep breaths. “Keep your cool Amethyst... you don’t want to give her a bad impression of yourself...” She cleared her throat. “Now Princess Luna... if you would be so kind as to—”

Splat. Luna licked off some of the icing from her hooves. “You must really like cupcakes, huh?” She asked sarcastically.

Something snapped inside of Amethyst. “Ooohhh... That’s it, I’m through being nice!” The unicorn grabbed one of the cupcakes from off the display table. “It. Is. ON!”

Amethyst furiously threw the cupcake at Luna, who somehow managed to catch the cupcake in her mouth. “These cupcakes are really good!” She exclaimed after swallowing the cupcake.

“Thanks!” Pastel responded. “It’s a super duper secret recipe, and—”

Splat. A cupcake landed square onto Luna’s face. The mare brushed the icing off of her face and glared at the pony who threw it.

Amethyst gave a haughty laugh. “You know what they say, *Princess*, an eye for an eye—”

Squish. A crème-filled donut smacked itself onto Amethyst’s face. “And a tooth for a tooth, right?” Luna finished, smiling playfully.

Amethyst wiped the crème off of her face. “I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t partake in crème-filled donuts. However,” The unicorn slowly picked up another pastry from the

counter. "I am quite partial to crepes. You should try one, it does *wonders* for your complexion."

A harsh voice cut through the madness. "What is going on here?!"

Amethyst froze and quickly dropped the crepe. Pastel giddily turned towards the source of the voice. "We were just about to have a food fight Mr. Toffee!"

Mr. Toffee surveyed the mess Luna and Amethyst made in the bakery. The disaster area was thankfully limited to around the two ponies, but Mr. Toffee could see ponies outside that were quietly avoiding the bakery in an attempt to not get caught up in the mess. Mr. Toffee sighed. "Pastel... you know that this isn't the proper place for something like a food fight..."

Pastel frowned guiltily. "I guess... but—"

"And who is this pony anyways?" Mr. Toffee asked, gesturing towards Luna. "Another stranger? You know that nopony here has forgotten what happened after the *last* stranger passed through here!"

"... I would prefer it if you didn't talk about my sister with that kind of tone." Luna said quietly.

"Your sister?" Mr. Toffee frowned. All of a sudden, an expression of realization dawned upon his face. "Wait... does that mean you're—"

"Pastel, Amethyst, Lily." Luna said curtly, ignoring Mr. Toffee. "If you can all step outside of the bakery... I have something I have to talk about." The three other ponies quietly followed her orders, noticing the dark atmosphere that suddenly settled itself around Luna. After the three exited the bakery, Luna glared at Mr. Toffee.

"I... I don't like it when ponies talk badly about Midnight." Luna whispered. She gave a solemn bow to Mr. Toffee. "I'm sorry about the mess, but I have to borrow Pastel for an hour or so. Good day." She began to make her way outside of the bakery.

"Wait a moment!" Mr. Toffee called out. "Why are you in Ponyville your highness?"

Luna froze. "Another thing." She said quietly. "I don't like it either when ponies treat me like I'm better than everypony else. Because I'm not." She quickly pushed the door open and exited the bakery, not giving a single glance back to the bakery.

--

"Where are we going?" Lily asked. The three ponies were being led by Luna towards the outskirts of the town, having no idea as to why Luna wanted them.

"Into the forest." Luna answered, her dark mood from earlier already gone. "We're going into a safe area, so don't worry about running into any strange creatures while we're there."

The three ponies shrugged and continued to follow Luna. Amethyst sighed and tried to clean herself up while they were walking. "Pastel," Amethyst said, "What is in those cupcakes that make it so hard to get out of your mane?"

Pastel shrugged. "There's nothing much in them but apples and cupcakes!"

"... that's why they're called apple cupcakes, Pastel." Amethyst sighed.

Luna giggled. "I'm sorry about getting you messy, Amethyst. I just really hate it when people give me special treatment."

"Oh, it's no problem darling, I'm already over it." Amethyst said, brushing the icing off her mane. "Although I do have to say I am quite surprised at how... unroyal you are. No offense of course."

"None taken." Luna smiled. "I don't like any of that stuffy royal stuff, I just like to have fun and play around like any other pony."

"I think you're fun, Luna!" Pastel exclaimed. "Maybe we can play with alphabetical moon frisbees later!"

Amethyst and Lily gave the two other ponies strange looks. "Alpha what?"

Luna grinned sheepishly. "Don't think too hard about it. I don't really know either."

They were encroaching onto the edge of the Everfree Forest, and the three ponies following Luna hesitated. "This is a bit late..." Lily mumbled shyly. "But... how do we know if we can trust you or not?"

Luna frowned. "Um... I dunno. You just can." The three ponies looked at Luna disbelievingly. "Look... just a couple meters into the forest and that's it. I'm not asking you to go deep in there or anything. So let's go, alright? I'm kinda working on a schedule here."

"I'm okay with it!" Pastel exclaimed.

Amethyst sighed. "Well... we're already walked all the way out here, so it'd be a shame if we turned tail now. Isn't that right, Lily?"

Lily quietly nodded.

"Let's go then!" Luna said enthusiastically. "Off into the Everfree!"

The group of ponies marched into the Everfree Forest. The forest was dark and dank, as always, with nothing but slivers of light shining through the canopy at the top. No pony would ever venture into the Everfree on purpose, the ominous atmosphere sent shivers up everypony's spine. It felt like some sort of creature could jump out and attack the ponies at any moment, stealing away their lives before they had a chance to know what hit them.

Luna suddenly stopped in her tracks and held up a hoof. She turned around and smiled at the three who stood behind her. "We're here."

Expressions of joy began to creep up on Lily, Amethyst, and Pastel's faces as they felt the darkness around them began to recede. It had only been a week, but the relief they felt reflected an anxiety that seemed to have lasted for months.

Three ponies stood in front of them. A blue pegasus with a scarlet scarf wrapped around her neck, an orange earth pony with a familiar looking cowgirl hat, and a small filly in-between them.

"Hi!" Sundae squeaked.

"Nice ta see ya'll again." Cinnamon commented.

Skyline grinned. "Told you guys we'd be back."

Session 14

The simplest way to describe Twilight Sparkle's situation was that she was lost. After the events at Gyren her spirit melded with Midnight's and the two of them couldn't tell heads from tails about who they were or what they'd become. The two existed in that state as a burning light pierced through their souls, inflicting an excruciating pain onto the two.

And as suddenly as the light materialized, it faded away, and with it the strange connection Twilight had shared with Midnight. Now separated from her ancestor's spirit, she found herself wandering an abstract space she could scarcely comprehend. It was a space composed of nothing but impossibilities; staircases that turned inward into themselves, pillars that pierced the sky forming jagged cracks that ran into the earth, shapes that suddenly materialized and dematerialized as soon as she tried to approach them. It was a land of optical illusions and paradoxes, a land that Twilight Sparkle had absolutely no idea as to how to escape.

As she wandered the region Twilight couldn't help but think that she herself was an impossibility. The moment she eased her concentration was the moment that her physical form began to melt away and shapeshift into strange structures. Twilight could feel her sense of self slowly corroding away with every second she spent in this space.

Yet, for some reason, Twilight lacked a sense of urgency. While she existed in this space, she could also feel herself existing outside of it. Her consciousness was split in two different places; one part that resided where she was, and the other continued to reside alongside Midnight. Her soul was whole yet at the same time fragmented, much like the nature of the paradoxical space. As long as Twilight maintained her connection with Midnight it felt like she wouldn't disappear.

Still, Twilight's inborn curiosity motivated her to examine this strange space, giving her the strength to keep her body together while she explored. As she wandered through the winding staircases to nowhere and the walkways of nothingness, she could glean pieces of conversation from Midnight's side of the world. Talks about something called Destiny Marks, astral bodies, and something about magic, but in her current state she could only make out small snippets she could derive no real meaning out of.

Twilight wandered limbo for many millennia, feeling time dissolve beneath her hooves with every step she took. If it wasn't for her connection with Midnight Twilight knew that her consciousness would forever be lost among the chaos, her wanderings truly taking place over millennia instead of mere seconds. The swirling energies around her constantly threatened to tear Twilight apart, but with enough effort the energies were nothing but an annoyance to the unicorn.

She sighed. There really wasn't much to be seen in this space. No pattern or order emerged from the chaos after examination, everything seeming to be completely arbitrary and random. Twilight could feel her body dissolving, but she didn't pay too much attention to it. The unicorn could reform it in a snap as soon as she wanted to after all; as long as she was connected to Midnight everything would be okay.

Midnight Star... What exactly happened back in Gyren anyways? There was no use exploring the void when there was nothing to be found, so Twilight thought it'd be much more productive if she pondered over Midnight's condition instead.

Twilight recalled the moment where she'd lost her sense of identity, when she and Midnight became one and the same. Was Midnight aware of her consciousness? Was she wandering the same type of space at this very moment, doing the exact same thing Twilight was?

I want to know who I am.

Who was Midnight Star anyways, and why did Twilight feel so drawn to her?

The unicorn hadn't told Rainbow Dash this, but the reasoning behind wanting to dive into the past wasn't just a result of her natural curiosity, at least, not anymore. Not even her thirst for knowledge would've been enough to make her want to re-experience the cruelty she faced at the Collection. No, her motivations for diving into the past stemmed from something completely different...

It was like there was a small voice in the back of her head, urging her to dive into the past. A small, quiet voice that started speaking to her after her first attempt at casting the spell. It gave her a feeling of urgency, a feeling that something bad would happen if she didn't dive into the past.

Thinking back on it, Twilight wasn't even aware of the voice until just now. She thought that her motivations were purely academic, but now that she had the time to calm her mind she became aware that the voice was the prime factor that led her into the past.

But what was this voice? Was it possible that Midnight was trying to communicate with Twilight ever since she made the connection? No, that's impossible, the book said that the spell only created a simulation of the past, it wasn't like she was actually time travelling.

Then how did their consciousnesses meld together? If this was nothing but a simulation, then such a thing should have never happened. Twilight would always be Twilight, and Midnight would always be Midnight, but their spirits had combined into one...

"Ah...!" Twilight noticed that her body was now nothing but a small stream of smoke in the air. Her concentration had been completely fixated on her thoughts, diverting all her attention from her physical form. Twilight quickly rectified this; she found it incredibly uncomfortable when she lacked her body.

As soon as her physical form had recovered itself Twilight let out a deep sigh; no matter how hard she thought she could never discern a definite answer from the tangled mess of fragmented information she had at her disposal.

I want to know who I am. This single question resounded through Twilight's mind. Who exactly was Midnight Star, and why was it so important that Twilight relived her life?

Twilight Sparkle allowed herself to lie down upon the monochrome ground, staring into the hazy reaches of the cracked sky. "Just who are you, Midnight Star...?"

"Who do you think I am?" a voice suddenly echoed through the void, startling Twilight. "I'm your ancestor of course."

--

The Everfree Forest was always considered to be a place where nopony should ever venture in. Hardly any light shone down upon the Everfree, for the sun was continuously obscured by the thick canopy that covered the forest. Within the darkness manticores, cockatrices, hydras, chimeras, and all sorts of other creatures concealed themselves, waiting to devour anypony unfortunate enough to find themselves in their hunting grounds. The Everfree Forest was an evil place, and it was said that nothing good could ever come from exploring its depths.

Despite all the horror stories told about the Everfree many ponies found themselves wandering its outskirts. There was something about braving the unknown and untamed

wilds that appealed to rebellious ponies, the warnings and rumors only serving to make it more attractive and transforming the feared forest into a veritable hotspot for tests of courage and the like. It was soon discovered that the outskirts contained very little threats to a pony's life. However, if anypony was to venture deeper into the forest, they could consider their lives forfeit.

Luna knew exactly where the safe areas of the Everfree ended and where the danger began from her studies. However, unable to persuade Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae to venture deeper into the safezones of the forest, Luna had to settle for a few meters. It would have been much more preferable to Luna if they went deeper into the Everfree to guarantee their privacy, even if the outskirts were only a tad less secluded than the inner reaches.

Regardless of the short distance they travelled into the Everfree, hardly any light penetrated the canopy as Luna led the three through the forest. The shadows crept at everypony's hooves, threatening to snatch them away the moment they let their guards down. However, the shadows of the Everfree were kept at bay by the warmth that radiated from the ponies' reunion. The moment they laid eyes on each other, all the darkness of the forest shrunk away as if the group of ponies shone some sort of light that pushed the darkness away.

Lily locked Skyline into a tight embrace, Amethyst was holding back her tears by berating Cinnamon about her disheveled mane, and Pastel was bouncing around the others happily with Sundae trailing behind her. All of the ponies were joyously pouring their affections onto each other.

Only Luna stood off to the side, excluded from this reunion. It was only natural after all, she never really made a place for herself in this group of friends. The few conversations she'd had with Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae on their way back to Ponyville wasn't enough to really establish a solid relationship with them. The fact that she had little experience with other ponies outside of the royal family didn't help much either, normally she just sort of let other ponies come to her and built off her interactions based on that. In situations like this, Luna had no idea how to include herself into the conversation.

The princess timidly spoke up. "U-umm..."

"Ah told ya my mane's fine!" Cinnamon laughed, causing Luna's small voice to go unnoticed. "Seriously, Ame, ya gotta loosen up a little. Fer bein' on the road few a couple days, ah'd say my mane's been kept pretty well!"

“Heaven’s no!” Amethyst cried. “Can’t you feel all the dirt and dust in your mane? It’s absolutely *atrocious*!”

“I don’t think it’s that big of a deal,” Skyline said. “My mane’s just as dirty as her’s since—ACK!” Skyline’s comments were interrupted by the yellow pegasus’s tightened embrace. “Lily! Seriously!” Skyline coughed. “I’m fine! You don’t need to hug me so tight!”

“Yes I do!” Lily protested through her sobbing. “Do you have any idea how worried I was about you? Not to mention how upset I was that you didn’t tell any of us about your plan before you ran off with Midnight!”

“You would’ve stopped us!” Skyline argued.

“Of course I would’ve!” Lily agreed. “Why on earth would I let you do something as dangerous as that?”

“Because there would be cake and ice cream at the end of it!” Pastel chirped in. “Apple Sundae ice cream to be exact!”

“Yeah! Apple Sundae!” Sundae squealed while hopping behind Pastel. The other ponies gave a small giggle at Pastel’s joke.

Lily smiled softly and wiped her tears. “W-well... I’m glad that Sundae’s safe, but...”

“What happened to Midnight?” Amethyst asked, finishing Lily’s sentence. “And why do you have the Prin—er, Luna with you?”

Luna’s ears perked up at the mention of her name. “Well, what happened was—”

“It’s kinda a long story,” Cinnamon said, cutting Luna off. “And it’s not a very happy one either...”

Luna sighed. For some reason, she couldn’t be heard by the other ponies. Did she really lack that much of a presence? She timidly shrunk back into the darkness as Skyline and Cinnamon began relaying the story of Gyren to the others.

It was always like this. No pony ever really paid any attention to Luna. Back in the castle, it seemed like there was never any time for her; King Themis was always occupied in

his chambers, Queen Ambrosia continuously catered to the many responsibilities that she had to attend to while her husband wasn't around, and Celestia... Celestia was always preparing for the Day of Ascension. Only Midnight ever found the time to keep Luna company and play with her; everypony else only spent time with her when it was convenient. Aside from Midnight, Luna was alone... always alone...

"... what's going on?"

Fluttershy's quiet voice snapped the other ponies out of the trance. Diving put them in. They were all loitering around the white void, still lost in the simulation of the past.

Rarity tried to shake the dreamlike haze from her eyes, focusing her vision on the yellow pegasus pony. "Whatever are you talking about Fluttershy dear?"

Slowly, the other ponies regained their sense of self and looked at Fluttershy quizzically, wondering what she had to say.

The yellow pegasus shrunk back at all the pairs of eyes that focused themselves on her. "U-um... w-well..."

I don't understand why I always have to be like this... why am I so afraid to let myself be heard?

"There it is again!" Fluttershy squeaked. The other ponies just gave her a puzzled look. "Y-you... don't hear her?"

"Hear who, Fluttershy?" Rainbow Dash asked. "All I can hear is Skyline telling everypony what happened back in Gyren."

"B-but..." Fluttershy's voice trailed off. Earlier, before Skyline and Cinnamon began to speak to everypony, a curious occurrence happened to Fluttershy. While she was sharing her consciousness with Lily, a small crackling noise buzzed in her ear, bringing the pegasus's attention away from the past and into the void. There, she saw some sort of strange haze in the whiteness. If she had to describe it, it looked like speckles of torn up autumn leaves that flickered in and out of her vision. For some reason, Fluttershy's curiosity got the better of her, and she tried to examine the floating particles...

I... I don't want to blame my family but... who else am I supposed to blame for the way I am? If I wasn't so worried about the Day of Ascension then maybe... maybe... no, I shouldn't be thinking these thoughts...

Fluttershy bit her lip. The voice and feelings that reverberated through her head felt similar to the way she shared her consciousness with Lily, but this consciousness was sadder... more lonely...

"... Fluttershy?" Rarity asked worriedly. "Are you alright darling?"

The pegasus timidly shook her head. "I-I don't know... something weird's going on... like there's something wrong with the spell..."

"Like there's a glitch in the matrix?" Pinkie Pie offered.

Fluttershy gave a nod. "Um, something like that."

"Why don'tcha jus' explain ta us what yer hearin'?" Applejack asked. "It'd be a mite easier than makin' us guess what yer gettin' at."

"Um... for some reason..." Fluttershy shuffled her hooves, trying to think of an explanation. "I can, um, hear—no, not hear... um... feel Luna."

"Feel Luna?" Pinkie Pie tilted her head. "You don't feel other ponies, silly! Unless you're hugging them, because then that means you are feeling them in a good way, but the bad way would be kinda—"

"Could'ya go into a bit more detail, sugarcube?" Applejack interrupted, not wanting to suffer through another Pinkie Pie tangent.

"W-Well... it's the same way we feel our ancestors..." Fluttershy mumbled. "Like... they're a part of us but at the same time they're not... except Luna's a bit further away than Lily is...eek!"

Fluttershy's legs suddenly buckled beneath her. She clutched at the void, suddenly feeling a torrent of negative energy wash over her.

Luna receded further and further into the darkness, not wanting to intrude on the other ponies' reunion. *I... I don't want to be a third wheel... if there's anything Celestia and my parents made clear, it's when I'm not wanted...*

"Fluttershy!" Rarity and the other ponies quickly ran over to the pegasus's side. "Are you alright?"

"I... I don't know... but... but Luna—" Fluttershy was interrupted by a large intake of breath. It felt like a needle was stabbing straight through her heart, an odd feeling when also paired up to the soothing comfort Lily felt.

Luna kept her head down in an effort to make herself invisible. *Strange... wasn't I in a good mood earlier? Playfully talking nonsense with Pastel while giggling with Amethyst about our small food fight? All of that seemed so far away now for some reason... but... isn't that only natural for me? It's not like my destiny was to be happy in the first place...*

No... don't think about that... never think about that... I can't handle thinking about that...

Luna tried her best to push her negative thoughts aside, yet a sliver of it continued to come back to her. *Why couldn't I be like Midnight or Celestia? They always have perfect control over their thoughts, they never let themselves linger on the future. But me... whenever I start thinking about that I can't stop myself... I hate it. I hate myself for not being strong like my sisters. I hate how I always have to depend on them so much. I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it I hate it!*

Luna crouched down further, burying her head in her hooves. *Ha ha... maybe if I could just disappear for a while... I'd feel a bit better if I could just lose myself in this darkness...*

Fluttershy's body was shivering violently, her consciousness torn between Luna and Lily. One side of her felt overflowing happiness while the other felt overflowing despair, the dissonance between the two emotions threatening to tear her apart. Fluttershy didn't know if she would be able to take it any longer. The darkness that surrounded Luna's heart just continued to grow, consuming both the Princess and Fluttershy.

Fluttershy felt the energy drain out of her as she tried to put up with the two differing sentiments of Lily and Luna. She began to lose hold of her consciousness, feeling as if she was breaking apart into a million little pieces that would be scattered into the void. Whatever that happened to connect her to Luna, it was destroying her spirit. It had to stop soon, or else...

"Hey Luna! What're you doin' all the way back there?"

Luna's head snapped up as Cinnamon's voice broke her looping thoughts. In an instant, the darkness that corroded Luna's heart receded, leaving her body to join the larger shroud that lurked within the Everfree.

"H-huh?" Luna squeaked, startled at the sudden call of her name. "W-what is it?"

Cinnamon and Skyline trotted over to her and dragged her back towards the group. "Don't wander off somewhere, Luna!" Skyline warned. "If something happened to you then how would we be able to explain that to Celestia and your parents?"

"O-Oh... yeah..." A bitter smile rose up on Luna's face. *Of course that'd be the reason... nopony would want to cause trouble for my sister... always my sister... no, I need to stop thinking like this. I need to think positive! Positive thoughts! Rainbows! Frisbees! Midni—*

SYSTEM RESTORED.

In an instant, the connection Fluttershy had with Luna disappeared following the strange monotone statement that echoed through her mind. The yellow pegasus felt the energy flow back into her as she shakily picked herself off the ground.

"A-are you alright, Fluttershy?" Rarity asked, her expression overflowing with worry over her best friend. "It looked like you were having a seizure or something!"

Fluttershy weakly nodded her head. "Y-yes... I'm fine now..."

"What the heck was that?!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "We all started freaking out when you started shaking!"

"It was like you were possessed and needed an exorcist!" Pinkie Pie followed up. "It was so creepy and scary!"

"C'mon sugarcube, explain yerself!" Applejack said firmly. "You were sayin' somethin' about Luna earlier, weren't ya?"

"Y-yeah..." Fluttershy mumbled. "I was drawn to Luna and while we were connected... I felt... um..."

"It was Luna's fault then!" Rainbow Dash interrupted. "I bet that was her plan all along! To take us all down one by one in here using her past self!"

Rarity frowned. "Don't jump to conclusions like that, Rainbow Dash. Remember, Princess Celestia's the one who sent us back here. You're not accusing our Princess of trying to murder us, are you?"

Rainbow Dash grimaced. "W-well... no. But what about that glitch thingy Pinkie Pie mentioned? Maybe Luna rigged it behind her sister's back and—"

"Stop tryin' ta pin the blame on Luna." Applejack said firmly. "Listen sugarcube, ah don't really trust Miss Ex-Nightmare Moon either, but it ain't right ta accuse somepony without some proof ta back it up."

"Then how do you explain the glitch?!" The blue pegasus argued.

"Please... can you stop, Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy asked softly. "I don't think Princess Luna would do something like that to us..."

"Yeah!" Pinkie agreed. "Nightmare Moonie is patooie, Princess Celestia said it herself!"

The blue pegasus sighed. "I'm just looking out for my friends, okay? Princess Luna almost plunged all of Equestria into darkness forever, remember? She still might be dangerous! A simple 'I'm sorry' won't be enough to get me to trust her."

"You don't have to trust her," Fluttershy said quietly, "but you just can't accuse her of things that aren't her fault..."

"Ugh, whatever!" Rainbow Dash threw her hooves up in the air and turned her back on the other ponies. "I'm going back in so we can get Twilight out sooner. I don't want to spend any more time in this place then I already have!"

A white veil surrounded Rainbow Dash, signifying her consciousness's return to the past. The other ponies sighed.

"She can be so hot-headed sometimes..." Rarity muttered. "It can't be good for her complexion..."

"Hey sugarcube?" Applejack reassuringly patted Fluttershy's head. "Don't get yer mane in a knot, Rainbow's jus' bein' Rainbow after all."

"I'm okay." Fluttershy said softly. "I just... I mean... Luna's so sad... and there's something that she's worried about..."

"Like what?" Pinkie asked. "Is it something that a fun party can't cure?"

Fluttershy gave the pink earth pony a small smile. "Maybe... I don't know. Let's all just go back and see what's going on in the past, maybe we'll get some answers then..."

"If you say so darling." Rarity agreed.

Fluttershy removed her consciousness from her body before another word could be said. She didn't know if it was because she wanted to rest and let Lily take care of things, or if it was because she was worried about Luna, but the pegasus wanted to get back into the past as soon as she could.

When Fluttershy regained her bearings only a few minutes had actually passed for her ancestor. In those few minutes the bitter smile had been erased entirely from Luna's expression, replaced by a playful smirk as she played around with Sundae. Yet... Fluttershy could still sense a hint of sadness in that happy expression, a tint that soiled the otherwise radiant smile Luna held.

"Ah think that's enough of our story," Cinnamon said tiredly.

Lily Blossom tightly embraced Skyline. "I'm so sorry about Revy..."

"Don't be sorry," Skyline muttered. "She'd just laugh at us if we wasted our time moping around."

"Le's talk about ya'll!" Sundae piped up, sensing the atmosphere that was beginning to build itself around Skyline. "Pastel, Lily, Ame, anythin' interestin' happen in Ponyville while we were gone?"

"Well if you must know, dear Sundae..." Amethyst cleared her throat, "I just had the most *marvelous* idea for a new dress design, not to mention that I recently came across the fabric that I needed for—"

"Nothing much interesting happened here," Lily interrupted, knowing that Skyline and Cinnamon couldn't care less about Amethyst's fashion talk.

“There was one thing though!” Pastel exclaimed excitedly. “Another stranger came into Ponyville last night!”

“Last night?” Cinnamon echoed. “Well ain’t that great, if we came in a day earlier then we coulda’ met this stranger.”

“Who was he?” Skyline asked.

“He was a nice stallion,” Lily told them.

“And he could do *magic*!” Pastel added.

Luna stopped frolicking around with Sundae. “Wait, what? Magic?”

“Uh-huh!” Pastel said, “He lifted me up so I could go ZOOM and after I zoomed I went WHOOSH and after that—”

“He cleaned up his attire in seconds too!” Amethyst cut off. “Why, if I was able to do what he did, my business would flourish!”

“Huh... that’s strange...” Luna frowned, pondering over this stranger. “No pony other than Celestia and I should be able to cast magic... unless...” Luna turned up to look at Lily. “What was this stranger’s name?”

“Oh, umm...” Lily shuffled her hooves at having everypony’s attention suddenly on her. “He said his name was, um, Deneb...”

A horrified expression crept up on Luna’s face after hearing the name. “D-Deneb? N-no, that means...”

“Are ya alright, Luna?” Cinnamon asked worriedly.

Luna ignored the earth pony and continued to press Lily. “He didn’t tell you anything else, did he?!”

Lily shrunk back at the princess’s shouts. “U-um, w-well, I, uhm...” She shook her head, trying to regain her composure. “H-he gave me a pendant to give to Midnight, and he told us to pass her a message, um...”

"The Summer Triangle is always looking out for her. And the Elements will show her the way."

Luna slowly backed away from Lily and the others, her lower lip slightly trembling. "T-the Summer Triangle... so it is him... and with Midnight's Awakening..." She suddenly shot up and grabbed Lily's hooves. "Forget you ever met him!!" Luna shouted.

"W-what?" Lily questioned, taken aback by the princess's demand.

"Why do we have to forget him?" Amethyst frowned.

"Just because, alright?!" Luna pleaded.

"What's the dealio, Luna?" Pastel asked with a stern tone. "Deneb's a nice pony, there's no reason to forget about him!"

"Yes there is!" Luna snapped. "I don't want him to be found just yet! I'm... I'm not ready!"

"Ready for what?" Skyline questioned. Luna bit her lip, not wanting to respond to the pegasus's question.

"Ah think ya need ta calm down a bit, sugarcube." Cinnamon advised. "Now take a deep breath an' tell us what the deal is with this Deneb feller."

"I... I can't." Luna mumbled. "I'm not allowed to tell anypony about it..."

"About what?" Pastel inquired.

"I just can't okay!" Luna shouted. "So stop asking!"

"... if you don't want to tell us, that's fine." Lily said softly. "But you can't ask us to just forget about somepony without giving us a good reason... besides, we promised him we'd get his pendant to Midnight."

Luna sat in silence for a few moments, trying to regain her composure. After her breathing calmed down, she calmly spoke up. "Look... I just don't want other ponies to know about him... if the wrong pony hears that he's in our territory, then..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry for exploding at you, but can you promise me that you won't say a

word to anypony else about Deneb?" Pastel opened her mouth to object. "*Promise me?*" Luna pleaded.

Amethyst sighed. "Well, if you're that worried about it... I suppose we can keep quiet for a bit... But we still do need to get that pendant to poor Midnight!"

"I can take it to her," Luna offered, relieved that they agreed to keeping Deneb a secret. "Me, Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae will be headed to the castle soon, so we can just drop it off once we get there."

"Wait, all of you?" Lily questioned.

Skyline and Cinnamon shot looks to each other and sighed. "Yeah... we can't stay in Ponyville anymore." Skyline admitted.

"What?!" The other ponies collectively shouted.

"If we stayed then those wolves would have an excuse ta take the village!" Cinnamon explained. "Me and Skyline already made our peace, so there's no use tryin' ta stop us."

"But what about Sundae?" Pastel asked, concerned about the small filly.

"Ah wanna go where ma sister goes." Sundae said quietly. "A home ain't a home without ma' brother and sister, and now that ma' brother's gone..." She shuffled over closer to Cinnamon, who lovingly patted her on the head.

"Point is, we're goin' and there ain't anythin' ya'll can do ta stop us." Cinnamon stated firmly. "And that's that."

"No." Lily stomped her hoof down. "Skyline, I am not going to be separated from you again. If you're leaving Ponyville, then I'm leaving too!"

"I can't ask you to do that!" Skyline protested.

"Why not?" Lily countered. "If I don't go with you who else is supposed to make sure you don't get into any trouble?"

"Cinnamon can do it!" Skyline offered. "Look Lily, I just don't want you to abandon your entire life just because of what Cinnamon and I did!"

"I'm choosing to abandon my life to go with you!" Lily said firmly. "I'm making this choice, and there's no way I am leaving you alone!"

Skyline sighed. "Fine... it's not like I can stop you once you've made up your mind..."

"What about me and Pastel?" Amethyst asked. "You're not really going to leave us behind, are you?"

"Ah'm sorry, Ame," Cinnamon said apologetically, "but you can't just leave all o' yer employees behind, and Pastel can't just leave Mr. and Mrs. Toffee either!"

"But... we can't just stay behind..." Pastel mumbled. "Who will be able to throw you all parties if I'm not around?"

"Ah think we'll manage." Cinnamon gave the pink earth pony a sad smile. "Look, it's fer the best. You and Ame can't jus' leave Ponyville. Everypony's probably put Sundae and I behind 'em, and ah heard what they say about Lily and Skyline behind their backs sometimes... but with you and Pastel, Ponyville will take a mighty loss if ya'll leave."

Pastel and Amethyst hesitated, not wanting to drop the subject but knowing that they had a point. Luna timidly took a step forward. "We could only get permission for a short detour over here to say goodbye so... I think it's about time we get moving."

"I need to go home first and pack a few things for Skyline and me," Lily mumbled.

Luna gave a small nod. "Okay, we'll wait for you over on the road leading to the castle. Skyline, Cinnamon, Sundae, are you all done?"

The three ponies embraced Amethyst and Pastel tightly. "Don't worry, we'll see you all again someday. It's not like this is goodbye forever."

"Is that a promise?" Pastel asked sadly. "Cross your heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in your eye?"

"It's a promise, sugarcube." Cinnamon agreed. The group of ponies released each other from their embrace.

"Remember not to tell anypony about Deneb." Luna reminded Pastel and Amethyst as she rounded up her group. "Lily, we'll be waiting, so make it quick, okay?"

Lily gave a curt nod as Luna, Cinnamon, Skyline, and Sundae departed the forest. As she took a few steps to follow them, Amethyst called out to her from behind.

“Lily! I still need to finish that dress for you!” Amethyst cried.

The yellow pegasus smiled sadly and faced Amethyst. The unicorn looked up at her with forlorn eyes, not wanting to be separated from her best friend.

Lily gave Amethyst a small kiss on the nose. “Just put that dress on hold for me, okay?” Lily knew that if she lingered any longer that her resolve would crumble. She quickly turned tail and galloped away from Amethyst before the unicorn could get another word out.

Amethyst half-heartedly reached out towards Lily as the pegasus disappeared from her view. “Yeah... I’ll put it on hold for you... it’ll be French haute couture, just how you like it.” She solemnly turned to face Pastel. “Well Pastel, I guess it’s just the two of us now...”

“Yeah...” Pastel sighed. “Just the two of us...”

Session 15

Lily was frantically fluttering around her hut, making sure that she had absolutely everything necessary before she set off. She wasn't coming back, so she had to make sure that the place was in tip-top shape as a shelter for all the animals to take refuge in. Lily cleaned up all the animal pellets, made room for the animals to move around easier, and unlatched all the windows as an open invitation. She planned to let nature take possession of her former abode, and, as such, there was no need to keep it locked up.

The pegasus packed her saddlebags and double-checked to make sure she had everything she needed. Her favorite romance novels, a couple personal mementos, the few clothes she had, Skyline's blanket...

Lily paused for a moment. Everything of value that she had ever owned had come from a single source. Amethyst. Whenever Lily was short on bits, Amethyst was always happy to loan her the money, even if she knew the pegasus would never be able to pay her back. Lily only worked as a volunteer; she didn't have an established career like Amethyst to provide a steady income. Lily lived mostly on sustenance farming and charity from the Apple family, so there was never any reason for the pegasus to own material belongings.

Lily let out a small giggle at the drawings that were strewn across her table. They were the half-finished dress designs leftover from the morning, Amethyst's latest gift-in-progress to her. That unicorn always did so much for Lily, she didn't know what she would really do without her...

"I'm not coming back, am I?" Lily whispered to herself.

A small chirping sound resounded from the corner of the room as if to respond. A cage hung from the ceiling, containing a small blue bird. "Oh! I'm sorry for forgetting about you Mr. Bluejay!" Lily squeaked. "Don't worry, I'll let you out right away!"

Lily flew up to the cage and quickly unlatched it. "Don't worry about that wing anymore, Mr. Bluejay," Lily smiled, "You should be all better now, so spread your wings and take flight back out into the world!"

The tiny bluejay gave an affirmative-sounding chirp before tentatively spreading its wings. There was a bare patch of feathers where the injury had been, but it was otherwise completely healed and scarcely left a mark. The bluejay took one—two hops to the edge of the cage, but was hesitant in taking flight.

“Don’t worry little birdy,” Lily cooed. “That little ouchie won’t do anything to you anymore.”

The bluejay gave a small chirp and turned to Lily, as if it didn’t want to be separated from the pegasus.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be okay...” Lily nuzzled the small bird as if to communicate her thoughts. The bluejay gave a happy chirp and lifted itself off, flying away to where it belonged.

Lily smiled fondly as the bluejay departed. It was the last injured animal she would ever heal in Ponyville. A deep sense of melancholy set itself upon the pegasus as she pondered over her decision.

Everything... everything would be left behind. There would be no more taking care of animals... no more Sugar Cane Corner... no more Pastel... no more Amethyst...

No more Amethyst. Lily wouldn’t be able to meet her best friend again anytime soon. This... this would be the first time they would be separated from each other, wouldn’t it? Throughout all her life, Lily had Amethyst by her side to support her through thick and thin. But now... now Lily would have to support herself. Sure, Skyline and Cinnamon will be there for her, but the relationship she had with Amethyst was different... special...

Lily sighed. She had to go to Canterlot with the others. If she didn’t, then who would look after Skyline? There was no way Lily was going to let her sister go off somewhere by herself again. No matter how much she would miss Amethyst, family came before friendship.

She checked her saddlebags one last time to make sure everything was there. Her books, her mementos, her clothes, and most importantly, the pendant. The pendant continued to rest within the pouch Deneb gave her, and Lily planned to keep it there.

Lily gave one last survey of the place. All the fun times she experienced, all her precious memories... all of that would be left behind.

She took a single step outside of the hut, feeling not only the saddlebags on her back, but also the enormous weight of the decision she was making. Lily laboriously put one hoof in front of the other as she tried to push away all the memories she had of her former home. Happy memories, sad memories, memories of the days where she played with Skyline, memories of the days she spent with her parents...

"Lily, Skyline, I want to talk to you two for a moment." An older stallion coughed.

Two small fillies hesitantly approached the stallion. One was slightly taller than the other, and was also quickly approaching marehood. "Y-yes daddy?" Lily stuttered.

"You two sure have grown..." Mr. Blossom chuckled. "Why, I could've sworn that it was just yesterday that your mother foaled you two!"

"I only foaled Lily, darling," Mrs. Blossom corrected. "But we love you just as much as your sister, Skyline, so don't worry."

"Ah, yeah, that's what I—" Mr. Blossom was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing.

"Daddy?!" Lily cried. "A-are you okay?"

Mr. Blossom smiled. "Yes. Well, no, not really." The smile slowly fell from the stallion's face. "You see... Lily, Skyline, there's something important I need to talk to you two about.

"What is it?" Skyline asked. "I-is this about how I practice flying in the woods out back sometimes?"

"Don't worry, it's not about that." Mr. Blossom reassured. "I believe that you should grow up doing what you think is best, although as a parent I shouldn't really be encouraging that kind of behavior." The stallion let out a few hoarse coughs. "I swear this illness is getting worse by the day..."

"I-I thought that it was just a cold!" Lily exclaimed worriedly.

"It is a cold, dear." Mrs. Blossom said weakly. "But even colds can be deadly. That's why you should always take proper care of your health."

"That's my wife," Mr. Blossom joked, "Always sharing her wisdom even when on her deathbed."

"Deathbed?!" Lily and Skyline exclaimed together.

Mr. Blossom gave the two fillies a sad smile. "Yes. Deathbed. I don't believe I'd be doing my children justice if I hid from them the obvious... and the obvious is that your parents don't have that much time left to live."

"B-but it's just a cold!" Skyline objected. "Mom once told me that you can't die from a cold!"

"You can, if you get it from trying to help out a nest of snakes that don't want your help." Mrs. Blossom stated. "Now children, I want you to listen carefully to what your father's about to say, alright? You two need to be strong and listen to him like adults, okay?"

Skyline and Lily gave two small nods.

Mrs. Blossom smiled at her children. "Take it away then, darling."

"Well then," Mr. Blossom cleared his throat. "Lily, Skyline, when your mother and father pass away—and don't try to deny the obvious—that doesn't mean that everything will be over. We taught you two the importance of life, how you need to cherish the time you spend on this earth. Death is just a natural part of life, something everypony has to face someday, it just so happens that your mom and dad have to face that day sooner than we expected.

"I know it'll be painful to see us go, but keep your chin up. You still have each other, not to mention Ponyville itself will help look after you two once we're gone. I want my children to grow up happy, and that can't happen if you think your lives are over once we're gone.

"Lily, you've grown into a fine young mare." Mr. Blossom smiled as he ran a hoof through his elder daughter's mane. "I want you to take care of Skyline. You know how she is, always getting into trouble."

"H-hey!" Skyline objected with a shaky voice.

Lily gave a sad nod, silent tears streaming down her face. "Y-yes daddy, I'll look after her..."

"And Skyline, be good to your sister. Even if the ponies in Ponyville will be around to help you out, your sister will always be the pony closest to you. Don't forget that."

Skyline nodded. "Yes dad..."

Mr. Blossom smiled. "This home is all your mother and I can leave for you two. After we pass, you're free to do whatever you want with it." He winked at Skyline. "You always wanted to make an obstacle course, didn't you?"

Skyline blushed. "D-dad!"

The stallion let out a hearty laugh before he was interrupted by another fit of coughing. He cleared his throat once more. "That's about all I have to say to you two. Just remember... you'll always have each other, so never grow apart, okay?"

"Okay daddy..." Lily whispered to herself. She made a promise to her parents to always stay with Skyline. This promise gave her the strength to walk away from Ponyville.

With every step she took away from her former home, another tear fell from her face. Soon enough, her hut was nothing more than a faraway building. Lily wiped away her tears as she approached Luna's group, trying her best to hide her sadness.

"... are you ready to go?" Luna asked, sensing the mood that hung around Lily.

Lily nodded her head. "Yeah... I'm ready now... let's go."

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The harsh rays of the sun peaked through Amethyst's curtains, forcing the unicorn awake. She moaned and groaned, covering her head with her pillow in a futile attempt to fall back asleep. Amethyst barely got a wink of sleep last night, tossing and turning on her bed, her head spinning from her thoughts.

Lily... Lily's gone now. By this time she should be halfway to Canterlot with Luna and the others. Amethyst sighed from under her pillow. She couldn't believe that pegasus was actually gone. From her earliest memory, Amethyst could recall being together with Lily. They brushed each other's manes, stayed up all night gossiping about other ponies, endured the awkwardness of puberty together... Lily was an integral part of her life. Without that pegasus, Amethyst just felt like something was... missing.

The sun continued to illuminate the room with its unforgiving light, as if the heavens were trying to force Amethyst out of her bed. "Ugh... go away sunlight!" Amethyst groaned. "I am *not* in the mood to put up with your antics today."

As if in response, the sun just shone harder down upon her. Frustrated, Amethyst threw her pillow at the window and angrily shut the curtains closed. Her irritated gesture did little to stop the sun, as the morning rays easily penetrated her thin curtains.

Amethyst sighed. There was no use fighting the fact that nature obviously wanted her awake. Besides, today was a workday. She already took yesterday off, and two days in a row would just be unbecoming of her. Her employees would get lazy if their boss was always missing.

Amethyst groggily set about her morning routine. Washing her face, doing her makeup, making her bed... all the normal mundane things that she always did. After she cleaned herself up, she'd head downstairs to begin tidying the Boutique. Dusting off her centerpieces, performing light maintenance on the sewing equipment, double checking to make sure they were still in the green. After she set up shop, she would march off to Sugar Cube Corner to pick up her breakfast. A strawberry crepe, covered lightly in powdered sugar and a warm drink to keep up her energy. Then she would wait inside the Boutique for her employees to come in and they would start their workday, waiting for the few customers that came in to get their formal attire mended. It was a routine that had never changed, a routine that reflected the static peacefulness of her life.

