



By the Unfaltering Light of the Sky

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Chapter 1

Moongazing

Luna eyed her handiwork wearily. Another night, another moonrise, another audience of sleeping souls. She really should be joining them- it passed the time and helped her forget her sorrow. She had to hide it, after all- for her sister's sake if anything. Tia would be heartbroken if she found out she was just as disenchanted now as she was before the darkness consumed her.

Oh, and the banishment. A thousand years spent on the surface of her own charge. They hadn't been pleasant, with or without the bitter resentment she could never explain, to herself or to anypony else. And then she had returned, vengeance in her heart. Friendship had defeated her- but what good was friendship when her life's work went by unnoticed?

That wasn't on her mind right now, however. Luna was thinking back to the night of her return...

~ * ~ * ~

The royal sisters sat opposite each other at the long ivory table- it was made to accommodate a large number of guests for special occasions, and on those the sisters would sit at the ends of it, but when they dined alone, they'd seat themselves somewhere along the middle- or at least that was how it had been before the sudden schism. ("This is how we used to do it, remember?" Celestia had mused).

They had sat in mutual silence for most of the meal, and it had been her sister who had opened the conversation at last. "How does it feel, to be back?" Her voice shone with all the eagerness one would expect.

"Well..." She chose her words with care. "It certainly feels good. I- I have missed you, and Equestria. But..."

The sun goddess lifted her gaze.

"I still feel terrible about what I've done."

"Oh, Luna, don't be silly! You know very well nopony could ever hold you responsible for all that."

"Yes, but I planted the seeds for Nightmare Moon's birth. That thing, whatever it was, took my feelings and turned them into action."

Celestia shook her head. "True, true. But we destroyed it, and now it's all over. Right, sis?" Her eyes glittered, and Luna knew she wanted the answer to be 'Yes.' That poor alicorn had probably suffered more than she could ever imagine.

"Of... of course, Tia!" She gave her what she hoped was an understanding smile. "What once was is no more. My shell has fallen apart and now we can start anew."

The other returned the smile. "Good, good. Oh, and I'd suggest eating your dinner- you haven't touched any of it and it's getting cold!"

*~ * ~ * ~*

She found tears had been flowing all throughout the memory. Why did every hour of darkness become *her* darkness? Why couldn't she just let it all be? Ah, but the answer was obvious- it was her purpose to raise the moon and bring out the stars and begin the night, just as her sister raised the sun to start off the day. Her skills as a leader had been acknowledged and proven many times in the past, and yet nopony ever seemed to recognize the other role she performed, the reason she had been gifted with both a horn and wings...

Of course you regularly mingle, don't you?

She stared at the ceiling- it was painted a deep, endless blue. Even her surroundings taunted her. She shut her eyes. She wanted, *needed* to open herself... But who was there to consult? Who didn't trust her to be content and yet knew her enough to listen?

Luna groaned and eased herself out of the bed. Perhaps a little stroll through the halls would ease her stress. Perhaps...

Chapter 2

Sugar

Far away in Ponyville's Sugarcube Corner, a magenta earth pony lay wide awake. In what would have surely shocked her friends, her face was twisted in worry. Not quite sadness- she knew she'd never be able to fully feel that- but Pinkie Pie was quite displeased. She supposed she really oughtn't be upset with herself- it wasn't her choice to be this way, after all- but here she was, awake again and unable to stop hitting herself over all she had done.

Her friends were completely unaware of what she was hiding, but what else did she expect, the way she had led them on- led the whole town on- presenting herself as the most outgoing, engaging pony the world had ever seen?

But the flank doesn't lie and you know your talents.

Pinkie groped around a little, found a lollipop and brought it her mouth. The sweetness rushed over her and she gorged herself on it.

And she was newly employed at the Corner again.

~ * ~ * ~

Pinkie Pie stared out the window, looking to where the rock farm was- or at least where she thought it was; she hadn't exactly bothered to remember what way she had taken on her journey to Ponyville. And why should she? That place held nothing but misery, loneliness, disappointment... and the discovery of her true talent. She smiled fondly. Balloons, so many balloons, and three on her flank! Since then she'd been dedicated to making everypony happy.

Except yourself?

Now here she was baking treats and bringing sweet sugary joy to all the world. If only those rock farmers could see her now, they'd witness a filly transformed! No more mournful looks and struggles and wishing for a purpose.

Or even straight manes and honesty.

All that was behind her.

"Pinkie?" It was Mrs. Cake. She turned to face her employee and friend

"Oh. Hey, Mrs. Cake!" She noticed she wasn't wearing her smile and-

Twist your face, Pinkamena, hide your feelings or lack thereof- don't you know laughter is the very best medicine?

flashed one.

"Well, I know you're on your break, but I was wondering if you could help me with a batch of strawberry cupcakes. The customer wants them rush delivered, so if you could take care of that, too..."

"I'm sure it's just Mr. Shears again. You know that stallion can eat!" She giggled, not sounding forced-

Because practice makes perfect and you practice, yes you do.

in the slightest. "Of course I'll help you!"

Cup smiled meekly, and Pinkie cheered inside. "O-okay. And Pinkie?"

"Hm?"

"Could you... try using less sugar this time?"

*~ * ~ * ~*

No, the flank didn't lie, she knew that much. She threw parties and brought joy but did that really mean she had to be so wild and random?

All part of the job- reserved ponies make the worst hosts.

Maybe so, maybe so. But her whole life wasn't a party, was it?

Make it one, then, because we're never going back to the farm.

She whimpered but was muffled. No, not the farm, not the farm. No matter what it held... but had she ever asked herself what it actually held?

Sorrow and sadness and so many rocks so just leave it alone already.

Sure, it hurt her to go back to those days, but hadn't she at least been truer to herself then?

This time, the voice was laced with aggressive sharpness.

You remember the rocks all too well, don't you? You ain't going nowheres, chump...

She frowned, her face cracked- and now she was quite convinced no good

would ever come from those memories, not when they had the power to turn her against her friends.

Satisfied with herself, the quarrels stopped and she let the graceful moonlight take her away, rhythmically lapping at the sweet in her mouth all the while.

Chapter 3

Vertigo

The blue pegasus angrily gave her pillow-cloud another smack. Another restless night. Her troubles had caught up to her again, and now she couldn't untangle herself- but how did she expect to face the mess of reflections that was flight camp?

It still held many a fond memory for her. It was when she had discovered her talents, after all. Oh, and how brash she had been. The spunkiest little filly in all of Equestria!

She had grown, however- matured and changed. Now whenever she looked back, she felt so much shame and regret and she just wished it had never happened. But it had, and she didn't like it one bit.

The lofty cloud she rested on stayed a cloud... but Dash was a foal again.

~ * ~ * ~

"Alright, so, first one to get to that funny-shaped cloud over there wins. Ready, everypony and... Gilda? What do griffons call themselves anyway?"

"Just shut up before I change my mind about hitting you, Checkers."

"Right! Ready?"

The three colts muttered their agreement, as did Gilda.

Dash eyed the "funny-shaped" cloud anxiously. She hoped she didn't look nervous. Because she wasn't. She was going to win this, no doubt about it. It wasn't as if anypony else had gotten their cutie mark, for flying with speed no less.

"Rainbow?" Checkers almost rolled his eyes but caught himself.

"Uh... yeah! Let's do this!"

"Okay then. On your marks-"

I've got a cloud on my flank.

"Get set, and..." Dash narrowed her eyes. "Go!"

The four fliers-

Dashed. You'd have said they dashed.

darted off.

Rainbow's confidence was sealed the instant she felt the current building up around her. This was her element, and nopony would beat her here.

Gilda, on the other hand, seemed less suited for success. The only one she could overcome in terms of agility was Score, but that could easily be remedied. The griffon grinned to herself.

Suddenly, the grey colt found he had something wrapped around his left hind leg- something that felt uncomfortably like a tail. Gilda pulled her victim back, released her grip and delivered a good, strong kick that sent him flying in the opposite direction. Her efforts were not for naught; a moment later Score crashed into Dumbbell, creating a definite setback for the pair. Satisfied, Gilda flew ahead.

Dash looked behind her, and her smug smirk melted into disappointment, then an angry frown. Hoops was getting closer and closer, but she wouldn't give up without a fight. She watched him carefully- his eyes were narrowed, focused on their common target. Tunnel vision would be his demise, she'd make sure of it. A small cloud presented itself to her, and she gave it a slight nudge- hopefully he wouldn't see it until it had planted itself on his face.

The colt surged on, oblivious to anything but his wings and destination- the cloud he'd reach before that dumb filly who thought she was so great just because she had her cutie mark. Then he suddenly couldn't see anything.

It took Hoops a few moments to realize what had happened, precious seconds during which he slowed down to brush off the cloud, and by the time he could see again, Rainbow Dash was proudly standing atop a cloud whose funny shape he seriously doubted at this point.

~ * ~ * ~

The mare wondered what the chances were she was lying on that same cloud right now. She hoped she wasn't, hoped it had been blown to pieces by a pegasus having a very, very bad day.

~ * ~ * ~

Checkers made his way to the cloud, where the racers were busy throwing insults at each other.

"It's not fair! You can't just launch a cloud at somepony!" Hoops was practically screaming.

"A-and Gilda cheated too!"

"Hey, the rules never said we couldn't do that stuff!" The griffon leered at them.

"All we had to do was get to the cloud. And I did." Rainbow flashed a smile that threatened to bring their blood to a boil.

"Well, the rules didn't say anything about what they did, so Rainbow Dash wins this race. Congratulations!" He smiled at her in what he hoped was a heartwarming way.

The object of his affections frowned. "Ew, nerd cooties. Those are the worst!"

"Come on, Dash. Let's leave these idiots alone."

"Yeah," she snickered, "Idiots."

~ * ~ * ~

She sighed. It had taken her so long to realize... and now she wondered how her friends had ever put up with it. Trixie had beguiled them so, but how was her behavior any better? At least the unicorn had had an excuse. So why hadn't she told them about this yet? Why was confessing to her newfound self-image so impossibly difficult?

Her reputation, of course. After all, she had been just like that until a few weeks prior- all her friends knew, all everypony she had ever met knew her for was her determined attitude, obsessions with flying tricks, explosive brashness and occasional superiority complex. And her tendency to crash

into things.