Now Lily, Skyline, and Cinnamon were gone. At the end of a hard day's work, Amethyst could always look forward to spending time with her friends, playing around with them and talking. It was a fun life, a peaceful life.

Now that life no longer existed.

"It'd be nice if everything could go back to normal..." Amethyst muttered to herself as she dragged her hooves downstairs. "But that Collection just had to happen, didn't it... and now it's just me and Pastel..."

Knock knock knock. A light rapping on the door caused Amethyst to break away from her thoughts. She tilted her head. "Who could be here this early?" Amethyst asked nopony in particular.

She trotted over to the door and unlatched it. "Hello? Oh, it's you Crochet, what are you doing here this early in the morning?"

A slender teal unicorn with a slightly curled blue-striped mane stood at the Boutique's door, timidly shuffling her hooves. "U-um, I was just wondering if you needed any help this morning."

"I'm alright, Crochet." Amethyst told the mare. "I wouldn't be able to pay you for your assistance either, we're tight on funds this month and you're not scheduled to work for another couple hours—"

"I don't need to be paid!" Crochet exclaimed.

"Don't need to be paid?" Amethyst frowned. "Alright, tell me what you want Crochet, I don't have all day. Why do you suddenly feel the need to assist me this morning?"

Crochet bit her lip. "U-um... I heard a rumor that Lily's gone..."

"What about it?" Amethyst snapped. "If you're here to pity me, then I'll have you know—"

"N-no ma'am!" Crochet interjected. "I-It's just... if you don't really feel up to working today then I thought I could..."

"What you're doing right there is called pity, Crochet." Amethyst huffed. "Even if my best friend is gone that does *not* mean that I am not perfectly capable of handling myself."

"So she's really gone?" Crochet asked curiously.

Amethyst slammed the door on her young employee.

"Amethyst?!" Crochet pounded on the door. "I'm sorry ma'am, I didn't mean to be nosy. I'm just worried about you! Amethyst? Amethyst!"

The door suddenly swung back open. Amethyst irritably gestured to Crochet and pointed her towards the interior of the Boutique. "If you want to set up shop so badly then go ahead and do it!" Amethyst shrieked. "But mark my words if I see one sheet of fabric out of place I will fire you on the spot!!"

"Y-yes ma'am!!" Crochet squeaked, bowing her head down in fear.

Amethyst gazed guiltily upon the sorry sight of the mare in front of her. She sighed. "You don't have to bow your head down like that... look, I'm going to go grab my breakfast, so make sure everything's in tip-top shape when I return. And if it's not... I'm not going to fire you, so don't worry about it..."

Crochet timidly raised her head to look up at Amethyst. "I-if you say so ma'am..."

Amethyst opened up her mouth to say more, but decided against it. She was in a fragile mood, and she didn't want to go off on Crochet anymore. That mare was Amethyst's most talented employee, and she would hate to lose her.

Amethyst slowly made her way to Sugar Cube Corner as she give herself time to sort her thoughts. Did Lily's departure really impact her that much? When Skyline and Cinnamon left for that week, Amethyst was still easily able to keep her temper under control. Maybe it was because she knew they were coming back that she was able to keep her cool, but even then she worked out in the back of her mind the fact that those two wouldn't be able to stay in Ponyville once they returned. So why was she so affected now that Lily was gone?

Maybe... maybe it's not just because Lily had departed, but because of the finality of the whole thing. Skyline, Cinnamon, Lily, and Sundae were lost to Ponyville from this point forward, and any happy delusions Amethyst had of going back to their previously peaceful lives had vanished. This was reality, and reality had a way of decimating any sort of flighty fantasy.

No matter what the cause was, Amethyst knew for a definite fact that there was an empty feeling inside of her that was eating away at her heart. She sighed again, wondering how Pastel was holding up...

As Amethyst reared up towards Sugar Cane Corner, the earth pony in question departed the bakery. The unicorn's jaw dropped when she saw what Pastel was adorned with; a heavily packed traveling saddlebag.

"Where on earth are you planning to go?!" Amethyst exclaimed, startling the earth pony.

"Eek!" Pastel yelped. "Geez Ame, you sure know how to greet somepony good morning!"

"Don't play around with me Pastel Lollipop," Amethyst said sternly. "Explain to me what you're going to do with that saddlebag of yours?"

“Oh, this?” Pastel twisted her neck to look at her saddlebags. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to Canterlot!”

“You? Go to Canterlot?” Amethyst fumed. “Darling, what are you talking about?! You can’t *leave* Ponyville! Have you thought of what would happen to everypony if they lost their favorite party pony?”

“Of course I did, silly!” Pastel exclaimed. “I thought for a long long long long long long loooooong time about this! I barely got any sleep last night because of it! Which isn’t really a good idea if I wanna catch up to the others...”

“Are you listening to yourself?” Amethyst asked. “You’re leaving Ponyville. *Leaving*. As in, never coming back.”

“Who said we can’t come back?” Pastel frowned. “Just because Skyline and Cinnamon can’t return to Ponyville doesn’t mean we can’t, right?”

“Wrong, Pastel.” Amethyst snapped. “You can’t expect free passage between Ponyville and Canterlot whenever you want. Once you step into Canterlot’s gates, you have to go through an extensive licensing process to establish your citizenship as a resident of Canterlot. You may be able to visit Ponyville every once in a while, but once you’re a citizen of Canterlot, you’re only really allowed to leave if you have important business elsewhere. Unless you want to spend half a year going through the immigration process, that is.”

Pastel tilted her head. “That sounds silly. Why do we have to go through all that?”

“Security reasons,” Amethyst explained. “If they just let anypony come in and out all whenever they wanted to, they’d be leaving all sorts of holes in their security! They *do* have the royal family to worry about after all.”

Pastel frowned. “But they sent Midnight here so...”

“That was an exception.” Amethyst said. “If you recall I was appointed as her attendant while she stayed in Ponyville. To get that position I had to go through all sorts of tedious examinations, but I thought that it’d be worth it if I could establish a relationship with one from the royal family. No pony ever expected a Collection to take place while Midnight was here, part of the reason why they chose this village was because it was so out of the way from the wolves’ usual routes...”

Pastel shrugged. "I don't really get all this political stuff, but I'm going to Canterlot anyways."

"We're you listening to me, Pastel?!" Amethyst exclaimed. "If you do go... You. Are. Not. Coming. Back!"

"I'm okay with that." Pastel said softly. "It wouldn't be the first time I had to abandon a place I held dear to me..."

Amethyst was taken aback by Pastel's sudden mood shift. "Pastel...?"

Pastel shot Amethyst a bright smile. "Don't worry, I've already said my goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Toffee. Besides, I'm nothing more than an apprentice. A worker, not a daughter... so if it's my decision to quit and follow my friends, then they have no choice but to accept it!"

"Y-you can't mean that Pastel!" Amethyst gasped. "The Toffees love you! Even if you are their apprentice, they treat you like a daughter!"

"Stop it." Pastel said flatly. "I've been enough of a burden for them... even if they didn't say anything, I have access to the bankbooks. I know how much money they've been losing because of me. Free breakfasts for everypony, parties every few days... they can barely make a profit running this bakery while I'm around."

"It's not like profits are everything to them!" Amethyst argued. "I'm sure they're happy to see you happy, even if it does drain their funds!"

"You're a businesswoman, aren't you Amethyst?" Pastel asked suddenly. "As a businesswoman, can you honestly say that you'd be happy having your profits fall by the hundreds every year?"

Amethyst hesitated. "W-well..."

"I know they love me, and I love them..." Pastel muttered. "And that's why I'm leaving them. I was planning to leave the bakery anyways once I've learned enough about baking from my apprenticeship, all of this happening just pushed my fast-forward button." The usual cheerful smile reappeared on Pastel's face. "Besides, I've always wanted to see Canterlot! If I get to help some of my bestest best friends in the whole world while sightseeing, then that's just a plus!"

Amethyst grimaced. She could tell how serious Pastel was about leaving Ponyville. "But... but what about me, Pastel? Aren't I one of your best friends too?"

Pastel pulled the unicorn into a tight embrace. "You are, Ame... but you're different from all of us. I can't ask you to come with me, you have a business and ponies who count on you..."

"What does that matter if everypony I care about is gone?!" Amethyst burst out, sobbing frantically. "First Cinnamon, then Skyline, then Lily and now you! My best friends, all leaving me one by one by *one*! There's no point in being successful if I can't share my happiness with my friends!!"

Pastel lovingly stroked Amethyst's mane in an attempt to calm the unicorn down. "You have ponies that are depending on you to run your business." Pastel said quietly.

"What is the world coming to when Pastel Lollipop of all ponies is giving *me* advice?" Amethyst sobbed.

Pastel giggled softly. "I guess you're just not used to me being all serious and stuff. I'm not as happy-go-lucky as everypony thinks I am you know, I think about things too sometimes." Pastel broke up the embrace between the two ponies. "I have to go now, Ame. If I wait any longer then it'll be nighttime before I even reach the halfway point."

"No..." Amethyst whispered, her voice cracking. "I-I don't want to be left alone... I don't want to be away from you or any of my friends. Without all of you it just feels so... so..."

"Empty?" Pastel offered. "That's how I feel too, that's why I'm doing something to fix that. But you Ame... whatever you do is going to be your decision. No matter what it is, don't let yourself regret it."

"I don't know what scares me more..." Amethyst mumbled. "That I'm being left behind, or that you're being so serious..."

Pastel wiped the tears away from Amethyst's eyes. "Your makeup's getting all smudgy and runny," the earth pony joked.

"Oh, shut it you." The two of them laughed lightly at their short banter.

Pastel trotted past Amethyst, heading towards the path that leads outside of the village. "Well... I'm heading out now."

"Wait!" Amethyst called out.

Pastel stopped in place, keeping her back turned to the unicorn. "What is it, Ame?"

"So..." Amethyst hesitated. "You're really leaving?"

"... I am."

Pastel turned to face Amethyst, revealing the torrent of tears that the earth pony was trying to keep hidden away from her friend. "I'm leaving Ponyville... leaving everything that made me the pony I am today." Pastel sniffed and tried to wipe her tears away. "But I've come to terms with that... so goodbye Amethyst. No... wait..."

She took a deep breath. "GOODBYE MR. AND MRS. TOFFEE! GOODBYE SUGAR CANE CORNER! GOODBYE PONYVILLE!!"

Tired heads popped out from the windows of nearby houses, trying to see what the shouting was about. Inside the bakery, two ponies were openly weeping over the departure of their beloved apprentice.

"I'LL NEVER FORGET ANY OF YOU!!" Pastel cried. "NEVER EVER EVER EVER!!" She turned away from Amethyst and galloped away as fast as she could, leaving the nearby residents of Ponyville confused as to what just happened.

Amethyst clenched her hoof. How was she supposed to respond to that?

So what are you going to do now, Amethyst? A little voice inside her head asked her. You're all alone now... is your business really worth more than your friends?

"... no. No it isn't." Amethyst whispered to herself. She fiercely wiped her tears away. "As if you'll get rid of me that easily!!" She quickly launched herself back towards her boutique, regaining the energy that she had the previous day.

Amethyst kicked the door open, causing Crochet to jump and scatter the fabrics she was holding across the floor. "Y-you're back already ma'am?" Crochet asked timidly.

“Crochet, you’ve always been my best employee,” Amethyst said quickly, “and I’ve been grateful for you for serving me all these years.”

“Oh no, you’re not firing me, are you?!” Crochet gasped.

“It’s the opposite.” Amethyst smiled. “I’m firing myself.”

A dumbfounded look spread across Crochet’s face. “E-excuse me...?”

“You heard me.” Amethyst beamed. “I am no longer the owner of this establishment, that fine right now belongs to you.”

“W-what?” Crochet stuttered. “I-I... I don’t know what to say! A-are you serious?”

“Since when have I ever joked around with my employees?” Amethyst laughed. “I’m leaving Ponyville, Crochet, and I’m leaving my boutique in your trusty hooves.”

Crochet stood in shock, not knowing how to react to having a gift like this suddenly dropped onto her back.

“As it stands, you currently have about four-thousand seven-hundred and sixty-two bits.” Amethyst stated. “I’ll be deducting about five-hundred bits for my own purposes, leaving you with four-thousand *two*-hundred and sixty-two bits, plenty for you to keep this business running for at least another year or two. If you want to double-check those numbers, the records are kept under my bed, and the safe combination is 6-3-6-3-2.”

Crochet shook her head to snap herself out of her stupor. “W-wait! You’re really leaving?!”

“Didn’t I already say that? Yes, I’m leaving! Hold on for a moment.” Amethyst quickly trotted up to her room and hastily threw together a travel saddlebag, shoving a couple dresses, makeup kits, and the five-hundred bits inside of it. When she returned downstairs, Crochet was still where Amethyst left her, dazed and confused in the middle of the boutique.

“I think that’s it!” Amethyst cried out happily. “Good luck running the boutique, and don’t forget that your employees are only as good as you are!”

“You can’t go!” Crochet shrieked. “I-if you do ma’am, then—”

Amethyst pulled her former employee into a warm hug. “Don’t worry Crochet, I have complete faith in your abilities.”

Crochet timidly raised a hoof in objection. “B-but—”

Amethyst broke apart from the mare. “Sorry, I don’t have the time to dilly-dally! The longer I loiter around here, the further away Pastel is getting from me! Toodles, Crochet!” Amethyst galloped away from the dazed unicorn before Crochet could respond, feeling no regret in leaving the boutique in her capable hooves.

Session 16

Located in the very heart of the pony territory, the capital city of Canterlot was perhaps the largest city in all of pony lands. In the center of Canterlot was the castle, a large towering structure that allowed the King and Queen to observe their surrounding subjects. The Royal Family and their servants lived in the castle, along with a few nobles of high standing. The ring that surrounded the castle was where the rest of the upper-class lived, in large houses filled with luxuries that regular ponies could never hope to afford. And finally, the lower-class were scattered around the outskirts of the city, creating a buffer zone between the higher-class and the gates to the outside.

In spite of the segregation of the upper and lower classes, Canterlot was a relatively orderly and well-maintained city. There were no riots, no burglaries, no random acts of violence. The worst that could happen would be a small dispute between buyers and merchants, but it was nothing that couldn't be solved with words. The lower-class was actually decently well off—those ponies didn't live in Shantytowns or slums, it was more akin to the middle-class of the larger cities like Coltsdale or Hoofington.

The standards of living in Canterlot were significantly higher than anyplace else found in pony territory, but in exchange, less freedom was to be found. With the Royal Family in the castle, stringent security measures had to be kept. Each and every pony had to have identification to prove who they were; each and every pony had their background checked for any record of misconduct. If a pony wasn't born into Canterlonian citizenship, it was considered too much of a hassle to immigrate to the capital. To some ponies, the suffocating presence of the Royal Guard was too much for them, and they opted out of Canterlot to live in a more rural area.

The upside of Canterlot's security was a sense of safety. The identification checks made sure no sketchy characters stayed for too long in Canterlot, keeping crime to an absolute minimum. Neither did anypony have to worry about wolves or other unpleasant creatures breaching the city's walls. As long as the population was kept strictly in check, the Quota was hardly a problem either.

Alongside Canterlot's security, the capital was widely regarded as a holy city. The Royal Family, envoys of the Goddess, lived in the castle and by extension the land must be sacred. Religion was steep within the capital's walls, as the mandates of the Goddess

were strictly adhered to. Several chapels were scattered throughout the city, and a large cathedral stood next to the castle for ponies to pay tribute to the Goddess. The refined architecture of these religious monuments helped to add a sense of refinement and class to Canterlot, making it clear to everypony that its lands were hallowed, in preparation of the salvation the Day of Ascension will bring to everypony.

The tall spires of the cathedral were the first things to let Luna know that she was almost home. "Look! We're almost there!" Luna exclaimed joyfully, gesturing towards the looming structure.

"That sure is... something." Cinnamon said, her mouth agape at the grand sight of the capital.

"I'd love to fly around those towers!" Skyline grinned. "Just think of the maneuvers I could pull off flying around those things..."

"No!" Lily stomped her hoof onto the ground. "You are not going to be flying if I have anything to say about it."

Skyline frowned. "But—"

"No buts, missy!!" Lily stated firmly.

"Whatever you say sis..." Skyline said, rolling her eyes.

Luna giggled at the two pegasi. "It's nice to know somepony thinks it's neat. I've spent all my life near those things, so I've never found them really exciting..."

"But they're so cool!" Sundae squealed. "Maybe ah can even see Ponyville from up there!"

"You'd need a telescope to see Ponyville from this distance," Luna commented. "And our telescopes are all designed for stargazing, so you won't really be able to make out any details anyways."

Sundae stuck her tongue out playfully at Luna. "Ah still wanna go up there anyways, ah've never been up that high before!"

"Hold on there a minute, sugarcube," Cinnamon chuckled. "First we hafta get in the city first."

Sundae pouted. "Let's hurry up then! What're we waitin' fer Luna?"

The group of ponies made their way towards the front gates of Canterlot. The two attendants Celestia left with Luna before they left Gyren stepped forward to show their identification.

"Members of the Royal Guard," One of them said with a husky voice. "Escorting Princess Luna. With her are four guests. Permission to enter?"

The gate guard gave a swift salute. "Permission granted, sir! Open the gates!!"

The large gate slowly began to open. Before the ponies, the hustle and bustle of a large city stood before them. While it was substantially less chaotic than Gyren was, the crowd somehow appeared denser with the ponies who were going about their everyday business.

"Well everypony, shall we go in?" Luna asked. "We're going straight to the castle to meet Celly, and then after that you're all free to go wherever you want. With supervision of course."

The other ponies nodded in agreement. Luna smiled and gestured to her attendants. "Gentlecolts?"

"EVERYPONY MAKE WAY!" The stallions bellowed. "HER ROYAL HIGHNESS, PRINCESS LUNA, COMING THROUGH!"

At the mention of Luna's name, the mass of ponies instantly parted, forming a clear path towards the center of town. The ponies all bowed at Luna's presence, causing the mare to blush. "Y-you all don't have to bow so deeply..." Luna muttered. All the ponies continued to keep their heads down. "C-come on everypony, let's get moving," Luna said uncomfortably. "No matter how many times I tell them it's okay not to bow..."

Luna's attendants led the group through the crowded streets of Canterlot. Ponies from all sides stooped to the ground to pay their respects to their princess, causing the walk through the city to be very awkward for Luna. The sooner they got to the castle, the better, and because of this the ponies didn't get to get a good look of the city.

From what they could see, the outer circle of Canterlot was mostly made of common wood, but as they got deeper into the city the building material shifted to stone. They

passed a few chapels, a few bakeries, but the ponies weren't given any real time to take in the sights.

Before they knew it, they were already at the castle gates. "OPEN THE GATES!" Luna's attendant shouted. An affirmative shout was heard in response, and the gates to the castle began to open. The attendants lowered their heads towards Luna. "Is there anything else, milady?"

Luna shook her head. "N-no, that's fine, you're both dismissed."

The two stallions saluted and galloped into the castle, presumably to resume their positions. The group of ponies followed them within, hearing the gate loudly shut closed behind them.

"Well... we're here," Luna said bashfully. "Welcome to my home."

The ponies, especially Lily, stood in admiration of the splendor before them. The courtyard was a verdant expanse of grass, a lovely compliment to the austere elegance of the castle itself. Rose gardens were maintained beside the courtyard, permeating the air with a sweet flowery scent.

"It's... it's beautiful," Lily gasped. Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae nodded in response.

Luna nodded in agreement. "The courtyard and gardens have always been my favorite places. I can have fun here, unlike inside the castle where it's all work and no play." Luna started walking towards the outdoor corridor that connected the dormitories, the cathedral, and the main castle. "Let's go, Celly's probably tired of waiting for us."

Luna led the ponies into the castle. The vast hallways and sophisticated décor made the ponies feel incredibly small. The stern mood of the interior largely contrasted with the welcoming feel of the courtyard. Servants scurried past the group performing their everyday chores, the Royal Guard filled the halls with their heavy presence, and nobles were hurriedly rushing through the halls to keep their appointments.

Lily felt incredibly distracted by the activity of the castle. This was the first time she had ever been taken outside of Ponyville's tranquil atmosphere, and it was all a bit overwhelming for her.

“The throne room is at the next left, everypony,” Luna directed. Skyline, Cinnamon, and Sundae each nodded to acknowledge the princess. As they rounded the corner, they all turned as Luna told them to.

“Eek!!” Not paying attention, Lily ran into an elderly unicorn wearing a long white robe, causing the two of them to scatter their things across the floor.

“I apologize.” The stallion muttered, not really taking notice of the mare in front of him. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“N-no, I’m sorry!” Lily squeaked. “I-I was the one who wasn’t looking... um...”

The unicorn was picking up the scattered documents and shoving them back into his saddlebags, as if he already forgot about the panicked pegasus in front of him.

“U-umm...” Lily bit her lip nervously. “L-let me help you pick those up...” She bent over and picked up one of the papers, the heading of the document catching her eye. She tilted her head curiously. “Project Type-II C—”

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING GIRL!?” The stallion quickly snatched the paper from Lily’s mouth and shoved it in his bag, any semblance of chivalry from before gone. “Don’t you know not to lay a hoof on a researcher’s private document?!”

Lily shrunk back in fright. “I-I’m sorry, I-I just thought you m-might’ve wanted some h-help!”

“Are you daft, girl?” The white-robed stallion asked, aghast. “You must be a new servant or something. You should know better than to peruse classified information! I was going easy on you because you were a lady, but now that you’ve laid your filthy hooves on my papers, I—”

“Gnosis!” Luna shouted, galloping back towards Lily as she heard the commotion. “Stop harassing my guest!”

The stallion named Gnosis stared at the princess, bemused. “Guest you say? Are you saying that our little antisocial princess actually has a guest? Ha!”

Luna clenched her hoof. “Gnosis... I’m ordering you to leave right now.”

Gnosis chuckled. "We really have to do something about those double standards of yours, princess. You always want to be normal yet you throw your weight around whenever something displeases you."

Luna grinded her teeth. "Leave. Now."

The stallion bowed mockingly. "Whatever you say, Princess Luna." He gathered up the rest of his papers. "Oh, and princess? I recommend you find better 'Guests' in the future."

"*Leave.*"

"Very well then!" Gnosis chuckled and left the princess, chuckling heartily.

Luna sighed. "I hate him so much..."

"Who was that jerk?" Skyline asked, trotting up beside Luna.

"My teacher..." Luna explained. "I swear... the only reason we keep him around is because he's brilliant. But if I had my way I'd..." She shook her head. "Nevermind. Are you alright Lily?"

The yellow pegasus timidly nodded. "Y-yes, I'm okay..."

"Let's continue to the throne room then." Luna said. The group of ponies followed Luna to the large doors that led into the throne room. Luna gave three strong raps on the wooden door.

"Enter," An elderly voice called out.

Luna pushed open the door and led the ponies into the throne room. It was perhaps the most magnificent room inside of the castle. Sunlight shone through large panes of stained glass, illuminating the room with a brilliant light. The stained glass itself depicted the figure of the Goddess, positioned in such a way that it looked like her hooves were showering blessings upon the King and Queen, who sat in two ornately designed chairs at the top of a long staircase.

A golden-armored pegasus stomped his hoof on the floor, the sound resonating across the room. "Presenting His and Her Majesty, King Themis and Queen Ambrosia!"

Luna bowed down to her parents, Lily, Cinnamon, and Sundae following suit.

“That’s enough formalities.” King Themis chuckled. “My daughter! I’m glad to see you’re safe! I was worried when your sister Celestia came back without you!”

Luna lifted her head up and smiled shyly. “I’m fine father... don’t worry so much about me.”

“It’d be nice if you worried about your subjects too,” Skyline scoffed.

The guard heatedly took a step forward. “You will show proper respect to His Majesty!”

Skyline stuck her tongue out. “I’ll show proper respect when I’m dead!”

The guard partially unsheathed his sword. “Why you—”

“Enough!” Themis bellowed. “This pony has the right to despise me for failing to save her friend. I can see how close you held her to your heart...”

Skyline clenched the scarlet scarf around her neck. “Don’t talk as if you know me...” she muttered.

“Please, we’re not here to fight,” Queen Ambrosia interjected. “You all are our guests after all. Our failure to save your friend means that we owe you.”

“You owe me her life back.” Skyline spat.

Cinnamon pulled on Skyline’s tail. “That’s enough now, sugarcube. Arguin’ with ‘em won’t get you anywhere.”

Skyline yanked her tail out of Cinnamon’s mouth. “Whatever...”

“U-umm...” Lily mumbled.

“Oh?” Ambrosia tilted her head. “This one’s new. What’s your name?”

Lily nervously shuffled her hooves. “U-umm... L-Lily Blossom... your majesty...”

“Lily Blossom then.” Ambrosia repeated. “What can I do for you, Miss Blossom?”

Lily blushed. "O-oh, no, just Lily's fine..."

"Alright Lily," Ambrosia corrected. "What can I do for you?"

"... how's Midnight doing?" Lily asked, voicing the question that was on everypony's mind.

"Midnight, huh...?" Themis sighed. "Celestia! Will you come in here please?"

A door opened from the back of the room, and a familiar flowing mane popped out of it. "Mother. Father." Celestia bowed.

"Take them to the infirmary," Themis ordered. "They want to see how Midnight Star is doing."

Celestia bowed again. "Yes father." She trotted over to the group of ponies, breaking her professional expression to crack a small smile at her sister. "It's nice to see you're safe, Luna."

"Before you all go," Themis interrupted, "Is there anything else you'd all like to ask?"

"Yeah, can I go now so I don't have to look at you anymore?" Skyline grumbled. Cinnamon kicked her in the flank. "Ouch!! What'd you do that for, Cinnamon?!"

"There ain't anythin' yer majesty," Cinnamon said respectfully.

"Ain't nothin'!" Sundae added.

Lily hesitated. The heading on the document from earlier flashed through her head. *Project Type-II* something... though it was probably something that she wasn't supposed to know. "T-there isn't anything..." Lily mumbled.

"Very well." Themis cleared his throat. "You're all free to go! Dismissed!"

Celestia and Luna led the other ponies outside of the throne room. The infirmary was only a few minutes away from the throne room on the second floor, just enough time for Celestia to get a few words in with the other ponies.

"I hope my sister wasn't too much trouble for you all," Celestia apologized. "I know how she can be sometimes, especially when she doesn't get her way..."

"I'm not that bad!" Luna argued. She seemed a lot more like a filly when Celestia was around.

Cinnamon chuckled. "Naw, she was alright. Didn't cause us any trouble at all."

"W-well... she did smear those cupcakes into Amethyst's mane..." Lily brought up.

Skyline snorted. "That was Luna? Was that why Amethyst was all sticky when we were hugging? Bwahahaha!!" Skyline burst out laughing. "Man, that's great, I can't believe you did that to Ame!"

Luna blushed. "N-no, I mean, it was me, but—"

Celestia clicked her tongue. "Tsk, ts. Always getting into trouble, aren't you Luna?" Celestia asked playfully.

Luna pouted. "Shut up, Celly..."

Celestia smiled. "Alrighty then, my dear, dear sister. Besides," She gestured to the door in front of them, "We're at the infirmary already."

One-by-one the ponies shuffled their way into the infirmary, the nurse on duty making sure they weren't disturbing the other patients. The infirmary was, as expected, a room of white walls and curtains, a room so sickeningly sterile it made a pony feel ill just standing in there.

"Midnight Star?" The nurse asked with a professional tone. "She's in the last bed all the way at the end of the room. Please don't disturb any of the other patients while you're visiting, your highnesses."

Celestia nodded. "Don't worry, we'll be sure to conduct ourselves appropriately."

The group of ponies quietly followed the nurse's directions to Midnight's bed. The unicorn was completely still, her body gently heaving up and down with the rhythm of her breath. The ponies all crowded around Midnight, looking down upon her. If they didn't know any better, she could have just been taking a simple nap.

"She's been like this since Gyren, huh?" Cinnamon muttered to herself. "Ah thought she would've woken up by now..."

"It's only been around five days since then," Celestia reminded. "It took me a week to regain consciousness after my Awakening, and Luna a month, remember?"

"U-umm..." Lily timidly raised her voice. "D-does that mean... for your Awakening thing... umm..."

"Are you asking if Luna and I were nearly killed to gain our magical abilities?" Celestia interrupted.

Lily shrunk back at the question. "W-well, I, um... yes."

Celestia smiled kindly at the shy pegasus. "Magical prowess is an ability that is inherited by bloodline, you see?" she explained. "The process for an Awakening differs depending on a pony's heritage, but fundamentally they all involve the same end result. Before a pony can tap into their magical abilities, she needs to have her spirit ascend to the Goddess's plane to be granted the right to magic."

"Hold up a second!" Skyline interjected. "What's this spirit to Goddess's plane stuff? Can't you just call it Heaven or something?"

"It's not Heaven," Luna said quietly.

"What do ya mean?" Sundae asked.

"What my sister means," Celestia answered, "Is that you can't simply define the Goddess's domain as you can shades of black and white. In her plane of existence, everypony and everything is absolutely equal. The good aren't rewarded and the bad aren't condemned, they just exist with the Goddess, waiting for their second chance to make their impact on the world."

"Ya'll are talkin' like ya'll have been there or somethin'," Cinnamon commented.

"Weren't you listening, Cinnamon?" Celestia chuckled. "For us to use the power of magic, our spirits had to visit Her domain. To be in Her presence is sort of an... enlightenment if you will. You see the world differently once you have access to magic. The colors are brighter, life is more vibrant..."

"Death is more tragic."

Celestia glared at her sister. "That may be so, but everything must come in equal increments. To experience greater happiness is to experience greater sorrows. Besides... the poignancy of death only serves to make one appreciate life more."

Luna sighed. "Whatever you say, Celly..."

"Ah'm not really one to ponder over stuff like life and death or good and evil," Cinnamon cut in, "But what yer basically sayin' is that Midnight is with the Goddess right now?"

Celestia nodded. "That's exactly what I'm saying. While her body is adapting itself to the new energies flowing through her body, her spirit is undergoing conditioning to give her the instincts necessary to handle magic."

"H-hold on..." Lily said quietly. "What about that thing about how Awakenings are different depending on bloodline?"

"Celestia and I are of the Royal Bloodline," Luna explained. "Our Awakenings were just like taking a nap... a really, really long nap."

"Couldn't you just have Midnight take that nap then?" Skyline asked tersely. "If you did that then she wouldn't have to get a hole punched through her chest."

Luna bit her lip. "W-well... the method used for our Awakenings were passed down the Royal Family, and were really only proven to work on the Royal Family. So..."

"If we tried that method on a pony outside of our bloodline, she might've died," Celestia said coldly. "We weren't going to risk her death by doing something like that."

"You risked her death anyways!!" Skyline shouted.

Celestia clicked her tongue. "We knew that Midnight would Awaken from that experience. If it worked on her mother and father, then it would work on her."

"Wait a moment," Cinnamon muttered. "Her parents... Midnight told me somethin' about them in Gyren..."

"So you know the story then," Celestia said quietly.

"What's the story?" Skyline and Lily asked together.

"It ain't a pretty one," Cinnamon answered. "Long story short, Midnight was a child that was never wanted, if ya catch my drift."

Looks of understanding dawned upon the two mares' faces, but Sundae just looked confusedly up at her sister. "Ah don't get it sis, what d'ya mean by that?"

Cinnamon roughly patted her sister's head. "Ah'll tell ya when yer older." She turned back to the Royal Sisters. "But anyways, her parents were part of some sort of group, weren't they?"

Luna shrunk her head back, feeling the conversation turn to topics she was uncomfortable with. Celestia failed to notice her sister's actions and succinctly stepped forward to answer Cinnamon.

"Yes, they were part of a trio known as the Summer Triangle."

"Summer Triangle?" Skyline repeated. "Isn't that—"

"They're names were Vega, Deneb, and Altair." Luna said loudly, cutting Skyline off. The blue pegasus quickly remembered the promise they made back in Ponyville about Deneb, and guiltily kept her head down. "They were named after a certain set of stars in the sky," Luna continued. "Vega, the brightest star of the constellation Lyra; Deneb, the star of Cyngus; and Altair, the star of Aquila. These three stars are known as the Summer Triangle, and that's where those three ponies got their names from."

"Geez, what're the chances that the three of them would have those names?" Sundae commented innocently.

For a brief moment, Celestia and Luna grimaced, but their expression quickly went back to normal. "Yes... it certainly is a coincidence, isn't it?" Celestia asked. "What's even more of a coincidence is that each of these ponies had the potential of magic inside of them, the potential that was unleashed through their brave deeds and struggles. But that's a story for another time..."

"Point is," Luna followed up, "Midnight's parents, Awakened through near-death experiences, so it was only natural that Midnight would Awaken the same way."

"And what if she didn't?" Skyline asked.

Luna shrunk back. "I-I, umm..."

"Then she'd be dead, and we'd all be in mourning right now," Celestia stated.

Skyline stomped her hoof. "How can you say that so coolly?"

"Because it didn't happen, as Midnight's Awakening happened as it was supposed to." Celestia answered. "Believe me... while everything was going on, it took all we had not to charge in to save you all. But if we did, it would only bring ruin to this land."

"... fine," Skyline sighed, clutching her scarf. "You did what you had to do... but I still don't like it."

"Skyline!" Lily objected. "Oh, I'm sorry Princess Celestia, but my sister's just so—"

"I know how that feels," Celestia smiled. "Sometimes Luna gets too feisty for her own good." Celestia paused, waiting for her little sister to retort.

"... huh?" Luna snapped back to attention. "I'm sorry, I wasn't really listening. I'm kinda tired I guess..."

"Oh, silly me! You all must be exhausted after travelling here!" Celestia said, clopping her hooves together. "I think it's about time we wrapped up this conversation and got some rest. Is that all right with all of you?"

Each of the ponies nodded in response. There was nothing else left to be said. Celestia led the group outside of the infirmary.

"Have a nice day your highnesses." The nurse on duty said as they walked out.

Celestia smiled and nodded her head in response. "Alright everypony, in a moment Jeeves will be here to lead you to your rooms, and tomorrow you're all free to whatever you wish. Your papers should be on your beds when you arrive in the dormitories, and once you have them be sure to keep them upon you at all times."

"Your highnesses," A young colt approached the group and bowed his head down. "What can I do for you all today?"

"Jeeves, I want you to attend to these ponies and take them to the dormitories," Celestia ordered.

Skyline snickered. "Jeeves? Seriously? Aren't you a little young to have a geezer's name?"

The colt frowned. "May I ask who these ponies are?"

"They're Midnight's friends," Luna answered. "That's why we thought you'd be the best pony to escort them."

"Ah, Midnight's friends?" Jeeves clopped his hooves together. "I'm glad to hear that she actually made some friends while she was in Ponyville. Allow me to properly introduce myself." Jeeves bowed deeply towards the other ponies. "I'm Jeeves, Midnight's personal servant and assistant. I've been with her for seven years, and I hope to serve her for many years after that. As far as I'm concerned, any friends of Midnight's are friends of mine."

"Pleased ta meet ya!" Cinnamon said enthusiastically. "Mah name's Apple Cinnamon, this filly right here's Apple Sundae, and the other two are Skyline and Lily Blossom."

"Well, now that we've got all the introductions out of the way, Luna," Celestia gestured at her little sister, "The two of us need to head to Gnosis's chamber to discuss certain matters. To everypony else," she said, respectfully bowing her head, "I bid you all a good day."

Celestia and Luna left the group of ponies. Jeeves smiled at his new guests. "Shall we head on over to the dormitories then? I'm sure you can all use a good night's rest."

Session 17

The four ponies were escorted to their rooms in the dormitories. They were placed across the servant chambers in well-furnished rooms, the chambers where royal guests were usually permitted to stay. The room looked like it was just recently cleaned, a hint of lemon-scented cleaner still permeating the air. The beds were newly made with fresh white sheets and fluffed up pillows, and as Celestia said their papers were lying on top of the mattresses.

Skyline completely ignored the cleanliness of the room and instantly plopped herself down on the nearest bed. "Phew, I'm beat! Let's catch some zzz's and figure out what we should do once we wake up!"

"Miss Skyline..." Jeeves said hesitantly. "I apologize in advance, but I don't think that's your bed. Miss Lily was assigned the bed closest to the door."

"I'm already here though!" Skyline whined. "Lily can just... have some other bed or something. It's no big deal."

Jeeves sighed. "Very well then. I'll have to ask you to give me Lily's documents so I can exchange them with yours though."

Skyline lazily waved a hoof around. "Yeah, yeah, do whatever you want, Jeeves. I think I'm going to head straight to... zzz..."

Cinnamon clicked her tongue. "She didn't even take off her saddlebags. Sheesh, what're we s'posed ta do with that pony..."

"Don't worry, I'll get her bags." Lily offered. She quietly went over to the sleeping pegasus and gently unwound the saddlebags around Skyline's waist.

"Ah found my bed!" Sundae said excitedly, jumping up and down on one of the mattresses. "It's so soft and nice and clean and—"

Cinnamon chuckled. "Now Sundae, ah think ya'll should calm down a li'l. There ain't no need ta be bouncin' all over the place like yer Pastel or somethin'."

Lily placed Skyline's bags down beside her bed and looked up at Cinnamon at the mention of Pastel's name. The yellow pegasus sighed. "I hope they're both fine without us..."

"Aw, don't worry sugarcube," Cinnamon comforted. "Ah got the feelin' we'll be seein' them soon someday."

"You sure...?" Lily asked shyly.

"Absolutely!" Cinnamon pounded her hoof to her chest. "And if they don't come and visit us sometime soon, why, we'll just hafta go and visit them!"

"Might I ask, who exactly are you talking about?" Jeeves said.

"Our other friends..." Lily explained. "Pastel Lollipop and Amethyst... we left them back in Ponyville because we couldn't really ask them to leave their lives behind..."

"Ah... my condolences then," Jeeves bowed apologetically. "Well then, if there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to give me a call. I'll be in the room opposite from you, room 105 to be exact."

"Alright, Jeeves," Cinnamon tipped her hat at the servant. "Mighty fine pleasure meetin' ya."

"Likewise." Jeeves departed the room, leaving the ponies to get their rest.

Cinnamon yawned. "Well, ah guess we should all get ta sleep. We can go through those papers whenever we wake up." The orange earth pony grabbed Sundae's tail and forced her to stop bouncing around on her bed. "Now Sundae, put yer li'l head right down on that there pillow and catch some shut eye!"

Sundae pouted. "Fine..."

While Cinnamon was tucking her sister in, Lily was still fidgeting around with her saddlebags. For some reason, she had a bit of trouble getting them off, as if some of the ropes were tangled together.

"Do ya need some help there, Lily?" Cinnamon asked.

Lily shook her head, not wanting to be a burden on the orange earth pony. “N-no... I’m fine, don’t worry about me.”

Cinnamon shrugged. “Whatever you say, sugarcube.”

Lily finally managed to unstrap her saddlebags and plop them onto the floor. She gave a sigh of relief and began to rummage through them to make sure everything was still there. There were her books... her clothes... the pendant...

The pendant?

Lily bit her lip. No... it couldn’t be... Lily frantically tore through her bag in search of the pouch that contained the pendant. It *had* to be there, there was no way it *wouldn’t* be there!

“There somethin’ wrong, Lily?” Cinnamon inquired.

Lily gave a small jump. “N-no... t-there’s nothing wrong...” She didn’t want her friends to know that she lost the pendant. Lily was a surprisingly stubborn individual and it would damage her self-esteem if word got out that she lost Deneb’s pendant.

“If you say so,” Cinnamon responded. “Well ah’m goin’ ta bed now. See ya in the mornin’ Lily.”

Lily gave a strained smile. “Y-yeah... see you in the morning...”

She thought about where the pendant could possibly be. The last time she checked her saddlebags was last night en route to Canterlot. There was no way she could have lost it while they were travelling... could somepony have possible pickpocketed her while they made their way through the city? That made no sense, everypony was bowing down to Luna...

A sudden thought struck Lily. Could it have been... when she bumped into Gnosis earlier? It’s the only possible explanation after all, Lily never really kept her bags tightly closed as it was too much of a hassle to tie the ropes, so the impact might have sent the pendant flying outside her bag.

“You’re so clumsy, Lily...” The pegasus whispered to herself. There was nothing left to do but to go back into the castle and search for it. With any luck the pouch containing the pendant would still be where she left it.

Lily silently pushed open the door and left the dormitory. The sun had just fallen, so the only ponies that were really traversing around were the servants. Lily gulped. She hoped that nopony picked up the pendant...

Lily briskly trotted towards the main castle, passing the gardens and the courtyard. As much as she'd love to stop and smell the flowers, finding the pendant came first. The interior of the castle was illuminated by the flickering torches that were fastened to each of the towering pillars, giving the main hallway an eerie atmosphere. Lily gulped and continued forwards, her eyes scanning the ground for any sign of the pendant.

Soon enough, she arrived at the corner where she bumped into Gnosis. The dim light provided by the torches made it hard for Lily to make out the floor, but from what she could tell, the pouch was not there.

"Oh dear... oh dear..." A sense of panic began to creep up over Lily. Everypony trusted her to keep the pendant safe until it could get to Midnight. If she ever encountered Deneb again, what was she supposed to say?

A voice spoke up, interrupting Lily's panic attack. "Um... can I help you, madam?"

"EEK!!" Lily jumped up three feet into the air and quickly hid behind a pillar. "W-who's there...?"

"Just a servant girl, madam." The owner of the voice said, bowing down to the floor. "Is there anything I can help you with? You look like you're looking for something?"

"I do?" Lily smiled nervously. "N-no, I'm fine, I mean... wait, no."

The servant girl tilted her head. "No you are fine or no you're not fine?"

"T-the latter," Lily gulped. "U-um... I was here a while ago and I think I dropped something... it was a small brown pouch and it's very important to me."

"Missing objects are usually turned in at the cathedral." The servant responded. "I'm assuming you know about the crossroads at the front gate, just take a left into the cathedral and the missing items box will be before you pass through the first main arch."

"O-oh, is that it then?" Lily said, trying to remember the directions the servant just gave her. "W-well then... t-thank you for letting me know."

The servant girl gave a deep bow. "It was my pleasure milady." The servant picked up her head and went back about her business.

Lily gave a sigh of relief as she began to trot towards the cathedral. Hopefully the pendant will be there, and that no pony stole it or anything.

Lily followed the servant girl's directions and pushed open the cathedral. It's design was much more ornate than the main castle, with gothic spires and tall ceilings even higher than the throne room's. From the doorway any pony could tell that this was a sacred place, causing Lily to levitate a few centimeters off the ground in fears that she might desecrate the holiness of this sanctuary.

"Before the first arch... before the first arch... ah!" Just as the servant had said, there was a small marble box that was labeled 'Missing Items.' Strangely enough, a donation box was located right next to it, as if it was placed in hopes that a missing item would be mistakenly put into it. Lily opened up the lid of the 'Missing Items' box and dug around its interior.

Some shawls... some books... some wallets... there it is! Lily found her small brown pouch wedged in-between a sweater and an old tome. She gratefully lifted it out of the box and opened it up to make sure the pendant was still inside of it.

The joy fell from Lily's expression. The pendant was not there.

Lily slumped down next to the box. "Oh... what am I supposed to do now?"

"You can leave a prayer to the Goddess," a voice suddenly said.

Lily squeaked hid behind the box. This was the second pony who crept up on her tonight! From behind the box, Lily examined the pony who startled her.

He was a unicorn about her age, his coat was dyed red, and a black mane covered his head. He wore a white robe similar to the one Lily saw on Gnosis earlier, and his eyes were staring blankly at the cowering pegasus.

"... why are you hiding?" The unicorn asked flatly.

"You startled me..." Lily mumbled. She hesitantly came out from behind the box to face the newcomer. The two ponies stood in silence for a few moments, each waiting for the other to say something.

Lily was the first to break the tension. "U-um... I'm Lily, what's your name?"

"Lycoris," the unicorn told her.

"O-oh..." Lily nervously shuffled her hooves. "I-isn't that the name of a flower?"

Lycoris nodded. "Lycoris Radiata, otherwise known as a Red Spider Lily. A flower often used in funerals to signify the parting of those who will never meet again. A beautiful flower if it wasn't for the stigma associated with it."

"I-is that so...?" Lily felt uncomfortable around this pony for some reason. Maybe it was his blunt style of speaking or the monotone way he spoke, but there was just something... different about him. Lily cleared her throat. "W-well... you sure know a lot about flowers..."

Lycoris shrugged. "I spend a lot of time in the gardens... it's the only place where I can feel at peace."

"W-well then..." Lily forced a smile, not wanting to stay alone with him any longer. "I-if you'll excuse me, I'm looking for something so..."

"You're looking for your pendant, aren't you?"

Lily's head snapped back to face Lycoris. "How do you know about my pendant?"

"I was the one who turned in that pouch," Lycoris explained.

"So you have my pendant?!" Lily exclaimed. Lycoris gave a small nod in response. Lily wiped the sweat off her brow. "Phew... for a minute there I thought I lost it forever..."

A sly smile rose up to Lycoris's face, the first change in expression since he spoke up to Lily. "Just because I have it... doesn't mean I'm going to give it back to you."

"What?!" Lily said, her mouth agape. "But it's mine! It's only right that you give a missing item back to its owner!"

“Keep your voice down,” Lycoris ordered, “This is a holy place, not a concert hall.”

Lily bit back her agitation. “Please... I made a promise to get that pendant to somepony... would you please return it to me?”

The sly smile danced upon Lycoris’s face once again. “I will... on one condition.”

Lily tensed up. “W-what is it?”

“Come with me,” Lycoris said calmly. “I want to show you something.”

Lily had an ominous feeling about this, but she had to go; if she didn’t then she would never get the pendant back. Lily gave a single small nod, and Lycoris nodded at her in return.

“Follow me,” Lycoris ordered. “First we need to pay our respects to the Goddess.” The unicorn led Lily towards the center of the cathedral, where small clusters of ponies were in the pews praying to the Goddess. The centerpiece of the cathedral was a large statue that depicted a figure of the Goddess, the same figure Lily remembered seeing in the throne room.

Lycoris stopped in front of the statue and kneeled down. “You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” he told Lily. Lycoris closed his eyes and held his hooves together in prayer. A lot of it was hushed muttering, and Lily watched Lycoris recite his prayer under his breath. She could only really make out the last line of his prayer.

“Quid sit futurum cras, fuge quaerere. Non omnis moriar.”

With those words, Lycoris clopped his hooves together and stood back up. Lily confusedly took a step forward. “U-umm... what did that last line mean?”

“You don’t pray much, do you?” Lycoris asked bluntly.

Lily grimaced. “U-um... n-no... not really...”

Lycoris shrugged. “It’s not really my business. ‘Do not ask what tomorrow brings. Not all of me will die.’”

Lily tilted her head, confused. “Excuse me, what?”

“You asked for a translation, didn’t you?” Lycoris sighed. “Do not ask what tomorrow brings. Not all of me will die.’ The meaning behind it is up to your interpretation though.” He gestured towards the back of the statue. “Come on, this wasn’t what I wanted to show you.” Lycoris began trotting to his destination, but Lily hesitated, staying behind. Lycoris frowned when he noticed Lily. “You do want your pendant back, don’t you?”

There was no use fighting it. Lily resigned herself to this unicorn’s whims and followed behind him like he asked. They went through a door located behind the main altar that led into a narrow corridor lit only by a few flickering torches. Lily gulped, she didn’t want to head down such a dark and dreary path with some strange pony she barely knew, but what other choice did she have?

Lycoris led Lily though the corridor for a few minutes, the sound of their hooves against the stone floor echoing throughout. As they descended deeper and deeper down the corridor, Lily could feel herself getting tenser and tenser. Any more of this and Lily felt that she couldn’t take it!

“We’re here,” Lycoris said softly, breaking Lily out of her tension. “Please keep the noise down, Miss Lily. We’re going to be eavesdropping for a bit and I’d prefer it if we don’t get punished for being caught.”

Eavesdropping?! Lily didn’t know exactly what this pony was getting her into, but she knew that she didn’t like it.

Lycoris quietly pushed open a wooden door and ushered Lily inside. The door led into a spacious room that had many other doors connected to it. Most of these doors were closed shut, but there was one door that was slightly open.

BANG. “What do you mean she’s going to stay like that!?” A voice exclaimed angrily.

Lycoris gestured Lily to come closer towards the crack of the door. Lily hesitantly obeyed, peeking into the other room.

Luna and Celestia were sitting at a table with Gnosis at the opposite end. Celestia was calm and collected, but Luna was fuming, causing Gnosis to grin bemusedly at Luna’s frustration.

“Calm down, Luna,” Celestia said softly. “We’re just telling you the facts right now, there’s no need for you to—”

“How can you just take this, Celly!?” Luna yelled. “Midnight is dying and you’re telling me to be calm!? What kind of sister are you!!?”

Lily took a step back in shock, but Lycoris kept her from running away. *Not yet*, his eyes told her, *just a little bit longer*.

“You’re not listening, Luna.” Celestia continued in the same level tone. “We said that at the current rate, Midnight will remain in that coma for about a year before she passes away.”

“That’s the same thing as saying she’ll die next week!” Luna accused.

Gnosis chuckled. “That’s a silly thing to say, Luna. A year is much longer than a single week!”

“I’m not in the mood for your jokes,” Luna growled.

“We just need to find a Suppressor to siphon off some of the magical energy that’s corroding Midnight’s body,” Celestia calmly offered.

“We don’t even know what one of those look like!” Luna exclaimed.

“I guess you’ll just have to find a Type-I and get a Suppressor off from one of them,” Gnosis offered. “But wait—the only two that are still alive have been missing for eighteen years!”

Luna hesitated. “W-well... if we could find them, then—”

“If we could find them, there’d be no need for the Type-II Project!” Gnosis argued. “Unless you’re telling me that—”

Lily’s body was forced away from the door. Lycoris dragged her back into the corridor and silently shut the door behind them. “That’s enough eavesdropping,” Lycoris said flatly.

“W-what are they talking about?!” Lily asked, panicking. “M-Midnight’s dying? And what’s with that Type-I Type-II stuff?!”

"It's nothing," Lycoris answered. "Or to be more accurate, it's nothing I'm allowed to tell you." He started walking back up towards the cathedral. "Come on, I'll give you back your pendant once we reach the courtyard."

"Wait!" Lily galloped to keep up with the unicorn. "Why can't you tell me?"

"To be even more accurate," Lycoris responded as they made their way back up to the cathedral, "It's nothing that I'm physically able to tell you."

"What does that even mean?!" Lily exclaimed.

Lycoris suddenly stopped in place. "The _____ is designed to _____ a new _____ in order to propagate the - _____. It is meant to substitute what was originally known as the _____, as the original members have all either _____ or _____."

"*What?*" Lily repeated.

Lycoris resumed his brisk pace towards the cathedral. "I'm physically unable to talk about it," he explained. "If I try, something like that happens. My voice blanks out whenever I try to utter a key phrase relating to what you want to know about. Writing's no good either, as my mouth moves on its own whenever I try to write down something relating to that."

"How does that even happen?" Lily asked dazedly.

"Conditioning," Lycoris stated simply. He pushed open the door that led into the cathedral. "Just a bit further and you'll have your pendant back, Miss Lily."

The yellow pegasus sighed and followed Lycoris to the courtyard. She wanted to know more about Suppressors and whatever was happening to Midnight, but it appeared that Lycoris really couldn't tell her anything even if he wanted to.

Lycoris led Lily into a secluded part of the gardens before stopping. He reached into his robes and pulled out a familiar-looking pendant, only this pendant wasn't shining radiantly like the one Deneb gave Lily.

The yellow pegasus frowned. "Are you sure that's my pendant?"

“Positive,” Lycoris responded. “It only shines when it has absorbed a surplus of magical energy. Once it has been cut off from its supply, then it’ll stop shining.”

Lily eyed the unicorn suspiciously. “How would you know something like that?”

Lycoris shrugged. “I read a lot.” He tossed the pendant over to Lily, who hurriedly caught it in her mouth. “I can tell you’re a really kind pony,” he suddenly said.

Lily was caught off guard by his words and almost dropped the pendant. “W-what? What are you talking about?”

“Just musing to myself,” Lycoris nonchalantly responded. “I can tell that you really care for your friends, and even though you don’t trust me, you were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt and followed me despite your suspicions. Although,” he paused. “Although... being too kind might let other ponies easily take advantage of you. You should fix that.”

“U-umm... thank you?” Lily said nervously. She stowed the pendant away back into her pouch. “Well... I guess I’ll be going now... I have my pendant so—”

“Tomorrow morning you will give that pendant to Midnight,” Lycoris calmly stated. “You will not tell anypony about me or about what you overheard. You said you needed to get that pendant to Midnight, so just get it to her. If that pendant doesn’t work...” He paused. “You and your friends will find a way.” He paused again. “If anypony finds out about tonight, you can consider yourself dead.” He paused for a third time. “And don’t think badly about me for saying that, it’s just fair warning. I don’t like it when people think ill of me for being me.”

Lily’s mouth hung agape at what Lycoris just said. “D-dead? W-what do you mean I can consider myself dead?!”

Lycoris shrugged. “Just don’t tell anypony about this and you’ll be fine. I’m telling the truth you know,” he added, “it’s not like I’m trying to scare you.”

Lily hesitated. She couldn’t feel any ill-intentions from him, he was just an odd pony. She sighed. “I won’t tell anypony that... wait a minute.” A thought suddenly struck her. “If you want me to get the pendant to Midnight... then—”

Lycoris smiled. “You’re smart as well as kind, huh? That’s good, then you won’t be fooled as easily.” The smile fell from his face as quick as it came. “You know nothing

about what you're thinking about right now though. Don't forget to forget. If it helps, you can always make a prayer to the Goddess and she'll help you forget. Or you can pray more in general so you can feel better about yourself. Or you can just not pray and just pretend nothing happened tonight. Whichever one works for you."

Lily gave a small chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind then..." She hesitated for a moment before leaving the garden. "Who are you anyways? I mean, not your name, but..."

"I'm a clergypony, or at least that's what they say I am." He gave a sly smile. "Actually I'm _____. But don't tell anypony that."

"Don't worry, I won't." Lily smiled. She was starting to warm up to this stallion a little.

"You should head back to bed now, Miss Lily," Lycoris suggested. "You probably won't ever see me again after this, and if you do happen to see me, you have to pretend you don't know me, okay? That said, I hope I can meet you again, along with all your other friends too." He gave a quick wave of his hoof. "Goodnight, Miss Lily, I hope you have sweet dreams."

Before Lily could respond in turn, Lycoris galloped outside of the gardens back into the cathedral. She sighed and made her way back into the dormitories.

Lycoris... what a strange pony he was. And that argument between Luna, Celestia, and Gnosis... Type-I and Type-II... Suppressors... Lily felt as if she could piece some of this information together, but then she remembered what Lycoris told her.

Don't forget to forget.

There was no use trying to piece everything together right now, she wasn't even supposed to know about any of that stuff in the first place. All that she needed to know was that the pendant was the first step to waking up Midnight. And if that didn't work... she and her friends would find a way.

Lily quietly entered her room and shut the door behind her. Cinnamon, Sundae, and Skyline were fast asleep, and it appeared that they didn't even notice her absence. Lily sighed and plopped herself down on her bed, moving her papers to the bedside table.

She peeked inside the pouch one last time to make sure that the pendant was still inside of it. Afterwards, she tightly closed the pouch and put it on top of her papers.

It was a long day... Lily was just glad to finally get some rest. She briefly wondered if she would ever talk to Lycoris again before realizing that she shouldn't be wondering that. Lily chuckled to herself and shut her eyes, closing her mind to allow herself a good night's rest. The pegasus felt her mind being washed away into the land of dreams...

Tomorrow... tomorrow she was going to see what she could do for Midnight, and after that... after that...

Quid sit futurum cras, fuge quaerere. Non omnis moriar.

Session 18-1

Lily woke to the hustle and bustle of the servants outside. She kept her head buried under her pillow, listening to the rhythmic pitter-patter of hooves that sounded from outside the room. *Clop clop clop clop...* the sounds were almost relaxing, but Lily's body refused to shut itself back down. She sighed, lazily dragging herself out of bed.

Lily let out a mellow yawn as she stretched her hooves. "Aaaah... good morning everypony..." The pegasus waited for a response to her greeting, but only the soft clopping noises of the outside filled the room. "Oh dear... I hope I'm not the first one awake..." Lily quietly examined the other beds to check on her friends. Sundae was still fast asleep in her bed, but Skyline's and Cinnamon's beds were vacant, the papers at their bedside missing along with them. Lily frowned. "Where could they have gone...?" Lily wanted her friends to be with her when she went to present the pendant to Midnight. She felt as if nothing would happen if everypony wasn't with her.

The pegasus haphazardly began to pat her bedmane down with her hooves in an effort to make herself presentable. No note, no notice, there was nothing left for Lily to do but to find out where her friends were herself. She grabbed one of her smaller saddlebags and stuffed the pendant and her documents inside of it, tying the bag closed tightly; she wasn't going to accidentally lose anything important this time.

A small voice stopped Lily before she could exit the room. "Ah... no... mmm..." Sundae was rolling around in her bed, haunted by a bad dream. "Don't... mm... Fritter... zzz..."

Lily looked down sadly upon Cinnamon's little sister. It appeared that she was still bothered by her brother's death, silently crying out his name in her sleep. Lily lifted the blanket and put it over the sleeping filly.

"Don't worry, Sundae..." Lily said gently. "You still have us... we'll take care of you..."

Sundae grumbled in her sleep. "Ah... ah don't need... ah'm a big filly..."

"Of course you are." Lily kissed Sundae's forehead and quietly exited the room. She trotted across the hall towards Jeeves's room, taking care not to get in the way of the servants performing their scheduled morning cleaning.

Jeeves opened the door before Lily could knock. "Miss Lily?" Jeeves asked with a surprised tone. "Do you need something?"

Lily shuffled her hooves around for a moment, not used to giving orders. "Um... if you don't mind... would it be okay if you kept watch over Sundae? Skyline and Cinnamon are already awake and..."

Jeeves swiftly bowed. "No worries milady, I'll make sure to keep an eye on the small filly."

Lily smiled. "Thanks Jeeves. And um... if it's not too much to ask for... umm..."

"If you wish, I can arrange for a servant to help you tidy up your mane," Jeeves suggested, smiling.

"O-oh!" Lily squeaked, startled. "U-um... how did you know?"

"Most mares require assistance in the morning to brush their manes," Jeeves explained. "I thought that maybe you might want the same treatment."

"That would be... nice." Lily smiled. "But um... first I need to find Skyline and Cinnamon so... do you have any idea where they are?"

Jeeves frowned. "I personally haven't seen them this morning, but I have heard that there are some newcomers in the training grounds. Perhaps that might be them?"

"The training grounds?" Lily repeated, confused.

"I suppose a pony from outside Canterlot wouldn't be too familiar with combat preparation," Jeeves commented. "I guess that's to be expected. No pony outside of the Royal Guard is allowed to take up arms. You'll just have to see for yourself, Miss Lily. Remember the intersection to the throne room? Instead of taking a left, just go straight through until you reach the stairs. Climb up about three floors, walk straight through that hallway and you'll eventually reach the training grounds."

"O-okay..." Lily said, "Thanks Jeeves."

"No need for thanks." Jeeves bowed, "I'm just doing my job."

Lily nodded in response before leaving to follow Jeeves's directions. On her way to the training grounds, she passed through the courtyard, the scent of the flowers reminding her of the encounter last night...

Goodnight, Miss Lily, I hope you have sweet dreams.

Lycoris... he was such a strange unicorn. And even stranger things came up alongside his appearance. Lily had a pretty good idea of what the Suppressor Midnight needed was, but the stuff about Type-Is and Type-IIs... why Lycoris's voice blanked out during certain phrases... so many questions, yet Lily couldn't speak a word about it to anypony. She probably shouldn't even be thinking about these things. Besides, apart from reviving Midnight, knowing about those things was completely useless!

"Watch where you're going!" a female servant barked at Lily, narrowly avoiding a collision with her.

"O-oh, s-sorry," Lily apologized, "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going..." The servant ignored her apology and went about her way. Lily sighed. She should stop thinking about things while she's walking; it'd be horrible if she lost the pendant through some stupid accident again.

Lily passed the throne room and continued straight through the main hall. She found the staircase Jeeves mentioned, and began to make her way up to the third floor. She thought three floors would be a relatively short distance, but she forgot how high the ceilings were for the ground floor. By the time she reached the third story Lily felt like she'd climbed seven stories instead of three. Slightly panting from the ascent, she continued straight through the hallway into the training grounds.

The sky opened up to the pegasus as the castle receded behind her, her eyes dazzled by the cerulean colors stretching over the verdant field of the training grounds where numerous amounts of ponies from the Royal Guard were training in. The turf covered the rooftop of the castle, overlooking the northern half of Canterlot. As Lily tried to take in the view, she noticed a strange rainbow-tinted flare of light behind her. From what she could see, the source of the light radiated from the crystalline tip of the towering spire of the cathedral, the glare of the sun creating the refulgent sight before her. Lily was unable to tear her eyes away from the spire, the ephemeral beauty fully capturing her attention.

A speeding object suddenly whizzed past Lily's ear, snapping her out of the trance. "Watch where you're aiming that thing, scrub!" A gruff voice barked.

Lily quickly turned to find the source of the shout and saw a familiar earth pony and pegasus. Cinnamon and Skyline were standing in the midst of the Royal Guard, a majority of which were snickering at the two in the center. At Skyline's hooves lay a crossbow, presumably where the the object was fired from.

Skyline gritted her teeth, glaring up at the stallion who yelled at her. "Don't call me a scrub..."

"Hold it there, sugarcube," Cinnamon hissed, restraining Skyline by the tail. "Ya don't wanna do somethin' ya might regret." She turned towards the stallion in front of her. "Ah'm mighty sorry, but my friend here's just a teensy bit sore whenever she messes somethin' up, ain't that right?"

"Didn't you see what he did?!" Skyline shouted. "He totally—"

"Are you accusing Captain Ares of foul play?" one of the knights asked provocatively. "Because if you are..."

"She ain't accusin' nopony for no reason!" Cinnamon said hurriedly. "And if ya'll thought she was, then she'd be perfectly happy ta apologize, *right Skyline?*" She asked, nudging the pegasus to emphasize her words.

Skyline gritted her teeth in anger. "I'm sorry for being such a lousy shot," she muttered.

"Cinnamon! Skyline!" Lily quickly galloped towards the two. "What's going on...?"

"Your new friend want in too?" Ares smirked.

"N-no!" Cinnamon answered. "Lily here ain't the type ta get down and dirty in combat!" She smiled nervously and turned to Lily to fill her in. "Y'see... Skyline wanted ta come here ta get some exercise, and when she saw these *wonderful gentleponies* practicin' out here, she wanted ta join in. And then... well..."

"She messed up with that simple crossbow," Ares scoffed. "I told her that a filly can't handle combat."

"*Filly!?*" Skyline spat.

“Yes, *filly*,” the captain repeated. “In my opinion, fillies like you should just stay at home and keep the beds warm and cozy for stallions like me who put roofs over your heads.”

Skyline leapt to tackle Ares. “YOU SEXIST—ulp!”

Cinnamon pulled Skyline back by the tail, keeping her from assaulting the captain.

“Werr, it waf mighty fine meetin’ ya’ll!” She spoke through Skyline’s tail. “Ah’m terribry sorry fer interruptin’ ya’lls trainin’. Ah hopf ya’ll haff a mighty fine day!” She gave Skyline a firm pull before releasing her. “Let’s go before ya get us all kicked outta here!” she hissed.

Skyline shot a nasty look at Captain Ares before grudgingly going along with Cinnamon, Lily quietly following behind them. As soon as they left the training grounds and were out of the Royal Guard’s earshot, Skyline angrily stomped at the floor.

“Can you believe those guys?!” Skyline asked incredulously. “Calling me a filly... a filly! Seriously?!”

“Now ah know they’re a mite rude,” Cinnamon said with a level tone of voice, “but ya can’t just be pickin’ fights with the captain of the Royal Guard. It just ain’t somethin’ a pony should be doin’.”

“But still!” Skyline objected. “Didn’t you see how that first shot was almost perfect? When I was about to fire off that second round he—”

“It don’t matter who was in the right!” Cinnamon interjected. “C’mon Skyline, they’re just a bunch of lunkhead stallions... don’t waste yer time tryin’ ta argue with ‘em.”

“Um... girls?” Lily timidly spoke up, bringing the two other ponies’s attention towards her.

“Good mornin’, sugarcube,” Cinnamon greeted halfheartedly. “Sorry that ya had ta see what happened just now...”

“It’s all that no-good Captain’s fault!” Skyline accused. “Everything would just be fine and dandy if he didn’t try to trip me up like that!”

“What happened, happened,” Cinnamon sighed. “C’mon Sky, le’s just put this behind us and go grab somethin’ ta eat. Ah heard the grub in Canterlot’s pretty good!”

Skyline reservedly kicked at the floor. "Fine, whatever... I'm over this," she muttered while trotting away from the training grounds. Cinnamon and Lily shot each other understanding looks over Skyline's attitude before following the pegasus.

A loud voice called out from behind the three. "Hey, hold on a minute!" Captain Ares galloped into the hall to catch the group before they began to make their way down the stairs.

Skyline stiffened up and gritted her teeth. "Ugh, what do you want?!"

"Cool it, Sky!" Cinnamon hissed. She turned to respond to the captain. "What can we do ya fer, Captain Ares?"

"One of the Pegasus Patrol flew in to tell me that there are some ponies at the front gates trying to get into Canterlot without documentation," Ares explained briskly. "They say that they're friends of our Princesses' new guests. I'm assuming that they're talking about you fillies?"

Skyline noticeably clenched her hoof at being called a filly again, but Lily stepped forward before Skyline could explode again. "Y-yes, Princess Luna brought us in as guests."

Ares sighed. "Then I suppose you three should head over to the front gates to confirm the identities of these ponies." He shoved a set of papers towards Lily. "Here, these will work as temporary passes for those ponies if they're who they say they are." Lily timidly took the papers from the captain's hoof. "I'm assuming you know how to get to the front gate? I don't want to have to waste any of my stallions' time escorting you three." Before the trio could respond, he quickly continued to speak, "That's all I needed to say. You fillies can get going before the blue one over there breaks something around here with her clumsiness."

Skyline angrily hoofed at the floor. "WHY YOU—ulp!"

Cinnamon quickly shoved her hoof into Skyline's mouth to keep her from saying any more. "O' course Cap'n!" she said obligingly. "We'll be able ta find our way perfectly!"

Ares gave a curt nod. "I bid you all farewell then. Hopefully I won't be seeing any of you up here again." He turned around and galloped back to the training grounds, leaving the three ponies alone in the hall.

Cinnamon removed her hoof from Skyline's mouth. "Phew, you were about ta say somethin' you were goin' ta regret, Sky."

"Let me regret it," the cyan pegasus huffed. "I just want to see that jerk eat his words..."

"Um, everypony?" Lily shyly cut in. "The ponies at the front gate... do you think they could be... you know..."

"Ah have a pretty good hunch they're who we think they are!" Cinnamon said brightly in an attempt to lighten the mood. "What d'ya'll say we head on over ta the front gates ta let 'em in? A bit o' fresh air would cool yer head off, Sky!"

Skyline gave the earth pony a slightly forced smile. "Yeah... I'm sure seeing them will cheer me up a bit. Let's go before Captain Jerkwad comes galloping in to throw me another insult."

Lily nodded in agreement. "Yeah... let's go."

--

"Are you absolutely *sure* that you don't want to allow us inside?" Amethyst asked, batting her eyelashes at the gate guard. "It's been *such* a long journey, and my hooves are absolutely *aching*..."

"I'm sorry ma'am," the guard said firmly. "But I can't let anypony in without any papers. It's the law."

"What kind of papers?" Pastel asked excitedly, bouncing around. "Parchment paper? Printer paper? Party paper?"

"Documentation papers," the guard answered, wondering what printer paper was supposed to be. "If you don't have a signed and approved document stating that you have been granted permission to enter Canterlot, then I can't let you in for security reasons."

"Security? But *darling*," Amethyst said seductively. "Why would a couple of innocent girls like us cause Canterlot any trouble, hmm?" The unicorn pouted and looked up at the guard with upturned eyes.

The guard was noticeably flustered over Amethyst's advances. "U-uh, hrm, i-it's just the rules, and—"

"Can't you just make an exception for me and my companion here?" Amethyst inquired, batting her eyes. "We won't have to tell anypony about it... and if you're still unsure, then I can always provide you with a little *service*."

The guard gulped. "S-service?"

"Mmm... yes, service..." Amethyst whispered enticingly. "Just. For. You."

"Are you offering him sex?" Pastel asked confusedly. "But you're totally a virgin! There's no way that you'd—"

"I am not!" Amethyst huffed. "I am simply offering this gentlepony the service of having a custom-made outfit to grace his otherwise drab attire! Besides, the only pony I would ever *consider* giving my virginity to is—"

"Wait, drab?" The guard interrupted. He frowned at Amethyst. "Do you really think that I look... drab?"

"Why noooooo!" Amethyst laughed nervously. "You don't look *drab* per se... it's just that... that armor your wearing is such a dull shade of color. It certainly does *not* match up well with the color of your coat." Amethyst frowned, taking note of the other guards who sat upon the top of the watchtowers. "In fact, I'd say that the uniforms of all the Royal Guard can use some touching up. Honestly, it's not even real gold! That tacky fake gold plating is definitely a turn-off, especially for a mare such as myself who values true quality!"

"You do look drab!" Pastel added. "But it's a nice sort of drab. Maybe if you added some streamers to it..."

"Streamers?" Amethyst repeated, tilting her head. "Honestly Pastel, I *cannot* understand your tastes in fashion. Streamers would look absolutely horrid in conjunction with the tacky metal plating of his armor. Perhaps if it was made from more natural minerals then..."

"Erm, ladies?" The guard spoke up, starting to tire of the two ponies's banter. "You do know that I sent a pegasus to fetch those ponies you asked for to confirm your

identities, right? They should have guest passes for you, so there's not really any reason for you to insult my uniform..."

"Insult?" Amethyst asked incredulously. "Why my dear, we're not insulting your attire, we're *criticizing* it. There's a large difference between the two!"

"It kinda looked like insulting to me," Pastel shrugged. "But don't worry about it Mr. Tacky Guardy Pants! A lot of mares like a stallion in uniform! Even if that uniform *could* use some streamers!"

The guard slapped his hoof to his face. "Ugh... these ponies are giving me headaches..." He turned up to the guards who were at the watchtowers surrounding the gate, the guards who were snickering at his misfortune. "Hey!" he shouted. "Do you see Princess Luna's guests yet!?"

"They're coming down Main Street!" his comrade shouted back. "Put up with those two for a few more minutes, okay! *snicker*"

"Put up with those two he says..." the guard muttered to himself. "Well ladies, you shouldn't have to wait much longer for your friends, they'll be here in just a couple more—"

"Hey Mr. Guardy Pants!" Pastel interrupted. "Do they have good parties in Canterlot?"

He was, once again, thrown off guard by the pace of these two ponies. He sighed. "I wouldn't know, my position as a peacekeeper prevents me from indulging in such activities."

"That's no fun!" Pastel frowned. "Having to stand here day after day after day and not having a party to cheer you up? I don't see how you could do something like that!"

The guard sighed. "Well... the pay is good..."

"You know what else would be good?" Amethyst added. "If I could talk to whoever designed that armor of yours. That pony needs to understand that aesthetics are just important as functionality!"

The guard sighed once again. "We can argue about this all day, but it's giving me a headache so can we stop? My job isn't to bicker with those seeking entry..."

Amethyst opened her mouth to comment, but a loud yell from the watchtower interrupted her. "Princess Luna's guests are here! Opening the gates!"

The guard let out a breath of relief at the thought that he didn't have to deal with these ponies anymore. The gates slowly rose up behind him, revealing the city of Canterlot that stood behind those walls. At the mouth of the gate stood three ponies, ready to meet with the two outside.

"Amethyst! Pastel!" The three cried out.

"Skyline! Cinnamon! Lily!" The two responded.

The group of ponies met in a large group hug, expressing their happiness at being able to see each other again. "It's mighty nice ta see ya'll again!" Cinnamon laughed, ruffling Pastel's mane. "But what're ya'll doin' here?"

"Yeah..." Lily agreed, "Don't you two have jobs to do?"

Both Pastel and Amethyst smiled sheepishly at the question. "Well... um..."

"Before you get into any conversations," the guard interrupted, "can you three confirm their identities?"

"Uh, yeah," Skyline said. "This is Amethyst and Pastel Lollipop. They're our friends from Ponyville."

Lily took out the set of papers she got from Ares. "Umm... the captain of the guard said that these would work for now..."

The guard took the documents from the pegasus and quickly sifted through them. He sighed with relief. "Alright then, head through the gates. Before my headache gets any worse..."

The group of ponies quickly trotted into town, the large gates shutting themselves closed behind them.

"So... how come you two aren't back working your jobs in Ponyville again?" Lily asked as they trotted through the streets of Canterlot.

Amethyst spoke up hesitantly. "W-well... um... funny story about that actually..."

"We quit our jobs!" Pastel answered enthusiastically.

"WHAT?!" Lily exclaimed, aghast. "What do you mean you quit your jobs?!"

"I just told Mr. and Mrs. Toffee that it was about time for me to go!" Pastel exclaimed, a fragile hint of sadness in her voice. "They understand... a pony like me can't just mooch off of them forever! I have to be able to take care of myself, you know?"

"And I left the boutique in the hooves of Crochet," Amethyst commented. "I trust that she'd be able to handle the business all by herself."

"But... that boutique is your whole life Ame..." Lily said timidly.

"Was my whole life, Lily dearest." Amethyst corrected. "I'm *much* happier whenever I'm with you and the others. A life without my best friends simply isn't a life at all! Not to mention... er, certain *perks* to living in Canterlot..."

"I was eventually gonna leave Ponyville anyways," Pastel shrugged. "The only reason I stayed for so long was because I had such great friends keeping me there!"

"Still..." Cinnamon said slowly.

"Nuh-uh!" Pastel cut off, drawing a cross on her lips with her hoof. "We're not talking about this any more!"

Skyline sighed. "Whatever you say Pastel. Whatever you say..."

"So tell us about poor Midnight!" Amethyst said, steering the conversation away from Pastel and herself. "Has she awakened yet?"

Cinnamon shook her head. "She's still asleep, but Celestia said that it's natural fer her ta be asleep fer so long. It's only a matter of time before she wakes back up, fit as a fiddle!"

Lily hesitated, remembering what she overheard the night before. "*Midnight will remain in that coma for about a year before she passes away,*" Celestia had said. What was happening to her right now wasn't exactly natural if it was killing her. Lily knew what to do to help out Midnight, but she wasn't sure how exactly she was supposed to casually suggest delivering the pendant to the unicorn.

“U-um...” Lily mumbled, trying to figure out what she was supposed to say.

“Is something the matter, Lily dear?” Amethyst asked, moving herself closer to the yellow pegasus. “It looks like you’re thinking hard about something.”

“U-um... well...” Of course she was thinking hard about something. Type-Is, Type-IIs, Suppressors, Lycoris. There were a myriad of things to think about that she couldn’t figure out. She sighed. She might as well just go for it, there was no use trying to stall something this important. “The thing is...”

“Didja get that pendant to Midnight yet?” Pastel piped up, interrupting Lily. The pegasus was slightly annoyed at being interrupted, but looked at Pastel gratefully for providing her with an opening.

“N-no... not yet...” Lily said, bowing her head down. “I didn’t get the opportunity to get it to her yesterday and... um... I wanted my friends around when I did, although I didn’t think you and Amethyst would be here... Not that I don’t want you two to be, I’m very grateful that you are, and—”

Amethyst pulled Lily into a hug. “That’s enough from you Lily. We’ll get that pendant to Midnight as soon as we get into the castle. What’s important now is that we’re all together, isn’t that right Pastel?”

Pastel nodded rapidly in agreement. “We’re all together again!”

“Enough with all this mushy stuff,” Skyline said lightheartedly. “We’re already at the courtyard!”

“WOAH! Lookit all the flowers and stuff!” Pastel bounced around the courtyard, examining the scenery.

“It certainly is very charming,” Amethyst agreed, casually smelling one of the flowers.

“It is, isn’t it...” Lily’s voice trailed off, her thoughts wandering to how she and Lycoris parted in the nearby gardens. Where was he now, and what was he doing...?

“C’mon everypony, the infirmary’s this way!” Cinnamon gestured. “You got the pendant on ya, Lily?”

Lily nodded. "It's right here inside my saddlebag, along with my documents... oh!" She turned to Pastel and Amethyst. "We need Jeeves to get you two permanent papers! Those guest passes probably won't last forever."

"Jeeves?" Pastel repeated. "That's the most generic name for a servant I've ever heard! It was like he was *born* to be one or something!"

Amethyst rolled her eyes. "Come on Pastel, it's not really considered polite to talk about other ponies like that, especially when you've never met them."

Pastel shrugged and the group of ponies continued to travel towards the infirmary. Once there the nurse on duty held up a hoof to stop them. "Hold it. State your business here today."

"We're here to see Midnight Star," Skyline responded. "Just wanted to give her a get-well present of sorts."

The nursepony frowned. "I'm sorry, but I don't think you all have the authorization to visit her."

"But we were here yesterday, remember?" Skyline objected. "You let us in then, so why won't you let us in now?"

"You were here yesterday, weren't you..." The nurse muttered. She cleared her throat before continuing. "Yesterday you were in the company of the two princesses, today, you are not. The only reason you all were allowed in was because of them. Unless either Princess Celestia or Princess Luna are here to accompany you all I'm afraid that I'll have to restrict entry."

"That's ridiculous!" Skyline exclaimed. "C'mon, why can't we go in by ourselves? It's not like we're going to pull the plug on somepony's life or something like that!"

The nurse sighed. "I'm sorry, it's the rules and—"

"Are you sure you can't make an exception for us?" Amethyst cut in. "Midnight is very dear to us you see, and we're so worried so—"

"What's going on out here?" Princess Luna stepped out from the infirmary with a strange wooden instrument poking out of her saddlebag. Her face lit up when she saw

the group of ponies who were arguing with the nurse. "Oh, hello everypony! And Pastel and Amethyst are here too?"

The nursepony cleared her throat. "Excuse me Princess, these five ponies were trying to visit Miss Star. I was just telling them that they could turn around and go find something else to do."

Luna frowned. "Why would you do that? I don't see the harm in letting them visit their friend." She gestured to the group of ponies. "Go right ahead. You remember where Midnight's bed is, right?"

Cinnamon nodded in confirmation as the group began to make their way into the infirmary. The nurse held out a hoof in objection. "Wait a minute, you can't go in without supervision!"

Luna sighed. "Fine, I'll keep them company while they visit. Is that fine?"

The nurse grimaced. "Well if you're with them, Princess, then I guess they can go in. But—"

"Then it's settled!" Luna interrupted, making her way back into the infirmary. "Toodles!" She shut the door to the infirmary before the nurse could get out another word. "Geez... everypony here is always so uptight..." She cleared her throat and turned to the group of ponies who were standing still, looking at her. "What're you all waiting for?" Luna asked. "I thought you all wanted to see Midnight?"

"Well..." Skyline said hesitantly, "We were wondering... uh..."

"What is that thing?" Pastel finished, pointing to the wooden object in Luna's saddlebag.

"O-oh... this?" Luna blushed as she took the object out, revealing a strange rectangle with beads hanging on rods inside of it. "Um... it's nothing... just an... um..."

"Is that an abacus?" Amethyst questioned, tilting her head.

Luna sighed. "Yes... it's an abacus... I came in here to do some thinking earlier, and Abacus here helps me sort out my thoughts sometimes."

"... did you give that thing a name?" Skyline asked.

“A-anyways!” Luna yelped. “It’s not important, so why don’t we all just head over to Midnight right this instant?”

The ponies grinned sheepishly and began to trot towards the back of the infirmary where Midnight was resting. The indigo unicorn looked the same as before, as if she was slumbering peacefully without a care in the world.

“At least she looks comfortable...” Amethyst said softly.

“C’mon Lily!” Pastel exclaimed. “Pass her the pendant!”

“Shh!” Cinnamon hissed. “This is an infirmary Pastel, don’t be so loud!”

Pastel shrugged but kept her mouth quiet. Lily let out a small giggle before untying her saddlebag to get out the pendant.

“Oh... that pendant,” Luna commented hesitantly. “Hey... um, you all are keeping that promise with me, right?”

“What promise are ya talkin’ about?” Cinnamon asked, winking at the princess.

Luna gave a slight smile. “Yeah... what promise...”

Lily successfully undid the knot on her saddlebag, taking out a pouch from her back. Opening the pouch went about much more quickly than the saddlebag, and in a matter of seconds she had the pendant out for everypony to see.

“Are you sure that’s the right pendant?” Amethyst asked, frowning. “I remember it being a lot shinier when we got it...”

“It’s the right pendant,” Lily said, nodding. “It just got duller because it only shines when there’s—” She quickly stopped herself from saying any more, remembering Lycoris’s warning not to relay anything about what she learned last night.

“When there’s what, darling?” Amethyst inquired.

“I-It’s nothing,” Lily hurriedly followed up. “A-anyways, this is the pendant. S-so... let’s just put it around Midnight’s neck so she can have it on her...”

Lily gently placed the pendant around Midnight's neck, taking care not to move the sleeping unicorn. Hopefully the pendant was really what she thought it was...

"Hey, what's going on with that thing?" Skyline asked.

A faint light began to materialize inside of the pendant. It was at first nothing but a glimmer, but with each second it grew in its intensity.

"It's mighty beautiful..." Cinnamon murmured, her eyes captivated by the mysterious light. The other ponies said nothing in response as they were being put into the same trance-like state.

The brilliance continued to return to the pendant, illuminating the room with scattered wisps of color and light. It concentrated itself around Midnight, fluctuating between the pendant and the unicorn as if some sort of equilibrium was to be established. Waves of particles shone off of this oscillation, creating a mystifying dance of energy that everypony could hardly tear their eyes away from.

Everypony except for one.

As the light surrounding the pendant grew, the Luna's expression grew darker. She wasn't sure what to expect once the pendant had been delivered to Midnight, but it certainly wasn't this. The princess's mind was stirring, trying to figure out exactly what this light show would do. It certainly had a familiar look to it...

"... is that a Suppressor?" Luna muttered to herself. "No, it'd be much clearer if it was... that light... it looks more like..."

A shockwave suddenly reverberated through the room, a familiar feeling passing through everypony. As the memories resurfaced to Luna's mind, a look of abject horror fell upon her face.

The light reminded Luna of the aura that had encased Midnight during her Awakening.

Crack. A small fracture appeared on the surface of the pendant. The solid equilibrium between Midnight and the pendant was disrupted, sending fissures of light spiraling across the room. The paths of illumination looked random at first, but for some reason, it seemed like it was concentrating itself upon the five ponies who were captivated by the sight...

Luna suddenly realized what was about to happen. “GET DOWN!!” she shouted instinctively.

However, her warning came too late.

The pendant burst into fragments, explosively scattering itself across the paths of light it radiated. The fragments propelled themselves directly into the five ponies, piercing their bodies. Unable to even react to what just happened, they all collapsed, droplets of blood oozing out of the places where the tiny fragments stabbed through them.

The last thing the five heard before slipping away into unconsciousness were Luna’s desperate cries for help.

Session 18-2

The normally stagnant white void was now in absolute chaos. Bursts of static cut through the air, making it seem like the world was tearing itself apart by the seams. The hazy fog that encompassed the area no longer conveyed a feeling of dreamlike peacefulness, in the current chaos the fog swirled around like an ominous maelstrom, threatening to decimate anything that dared to come near it.