And crashing into walls you didn't even know existed is just what you're doing now. Where are you going, Rainbow Dash?

She had to admit she really didn't know. At least she still enjoyed flying- and she had a feeling a little trip through the skies was just the thing she needed now.

Chapter 4

Flop

Scootaloo watched the skies grimly through her wide open window. How she wished she could be up there in the clouds, speeding wildly through the air with the wind against her, just like her idol. Hay, like any *other* pegasus. Why was she always so alone? The only friends she had were with her because they were all outcasts, and the one pony that had inspired her in crafting her personality seemed to think of her as nothing more than a nuisance.

Those she could cope with, though. What she couldn't seem to cope with were the neighsayers who never went away, no matter how fast she rode...

~ * ~ * ~

The scooter raced ever forward, a smug-faced Scootaloo at the handlebars. This was the highlight of the day, when she could just speed ahead and leave her troubles behind. At school, she was just "one of those blank flanks," but out here she was the fastest thing on wheels and nothing could stop her. Until she caught sight of Diamond Tiara's tail behind an approaching corner, and then heard Silver Spoon's voice. She cursed under her breath. Their conversations had a tendency to be long and unpleasant.

"...to Scootaloo today. It was, like, so terrible."

Of course. She had sat next to Silver today. At least neither of them found it enjoyable. As much as she hated to admit it though, they had gotten her attention.

"Ugh, that orange thing? She thinks she's so great with that stupid scooter of hers."

Scootaloo eyed it affectionately.

"And she's always going about that Rainbow Dash, like she's going to grow up like her!"

"I heard she's a filly-fooler!"

Scootaloo dug at the ground bitterly. Those damn fillies... She knew the d-word was bad, but they deserved it if anypony did.

"How does she plan on being some famous flier if she can't even use her wings yet?"

Diamond chuckled. "Still can't fly, still no cutie mark. I almost feel sorry for her. Not!" The pair laughed.

She promised herself she wouldn't cry. No, she wouldn't cry, because Rainbow Dash wouldn't cry and even her friends wouldn't cry, would they? As she turned her scooter to another street and fled, the smallest tears formed in her eyes...

~ * ~ * ~

The tears she shed now were anything but small. She cried for all she had wanted to be and all everypony else was and all she was sure she would never be. Maybe those two were right after all. Maybe she'd never fly, and maybe she'd never get her cutie mark... Scootaloo poked her head out the window and let the wind blow through her mane. Maybe she never would fly, but she wouldn't know until she tried. The filly stepped up, spread her wings, and then she leaped.

Pure instinct drove her to beat them frantically, and after the shock lightened, she realized she was *flying*. Her heart skipped with joy but she checked herself. She couldn't make any mistakes now. Her fluttering slowed to a gentler rhythm and she tried navigating. Her beloved scooter seemed to have been useful after all. She landed on a nearby tree branch and smiled, then she laughed. She had *flown*, she had flown and *they* were wrong. She looked up to the sky. How far could she go? After all, she'd never know her limits if she kept worrying she might fall.

And so she lifted off, slowly gaining altitude, united with the heavens. The pegasus finally felt alive. She laughed merrily, realizing with pride just how high she had gotten- and as she flew higher and higher, her spirits rose too. Until her wings, unused to the strain, gave out.

She yelped as she suddenly became aware she had stopped flapping, and nothing she did would get her wings to work. She was losing altitude fast-

Scootaloo screamed as the world around her turned into a kaleidoscopic blur. She braced herself for the impact she knew was coming- for what else had she expected? She was still just a proud blank flank after all...

Then a multicolored haze caught her.

Chapter 5

Entwined

Rainbow Dash skidded to a halt, holding on the orange pegasus tight. Their hearts raced in unison. When asked about it later, the mare would always claim she had seen the little filly's ascent, but the truth of the matter was she was quite lucky to be unhurt.

Scotaloo eased herself out of Dash's grasp, who still had not fully realized what had just happened. "Thanks for saving me!" Her voice trembled, not just because she had narrowly missed breaking several bones, but because it was *Rainbow Dash* who had rushed to help her. "I'm Scotaloo! I'm a huge of fan of your-"

"Moves. Yeah, I know."

The smaller pony looked down in disappointment. Still just an unwelcome intrusion.

"Listen, um." She shook her head in disbelief. "What in Celestia's name were you doing up there?"

She backed away. "I... I was flying."

"You- you almost died!" She sighed. "Nevermind. I thought you were still figuring that out."

"I guess I must have done it. My wings are strong enough now."

"If you're crashing down in mid-air, they aren't."

"I guess you're right..."

"Hey, kid," Rainbow turned to face her. "Don't be so hard on yourself. First time's always difficult."

Scotaloo's eyes twinkled ever so slightly in the darkness

"I know I've been a little rough on you. And I know you're a big fan of me, in..." She gave a small laugh. "Well, in every way possible. So I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

The filly looked up, mouth agape.

"I just haven't been feeling good at all lately."

"What do you mean, Rainbow Dash?" She tried sounding as gentle as possible, but the filly was quite eager to help.

"Have you ever..." She couldn't believe she was trying to explain her feelings to a foal. "Have you ever felt like you just have no idea where your life is going, like you've lost sense of it?"

Scotaloo sighed and gazed deep into the ground again.

"What is it?"

"Oh, I'm just a little down with myself."

"How come? You should be proud!"

"Because..." Proud. Proud of failed attempts that almost killed her? She broke out into a whimpering sob.

Rainbow Dash's heart churned at the sight- it was her fault, wasn't it? She nuzzled her with concern. "There, there. It's alright. Please don't cry, Scotaloo." She paused. How could she bring light to this poor pony? "What if I let you fly with me?"

The filly glanced up, eyes still moist. "But... but I'm no good at flying."

"Oh, don't be silly. You can do it. Are your wings relaxed?"

Scotaloo flapped them slowly, the sudden stiffness she had experienced earlier gone. "Yep."

"Alright! I'll lead the way and you can follow- and don't worry, I'll slow down for you." With that the two pegasi lifted off.

"Ready?"

"Yeah!"

The pair surged on together.

Dash was hoping to slip back into a gentle pace, but her feisty companion would have none of it- Scootaloo had something to prove to herself. Rainbow caught up to her and pondered the fact that a little filly was leading the way. The orange one turned to her and smiled at her before speeding up again. Rainbow returned the smile and followed suit. She just hoped the girl wasn't straining herself too much. This was nothing for her, but Scootaloo had literally just learned to fly. Needless to say, the mare was taken aback when the other doubled her tempo in an instant. That pegasus was fast...

But she wasn't going to let her win that easily, no matter how adorable and innocent. The self-proclaimed fastest flier in Equestria still had her pride, and she transformed it into greater, stronger flaps, until she passed Scootaloo, grinning from ear to ear and laughing. Then she crashed into a tree.

"Rainbow Dash! Are you okay?" The orange pegasus rushed over to her mentor's side.

She groaned. "Yeah... could you try warning me the next time I'm about to fly into something?"

"Well- I tried! You were going too fast!"

"I wonder why. It definitely wasn't because of a certain filly who decided to speed ahead of me."

Their gazes met, and they realized they were both smiling. And then they both exploded in hearty laughter, heavenly light shining down on them all the while.

Chapter 6

Sanguis

On a moonlit plain- what most ponies would have deemed the middle of nowhere- a wooden caravan was stopped, home to a traveling showmare. The unicorn in question sat upright in her bed, nursing a glass of fine red wine with a mournful look. Having fled from Ponyville after what was surely her least-successful show, she had traveled to Manehattan, where a carpenter had offered to build a replacement for her crushed transportation and stage- for a price. Trixie took a sip of the bitter liquid and let it slosh around in her mouth.

And Manehattan rose up around her.

~ * ~ * ~

Trixie eyed the sign almost reproachfully. Just as she was about to call it a night, this establishment offered itself- "DUSTY WOOD, CARPENTER"- fair enough. There didn't seem to be any other carpenters open at this hour, and the sooner she had it fixed, the sooner she could get back to her shows-

So you can forget Ponyville and the Ursa and Twilight Sparkle.
and move on. Mistakes happened.

Trixie swallowed heavily and sighed.

~ * ~ * ~

She opened the door sheepishly and entered. A bell shyly twinkled as the door closed, and noted the darkness in which the place was covered. The owner didn't seem to be a strong believer in the wonder of halogen. He did, however, notice her quite easily. "Hey there. I'll be with you in a sec, I'm just finishing up inventory here."

Trixie observed the woodworker. He was a unicorn, with a dark tan coat and a ruffled brown mane. He seemed to be just as weathered as his surroundings, but overall there wasn't anything too odd about him-

And yet you of all ponies should know appearances can be misleading.
and hopefully he'd be able to build her a new stage.

"How can I help you, Miss?"

Trixie gasped. "Oh! I was looking to have a caravan built."

"You make it sound easy. From scratch?"

"I've got a few sketches."

"Those'd be helpful."

She removed her hat and pulled out a few folded pieces of paper. The carpenter unfurled them. "I'd say these are more than sketches. Who drew these?"

"The stallion who made the original- a craftsman like yourself."

"Ah. Well, these'll make my job easier for sure. Just what do ya need somethin' like this for?"

"I'm a travelling showmare."

"I see. Got yerself some fancy name too, I bet."

"The Great and Powerful Trixie."

"Say, I've heard of you! A friend a' mines went to one of yer shows."

"Oh?"

"Said you were a right bitch."

She looked down. "Some would say that."

And they'd be right.

"Anyway, how much will it cost me?"

How much, Trixie? How much has this cost you?

"About a thousand bits to start. What I don't need I return."

"Fair enough." She produced a small leather wallet from her hat.

"If you don't mind me asking..."

"Yes?"

"What else is there in your hat?"

The showmare blushed. "Usually nothing. I came here because my caravan was... destroyed."

"So you don't have nowheres to stay?"

Trixie shook her head.

For once you weren't lying.

"Tell you what- you seem like a nice mare, alright? I'll charge ya seven-fifty."

"Th- thank you!" She resumed to look in her wallet, then swallowed hard. But of course- those flyers she had commissioned and that fireworks merchant in Hoofington who really knew what he was talking about. "I've only got five hundred here, I'm afraid."