In the midst of this chaos were the five ponies, dazed from the shock of having their chests pierced by the pendant's fragments. The moment they regained their sense of selves, the pain in their chests was dwarfed by an even more nerve-wracking sensation.

Rainbow Dash clutched at the ground, every inch of her body bombarded with waves of agony. "Urgh... what's... what's going on?!"

The other ponies were in the same position, enduring this pain that threatened to tear them apart. Rarity and Fluttershy were absolutely stricken down by the pain, while Pinkie Pie and Applejack were hardly in better conditions.

"I-I don't know!" Pinkie gasped, "I don't like it though... i-it hurts... i-it... hurts..." The pink earth pony's words gave way to ragged breathing, the tortured expression on her normally smiling face terrifying the other ponies.

"Pinkie Pie!" Rainbow Dash yelled. She spread her wings to jump to the pink pony's aid, but a jolt of agonizing pain sent her crashing back down. "Agh... dammit... DAMMIT!!"

"C-calm down, sugarcube!" Applejack called out to the pegasus. "A-ah'll be right there!" She tried to stand up straight, but her hooves ended up buckling down, causing her to crumple onto the ground. "W-we're... we're not jus' gonna... roll over and... and die!"

A sudden shrill cry alerted Applejack and Rainbow Dash to look in Fluttershy's direction. The yellow pegasus was writhing upon the ground, tears and saliva running down her face as if she were being violently choked. Next to her pitiful form was Rarity, who was desperately trying to reach out to comfort her best friend. She worked as hard as she could to drag her feeble body towards Fluttershy, but the best she could manage was a trembling hoof that stopped just short of the pegasus.

“Egh... Fluttershy... Rarity...!” Applejack struggled to move herself closer towards her suffering friends, but in her current state she couldn’t even manage to traverse the few feet that kept them apart. She could feel her vision begin to fuzz, the outlines of her friends becoming blurrier and blurrier. “H-hold on... ah’m a comin’...” Applejack fell back onto the ground, too weak to keep going.

A deep rumbling noise reverberated through the void, causing everything to twist and distort. The world around them was breaking apart, and soon enough they would be broken too.

Fluttershy’s screaming became less frantic, subsiding into faint whimpers. Rarity tried to call out to her friend through with a strained voice, her hoof barely touching Fluttershy’s mane. “F-Flutter... shy...” Rarity’s hoof fell to the ground as the last of her strength disappeared.

A bitter laugh resounded from Rainbow Dash. “Haha... so... we’re all gonna die here then...?”

“Don’t... don’t say that...!” Applejack shouted, her voice barely audible amongst the chaos. “We... we’re not gonna die... we can’t...”

“H-hey girls?” Pinkie Pie mumbled. “I... I love you all... You’re all... the bestest best friends a pony could... ever... have...” Pinkie’s face suddenly began to relax as her body became completely numb from the pain.

Only two ponies were left remaining while everything shattered to pieces around them. With every second that passed they could feel themselves fading into oblivion just like the rest of their friends, their bodies feeling as if they could fall apart at any moment.

“...hey, Applejack?” Rainbow Dash croaked.

“What is it, sugarcube?” she responded.

“It... hurts...” Tears began to fall from the cyan pegasus’s eyes. “It... hurts so much...”

Applejack felt her heart tighten at the sight of her friend’s tears. This was the first time she ever saw the pegasus so broken and defeated. “Rainbow...”

“Make it stop...” Rainbow sobbed. “No more... just... just let me die already...”

“Ah don’t wanna hear that from you!!” Applejack cried out as loudly as she could. “Yer... yer the bravest pony ah’ve ever met... so...”

“I’m not brave like Skyline!” The pegasus said bitterly. “I just... can’t handle it anymore...”

“Rainbow Dash—”

Applejack was interrupted by a violent surge of pain. She couldn’t feel anything anymore. Not her hooves, not her body, not even the small stream of tears that ran down her face. All she could do was to watch as the world disintegrated around her.

“Applejack...” Rainbow Dash mumbled. “It’s... it’s been fun...”

Suddenly, there was nothing. The familiar whiteness of the void was no more. There was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to taste, smell, or touch. It was a state of non-existence, where the concept of reality could not be even fathomed.

Hey... what are you all doing here?

A single voice resonated through the nothingness, causing a spark of awareness to develop.

Who are you?

The voice chuckled. *I think a better question would be to ask who you are.*

That’s easy. I’m... I’m Rainbow Dash, right? No wait... Applejack? Rarity? Fluttershy? Pinkie Pie? Wait... who... who am I?

Everyone and no one, all at the same time.

How the heck does that make any sense?!

It doesn’t if you were still in reality. Where you are right now transcends the your original existence. But don’t worry, you haven’t yet lost that connection to your reality. If you did we wouldn’t be able to have this conversation.

Ah don't get it. Jus' tell me what's goin' on already, would you? I mean, if you don't mind that is...

In due time, the voice replied playfully. For now... it's probably best if we take this conversation into more familiar territory. It won't exactly be beneficial for you if we stay in this dimension any longer.

Slowly, a sense of existence began to return to the surroundings. An influx of color was the first to appear, splashing a multitude of particles across the environment. From these particles abstract shapes constructed themselves out of liquefied substances. It looked like a torrent of rain splashed the scenery from all directions, the raindrops scattering to form a solid landscape.

The landscape suddenly splintered into a million pieces, scattering into innumerable speckles of light. The shower of powdered glass shone like the glistening of the night sky, imbuing the strange scene with an ethereal beauty. Beams of light emitted from these shards, weaving together endlessly until there was nothing to be seen but a large pane of light. The light darkened from pale white to a ghostly view, a reflective tint now shining on its surface.

"So, are you able to figure out who you are now?"

The mirror shattered itself, revealing a strange land beneath its depths. If this area had to be described, it would be known as a land of paradoxes.

The ponies picked themselves up off the ground, catching glimpses of themselves from the mirror shards. Fluttershy, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Applejack... there was no mistake as to who they were anymore.

A sixth figure descended from the sky, gracefully clopping her hooves onto the tip of a metallic spiral. The figure looked... seraphic against the backdrop of chaos; the only orderly figure in this land of paradoxes. They could almost say that she looked like a god.

"U-um..." Fluttershy spoke up, her voice weaker than usual. "W-what's going on...?"

The figure hopped off of the spiral, slowly descending to the other ponies' levels. The figure spoke with a clearly feminine voice. "There's no real point in explaining, Fluttershy, it's all too complicated and unnecessary for you all to understand. Besides, I would have to hate to give this explanation more than once."

“More than once,’ you say?” Rarity parroted. “If you don’t mind, I’m sure everypony here would like to know exactly what you mean by that!”

“Yeah!” Rainbow Dash agreed. “We were put through hell back there! We at least deserve to know what the heck is going on!”

The mare smiled. “Well then... if you really must know, I suppose I’ll just have to explain it all to you and young Twilight Sparkle at the same time.

“Wait a minute, Twilight?” Applejack said suspiciously. “Jus’ who exactly are ya...?”

The figure chuckled lightheartedly at the earth pony’s question, her figure starting to become more defined. “Who do you think I am?”

--

“I’m your ancestor of course.”

Twilight quickly turned around, startled at the voice. Her eyes darted around, scanning the area for whoever spoke to her.

The voice whispered into her ear. “There’s no point trying to see me, I don’t usually bother with trying to keep a form if there’s no point. And you shouldn’t either, it only tires you out after a while.”

“W-who are you...?” Twilight asked timidly.

“Are you just going to keep asking that same question?” The voice said, almost playfully. “Aren’t you the one who’s been invading my body and trampling all over my memories?”

“M-Midnight?” Twilight bit her lip.

“Ding ding ding!” A brilliant light shone before Twilight’s eyes, momentarily blinding her. When she regained her vision, a familiar looking unicorn stood in front of her. Midnight laughed. “It’s been a while since I materialized myself you know. Of course, time doesn’t exist in this dimension so I suppose it doesn’t matter!”

Twilight Sparkle stood frozen in shock, her mouth opening and closing in an attempt to form a coherent sentence. "H-how am I even talking to you!? You're dead! Deaaaaaad! D-E-A-D, dead!"

"I think I get the point," Midnight said sarcastically. "But if you think that we simply just disappear right after we die, then you're sorely mistaken. You do know where this is, don't you Twilight?"

--

"The collective unconsciousness thingymajiger?" Pinkie Pie responded.

Midnight smiled at the pink pony. "Yep, the collective unconsciousness. Actually, I'm surprised you knew that. Who told you?"

"Princess Celestia explained it to us..." Fluttershy answered.

"Celly, huh? Well she *did* always like explaining things..." Midnight said with a nostalgic expression. "Anyways, I'm hoping you remember how a soul is what powers a pony's magic, correct?"

--

"Souls power magic?" Twilight repeated, a quizzical look on her face.

"That they do, Twilight," Midnight said. "I'm really hoping you're familiar with the concept of a soul..."

Twilight frowned. "Of course I am, what kind of pony do you take me for?"

"You never know," Midnight commented, "A lot of ponies back in my day were not consciously aware of their souls. But that's not important right now. What's important is that you understand that your body and your soul are two completely different entities. The body is just a vessel for the soul, and once the body expires the soul returns to its origin point, the collective unconsciousness."

"But I don't really get what this collective unconsciousness is supposed to be!" Twilight exclaimed. "Is it just the afterlife?"

"It is, in a sense." Midnight paused, wondering how to continue her explanation. "I'm betting that you're not at all familiar with the theory of multiple dimensions, are you?"

Twilight shook her head. "Not really. Although I know we live in a three-dimensional world... but what does that have to do with anything?"

"You're in the fourth dimension right now." Midnight said briskly. "Or, technically speaking, the boundary between the third and fourth dimension, although the collective unconsciousness lies mostly in the fourth..."

--

"Wait wait wait!" Applejack interrupted, shaking her hooves back and forth. "Ah'm just a simple country pony, ah don't understand any of this talk 'bout dimensions!"

Midnight sighed. "Splitting my attention like this can be so irritating sometimes... show of hooves, who here understands the basics of dimensions?"

Everypony but Applejack and Rainbow Dash put their hooves up. "Really you two?" Rarity questioned haughtily. "Honestly, this is something that you learn during basic mathematics in grade school!"

"Well excuuuuuse me fer not payin' attention in math!" Applejack retorted. "Ah don't need no fancy mathematics to run a farm!"

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "I just slept through any class that wasn't PE."

"Well... simply put, we live in a three-dimensional world, correct?" Light emitted from Midnight's horn, causing a transparent cube to appear in accompaniment with her words. "We have length. We have width. And finally we have height. However, if you take away one of these," She swept away the entire top portion of the cube, leaving a flat square. "You end up with only two dimensions, length and height."

Midnight held the square up to make it face the other ponies. "Now, I'm going to draw something on this square, and I want you to tell me what you think it is." Using her magic, Midnight etched in a crude stick figure onto the plane, finishing it off with a smiley face.

"Oooh! Oooh!" Pinkie exclaimed, hopping up and down. "It's a stick pony!"

Midnight nodded. "Yes it is. Now then, what would happen if I did this...?" The unicorn continued to etch more shapes onto the square. First a house, then a tree, and then a sun. By the time she finished, it looked like exactly like what somepony in the second grade would consider art.

"... ah don't get it." Applejack frowned. "All yer doin' is drawin' on that there piece o' glass."

Midnight gave Applejack a sly smile. "Or maybe you'd say I just created a work of art?"

"Calling it art might be pushing it." Rainbow Dash commented. "I still don't get how this is important."

"Think about it everypony..." Midnight chuckled. "I, a third-dimensional being, just created a world out of two dimensions. Imagine if within this drawing the little stick pony was living her own life with her own personality that I dreamt up for her.

"Since I created her, doesn't that make me her world's god?"

--

"You're saying... you're a god?" Twilight asked. "I'm sorry, but that's just—"

"Ridiculous?" Midnight finished. "It may sound ridiculous at first, but if you think about it a little it makes perfect sense."

"How does it make sense?" Twilight frowned. "Those are *drawings*. Drawings aren't alive like we are, they don't live or breathe or... *anything!*"

"Are you sure about that?" Midnight cleared her throat before continuing. "This here is Miss Sprinkle Dolphins, she lives in North Hoofington and she works as a mailpony. Her best friends are Cupcake Sugarsnacks and Licorice Merryweather, and the three of them have known each other since childhood. North Hoofington's economy is wholly dependent on chocolate rainbows and bon-bons, which Miss Sugarsnacks and Miss Merryweather make every day."

"I'm sorry, but those are some of the worst names I've ever heard." Twilight commented. "So how does this tie into you being a god?"

"I just created a background for Sprinkle Dolphins and her friends. It might not mean anything to you on the third dimension, but in the second dimension that life I made up for them is all they have." Midnight paused, noticing Twilight's still confused expression. "Perhaps if I phrased this another way... have you ever read a thoroughly engrossing book? A book that creates such an amazing world that you can't help but be captivated by the characters and story?"

"Well yeah, of course," Twilight answered. "I think everypony at some point has read a novel like that."

"Then wouldn't you say that the author is that story's god?"

"I—" An expression of understanding dawned on the unicorn's face. "Oh... I get it... but... books are different from drawings, aren't they?"

"That's not really the point of the comparison, Twilight," Midnight answered. "What I'm trying to say is that we have the capability to create our own universes, making us gods and goddesses in our own rights." Midnight paused. "I'm sorry, I'm getting off topic. You only wanted to know how dimensions factored into the collective unconsciousness, so all this talk about creating our own worlds must seem very tangential to you."

"Just a bit," Twilight commented.

"Well, if I wanted to continue with this analogy..." Midnight waved her hoof around, bringing the figure in the drawing to life. The stick pony was now frolicking happily in the child-like world Midnight had crafted. "Right now I'm using my magic to create the illusion that Sprinkle Dolphins is alive. Pretend that inside of this drawing, she's living with the personality I created for her just carrying out her day job as a mailpony."

Sprinkle Dolphins pranced around the crudely drawn tree as if she didn't have a care in the world. Twilight's eyes were drawn to the stick pony... almost like Sprinkle was a living, breathing pony...

"Now... the personality I gave her," Midnight continued, "wouldn't you say it's the same thing as providing her with a soul? The stick figure would be the body that houses the soul, so if I got rid of the body..."

Midnight stomped her hoof straight through the glass, causing Twilight to recoil in surprise. "I just 'killed' Sprinkle." Midnight said softly. "Her body is no longer around to contain her soul. However," Midnight tapped her head with her hoof. "I still remember

who she is. If I were to draw another stick pony using my idea of whom Sprinkle originally was..." She materialized a new pane of glass, etching in another crude pony.

"Reincarnation," Midnight stated.

--

"Wait a minute..." Rainbow Dash frowned.

"Confused?" Midnight chuckled. "Don't worry, it's fine if you don't really understand what I'm trying to tell you. The collective unconsciousness is just a place where all departed souls reside, waiting for the cycle of reincarnation to bring them back into their dimension."

"Ya still haven't answered our original question!" Applejack pointed out. "How inarnation are we able ta talk ta ya like this?"

Midnight gave a small smile. "If you'll allow me one last tangent before we get to that... I believe Celly talked to you all about the nature of magic as well?"

"Magic is energy, right?" Pinkie Pie answered energetically.

Midnight nodded. "We draw the power of magic from the energy that resides in our souls. But... have you any idea the potential magic possesses?"

"I do recall the Princess saying something about particle manipulation," Rarity said. "Is that the potential you're talking about?"

"Sort of." Midnight took a deep breath before continuing. "Particle manipulation is just the tip of the iceberg. I'm sure you're all plenty familiar with transmutations, the ability to turn one object into something else entirely; it's how you're able to exist in this space. You transmute your souls into a different state that can access the collective unconsciousness. But think for a moment exactly what that *means*. You are a third-dimensional being, and the collective unconsciousness lies on the boundary of the third and fourth dimension. In order to be here, you had to cast a spell that allowed you all to transcend conventional reality.

"What I'm getting at is that magic has the potential to weaken the boundaries between dimensions. After all, that's exactly what you all are doing right now, stretching the barrier between the third and fourth dimensions to its limit in order to reside in this

space. If you were able to concentrate an even greater amount of magical energy, you would even be able to break into the fourth dimension where the Goddess resides!”

“... you sound like you’re speaking from experience.” Rainbow Dash said suspiciously. “Enough of all this, just tell us how we’re able to talk to a dead pony already!”

Midnight sighed. “Very well then. I suppose I’ve stalled for long enough. The reason why you’re all able to talk to me right now is because of one simple thing.

“The Elements of Harmony.”

--

“The Elements...?” Twilight parroted. “Well... I guess that those are the only things powerful enough to break through dimensions...”

“They are.” Midnight stated. “The Elements of Harmony are an anomaly in and of themselves. It’s the strongest form of magic that exists within our world, something that was never supposed to exist in the first place.”

“What do you mean by that?” Twilight asked.

Midnight smiled sadly. “Skyline and Lily Blossom, Apple Cinnamon, Pastel Lollipop, Amethyst... and finally myself, Midnight Star. We were the first and only bearers of the Elements of Harmony before you and your friends came along. Loyalty, Kindness, Honesty, Laughter, Generosity, and Magic. The Elements were something that all of us forged together with our naïve idealism... if only we weren’t so foolish...”

“I don’t get it,” Twilight frowned. “You’re talking as if the Elements of Harmony are a bad thing...”

“Say Twilight,” Midnight said suddenly. “Hasn’t it been getting easier for you to keep your form?”

“Wha?” Twilight recoiled, caught off guard by the sudden question. “Um... now that you mention it... it is kinda easier...”

Midnight smiled. “That means that you’ll be going home soon.”

“Wait, what?!” Twilight exclaimed. “What do you mean I’m going home soon? I thought I was stuck here!”

“Your friends came to get you.” Midnight explained. “In fact, I’ve been talking with them while I was talking to you, trying to keep you all distracted while the bonds between you all gained strength.”

“Distracted?” Twilight questioned. “But why?”

The indigo unicorn chuckled. “Isn’t it obvious? If I allowed you to take control of the conversation, you’d be asking me all sorts of questions about the past that I wouldn’t want to answer. After all, I’m not the Midnight of your simulation, but the Midnight of long ago who died from the fate bestowed onto her. Simply telling you what will happen would hardly prepare you for the Truth.”

“The Truth?” Twilight repeated, confused.

The smile fell from Midnight’s face. “Don’t tell me... Celly didn’t tell you why she sent you on this journey through the past?”

“Princess Celestia sent me?” Twilight shook her head. “But... I just found the book containing the spell in my mailbox one day...”

“What is that alicorn thinking?” Midnight muttered to herself. She sighed. “Listen Twilight... I told Celestia to give the spell to the next bearers of the Elements of Harmony in order to prepare them for what was to come. She must be thinking that she’s protecting you all by not telling you...”

“T-telling me what...?” Twilight said hesitantly.

CONNECTION REESTABLISHED. INITIALIZING DISCONNECTION PROTOCOL.

The robotic voice echoed throughout Twilight’s ears, causing her to clamp her hooves to her head in surprise. Midnight walked over to her and pulled her hooves down. “... There’s no time to explain anymore,” Midnight said. “I gave you some hints as to what the Truth is, but it’s useless if you don’t even know the reason why you need to be here.”

PROTOCOL INITIALIZED. INITIALIZING DISCONNECTION PROCEDURE.

Twilight could feel herself being gradually sucked away from Midnight. “W-wait! What’s this Truth!? What’s Princess Celestia hiding from me!?”

The older unicorn looked down on Twilight with an expression of pity. “I’m sorry. I can’t tell you what the Truth is...” Midnight knelt down and put her hoof on Twilight’s cheek. “You remind me so much of myself when I was your age...”

“Please... before I go, tell me,” Twilight pleaded. “I want to know.”

Midnight pulled her hoof away from the unicorn and stood back up. “I suppose I can’t blame Celestia for not telling you all... but still... it can’t be avoided.” She looked Twilight firmly in the eyes. “Twilight Sparkle... what you need to know is this.”

DISCONNECTION SUCCESSFUL. TERMINATING DIVE.

“The Elements of Harmony will be the death of you all.”

Intermission 4

“Cellyyyyyy!” Luna cried out. “Stop being so meeeeeaaaannnn!!”

The elder sister sighed. “Now Luna, you can have your little frisbee back when you finish studying.”

“But I don’t wanna study!” Luna pouted. She turned to the only unicorn in the group of three fillies. “Come oooooonnn Midnight, tell Celly that she needs to take a break from all this studying and play!”

Midnight chuckled and patted Luna’s head. “I don’t see the harm in playing around for a little while.”

“See Celly?” Luna stuck her tongue out at her older sister. “Midnight agrees with me!”

Celestia frowned at Midnight, to which the unicorn responded with a sheepish grin. “You know Luna’s not as studious as we are Celly. Besides, if we take a break then Luna will be able to concentrate better!”

“Honestly Midnight, you can’t let Luna have her way every time...” Celestia criticized.

“Pleeeaaaaasse?” Luna begged. “Please please please please *please?*”

Celestia let out another sigh. “Fine, you can play with your frisbee for a while. Just remember that Gnosis is expecting us to have memorized the foundations of astral—”

Luna leapt up behind Celestia and grabbed the frisbee before she could get another word out. “Thank you sis!” Luna exclaimed, giving the elder sister a quick kiss.

“Midnight, let’s go to the courtyard before Celly changes her mind!”

Midnight smiled at Celestia, who was still sighing and shaking her head. “Don’t worry,” Midnight reassured, “I’ll be sure to help Luna out with her studies when we get back.”

“Miiiiidnniiight!” Luna shouted impatiently. “Hurrrrryyyyy!”

"I'm coming!" Midnight replied. She turned towards Celestia. "We'll be back before lunchtime, Celly, see you then!"

The two ponies galloped out of the library and straight into the courtyard. "It's such a beautiful day!" Luna said happily. "Can you believe Celly? Making us stay inside and read when it's so nice out... who does she think she is?"

"I think she's your older sister." Midnight responded with a playful tone. "Don't be so harsh on her, she only wants to prepare you for the Day of Ascension the best she can."

Luna's smile faded from her face. "But... I don't want to be prepared for that..."

"Now Luna," Midnight said sternly. "You know how important the Day of Ascension is for everypony. If you're not prepared for it then—"

"I know!" Luna shouted. "I know... it's important for everypony's happiness... I get it..."

Midnight smiled sadly at the small earth pony, pulling Luna into a warm embrace. "Even if I'm scolding you about not wanting to do it... it's not like I don't understand how you feel."

Luna snuggled in closer to Midnight. "I don't wanna leave... I don't wanna be alone..."

"You don't have to be alone," Midnight said softly, gently running her hoof through Luna's mane. "You'll always have Celestia with you after the Day of Ascension... and until then, you'll always have me."

"Promise me?" Luna pouted.

Midnight nodded reassuringly. "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

"That's a silly promise," Luna giggled.

"Silly or not, it's still a promise," Midnight responded, poking Luna on the nose.

"Wah~!" Luna squeaked in surprise. "Don't do that..." she said, sticking her tongue out in a playful manner.

"You know you like it," Midnight said jokingly.

Luna suddenly kissed her sister, catching Midnight off-guard. With her grip loosened, Luna managed to break away from her embrace, now prancing around the courtyard. "I'm being adorable and nopony can stop me~" Luna yelled happily.

Midnight giggled. "Yes, you are very adorable. Why don't we toss that frisbee around for a bit?"

"Okay sis!" Luna beamed. She galloped to the far side of the courtyard, where the gardens were located. "Ready? I'm gonna toss it super far!"

"Ready, Luna!" Midnight called from across the courtyard.

Luna tensed her muscles, getting ready to launch the frisbee towards Midnight. She wound up her body to toss the disc as far as she could, and when she threw the frisbee...

You lied to me.

The scene suddenly shifted around Luna, the sky blackening and the plant-life around her withering away. Luna dropped the frisbee from her mouth in shock, not having a clue as to what was going on. She took a few frightened steps back as the courtyard continued to deteriorate around her.

"H-hello...?" Luna spoke up meekly. "M-Midnight...? W-where did you go...?"

YOU LIED TO ME!!

The courtyard gave way to an altogether different scene. Instead of the familiar surroundings of Canterlot, Luna was now high up in the sky, towering over a vast forest. She was inside of a crystalline tower, the twilight of the breaking dawn illuminating the area with a ghostly light.

"Calm down," a voice spoke coldly from Luna's right. "This is the moment we have lived for. You knew this was going to happen from the very beginning."

"SHUT UP!!" Luna felt herself say. She seemed to have absolutely no control of her body, as if she were only a bystander to the events unfolding before her. "Just... shut up..." She felt her head turn to face the ponies in front of her, tears of desperation falling from her eyes. "I... I never wanted this... so please... let me go... let me go..."

I don't... I don't want to be alone...

The scene shifted once again, this time Luna was standing at a much more familiar scene. She was standing inside the Canterlot of today with her sister Celestia, overlooking the Equestria of the night as the two alicorns who governed the land.

"I hate you, Celestia," Luna felt herself say.

Celestia winced at her sister's words. "C-come now, Luna. You don't really mean that..."

"Why wouldn't I mean it?" Luna said coldly. "All my life, I've been forced to do what other ponies expected me to do. I was never allowed to be myself, to have fun! It was all 'study this' and 'study that,' the only pony I was ever myself around was Midnight! And even then, she... she...!!"

"She saved us," Celestia interrupted quietly. "If it wasn't for her, we'd still be—"

"She's using us!" Luna shouted. "The only reason Midnight saved us was so that we could clean up whatever mess she made!!"

"Don't say that, Luna!" Celestia responded. "You know that Midnight loves us, so—"

"She loves you, Celestia," Luna spat. "She didn't tell me a thing about what happened while we were gone. There's no Quota, no Collection, this 'Equestria' is nothing like how it was before! And you... she told you what happened..."

"That's not true!" Celestia objected. "She only told me what I needed to do to control the sun!"

"THAT'S A LIE!" Luna shouted. "Besides... even if she did tell me the truth..." Her voice quieted down to nothing but a whisper. "If she really loved me... then she wouldn't have left me alone..."

"But you're *not* alone," Celestia reasoned. "You have me, your sister, by your side, and I'll never leave you by yourself!"

"Haha..." Luna laughed bitterly. "You're always tired by the time my night comes around, you can't say I'm not alone when you're half-asleep whenever you talk to me!" Luna could feel the rage building up inside her, a rage that refused to subside. "You

have so much fun during the day playing with all the ponies who bathe in your sunlight. Meanwhile, my night goes completely unnoticed. Whose fault do you think that is, huh?!" A strange darkness began to surround itself around Luna. "If you weren't around... if Midnight gave the day to me... then..."

"L-Luna...?" Celestia stuttered. "A-are you feeling alri—"

Luna violently stomped on the ground, bolts of dark magic emanating from her hooves. "Silence sister!!" Celestia recoiled from Luna's sudden yell. The waves of darkness began to swirl around Luna, transforming her appearance.

"I've decided, *sister*." Luna said menacingly. "The only way for me to not be alone is to destroy your daytime..."

"What are you talking about?!" Celestia objected. "Have you lost your mind, Luna?!"

"On the contrary," Luna spat. "I think I've found it." She spread her wings and took to the air. "No longer am I going to sit contentedly in your shadow. I'm going to take things into my own hooves, and bathe this land in eternal night!"

The darkness took full hold of Luna, drastically changing her appearance. Her coat was no longer the grayish purple it once was, but now solid black. Gone was the innocence in Luna's eyes, and in its place was a look of malice.

Celestia stumbled back from the pony in front of her, not believing what was unfolding before her eyes. "L-Luna...?"

"Luna died a long time ago," she responded cruelly. "From now on... my name is Nightmare Moon!!"

I... I just didn't want to be alone, that's all.

A large rainbow suddenly struck Nightmare Moon, restricting her movement. "What are you doing?!" she spat.

"I'm so sorry, Luna," Celestia said, tears running down her face. "I have to get you away from this space. I talked to Midnight and... well, this is the only way you can go back to normal..."

"Where are you sending me!?" Nightmare Moon shouted frantically.

“Away,” Celestia answered, her voice shaking. “Away to a faraway place where the darkness in you has time to grow weak enough to eradicate...” She paused. “Luna... I’m banishing you to the moon.”

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT TO ME!!” Nightmare Moon screeched.

“I have to, Luna.” Celestia sobbed. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. It’ll take one-thousand years for the hatred inside of you to subside... one-thousand long, lonely years...”

Nightmare Moon felt the rainbow’s grasp grow tighter. “My hatred will only grow stronger if you do this!” she screamed. “I’ll return stronger than ever and plunge Equestria into eternal night!!”

“*Your* hatred for me might deepen,” Celestia whispered. “But once one-thousand years pass, *your* hatred will be the only hatred left...”

“No... I won’t allow this to happen!!” Nightmare Moon struggled against the rainbow. “Let me go! I SAID LET ME GO!!”

“Don’t worry Luna...” Celestia said solemnly. “Just as the Summer Triangle laid the foundations for the Elements that are sealing you, the Summer Triangle will be what sets you free.”

Nightmare Moon reached out for her sister as the rainbow completely swallowed the last of her up. “Celestia... CELESTIA!!”

I just didn’t want to be alone... was it really that bad of a wish?

“CELESTIA!!”

Luna bolted awake, sweating gasping for air. It took her a moment to register Ponyville’s library her surroundings while her breathing calmed down. “It was... just a dream...” Luna sighed and collapsed back down upon the table she chose to sleep on. “It’s just... a dream... *hic* ...”

Tears silently fell from Luna’s eyes. She knew it was much more than a dream, they were flashbacks of a time she would rather forget. Luna laid back on the table, her body still shivering. “It’s just a dream...” she told herself, “... just a dream...”

“Mmph...”

Luna snapped up her head to the sudden groan. The six ponies in the center of the library were beginning to stir. Luna wiped away her tears and sprung off the table, quickly trotting to the group of ponies.

The six ponies rose at about the same moment, but Twilight Sparkle was the first to speak. “Mhmm... where am I...?”

“You’re in Ponyville’s library!” Luna exclaimed. “I’m so glad you’re awake again, Twilight! It must’ve been tough for you back there.”

“Wha...?” Twilight said groggily. “P-Princess Luna? What’re you doing here?”

“Oh, right, you were unconscious when I got here.” Luna smiled. “I just came down here with Celly to—”

“YOU!” Rainbow Dash suddenly leapt off the floor and tackled Luna, pinning her to the ground.

“R-Rainbow Dash?!” Twilight exclaimed. “What the hay do you think you’re doing!?”

Rainbow Dash ignored the unicorn’s exasperated yells and kept her concentration focused on Luna. “Were you trying to kill us back there, Nightmare Moon!?” she shouted, the memory of the pain wracking through her body and those of her friends still fresh on her mind.

Luna grimaced at the sound of her old name. “I-I’m not—”

“Don’t try to dodge the question!” Dash interrupted. “Why else would it feel like we were dying during the Dive? I know what you’re up to, Nightmare—oof!”

Twilight tackled Rainbow Dash, knocking her off of Luna. “What is with you, Rainbow Dash? You can’t just go around tackling royalty like that!”

“... she’s just pretty worked up over what we just went through.” Applejack said, stepping forward to answer for the cyan pegasus. “I mean, who wouldn’t be worked up after what we’ve been through?”

Twilight sighed. "First thing's first... what's everypony doing here? I thought it was just me and Rainbow Dash..."

"Your mind was apparently trapped within the collective unconsciousness, darling."

Rarity answered. "Princess Celestia came by and instructed us about how the only way to rescue your mind was to Dive back into the past and let events play out!"

"The Princess came by?" Twilight asked. "Is that why Princess Luna is here too?"

Luna nodded. "Celly had to go back to Canterlot to take care of some business. She left me behind to take care of you all when you woke up..."

"So the Princess wants us dead then?" Rainbow Dash spat.

"Dashie!" Pinkie Pie objected.

"What?" Dash countered. "Why else would Princess leave us here alone with Nightmare Moon!?"

Luna winced. "I'm not Nightmare Moon anymore... so please stop calling me that..."

"Oh yeah?" Rainbow Dash provoked. "Then who was responsible for almost killing us back there?!"

"Rainbow Dash!" Fluttershy scolded, catching everypony's attention. The yellow pegasus shrunk back a little after noticing that everypony's eyes were upon her. "Oh, um... i-if Princess Luna wanted to kill us... then she would've done it while we were all unconscious..."

"She has a point there sugarcube," Applejack commented. "Ya can't just lash out at somepony jus' because ya don't trust her..."

"Tch," Rainbow Dash kicked at a book on the library floor. "Fine..."

"Say, everypony?" Rarity spoke up. "What happened in those last few moments before we awoke? For some reason I'm having a hard time reorganizing my thoughts..."

The other ponies frowned. "Um..." Fluttershy mumbled, "I remember us talking with Midnight about dimensions or something..."

"Midnight?" Luna piped up. "You all talked to *Midnight*?"

"Mhm!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "Though it was more her talking to us."

"How does that... nevermind," Luna shook her head. "The 'how' is not important. What did she say to you all?"

"We're tryin' ta remember," Applejack said. "She was tryin' ta tell us somethin' about... about how Princess Celestia was hidin' somethin' from us... we disconnected before we could hear what she said though..."

"C-Celestia's hiding something from you?" Luna grimaced, trying and failing to mask her emotions. "What could that be, I-I wonder..."

"It's all so hazy for some reason," Rarity muttered. "But for some reason, I have the strangest feeling that it wasn't anything good."

"...girls?" Twilight spoke up solemnly. "I think I remember what Midnight told all of us."

"Spit it out then, Twilight!" Rainbow Dash urged.

Twilight hesitated. "She, um... she said the Elements of Harmony were going to kill us."

Each of the ponies' expressions grew darker as the memory of what Midnight last said to them resurfaced. Luna took a frightened step back, accidentally tripping over on herself and falling over from the shock. "T-the Elements of Harmony... are going to kill all of you?" Luna stuttered.

"You're talking as if you didn't know that, *Luna*," Rainbow Dash muttered. "Midnight said Celestia knew about it, and that means *you* know about it too!"

"... just because we're sisters, doesn't mean Celestia tells me everything," Luna said, her eyes downcast. "That's probably just one of those things she kept a secret from me... but I'm sure she has a good reason." Luna bit her lip. "I'm a blabbermouth so I would have told you all."

"Ah think that's somethin' we might wanna know," Applejack pointed out. "If ya really don't know anythin' about this, go fetch Celestia an' have her explain things!"

"I'll send a letter to her," Twilight offered. "Spike? Spiiiiike? Where's Spike?"

“He’s, um, sleeping.” Luna answered, remembering how Celestia knocked the baby dragon unconscious before leaving. “Hold on for a second, I’ll wake him up.” Luna concentrated a small amount of magic for an awakening spell and had it pulse across the room in order to wake the dragon.

“WHAHUUH?” Spike suddenly shot up into the air, startled from his sleep. “Oh... hey girls, you’re all awake... how was the past? Didja get Twilight back?”

“I’m right here, Spike,” Twilight pointed out. “And I need you to take a letter for me.”

Spike groaned. “Sheesh, they just saved you and already you’re bossing me around...”

Twilight cleared her throat. “Dear Princess Celestia, you’ll be happy to hear that I’m conscious once again, however, I request your advice on a manner most urgent. My friends and I have met with Midnight in our venture inside of the collective unconsciousness, and we bring back some disturbing news. It appears that the Elements of Harmony are going to kill us, and—”

“WHAT?!” Spike exclaimed, leaving a large streak of ink on the parchment due to his shock.

“You heard me, Spike.” Twilight said somberly. “Now finish the letter. The Elements of Harmony are going to kill us, and we are in need of your wisdom. Please get to Ponyville as quickly as possible. Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle.”

Spike quickly rolled up the parchment and sent it to Celestia before quickly turning back to face Twilight. “What do you mean you’re all going to die?!”

“We don’t know!” Rainbow Dash said, annoyed. “*Luna* here says she doesn’t know jack about it, and we didn’t get any info besides that!”

“Just calm down a bit, Dashie!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed. “It’ll be a bit before the Princess gets here, so there’s no point in being so grumpy-wumpy!”

“How can you be so cheerful knowing that we’re going to die!?” Rainbow Dash criticized. “This is *not* the time for your randomness!”

Pinkie’s smile deflated a bit from the pegasus’s words. “I’m only trying to lighten the mood a little...”

"I think we can all agree that today's been very taxing for all of us," Rarity sighed. "Let's all just take it easy until Princess Celestia arrives." She turned to Twilight. "Come to think of it, we haven't congratulated you on your recovery yet! It's good to see that you're up and running, darling!"

"Thanks," Twilight said tiredly. A strained silence fell upon the library, causing the tension between them to rise.

"Maybe I can sing a song for everypony...?" Pinkie offered.

Rainbow Dash raised a hoof to lash out at the pink pony, but caught herself at the last moment. "... I don't think we're really in the mood for a song right now."

"O-okay then... just thought I'd offer is all..." Pinkie Pie shrunk back, the gloomy atmosphere of the library beginning to get to her.

"Ugh, I can't handle all this pressure!" Spike exclaimed. "I'm going out to get some fresh air. Hopefully when I get back Princess Celestia's told you all what to do." Spike marched out of the library, leaving the ponies to sit in wait for the Princess's arrival.

Knock knock. After a few minutes, the rap on the door broke the silence that settled itself over the ponies. Twilight quickly magicked open the door, allowing whoever knocked to come inside.

Princess Celestia quickly stepped into the library and shut the door behind her. "I came as quickly as I could when I received your letter, Twilight. Is everything okay?"

"Are you seriously asking that?" Rainbow Dash questioned. "We're going to *die*! How can everything be okay knowing that?!"

Celestia sighed. "I knew you'd react like that if I told you this would happen..."

"So you did know about this?" Luna piped up. "And... and you didn't tell me about it?"

"Luna..." Celestia shook her head. "If I told you then you wouldn't be able to restrain yourself..."

Luna winced. She knew the reason was something like that already, but it still hurt hearing it straight from her sister's mouth. "If... if you say so Celly."

“Princess Celestia...?” Twilight interrupted. “Do you mind telling me what this is all about?”

Celestia responded with a bow of her head and took a deep breath before answering. “It’s as Midnight said to you, the Elements of Harmony will lead to your deaths.”

“I thought the Elements were supposed to protect ponies...” Fluttershy mumbled.

“That’s why they were created, but...” Celestia sighed. “It’s all too hard to explain the Elements. To be completely honest with you all, I don’t even know how the Elements of Harmony came about.”

“What?” Rainbow Dash questioned. “Aren’t you supposed to be like a goddess Princess or something? You’re supposed to know everything about Equestria!”

“... I really hoped I didn’t have to talk to you all about this so soon.” Celestia said quietly. “But it can’t be helped anymore.” She slowly gazed into each of the six ponies’ eyes, as if she were looking deep inside of them.

“My sister and I are going to die.”

The six ponies stood in silence, not entirely sure of what they just heard. Luna timidly trotted up to stand next to her sister, trying to hide her eyes behind her mane.

“You’re... you’re both going to die?” Twilight finally said, her voice cracking.

Celestia responded with a single nod. “To be more accurate... I’m going to die first, and then Luna will die around the end of your lifespans.”

“B-but, you’re both immortal!” Twilight objected. “You can’t die! You’re supposed to live forever!!”

Celestia took another deep breath. “One thousand years is a long time to live, Twilight.” She turned to the other five ponies. “Do you all remember what I explained to you all last time we spoke? How aging comes as a result of the loss of energy?” Celestia gazed outside of the window, her eyes reflecting the bright glow of the sun. “The magic required to manipulate celestial bodies is incredibly powerful. If any normal unicorn attempted the spell, they would die instantly as they lack even a fraction of the magical

energy necessary to budge the sun or moon. So for somepony who has had to govern the sun and moon for one-thousand years..."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Twilight cried out. "You don't look at all like somepony who's about to die of old age!"

Celestia chuckled. "That's very kind of you, Twilight. But appearances can be deceiving." Celestia's smile wore away as she continued speaking. "I'm sure you've all seen it in the past by now... Luna and I used to be nothing but regular earth ponies. More magical ability than other ponies, yes, but still regular ponies. Haven't you ever wondered why we were earth ponies then and alicorns now?"

"Isn't it because of the Day of Ascension?" Rarity offered.

"The Day of Ascension..." Celestia let out a bitter laugh. "It was such a joke, what they told us. They said we were to bring happiness to everypony, but..." she shook her head. "No, that's not something I should be telling you."

"Why do you still need to hide things from us?" Rainbow Dash asked, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"Luna will live on for many decades after I pass away," Celestia responded. "You see, the reason why I wanted you all to take this journey into the past... was so you could make a choice. The choice to forgive Luna for her transgressions."

"What?" the six ponies said simultaneously.

"I can feel it," Luna mumbled. "Because I was Nightmare Moon... I'm more, um, in-tune with the negative emotions ponies have. And even if I wasn't... I can see how you all don't trust me."

"That's not true!" Twilight Sparkle objected.

Luna gave a sad smile. "Even if you're not consciously aware of it, the small seeds of doubt sewn from when I was Nightmare Moon still lie within each of you."

"Luna will be in charge of Equestria when I'm gone," Celestia stated. "And if at all possible, I want the six of you to advise her and be there for her in the years before she passes away too. But in order to do this, you must have complete trust in her, trust that can only come from absolute forgiveness."

“That’s why I wanted you all to take this journey into the past,” Celestia continued. “I wanted you all to get a feel of who Luna really is... and what drove her to become Nightmare Moon.” She looked upon her younger sister with a poignant look in her eye. “And then you’ll realize how Nightmare Moon is a creature to be pitied, not hated.”

“What about the Elements of Harmony?” Rainbow Dash pointed out. “You still haven’t gotten to why it’ll kill all of us!”

“Young Rainbow Dash,” Celestia commented, “Always so impatient.” The pegasus grimaced at being called impatient, but kept herself in check.

The white alicorn continued speaking. “It all comes down to what I said about energy. The Elements of Harmony are incredibly powerful... so powerful that a normal pony’s body would be unable to handle the strain.” Celestia surveyed the six ponies in front of her. “I honestly don’t know how many years of your lives housing the Elements have shaved off, but the last time I spoke with Midnight, she told me that it was best for you to remove them as quickly as possible. Which is another reason for you to Dive into the past aside from learning more about Luna...”

“I do so hope you don’t mind me asking,” Rarity interrupted, “But couldn’t you just remove the Elements yourself?”

Celestia shook her head. “The Elements of Harmony are beyond my power. I had no hand in their creation. If I attempted to remove them from your bodies... my lack of knowledge about them might result in a horrible outcome.”

“Midnight knows everything about the Elements,” Luna cut in. “She and her friends, they created them when Celestia and I were... incapacitated.”

“I didn’t really want to tell you this because it would seem like I was giving you no choice,” Celestia admitted. “The only way for you to cast off the Elements of Harmony is to learn more about them from their creators. But if you choose not to Dive into the past... it’s not like the Elements would cause a painful death. It would be a peaceful, quiet passing, just like falling asleep.”

Celestia sighed. “I don’t want to force a choice on you all... but...”

“We’re going.” Twilight said softly. “I’m sure I’m speaking for all of us when I say that we want to live. Isn’t that right, girls?”

"It's not like we have much of a choice," Rainbow Dash shrugged. The other ponies nodded in agreement with the pegasus.

"Besides," Twilight said, a hint of ice to her voice. "I'm sorry, Princess, but I still have this feeling that you're hiding something else from us. Something... important."

Celestia kept her expression still. "Is that so, Twilight? Well then... I'm sorry you feel that way."

"The Truth," Twilight stated coldly. "Midnight said something about a Truth, and I'm thinking it's not something to be taken lightly. It's fine if you don't want to talk to me about it, but..." Twilight looked Celestia firmly in the eye. "I want to know what it is."

Celestia kept her lips pursed. "Very well then. I'm assuming that you'll stick with it until the end?"

"There's no reason to stop anymore," Twilight answered. "We can only keep moving forward now that we're on this path."

The two alicorns winced at Twilight's words. "... is that so?" Celestia asked.

Twilight nodded before turning to her friends. "Ready girls? No matter what we might experience in the past... we're going to see it through until the end." Each of the ponies gave a single nod in agreement.

"Alright then." Twilight opened up the spell book, scanning over the pages that recorded their journey thus far. "Here we go..." The unicorn began to concentrate, feeling the magic within her connect to each of her five friends. Their combined energies draped their consciousnesses, their souls beginning to change form to travel back into the collective unconsciousness.

Twilight Sparkle finished off the spell by reading a single phrase. "*Quid sit futurum cras, fuge quaerere. Non omnis moriar.*"

The six ponies' bodies slumped to the ground, a sign that their souls have traveled to the space between third and fourth. Seeing that they were now gone, Celestia let out a melancholy sigh.

"What is it, Celly?" Luna asked timidly.

“There’s no reason to stop anymore,” Celestia said, repeating Twilight’s words. “We can only keep moving forward now that we’re on this path.” Her eyes met with Luna’s, conveying a deep sadness that only the two of them could understand.

Luna broke the gaze, unable to handle the pressure her sister was putting it on her. “I know...

“Midnight said those exact same words.”

Session 19

I was floating. Floating in a vast darkness that I could hardly comprehend. There was nothing but myself in this space, yet myself was so much more than that. I maintained my sense of individuality, but that individual self was composed of countless other personae, almost as if I was not myself, but a collective.

“That’s just how it is here, don’t you think?”

The darkness dispersed to reveal a strangely ethereal room. There were no doors to be seen, only large panes of stained glass on every side depicting strange symbols and shapes that gave off a sense of familiarity, despite the fact that these murals could not be labeled or identified. A ghostly light shone through the stained glass, casting a dreamlike haze over the area.

A marble pillar stood as the centerpiece of the room, two elegant looking chairs on opposite sides. A chessboard was placed on top of the pillar, showing a game that looked half-finished. Yet for some reason... the game looked nothing like chess at all. I cautiously trotted towards it, trying to discern the rules of the game.

“It’s a witch’s gameboard. Isn’t it interesting?”

I whipped my head around to see another mare in the room. When did she get here? I wonder...

The mare wore what appeared to be a mage’s robe that cloaked her magenta colored body. Her indigo mane was held back with a star-shaped clip, yet was still long enough to hang straight down to the floor, almost obscuring the front of her body. The tip of her horn poked out of her mane, signifying her lineage as a unicorn.

She trotted right past me, eyeing the gameboard with a look of curiosity. “Such a masterfully constructed game... I feel sorry for whoever was trying to challenge this witch.”

“Witch...?” I croaked, feeling as if it was the first word I’d spoken in ages.

"It's not important," the mare responded. "This room is for a story far removed from yours. Although..." She looked down at the world upon the gameboard with a thoughtful gaze. "It wouldn't be that far of a stretch to say that these witches are on the same plane of existence as our Goddess."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, my confusion mounting with every passing second.

"Nothing but nonsense, my dear," the mare said with a smile. "Come now, the witch's game will be resuming soon. Let us go somewhere else to talk and leave those seagulls to cry."

The stained glass room warped before my eyes, transforming into a different scene entirely. The first thing I noticed were the roses. Beautiful golden roses that stretched as far as the eye could see, with red and blue roses interspersed within the landscape.

The second thing I noticed was the sky. It was a myriad of dark colors, almost as if it was straight from the scene of an abstract painting. Blues blended into blacks which blended into purples, all melding together into a dreamlike sight. Two orbs of light shone in the sky, piercing through the dark sky with an otherworldly glow.

"The Golden Land certainly is wondrous," the mare commented, noticing my captivation. "I need to remember to thank Lambdadelphi for allowing me to stay here. Before you ask," she quickly added, noticing my incoming question, "Lambdadelphi isn't someone you really have to know or care about."

I replied with a frown. It felt like there were so many things in this place that were supposedly irrelevant to my life.

"It's because this entire place is irrelevant," the mare said, as if she were reading my thoughts. "The only thing here that matters is me and you. And the delicious black tea." She smiled, using her magic to conjure a kettle of tea from thin air. She poured the tea into a pair of sophisticated-looking cups, offering one of them to me. "Want a sip? I can get some biscuits if it's not enough for you."

I hesitated. I was pretty sure that unless I was a magnetic pony, I wouldn't be able to easily lift the cup with my hooves...

"Just levitate it with your magic, dear," the mare chuckled.

I frowned. "Uh... I can't really use magic..."

She smiled. "You went through your Awakening, didn't you? Then you should be able to use magic."

"Awakening...?" I paused. The memories suddenly came flooding back through my head. Cinnamon and Skyline, Gyren, Revy, Sundae... everything about what happened before I found myself in this bizarre universe.

"And now she remembers who she is." The mare took a sip of her tea, a twinkle in her eye. "How are you feeling, Midnight?"

"I feel like I died or something," Midnight muttered in response.

The mare chuckled. "Technically you'd be right. This space isn't exactly life as you knew it."

Midnight surveyed her surroundings once more. "You can say that again... this place is more beautiful than Canterlot's gardens..." She closed her eyes, trying to sort through her memories to figure out what happened. "There was this light... and then..."

"You've been floating around, waiting to come back to your body," her strange companion followed up. "I went through the same thing; not exactly the most pleasant sensation."

Midnight tilted her head as she looked at the mare, as if she just noticed her for the first time. "I've been meaning to ask this but... who exactly are you?"

"The question of the day," she joked. "It's no fun if I just tell you, so let's play a little guessing game, shall we?"

Midnight shrugged. Something told her that it would be easier just to play along with this pony.

"Alrighty!" the mare exclaimed excitedly, clopping her hooves together. "You get three hints. If you can guess who I am from those hints, then you win. If you can't, I win. Simple, no?"

"What happens if I lose?" Midnight asked.

"Nothing at all," she answered. "Unless you want to have some sort of punishment game to motivate you. Maybe I should have you parade in a maid outfit if you lose. That might entertain me for a bit."

"A maid outfit?" Midnight said incredulously. "Where would you get something like that anyways?"

"Magic can do interesting things," the mare winked. "I could go with putting you in a bondage saddle, but I think a maid outfit would be cuter."

Midnight grimaced. "No thanks."

"Maid outfit it is, then," she laughed. "Well then, your first hint is this: Based on what you know of me so far, who would you say I was?"

"Is that seriously one of your hints?" Midnight commented. The mare nodded gleefully in response. "Ugh..." the unicorn slapped her head in annoyance. "Based on how you look... are you a wizard?"

"Sort of, but that's not specific enough," she responded, a sly smile dancing around on her lips. "I may have my robe yet I lack the wizard hat. Two more hints before you become my cute little maid!"

"Are you a pervert?" Midnight offered before the second hint got out.

"Oh Midnight just *how* can you even suggest that?" the mare asked histrionically, pretending to be distraught. "Just because I think you'd look absolutely adorable in a maid outfit..." She gave an overblown sigh. "Well, I don't think this second hint would really improve your opinion of me. Hint number two is that I absolutely *adore* you, Midnight Star, and I want to *love* you with every *inch* of my being!"

Midnight jumped back in surprise, not believing what this mare was spouting off. "So you're a foalfiddler!?"

"Bzzt, wrong!" the mare sounded, sticking her tongue out at the unicorn. "Really? I can't give a younger pony my everlasting eternal love without being branded as a foalfiddler?"

"That's the exact definition of one!" Midnight protested, trying to put some distance in-between the two of them.

The mare pouted. "Aww, don't be like that Midnight! How about you come here for a hug and stop looking at me like I'm some kind of freak?"

"I... I'd like to keep my chastity, thankyouverymuch," Midnight responded.

The mare sighed. "If that's what you want. Honestly Midnight, I'm somewhat disappointed that you haven't figured out who I am yet. At this rate I really will have to put you in a maid outfit and parade you around like my servant..."

"Last hint, please!" Midnight said loudly, pretending that she didn't hear the last part of the mare's statement.

"Okay then, just know that if you make a wrong guess after this one you'll be serving me tea and doing whatever else it is maids do." The mare took a deep breath and closed her eyes. This simple gesture brought about a complete change in her expression; gone was the mirth and frivolity, replaced with a composed expression that brought about an air of solemnity around her.

"My final hint," she said calmly. "I believe that when we die, we become part of the heavens and watch over our loved ones in the form of a star."

The words struck a chord within Midnight. She fell back, shock spreading throughout her body. "Y-you... a-are you really...?"

The mare chuckled. "I'm thinking you have a decent idea as to who I am now." She trotted over towards the fallen unicorn and gently gave her an affectionate nuzzle. "You've grown into a fine young mare, Midnight..."

Midnight's entire body was shaking underneath the mare's warmth. Right here, right in front of her, was the pony she always wished she could have known. The pony who had been missing her entire life, taken away by the cold arms of death before she was even old enough to form a coherent thought.

In front of Midnight was her mother, Vega. The pony who held the brightest star in the Summer Triangle.

"M-mother... mother!!" Midnight leapt onto Vega, wrapping her hooves around the older unicorn in a tight hug.

Vega chuckled. "Suddenly so eager to get near me. I'm guessing you don't think I'm some kind of pervert anymore, do you?"

"I still do!" Midnight laughed, tears of joy sparkling in her eyes. "What kind of mother would want to parade her daughter around in a maid outfit?"

"The kind of mother who likes to have fun of course!" Vega defended.

"You have a weird definition of what 'fun' is then!" Midnight broke away from her mother, a large smile on her face. "I can't believe I'm talking to you... how is this even possible?"

"Well you died, didn't you?" Vega pointed out. "Maybe you've been reunited with your mother in the afterlife."

Midnight thought for a moment, eyeing her surroundings. "This place certainly does look like some kind of afterlife..."

"Enough wondering about *how* you're able to talk to me," Vega said, waving her hoof around. "Just be glad that we have the opportunity to talk." The older unicorn poured herself another cup of tea. "Come now, tell me about your life. I want to know everything about you, starting from your first memory."

Midnight smiled and began to tell her mother the story of her life. The fun days spent playing around with Luna and Celestia, the endless nights spent studying to be her sisters' advisor, the sheltered years spent in solitude within Canterlot's walls, and more recently the times spent with her new friends from Ponyville.

All throughout Midnight's story, Vega listened intently the only outward reaction being the slow nods of her head. When Midnight finished off her narration, Vega ruffled her daughter's mane.

"You are such a nerdmuffin, Midnight," Vega teased, her tongue sticking out. "I remember back when I was a filly I would always sneak out to go party, none of that boring studying stuff. Sheesh, that Gnosis guy must have a rod jammed up his flank or something."

Midnight blushed at her mother's crass analogy. "W-well he is my professor... besides, he's trying his best to prepare me for the Day of Ascension."

“‘Day of Ascension’ this, ‘Day of Ascension’ that,” Vega groaned. “Young mares like you should be out and about, living life and having fun! If I was still around—”

“If you were still around ponies might think I was loose or something,” Midnight interrupted.

Vega frowned. “Would you really think I’d let ponies see my daughter that way?”

“Well, you *did* want me in a maid outfit...” Midnight pointed out. “Not to mention that you probably *were* seriously considering putting me in a bondage saddle...”

“And?” Vega questioned. “I went around wearing those things all the time and nopony ever accused me of being loose!”

Midnight stood still for a second, not sure how to respond. “You know what... nevermind. I guess that’s just the type of pony you are.”

“I’ve also dressed up as a nursepony and a schoolfilly,” Vega added. “It was a lot of fun dressing up in all those different outfits.”

“... okay.” Midnight had gotten used to her mother’s... eccentricities. Sure, it completely went against the image of her mother being a wise and serious pony, but this was fine too. A pony can’t really pick her mother after all.

“You do know I’m joking about all that, right?” Vega suddenly said, noticing how monotone Midnight’s voice was. “I wouldn’t *actually* go out in public wearing those. It’s all just for private use. Well, not the schoolfilly outfit, that one’s really cute so I don’t mind wearing it in public. And it *is* pretty fun to tease those silly stallions at the bar...”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Midnight interrupted, not wanting to picture the situation.

“So you don’t want to hear my stories about when I was a filly?” Vega pouted. “A lot of them are really entertaining, most of them with a hilarious twist ending. Like the time I got a bit too tipsy and ended up with this mare...”

“Enough of that!” Midnight exclaimed, her face bright red.

“We were only playing a game of checkers!” Vega laughed. “What were *you* thinking about, Midnight?”

"Not checkers," the unicorn muttered.

Vega giggled at her daughter's blushing face, trying her best to keep herself from just bursting out in laughter. "You know what they say, Midnight. 'Dirty minds lead to dirty places' or some other tripe like that. It's better to be completely open with your thoughts about things like that rather than to just keep it all bottled up inside." She draped her hoof around Midnight's shoulder. "Come on Midnight, you can tell your dear mother anything that's on your mind..."

"This is getting really weird," Midnight muttered.

"Just a little," Vega smiled. "Besides, when I died I was only a few years older than you, so it's not like there's really an age disparity here."

"I'm going to forget that you ever just said that," Midnight sighed.

"You know you like me, Midnight~" Vega teased.

A slight smile escaped from the younger unicorn's lips. "Of course I love you, you're my mother... uwah!" Vega suddenly pushed her away, catching Midnight by surprise. "What was that for?!"

"Of course I love you, you're my mother," Vega parroted, the merriment suddenly gone from her voice. "Did I do anything deserving of your love just yet?"

Midnight frowned. "But didn't you just ask me if—"

"I asked you if you liked me," Vega interrupted with a soft voice. "I'm not so insensitive as to be completely oblivious of how you were feeling. You were restraining yourself from criticizing the way I lived my life."

Midnight guiltily shuffled her hooves around, knowing that Vega was right on the mark. "But... didn't you say earlier that you wanted to um... love me with every inch of your being or something like that?" she pointed out.

"It was a joke. I was in the moment." Vega sighed before continuing. "I know that a lot of what I was saying isn't something a mother would normally say to her daughter, but there's a reason I'm being so open. In the short time we have together, I want you to

know *me*. I don't want you thinking I was some pure pony who kept her head bowed down and studied all day, I want you to see me for who I truly am."

"A party pony who likes to fool around?" Midnight asked meekly.

Vega gave her daughter a sad smile. "Not really, just a pony who wanted to escape her fate for however long she was able to."

"Escape fate...?" Midnight tilted her head, confused. "I'm sorry, could you run that by me one more time?"

"The Summer Triangle Project."

Vega paused, letting her words hang in the air for a moment. "Did you know that Vega's actually not my real name?"

Midnight stood still for a moment, not entirely sure what she was hearing. "What're you...?"

"The name my parents gave me was Lilac Dust," Vega said quietly. "As a filly, I liked to play around with different names. Lilac was too girly of a name for me, and Dust was too... uh, not girly. Although looking back on it, Lilac was probably the perfect name for a pony like me." Vega smiled at her recollections. "I was a normal enough pony, a little eccentric at times with my whole name changing thing, but normal enough. I went to school, procrastinated on my homework, played around with my friends... those types of mundane everyday things.

"And then the Collection happened." Vega paused, a dark look coming over her expression. "I lived in Coltsdale, so every year a Collection was held to fulfill the Quota. Our family always hid away in the cellar to avoid it; me, my parents, and my older brother. Of course, we couldn't hide away forever."

Vega closed her eyes, the events of her past playing out in her head. "I was still in elementary school when it happened... those wolves took us from our hiding place and dragged us to the town square, along with a couple other families. The wolves didn't herd all the ponies in the city into a single place like they did in Ponyville. No, the only families who were brought there were the ones who were to fulfill the Quota.

"I remember how frightened I was. I wanted somepony, anypony to help me. But of course, nopony came to save us. Everypony in the city avoided the town square

whenever a Collection took place, not wanting to become an addition to the Quota.” Vega’s quiet voice began to shake. “Somepony in the square made the foolish decision to try and escape. The wolves didn’t take to kindly to that. They quickly captured and restrained him, holding him at the center of the square. I remember the desperation in that pony’s eyes as those wolves slowly made an example of him, hacking and chopping his pitiful body into tiny pieces, saying how they’d enjoy his corpse for dinner later that night. I wanted to vomit. All those little pieces of flesh strewn about the ground, soaking in puddles of blood... I couldn’t stand the sight of it.

“So I prayed. I prayed to the Goddess, pleading for her protection, begging not to be taken away.” Vega laughed bitterly. “It was a foolish prayer, by praying for myself not to be taken away, that meant that I’d be condemning somepony else in my family to die. But I was overcome by fear, at the time unable to even comprehend what I was praying for. As a filly who hasn’t even given the chance to explore questions of morality, of course self-preservation was at the front of my mind.

“My parents didn’t have that excuse.” Vega clenched her hoof, her body shaking in anger. “They wanted to sacrifice me and my brother in order to save their own sorry flanks.”

An eerie silence fell over the gardens, the only sound being the howling of the wind through the roses. For some reason, it felt like the world grew darker as Vega told her story, the two stars in the sky losing their brilliance.

Midnight spoke up to try to break this unbearable silence. “I-I’m sorry...”

“You should’ve seen them, the cowards,” Vega spat, continuing her tale. “Hiding behind their children, telling the wolves to spare them and take us instead. It was disgusting, even the wolves weren’t used to seeing this level of depravity.” Glints of tears began forming within Vega’s eyes. “My heart broke that day. Everything that I was built up to believe, that my parents loved me unconditionally, that family was something that could never be broken apart, gone in a single instant. You should’ve seen how furious my brother was, he was about ready to kill our parents himself. And I could do nothing but cry. Cry my little filly heart out, just waiting for the wolves to tear me limb from limb.

“Ironically enough, because of my parents’ cowardice, the wolves decided to spare the two of us.” Vega laughed bitterly, hints of hysteria creeping into her voice. “Imagine that! The wolves we were raised to believe were heartless took pity on us, while the parents we were raised to believe would love us decided to cast us away! The looks on my

parents' faces as they were dragged to the wolves' caravans, how they were begging for the wolves to take us and not them! It was pathetic! Absolutely pathetic!!"

Midnight took a few steps back, frightened by Vega's cries. Upon the young unicorn's action, the madness disappeared from Vega's eyes, her voice going back to level tones. "I... I lost myself a bit there. I apologize. Anyways, the wolves took my mother and father for the Quota and the Collection was over. Nothing more to be said about that event."

Vega paused for a moment, allowing her daughter the time to take everything in. "Anyways, my point is... don't love me when I haven't given you a reason to," Vega said quietly. "Looking back, my parents never gave me a reason to either. They were always preoccupied with their own lives, barely paying any attention to their foals. I was too young to even realize it, to realize that it was my brother who took care of me. My mother and father did nothing to deserve my love, yet I loved them anyways because that's what us foals were raised to believe."

Vega looked Midnight straight in the eye. "Don't be blind, my daughter," she advised. "You should never give your love to somepony just because you feel obligated to."

"But... you're family," Midnight mumbled. "Isn't that enough of a reason to love you?"

"Don't get me wrong, by all means a pony should love her family. But... family..." Vega paused, trying to find the right words to say. "Family doesn't necessarily have to be the ponies who gave birth to you. If that were the case, then I'd have to shower my love onto those cowards that left me and my brother for dead. Family... to me, family is the ponies who are willing to do anything for you, and you would be willing to do anything for them in return." The tone of her voice dropped down to a whisper. "Just like my brother..."

Vega shook her head to clear her thoughts. "The point I'm trying to make is that I don't feel like I have the right to be considered your mother. I died before I could make any sort of impact on your life."

"But you did," Midnight offered. "I've always been told stories about you, stories about how talented and wise you were."

Vega smiled. "I'm afraid that was only during the last few years of my life, after I came to terms with my fate. Before that I was nothing but a troublemaker, which was why I have so many interesting stories to tell about my time as a filly."

"Your fate?" Midnight inquired.

"I never did explain it to you just yet, have I?" Vega chuckled. "The Summer Triangle Project." She took a moment to collect her thoughts. "I suppose I should start with how I got roped up into it. After the Collection, my brother and I were stuck in an orphanage. The conditions there were horrible, and we wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. Sadly, adoption was never really popular in those days, and it seemed like we'd be stuck in that orphanage forever.

"Then one day, this crabby old unicorn came to visit. He said he was from Canterlot, looking to adopt some ponies. You can imagine the orphanage's reaction at this; nopony ever expected to be adopted. We all lined up for the unicorn to choose from us, and after examining us thoroughly, he took me and my brother, along with four other ponies.

"When we arrived at Canterlot, we didn't know what to expect. After all, what did a crabby old unicorn want with a bunch of foals? I was even more surprised when we found out that he lived in the castle, where he stuck us all in the dormitories. For a few weeks we just lounged around the castle, exploring every inch of the place without getting caught. There's a funny story on how we met Themis and Ambrosia, but that's not really important.

"And then that crabby old unicorn called the two of us to join him for a walk. It was actually the first time we've seen him since the day he adopted us, so we had no idea what he wanted us for. He took us into the secret chamber behind the cathedral... I'm assuming you're familiar with it, considering your position?"

Midnight grimaced. "Y-yeah, kind of..."

Vega frowned at Midnight's tone, but ignored it and continued regardless. "Anyways, inside the secret chamber, he told us about this secret project he was working on... a project that would end the suffering that the Quota brought upon us."

"The Day of Ascension?" Midnight frowned. "How is that a secret project? Everypony knows about it through the sermons we hear at church..."

"At the time, the Day of Ascension hadn't evolved into what it is today," Vega said quietly. "In fact, most ponies didn't even know about it. There were just rumors that the Royal Family had some kind of plan that would deliver everypony to salvation. It was

only during your generation that the news of the Ascension became widespread. But I digress. As I was saying, the crabby old unicorn told us the details about the Day of Ascension, and what he needed from the two of us for it to succeed.”

“Doesn’t this ‘crabby old unicorn’ have a name?” Midnight asked.

“Of course he does!” Vega exclaimed. “I just didn’t pay attention when he introduced himself, nor did I have the courage to ask and let him know I wasn’t listening!”

“... why am I not surprised?” Midnight groaned.

“Moving on,” Vega continued, “he asked us to participate in a little test to see if we would be suitable candidates for the Day of Ascension. He gave this test to all the other ponies who were adopted alongside us, but he sent them all home because they failed. My brother and I didn’t really have much of a choice other than to go along with the crabby old unicorn’s tests; if we refused then we’d be sent back to the orphanage, and we’d grown quite accustomed to life in the palace.”

Vega’s words suddenly came to a halt. Midnight stayed silent for a few moments, waiting for Vega to continue, but the older unicorn sat still. “Umm,” Midnight said, breaking the silence, “what happened with the test?”

“I don’t remember,” Vega admitted.

“... what?” Midnight tilted her head. “How can you not remember? You remembered everything else up until then clearly enough.”

Vega shrugged. “Well... that crabby old unicorn gave the two of us crystals, and after that... nothing.”

“Nothing?” Midnight repeated.

“Nothing,” Vega shrugged a second time. “I think we fell asleep after he gave us those crystals, but when we woke up that crabby old unicorn smiled and told us we passed the test. I don’t remember doing anything to pass that test, but apparently managed to do it...” Vega shook her head. “Whatever, it’s probably not important. I kept asking that crabby old unicorn what the test was, but he’d just smile and tell us that we shouldn’t worry about it.”

“So when does your so-called ‘fate’ come into play?” Midnight asked, trying to speed up the conversation.

“On that very same day.” A sad smile crept up upon Vega’s face. “From that moment on, my brother and I were Catalysts.”

Midnight felt like the wind got knocked out of her. “C-Catalysts...?”

Vega nodded. “I presume you’re familiar with what they are, right?”

“Y-yeah...” Midnight grimaced. “Catalysts are the key to the Day of Ascension’s success, alongside Celestia and Luna... but Gnosis said that there were no Catalysts at hand...”

“Oh?” Vega raised an eyebrow. “What are those two ponies doing...?” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Midnight inquired.

Vega sighed. “I’m sure that you can figure out how the rest of this goes. Eventually the crabby old unicorn found a third pony to join our trio of Catalysts, completing the Summer Triangle Project. With our new identities as Catalysts we were given new names. Deneb, Altair, and finally me, Vega.”

A deep rumbling noise reverberated through the gardens, throwing the two ponies off balance.

“W-what was that?” Midnight timidly asked, a sense of weakness suddenly washing over her.

Vega gave her daughter a sad look. “It appears that our time together is almost up.”

“W-what do you mean by that?!” Midnight exclaimed.

“It’s about time for you to wake,” Vega smiled. “You don’t belong in the world of the dead, after all.”

“But we haven’t finished talking yet!” Midnight shouted.

"No, we haven't," Vega agreed. "There's a lot more I want to say to you... but there's not enough time to say it all." She closed her eyes, listening to the vibrations of the air grow in frequency, signifying the amount of time Midnight had left before she departed.

"Listen, Midnight," Vega suddenly said. "You being here means that you've gone through your Awakening, right?"

"My—what?"

Vega shook her head, sighing. "I'm sure you'll have it all explained to you once you regain consciousness back in the land of the living. But as your mother, I feel compelled to give you this advice:

"When you wake up, you'll find that everything you are has changed," Vega said hurriedly. "Your body will be different, your abilities will be different, and your entire perception of the world will be different."

"W-what are you talking about?" Midnight stuttered, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information Vega was suddenly pouring upon her.

Vega smiled. "The moment I came to terms with my fate as a Catalyst was the moment of my Awakening." She ruffled Midnight's mane with a single hoof. "And now... you may have an entirely different fate set out for you upon your return."

Midnight could feel her grip on this world weakening as the vibrations in the air grew stronger. "... I don't understand!" Midnight cried.

Vega gave her a kiss before making it clear. "Midnight Star, the daughter of two of the Summer Triangle... yet another reason why I don't deserve to be called your mother."

Everything was still. The sound of the vibrations disappeared from the air, the steady motions of the roses frozen, even the scent the permeated the air was gone.

All of a sudden, there was nothing. Nothing but the two ponies and a single voice.

"Your Awakening means you'll be just like me, Midnight," Vega said sadly. "A Type-I Catalyst."

Session 20

The whiteness of the void engulfed Twilight Sparkle and her friends once more. The now familiar hazy mist clouded their vision, obscuring the boundaries of the collective unconsciousness, as well as their vision of each other. They went through this procedure every time they Dived into the world of their ancestors, into the simulation that allowed them to experience the events of the past. In another few moments, their consciousnesses would settle into the bodies of their ancestors, and once again they would sit back and watch everything unfold before them.

The Summer Triangle Project.

Twilight grimaced, a sudden voice echoing inside her mind. Her odd motion snapped everypony's attention to her before they were given the chance to settle in. "Is everythin' alright, Twi?" Applejack asked the unicorn.

The voice went away, making Twilight wonder if she actually heard the voice in the first place. "Eh, um, I'm fine Applejack," Twilight responded, waving away the issue.

Applejack frowned. "If ya say so sugarcube..."

The name my parents gave me was Lilac Dust.

"Ergh..." Twilight's vision became wobbly, strange colors blending into the normally stagnant void. She could smell something... flowers maybe? She wasn't as familiar with floral scents as Fluttershy was, but if she had to guess... roses?

"You sure you're feeling alright, Twilight?" Pinkie Pie questioned. "You look pretty wobbly woozily right now."

Two figures were flickering in and out of existence before Twilight's eyes. It seemed to her like there was a whole other world trying to integrate itself into the white void, yet it could only exist in brief flashes.

"I... um... I'm not really sure," Twilight muttered, trying to make sense of the sight before her. "Do any of you girls see that?" she asked, pointing towards the images.

“S-see what, Twilight...?” Fluttershy mumbled curiously, looking in the direction the unicorn was pointing in.

For some reason, none of the other ponies were able to see the sporadic images, nor could they hear the voices.

Twilight frowned. “There’s something over there, like... a garden or something.” She squinted her eyes, hoping that the image would become clearer. “Two ponies are talking about something, but I can only hear bits and pieces of it.”

“Perhaps we should have taken a brief respite before suddenly charging back into the past, darling,” Rarity said with a concerned voice. “If you’re seeing things the rest of us can’t then you *can’t possibly* be in tip-top shape!”

“I’m fine! Don’t worry so much!” Twilight exclaimed, trying to shrug off Rarity’s concerns. “Besides... a lot needs to get done, I don’t have the time to rest.”

“U-um... a-actually we have plenty of time to d-do this...” Fluttershy shyly interjected. “Um, i-it’s not like we or the princesses will... um... d-die tomorrow.”

Twilight grimaced from being reminded of all their fates. “It’s just... it’s just something that I want to get over with as quickly as possible.” The images continued to flicker before her, showing the two ponies in deep conversation. “Besides... I really just wanted to get away from Princess Celestia for a bit.”

“Get away from the princess?” Pinkie questioned incredulously. “That’s not like you, Twilight! Normally you’d be leaping forward for an opportunity to spend time with Princess Celestia!”

Twilight shot Pinkie a weak smile. “Yeah... but these aren’t exactly normal circumstances.” She eyed the distortion, her attention split between the two ponies and her friends. “The whole thing about the Elements of Harmony affecting our lifespans... I can deal with that. All we have to do to fix that is to keep Diving into our ancestors’ memories. But for Princess Celestia to blatantly lie to us... to me...”

“Pardon me, sugarcube,” Applejack cut in, “but ya seemed ta be fine with the princess leadin’ ya on that li’l goose chase durin’ that whole Nightmare Moon fiasco. From what ah can tell she’s tryin’ ta pull the same kinda thing on us now.”

Twilight shook her head. "You don't get it, Applejack. This time it's... different."

"How's it any different from what she did during the Nightmare Moon incident?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Tell me if I'm wrong, but don't you get all your books from Celestia?"

Twilight gave a quick nod to confirm the pegasus's statement. "She just delivered that book to you without any note or letter, expecting you to go through your ancestor's memories—just like how she sent you to Ponyville without any instructions other than to make some friends!"

"It's still different!" Twilight exclaimed, startling her companions. "Look... when I asked Princess Celestia if she was hiding anything important from us, she just denied that she knew anything about it!" She stomped her hoof on the ground, venting her frustration alongside her words.

"Settle down, darling!" Rarity yelled. "First off, how do you even know she's lying to you? Perhaps she really *did* tell us everything she knew. After all, there really is no point in withholding information from us."

"You didn't see her eyes," Twilight muttered. "I could just tell that she was hiding something... something about the Truth..."

When you wake up, you'll find that everything you are has changed.

"If she's hiding something, then let's just hurry up and figure out what it is!" Rainbow Dash shouted, her voice overpowering the ones in Twilight's head. "I don't wanna waste any more time lounging around worrying about this stuff; let's just get it over with already!"

The images Twilight saw began to disperse before her eyes. It seemed that whatever weird vision she was experiencing, it was now over. "You're right, Rainbow Dash," Twilight sighed, trying to shake her vexation about Celestia away. "The sooner we get into it, the sooner we can find a way to save ourselves."

"A-and don't forget about Luna..." Fluttershy mumbled. "We need to learn more about her too..."

"Forget Luna for now," the cyan pegasus responded. "Let's just concentrate on staying alive for now. Whatever's up with her can wait for later."

Fluttershy shrunk back at Dash's quick rejection of Luna. The rainbow-maned pony turned her back on the others and let the white mist wash over her, bringing her back into the world of the past.

"Don't mind Dash, sugarcube," Applejack said reassuringly. "She just hasn't warmed up to Luna yet." The yellow pegasus responded with silence. Applejack sighed. "And neither has the rest o' us..." she trotted into the void, leaving the others behind.

"Chin up, Fluttershy," Rarity comforted. "Neither of those two have any tact. Honestly, leaving a fragile girl like you with only a few words of comfort. They are so unladylike." She gave Fluttershy an encouraging nuzzle. "Come on, darling; let's go get to know Princess Luna a bit better." Fluttershy nodded to her best friend, the two of them allowing themselves to be swallowed up into the past.

"See you two on the other side," Twilight waved. She gave one long look to the place where she saw the vision of the garden. "Catalysts..." she whispered to herself. "What in the world is a Catalyst?" The unicorn shook her head and followed her friends, resuming her journey in search of the secrets that were locked away in the past.

--

Skeech. Ktch kch skeeeeech.

An annoying scratching sound could be heard, stirring Midnight from her slumber. The unicorn groggily shut her eyes tighter; trying to ignore whatever it was that was making that noise. She was having such an interesting dream, like she was talking to her mother or something...

Ktch. Ktch. Skeeeech.

Would you please just stop doing that? Midnight thought to herself, clenching her teeth. *Somepony is trying to sleep!*

"Ah! She moved," a voice spoke, presumably the source of the noise. "That's no good, now this thing's a whole millimeter off..."

The sound of ripping paper echoed through the room, followed by a defeated sigh. Midnight smirked, maybe now that noise would be gone and she could go back to sleep.

“That’s really rude, you know that?” the voice reprimanded, much to Midnight’s displeasure. “If you’re going to pretend to be asleep then you should at least have the decency to pretend to be still.”

Midnight opened her eyes and leapt up off of her bed. “What the heck does that even—ah!” The unicorn’s annoyance suddenly went away as she perceived the world in front of her. On the surface, it appeared to be nothing more than an old stone chamber. The walls were made out of rocks, the atmosphere was clammy, and the only sources of light were the torches that were positioned on the sides.

However, there was something extremely... off about it all. Midnight thought she could feel motion in the rocks, as if they were alive. She could taste a quality to the air that was never there before, and the colors of the flames were more vibrant. The unicorn stood there for a couple moments trying to process all these small differences, her senses transfixed upon the world around her.

Ktch ktch skech.

Midnight’s attention was suddenly brought back to the pony making the scratching noises. A white robed unicorn stood in front of her, a pencil in his mouth and a sheet of parchment on top of a stand in front of him. Their eyes met for a moment before the other unicorn put the pencil down with a frown on his face.

“I thought you were going to stare at the wall for a couple more hours,” the pony commented. “It’d be the normal thing to do anyways.”

“Normal—who are you anyways?!” Midnight questioned.

“I’m a clergypony. Named Lycoris. We haven’t met.” He picked the pencil back up. “If you’d be so kind as to not move for a couple more hours, that’d be really great. I’d like to finish my sketch.”

“Sketch?” Midnight tilted her head, trying to get a look at Lycoris’s parchment. On it was an incredibly detailed portrait of her sleeping self. For a moment, she couldn’t help but be impressed by his skill.

“A model is supposed to stay still,” Lycoris mumbled, taking a step away from Midnight. “How am I supposed to finish this if you’re always moving every which way?”

"That looked pretty finished to me," Midnight told him. "What else could you add onto it?"

"Your Destiny Mark obviously," Lycoris stated.

"My *what?!?*" Midnight leapt back in surprise, jerking her head to look at her flank. To her amazement, there were three six-pointed stars were arranged there in a triangular formation. "What the—why the heck do I have one of these?!"

"Because you do," Lycoris replied. "It's not really that big of a deal. Now if you would please sit still for a moment..."

"Not that big of a deal? *Not that big of a deal?!*"

Lycoris frowned. "You're really distraught over this for some reason. I heard it's not really good for mares to be so stressed out. Makes them less pretty. Or something."

"Only the princesses are supposed to have these!" Midnight shouted. "If I have one of them than that would mean—"

"Yes, you can use magic now. No, nothing else is really different." Lycoris paused.

"Wait, I guess the world would be different for you. But you get used to it. Eventually."

He paused again. "I like your Destiny Mark by the way. Much nicer looking than mine."

He paused for a third time. "Are you in shock right now? Good, stay like that for a couple of hours so I can finish drawing."

"Wait a moment, *you* have a Destiny mark too?!" Midnight interrogated.

"Yeah, it's a flower," the stallion responded, "a red spider lily to be exact. I don't really like it since it's a really busy design compared to your much simpler one, but hey, it's not really something I have much of a choice in."

"Just who are you anyways?" Midnight asked suspiciously.

"Didn't I tell you already? I'm just a clergypony." Lycoris looked Midnight straight in the eye. "A clergypony with a similar existence to yours."

"I... I don't really get it."

"You don't have to." Lycoris sighed and with a glow of his horn, he magically rolled up his parchment and placed it within his saddlebag. "I suppose since you're awake now I can't really keep you here and have my way with you. And by that I mean draw you." He magicked open the door and gestured towards the mare. "I'm sure the others will wake up soon anyways, it'd be rude to let them be alone when they do."

Midnight took a few tentative steps outside of the room, Lycoris quietly shutting the door behind them. "We're under the cathedral, aren't we..." she observed.

"Mhm," Lycoris nodded. "Come on, let's go. I'll try to answer any questions you have while we trot."

The two ponies navigated the underground passage with Lycoris in the lead, taking Midnight through the twists and turns of the area.

"I've never knew this place extended so far below ground," Midnight muttered to herself.

Lycoris shrugged. "Decades of slave labor does wonders for the architecture. Either that or giant sandworms. There aren't really any books on how this place was built so I can't say for sure."

Midnight sighed. She really couldn't keep up with this pony's pace; it was just like somepony she met in a dream...

A sudden thought struck her as the two of them took a turn. "Wait a moment, when did I get back in Canterlot?" she asked.

"Phew, it's about time you asked that," Lycoris replied. "I thought the order of events would be you waking up, questioning the world around you, wondering who I am, asking that question, and *then* me taking you to the others. It's good to see I was only slightly off."

"Just answer the question," Midnight said sternly.

Lycoris pursed his lips in thought. "Mmm, you exploded back in Gyren. And then you exploded again in the infirmary. So the short version is that you exploded. Twice."

Midnight was about to explode for a third time, but Lycoris quickly cut her off before she could yell at him. "And the long version is that you went through a near death experience in Gyren and that caused you to go through your Awakening which is the

thing Princess Luna and Princess Celestia went through so you were in a coma for a while until your friends delivered you a pendant which for some reason exploded in the infirmary and stab your friends in the eyes or something so we had to place you all down here so we can gather information on what just happened.”

He paused to take a deep breath. “What a run-on sentence that was. Did you get all that?”

The mare stood still for a moment, still processing Lycoris’s infodump. “Uh, sort of.” She decided that his overview would be enough, no need to go into explicit detail. “So my friends are here too? All of them?”

“Apple Cinnamon, Lily Blossom, Skyline Blossom, Pastel Lollipop, and Amethyst I-don’t-know-her-last-name,” Lycoris listed. “Seriously, her writing is so curvy I can hardly make out what it says on her papers. But that aside, yeah they’re all here. Who else did you think those others would be?”

“The Princesses actually,” Midnight answered. “I thought they’d all still be in Ponyville once Skyline and Cinnamon rescued Sundae... speaking of which, is she okay?”

“Apple Sundae’s fine,” Lycoris answered. “She’s here in Canterlot too; Jeeves is watching her. Don’t worry, everypony made it out of Gyren just fine.”

Midnight let out a sigh. “That’s a relief. So my next question... what was that pendant they delivered to me?”

Lycoris shrugged. “Don’t ask me, ask them. I don’t know anything about it.” The two of them took another turn and began to descend down a flight of stairs. “Hold off on your other questions for now, we’re just about there.”

The stallion pushed open a large door, which surprisingly enough, only led to another long corridor. However, there was something immediately wrong with the place. On the sides were rooms sectioned off from the hallway by metal grates. Each of the rooms were barely furnished, having only a single bed and a bucket. Pairs of chains and shackles were pinned to the walls of each room, giving off an ominous air to the whole place.

Midnight took a frightened step back. “I-isn’t this...”

“The dungeons?” Lycoris finished with a quiet voice. “I’m afraid it is.”

"Why are my friends in here?!" Midnight exclaimed. "This place is only for the worst of criminals!"

"I'd like to say that they're only here because we ran out of beds," Lycoris said softly.

Midnight waited a few moments for the stallion to continue. "Is that all you're going to tell me?" she questioned impatiently.