He frowned. "Listen, I really wish I could-"

"What If I put on a little show for you?"

"A show... Well." He grinned. "I suppose a 'show' would do."

*~ * ~ * ~*

Trixie sighed. That had been quite a show indeed. But she had gotten what she wanted, hadn't she? A showmare is nothing without her stage, and the show must go on.

Even if the actress is all too eager to give up?

Even if. For Mother, if anything. Oh, Mother...

Words came back to her. Words said by a mare who had decided she would never let her daughter fall prey to the same misfortunes life had thrown at her. A mare long gone but whom she still remembered so well-

"Ponies will hate along the way, Trixie," she had told her solemnly, "But they'll hate you because you show them how much better you are than them."

Mother hadn't seen Twilight Sparkle coming. In the end she should have known those Ursa boasts would come back to haunt her, but hadn't She encouraged it?

It's all for Her. You can't let yourself have dreams, can you?

Trixie gulped down more of the brew.

That's right, swallow your bitter sorrow, just like She said. How long until you overflow, Great and Powerful? How long until more than just your caravan crashes down on itself?

She snorted and hurled the glass at the wall before her, where it shattered and bled.

Remind you of anything?

The Great and Powerful Trixie crashed into her pillow and let loose a howling sob, until she at last tired of it.

Chapter 7

Flicker

Celestia tossed and turned once more. Maybe she'd adjust and be able to ease herself into slumber. Then again, the chances of that happening seemed rather slim, what with the thoughts plaguing her at this hour. Oh, little sister, why did it ever have to come to that?

A thousand years, and yet still she remembered it all so clearly...

~ * ~ * ~

Celestia gazed at the empty bed. It was hard to imagine only a week ago the filly she loved so much would have been lying peacefully in it. Glimmering moonlight streamed in through the window. She'd have to take care of that herself from now on... Well, no time to dwell. As much as she wished it wasn't, tomorrow was another day.

~ * ~ * ~

When she returned to her room, she was quite surprised to see Iris- Luna's maid- attending to her furnishings while humming a jolly little tune. "Well, what brings you here, dear?"

"Oh, Princess! You startled me... I- I hope you don't mind. I just felt so unfulfilled, with your sister gone, so I decided to polish up your quarters a little."

"No, I don't mind at all. But isn't Camilla in charge of this?"

"Yes. She told me a few days ago she caught a rather nasty cold."

"Ah. Why was I not informed?"

"She... told me you were, Your Majesty." Iris looked away uncomfortably.

Celestia observed her body language. No, she wasn't lying... was she? "Very well. Thank you, Iris. You may go." She eased herself into her bed and stared into the night.

"Princess, I hope you don't mind me saying this, but..." Iris sighed. "Well, I've noticed you seem a little distracted lately. And I know- we know what you've been through. Luna is in our hearts as well. Just yesterday I found myself going to make her bed and then... Then I realized she was gone. Lost to us."

The monarch turned to her. "Loss?" She shook her head. "Tell me, dearest Iris, what do you know about loss?" Iris shrank away. "What do you know about loss?" Celestia spat.

The caretaker left hurriedly and Celestia returned to her sister's piece de resistance. (You were always fond of your Prench, weren't you, Luna?) And the raiser of the sun buried her head in her front hooves and wept.

~ * ~ * ~

Now she was all too eager to do the same, but she knew she couldn't let herself. It was then that she had faltered, let the stark reality of her sister's fall overtake her. The feelings she accepted- even she was equine, after all, but she was a ruler, and how could she begin to take care of her subjects if all she thought of was how much she missed Luna?

That time had passed, however. Her servants had pulled her through, somehow even wiser than her, and yet she had been so glad when the Nightmare was defeated without her interference. Now her wish had been granted- the princess of the night was back. So why was she still unsatisfied?

Because she never felt as if she had atoned. Atoned for not being there when her sister's resentment was growing, atoned for being so selfish when the darkness that had swallowed her was banished. She had tried, but that required crossing the chasm that had separated them... and this was a chasm her wings could never hope to cross. There was a way, there had to be, but the best she could do was make Luna feel welcomed.

Celestia sighed and eased herself out of her bed- she often suspected it had been designed for two. A little stroll through the halls would at least give her other things to ponder...

Chapter 8

Harmony

As Celestia passed a balcony, a sound caught her attention, a sound she really hoped she wouldn't hear. It was a quiet sob, and the voice behind it was hauntingly familiar. "Luna? Is that you?"

The princess gasped and cursed herself for not hearing the hoofsteps. Of all the times...

"Oh. Hello, Tia." She stood facing away from her intruder. "What's keeping you up?"

"I might ask you the same thing." She sighed. "I've been ruminating. But why the tears, sister?"

"It seems there are a few thoughts on my mind as well. You may join me, if you like." Celestia stepped out onto the balcony.

Silence.

"You're staring off into the night again, aren't you?"

"I... yes."

"Does it make you feel anything? Sadness, perhaps?"

"Hm?"

"Does the night make you feel anything?"

Luna sighed. "No. Why should it?"

"Luna, Luna... you're still disappointed most everypony sleeps through it- so callously."

She frowned. Her sister knew. She knew and it had all been pointless in the end. "Tia, I'm not. I've already told you that, and it's the truth."

"Is it? Then tell me why you're crying."

"I- I have nothing to say to you if you insist on being like this."

The white one couldn't help but smile. She was close, and once she passed the threshold, all should work out.

Luna whimpered. "I've just felt so... unwanted. Lonely, Tia, lonely."

Something inside her raged. It wasn't like her to be angry at anypony, especially her sister, but this... *Unwanted*. The recluse laments her feelings of rejection.

"Oh, I'm sure spending your days in the library catching up on the last thousand years and never going out to actually meet your subjects has helped us all accept your presence." It was out, and she wished it wasn't. What was this doing to her?

"Yes, well, I'm sure spending *your* days with the holders of the Elements and touring the nation in that damned chariot of yours has helped your relationship with your sister."

A bitter silence fell on them again, until Celestia found her voice- she had to try.

"Luna, I'm so-"

"No. Don't say you're sorry. Don't!" She turned to look at her, though the gaze wasn't returned. "I'm the one who should be sorry. I was the mare of darkness."

"Oh, goodness. Luna, you... you silly filly. That was *never*-"

"Never me? I know, sis, I know. But it definitely felt like it was me."

"I... I told you that you were an unwilling hostage before and you agreed with me. Why?"

"Because, well." She sighed. "I wanted to make you happy, Tia."

"Oh, Luna. If only you had told the truth."

"If only *you* had told the truth! If only you had told me how *you* felt all those years! I'm not as weak as you'd like to think."

Celestia sighed. "Lying... is part of who I am. I can't help it, but I'm good at it. You, on the other hand..." She chuckled. "You're the most honest pony I know. Applejack can't hold a candle to you."

"Who?"

"The one with the accent. Always wears a hat?"

"Ah."

"I should really get to introducing them properly."

"I'd prefer to do it myself."

"Alright then."

"Tia?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for this. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome." She nuzzled her affectionately. "Feeling better, sis?"

She was crying again, but her tears were of exalted joy. "Yes. Yes." The words flowed out of her as they embraced each other- and for the first time that day, the pair smiled, as one.

Celestia closed her eyes and let the simple pleasure of happiness hit her. Somehow they were together again- and the moment seemed to last forever. Until she herself broke it, the tenseness gone from her voice. "Ah, Luna, I was just wondering if you- if you could give me some room to breathe!" She chuckled.

The azure one retreated. "Oh, sorry!"

"As I was saying... I was wondering if you'd like to switch places for a day. You raise the sun and I'll take care of the moon."

"Seems to me you've taken an interest in my stars." She trotted over to the edge of the overlook.

The other skipped after her like a little schoolfilly. "Well, aren't they simply amazing? Great glowing masses of plasma, suspended in the sky, as unique as the populace of our nation. And the constellations-"

"Alright, alright. I'm sold!" She gave a hearty laugh. "Anything for you, dear sister."

Celestia gave an involuntary yawn. "Thank you. I'm off to bed now." She turned away.

"Oh, uh, sis? I was going to ask you something as well."

She stopped. "Yes?"

"Could I..." She paused. "Could I sleep with you tonight?"

"I do hope you aren't planning anything mischievous," the alicorn teased.

"Wha-?!"

"Only kidding. Of course you can."

"Yay!"

Chapter 9

Untying

"Well, here we are. Make yourself comfortable." Celestia closed the door behind them.

"Did you ever find out why your bed is so big?"

"I did not. Though it is quite useful now." The pair slipped under its covers.

"We haven't done this in... in forever, it seems."

"Back when you were just a little filly! You'd see things hiding in the shadows and come to me. Imagine that- the princess of the night, scared of the dark."

"And I always came to you because our parents were too busy being royal."

Celestia sighed.

"Do you think they knew, that they wouldn't be able to watch over me? Maybe that's why your bed is so inexplicably large."

"Maybe, maybe... it is rather nice, I must say. I just wish I had more pillows for the two of us!"

"Oh, it's quite alright." She grinned. "You always did like feathery things. Like your phoenixes."

"That reminds me- you haven't met Philomena yet, have you?"

"I don't think so. When do you come up with all these names anyway?"

"You're not the only one who enjoys reading, Luna."

"I'm not?" She chuckled. "I... don't suppose Amber is still around."

"No. She passed away. Everypony around us does, don't they?"

"At least we have each other again."

She smiled. "Yes. We do."

"Tia?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me a story."

~ * ~ * ~

Pinkie blinked a few times. Then her eyes snapped open and she yanked the lollipop out of her mouth. How it had ever seemed like a good idea was a mystery.

She stared into it, lit up by the moon. It was a pastel-looking pink swirl-bright and garish and, as she was quite aware, painfully sweet. It was everything she hated about herself. But there had been times when she hadn't hated herself, days of misery shared with her companions that now had become something to threaten herself with. She was sure that was where her happiness was hidden, if only she would *stop focusing on the damn rocks*.

She sighed. When she had arrived in Ponyville, she had buried those memories deep, and all that was associated with them- it was sadness she felt when looking back, but she realized it had never been very strong. In fact, she had never been passionate about anything except pretending to be passionate, which created a conundrum all by itself. *That* was the problem- she was forcing herself to feel, even though she knew very well it would never be possible.

Even the concept of a friend was something difficult to grasp. She did know they were supposed to be supportive, and the ones she had acquired were. They loved her, and they had been there for her, and if there was something they didn't like about her, it was likely going to be the fact that she sometimes got so caught up in exaggerating everything that she lost track of everypony else's emotions. Perhaps confessing was better for all of them, after all...

For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Pinkamena smiled an honest smile. Tomorrow she would tell them; Twilight first. Twilight seemed

like the sort of mare who would start rambling about the disorder her friend had and how rare it was and how some pony from Stalliongrad with an impossible name had done a study on it. She just hoped she wouldn't ask her to be hooked up to that gadget of hers again. Her mind was clear now, if a little tired. But that was something easily fixed...

~ * ~ * ~

"Are you sure you're okay?" asked Scootaloo for the umpteenth time.

"Look, I know you're worried about me, but when I say I'm fine, that means I'm fine."

"So... is that a yes?" She cocked her head.

"Yes." *Because I found you.* "Are you?"

"Yup. You caught me!"

Rainbow smiled. "Well, good night, then. Wouldn't want to keep you up- you're a growing filly."

"Okay."

The pair stood unmoving. "Well...?"

"Rainbow Dash."

"Yes?"

"Thank you for this night. I'll remember it." Scootaloo turned and began to walk away as Dash watched her fondly.

"H-hey, Scootaloo!"

The pegasus stopped and looked at her, uncertainly. Almost frightened.

"I was wondering..." She huffed a little. "I was wondering if you'd like to meet again tomorrow so we can practice some more."

The little one's face lit up and she grinned. "I'd love to!"

Her mentor smiled. "How about we meet out by Sugarcube Corner? Then we can grab a quick snack."

"That sounds great!" Scootaloo began walking away again, and the mare sighed when she disappeared behind a corner.

She decided to follow suit and set off for home. Yes, they'd meet at the Corner tomorrow, and she could confess to Pinkie. Pinkie would take it in a stride and probably start singing a song on the spot. Though she'd also probably want to throw her a party, which would create unnecessary excitement for everypony. Oh well. She'd already told Scootaloo she'd be there, and she couldn't let her down. And besides, it was a start- if she told one pony, the others would come easier.

Just like that, it seemed the wall she had been bashing her skull against for all this time was gone. It wasn't so hard. All she had needed was somepony looking for comfort. She was sure her friends would accept her, perhaps even appreciate her mellowness, and if they didn't... well, what kind of friends were they?

They weren't. Friends supported each other and pulled each other through, just as she and Scootaloo had done. Once, the same mare had belittled while the other had placed her on the highest pedestal. Now they were both learning from each other. That was friendship.

Rainbow Dash giggled a little. It also made great material for a friendship report to the Princess. That was what Twilight would make of it.

She stopped, having arrived, and entered her house. A lofty home where lofty goals could be pondered. She drifted up to her bed and slipped in, snuggling against the clouds. She was filled with a perfect contentment that she couldn't quite put into words, but the pegasus knew it was there because she had opened herself. She just *had* to do it again tomorrow.

~ * ~ * ~

As she turned a corner, Scootaloo spread her wings but then stopped. Would Rainbow Dash approve? She had already fallen once, and now there wouldn't be any safety nets. She rested her wings. They would have enough time tomorrow, anyway, and then they would be together.

...as friends, she realized. They had shared a moment together, and now they were united. Scootaloo grinned again. She had *made a friend*.

Speaking of friends, she'd have to tell her fellow Crusaders what had happened- she had learned how to fly, at last! She wondered how they would react. She wouldn't let them be jealous. That wasn't what friends did.

The neighsayers had been proven wrong, and that was enough for her. Diamond and Silver would probably be shocked anyhow, so there was no need to brag. Too much. Their envy resulted in hilarity. and that was something she couldn't leave behind.

She realized that, much to her delight, she would have to fly to her window if she didn't want to risk getting caught. She did so, still a little shakily, and slipped under the covers, hugging her pillow tight. She'd also have to tell her parents. Except she'd need to explain how she got around to testing her wings at this time... Perhaps she should just tell them the truth. They'd understand, right? Everypony needed some risks and excitement from time to time.

She would see in the morning.

~ * ~ * ~

Trixie opened her eyes slowly, taking in her surroundings. She had slept, but she was certain it wasn't morning- even on her worst days a night's sleep made her feel rested. Now there simply was a gap between sobbing herself to sleep and waking. She reached over for the bottle beside her- *Come now. At least give yourself a chance.* then sighed and drew back. She'd give herself a chance, but for what? *To reflect. That carpenter left his mark on you in more than one way, after all.*

Though it hurt to admit it, it seemed his appearance was what caused her to end up in this situation. That, and Ponyville. But she could have taken a different path, scurried back to Canterlot where she would have had a moment to figure out just what she was doing with herself. Even Mr. Wood had given her every chance to back out. So why hadn't she? Pride?

Pride and a need to please Mother, of course. That had been driving her since the beginning. It was only natural, she told herself. She had been a little filly and they had had each other and not much else. And She had worked so hard and sacrificed so much to groom her into what she was now that she just couldn't live with the thought of leaving her wishes unfulfilled. She had to draw a line somewhere though.

And yet Trixie remembered a time when this had seemed not just right, but *fun*. A moment when she had actually looked forward to performing, and she knew it had only been a moment, so perfect. The talent show. The mare smiled. She had been a little filly, just starting her training. Her act had been simple, and not once had she addressed the crowd. A few simple tricks here and there that looked pretty. Mother hadn't approved, had she?

No, she had told her it wouldn't end well. It had seemed she was right- the aspiring magician hadn't even gotten an honorable mention... but was that really what mattered? Was her happiness to be sacrificed for fame? Somehow that didn't make much sense. In the end, she had only wanted to make her daughter live a good life; she couldn't blame her. But a good life included happiness, and if she lived on this way, she was pleasing nopony.

Tomorrow she would begin making herself happy. It was time to start living up to her name.

~ * ~ * ~

"...and the stallion said-" she lowered her voice-

"Don't fret, little one. The path is among the trees, but all one has to do to find it is know where to look!" And his horn glowed as he summoned a lovely golden butterfly that perched itself on her nose.

'But Mister, a butterfly is what got me lost in the first place!' she wailed.

The stallion looked at her with understanding. 'Some butterflies get you lost. Others get you where you want to be. You just have to know which is which and which you want.'

'Why would I want to get lost?'

He chuckled. 'Well, sometimes a little detour gives you time to think.'

She decided she was too tired to argue. 'But... if I go in the forest all alone, won't there be all sorts of fearsome creatures?'

'There's creatures, dear, but as long as you show them you're not afraid of them, there's nothing they can do to you.'

The filly smiled. Somehow, it made sense. She walked into the woods, the stranger who had met her with such kindness watching over her. She turned to thank him-

"But then a manticore leapt out of a nearby bush and bit her head off!"

"Luna!"

She giggled. "I like it better that way."

"But you're ruining the moral."

"Oh, moral, schmoral. Let me have my fun!"

They laid in silence until the older sister yawned. "About time we got to actually sleeping, don't you think?"

"It would seem so. Tomorrow I'll raise that sun of yours and go see what my- *our* subjects are up to."

"Well, I'm flattered, Luna, but-"

"I'm not doing this because you told me to. Well, I am, but..." She sighed.

"I'm not a foal anymore, Tia. I can make my own decisions. And while I do want you to talk to me, I want you to listen to me, too. Promise me you'll do this."

Celestia nodded solemnly. "I promise."

Luna smiled. "Thank you for this. I just feel so happy. My heart was a hole and now you've filled it with, with..." She stopped, unable to find words. She didn't need them. The two sisters locked gazes and embraced each other, wrapped in mutual appreciation until they dozed off.

And by the moonlight, six fillies slept.

Chapter 10

Illumination

Celestia woke to the rhythmic ticking of a clock, a sound of the highest importance. Time was everything when you had stars to raise. She observed it sleepily. It looked to be around five. They would have to make haste. She placed an arm around her sister's shoulder.

"Luna... Time to wake up, dear."

The other yawned. "Morning, Tia."

"It isn't yet! Somepony's got to raise the sun."

"I did say I'd do that today, didn't I?" She sighed. "Five minutes, please?"

"Alright. I'll have the servants prepare breakfast."

She exited the room, smiling to herself. She'd have to bring the moon down, too. Even the most beautiful things had to rest, after all.

Trixie lowered the pillow she had apparently adopted as a shield in her sleep. The sun wasn't out yet, but the sky was of a lighter hue. She'd have to get a move on- few things were worse than having to move a filled cart under the heat of the blazing sun.

She rummaged around for her map and looked it over quickly. She'd hoped to make for Fillydelphia, but it seemed a (very) small village that wasn't out of her way would make a better venue to reinvent herself. It was precariously close to Manehattan, but that would be no problem.

She stepped out of the caravan and admired her surroundings. Minimalist, but beautiful nonetheless. She would have to attempt to replicate this plain's success.

Then her stomach grumbled. Truly the best motivation.

She headed to the front of the vehicle, where a modest metallic knob would soon be the focus of her attention. It was made of a material that quite eagerly absorbed magical energy, making the task of moving a whole cart slightly less precarious. It still wouldn't be a light load, she knew.

But it helped if you started small.

As the two sisters walked along the cobblestone path, the sound of their hoofsteps rang out with an air befitting their emotions- especially Luna's.

"Oh my goodness! I haven't handled that star of yours in... a long time. When this mind has trouble remembering something..."

"2746 years, 5 months and 19 days."

Luna scowled, then smiled again. "Oh, and it will be so delightful! The Royal Equestrian Brass will be there, yes? And they shall play the Song of the Sun as I make my ascent, a glorious melody to bring out an ardent spirit in all our subjects!" She blushed and shrank away.

"That... would indeed be the most logical piece for the occasion." She chuckled as they stopped before a corner. "Alright, here it is. Are you ready?"

Luna nodded and they walked out onto the square. She immediately wished they hadn't.

Their appearance drew the attention of a small crowd, who bowed in respect. A small filly remained standing, watching the new arrivals eagerly, before a hoof pulled her down. The brass section was there, at least.