Lycoris shrugged. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Ugh, fine, whatever," the mare fumed. "Just take me to my friends so I can get them out of this place. There's no reason for them to be in here."

The two of them trotted through the dungeon to where the other ponies were. Most of the cells were thankfully empty but curiously enough, one or two of them contained a dead or dying wolf inside. "... how did they even get in there?" Midnight muttered.

"Don't think about it too much," Lycoris responded. "I've learned not to question how some of these prisoners get here." He gestured towards a wooden door at the end of the hallway. "They're in there. Let me unlock the door." He took a key out of his saddlebag and removed the lock, opening the door.

The five ponies were fast asleep atop of separate beds, visible from the light of the torches on the walls. Midnight let out a sigh of relief as she examined them, the soft sound of the door closing shut behind her. Despite their surroundings, they looked to be in good health. Their breathing was normal, there weren't any apparent injuries on them, and on their flanks...

"Wait a minute." Midnight felt her heart stop for a moment. She moved closer towards the sleeping ponies, trying to confirm what her eyes saw from a distance. "Those can't be... are those...?"

Pastel suddenly stirred, causing the unicorn to jump back in surprise. One by one, the other ponies began to awaken from their slumbers as well.

Cinnamon was the first to raise her head. "Ugh... what in tarnation happened? It feels like ah jus' had ta find some hay in a needlestack..."

“Woah!!” Pastel exclaimed, bouncing off her bed. “Why is everything so colorful and why do I feel so energetic and how come the ground is talking to me?”

Skyline buried her head into her pillow. “Pastel is the last thing I want to hear in the morning...”

“Um, girls?” Midnight hesitantly spoke up. “Are you all feeling okay?”

“EW!” Amethyst jumped out of her bed in disgust. “Just where in the world are we?! It’s so musty and dirty and altogether just an unpleasant place!”

“I-it’s kinda scary here...” Lily mumbled.

“If we got some balloons around here it’d brighten the place up!” Pastel bounced. “Get rid of those depressing shackles and chains and then we could have a party!”

“Midnight?” Cinnamon rolled out of bed and dazedly trotted towards her. “What’s goin’ on? Fer some reason ah feel real different...”

“Stop bouncing around Pastel!” Skyline exclaimed, leaping out of her bed in annoyance. “Ugh, I was having such a good nap too!”

There was so much chaos going on around the room that Midnight couldn’t think straight. Pastel was bouncing around, Skyline was chasing her, Amethyst was complaining about the décor, and Lily was cowering behind her. The only pony who appeared to have some kind of focus was Cinnamon, and even she looked like her mind was wandering.

“Confusion is normal after regaining consciousness from an Awakening,” Lycoris commented. He shut his eyes closed in concentration and a small glow emitted from his horn. All of a sudden, Pastel and Skyline were pulled to the ground, brining all the ponies’ attention onto Lycoris. “Now that I have everypony’s attention...”

Lily gasped when she recognized the stallion. “Y-you’re—”

“*Now that I have everypony’s attention,*” Lycoris repeated, interrupting the yellow pegasus. Lily recalled his warning and hurriedly put a hoof over her mouth to keep herself from talking. “I’d like to take this opportunity to tell you all ‘good morning.’”

“Just who the heck are you anyways?” Skyline asked brashly. “And where are we? This place looks like some kind of dungeon...”

“My name is Lycoris and I’m a clergypony,” he responded. “As for where we are... you’d be right about that. We’re in a dungeon.”

“You need a better interior decorator for this place,” Amethyst criticized. “Even if it is a dungeon, that’s no excuse for it to be so dull and dreary.” She paused. “Wait a moment, why are we in a dungeon of all places?”

“If ah recall correctly,” Cinnamon muttered, “the last thing that happened was that we were all in the infirmary with Princess Luna... and then we gave Midnight that pendant and...” She froze, her eyes widening. The earth pony’s eyes were transfixed upon the indigo unicorn in front of her. “You’re awake!”

“It’s normal for cognitive functions to be slow for a bit after regaining consciousness from an Awakening,” Lycoris whispered to Midnight.

Cinnamon pulled Midnight into an embrace, and soon enough the other ponies joined in, making it a large group hug.

Midnight’s face flushed a deep red at this unexpected show of affection. When they all parted she thought she could feel the steam coming out of her ears.

“So back to my earlier inquiry,” Amethyst reminded everypony, “what are we doing here in this dungeon?”

“I’d like to say that you’re only here because we ran out of beds,” Lycoris said, repeating the same words from before, “but... before we get to that, tell me, is anything... different?”

“Now that you mention it,” Amethyst said, “I think I can see more colors for some reason. Probably why this place looks so drab...”

“I can hear the ground talking to me!” Pastel exclaimed happily. “I can’t really understand what it’s saying, but I can hear its language!”

“Same here,” Cinnamon commented. “It’s like... ah can feel the life within the earth or somethin’. It’s kinda hard ta explain, but I also feel lighter and stronger...”

"I do too!" Skyline interjected. "When I was chasing Pastel around earlier it felt like I could fly faster than I ever did before!"

"Um... I guess I do too..." Lily mumbled. "But... I can also feel the earth too for some reason..."

Lycoris pursed his lips in thought. "Hmm... if you're a pegasus then you shouldn't feel the earth... but then again, your Destiny Mark is a lily so..."

"Um... a Destiny Mark?" Lily questioned confusedly.

"What's a Destiny Mark?" Amethyst and Pastel said simultaneously.

"They're something that's supposed to appear on ponies with magical ability," Skyline muttered, recalling what King Themis said in Gyren. "But... why do you have one Lily...?"

"It's not just her," Lycoris spoke up, "all of you have them. Just squint a bit so you can make them out."

Each of the ponies gazed intently at their flanks, trying to make out the strange markings upon them. "It looks like ah got a pair o' red apples on me," Cinnamon murmured.

"I have lollipops!" Pastel exclaimed excitedly. "One yellow, two blue!"

"I don't know what mine is," Skyline frowned. "It looks kinda like a feather, but for some reason it's half burnt or something..."

"I have a darling gemstone for mine!" Amethyst said gleefully. "It looks like an amethyst, just like my name! And it's shaped like a cross or some kind of four-petal flower!"

"Mine's just a lily," Lily mumbled. "It's... nice."

"Hey, does this mean we have magical ability?" Cinnamon asked.

Lycoris nodded. "You all did say that things were different, didn't you? That difference means that you have the magical ability necessary to discern these differences."

"That's all cool and interesting," Skyline said, "but why are we in a dungeon again? You still haven't answered that yet."

Lycoris hesitated. "Er, well..."

The door suddenly slammed open behind all of them, causing the ponies to jerk their heads towards the noise. An elderly unicorn in a white robe stood there, looking down upon the ponies with a smug expression on his face.

Lycoris instantly lowered his head and bowed. The other ponies just stood and stared.

"P-Professor Gnosis!" Midnight exclaimed in surprise. "What are you doing all the way down here?"

"Oh, hello Midnight," Gnosis said quietly. "It's nice to see you're awake." He smirked at the other five ponies in the room. "It's nice to see you're all awake."

Lily cowered behind Amethyst, remembering him as the stallion she bumped into the day they arrived in Canterlot. Skyline took a step forward to defend the other pegasus. "What do you want, old geezer?" she hissed.

Gnosis chuckled and trotted over towards the cyan pegasus. "Old geezer she says... that's funny." He suddenly drew his hoof back and rammed it against the side of Skyline's head, sending her spiraling onto the floor.

Pastel galloped toward Skyline, the smile on her face replaced with an exasperated worry. She gingerly examined the red glow on the spot Skyline was struck at. "What did you do that for you big meanie-face?!"

Gnosis drove another hoof into Pastel's stomach, causing the pink earth pony to recoil in pain. "Know your place, knave."

Lycoris kept his head down to the floor, hiding a small expression of guilt on his face. Midnight timidly trotted over towards the elder unicorn. "U-um... P-Professor? Y-you don't need to hit them..."

"I'll do whatever I please with them!" Gnosis exclaimed. "After all, they're nothing more than a dirty bunch of *prisoners*!"

"Prisoners?!" Amethyst parroted. "Just *what* are you talking about?!"

Gnosis paused. "What am I talking about?" He turned to Lycoris, a devilish smile on his face. "Dear boy... are you telling me you haven't told them why they're in this dungeon yet?"

"No sir," Lycoris muttered. "I haven't gotten there yet."

"How absurd!" Gnosis laughed. "I thought that would be the very first thing to come out of your mouth, Lycoris!" The red-coated unicorn kept his head down and said nothing in response. "Very well," Gnosis chuckled, "I suppose I'll be the one to tell these ponies why they're here." He cleared his throat.

"You five ponies have been charged with the attempted murder of our Princess Luna as well as the high crime of treason," Gnosis announced. "The consequences of which are life in prison, or death."

Session 21

The ponies looked aghast at Gnosis's announcement. Skyline was the first to react, jumping back onto her hooves and staring the stallion in the eye. "What the heck are you saying?" Skyline spat. "Attempted murder? Treason? What the hell is that!?"

Lily quickly stepped in front of Skyline before the pegasus had a chance to make another outburst. "P-please, there must be some kind of misunderstanding!" Lily squeaked.

"There is no misunderstanding," Gnosis responded. "The shards that struck each of you could have hit and killed Princess Luna. It certainly came close to killing the five of you anyway."

"Hold on jus' a moment!" Cinnamon exclaimed. "We didn't know that'd happen when we took the pendant out! It was jus' a gift we were s'posed ta give Midnight once we met up with her!"

"Oh? A gift you say?" Gnosis asked, smirking. "And just who was this gift from?"

"It was from—"

"Excuse me!" Amethyst yelled, cutting Cinnamon off. "Allow me to explain. After all, Cinnamon, that pendant was a gift from none other than myself!"

"Yerself?" Cinnamon frowned for a moment before the memory of a promise surfaced to the front of her mind. *Forget you ever met him!!* Luna had shouted, a frightened look in her eyes. Cinnamon shot the unicorn a nervous grin. "Uhh... y-yeah, ah remember that..."

"I found the gemstone during one of my material expeditions," Amethyst lied. "I do love searching for gemstones, and when I examined that one I decided that it was a gift I just *had* to present to our royal guest. Sadly, all that Collection business happened and, well, you know the rest darling."

"You *found* the jewel for the pendant?" Gnosis said incredulously.

"Is that so hard to believe?" Amethyst frowned.

Gnosis chuckled. "Pardon me for my skepticism, but do you even know what the material was?"

"Of course I didn't!" Amethyst exclaimed. "All I needed to know was that it had a beautiful shine to it! The details about are hardly important when I could tell how brilliant it was compared to other gemstones!"

"That's cute, thinking she can lie to me." Gnosis glared at the snow-white unicorn, causing her to take a frightened step back. "It's made out of nothing more than a simple diamond. If you really were a connoisseur of gems you'd be able to recognize something as simple as that." Amethyst grimaced. The pendant had never left Lily's side, so the unicorn never got a chance to have a good look at it. Gnosis took the unicorn's pause as a chance to continue speaking. "And this brings me to the second charge against you ponies: treason. The pony you got that pendant from is a traitor who cast off his responsibilities towards ponykind. Because you all withheld that information, you all are automatically branded traitors to your kin."

"How're we supposed to know if he was a traitor or not?!" Pastel objected. "He seemed like a nice enough pony, and—" She instantly shut her mouth, noticing the huge mistake she just made.

"So you admit then that you received the pendant from a certain stallion, do you not?" Gnosis pushed.

"Y-yeah, but he just told us to give Midnight the pendant and that was it!" Amethyst said, trying her best to salvage the situation. "He didn't even have the courtesy to give us his name!"

"Telling more lies will only seal your fate," Gnosis snarled. "Even though he's a filthy traitor, Deneb of the Summer Triangle would never trust anypony with his pendant unless he's gotten to know them. The mere fact that his pendant was in your possession means that he held some sort of cordial relationship with you all."

"We've never heard that name in our life!" Skyline objected. "I'm telling you he's just some random pony who decided to dump that pendant thing on us!"

“Enough!!” Gnosis roared, the ponies wincing at his outburst. “I’ll have you all know that every word you say that isn’t the truth is only going to dig you all deeper down the hole you’re all in. So, unless one of you decides to come clean it’s straight to the gallows!”

The ponies retreated back in fear, their minds racing to find some way out of this situation. Seeing her friends’ expressions, Midnight timidly raised her hoof into the air. “E-excuse me professor, but maybe you’re being too harsh on them…”

“Too harsh?” Gnosis turned on his pupil. “Are you suggesting that those who hinder the Day of Ascension are deserving of mercy?”

“Of course not!” Midnight defended. “I know how much the Ascension means to you, but these ponies are my friends! There’s no way they’d try to stop it, this *has* to be some sort of misunderstanding!”

Gnosis stood fuming for a few moments, trying to work out a response, when Lycoris suddenly lifted his head to speak. “If I may have permission to speak, Professor.”

“Say what you will, Lycoris,” the elder unicorn said gruffly.

Lycoris gave a quick bow in response before speaking. “I personally don’t think that yelling at these ponies would get you any further in procuring the truth from them. In fact, I think it’d just make them more inclined to lie to you.”

“Everypony has a breaking point,” Gnosis growled.

Lycoris waved his hoof to brush off the stallion’s comment. “It’s true that breaking them is always an option, but it’s not exactly the most efficient. You could spend weeks down here attempting to get the truth out of them, or you could just explain the situation to them and have them tell us the truth of their own accord. I personally think the latter is easier and less time-consuming.”

“Are you suggesting that we reveal our secrets to these *commoners*?!” Gnosis said, aghast.

Lycoris shook his head. “Not all of them per se… just the ones that matter.” He gestured to the symbols on the ponies’ flanks. “I’m sure you’ve noticed they have Destiny Marks,” Lycoris said quietly. “I’ve worked under you long enough to know that there’s another reason why you want to keep them down here.”

Gnosis pursed his lips as a pregnant pause filled the room as the ponies waited for him to make his decision. "Very well then," he finally responded, "I have some business to take care of anyways. Lycoris, I expect you to have this taken care of before I get back." He glared at each of the ponies in the dungeon before stepping out. "If you all know what's good for you, you'll cooperate. Those who get in the way of the Day of Ascension will be subject to the harshest punishment you could possibly imagine."

The elderly unicorn promptly trotted out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The tense atmosphere dispersed with his departure, and the ponies finally managed to relax a little.

"Can you believe this?" Skyline muttered, kicking her hooves back to lay on the bed. "Why the heck are we branded criminals? We didn't do anything wrong!"

Pastel crawled onto the bed next to Skyline, nuzzling the pegasus where Gnosis struck her. "Don't worry about it; I'm sure that it'll all work out eventually..."

Skyline turned her head over to the earth pony next to her. "What about you, Pastel? It seemed like he hit you pretty hard earlier."

"Oh, I'm fine, it didn't hurt that much." Pastel shrugged.

"Earth ponies seem to have higher strength and resilience to pain," Lycoris commented dryly. "Unicorns have magical ability and pegasi gain more speed and dexterity." He walked to the center of the room, drawing the attention of everypony onto him. "Earlier you all asked if you had magic. But what you all need to remember is that every living organism has magical ability, the energy we call 'life.'"

"H-hold on for a moment," Lily interrupted. "Why are you suddenly explaining things?"

Lycoris frowned. "Weren't you listening? I need to explain everything important before Professor Gnosis returns."

"Why can't you just get us off the hook?" Skyline asked. "There's no reason for that Gnosis guy to keep us locked up here!"

"It's not that simple," Lycoris sighed. "Professor Gnosis is just the one enforcing the punishment. The ones who pressed charges against you girls was his royal highness, King Themis himself."

“The king put us down here?!” Amethyst gasped. “Why would he do that?!”

Lycoris shrugged. “King Themis is overprotective of his daughters and their fates. No matter how illogical it may seem, if something might even remotely be a threat to the princesses, he’ll do all he can to inflict harsh justice onto the offenders. And once he’s made up his mind it’s incredibly hard to change it. Isn’t that right Midnight?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, right.” Midnight had spent the last few minutes staring into space, Lycoris’s question bringing her back to reality. “He’s an incredibly stubborn stallion...”

“What were ya starin’ off into space fer, sugarcube?” Cinnamon inquired.

“O-oh, nothing!” Midnight exclaimed. “It’s just... well, I can’t get over how different the world is. I mean, I know the situation is really bad right now, but I can’t help but be a bit distracted...”

The other ponies took a moment to observe the world around them. The colors were more vibrant, the sounds more crisp, and there seemed to be a strange colored haze outlining each of them.

“Those are auras,” Lycoris muttered. “They’re the mediums through which magic is channeled.” He held one of his hooves above the other, just barely touching his skin. “The auras of regular ponies are usually incredibly thin, so you can barely discern it without close examination. But those whose magical potential have been tapped have auras that are a little more pronounced. Take, for example, a unicorn like Midnight or Amethyst here.” He gestured towards the two ponies in question. “If you’d observe them, you’d notice that it’s far easier to see their auras when compared to, say, Cinnamon or Lily.”

He was right; the auras around the two unicorns were slightly more pronounced than the earth ponies and pegasi in the room. The colors of their auras matched the colors of their coats, so even with this extra distinction, they were still hard to observe.

“Unicorns have stronger auras because they’re able to easily manipulate magic,” Lycoris continued. “Their bodies are more in-tune with the flow of energy around them because of their physiology, namely their horns.” A small light glimmered from the tip of the stallion’s horn, and an ink pen levitated out of his saddlebag. “In case you haven’t noticed, my aura becomes more visible following the use of magic, enough so that even the average everyday pony can make it out. On the other hoof,” he gestured towards

Skyline and Lily, "pegasi do not have horns, therefore the magical energy is directed towards another area."

"Our wings?" Lily answered timidly.

Lycoris nodded. "If I were to be technical, because pegasi have greater surface area and mass their auras are more dispersed throughout their bodies. The part of a pegasus that does the most work is none other than the wings, so the extra energy resulting from magic is allocated towards greater wing control and power, therefore increasing dexterity and flight capabilities. As for earth ponies..." he turned towards Cinnamon and Pastel. "their kind are naturally geared towards physical activity among the three species of ponykind, so their increased muscle mass has their auras concentrated on the interior, increasing their strength and endurance. Which is why Pastel here didn't really feel the pain from Gnosis's blow."

Pastel frowned. "So, basically, unicorns are mages, pegasi are ninjas, and earth ponies are monks?"

Lycoris chuckled. "Their extra experience points are allocated to the classes that suit them most."

The other ponies in the room stared quizzically at Lycoris's analogy. Skyline cleared her throat before speaking. "Wait a moment... if earth ponies are just supposed to only get stronger... how come Luna and Celestia were able to use magic back at Gyren?"

"*Princess* Luna and *Princess* Celestia," Lycoris corrected, much to Skyline's displeasure. "You see, well, the princesses are different." He took a deep breath before continuing. "What you all need to understand is that the magical enhancement you all experienced is not commonplace at all. The only reason I know so much about it is because I read the results of Gnosis's... research, if you will." He took another pause. "Everypony, no, every *species* has the potential to use magic. It's just much easier for unicorns to use it because of their genetic structure." He paused again. "I said before that your auras are the mediums through which magic is channeled, but in reality it's just the residual energy your body gives off as part of the process known as... what did Professor Gnosis call it again? The Process of Thermodynamics, if I recall correctly."

He grimaced, trying to recall the information and find easiest way to present it to everypony. "You have the system, and you have the surroundings, and everything has to stay in equilibrium. So when your body exerts energy, it also exerts heat, because heat is energy, and um... the excess heat goes into the surrounding to increase the

entropy of the universe and uh..." He rapidly shook his head. "It's all a bunch of mumbo-jumbo Professor Gnosis read in some ancient texts one day. Point is, your auras are the visual representations of energy, and unicorns have stronger auras because the manipulation of energy—er, magic—exerts more energy than the processes of flight or endurance. Am I right, Midnight?"

The indigo unicorn nodded. "Sounds about right." She turned to her friends. "Did you get all that?"

The other ponies and Pastel responded with slightly confused expressions on their faces. "Uhh, yeah, we got the gist of it I think," Skyline answered for them.

"Good," Lycoris smiled. "So, back to the original question: All living beings can use magic, however only unicorns can use it easily. The keyword being 'easily'." He gazed past his audience, as if he was staring into a place far removed from the dungeons in which they stood. "The princesses... they've gone through incredibly harsh training and conditioning to prepare them for the Day of Ascension. I believe you saw them use magic back in Gyren? The training is to give them control over their auras, or as they call it their astral bodies, in order to give them the magical prowess they need for the Ascension. Every day they're subjected to exposure to the _____ and given substances to alter their physical structure to augment their magical ability. Mind you, it's all safe and controlled so there's no room for a fatal mistake, but to be constantly exposed to the _____? I can't imagine what that'd be like..."

"Um, excuse me..." Lily timidly said. "But... um, we didn't exactly get that..."

"The _____?" Lycoris frowned. "Oh right, I forgot that I can't say that..." He recalled his time with Lily in the gardens, how he had told her that it was physically impossible for him to say certain things. He turned to Midnight. "If you wouldn't mind explaining to them..."

Midnight grimaced; it was a topic she wasn't exactly fond of talking about. "First I'd like an explanation of how a simple clergypony knows all this." Lycoris just gave her a blank stare in response, waiting for her to fill in the blanks for him. "But, since he's not going to talk... I think he's trying to reference the *excio animae*."

"The what now?" Cinnamon replied.

"The *excio animae*," Midnight repeated. "I doubt any of you have heard the name before, but I'm sure you have all heard of what it is." She paused for a brief moment to

prepare her explanation. “The *excio animae* is more widely known as the Goddess’s secret weapon.” The other ponies took a moment to digest the name before Midnight continued. “The *excio animae* has been with the Royal Family for as long as anypony can remember; it would have to be, considering that the Goddess was the one who bestowed it upon us during our beginnings. It’s original purpose was just to provide ponykind with an ultimatum in case the wolves got too out of hand but... after a couple decades of research a new purpose was assigned to it.

“The Day of Ascension.” Midnight’s tone of voice began to lower, so much that the other ponies had to strain to hear her words. “Plans for the Ascension officially began with Professor Gnosis’s father. Using the research his father and his father’s father had put into the *excio animae*, he devised the method through which the Day of Ascension could be achieved.”

“Wait just one moment, darling,” Amethyst interjected. “Pardon me for interrupting, but I thought the Day of Ascension was a prophecy the Goddess created to be fulfilled with our two princesses?”

Midnight shook her head. “That was a lie the Royal Family told to the public. The truth is that the Day of Ascension is a purely ponymade endeavor. The planning, the details, the result, all a product of ponies, not the Goddess.”

“Ah know ah’m not really one ta say this,” Cinnamon commented, “but isn’t that considered blasphemy against the Goddess?”

Midnight gave a weak smile. “Not really, it’s something she wants us to do. We found it of our own accord, but we’ve gotten approval from the Goddess to carry it out. So it’s not blasphemous at all...”

“How in the world did you get approval from the Goddess?” Pastel questioned. “I thought she lived far far far far *far* away from anyplace we could reach!”

“That’s what I was getting to,” Midnight answered. “The *excio animae*... alongside its original purpose as a deterrent for the wolves, it was also found to work through a direct connection to the Goddess’s domain. The way it works is that it once accessed, it forms a connection into the spirit world, where the user will be able to ask the Goddess to execute the weapon.”

“Waitwaitwait, the *spirit world*?!” Skyline exclaimed. “AKA the afterlife? AKA pony hell?”

Midnight gave a small chuckle. "Not exactly, Skyline. From what I've heard, the spirit world is just a plane of order and chaos that we're all connected to even in the land of the living. Sometimes it's nothing but a white void and at other times it's a paradoxical wonderland... not that I've seen it for myself anyways. Moving on, the *excio animae* is the whole basis of the Day of Ascension. In order to prepare the princesses for that day, they have to be constantly exposed to the spirit world to ease their transition into it. From what I hear, it's not exactly an easy task to perform even once, so having to do it daily must be difficult for them..." She sighed. "That's part of my job too as their advisor after all: to keep their spirits up while they go through training."

"So how d'ya know if this is all gonna work?" Cinnamon asked.

Midnight was taken aback by the question. "E-excuse me?"

Cinnamon shrugged. "Ya know, if this ain't a prophecy or somethin' made by the Goddess, then how do y'all know if this'll work? If it's never been done before than ya can't be certain."

A dark shadow fell over Midnight's face. "It works. There's no doubt about it."

Cinnamon frowned. "How d'ya know that sugarcube?"

"Because I do," Midnight stated flatly.

"Stop me if ah'm wrong, but ain't the Day of Ascension when the princesses get to the same level as the Goddess?" Cinnamon inquired. "And then they purify the world with their newfound powers or somethin'?"

Midnight hesitated, not sure how to respond. "Yes... and no." She bit her lip, wondering if it was alright for her to continue or not. "Um... you see, the Day of Ascension takes advantage of a very specific attribute of the *excio animae*, which is—"

"They don't need to know about that," Lycoris quietly interrupted.

The ponies gave Lycoris quizzical looks. "Didn't Professor Gnosis give us permission to tell them the truth?" Midnight asked.

"Just the ones that matter to them," Lycoris quoted. "_____ isn't anything they need to worry about."

"What?" Skyline responded.

Lycoris responded with a cryptic smile. "It's the name for the transition from a solid to a gas phase with no liquid in-between."

"Beg pardon?" Cinnamon replied.

"I can't say anymore," Lycoris said. "I'm physically unable to, remember? Anyways, Midnight," he turned to the unicorn, "there are some things that just simply cannot be told to others."

Midnight face contorted, her mind torn on what she should do. "But... they're my friends and..."

"If they're your friends then you should care about them enough to protect them from the truth," Lycoris warned. "I personally have nothing against you telling them... but once they know there's no way they'd be able to keep quiet about it. And if Professor Gnosis hears about how they know then... it can't end well for them at all."

"Ugh, I'm sick and tired of being kept in the dark!" Skyline shouted. "Would you just tell us what the heck you're keeping secret?!"

The scarlet stallion ignored Skyline and trotted over towards Lily. "Hey... you trust me, right?" His eyes looked into hers, pleading the pegasus to heed his advice. "You don't want to know this truth... not now anyways..."

Lily gulped. "U-um..."

"You'll know in due time," Lycoris said quietly. "But right now, at this time, in this place, your lives are forfeit once you gain this knowledge." He gazed off into the distance with a far-off expression. "I have a feeling that you'll all get the chance to hear the truth... just not today." He turned back to Lily and smiled. "So trust me, okay?"

"U-um..." Lily broke eye contact, her cheeks flushed red. "O-okay... we'll trust you."

"Are you serious?!" Skyline exploded. "How can you just sit back and listen to what he says?!"

"Quiet down, Skyline!" Amethyst protested. "As the younger sister you should trust Lily's judgment. Heavens know I do."

Skyline crossed her hooves in frustration. "Ugh, fine, whatever... what about you two?" The pegasus gestured towards Pastel and Cinnamon.

Cinnamon shrugged. "Ah don't mind waitin'. Besides, somethin's tellin' me that Lycoris here's just lookin' out fer us. Ain' that right, Pastel?"

Pastel rapidly nodded her head. "Mhm! He's a much nicer pony than that grumpy-meanie-pants!"

Lycoris smiled again. "Thank you all for trusting me and dropping the subject. Now... if you'd all trust me once more..." The smile faded away from his expression. "Why are you all lying about the fact that Deneb was the owner of that pendant?" Looks of guilt fell upon everypony's faces, none of them wanting to answer Lycoris's question. "There's no point in hiding it anymore," he continued. "Deneb is the only one who that pendant could have belonged to. There's nopony else who'd have access to that kind of artifact."

"Um, excuse me," Midnight cut in. "If we're talking about the Summer Triangle..."

"Two of them were your parents, weren't they?" Lycoris brought up.

Midnight shrunk back a little. "Y-yeah... Vega was my mother and... I don't know who my father was..."

"You don't?" Lycoris frowned. "Come to think of it, the exact story has always been a little vague... but that's not the point. The point is only Deneb could have given you girls that pendant. Midnight, you already know what happened to Vega, and Altair... well, let's just say he's accounted for."

"Exactly what d'ya mean by that?" Cinnamon inquired.

Lycoris hesitated. "I mean... well, we're certain of his loyalty to the Royal Family. Deneb on the other hand, he deserted his responsibilities after the little... fiasco with Vega. Which brings us back full circle to why we're all sitting here in this musty dungeon."

He cleared his throat before continuing, making sure he had everypony's attention. "Deneb is a traitor to ponykind. He abandoned his duties towards the princesses and is knowingly hindering the Day of Ascension. What makes it worse is that he abuses his

magical ability and severely injures or kills the soldiers we send after him. To make things absolutely clear, he is a traitor and a murderer.”

The ponies stared at Lycoris in shock, his description of Deneb not matching up with the image of the kindhearted pony that they met back in Ponyville. Midnight gave a resigned sigh and stayed in the background, allowing Lycoris to explain everything. “Ever since he left Canterlot he’s been wandering all over the world,” he continued. “With his power he can go anywhere he wants to without fear. From what I’ve heard, he’s explored wolvern territory, griffon territory, navigated the mountains of Arkhaven, ventured through the Everfree, and has even explored lands which we have no knowledge of. So if he gave you girls that pendant then that means he’s back in equine territory, meaning we have another chance at retrieving him. And once he’s back in the Royal Family’s custody, we can get started on the Day of Ascension right away!”

“Why do you need him for the Day of Ascension?” Amethyst questioned. “I thought all you needed were the princesses and the um... *excio animae*, was it?”

“We need something called Catalysts too,” Midnight responded. “The Summer Triangle provided us with three, but... we have none on hand right now. Vega’s dead, Deneb’s rogue, and Altair... I don’t even know what’s going on with him.” She turned to Lycoris. “Since you seem to be the all-knowing clergypony, do you know where Altair is?”

Lycoris shrugged. “Not a clue.”

“I see... well, anyways,” Midnight continued, “in order for the Day of Ascension to be successful, we need at least three Catalysts. One to access the *excio animae*, another to manipulate its energies, and the third as support for the other two to be sure they don’t falter. As it is now, we don’t have any Catalysts for this job, but Professor Gnosis has told me that he has something in mind. Still, we need either Altair or Deneb back here, and since Altair seems to have completely disappeared...”

“In summarization,” Lycoris said simply, “Vega’s dead, Altair’s gone, and Deneb is the closest shot we have at having a Catalyst for the Ascension. He’s also a traitor and a murderer, which is why you all shouldn’t be trying to keep him a secret and just tell us the truth.”

“Yeah girls, there’s not really any point in trying to hide it,” Midnight mumbled. “If you come out clean then you could probably get out of capital punishment...”

“We made a promise,” Lily said quietly.

Lycoris and Midnight frowned. "What was that?" the former asked.

"A promise," Amethyst responded in Lily's stead. "I apologize in advance for this, but what you're saying doesn't really sit too well with me." The other ponies from Ponyville nodded in agreement.

"If we did actually meet with this Deneb pony, and I'm not saying we did," Pastel hastily added, "then I'd say he was a kindhearted pony who wouldn't hurt a fly! All that stuff about him being a murderer sounds like a load of hooey!"

"Listen," Midnight said tersely, "I know you're all my friends, but you can't keep promises with a pony like Deneb—"

"Who said the promise was with Deneb?" Skyline cut off.

Midnight frowned. "What do you mean?"

Skyline shrugged. "It's probably too late to be worth anything anyways, if you guys are absolutely sure that this Deneb dude gave us that pendant. But on the off-chance you're all just bluffing, then we gotta do all we can to keep this promise."

"Who did you all make this promise with?" Midnight asked again.

Skyline stared Midnight down. "How's Princess Luna doing? I was thinking she's been worried about us the whole time. Might be good to let her know that we're all okay and rotting in a dungeon."

"Hold on... Luna?" Midnight took a step back in confusion. "Why would she... a promise like that?" She shook her head and turned her back on the others. "Wait here everypony, I'll be right back!" She threw open the door and galloped out, leaving Lycoris to deal with her friends.

The scarlet stallion sighed. "Well... while we're all still here, any other questions? I think I hit all that I needed to hit..."

"I have a question!" Pastel exclaimed. "Are you really just a clergypony? Because I don't think normal clergyponies are supposed to know about all that stuff!"

Lycoris responded with a sly smile. "I'm just a servant of the Goddess, nothing more, nothing less."

Session 22

Midnight galloped through the underground corridors, trying to get topside as quickly as she could. She didn't want to waste any time in getting to Princess Luna, if she took too long than Gnosis would have probably already passed judgment on her friends before she returned to the dungeons. Making her way through the corridors of the dungeon she could feel the atmosphere growing lighter. It was as if a burden was being raised off her back as she continued through the underground passage; the sloping of the floor telling her that she was heading towards the surface.

The indigo unicorn ran into the door leading back into the cathedral, only to jar her body as the door failed to budge. Groaning, an ache spread across her body from the point of impact. "Seriously?! When is this thing ever locked?!" she cried out. The unicorn buried her head in her saddlebag, searching for the master key she used to get around. For a few brief moments she rummaged around the contents, before realizing that she didn't have the key on her. She angrily stomped her hoof on the ground. "Dang it! I don't have time to go back and look for my key!!"

A vibrant flash of light suddenly lit the area, disappearing as quickly as it came. A cracking sound echoed throughout the stone corridor followed by the thud of metal falling on dirt. Midnight jumped back in surprise, her eyes drawn to the source of the noise. The lock portion of the doorknob was sitting on the ground, a small section of it dyed black with scorch marks. It appeared to her that some kind of powerful force magically blew the lock off of the door.

Midnight was sure to have found the occurrence rather strange and worth questioning, but after a few brief seconds of looking around for the source the matters at hand pressed the curiosity straight out of her head. She pushed through the door into the cathedral, her eyes greeted by the rays of the sun shining through the stained glass. Everything was quiet, only the soft murmurings of prayers could be heard. Midnight judged from the volume of the noise and the angle of the light that it was a couple hours before noon, meaning that the castle was just beginning to fully awaken.

She formulated her plan of action while she made her way through the cathedral and into the courtyard. Around this time of day the princesses would be reading in their rooms until the afternoon, when they're usually given free time... that means she should be heading towards Luna's room.

Midnight trotted into the main hall of the castle, ignoring the various servants calls of greeting. The princesses' rooms were through the throne room and up the stairs, where all of the Royal Family slept. It was quite the walk away from the underground chambers, but if she galloped the distance would appear to shrink exponentially.

"Midnight? Is that you?"

Of course, if she galloped the whole way, she'd get some curious looks. She didn't want to draw the attention of the entire castle onto her after all. And it was disrespectful to gallop in the cathedral, so she definitely couldn't on the way back. A brisk trot would be the best she could manage.

"Midnight? Heeeeeyyyy, Midnight!"

She always seemed to catch everypony's attention despite trying to keep low profile. She supposed it *was* rare to see her out of the library, and it *was* the first time she wandered the castle's halls since she departed for Ponyville... but still! There's no reason for ponies to keep calling her name if they just wanted to say good morni—

"HEY MIDNIGHT!!"

Something suddenly crashed into Midnight, sending her spiraling down onto the previously polished floor. The servants galloping around the hallway snickering at the downtrodden pony for a couple seconds before they quietly went about their business.

Midnight, dazed, stood back up, feeling an extra weight on her back. "Ugh... what the heck?"

A pair of hooves wrapped around the unicorn's neck. Midnight felt something nuzzling her back, sending shivers up her spine. "H-hey! S-stop that, I'm sensitive there!"

"Ya are?" A filly slid off Midnight's back, looking up with her with a slightly disappointed expression. "Ah guess that means ah can't really ride on ya then..."

Midnight tilted her head as her mind processed the filly in front of her. "Sundae...?"

"Who else would ah be, silly?" Sundae shot the unicorn a huge grin. "It's nice ta see ya again after all this time! Glad yer feelin' better!"

Midnight couldn't help but relax at the sight of the filly's innocent smile. "It's nice to see you too. I'm glad Skyline and Cinnamon got you out of Gyren safely..."

Sundae nodded her head rapidly. "Speakin' of those two, where the heck are they? They've been missing for the past couple days along with the others and whenever ah ask ah'm just told they're out on some kinda business or somethin'."

Midnight strained to keep her smile up. "Is that so?" Apparently nopony told Sundae about what was happening to her sister and the others...

"Mhm!" Sundae responded. "Ah don't really know why she'd go off without tellin' her li'l sis anythin', but ah'm sure she has her reasons." The smile on her face shrunk a bit. "Ah mean... she did come after me when nopony else would... so ah trust her with anything."

Midnight gently lifted up Sundae's head to raise her spirits. "That's all behind you now," Midnight said quietly. "Besides, I'm sure the rest of your family would like to see you again someday."

"Ah... ah guess, Midnight." Sundae quickly wiped her hoof over her eyes and beamed up to the unicorn. "They're mah family, o' course they'd be happy ta see me again!"

Midnight gave a small chuckle. "There you go Sundae, just keep on smiling like that! I'm sure it'll brighten up anypony's day!"

Sundae giggled. "Yer jus' sayin' that."

Midnight shook her head. "I'm serious! I know it definitely brightened mine up a little!"

Sundae bashfully turned her blushing face away from the unicorn. "R-really...?"

"Really." Midnight smiled and started trotting away from the filly. "Sorry Sundae, but I have to be somewhere right now. I'll talk to you later, alright?"

"Ahh! Wait up!!" Sundae quickly trotted up alongside Midnight. "Can ah come with you?"

Midnight frowned. "I don't think that'd be the best idea..."

"Awww, come onnn, pleaaaaaaase?" the filly pleaded, flashing Midnight her irresistible puppy eyes..

The unicorn hesitated. What she was going to discuss with Luna wasn't exactly something the little filly was allowed to hear...

"Sundae? Sundae!!" A young colt galloped through the throng of servants going about their daily activities to meet up with the pair of ponies. "Thank goodness I found you! For a moment there I thought something might've happened to you!"

"J-Jeeves?" Midnight was taken aback by the sudden reappearance of her faithful servant. The last time she saw him was the day she left for Ponyville, the day everything started...

The young colt deeply bowed towards his master. "Ah, It's nice to see you again milady. I'm glad you still recognize me after all your adventures."

"Of course I'd still recognize you, Jeeves!" Midnight laughed. "There's no way that I'd forget my faithful servant!"

Jeeves gave the unicorn a kind smile. "Thank you for your kind words, milady. I'm afraid that I can't take the time to catch up with you though, I've been charged to take care of a certain little filly..."

Sundae tried to hide from the colt by sneaking behind Midnight, playfully sticking her tongue out at the servant. The unicorn chuckled and took a step away from Sundae, leaving the filly completely exposed. "It's completely fine, Jeeves. I have some business to take care of with Princess Luna anyways."

Jeeves raised an eyebrow. "Business you say? You sure you're not just going to play frisbee with her again?"

Midnight chuckled and shook her head. "Not this time. I need to talk to her about something serious."

"Ah... is that so?" Jeeves trotted towards Sundae and took her hoof. "Then allow us to get out of your mane then. Best of luck with the princess."

"Ack!" Sundae groaned. "Ah guess ah'll see ya later, Midnight! Tell my sis ta hurry up with her business if ya see her!" The little filly let herself be dragged off by Jeeves to unknown places, leaving the unicorn alone once more.

"Right... when she finishes her business." Midnight sighed. For some reason she felt like this 'business' wouldn't be over with for a while. The unicorn continued on her way towards the throne room to get to the princesses' chambers, Sundae's smiling face floating through back of her mind.

Midnight pushed open the doors to the throne room, the sound of creaking wood echoing through the vast chamber. The two thrones at the top of the stairs were vacant, signifying that the king and queen were most likely still asleep or taking care of something important elsewhere. Midnight didn't spend another thought on what her parents were up to, it just meant that she didn't have to waste time explaining to them why she had to visit Luna so early in the morning. The unicorn galloped up the stairs and past the two thrones, going through the door that led into the spiral staircase that led up to the royal chambers. After a few flights of stairs, Midnight found herself between two rooms: Celestia's and Luna's. If she were to climb up to the next floor, she'd find Themis's and Ambrosia's rooms.

Midnight gave three loud raps onto Luna's door. She heard a loud thump afterwards, like the princess threw something at the door in response. "Go away! I told you all that I don't want to be bothered!"

"Luna?" Midnight called out. "It's me! Open the door!"

"Wah?!" Another thump was heard inside the room, like the princess rolled out of her bed in surprise and fell onto the floor. Some more scuffling was heard, followed by some hoofstomps, and then the door swiftly opened. "It is you!" Luna cried. She jumped onto the unicorn, tackling her to the ground. "I'm so glad you're okay..."

"I-I'm glad I'm okay too," Midnight replied. She suddenly felt a shiver go up her spine. Luna was nuzzling her on her sensitive spot, the spot Sundae was nuzzling previously. "Ergh... um, could you stop doing that to my back? You know how it is for me there..."

Luna blushed a bright red and hopped back. "S-sorry. I'm just so glad to see you're okay! When did you wake up? And how are the others?"

"About an hour or two ago," Midnight murmured. "And about the others... well, that's why I came to talk to you."

"Oh?" Luna cutely tilted her head in curiosity. "What's going on?"

Midnight decided that it was best to get straight to the point. "Did you make them promise not to say anything about Deneb and the pendant?"

Luna froze. "D-Deneb? I-I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Don't play dumb, Luna," Midnight interrupted. "There's nopony else who could've given them that pendant. Please, just tell me what's going on."

Luna hesitated. "Erm... how do you know that only Deneb could've given them that pendant? What if Altair did? Or they just found it? Or—"

"That pendant was a Suppressor," Midnight said calmly. "You know as well as I do that only three of those were made, one for each of the Summer Triangle."

"So why does that pendant have to come from Deneb?" Luna countered. "Altair could've given it to them, or—or maybe they just happened to find Vega's!"

Midnight recoiled at the sound of her mother's name. "Vega's Suppressor... that's exactly why only Deneb could have given them that pendant."

Luna bit her lip. "What do you mean...?"

“You don’t know?” Midnight frowned. “When Deneb left, he took Vega’s Suppressor with him. That’s part of the reason why... you know...”

“O-oh, it must’ve slipped my mind,” Luna stuttered. “You know how much I pay attention to old Gnosis’s lectures... he’s such a nag, isn’t he?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, Luna,” Midnight said sternly. “Did you or did you not get the others to make a promise with you?”

Luna’s ears drooped, a sad expression forming on her face. “W-well... I-I’m not sure... s-so...”

“They’ve been charged with treason, Luna!” Midnight exclaimed.

“T-treason?” Luna shrunk back, confused.

“Yes, treason,” Midnight continued. “Deneb’s a traitor, and because they refuse to come clean about where they got the pendant from, our father is going to sentence them to death!”

Luna made herself even smaller. “H-he did that? I thought he just put them down there so Gnosis could help them recuperate...”

“Obviously not,” Midnight sighed. “Not only are they charged with treason, they’re charged with the attempted murder of you...”

“Me? But—oh!” Luna bit her lip. “It’s because I was in the infirmary when it happened...”

Midnight nodded. “Listen Luna, there’s a so-called ‘clergypony’ named Lycoris down in the dungeons with the others, trying to get them to tell them the truth behind the pendant. They need to drop whatever promise they made with you to clear their names!”

Luna was at a loss for words. She stood at her doorway, shuffling her hooves, her eyes looking every which way away from Midnight. “I... um...”

The indigo unicorn suddenly grabbed Luna’s hoof, looking at her with urgent eyes. “Just come with me down to the dungeons. I’m not the pony you need to be talking to about this.” Without waiting for a response, she dragged the pony out of her room, shutting the door behind them. As they galloped back to the dungeons, the servant ponies roaming the halls gave the pair strange looks, but the two ponies ignored their inquiring gazes. Luna stayed silent the entire time, wondering what exactly she was supposed to say.

As they pushed past the cathedral and into the underground passages, Luna decided to speak up. “U-um... Midnight? Are you mad at me...?”

"I'm trying to keep my friends from being either killed or locked away down here forever," Midnight replied in-between breaths. "As for if I'm mad at you... no. I'm just confused as to why you'd make a promise like that."

"So you're not mad at me?" Luna let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness... if you really were mad at me then I thought that maybe... um..."

Midnight abruptly stopped short of the entrance to the dungeon. "Did you think I was going to leave you if I was mad enough?"

Luna grimaced. "U-um... well... kinda..."

Midnight sighed and gave her sister a small smile. "Luna... I'll never leave you. Remember that promise we made back in the gardens?"

Luna quickly nodded. "Of course I do! When we were playing frisbee, right?"

"Yeah." Midnight closed her eyes in reminiscence. "I promised that I'd never leave you alone. Until the Day of Ascension, it'll be me, you, and Celestia against the world if need be."

Luna hesitated. "And after the Day of Ascension...?"

Midnight blinked. "After...?"

Luna gazed at her younger sister with a sad look in her eyes. "You haven't thought about it at all, have you?"

Midnight tried to maintain her composure. "I assume that I'll just live happily in the paradise you and Celestia will create. But that doesn't matter right now, what's really important to me is to be with my two sisters until the Ascension."

"*You* will live happily in the paradise we create," Luna said quietly, ignoring the latter part of Midnight's statement. "But I... nevermind."

"Go on Luna," Midnight gently pressed. "Do you have something you need to say to me?"

Luna shook her head. "No, I'm fine!"

"... are you having second thoughts about the Day of Ascension?" Midnight inquired.

"N-no! I mean, yes! I mean..." Luna took a deep breath. "Midnight... I know how important it is for me to go through with it, and I wouldn't dream of trying to avoid it, but... it's still so scary, you know?"

Midnight gently nuzzled the darker pony, trying to comfort her. "I know it's scary, but just think of how happy everypony'll be after that day."

Luna smiled a weak smile. "I know, sis, but..."

"Princess Luna? What're you doing down here?" Professor Gnosis trotted haughtily towards the two ponies, a frown plastered on his face. "I thought you were still crying up in your room."

"S-shut up!" Luna exclaimed, a faint blush on her face.

Gnosis smirked at Luna's embarrassment. "Are you telling me you weren't crying? It's been... about three days since the incident? And during all that time you refused to leave your room!"

Luna bared her teeth at the elderly pony, expressing her discomfort. Midnight stepped up in front of Luna to speak. "Professor? Are you done with your, um, business?"

Gnosis gave her a curt nod. "I was reading up on a bit of magical theory to help me determine how exactly we're going to deal with the prisoners. Speaking of which, have you and Lycoris gotten them to talk?"

"I left about twenty minutes ago to get Luna," Midnight answered, "so I'm not really in a position to answer that question."

"Is that so?" Gnosis sighed. "Those ponies better come clean... it'd be a shame to be rid of such interesting specimens."

Luna's ear twitched. "Specimens?"

"Of course!" Gnosis replied. "There's so much research that needs to be done on those ponies! Why didn't they die back at the infirmary? Why do they have the potential to use magic? What does the Goddess plan for them? So many questions that will never be answered once they're dead!"

"Are you telling me that you just want them alive so you can experiment on them?" Luna fumed.

"Ah... well if they confess then we can spare ourselves from putting a pony on the chopping block." Gnosis said bashfully. "Those things were designed for wolves anyways and it'd be more effort than it's worth to make the necessary adjustments to fit a pony."

Midnight sighed and put a hoof on Luna's shoulder. "Let it go, Luna, you should know how he is by now."

“Knowledge over compassion, that’s what I say,” Gnosis commented. “Now let’s get in there and wrangle the truth from those ponies already.”

--

“So that’s why only Deneb could’ve given you ponies that pendant,” Lycoris finished explaining. “Any other questions?” The ponies quietly shuffled their hooves around. They couldn’t find a way out of this one. Lycoris let out a relieved sigh. “Well, since you don’t have any more clever lies to tell, I’m sure that you’ll all have no problems telling Professor Gnosis the t—”

“I’m sorry,” Lily mumbled, “but we can’t.”

Lycoris froze midsentence, his mouth half open and his hoof still extended into the air. “Eh?”

“We... we made a promise,” the yellow pegasus said quietly. “And we don’t break the promises we make...”

“Seriously?” Lycoris frowned. “You girls do know your lives are at stake here, right?”

“Psshhh, like they’re actually going to kill us,” Skyline commented, punching at the air with her forehooves. “Heck, I’d like to see ‘em try! The five of us can take ‘em on!”

The door promptly opened, allowing Gnosis, Midnight, and Luna to enter the room. Gnosis smirked at the cyan pegasus. “Take all of who on, exactly?”

Skyline fell back in surprise. “Ack! When did you get back here?!”

“Just now obviously,” Gnosis answered curtly. “Also... need I remind you what happens to prisoners who speak out of turn?”

“Tch, like I care...” Skyline muttered.

Gnosis’s ears perked. “What was that, *foa*?!”

“I SAID—ulp!”

Pastel stuck a hoof in Skyline’s mouth to keep her from talking. “Oh, Skyline’s just being a silly filly.” The pink pony tilted her head as she spotted the other two ponies behind Gnosis. “Welcome back Midnight! And hi, how you doing Luna?!”

Luna couldn’t help but smile at the earth pony’s frivolity. Somehow she managed to keep it up even in these circumstances. “I’m doing fine Pastel. A little tired, but otherwise...”

“Let’s not waste any time with pleasantries, shall we?” Gnosis interrupted. He glared at the five convicted ponies. “Are you going to do the smart thing and talk? Or are you going to continue with your lies?”

Skyline forcibly removed Pastel's hoof from her mouth. “Isn’t it obvious? We’re gonna—ulp!!”

This time Cinnamon was the one who shoved a hoof in Skyline’s mouth. “Y’know girls? Ah’ve been thinkin’, and well...”

“Oh?” Gnosis laughed dryly. “So the orange earth pony has some sense then?”

Cinnamon turned towards the elderly unicorn. “scuse me, but may ah ask ya ta leave the room fer a few moments. Lycoris and Midnight too. We need ta talk ta the princess in private fer a bit.”

“Leave you with the princess?!” Gnosis seethed. “And just why would I leave her in the company of a bunch of criminals!?”

“I’m fine with it,” Luna said quietly. “A few moments won’t hurt anypony.”

“You obviously have no idea how easy it is to kill a pony.” Gnosis said coldly. “Especially when it’s five against one!”

“I’ll be fine!!” Luna shouted. “They won’t hurt me! Besides... I know how to defend myself. You definitely made sure of that.”

Gnosis scowled. “Fine! Five minutes! Make it quick!” He gestured for Midnight and Lycoris to leave first. As Gnosis followed them, he harshly slammed the door shut, leaving Luna alone with the five ponies.

“Gah!” Skyline spat as soon as Cinnamon removed her hoof. “What the heck are you trying to pull, Cinnamon?!”

“Hush, darling,” Amethyst said quietly. “If you’d stop to *think* for a moment instead of charging in hooves blazing then you’d see that continuing to lie would only dig us deeper down the hole we are all in.”

Cinnamon nodded. “Exactly. Ah know we have a promise and all and well...” she turned to the princess. “That’s why ah asked fer a couple o’ minutes with her.”

A short silence fell over the group, each of the ponies waiting for the others to say something.

“Um... Luna?” Lily mumbled, shyly breaking the tension. “I’d really like it if we could all keep our promise with you but...”

"We're not exactly in a situation where we can keep coverin' fer ya," Cinnamon finished. "If we keep lyin' our heads'll probably be mounted on some kinda poles."

"Like some sort of twisted party decoration!" Pastel added.

Luna grimaced at the less-than-desirable image. "I'm so sorry that you've all been dragged into this mess..."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, darling!" Amethyst comforted. "How could you have known that we would end up in this mess when you told us to make that promise? There's no predicting the future after all!"

"Well... um..." Luna bashfully shuffled her hooves. "I probably should've known what that pendant was... so it's my fault for not paying attention during Gnosis's lectures..."

"Um, girls? We don't exactly have the time ta be makin' each other feel all light and fluffy. We got less than five minutes," Cinnamon commented. "Luna, that Lycoris feller told us that they know without a doubt that the Suppressor pendant thing had to belong to Deneb. That true?"

Luna gave a hesitant nod. "Y-yeah. Altair still needs his, and Deneb stole Vega's when he ran away..."

"What are these Suppressor things anyways?" Skyline frowned. "And how come there are only three of them?"

"Oh, well," Luna furrowed her brow to work out the quickest way to explain it. "Suppressors do exactly as the names say; they suppress a pony's magic. They're just used to keep magical energy from overstressing the body. It's just a precaution to let the Summer Triangle live for a little longer. Only three were made because only three were needed... and don't bother asking me how they're made, I really have no idea."

Cinnamon tapped her proverbial wrist. "We're short on time here, remember? Let me cut straight to the point." She looked directly into Luna's eyes. "If they're absolutely sure that the pendant could have only come from Deneb, then there's no point in keeping the promise anymore. So is it alright if we tell 'em the truth?"

Luna sighed. "You should've told them the truth as soon as they took you girls prisoner... I don't see why you all tried to keep this up for so long."

"Silly filly!" Pastel beamed. "We made a promise with you! And a promise is a promise!"

"What she said," Lily mumbled shyly.

A soft smile crept up upon Luna's face. "You ponies... you're all really..."

"Time's up!" Gnosis shoved the door open, Midnight and Lycoris trailing behind. The two ponies kept their heads turned in opposite directions, as if they were avoiding each other's gazes. Gnosis snickered. "Little Midnight had a small spat with Lycoris, you see."

"It's nothing," Lycoris muttered.

"It's not nothing," Midnight replied under her breath. "I just want to know who the heck you are..."

"Anyways!" Gnosis clopped his hooves together. "Do I have an answer from you all now? Are you going to admit the truth?"

"We are, actually," Amethyst answered. "Everything you said is true. One night in Ponyville, that Deneb fellow showed up out of nowhere and gave me, Pastel, and Lily the pendant. Skyline and Cinnamon were still in Gyren then, so they never actually met the pony. Deneb told us to give the pendant to Midnight, and since he seemed perfectly agreeable at the time we decided to comply. We had absolutely no idea that he was a traitor until today. Is that all you needed to know?"

Gnosis kept silent for a moment. "Hmm... I wasn't really expecting you to talk..." He eyed the group suspiciously. "What made you all keep quiet before?"

"We just don't like authority," Skyline lied. "If you try to make us do something, we're all like, uh, anarchy and communism and stuff. Yeah."

"Is that so...?" Gnosis muttered skeptically.

"Not to mention he was much nicer to us than you ever were..." Amethyst muttered under her breath.

Gnosis chuckled. "Fair enough. I'm starting to get a sense of how you commoners think..."

"So does this mean we're free to go?" Lily asked hopefully.

Gnosis snickered at the yellow pegasus's words. "Of course not! Your punishment may be lighter because you stopped lying, but you're all still criminals!"

"What?!" The ponies outburst simultaneously.

"That's not fair!" Midnight objected. "They came clean! Shouldn't you let them go because of that?!"

"Young Midnight, you should know better than anypony how the law works!" Gnosis exclaimed. "With this information we can drop the charges of high treason, but the charges of attempted murder and withholding information still remain."

"Attempted murder?" Luna glared at the elderly unicorn as she put the pieces together in her head. "The incident in the infirmary was an accident! They weren't trying to murder me!!"

"Despite your opinion on the matter your father views it as attempted murder," Gnosis stated. "I'm sure that he'll drop the charges of high treason, but the ones I stated still remain."

"So what'll the punishment be?" Lycoris brought up. "Surely they'll be able to keep their lives if the treason charges are dropped."

"You're right about the fact that they'll keep their lives..." Gnosis pondered over the matter for a moment. "I'll have to think over this. There's a lot I'd like to do with these ponies, but their offenses aren't so severe that I can do whatever I want with them. Besides," he smirked at Midnight and Luna. "It seems like the princess and her advisor have taken a liking to these ponies. I'm afraid of what two magically endowed specimens would do to me if I angered them."

"Specimens' he says..." Luna muttered under her breath. She stomped her hoof down. "You know what? I'm going to have a little talk with my father about this. He can't keep these ponies in the dungeon, it's not fair!"

Gnosis chuckled. "Life's not fair my dear. But go have a talk with His Highness anyways. And while you're at it, have a talk with Princess Celestia too! Goddess knows you've been shutting them out the past few days!"

Luna glared at the stallion. "Maybe I will!" She turned tail and stomped away from the dungeon, presumably heading towards the throne room and the royal chambers.

Midnight hesitated. "I think I should go with her too..."

"Me too," Lycoris chimed in. Midnight frowned at Lycoris's offer. "What?" he asked. "You're not the only pony who wants to see what happens to these ones."

Midnight sighed. "Fine, whatever." She turned to the five convicts. "Listen girls... I'm going to try my best to get this all solved today. So don't worry, I'll have you out of there in a jiffy!"

"Me too!" Lycoris chimed in again. "I'll also try my best to get this solved today!"

Midnight tried her best to ignore the scarlet pony. "You all just sit tight, okay? I promise I'll be back soon with good news." She galloped out of the room, Lycoris following close behind.

Gnosis brushed some dust off his hooves. "Well, now that they're gone..." He quietly shut the door and turned the lock. "I think it's about time I get to do some 'research.'"

Session 23

Skyline and Cinnamon took a defensive stance trying to protect the other three upon his words. "Ah don't like the sound of that," Cinnamon muttered.

Gnosis smiled a sly smile. "Don't worry, it'll benefit you ponies as much as it'll benefit me." He took a couple steps towards the five ponies, who all took steps back in response. "Oh, don't be scared, I won't bite... much."

"Just what are you planning to do with us, huh?" Skyline prodded. "If you're thinking of doing something messed up, we're not gonna put up with it!"

"Don't you ever get tired of your posturing?" Gnosis taunted. "If you keep this up then ponies will start to see you as a stallion instead of a mare."

"You trying to start something?!" Skyline shouted defensively.

"Hush, Sky!" Cinnamon warned. "Jus' what exactly are ya gonna do that'll benefit us? It looks like ya'd only cause us trouble from mah point of view."

"I do give off that impression, don't I...?" Gnosis smirked at the group of ponies. "The only thing I have to gain is the stimulation of my intellectual curiosity. But what you all will gain is something much greater..."

"I don't like the look you're giving us..." Amethyst muttered.

The gnarled old smile on Gnosis's face twitched for a moment. "Let's just get this over with, shall we?" In a swift movement uncharacteristic of a pony his age, Gnosis lunged at the ponies. Skyline and Cinnamon were quick to reflexively leap out of the way, but the same couldn't be said for the ponies they were trying to protect. Gnosis pushed his hoof into Lily's head, launching her straight into the stone wall behind her. The harsh sound of the impact echoed through the room, along with a pained gasp from the yellow pegasus.

"Lily!!" Amethyst was the first to respond, quickly galloping to her best friend's aid. "What do you think you're doing you ruffian?!"

"If you take one step closer I'll break her neck," Gnosis threatened. "You'd be surprised at how fragile a pony's neck could be if the right amount of pressure is applied..."

Amethyst clenched her hoof. Skyline angrily spat at the elderly unicorn. "Just what the heck do you think you're doing!? I thought we were off the death sentence!!?"

"You are," Gnosis stated calmly. "This is just something I'm doing of my own accord."

Cinnamon viciously hooved at the ground. "Why ya no good lyin' backstabbin' li'l—"

"Calm yourself!" Gnosis interrupted. "Don't worry, this will all be over soon..." He leaned his head in towards Lily, close enough that he could feel her breath on his ears.

"P-please... s-stop..." Lily pleaded. "It h-hurts..."

Gnosis ignored the pegasus's protests, harshly prodding his nose into the spot directly below Lily's neck as if he was searching for something. Lily shivered uncomfortably, squirming to get free, but the stallion refused to loosen his hold on her.

"Aah!" Lily let out a pained cry as she felt Gnosis dig his nose deeper into her body. Suddenly, she felt her body stiffen, her mouth opening to form a voiceless scream. The elderly unicorn smirked. It appeared that he found what he was looking for; a small solid object protruding from Lily's chest. He loosened his hold, the lack of support causing the pegasus to crumple onto the ground.

"Lily!!" Amethyst galloped to the fallen pony's side. Lily was still conscious, but her breaths were raggedy and uneven.

"The debris from the pendant struck her directly in the chest," Gnosis explained nonchalantly. "Only the very tip is exposed, the rest of it is embedded into her flesh. I wouldn't be surprised if a little bit of it is actually rooted inside her heart." He briefly glanced at the other four ponies in the room, halting his gaze on Pastel. Just like he did before, Gnosis swiftly lunged at the pink earth pony, but this time Skyline and Cinnamon were prepared. The two ponies moved to intercept Gnosis, keeping him from pinning Pastel like he did Lily.

"Heh, quick to learn, aren't you?" Gnosis taunted. "But one of you is just as good as the other!!" He rapidly dodged the two ponies' assaults, sidestepping Cinnamon while ducking under Skyline. Gnosis reached out for the cyan pegasus, ramming his hoof into her chest.

Skyline let out a sharp intake of breath as the blow reverberated through her body. Gnosis had managed to get Skyline in the exact same spot where he got Lily. The cyan pegasus felt something small shift inside of her body—inside of her heart—causing her to collapse down to the floor, clutching her chest. "W-what... the..."

"Skyline!!" Pastel galloped to her friend's aid, doing whatever she could to comfort her. "You didn't have to... I could've..."

“Just as I thought, the shards are embedded in the exact same location,” Gnosis observed as he casually brushed the dust off his hooves. “It probably wouldn’t be a stretch to say that the shards pierced the rest of you in the same spot too.”

“What the heck are ya doin’!?” Cinnamon exclaimed. “Who cares where those shards are? Yer just hurtin’ ‘em fer no reason!”

“No reason?” Gnosis frowned. “I did it for the pursuit of knowledge, isn’t that enough reason?”

“Of course it’s not!” Amethyst objected. “You can’t just hurt others for the sake of a little information! That’s just barbaric!!”

“‘Barbaric,’ she says...” Gnosis scoffed. “Well, if you’d rather have that little weak point discovered during a scuffle with a bunch of creatures who wish to do you harm, be my guest. Though I don’t think they’d be quite as merciful...”

“This is what you call merciful...?” Skyline moved Pastel aside as she struggled to get back on her hooves, her body still shaking from the pain.

“Sky... you’re still hurt...” Pastel mumbled, trying to get Skyline to lie back down.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?” Gnosis pointed out. “That sounds pretty merciful to me.” He turned towards Amethyst, whose hooves were draped around Lily. “What are you waiting for? Aren’t you going to heal her?”

“H-heal her?” Amethyst parroted, her composure beginning to crumble apart.

“Yes, yes, heal her!” Gnosis said impatiently. “You’re a unicorn who can use magic, you have that power. So cast it already if you’re so worried about your dear little friend!”

Amethyst hesitated, not knowing what to do now that she’s been put on the spot. “I...” She gazed down at the suffering pegasus, her best friend, wanting to ease her pain. “What am I supposed to do...?”

“Use the power of your will!” Gnosis commanded. “Now hurry it up, we don’t have all day to wait around on you!!”

Amethyst tried her best to concentrate on the mare in front of her. As she focused her gaze on the pegasus, she noticed the fringes of color that exuded from Lily’s body. It was a soothing bright yellow... a color that seemed to represent everything that Lily was. Yet the flow of the color was frantic, agitated, completely unlike the calm pony Amethyst knew and loved. The unicorn concentrated all her thoughts towards helping Lily. She had the strange desire to make the colors reflect the normal Lily—to make them calm, serene.

Slowly... a tint of lavender began to creep its way into Lily's aura. For a moment, Amethyst was afraid that the new color would harm her friend. But then she realized that the lavender was her own aura, gently waving itself over Lily like a blanket. Amethyst did what felt natural to her, letting her colors blend with Lily's in accordance with her desire to comfort the pegasus.

It felt strangely... intimate for Amethyst. The sensation she was feeling now was completely new to her. It was like her mind was stretching out of her body and into her friend's, like her own personal self was blending in with Lily's. For a moment, it scared Amethyst. What if she couldn't get back into her body? What if she left a part of her with Lily when she was finished? All sorts of worries filled her head, but the one thought still remained. She wanted to ease Lily's pain. As long as she could do that, she didn't care what would happen to her.

"Mmph..." Lily let out a small moan, bringing Amethyst back into her body. The lavender receded from the yellow, leaving behind a much more docile aura. "A-Amethyst...? Was that you...?"

Amethyst gave a tired smile in response. "Are you feeling better now, darling?"

"Um... yeah..." Lily nodded. "The pain's all gone now so..."

"Thank goodness..." Amethyst suddenly collapsed onto the ground, panting.

"Ame!!" Lily leapt up to her hooves and tried to get the unicorn off the ground.

"She's just tired," Gnosis stated. "It was her first time casting a spell, and the first time is always the hardest. Although I didn't expect it to go so smoothly... interesting..."

"It didn't have to go at all if you didn't freaking hit us..." Skyline muttered under her breath.

Gnosis smirked at the cyan pegasus's comment. "I may have done this to satisfy myself, but I'm sure you all benefited from this as well. Not only do you know your weak spots, but your little unicorn over there has now had an intro to magic. Absolutely free too, I'll have you know my services aren't cheap."

Pastel blew a raspberry at the elderly stallion. "Who'd want to pay for a meanie-pants's services?"

"The Royal Family obviously," Gnosis retorted. His ear twitched, and the sound of hooves clopping on stone could be heard in the distance. "Speaking of which... I think I hear them coming down now. I wonder what sentence they determined for you ponies..."

--

"Father! Mother!!" Luna shouted as she burst through the doors that led into the throne room.

The two ponies in question were not in the room, causing Luna to kick at the ground in frustration.

"Luna?" A familiar voice spoke out with relief, "You're finally out of your room?"

Luna jumped and turned to face the source of the voice. Princess Celestia was standing off to the side, a tired expression on her face. "Oh... hello Celly. Where are our parents?"

"Still asleep," Celestia answered. "It was a long night last night... so are you finally feeling better then?"

"Luna!" Midnight and Lycoris galloped into the room, huffing to catch their breath. "Couldn't you have slowed down a bit...?"

"Midnight!" Celestia beamed towards her younger sister. "It's so good to see you awake!!"

"Oh, hi Celly," Midnight smiled. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"So mother and father are in their room?" Luna asked, getting back to the subject.

Celestia frowned. "Well, yes they are. They don't usually sleep anywhere else so..."

"Alright, thanks!!" Luna cried out, dashing towards the Royal Chambers.

"Ah, Luna, wait!!" Celestia called. "What is with that pony this morning?"

"Sorry, Celestia," Midnight apologized. "I'll fill you in later." She hurried to follow Luna before the princess got too far up ahead.

Lycoris gave a short bow and followed suit. "Hold on a moment!" Celestia suddenly put a hoof out to stop the scarlet unicorn. "Who are you and what gives you the right to enter the Royal Chambers?"

"I'm a clergypony," Lycoris replied. "And I have the right just because I do." He tore away from Celestia and galloped up the spiral staircase.

"Hey, get back here!!" Celestia shouted as she leapt to follow the clergypony.

The ponies all followed Luna to the mid-level of the tower, where the king and queen slept. Luna pounded on the door. "Father! Mother!! Could you come out please?!"

“Luna, calm down!” Midnight gasped as she finally caught up to the princess. “There’s no need to be banging on their door like that...”

“It is quite rude,” Lycoris commented as he rounded up the staircase.

“Don’t take another step further!!” Celestia ordered, stopping herself in her tracks just before she crashed into Lycoris. “A clergypony does not have permission to be up here!”

“So you don’t know who he is either,” Midnight quietly stated.

“Well I think I’ve seen his face before in the cathedral,” Celestia clarified. “But aside from that, no, I don’t know who he is. So if you don’t want to be thrown in the dungeons you better—”

The door to the king’s and queen’s chamber opened, derailing Celestia’s line of questioning. “What’s going on out here?” Queen Ambrosia asked, rubbing her eyes.

Luna gave her mother a quick bow. “I need to talk to father,” she told the queen.

“Luna? You’re out of your room?” Ambrosia gave a relieved smile and pulled her daughter into a hug. “Thank goodness you’re okay, we were getting worried!”

Luna squirmed in her mother’s hooves, embarrassed. “Mom... you don’t need to... I need to talk to father!”

“I’m right here,” King Themis said with a gravelly voice, stepping next to his wife. “What do you need to talk to me about?”

“Drop the charges you placed on those ponies!” Luna commanded. “Skyline, Pastel, Cinnamon, Lily, and Amethyst! Let them go!!”

Themis scowled. “What do you think you’re doing? Speaking to your father with that tone of voice...”

“Please excuse the princess’s rudeness, Your Highness,” Lycoris humbly apologized.

The king raised an eyebrow. “Lycoris? What are you...?”

“You know this pony?” Celestia and Midnight asked simultaneously.

Themis hesitated. “Dear?” Ambrosia cut in, “I’m afraid I have no knowledge on who this pony is either. Would you mind explaining?”

“He’s... just a clergypony,” Themis answered, “an orphan that Professor Gnosis took under his watchful care.”

“An orphan...?” Midnight repeated, mulling over the words inside her head.

“Anyways,” the king turned his head back to Luna, returning to the subject at hand, “What are you going on about? Setting those criminals free...”

“I’m telling you they’re not criminals!” Luna cried. “It’s all just a misunderstanding!”

“A misunderstanding?” Themis repeated, raising an eyebrow. “There is no misunderstanding here, Luna. I told you back then that those ponies needed to be put down in the dungeons!”

“Yeah, so it’d be easier for Gnosis to look after them!” Luna protested. “And you didn’t even wait to hear my side of the story!”

“A king must take swift actions!” Themis bellowed, causing the other ponies to flinch. “If you were truly worried about those ponies we would’ve had this conversation days ago. Instead you threw a tantrum and refused to speak to any of us!!”

Luna recoiled, her father’s words cutting deep inside her heart. After the events in the infirmary, King Themis gave the swift order to send the ponies to the dungeons, and all Luna did in response was mope around and sulk in the corner of her room. She timidly raised a hoof, the knowledge that the fates of five innocent ponies rested on her spurring her on. “E-even so... you can’t keep them down in the dungeons. I promise you, they weren’t trying to kill me!!”

King Themis sighed and kneaded his forehead with his hooves. “Luna... I’m sorry to say this, but you’re an extremely gullible pony.”

Luna’s jaw dropped at her father’s words. “Gullible?! I—”

“You’ve barely talked to anypony outside our family, have next to no experience in the outside world, and worst of all you continue to act like a filly!” Themis pointed out. “If those ponies wished to fool you into trusting them, I’m afraid it wouldn’t be that difficult.”

“But... but if they were trying to murder me, then why were they hurt by it too?!” Luna cried.

“It isn’t too far-fetched to believe that radical traitors would give their lives for their cause,” Themis answered.

Luna bit back her frustration, her mind unable to come up with a suitable rebuttal. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she scrambled for the right words that’d free the ponies, but nothing came to her.

"If I may interject," Lycoris suddenly said, causing the group to turn their attentions onto the scarlet unicorn, "those ponies don't strike me as the type who'd attempt murder."

The king furrowed his brow. "Just what are you—"

"Luna's gullible, yes," Lycoris interrupted, "and it wouldn't be too farfetched to say that Midnight could be fooled too. But me..." He looked the king straight in the eye, his gaze strong and unfaltering. "You know about me. I can't be fooled."

"Or maybe," Themis responded with a low growl, "because of who you are, you are the easiest to be fooled."

"What the heck are you talking about?" Midnight cut in, her confusion mounting. "Could somepony just tell me who exactly Lycoris is?!"

"In due time," Themis said abruptly. "Come now, we're going down to the dungeon. "I'll put an end to this matter."

The king briskly marched past the ponies as he headed down the spiral staircase, the other ponies hurrying to catch up after him. Midnight turned to the queen as they passed through the throne room. "Mother... do you have any idea what's going on right now?"

Ambrosia shook her head. "Sometimes I think it's best if we just let your father take the reins. Everything he does is for the good of everypony else, after all."

Gah... this is so frustrating! Midnight thought to herself. *All these secrets and nopony wants to reveal them! I'm supposed to know everything revolving around the princesses, but for some reason this clergypony knows more than I do!! It's so frustrating, frustrating—*

"Frustrating!!"

Twilight stomped her hoof down in the white void, her annoyance snapping everypony else out of the past.

"Whassgoin' on Twiligh'?" Applejack slurred, her body still getting over the effects of the trance.

"I'm getting sick and tired of not knowing anything!" Twilight complained. "*Excio animae*, Catalysts, Suppressors, Ascension, auras, that Goddess, not to mention that so-called Truth—am I missing anything else here?"

"Dimensions~" Pinkie exclaimed enthusiastically.

Twilight facehooved. "Yeah, that too."

Rainbow Dash groggily rubbed her forehead. "Pinkie... how the heck can you be so cheerful with all that crap that's happening to us right now?"

Pinkie shrugged. "Because we're all doing it together? If we're all downy all the time, then nothing'll ever get done, so we gotta cheer each other up to keep on going!"

"But all we do is watch..." Fluttershy mumbled. "It's not like we actually get anything done ourselves..."

"We're learning, aren't we?" Pinkie retorted, tilting her head to the side. "You know what they say, knowing is half the battle!"

"What's the other half then?" Twilight asked tiredly.

Pinkie put a hoof to her chin as she pondered. "Hmm... luck and intuition I suppose. If you can't depend on knowledge, you can always depend on yourself~"

Twilight raised a hoof to object for a moment before quietly lowering it back to the ground. "Pinkie... that's surprisingly wise of you to say."

"If I may suggest," Rarity spoke up, "could we possibly review everything so far? We've had all this information thrown at us and barely any time to take it all in!"

The purple unicorn slumped and grinded a hoof against her forehead. "Yeah... let's take a moment to do that."

"First off," Applejack said, "what's up with that Gnosis feller? Fer an ol' pony like him he sure can move around..."

"He's just a jerk!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, pumping her hooves in the air. "Beating us up for no good reason... if I had my way I'd give him one for sure!"

"I don't think he's a bad pony," Fluttershy mumbled.

The cyan pegasus recoiled at the timid pony's statement. "You *what*?! He's beating us up for no apparent reason; of course he's a bad pony!!"

“Eep!” Fluttershy squeaked at Rainbow Dash’s outburst and hid behind Rarity. “Well... h-he did have a reason... showing us our weak spots...”

Rarity gently patted Fluttershy along her mane to calm her down. “I’d hate to defend a ruffian such as himself, but dear Fluttershy here does have a point. I’d rather he than one of those wolves.” A faint blush rose to Rarity’s face as she felt the events in the past play out in the background. “And... right now he *is* teaching Amethyst how to use magic...”

“Girls, let’s stay in the present, or whatever this is,” Twilight told her friends. “We won’t be able to really concentrate on sorting our thoughts if they’re split between then and now. Besides, all Midnight is doing right now is trotting down to the dungeons with everypony else...”

“You’re right darling, I apologize,” Rarity said as she cut herself off completely from the past, everypony else following suit shortly afterwards. “So I believe the topic at hand was that Gnosis fellow?”

“From what I gather, he’s the professor of Midnight, Luna, and Celestia,” Twilight offered, sifting through the memories her ancestor had provided her. “He’s a bit strict, and kind of a jerk, but Midnight has nothing but respect for him so...”

“If Midnight’s okay with him, then that means he’s a good guy?” Rainbow Dash scoffed. “A good guy wouldn’t be abusing and threatening us!”

“I’m just saying maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt!” Twilight refuted. “I mean, if I thought somepony was trying to kill you girls, I probably wouldn’t exactly be kind to them either...”

“Ah always thought murder and stuff were jus’ things in stories,” Applejack muttered. “Think about it, nopony ever harmed anypony else in Equestria... sure, accidents happen every once in a while, but there’s never any ill intent behind ‘em.”

“Modern day Equestria doesn’t have wolves!” Pinkie pointed out. “It’s a lot safer today than it was then! The worst that we ever have to worry about are hydras and cockatrices and manticores and dragons and all that other stuff, but as long as we stay out of the Everfree Forest those things never come out!”

“Well Pinkie dear, I was ponynapped by those Diamond Dogs,” Rarity reminded her. “Although... they weren’t exactly a threat. Not exactly the brightest creatures around.”

“Princess Celestia just takes great care of her subjects,” Twilight said softly. “With her power, it isn’t hard to believe that she can keep order within Equestria...”

A brief silence fell over the ponies when the subject of Celestia was brought up. Twilight stared blankly into the dense fog, her thoughts occupied with the crumbling image of her mentor.

“Umm... Twilight?” Fluttershy mumbled. “Do you wanna talk about it a little...? I mean, you know, about the princess...”

Twilight hesitated. “I just don’t like being lied to, that’s all. Especially when I thought the pony lying would always tell the truth...”

A sudden thought struck Rarity. “Twilight darling, maybe it’s not that she doesn’t *want* to tell you the truth, but that she isn’t even *able* to tell you the truth!”

Twilight looked confusedly at the pearl-white unicorn. “Beg pardon?”

“Maybe she promised somepony that she wouldn’t tell,” Fluttershy said quietly. “Like the promise our ancestors made with Princess Luna...”

“That’s...” Twilight’s voice trailed off. “That... sounds like something she’d do. I’ve never seen Princess Celestia ever break a promise before... but who would make her promise such a thing?”

The six ponies thought for a few moments, trying to determine who the pony Celestia promised might be. “Hmm, let’s just put that aside for now. Howsabout talking about something else?” Pinkie spoke, not wanting to stand still in the eerie silence of the void. “I wanna talk about the Day of Ascension thingy for a bit, everything seems to go back to it after all!”

“Ah agree sugarcube,” Applejack said, nodding. “Ah’d rather talk about the things we do know over makin’ wild guesses as to who this mystery pony is.”

Twilight tilted her head in agreement. “Alright then, the Day of Ascension.” The purple unicorn pursed her lips in thoughts. “From what everypony’s been saying about it, it’s the apotheosis of Princess Celestia and Princess Luna.”

“Apo—what now?” Rainbow Dash frowned.

"Apotheosis," Twilight repeated. "It's when—"

"It's the ascension to godhood~" Pinkie finished. "So the Day of Ascension is probably when the princesses become the goddesses of the sun and moon!"

"Well that part is obvious," Rarity commented. "At least, it's obvious to anypony who has paid attention during her language classes."

"Ha ha, very funny," Rainbow Dash responded sarcastically. "If it's so simple, then what's the deal with all this other stuff like Catalysts and that exmiko whatever-ae?"

"Ah think the point is that it's not simple, sugarcube," Applejack commented. "All that complicated other stuff is needed 'cuz ya can't raise up the princesses up as high as they are without some kinda magical doo-dads. If it was that easy makin' ponies into Goddesses, why, ah'm sure we'd all be flyin' high in the sky with them fancy alicorn wings!"

"Which is why the Day of Ascension needs Catalysts and that *excio animae* thing," Twilight said. "But that much should be obvious."

"Excuse me for not catching the obvious then..." Rainbow Dash muttered. "I'm a pony of action! All these details and things only slow me down!"

"The details are important, Dash," Twilight scolded. "So quiet down and think for a little bit."

The cyan pegasus plopped onto the ground with a resigned scowl on her face. "Fine, whatever, I'll try to be an egghead for a bit."

Twilight returned Dash's brusqueness with a warm smile. "Good. Now, we get what the Day of Ascension is but... why is Midnight always so worried whenever it comes up?"

"... Princess Luna's worried about it too," Fluttershy mumbled.

"Huh?" Twilight turned to the yellow pegasus. "How do you know that?"

"A while ago... back in the Everfree Forest..." Fluttershy answered. "You were still asleep then... there was this weird sensation where I could feel Princess Luna's thoughts, and when it came to the Ascension..."

Twilight kneaded her forehead in thought. "Midnight... Princess Luna... if the Day of Ascension was just the princesses' transformation into alicorns, then they wouldn't be so worried about it..." She faced the other ponies. "Do you girls remember if Princess Celestia ever acted weird when it was mentioned?"

The girls shook their heads. "Princess Celestia always conducts herself with finesse," Rarity told her. "Even if she was apprehensive about the Ascension, she *definitely* wouldn't allow anypony to notice it."

"She does seem pretty good at hiding things..." Twilight said with a distant voice. "Anyways, there's something strange about the Day of Ascension, something that only a few ponies know. And those ponies aren't willing to let on about what it is..."

"Maybe..." Fluttershy hesitated.

"What is it Fluttershy?" Applejack said, nudging the pegasus along.

Fluttershy shrunk back, trying to hide her eyes behind her mane. "Maybe... it's when Princess Luna transforms into Nightmare Moon..."

A pregnant pause followed Fluttershy's words, the possibility of what she said settling into each of the ponies' minds. Rarity was the first to break the silence, forcing out an uncomfortably loud laugh. "Ohh, Fluttershy-y-y-y," she said, punctuating the end of the pegasus's name with a strained chortle. "That's just ridiculous~"

"Is it, Rarity?" Fluttershy asked quietly.

The unicorn fell silent again, the unnatural smile still plastered on her face.

"It would explain why Princess Luna and Midnight are so hesitant about it..." Twilight mused. "But why would they want to create a monster out of Princess Luna?"

To this, no pony had a response.

"Ack, what's the point in just standing around here and talking about this stuff?" Rainbow Dash huffed. "The only way we're ever going to get anywhere and figure out what the heck is going on is if we Dive back into the past and see it ourselves!"

“Rainbow Dash is right,” Rarity quietly agreed. “If we spend any more time around here twiddling our hooves then we’ll only ever end up going in circles.”

Twilight stood in silence for a moment, trying to mull over the information in her mind. Her friends were right; all they could ever do around this endless void was talk about things they’ve already learned. They were only wasting their time by trying to reason things out themselves. It would be best for them to just take things in stride while thinking about what things mean on their own time.

“Alright girls, lets head back into the past,” Twilight decided, bowing her head down.

The group of ponies all nodded and turned their backs on each other, allowing the flowing fog to take repossession of their bodies, easing them in back into the world and minds of their ancestors.

Session 24

Midnight, Themis, Ambrosia, Luna, Celestia, and Lycoris all made their way through the underground corridors of the cathedral, barely speaking a word the whole way. Every time Midnight, Luna, or Celestia tried to ask something, they were hushed down by Ambrosia or given a cryptic non-answer from Lycoris, causing the lot of them to just keep their mouths zipped tight the whole way down. It frustrated Midnight to say the least.

They made no attempt to disguise their hoofsteps, so it was no surprise that the ponies within the dungeon could hear them coming from many meters away. Gnosis smirked at the five ponies kept under his jurisdiction. "I wonder what sentence they determined for you ponies..."

Amethyst held Lily close to her body as if she was trying to protect her, with the other ponies crowding around them in a defensive stance. Gnosis chuckled. "Isn't this cute... the prisoners think they can protect themselves from their fates..."

The dungeon door swung open and the six other ponies made their way into the crowded room. Themis and Ambrosia stood at the center, Luna at her mother's side and Celestia at her father's. Further to the border was Gnosis to Celestia's side and Midnight and Lycoris to Luna's side, the ring of ponies surrounding the five prisoners huddled in the middle of the room. The prisoners made eye-contact as they looked to Midnight and Luna for help, hoping that they managed to convince King Themis that they were innocent.

"So we meet again," Themis grumbled, gesturing towards Skyline and Cinnamon. "You two certainly haven't changed from our encounter in Gyren... and Miss Lily was it?" he asked, turning to the yellow pegasus hidden underneath Amethyst. "You act with so much more grace than those two ruffians did the other day... shame you were roped into treason."

"We have nothing to do with any sort of treason!" Amethyst defended. "It was all just a misunderstanding!"

An expression of displeasure flashed itself across Themis's face. He wasn't used to his subjects talking back to him, and he certainly didn't like it. He wiped that expression off his face before confronting the fashionista. "Why hello there, I don't believe we have met, Miss...?"