Luna gulped, but then set her gaze straight again. These were her subjects. She couldn't be afraid of them, could she? No, she had a sun to raise and a day to start and these ponies were simply here to watch her. Well, to watch Celestia, but she was sure they wouldn't mind a surprise.

She made her way to the gathering, facing them, and cleared her throat. "Greetings, loyal subjects."

No response.

"I'd bid you good morning, but as my sister kindly pointed out to me, the morning has not arrived yet."

Blank looks again.

"The more... vigilant among you may have noticed that today it is not Celestia who is preparing to bring sunlight to Equestria. The two of us have decided to switch our duties for the day. I do hope my performance will be adequate for you dedicated spectators!" She added a somewhat forced hint of enthusiasm to her last sentence and resisted the urge to cringe.

Instead, she spread her wings and sought out the sun with her magic. Her horn glowed, spurring a light drumroll. The melody developed and grew in volume as her wings began beating with greater determination, and she closed her eyes, taking in the vibrant tune. One drove the other on, it seemed- she yearned to hear their singing and they were... a band. It was their talent, just as raising, well, the moon, but really any heavenly body, it seemed, was hers.

Having pondered this, she decided to open her eyes again. Quite a fair bit of progress she had made- she wasn't sure exactly how high she was supposed to take that flaming orb, but the sound would guide her. Perhaps the players didn't know any more than her, but the two parties had confidence in each other and that was what mattered.

A ringing, brilliant climax that was everything she associated with Celestia's star reached her ears and she sighed, releasing her hold. She let the magic of the moment wash over her until all was quiet. Then she headed down, stopping before the musicians. They bowed.

"An excellent performance, fillies and gentlecolts. I've always been fond of that piece, and your rendition was simply magnificent. Thank you for helping me begin this day on a, if you'll excuse me, high note." She paused. "Tia tells me my speech may seem a bit dry or overly polite at times. I... truly am grateful. Your talents bring joy to my heart, and to others too, I am sure!"

She trotted over to the other group. "My duty has been performed, little ponies. I do hope you've enjoyed it, and wish every one of you the best of luck with the rest of the day." There were a few scattered thanks.

The filly she had remarked earlier grinned at her admiringly. "Good job, Pwincess!"

Luna blushed and began walking away, stopping to lower her head and nuzzle her softly. She heard a few murmurs of agreement behind her. Talking to other ponies wasn't *that* hard, it seemed.

And she was only getting started.

The warm glow of dawn brushed against Pinkamena's face affectionately, and she gazed upon it. Somehow, it seemed brighter, if that was at all possible. But of course! It had to be brighter- today was the day her friends would see her for what she truly was. Happiness was sure to be in abundance for all, no matter how mystical for her. She turned over in her bed and was presented with Gummy staring at her, wearing his usual poker face.. A kindred spirit. She smiled at him. "Mommy's going to tell the whole world her secret today."

And she was. She descended the stairs slowly but with determination. The sound of tea being slurped interspersed with conversation she was too tired to understand greeted her.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Cake."

"Good morning, Pinkie," said Cup as her husband nodded. "Care to join us?"

"I'm fine. More than fine, actually."

"Alright then."

"Um... I was just wondering..."

"Yes?"

"Could I... Could I take the day off? There's some things I need to talk about with my friends."

The stallion lowered his beverage. "Of course, dear. You know how much we care about you."

She laughed. "I'll be going, then." She skipped across the room, exited the bakery and was faced with a world in bloom. The town square was as lively as it always was, spotted with vibrant hues in motion, and the light spring air flowed through her lungs. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again and set off for the library. There was a unicorn she needed to see.

As Trixie walked into the village, the sun had already risen. Her first task was to cure her hunger, and she entered a small restaurant. Far below her refined Canterlot standards, and yet its simple, quaint atmosphere appealed to her.

The owner greeted her, a smile on his face. "Good morning. What can I get you?"

This was no time to be fancy. "Er... hay fries?" A small part of her recoiled.

"Alright. Those'll be a few minutes."

She took a seat at a table as the stallion went off to do his cooking. She laid her head down on her forehooves and closed her eyes.

"Say, what brings you here, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Wha-? Oh. You... startled me."

"Sorry."

"Quite alright. I really ought to be waking up anyway. I'm a traveling magician."

"And you came here to do a show...?"

"Yes?"

"That's, uh... an interesting decision. Not the biggest crowds around here. Only one pony who's ever seen big crowds, really."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, a carpenter from Manehattan. He's got some relatives here; comes by to visit sometimes."

She swore a bit too loudly.

"You okay?"

"Y-yes! Please do excuse me! Hey, would those fries be done, do you think?"

Rainbow yawned, stretched her legs and lay still again. She smacked her lips complacently, then jerked up, remembering what had happened the other night. She hadn't overslept, had she?

The pegasus darted down to her living room and checked the clock. No, it was much too early to have missed her appointment. Hopefully.

She noted the time and dashed out the door.

"Salad, sprinkled with ground rosemary and cloves, topped with a vinaigrette that Her Majesty Celestia is rather fond of, if I recall correctly." The plates were set before them.

"Salad. A sensible choice."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, Luna."

The servants walked off, leaving the two alone at the table. One of them was eagerly devouring the greens.

"Alright, Tia... um." She sighed.

Celestia swallowed. "Yes?"

"I can't talk while you're eating. I feel so rude."

"Oh, sorry. Well, I can put that off. Salads don't get any colder."

"Indeed. I'll be leaving after this meal. However, I haven't had time to really think of where I wish to go."

"Ah. And you want me to offer some destinations?"

"Yes."

"Well... how does Ponyville sound?"

"Somehow I had a feeling you would say that."

"Well, there's somepony I can easily contact there who can help you! She, too, was faced with joining society once."

"Fair enough. Then the Princess of the Night shall visit Ponyville. You will write that pony a letter?"

"Yes."

"In that case, we may consume these increasingly delicious-looking salads."

The great tree that was Ponyville's library stood before Pinkamena, a familiar destination for her. There was no reason to be nervous; she had been here to visit her friend countless times before. But those butterflies really liked it in her stomach.

She approached the door, raised a hoof, and then lowered it again. The world around her continued to move. Bitterly, she stared at the ground as the sun bore down on her. She had told herself she would do this. She *had* to do this. If she didn't, what had happened last night would happen again, and again, and again...

Pinkamena held her breath and knocked at the door.

Twilight Sparkle opened it.

"Oh, hello, Pinkie!"

"Good morning, Twilight. Can I come inside?"

"Of course."

Pinkamena heard the sound of the door closing behind her but kept her gaze straight.

"So, what brings you here?"

"Well, there's... There's some things I wanted to ask you about."

"Ask away."

"It's not really that easy. Kind of private, actually."

"I'll listen to whatever you want to tell me, Pinkie. We're friends."

She smiled. This was it, then. "Twilight, I think there's something wrong with me, something I've been hiding from ponies. And now I'd like to know what exactly it is."

The entrance to Sugarcube Corner burst open allowing a blue pegasus to fly in and skid to a halt before a startled Cup Cake.

"Mrs. Cake *what time is it!*"

"Oh, uh... eight twenty-two!" she stammered.

Rainbow calculated her time, breathing heavily, then grinned in triumph. "Under three minutes. Ha!"

The older mare smiled at her. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Hm... No, not right now. I'm waiting for somepony."

"That's alright."

"It is. I just hope she doesn't leave me hanging."

Morning came to Scootaloo on its own, without the somewhat annoying aid of her mother telling her it was time to get ready for school. Today was Saturday, and she wouldn't need to worry about that.

She wouldn't need to worry about anything, it seemed. She would be meeting with Rainbow Dash and they would do all sorts of things that involved flying and being friends and she simply knew it was going to be so much fun.

She stumbled out of her bed, spread her wings and prepared for an entrance befitting her mood, flying right past the kitchen, where her mother was busy cooking. She saw her daughter out of the corner of her eye and greeted her as she often did.

Scootaloo continued into the living room where her father was stretched out in an armchair, still attempting to wake up. "Morning, Scoot- are you *flying!?*"

A grin spread across and she stifled a triumphant laugh. "I am!"

Her mother rushed over with a look of joy. "When did you ever learn to-?"

"Last night."

"Last night... What were you doing up?"

"Um, well..." Her grin faded.

"It's alright, dear. We won't get mad at you."

"I was just... bored. And I tried to fly." She lowered herself to the ground, only to suddenly start hopping up and down excitedly. "Oh, and, and! I met Rainbow Dash, and she said we should get together again today and do some *things!*"

The two looked at her with what she hoped was empathy. Then again, she didn't remember if empathy was good.

"Well, that sounds wonderful! It's a bit sudden, but we're happy for you. Really, we are."

Scootaloo embraced the warmth of their smiles and walked to the door. "I'll be going then."

"Aren't you going to have breakfast?"

"Rainbow said we'd meet at Sugarcube Corner and grab something to eat."

"Sounds like you've got a busy day ahead of you. Oh, that reminds me! Did you finish your homework?"

"Just a few math problems, Mom."

"Alright then. Off you go!"

The stallion turned to her. "Hold your head up, filly. You've got places to see and ponies to meet."

Scotaloo nodded.

Trixie stared at herself in the mirror. This was nothing new. She had set up her cart in the spot that vaguely resembled a plaza, put up some flyers (making sure to indicate the time the show started and that donations were very welcome), gotten dressed, and she had even attracted an audience. So why did she have to keep herself from sweating?

She turned, the sun peeking in through the veil before her. Whether she was willing or not, it was time to shine.

She brought her hoof down on a switch, causing the curtains to swing open. Fireworks and a small fanfare punctuated the entrance.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, the Great and Powerful Trixie invites you to feast your eyes upon magic unmatched in beauty in all of Equestria!"

Somepony yelled a half-hearted "Yeah!" She gulped.

Then she noticed Dusty Wood, carpenter and destroyer of delusions, and almost gulped again.

But, she reminded herself, there were roses to produce from thin air. She would win these ponies over. She had performed before royalty, for goodness' sake; a few villagers were *not* going to end Trixie.

And if they didn't enjoy Trixie, they would enjoy her magic.