"Amethyst," the unicorn answered with a slight tinge of fear in her voice.

“Amethyst, eh...” Themis repeated as if he was rolling the name around his tongue. “And what about you?” he asked, gesturing towards the pink pony.

“I’m Pastel Lollipop!” Pastel answered enthusiastically.

Themis couldn’t help but show a slight smile that he quickly wiped away. There was just something about Pastel that had that kind of effect on others. Ambrosia, on the other hand, smiled freely at the pink pony. “It’s nice to meet you Miss Lollipop.”

“Shame such a nice pony is accused of being a traitor,” Themis said, narrowing his eyes.

“So, *Your Highness*,” Skyline said bitterly, trying her best to keep her temper in check. “What’s going on? Are we off the hook or what?”

“You would do best to be respectful around the one who’ll determine your sentence,” Themis growled. He turned to the professor. “Tell me Gnosis, what is your opinion on these ponies?”

Gnosis chuckled at the king’s question. “These ponies are ill-mannered, hot-tempered ruffians who quite obviously represent their backwater heritage. If it were up to me I’d keep them confined to whence they came.” The open insult to the ponies caused Skyline to reflexively clench her hoof. “But!” Gnosis suddenly said, interrupting the cyan pegasus’s prepared retort. “But... I don’t believe that they knowingly committed crimes of treason against the State. Masterminding such a task would be beyond the capabilities of their primitive intellects.”

“Primitive?!” Amethyst objected. “Well I have never been so insulted as to—wait... what?” Her anger was replaced by confusion as she realized what the elder stallion just said. Was he... defending them?

“They’re foolishly innocent and probably can’t even go more than three steps without having the wool pulled over their eyes,” Gnosis continued. “They’d probably trust a wolf if it gave them a convincing enough sob story, so it’s not a surprise that Deneb got these halfwits to do his bidding. If anything, they should be charged for crimes of utter stupidity!”

The five prisoners stared at the elderly stallion, their mouths agape. They wouldn’t have thought after all this time that the pony who had oppressed and abused them would end up trying to liberate them.

Themis mulled over Gnosis’s testimony, kneading his brow in thought. A tense atmosphere settled over everypony as the king thought, leaving each of them anxiously waiting for Themis’s decree. Each of them except for two.

Gnosis stood to the side, yawning. He played his part, and it didn't really seem to matter to him which side of the coin the ponies' fates rested on. Lycoris had the same expression, however... there was something... off about it. At first glance he looked detached from the scene, his eyes wandering around the room in what seemed like boredom. But just past the surface... his eyes held a completely different expression. It looked like he already knew what the outcome of this meeting would be, and he was looking toward an encounter that stood farther along the future than this one. It seemed to him that the fate of this meeting had been predetermined beforehand.

It was a look that nobody physically present in the room could notice or understand. Only the silent observers took note of this through another's eyes.

The king suddenly opened his mouth and uttered two words. "I see."

These two simple words the king uttered pushed the ponies to the edge. What did he see? Did he see that they were all innocent? Or did he still see them as criminals and was going to sentence them to life in prison?

Themis slowly looked over each of the five ponies, gauging their reactions. Their faces held a mix of fear, tension, and apprehension. But above all... their eyes contained genuine innocence.

"It is a fact," Themis said quietly, "that your actions have put my daughter in mortal peril. It is also a fact that you all acted as accomplices for a traitor, even if you were truly unaware of his identity." The ponies stayed silent, knowing that the king wasn't finished yet. "However... ignorance should not be considered a crime worth capital punishment. I trust Professor Gnosis's judgment, and as of this moment... I will decide to give you five ponies the benefit of the doubt. Your freedom from this dungeon is secured."

The ponies suddenly broke out in laughter. Wide smiles erupted from their faces and they embraced each other in relief.

They were free.

Midnight galloped over to join the merriment of the rest of her friends. "I'm so glad you girls are off the hook!" she cried, tears of joy falling from her eyes as she jumped into the group hug.

"There ain't no way we'd be locked away forever!" Cinnamon laughed.

Luna and Celestia trotted over to the pile of ponies. "It's nice to see that the charges are dropped," the elder sister said. "It'd be a shame to see such good ponies unjustly punished."

"Yeah..." Luna said, relieved. "I'm glad my stupidity didn't get you all in too much trouble..."

Pastel giggled. "Only good things happen to good ponies!"

Lily smiled softly. "Yeah... good things..." The smile slowly faded from her face as her eyes caught sight of the ponies that stood at the side.

Gnosis and Ambrosia stood quietly behind the king, who looked like he still had more to say. But behind them, the scarlet stallion was making his way out of the room. Lycoris paused just short of the door, noticing Lily's eyes fixated on him. He turned around, showing the pegasus a slight expression of sadness.

"Eek!" Lily let out a small gasp of discomfort, too soft to be heard over the gaiety of her friends. It felt like something just pierced into her mind, opening her consciousness to the world around her.

I'm sorry... a voice echoed within her mind. Startled, Lily flinched, causing her friends to take notice of her discomfort.

"You alright, darling?" Amethyst asked. "We weren't holding you too tightly, were we?"

You probably would have been better off locked away down here to be honest... the voice said. I apologize in advance Lily... for everything...

The realization hit Lily as soon as the door quietly shut itself, confining her consciousness within the reaches of her own mind. *Lycoris... why are you apologizing?*

"Um... Lily? Are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh!" Lily shook herself back into reality, noticing her friends giving her a worried look. "I-I'm fine..."

"Are you sure, Lily?" Pastel asked, a frown plastered on her face. "You looked all spacey and out of it... are you still aching from the pains from earlier?"

Lily forced a smile, not wanting to worry her friends. "No... I'm fine, don't worry..." Once she got the chance, she needed to ask Lycoris what that was all about...

King Themis suddenly spoke up. "I loathe interrupting the happiness of my subjects, but it appears that you're all done celebrating so..."

Midnight snapped to attention. "What is it, father?"

The stallion sighed. "I may have decided to release you from this dungeon... but that doesn't mean that I'm completely dropping all your charges."

The smiles instantly dropped from all of their faces. "What the heck is up with that?!" Skyline yelled.

"This isn't fair!" Luna cried out. "You said it yourself that you're letting them go! Doesn't that mean you think of them as innocent?!"

"Innocence can be feigned," Themis explained quietly. "You ponies might all very well be completely innocent, but on the other hand you all could be experts of deception."

Cinnamon yanked on Skyline's tail before the cyan pegasus could throw another outburst at the monarch. "If ya don't mind me askin'," Cinnamon said, looking Themis directly in the eye, "can ya be straight with what yer gonna do with us now?"

Themis nodded. "I'm sure you've all heard the expression 'actions speak louder than words.' If I was a king who let himself be swayed by mere discourse, then I would've been fooled long ago by the Ambassadors of neighboring territories. A silver tongue can only get you so far in life you see." He paused and made sure that everypony was giving him their full attention. "So... until you prove to me beyond reasonable doubt that you are loyal to the State, you must all have an escort with you at all times."

"You're putting them on probation?" Midnight asked quietly.

"Yes I am, my child," Themis answered. "If their escorts even catch the slightest hint of disloyalty or rebellion... they'll have permission to execute them on the spot."

Skyline ground her teeth together. "I can't believe it... you're still suspicious of us?!"

"Calm down Skyline!" Amethyst said firmly. "Think about it for a moment... we may be kept under watch, but we'll be plenty freer then we would have been if we were sentenced to be locked in this dreary dungeon for the rest of our lives!"

"Hmph," Gnosis grunted, making his first sound in a while. "At least one of you has sense. You're all getting out of here with your lives intact, be thankful for that and stop complaining." He lifted himself off of the wall he had been leaning on and threw open the door. "I've wasted enough time here. If you'll excuse me Your Highness, but I have to attend to... certain duties if you will. I'll send him down once I've got him prepared, Your Highness." Themis gave a curt nod to the professor, who gave a quick bow before exiting and shutting the door behind him.

"... he's right, everypony," Celestia muttered. "Even if you all are on prohibition, you'll all still be pretty much able to live your own lives. You're all honest ponies, so the worse-case scenario is that you'll each be stuck with a constant companion. And that's not so bad, is it?"

"Correction," Themis cut in, "not 'each.' They'll only have two escorts assigned to them." He ran his eyes over the symbols that rested on all of their flanks. "They have magic

now... there are only two ponies that I trust to be able to handle magical anomalies. Of course since there are only two of them, your five can't wander about separately anymore..."

"So we're stuck together?" Lily murmured. "I-I mean, not that I really mind but..."

Themis opened his mouth to answer, but Pastel got to speaking first. "It's only until we prove that we're innocent beyond reasonable doubt!" she answered enthusiastically. "Weren't you listening, silly?"

Themis sighed. He hated being beaten to the punch. "I'm going to overlook that misstep... but yes, she's correct. This is only a temporary measure until your actions show to me that you all are loyal to the State."

"Then how exactly are we supposed to prove ourselves innocent?" Amethyst asked.

"It's simple really," Themis spoke. "To prove that you're all not traitors, turn in the pony who put you all into this position in the first place."

The ponies stood silent for a moment, realizing what they'd have to do to clear their names. Luna gave voice these thoughts, speaking shakily. "A-are you asking them to capture Deneb and bring him to his execution?"

They collectively winced at the word 'execution,' Midnight turning to face the king in shock. "Execution?!"

Themis waved a hoof, dismissing the word. "I am not a tyrant; even a traitor like him will get a chance to present his case before me. Besides... a pony with abilities like his would be almost impossible to truly replace."

"*Truly* replace?" Cinnamon repeated. "Are ya talkin' about those Catalyst things ya'll need?"

"Heh, so the professor has seen it fit to impart that information onto you ponies," Themis chuckled. "A fitting choice, considering your new abilities. But yes, the Day of Ascension was designed to be carried out with three Catalysts. Vega, sadly, is no longer with us, but even with her absence two should be enough. Which is why we need Deneb... alive."

"And just what're you gonna do with Deneb once the Ascension's over?" Skyline asked suspiciously.

For the first time, a genuine smile cracked itself upon Themis's face. "There are no criminals in Paradise. Once the Ascension is carried out, everypony will live happily, free from the despairs of the world."

A faint glare of suspicion still existed on each of the five ponies' expressions, but it was hard to maintain in the face of the pure smile that the king radiated. The Paradise of the Ascension... freedom from the wolves, freedom from sadness, it was something everypony dreamed of after all.

"I say we help find Deneb," Pastel suddenly said.

Her friends looked back at her with questioning looks. "What makes you say that...?" Lily asked.

Pastel shrugged. "I dunno. But for some reason I feel like everything is a misunderstanding... I don't think Deneb is a mean pony, so there's no way he was the one who hurt the ponies who came after him! Maybe if we just talk to him again then we can clear everything up and then everything will be all peachy keen!"

Ambrosia giggled, the first sound that she had uttered inside of the dungeon. "My my, you're certainly an optimistic one," she told Pastel, smiling. "That's good, we need more ponies like you in this dark world of ours."

Themis paused for a moment and turned to his wife. "Say... why don't you go on ahead and take Celestia and Luna back up to their chambers? I think they've had enough of this dreary place."

Luna puffed out her cheeks in defiance. "I don't wanna leave yet!"

Celestia stealthily nudged her sister and hissed in her ear. "Stop being so disobedient, Luna!"

"No fighting, girls!" Themis bellowed. "We'll be out of here shortly, I'm just asking you three to go on ahead of us." Luna continued to glare at her father, not wanting to budge. Themis sighed. "You have my word Luna, these ponies won't have to see these walls anytime in the near future."

That statement of reassurance was enough for Luna, as a large smile broke out on her face. "Good!" she cried happily. She turned towards the other ponies. "I'll see you all later then!"

Ambrosia took her daughters under her hoof and ushered them out of the room, leaving the king alone with Midnight and the Ponyvillians.

"Before I allow you all to leave," Themis spoke, "let me reiterate the terms of release. You all will enjoy the previous freedoms you had before this whole mess, and as long as you all are well behaved, you'll never have to suffer anything more than a lack of privacy from the two escorts who will keep watch of you all at all times. Whether or not you all decide to search for Deneb though is up to you."

"I'm not really looking forward to a life of having somepony constantly looking over my shoulder," Skyline said dryly. "And Pastel has a point. Maybe we will go out and find Deneb for you."

"As I said, whether or not you do is your choice," Themis reiterated.

"So who are our escorts then?" Midnight asked.

"Lycoris is one of them, obviously," Themis told her. "I know you're trained to handle magic anomalies too, Midnight, but considering how close you are to the escortees... well, you understand."

Midnight grimaced. Lycoris again! How does somepony get so highly ranked without her even knowing about his existence?! She tried her best to hide her annoyance when addressing her father once again. "And... this second pony...?"

"A certain hothead who I think might go well with this one here," Themis chuckled, gesturing towards Skyline. "I believe you two have met once before?"

Skyline looked confused at the monarch for a moment, before an expression of understanding dawned on her face. "Oh Goddess... not that guy..."

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"I have to babysit these foals?!"

After what seemed like forever, Skyline, Cinnamon, Amethyst, Lily, and Pastel were finally outside of the dreary underground prison and back in the radiant sunlight, standing in the outdoor training grounds at one of the roofs of the castle along with Midnight and Themis. Standing in front of the ponies was a silver earth pony cloaked in armor, his forehead soaked with the sweat resulting from a long day of training. A longsword stuck out of dirt next to him, the weapon he was practicing with just moments before he was interrupted.

"Is this how the captain of the Royal Guard should be addressing his king?" Themis asked with faint displeasure in his tone. "I expected better from you, Captain Ares."

Ares grimaced, the displeasure readily apparent in his face. "I apologize, my liege. You know that I'll take on any duty you assign to me without fail. But... you can't be serious about this, can you? I have better things to do than to look after a bunch of foals!"

"This guy really gets on my nerves..." Skyline muttered harshly under her breath.

Cinnamon nudged the cyan pegasus. "Just bear with it, okay?" she hissed. The six ponies were told to keep silent until the arrangements for their escorts have been made, an order that Skyline found hard to follow.

"Can't you get somepony else to do this?" Ares continued, not hearing Skyline's objections. "You know how many responsibilities I have with my troops; if at all possible I'd like to respectfully decline your request!"

"This is not a request, but an order." Themis leaned in towards Ares's ear, not wanting to be overheard by any of the other guardponies. "Do you see those symbols on their flanks? You do know what that means, right?"

Ares looked towards the other ponies for the first time, his eyes widening as he noticed the Destiny Marks. "Oh you have *got* to be kidding me...!"

"You're the only pony who's been trained to handle these types of situations," Themis told him. "And I need to make sure these ponies don't go rogue."

"Lady Midnight can handle them, can't she?" Ares asked, his voice begging not to be assigned this duty.

Midnight's ears perked up at the mention of her name, but her father spoke before she was able to. "She has the ability, but not the will," Themis explained, causing Midnight's ears to droop. "Above all, their escorts have to be rational and impartial, one quality of which my daughter lacks."

Ares raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me, escorts? As in... more than one?" He frowned. "I know I've been complaining about this position... but may you inform me on who else is qualified for this job aside from me and Lady Midnight?"

"A clergypony named Lycoris," Themis said simply.

"A *clergypony*?" Ares repeated incredulously. "I'm sorry, but I find it hard to believe that a clergypony would be able to do anything other than sit around and pray to the Goddess. How is this pony supposed to keep things under control?"

"If you value your position, you would do best not to delve too deeply into his secrets," Themis warned. "All you need to know is that he's qualified for the job, got it?" Ares gave a quick salute in response, to which Themis nodded. "Good. I'll be taking my leave now. Lycoris will join you once he is able, Captain Ares."

"Yes, my liege!" Ares gave another salute.

Themis turned to the six ponies before he departed for the throne room. "Some words of advice for you all before I leave you to your own devices: Your new abilities are not something to be trifled with." He shifted his eyes towards Midnight. "Be sure to educate your friends on how to control their magic. Nothing is more dangerous than a rogue mage."

Midnight nodded. "Yes father, I'll tell them what they need to know."

"That includes you too, Midnight," Themis said ominously. "Just ask your friends Cinnamon or Skyline about what happened back in Gyren." He glanced over the other five ponies. "I have my suspicions on how the others acquired their abilities, but I know for certain that your talent is the real thing. If you're not careful, you'll become nothing more than a ticking time-bomb just waiting to go off."

The warning sent a shiver down Midnight's spine. "Y-yes father... I'll keep that in mind..."

Themis smiled. "Good. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of other business to attend to." He swiftly turned his back on the ponies and trotted back into the castle to resume his kingly duties.

"And now I'm stuck with you foals," Ares grumbled. "Just great. *Terrific*. I'm so happy I can cry."

"It's not like we like it any better," Skyline responded in the same tone of voice. "We don't need some lunkhead to drag us down."

"Okay, who wants some lunch?!" Cinnamon said loudly, trying to defuse the sparks between the two ponies. "Now that ah think about it, what time is it anyways? We've been down in that there dungeon for so long ah've lost track o' time!"

"It's a few hours past noon," Ares answered briskly, breaking eye-contact with Skyline. "Just about time for me to dismiss the afternoon practice." He glared at his new charges before he violently yanked his longsword out of the ground, the tip of it just narrowly missing Amethyst.

"H-hey!" Amethyst yelped, reflexively jumping back in surprise. "Just what do you think you're doing you ruffian?!"

"I know exactly what I'm doing," Ares said bitterly. "We'll all get along fine as long as none of you get on my bad side. And as far as things go right now, you ponies are already getting pretty close towards there." He paused. "Lady Midnight excluded of course." Before anypony could say something, Ares galloped off to the crowd of soldiers, barking orders at them.

"Ugh, he's such a creep..." Skyline muttered under her breath. "I can't believe we're stuck with him..."

"I'm sure he'll warm up to us..." Lily said shyly.

"I agree!" Pastel chirped. "No pony can be that grumpy-wumpy forever!"

“Ah dunno,” Cinnamon frowned. “Ah’ve met plenty of ponies who ah’ve never seen smile.”

“He almost chopped my mane off!” Amethyst cried. “My beautiful, beautiful mane!”

Midnight sighed and turned to face her friends. “Look... he may be a bit abrasive... but Ares is one of the most trustworthy ponies in Canterlot. So don’t give him too much trouble, okay...?”

“I’ll give him trouble if he gives me trouble,” Skyline grunted.

“Don’t be like that,” Midnight said, giving the cyan pegasus a weak smile. “I’m sure everything will be fine!”

“Alright,” Ares barked as he rejoined the group, “quit your yappin’ and tell me why the hell you’re all up here and not locked away in that dungeon!” Ares barked as he rejoined the group.

Skyline’s eye twitched. “Yeah... everything’ll be just great...”

Session Final

The seven ponies sat in the dining hall of the castle, answering the last of Ares's questions over a late lunch of apple-dandelion sandwiches. At first the ponies thought that dealing with Ares would be a pain, considering the way he openly disliked his newfound responsibility with the girls. But surprisingly enough, he was more than cordial enough with them, choosing to only address each pony whenever he had to in a direct and efficient manner.

Except for Skyline of course.

"Oh, are you gonna finish that sandwich of yours, *Miss Skyline*?" Ares asked as his string of Q&As expired. "I was afraid that such a large meal would be too much for a *delicate filly* such as yourself."

Skyline shot a venomous look at Ares before taking up the sandwich and polishing it off in a couple bites. "You kidding me?" she asked through a full mouth. "I'd need two more of these to even be *close* to full!"

"Sure you wouldn't rather have a side salad instead?" Ares retorted. "Or maybe a small cup of apple sauce? I heard that little fillies like you just *love* apple sauce!"

"I'd actually like some more salad if you please," Amethyst said, daintily waving her hoof around.

"And ah wouldn't mind some apple sauce," Cinnamon requested.

Ares shrugged and fetched over one of the servants, asking her to fetch what the two ponies wanted. "Oh, and bring a little doily and a cup of tea for the filly here," Ares added, gesturing towards Skyline. "I'm sure she'd appreciate these little garnishes."

"AGH!" Skyline flipped over her empty plate in frustration. "You are the biggest jerkwad of a stallion I've ever met! I can't believe I'm stuck with an asshole like you!"

Ares slammed his hoof on the table and brought his face right next to Skyline's to intimidate her. "Well *I* can't believe I'm stuck with *you*! I've never met a mare who's always blurting out something stupid every other second!"

Skyline butted her head against Ares's. "Oh yeah?!"

Ares pushed his head against Skyline's. "Yeah!!"

The servant nervously walked in and placed the salad and apple sauce next to Amethyst and Cinnamon, respectively. "Um..." the servant darted her eyes towards the two raging ponies. "Is everything alright...?"

"Everything's fine!!" Skyline and Ares said together. "Hey, what? Grr, shut up! Why you—!!"

The servant shrunk back and meekly exited the room. Pastel waved at the departed servant and continued to munch on her apple. "Is he normally like this, Midnight?" she whispered to the pony next to her. "It's funny now but if we're gonna be stuck with him for a while then..."

Midnight shrugged. "Well, I don't think I've seen Ares this energetic in a long time, so things might settle down after he gets used to his new responsibility." She cringed as she heard the two arguing ponies start shaking each other by the shoulder frantically. "But um... maybe we'll have to get used to this kind of thing every day."

Pastel swallowed the last of her apple and tossed the core into the nearby waste receptacle. "Mmm, if I know Skyline she'll just end up burning herself out. So it should be over soon." Another crashing sound was heard and the two ponies were now on the ground, trying to wrestle the other into submission. "Hopefully," Pastel added with a wince.

Lily took one last sip from her juice box and trotted over to the two fighting ponies. With a single swift movement, she latched onto Skyline's tail and pulled her away from Ares, causing the pegasus to flail confusedly. "Ah-hah-wha?!"

"That's enough now," Lily said sternly. "As your older sister I won't let you get into fights with other ponies."

"But he started it!" Skyline whined.

"No buts!" Lily replied, staring down the cyan pegasus. "Now apologize to Ares!"

"Yeah Skyline, *apologize*," Ares snickered.

"Grrr... fine, whatever," Skyline fumed. "I... *mumble*mumble*. There, I said it!!"

Ares grinned and took a swig from his chalice. "That's enough fun for now. Anyways," he looked over each of the other ponies, a serious expression settling on his face. "I'm going to be honest with you all. I personally have no real reason to really care about any of you, Lady Midnight excluded of course. The lives of five ponies from some small village don't stack up to the thousands of lives that'll be affected if I'm not around to protect the princesses." He paused. "However... this job might be a bit more interesting than I thought it would be. It wouldn't be too farfetched of me to say that you want out of

this arrangement as much as I do. So does this mean you're all going to go find Deneb?"

The ponies all looked to each other, finally settling their gazes on Midnight. "Um, err," Midnight coughed and cleared her throat. "We haven't really got any alone time to think about it but... I know that I want to find Deneb." She half-lidded her eyes and gazed down at the floor. "I have something I need to ask him..."

Ares nodded and decided not to press Midnight on the subject. "What about the rest of you? No time but the present to make such decisions after all."

"I'm sure we'd all like to coax the truth out of that pony," Amethyst answered for the group. "I personally don't think he's such a rabble-rouser, but if he is... then I'd like to hear it from his own mouth. Isn't that right girls?"

Each of the ponies nodded in turn. "Not to mention," Skyline said, "the sooner I can get away from you the be—"

"I have my own reasons for being interested in Deneb," Ares commented, completely ignoring Skyline's existence. "As the captain of the Royal Guard, I want to do everything I can to help His and Her Highnesses attain their goals. And capturing the traitorous third member of the Summer Triangle will be sure to help them reach those goals." His ears suddenly drooped and he slumped back in his seat. "But... I have to follow around you brats to do that. So much for being the Captain..."

"Hah!" Skyline pointed her hoof at the dejected stallion. "That's right, you have to follow *our* lead!"

Ares stuck a hoof in Skyline's mouth, shutting her up. "Remember who the pony is with the sword and the crossbow," he said menacingly. "I don't have anything against you ponies, but I will use these weapons if I have to."

"But... you won't, will you?" Lily asked, tilting her head and turning her eyes up at the captain. "Because... we're innocent..."

The menace escaped from Ares's eyes and he slumped back once again in his seat. "Whatever... so when are we heading out?"

"I was thinking tomorrow morning," Midnight said. "Is that alright with you girls?"

"Fine by me," Cinnamon shrugged. "Ah need to go find Sundae and apologize ta her fer disappearing first anyways... hope she wasn't scared too bad from bein' alone..."

"Don't worry about that," Midnight smiled, "Jeeves was taking good care of her. And she didn't look scared at all when I saw her."

Cinnamon frowned. "Wait, ya saw her? Ya shoulda told me sooner!" Midnight flinched from the orange pony's sudden outburst, causing Cinnamon to elicit a sigh. "Eh... nevermind, with all this crazy business it prolly slipped yer mind."

Amethyst comfortingly laid a hoof on Cinnamon's. "No worries, let's all go see her this very instant! I think I'm quite finished with my salad anyways." She turned to Midnight. "Might you have any idea as to where she and Jeeves are at the moment?"

Midnight pondered for a moment. "If I recall correctly, it should be Jeeves's turn to tend to the gardens today so... they're probably in the courtyard right now!"

"Let's go to the courtyard then!" Skyline said energetically. The other ponies smiled and agreed, getting out of their seats and beginning to make their way towards the courtyard.

"Hey, wait a minute! If anypony's going to lead the way it's going to be me!" Ares called out. He dashed off to catch up to the ponies, accidentally bumping into Lily to continue to verbally assault Skyline.

The yellow pegasus pony clumsily fell to the ground making a small squeak as her body met the floor. Sadly, she was too quiet to hear, and her friends continued to move forward without her. "H-hey... wait a moment..." She quickly got up to her hooves to close the short gap between them, but something suddenly reached out at her and pulled her aside.

"Eee—ulp!" A hoof was placed over her mouth to keep her from squealing.

"Shhh, it'd be a pain if Ares caught us," her mysterious assailant said.

Lily was kept still for a few moments before she calmed down and recognized the pony who was pinning her to the wall. The pony took his hoof out of her mouth, returning to the pegasus the ability to speak. "L-Lycoris? What are you doing...?"

Lycoris shrugged. "Stuff. Come on, follow me, I want to show you something." He turned his back to Lily and started trotting away without waiting for a response.

"S-show me...? H-hey, wait!" She quickly moved to catch up to the scarlet pony, going at a brisk trot to keep up with his pace. "Where are we going...?"

"Someplace private," Lycoris answered, keeping his eyes facing forward.

Lily curiously tilted her head. "Someplace private...?"

Lycoris randomly stopped and threw open a door, trotting nonchalantly inside of it. "Yeah, like this room." He glanced around at the interior, it was one of the castle's many storage rooms, this one storing sheets and linens. "You coming?"

Lily hesitated for a moment before she trotted in after him. "U-um..."

Slam.

"Eek!!" The pegasus jumped at the sudden sound, turning back to see that the door had shut itself closed. "H-hey... w-what's going on...?"

"Obviously I shut the door," Lycoris stated simply, a few specks of magic flickering off his horn.

"H-how..."

"Oh, I guess you haven't seen me use magic," Lycoris frowned. "I'm not supposed to at all, but I think I let my guard down earlier around Midnight. But yeah, I shut that door with my magic, not really that big of a deal."

"N-no!" Lily shook her head. "How come you shut the door like that?"

"Didn't I already tell you?" Lycoris asked. "I needed someplace private. If that door was still open then that would make this a public place, which completely goes against what I was looking for in the first place."

Lily shrunk back a little. "W-well... I suppose... but—eek!" Lycoris suddenly shoved his flank in front of Lily's face, causing the yellow pegasus to fall over in confusion and embarrassment. "W-what are you doing?!"

"I want you to look at it," Lycoris stated.

A bright red blush rose to Lily's face as she tried to avert her gaze away from the scarlet stallion's flanks. "W-why are you asking me to do something like that?!"

"Because I need you to see it," Lycoris answered, shoving his flanks closer towards Lily's face, his tail swishing back and forth impatiently.

"W-we haven't known each other long enough for you to be doing something like this!" Lily cried. "A-and I don't think I like you that way!!"

Lycoris ruffled his brow in confusion. "What are you talking about? Just look at it already."

"Why do I need to look at your flanks?!" Lily squeaked, her voice raising several octaves.

"I don't want you to look at my flanks!" Lycoris retorted, a slight tone of exasperation finally entering his voice. "I want you to look at what's *on* them."

“W-what’s on them...?” Lily asked confusedly.

“Yes. What’s on them,” the stallion repeated. “Namely, my Destiny Mark. If you stare long enough, it should become clearer to you.”

Lily hesitated before focusing her eyes upon Lycoris’s flanks. As she stared, a faint shape began to manifest itself. The seconds ticked by, the image becoming clearer and clearer. Because the shape itself was a deep scarlet color, it blended in with the hue of Lycoris’s coat, it took some time before Lily could discern what it was.

She saw the petals at first. The thin red outlines gradually darkened against the slightly lighter shade of Lycoris’s coat. The thin petals continued to appear, materializing in almost a viscous fashion, spreading up across his flanks almost like blood. Spidery stems extended out from those petals, curving upwards as if the flower were trying to grasp something beyond its reach. Soon enough, the red lines stopped flowing, Lycoris’s Destiny Mark in full view for Lily to see.

“Do you know what it is?” Lycoris asked.

“A Destiny Mark, right...?” Lily answered hesitantly.

“No. Wait, yes. But no,” Lycoris replied. “I’m not talking about exactly *what* it is, because I’m pretty sure you’ve had enough about what Destiny Marks are. I’m more asking about the form that it’s taking. Like with how you have a lily for your Mark.”

“It’s a... um...” Lily scrunched her brow in thought, scouring her memory for what Lycoris’s Mark was. “It’s a Red Spider Lily, isn’t it? A Lycoris Radiata?”

“A flower often used in funerals to signify the parting of those who will never meet again,” Lycoris stated mechanically, almost as if he was reading it from a dictionary. “A beautiful flower if it wasn’t for the stigma associated with it.”

A faint sense of déjà vu settled upon Lily. It felt like the other pony said those exact same words to her some time ago. “I... see,” Lily mumbled without actually seeing. “So um, what does this have to do with anything again?”

“Lycoris is a lycoris,” the scarlet pony said, referring to himself in third person. “And Lily is a lily.”

“I... still don’t really get it,” Lily admitted. “Can you be a bit clearer? Um, if you don’t mind of course...”

Lycoris stared at Lily in thought for a few moments, causing the pegasus to awkwardly hunch down in embarrassment. “A Destiny Mark is much more than a manifestation of

magical power, you know,” he explained slowly. “Can you think of a reason why your Mark is a lily...?”

Lily tilted her head in thought. “Well... my name’s Lily I suppose... and I do love nature too...”

“There you go then,” Lycoris spoke. “There doesn’t always have to be a deeper meaning to it, it’s just a symbol of what defines you the most.”

“So... you’re a nature lover too then, Lycoris?” Lily asked confusedly, not really understanding what the other pony was getting at.

A sad smile crept up onto Lycoris’s face. “*A/ways* means that there’s always been an exception or two hidden within the masses.” He quietly trotted towards Lily, moving past her like a soft breeze on a summer day. The words he spoke as he passed her carried with it a strange sort of weight to it, an emotion that Lycoris scarcely ever showed through his aloof exterior.

“Please, Lily... once you have the chance... take your friends and go back to your normal everyday lives.”

“H-huh?” Lily moved to turn around, but a gentle glow suddenly enveloped itself around her body, keeping her from facing the scarlet pony.

“You don’t need to be involved,” Lycoris continued on softly. “Gnosis, Themis, Ambrosia, Ares... the Summer Triangle, Catalysts, the Day of Ascension... Midnight and I... it’s best if you and your friends distance yourselves from all of this as soon as possible.”

Lily strained her neck to face Lycoris, but she couldn’t even manage an inch. “What... what’re you talking about?”

“It’s for your own good,” he said quietly. “There’s nothing to be gained but sadness if you intertwine yourself in this farce of a play.”

“But... aren’t we friends?” Lily asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Why would anything be sad if I’m with my friends...?”

Lycoris stood in silence for a moment before responding. “Midnight and I are trapped in our roles,” he answered cryptically. “There’s no escape from our cruel fates, we know too much, we’re too involved. But you... you and the others still have a chance. A chance to get away from all of this madness and go back to living happily in ignorant bliss. A chance that you’d be foolish not to take.”

“I don’t get it!!” Lily shouted, startling Lycoris. The pegasus almost never raised her voice, but the confusion and emotion welling up inside of her caused her to snap at the

other pony. "Aren't all of us stuck in the same boat now that we have magic? Now that we know about the truth behind the Day of Ascension and that... that *excio animae* thing?"

"It'd be nice if the truth was just that simple..." Lycoris sighed. "None of you are anywhere close to being in the same boat as us."

Lily waited for Lycoris to continue, but no more words passed through his lips. The spell keeping her body in place faded away, and the yellow pegasus quietly trotted over towards Lycoris. "Hey... um..."

"I should probably get you back to Ares now," Lycoris said curtly, signifying that the conversation between them was over. "He's probably on the rampage right now looking for you."

Lily hesitated for a moment as Lycoris magicked the door open before suddenly stomping her hoof on the floor. "No," she spoke in a soft yet firm voice.

Lycoris paused, his mind not processing Lily's assertiveness. "Did you say something, Lily?"

"I said no," Lily repeated. "You can't just say all those things without a proper explanation and expect me to nod my head and go along with you!" She took a few tentative steps towards the scarlet pony. "Aren't I your friend Lycoris...? Can't you tell your friend the truth of why you want her to leave you...?"

"Friend... haha..." A bitter laugh escaped the stallion's lips. "It hasn't even been that long since you've met me and you say we're friends?" He glared at Lily, an ice-cold glare that forced the pegasus to instinctively take a step back. "You'd do best not to put your trust in ponies you barely even know. Something like that might get you killed one day."

The two ponies' eyes were locked together for a moment, Lycoris's icy stare rooting Lily to the spot. She was transfixed by his gaze, a gaze filled with unfathomable emotion. A gaze shrouded by a frosty haze that masked his true emotion. Yet even through this blizzard, Lily could see something in the depths of his eyes. Something that kept the pegasus from breaking her line of sight.

It was a hint of sadness.

Lycoris broke the trancelike atmosphere the two settled into, shutting his eyes as he turned back towards the outside corridors. Lily hesitantly reached out towards him.

"Please, just leave if you have the chance. That's all I'm asking of you."

Lily gritted her teeth and prepared to fight back his request, when a loud voice bellowed through the air.

“WHERE HAS THAT PEGASUS GONE?!”

Loud hoofstomps reverberated throughout the halls, the driving force behind them containing the rage and fury of a thousand and a half suns.

“As I said,” Lycoris spoke, his voice resuming his usual nonchalant tone, “Ares is probably on the rampage looking for you.”

Lily grimaced and stepped timidly into the hallway. The first thing she noticed upon stepping back into the velvet corridors was an armored stallion running a storm through the area. The second thing she noticed were the five other ponies trailing behind him. The pegasus took a step towards the group. “U-um... girls...?”

“Captain Ares, stand down!” Lycoris barked.

The rampaging earth pony’s ears perked at Lycoris’s order. He swung around to face the other stallion, an annoyed look in his eye. “Who the hell do you think you are, giving me orders like that?!”

“Your superior,” Lycoris responded briskly. “Now settle down already and stop being such a berserker. Lily’s right here.”

The captain noticed Lily for the first time, angrily cantering up to her. “Where the hell did you go?! Don’t you know that if you just randomly disappear like that I have to assume the worst? You better have a damn good reason as to why you vanished, because by the Goddess’s name if you don’t you’re getting thrown straight back into the—”

“Calm down already!” Lycoris ordered, a tinge of annoyance coloring his voice. “If you’d care to use the powers of perception that our oh so magnificent Goddess granted you, then you might notice that Lily’s in my company.”

“And I trust you as far as I can throw you!” Ares scoffed. “Wait a minute, scratch that. A clergypony like you has bound to be as light as a feather!”

Lycoris narrowed his eyes. “Are you questioning my abilities?” he asked with a hint of menace.

“I’m doing no such thing!” Ares said sarcastically. “I’m only voicing my doubts of having to depend on somepony I’ve never even heard of before to be watching my flank!”

Lycoris shrugged. “Fair enough. Just remember that I have just as much responsibility as you do, *Captain*.” He glanced at the yellow pegasus pony. “And if I want to have a

private chat with Miss Lily here, then I will do so without having to acquire the permission of a pony such as yourself.”

Ares gritted his teeth. “Listen here, hotshot. Even if the King told me to blindly trust in you, that doesn’t mean that I have to like you. And you’re really pushing my limit here, so if you want our little journey to go smoothly then you’d best shut your mouth before I shut it for you!”

“Oh? A journey you say?” Lycoris smirked, changing the subject. “What for?”

“Don’t pretend that you’re clueless,” Ares grumbled.

Midnight finally took a step forward between the two feuding stallions. “E-erm... well, we’re all going on a search for Deneb so we can clear the others’ names...”

Lycoris raised his brow. “Oh? How do you propose to find a pony who has evaded Canterlot’s forces for more than fifteen years?”

“We were thinkin’ that we’d head back to Ponyville and see if we can find any clues,” Cinnamon offered. “It was the last place anypony saw ‘em, according to Lily and Ame anyways.”

“Sounds reasonable enough.” Lycoris nonchalantly stretched out his forehooves. “Well... I’m assuming that we’re setting off tomorrow morning, so if you’ll all excuse me, I’ll be going off to bed. I suggest you all do the same if you want to be bright and chipper when the sun rises!”

Before anypony could say a word in response, the scarlet pony trotted off, leaving the group in a confused daze that none of them could shake off.

Ares struck his hoof down in frustration. “Ugh, I can’t believe I’m stuck with that clergypony...”

“And I can’t believe we’re stuck with you either,” Skyline muttered under her breath.

Ares raised a hoof to object before lowering it back down to the ground. “You know what, forget it. I’m too pissed off right now to play with you.”

“What?!” Skyline fumed, her wings flaring up in frustration. “Play? Play?! You think you’re playing with me?!” Ares ignored the pegasus and began trotting off towards the dormitories.

“We all get some sleep,” Ares ordered. “Goddess knows we need it if we’re going to be stuck together tomorrow.”

“Hey! Hey!!” Skyline shouted. “Pay attention when I’m talking to you!!”

The others began to follow suit, shadowing Ares as he travelled towards the dormitories. Lily looked towards the direction where Lycoris was trotting off in, before Amethyst grabbed her and pulled her back to the rest of the group.

“What on earth was that pony talking to you about anyways, darling?” Amethyst asked.

Lily mulled the question over for a moment, not exactly sure herself what the true meaning behind Lycoris’s words were. “He just wanted to talk about flowers,” she finally answered, obscuring the real conversation the two ponies had.

Amethyst looked at her best friend in disbelief. “Flowers? Are you being serious?”

Lily nodded. “It’s because both of our Destiny Marks are flowers, so he thought that we could talk about them.” Her lie was so obviously transparent, she was half-expecting for the unicorn to call her out on it. Lily wasn’t sure why, but for some reason she was afraid to impart the contents of that conversation she held with Lycoris.

Amethyst examined Lily’s face for a moment, scrutinizing the pegasus’s features. At any moment, Lily expected her friend to call her out on her lie. But to Lily’s surprise, Amethyst instead shrugged. “If you say so, dear,” the unicorn said nonchalantly.

For some reason, a twinge of pain reverberated in Lily’s heart. Something about the way Amethyst responded to her filled her with a strange sadness. “U-um... yes...” Lily replied half-heartedly. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was supposed to say now that she had lied.

“Phew, I’m tired!” Pastel suddenly cut in. “Let’s hurry up and get to bed so we can see Ponyville again tomorrow!”

Lily sighed. “Y-yeah... let’s go...”

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The next morning, fourteen ponies stood at the front gates of Canterlot. They were split up into two groups, those who were staying, and those who were departing.

Themis, Ambrosia, Gnosis, Celestia, Luna, Sundae.

Midnight, Cinnamon, Skyline, Amethyst, Lily, Pastel, Ares, Lycoris.

Those who were staying were saying their goodbyes to those who were departing. Cinnamon and Sundae. Luna, Celestia, Midnight and her friends. Ares and the King and Queen.

And Lycoris and Gnosis.

Feelings were relayed to each other. Words of encouragement to bless the journey ahead. Tears falling from loved ones' eyes.

It was a typical heartwarming parting scene, a scene that's been played out so many times it was almost sickening.

This is boring. So boring. How could anyone want to see something like this?

"I love you big sister." How sickening. "Be safe everypony." Disgusting. "I'll miss you."

Aaaaah, it's so annoying, so so annoying.

All of these ponies are so fake. All these false pretenses of love and adoration don't do anything but piss me off.

It'd be so much more interesting if a confession was made. A public confession of sin that would paint their ridiculous friendships a bright red. But no, no, that doesn't happen just yet. It happens much later, much much later. It's so annoying, having to wait to see the good part. It's even more annoying, having to sit through the boring parts a second time.

At least there's one interesting thing in this sickening display. A perverse, twisted display of love. That kind of love is so much more interesting than that stupid flowery form of love, isn't it?

"Realize your purpose, my greatest creation."

If only a single line could save a failing play, then it wouldn't be so boring. But it's not enough, not yet anyways.

It's almost there. The beginning of tragedy. The wait will be worth it.

I won't have to be bored anymore.

So hurry off to Ponyville. Hurry off to all those neat little adventures of yours. Hurry it up and reach the truth of everything. Reach the truth that'll tear the lot of you apart.

Then I get to see something beautiful. Even if it doesn't live up to the first time, the second time through should still be beautiful.

I wonder if he can hear me.

I wonder if a mere projection can hear my voice.

Then I can tell him to speed things up.

The destruction of friendship.

I want to see it.

So hurry off, hurry off.

And then they will seek me out.

And then I'll be able to play again.

And then I won't be bored.

Because then I'll have you, Miss Twilight Sparkle.