Scotaloo's pace quickened as she left her home, getting quite close to a full gallop as she reached the town's center. She stayed on the ground, however. Not only did she think it best to keep her newfound skill secret for now, but if she knew Rainbow Dash in the slightest, she'd be needing them soon.

She stopped, spotting an apple stand, courtesy of the Acres. Applejack was at the helm, with her sister at her side, eying the goods wistfully. She approached the duo.

"Howdy there, Scootaloo! Yer here fer Apple Bloom, aren'tcha?"

"Yeah. No, wait." She lowered her voice. "Eeyup." The others giggled. "There's something I wanted to show you guys, but it has to stay secret. No telling anypony; not even Sweetie Belle. That goes for you too, Applejack."

"Well, a' course! Show us!"

"Alright." She grinned again. She really ought to stop doing that. It made her look some giddy little foal. But for now she had to focus on flying.

The filly spread her wings and flapped them, gradually increasing her speed until she reached a steady rhythm. As she did so, her altitude increased slightly, and soon she was a whole half-foot above the ground. A modest distance she hoped wouldn't attract attention.

Applejack smiled at her as Apple Bloom admired her proudly. The mare was first to speak.

"Mighty impressed, Scootaloo. That there is some fine flying, if a bit low."

"Congratulations, fellow Crusader! That's another step to getting your cutie mark, ain't it?"

"Ha! I hope so." She realized she hadn't even thought of that conundrum until now. That... wasn't bad, she was sure. Her cutie mark was another worry, for another time. She had a pegasus to meet. She bid the others farewell and galloped away.

Applejack gave her a mock scowl as she disappeared. "Pegasi."

Rainbow Dash sighed. "What time is it, Mrs. Cake?"

"Half past nine, dear."

"So... I've been waiting for over an hour."

"Y-yes." She gave her a look of pity. It stung her a little.

"I'll be going, then." She headed for the exit.

"Miss Dash, I don't mean to sound overbearing or anything, but-"

"Yeah?" She realized she'd cut her off and looked away again.

"Please don't be upset. I'm sure whoever you were waiting for just got caught up in something."

"Yeah, of course. I'm sure they did. Just... couldn't make it." Her voice wavered and she hurried out of the bakery, eager to avoid any further scrutiny.

Instead she found an out-of-breath Scootaloo.

"Anything else, Pinkie?"

"Anything else? Well, I don't like to talk about this too much, but-"

"It's alright if you don't want to."

"No. I need to tell you as much as I can." Pinkie looked her straight in the eye, and the unicorn resisted the urge to shiver. "Anyway. Remember my last birthday when you ponies surprised me and I was kind of... bitter?"

Twilight nodded.

"Well, when Rainbow came to pick me up I was in the middle of another party."

"Oh?"

"With some rocks."

"Oh. Uh." She tried to find a polite way of expressing what she felt.

"I know it sounds weird."

"It doesn't-"

"Yes, it does."

The purple mare grimaced.

"I had friends much like those; rocks and vegetables and lint and whatever else I could find on that miserable farm- you know about the farm, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Right. Well. Those friends kept me happy. Happier than the others ever could. And when I came to Ponyville, I... tried to forget them. It worked for a while."

"Did anypony else know about them?"

"Granny Pie walked in on me once."

"How was that?"

"Called me crazy."

Twilight looked at her uncomfortably.

"Oh, I was fine. My heart's pretty tough, you know."

Twilight struggled to find her words.

"That's it, I think. What's wrong with me, doc?" She smiled.

It went unnoticed.

"Hello, Rainbow Dash! I came as fast as I could!"

"Hi there. Good morning and all that." She sighed. First she had expected a little filly to not wake up late on a Saturday, and then she had almost lost faith in her arriving at all.

"Is something wrong, Rainbow Dash?"

"No. Well, actually, yes."

Scootaloo looked at her worriedly. "What is it?"

"You keep using my full name. Don't idolize me like that. We're friends, and friends are equal."

She was met with humbleness and confusion. "Alright... Rainbow?"

"That's it. Or Dash. Or anything you like. Speaking of which, can I call you Scoot?"

"...sure."

"Well then. You wanna grab something sweet before we fly?"

The question didn't need to be answered and they entered the Corner. Cup, who had been watching the scene, tried to hide her grin.

"Welcome back, Rainbow! Can I get you two something?"

"How's two slices of pie sound, Scoot?"

"Great."

"What kind, then?" Cup's smile refused to fade, especially as her suspicions that the pony Dash had been waiting for had arrived became certainties.

"Uh... cherry?"

"Blueberry?"

The two exchanged glances.

"Blueberry."

"Cherry."

The earth pony laughed. "I'll get you one of each."

"Oh, and could you cut the slices in half too?" asked the blue one.

"Sure thing."

She turned to Scootaloo. "I just thought you'd like to share."

Trixie gorged herself on the applause, however meager. She resisted the urge to grin, and bowed. "Thank you; thank you, all. You've been a wonderful crowd, but I'm afraid I've been keeping you for as long as I can!"

She backed away and delicately slid out a metal box with a slot from behind the curtains. "Donations go here. Not required, but Trixie would appreciate them."

She slipped from their view, pushed open the back door lightly, and left her caravan. She headed for the same restaurant that had welcomed her here.

After greeting the stallion and picking out a table, she proceeded to lay back and let out a long, deep sigh.

"Well?"

"I'm not ready to order."

"I meant your show."

Was this empathy? And, if so, why did she act so awkwardly when met with it? "They liked me, I should say. A good performance, I think."

"I guess you'll be leaving us now."

"Yes. A traveling showmare must travel. But I shan't forget this day. It means quite a lot to me."

"Course."

The door opened again. "Hey, Top." The voice snapped her from her lazy rest, familiar in every wrong way.

"Morning, Dusty. Want something?"

"Eh, just a fruit salad." He noticed Trixie. "Morning," he stated calmly.

She froze, staring at him with wide eyes. "H-hello..."

"Though, ha, it's evening, I guess."

"...yes."

"You mind if I sit with you?"

"Go ahead." She tried to get her heart to stop thumping. "Rather forward, wouldn't you say?"

He laughed. "Always. But you already know that."

She wondered if this conversation would test her more than the previous performance.

"Okay, let me try it again. Schi...?"

"Keep going."

"...zoid. Schizoid."

"That's it."

"Wow, how do you spell that?"

"S-C-H-

"Don't answer that. But that's what I've got?"

"Yes. Socially withdrawn, emotionally cold and with an- I'm guessing-elaborate imagined world."

The magenta one sighed. "Not what most ponies think when they think Pinkie Pie, eh?"

"I guess not. But if you say it's who you really are, then I... have to respect it."

She nodded. "So I guess somepony like me wouldn't have that many friends."

"No..."

"I'm not leaving you behind, unless you want me to."

"I'll always be here for you when you need me, Pinkie, just like I always have. How can we be anything but happy for you?"

She chuckled a little. "Alright, we'll see. I've gotta go." She turned and flashed her flank. "Have to see if I'm still good with parties."

The two winged equines ate as they walked, making quick work of the pastries. Neither of them had had breakfast, and they welcomed the still-warm sweetness.

Rainbow looked to the sky. "Well, here we are. Ready to go up?"

"Isn't it... a little far?"

"Well, yes, but I'm sure you can do it. You've got a lot of potential in those wings; I saw that last night. And don't forget I'll always be right by your side."

Scootaloo nodded sternly.

"Now, you want me to guide you, or...?"

"I can do it." She spread her wings and gained some altitude. Rainbow followed her.

"Uh, you're gonna have to get a little faster there-"

Suddenly the foal flew off, extending her forelegs in instinct as she accelerated.

The older mare sighed and began to chase her.

The door to Ponyville's most renowned bakery opened and a brightly-colored mare stepped in.

"Welcome back, Pinkie! Done already?"

"Not yet, I think. I was hoping to host my friends a party, if you don't mind."

"A party? With you as the host? Why, I think it goes without saying I'll allow it! Just, uh... if you could host it somewhere other than Sugarcube Corner..."

"Sure thing."

"Just remember it's coming out of your paycheck."

"Mrs. Cake, I thought I got an hourly- oh. Ha." She smiled, though more at the fact she could still have normal conversations than at the joke.

"Ah, I just remembered. Some ponies came asking for you."

"Who was it?"

"First Rainbow Dash, and then later a pegasus filly joined her."

"Orange coat?"

"Yes."

"Scootaloo."

"That would be her."

"Did they say anything else?"

"No. A surprise, perhaps?"

"Well. I've got my own surprise coming, and they're both invited."

"I'll get out of your way and let you work, then. Good luck, dear."

Pinkie wondered if she needed luck for a moment, then hopped off to find some balloons.

Luna rocketed through the skies, relishing the feeling of freedom. Tia had suggested a carriage, but she had politely reminded her that she preferred to fly by her own means.

Now there were things to attend to. She would have to enter Ponyville, obviously, though she guessed she would disguise herself. She wasn't quite ready to see how the world would react.

Then she would have to find that Twilight Sparkle. Apparently she had been in a similar position once as well. There was, she hoped, a thing or two she could learn from her.

Her sister had already mentioned a few of the more interesting shops that had sprung up while she had been away, though she remembered

Ponyville as a simple little town that she had been fond of visiting in her earlier centuries.

She stopped. Below her, it seemed as if somepony had torn off a corner of Cloudsdale and moved it to the outskirts of her destination. She simply had to take a closer look.

In her eagerness to explore, Princess Luna even forgot to hide her identity.

Exhausted, Scootaloo plopped herself down on a cloud, barely even bothering to keep her eyes open. Rainbow Dash stood by her. "How was that?"

"That was... tough. Hey, wait, I'm on a cloud!"

"Yup."

"That's so cool! Like, I knew pegasi could do that, but it's just so... ha!"

Dash only smiled fondly. "Alright. Since you're still not used to long flights or pacing yourself, I don't think you're really in any condition to be doing flying tricks today."

"Aww..."

"I do see that you're interested in clouds though, so I think I'll introduce you to pegasus magic."

"Magic?"

"Oh yeah. Unicorns aren't the only ones who have it. Hay, even earth ponies. It's not as flashy, of course, but you shouldn't, you know..."

"Make fun of them?"

"Yeah." She tried to get memories of insults, delivered and received, out of her head. "Anyway! Let's start with something simple. Clouds are what your magic affects. Pegasi are the only kind of ponies who can stand on them. Well, except alicorns, and I'm pretty sure Twilight knows a spell that- ugh, now I'm rambling. Do you get it so far?"

"Mm-hm."

"If we just take a little cloud from somewhere..." She searched around, and having found a target, flew up, landing on the wooly mass and maneuvering it to her student. "Now just try bending it a little."

Scootaloo reached inside with a hoof experimentally, then pulled it up slowly. Nothing happened. "Uh..."

"Oh! Gosh, I'm so stupid sometimes. You can't just bend a cloud if you don't want to. Try again, but this time really concentrate on what you want to do with it."

The orange filly focused on the formation determinedly and moved both her forehooves across it, creating an odd bulge on the right side. "Like that?"

"Just like that! Really, I'm impressed. It doesn't come that quickly for most ponies. Now you can try other things with it, like... Try hitting it really hard."

Scootaloo did, causing the cloud to vanish in a puff.

"Best part about being on the weather team right there. Oh, speaking of weather, I need to teach you about that too! Except I'll have to get some more interesting clouds. That's where the real fun is. Don't they teach you any of these things at school?"

"Not really."

"Such a shame. You should know what you can do!"

The two sat in strange silence for a moment.

"So that's all I got, Scoot."

"Aren't you going to give me homework?"

"What? Oh." She giggled. "You kidder."

"No, I was being serious."

"I guess I *am* your teacher now, too... Work with those clouds. Form them, shape them, do everything you can with them."

"Alright! I guess that's it for today?"

"Yeah... Hey, sorry we didn't do much. It's all just so sudden. But I hope we can be good friends."

"No, it's fine! I... I still can't believe I've got *Rainbow Dash* teaching me!"

"Hey, what'd I say?"

"Oh, sorry. Good-bye, Rainbow. See you around."

"Can you make the trip back down?"

"Of course."

Suddenly a dark figure landed on their cloud. Dash gasped and bowed. Scootaloo turned to see who had intruded on their meeting. "Morning, ponies. I just happened to be flying here and I noticed- oh dear, why are you bowing?"

"...shouldn't I kn-kneel before Her Majesty?"

"Pardon? Oh!" She blushed. "Please, rise. I am here not as a princess. Not yet."

The mare did as she was told.

"Anyhow, I was just passing over you when I noticed your house's exquisite architecture!" She grinned.

"Thanks. It's a nice little reminder."

"A Cloudsdale pony?"

"Yes. I moved here when I was little."

"It's a pleasant town. And quite vital to the nation's weather. Who are you, then?"

"Rainbow Dash."

"Oh, yes, Rainbow Dash! Tia's talked about you. Loyalty?"

"That's me."

"Ah, and who would you be, little one?"

"That's Scoo-"

"I didn't ask you. Speak up, filly."

"I'm Scootaloo..." She looked up with fear, still not quite sure who the stranger was.

"Are you... afraid of me?"

"N-no."

Luna sighed. "I am Princess Luna of the Night, in case you did not know, which seems to be the case as you are shivering in your horseshoes, so to speak."

"Am not!"

"That's more like it. Well. I hope our paths may cross again, Rainbow Dash and Scootaloo. I'm afraid I have other matters to attend to, but it's been a pleasure meeting you. What you see next is to remain completely secret." Her horn began to glow, and an aura of magic enveloped the alicorn, changing her appearance into something decidedly different. When the spell finished, a shorter mare with a stunning emerald green mane, pearly white coat and a rose for a cutie mark stood before them. Her horn had vanished. "Call me Rose Petal."

Her subjects admired the goddess-turned-pegasus. Rainbow was the first to break the silence. "Hello, Rose."

"The pleasure is all mine. I believe a filly will be accompanying me?"

"Yeah."

"Then let us go, Scootaloo."

"Okay. Hope to see you soon, Rainbow!"

"See you around." Rainbow watched the pair fly off. The little one was still speeding. That made her feel a little. It meant she didn't just feel the need to push herself when near her mentor.

And as nice the first day of their friendship had been, she still hadn't had an opportunity to open herself. If Pinkie wasn't available, she would need to seek somepony else.

She'd give them a few minutes; running into them again so soon would be odd. Then she herself would leave her home and find another's.

"This is the town, Pri- Rose."

"I noticed."

"I'll leave you to do whatever it is you want to do here."

"Wonderful."

"Just, if I could ask one thing..."

"Yes?"

"See, there's these fillies in my class- you know, high-class and stuff- and they're always teasing me and my friends because we're..." She sighed and showed her companion her flank.

"Oh. No cutie mark yet. And that's why they... why, how despicable!"

"Yeah."

"And how can I help you with this regrettable situation?"

"Well, I was thinking how you're kind of the Princess of the Night and you could maybe just go and visit them and..." She looked away. "Give them a little scare?"

Rose blinked a few times, incredulously. Then she laughed. "Scare those awful fillies?"

Scootaloo sighed and began walking away.

"W-wait, please! I'm sorry if I hurt you."

She stopped.

"What I meant was that you shouldn't lower yourself to their level like that. If they want to pester you for something so meaningless as how late you get your cutie mark, let them be. Having me 'scare' them, presumably referring to you by name, is only going to cause them to feel threatened, and that will make their attacks even more vicious. We don't want that, do we?"

"I guess not."

"Besides, I wouldn't enjoy the company of those ponies either. And one last thing."

"Hm?"

"Be strong. Don't let anypony own you or get at you. Especially not some shallow, vain socialites."

"...thanks. I'll remember that." She blinked. "Wait, what's a socialite?"

"Never you mind. You'll be heading home now?"

"Yes."

"Then I bid you good day. And please, stop being so intimidated around me."

"I-I'll try!"

"Is that a stutter I hear?"

"I said I'll try!"

"And may you be unfaltering always."

Rainbow Dash stared at the door before her, the door to Fluttershy's cottage. Then, not giving herself time to reconsider, she knocked at it loudly.

The mare poked her head out shyly. "Y-yes? Hello, Rainbow. You knocked a little... hard."

"Sorry about that."

"Oh, it's fine."

"Actually, it's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. In a way. It's complicated."

"If you want to talk to me about something, go ahead and come in."

"Right." She accepted the invitation and entered.

"Would you like me to make us some tea?"

"Sure."

"What kind?"

"Just something hot. Help me relax."

Twilight opened the door carefully. Yet another visitor? Why couldn't the town just let her finish a chapter of that romance novel Rarity had let her borrow? "Hello. May I ask who you are?"

"I am Rose Petal, sent by Princess Celestia with a message."

"And why couldn't the Princess send a letter?"

"It is a message of the highest importance that requires a messenger to deliver it."

The unicorn groaned quietly. "Alright, come in." She closed the door behind them. As she turned she froze and, regaining her sense, stooped. "When did you get here, Princess Luna?"

"Good evening, Miss Sparkle. It is most joyful to see you still remember me."

"Of course I do. A disguise spell?"

"Indeed. Please never tell anyone of Rose Petal. I'm rather fond of her."

"I promise."

"Now then. If you'll kindly try to ignore the fact that I am royalty, I'd like to discuss some matters with you."

"I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will succeed. My sister tells me you were in a situation much like mine."

"Then what is your situation, Luna?"

"I... wish to become accustomed with the ways of society once again. I find myself somewhat uncomfortable among ponies and that's no way for a ruler to be, now is it?"

"I can see how that would be a problem. Have you already thought of something you can do to, well...?"

"Yes." She glared. "I really do wish everypony would stop losing the ability to speak as soon as I address them!"

"I'm sorry, it's just... you're the *Princess*."

"Perfectly understandable." She shook a little. "Just a little outburst; everyone I've spoken to today has done that same thing. Anyhow. I wanted to ask you if you happened to know of any occasions I could get involved with today, though in my earlier apparition."

"Rose Petal?"

"Her. I feel I shouldn't make my entry as Luna quite yet."

"Well. There's lots of great places to see in Ponyville! I could show you around the town, if you like- or even better! One of my friends told me she's throwing a party later today, actually. I'm sure she wouldn't mind an extra guest."

"That sounds most grand, Miss Sparkle. But I would still like it if you could show me the rest of this town."

"Not a problem. I have a feeling you'll like it."

"Once, this was one of my favorite villages to visit..." For a moment she stared off at nothing in particular wistfully. "Ah, but that was long ago! Different memories for a different time, no? Let us go out."

The sun was smiling upon them.

Chapter 11

Bloom

Pinkie gave the supplies she had set up one last look. It would be perfect as long as she could convince Twilight to let her use the library. In hindsight it would have been smarter to take care of that first, but she hoped things still worked out. Sometimes you had to just go for it.

"I'm home!" announced Scootaloo before plopping down on the couch and sighing. What a morning...

"Did you have a good time?" Her mother eyed her, eagerness shining in her eyes.

She looked up lazily. "...yeah. We, um. We flew an' stuff. My wings are tired," she whimpered.

"Aww..." The mare leaned down and kissed her cheek softly. "Then go ahead and rest, dear."

"I've still got work to do though. Oh, fine. I guess I won't be able to do much if my wings are all sore. Can you tell me in half an hour or something?"
"Of course."

"Oh, and one more thing, mom."

"Hm?"

"Could you get me a pillow?"

She smiled fondly. "No problem, sweetie."

"Alright, my dear Twilight, where shall we go first?"

"That is a very good question. There's a lot of places I could show you."

"I suppose it'd be easier for you if we started with one of your friends."

"Hm." She gasped. "I forgot to ask about where the party would actually be!" She blushed. "Erm... Rose, do you like bakeries?"

"I do love confections."

"Then I know just where to take you."

Trixie sighed. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Only two weeks or so."

"It certainly seemed like an eternity to me. Of course, I don't expect you to feel the same. For you I must have just been another random mare, successfully seduced."

"Hey, don't be so mean. I remember all the faces I see."

"Oh, I'm sure. The flanks too, presumably?"

"Hey, quit it!"

"Fine."

Dusty attempted to steer the conversation towards a more delicate topic. "So... how you been?"

"Quite pleasant. Except that you managed to completely demolish my worldview."

He gave her a look of regret.

"The one good thing you did. Well, two good things."

"Huh?"

"It's... a bit difficult to explain."

"I've got time."

"Well, maybe it isn't only about you? Maybe it hurts me to divulge the details? Has the idea that other ponies in the world matter ever even *occured* to you!?" She became painfully aware of the owner watching them with interest and blushed.

"...sheesh. I'm sorry."

"I should be the one apologizing. One doesn't snap like that. Even if you deserve it."

"Yeah. I do. So..."

"Yes?"

"Are you going to tell me what I did?"

She muttered something about mules, then turned to the counter. "Do you serve alcohol here?"

Celestia sighed once more, watching the skies. "It's beautiful, isn't it? That sun is so familiar and yet wondrously fresh every time. The way it unabashedly lights up the world..."

"Yup. Amazing," commented Spike, feigning interest. "Um, Your Majesty?"

"Yes?"

"Why exactly am I here?"

"I do believe only you can answer that question, seeing as you came here by your own will."

Spike sat in stunned silence for a moment. "Well, yeah, but... I don't usually stay this long."

"You usually aren't offered a wide selection of fine gems for your enjoyment."

The dragon looked at the bowl before him again, filled to the top with a scrumptious assortment of stones. He decided it wasn't worth arguing against.

"So. Anything interesting you'd like to share?"

"Not really," he answered, attempting to decide between sapphire and turquoise. He took a bite of each.

"Has Miss Sparkle had any developments, or any of her friends?"

"They're doing great. It's amazing how... *sociable* Twilight is now, though. I mean, a year ago-! Well, you know how she was."

The alicorn nodded. "I believe a messenger of mine is meeting with her today. Please ask your friend about her after your return."

"Will do."

"That's everything, then. You may resume gloating about that unicorn of yours."

"Hey! Rarity's more than just a unicorn..."

Celestia smiled softly. "One more thing. Please stop chewing so loudly."

As the two ponies entered the Corner, they were warmly greeted by a (equally warm-hued) stallion. "Hey, Twilight. Who's your friend?"

"Hello, Mr. Cake. This is- oh."

"Allow me, please. I am Rose Petal, one of Miss Sparkle's cousins."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ma'am!"

"Mr. Cake, do you know where Pinkie is?"

"She's upstairs, planning a- whoops. Almost spoiled the surprise!"

"She already told me about the party."

"Oh." His ears drooped. "Well then. I'll tell her you want to talk to her." He disappeared, leaving the Element of Magic to voice her concerns.

"Cousin? Really?"

"You should be flattered."

Twilight sighed, bewildered. After a few moments, a magenta mare came down, beaming at them. "Hi again, Twi! And you're... Rose Petal?"

"That is correct."

"Huh. What did you want to talk to me about, Twilight?"

"Well, see, Pinkie, about that party... where exactly is it going to be?"

"Right! See, Mrs. Cake asked me not to host it here, so I... kind of planned for it being held at the library. Sorry."

"That's fine. I wasn't planning anything today, really- Spike's away for his regular Canterlot meet, so I'm free."

"Alright! Then I guess you're invited. Does your cousin like parties too?"

"I am rather fond of them."

"That's the spirit. I'll be going, then. Nighttime's coming and I've still got ponies to invite."

"So, um... What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well. Fluttershy, you know how you're kind of... mellow?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that."

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't describe me like that, would you?"

"I- I suppose not. I mean. You're a bit..."

"Rough and tumble?"

"Let's go with that. Oh! I should go see how the tea's doing." As Fluttershy departed, Rainbow closed her eyes and groaned. Why was this such an awkward situation for her? The yellow mare was the friendliest pony she knew. A bit reserved and difficult to actually befriend, but once you got there...

Her mind drifted off and was only awakened by the scent of lavender.

"I hope you like it. It's a personal favorite of mine."

"Thanks." She stood up, a tray with two steaming cups before her. She took one of them and sipped slowly. "It's good."

"You're welcome."

"So, as I was saying. I realized I haven't actually felt that way... since I was a foal, really."

"Does this... have anything to do with Gilda?"

"Wha- oh, Fluttershy." She closed her eyes and cursed her friend's intuition. "I'm really sorry for what she did."

"I already knew that; it's nothing, really."

"It isn't. She..." The mare sighed. "We used to understand each other, back at flight camp. We just kind of clicked. Sometimes I wish it hadn't happened. But still, I kept behaving like that- it had brought me friendship before, so why should it bother anyone now? Then she came back." She took another sip, swallowing heavily. "You know how that went..." Fluttershy nodded slowly.

"That's when I realized just how dangerous a pony like that could be- so searing with *meanness*. I don't remember what I felt when it hit me the first time. Fear, shame, anger at myself... But I knew I had to do something."

"When did that happen?"

"A month ago, I think."

There was no answer.

"It took me a while. Until last night, actually. I was in a funk again, just lying there, trying to get to sleep, and I figured I'd go for a flight. Then I met somepony. She showed me how beautiful it is to..." She looked the yellow one in the eyes, smiling elatedly. "To just be yourself."

"Isn't it? We all fit into this whole world so nicely."

Dash noted the observation and kept going. "And the funniest thing is, I never even expected that pony to connect with me like that! I mean, sure, I knew she pretty much worshiped me, but... that was different." She laughed. "I guess surprises really *are* the best. Hey, that reminds me! I should go see if I can find Pinkie."

There was a polite knocking. "I'll go see who it is, Rainbow."
The blue pegasus mumbled in agreement and leaned back in her seat, relaxing. She heard two voices engaged in conversation- Fluttershy and somepony who she felt she really should be able to recognize by now...

"Oh, Rainbow's here too."

Her eyes snapped open and joyous recognition spread across her face.
"Hey, Pinkie. What's up?"

"Well, see, I was just inviting Shy here to a party I'm hosting tonight, and I was going to invite you too. So now I managed to get two for the price of one. Again!"

"That sounds great. I'll definitely be there."

"I heard you were looking for me earlier."

"Yeah, that's been taken care of, thanks to Fluttershy. But thanks for asking."

"Of course. I wouldn't forget about my friends."

Dash laughed. "And that's why we love you!"

"...are you *sure* there's nothing else you need to do?"

"Yes," answered Scootaloo, trying hard to not sound frustrated. "You know Ms. Cheerilee's nice."

"Yes, but... oh, okay, I'll trust you."

Her father smiled at her knowingly. "Well then. Since you're free for the rest of the day-" He was interrupted by the sound of knocking.

"I'll get it." Scootaloo skipped over and was greeted by the smiling visage of a pink earth pony.

"Hey, Scootaloo!" She looked at the other ponies. "Hey... Scootaloo's parents."

"You're Pinkie Pie, right? Dash's friend?"

"That's me."

"She was looking for you earlier."

"Yep, I heard. Which is great, because I wanted to host a party today. Then I heard you two are friends now, so I figured that if you want, you could come by too."

"Oh. Um. Could you give me a sec?"

"Sure. I'll be out here."

The filly turned to her parents. "So. What do you guys think?"

"If you want to go, that's fine with us." The stallion forced a smile. "It's just..." He sighed, and his wife took over.

"We wanted to celebrate today. You know, take you out somewhere, have fun together. It's alright, dear. We just want you to be happy."

"Then I'll..." She sighed. She hated decisions. They always tore her from things. "I'll have to go with the party. Sorry."

"Oh, don't be! Just remember to have fun!"

The stallion nodded at her weakly. "Don't worry about me. I'm just afraid we might lose each other. As a family, I mean. It's silly, but-" He stopped as he found his daughter embracing him.

"I understand, Dad. Listen, tomorrow we'll all go out together. As a family." She backed off, smiling. "And now I'll go."

"Have a good time!" her mother called out as the pony left. Then she turned to the one next to her. "You little tease!"

"Hey, I need to get her thinking, don't I? Besides, don't think I didn't see you grinning there."

Dusty grinned. "You were expecting something... classier?"

Trixie glared at him from behind a mug of ale. "It's quite good, actually. Sometimes one has to step outside their comfort zone, you know? Anyhow. You. You came in at a point in my life where I had just been humiliated, something that hadn't happened in a very long while. I had entered a town, done a show, and been ready to move on. Then by some misfortune a pair of colts managed to anger an Ursa Minor as a result of my boasting-"

"A what now?"

"A very large bear made of cosmic energy."

"Right."

"The creature followed the colts to the town I was in, and I attempted to stop it. Of course, my talent, as I would later realize, doesn't extend very far beyond putting on a nice performance. Luckily for everyone involved but me, another unicorn managed to summon her powers and gracefully incapacitate the menace. Then I... sort of ran away as fast as I could. And that's how I found you."

"Ouch. That sounds rough."

"I thought that too until a certain carpenter decided to rub salt in the wound."

He smirked apologetically.

"But I only have myself to blame. I was so desperate to just get back to what I was convinced was right that anything could be sacrificed in exchange for a cart. Which isn't to say it was incredibly rude and degrading of you to offer *that* as a form of payment."

Dusty shook his head. "You'll never let me live that down, will you?"

"No."

"Thought so."

"And yet, I wouldn't be anywhere without it. You opened my eyes- showed me that one can in fact go too far. A pony's talents guide their lives, but they should never endanger it. As much as I hate to say this, Mister Wood... thank you. So much."

"About time I heard that."

"Oh, hush."

"What'll you do now?"

"I'm... not sure. I was planning on heading to Fillydelphia next, possibly leaving the country for a while... what are your plans?"

"Oh, I always go back to Manehattan after this. Never really leave that city all that much."

"I'm afraid that means we'll part soon. I do hope your business continues to thrive, however. Though I'm sure you already know this, seeing as you taught me it so recently, always follow your dreams. They know exactly where they're going."

"Yup. I knew that." He pretended to yawn. "Gee, I'd love to chat, but for some reason I keep falling asleep."

"You really are impossible!" She scowled. "No wonder you ask poor showmares to pander to your needs."

"I thought we agreed we'd stop talking about that."

"Agreements? With you?"

He whistled casually. "...you know, you oughta finish that drink."

"It's certainly more interesting than you, I find." They both knew she was lying.

Outside, the sun was slowly reddening, awaiting its fall. The way it lingered made her wonder if it didn't want to leave them yet.