

Don't Let the Sun Catch you Crying

By l0x0r

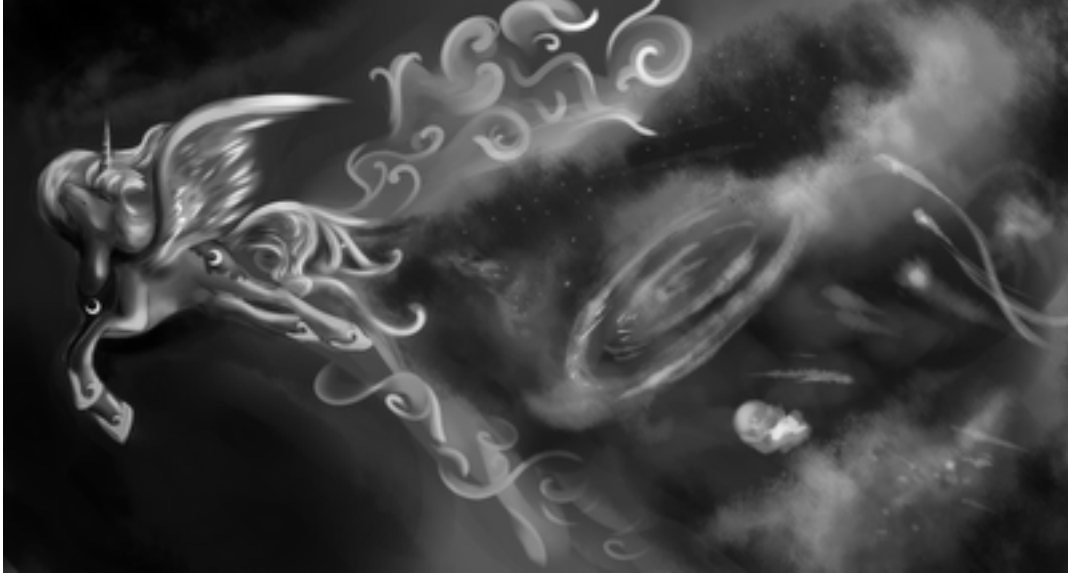


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Chapter 1

It was a perfect spring day in Ponyville. Warm and temperate thanks to the dedication of Princess Celestia and the weather pegasi. Under the gentle sunlight the citizens of Ponyville contentedly went about their daily lives. Well, most of them at least.

Despite the fine day, Twilight Sparkle was feeling a bit troubled, though she couldn't pinpoint the exact reason why. Actually, she could, but she much preferred not to think too deeply about the problem. It was just too ... problematic.

It wasn't that life had been hectic as of late, far from it in fact. For the past few months life in Ponyville had been decidedly quite. While Twilight, with the help of her friends, had learned many valuable lessons about the magic of friendship, they hadn't been on any grand, death defying adventures lately. Just quiet, normal, everyday adventures which might not have seemed important to Equestria at large, but would never be forgotten by six ponies who lived in Ponyville.

Even the previous winter had been mild and relatively uneventful. The latest winter wrap up had been smooth and efficient under Twilight's administration. In fact Twilight had been so proud of how well she had handled that year's winter wrap up that she had written a rather voluminous letter to Princess Celestia detailing her intricate plans and dedicated oversight. That had been the start of Twilight's slight discontent. The reply she had received from the princess had been polite and full of support, but Twilight had felt like it had lacked a certain element which was the hallmark of a letter from Princess Celestia.

Twilight wasn't sure what that element was exactly, since she hadn't ever noticed it until it was absent, but as the weeks and months progressed, Twilight couldn't help but feel that it never reentered Celestia's replies to her reports on friendship. The princess' letters had for the most part become brief, only a few sentences long. They always praised and encouraged Twilight, but their brevity wasn't like the teacher Twilight knew so well.

So, on this perfect spring day, while her friends were occupied with personal projects they had assured her they didn't need her help with, and while Spike was minding the library, Twilight set out for Canterlot. She had a vague feeling that something had changed between her and Celestia, and she wanted to surprise her mentor, to catch her in a candid situation so she could easily find out what the matter was. So Twilight hadn't written to the princess asking for a chariot, but instead had decided to rely on her own hooves.

The road to Canterlot by hoof was long, and the warm spring sun became quite hot as Twilight walked its dusty length. But, thanks to her research, she knew the benefit of pacing herself, and had packed plenty of water and energy efficient snacks in her saddle bags. She only broke a light sweat on the way to Canterlot, but due to her sedate pace, it was late afternoon, almost evening when she arrived at the terrestrial entrance to the grand city.

It had been quite some time since her last visit to her home town, but it didn't appear as if too much had changed. As she made her way deeper into her formerly familiar haunts, Twilight experienced several brief bouts of nostalgia, but she fought back the memories. She was on a mission to find Princess Celestia, and she had a good idea of where she was. It was the time of day that Princess Celestia normally reserved for lessons at her school for gifted unicorns, so Twilight bent her steps toward that well known institution.

She passed by lecture halls and classrooms, most deserted, but all filled with remembrances of her time in school, learning how to control the enormous gift that she possessed. It was in one of the smaller, more personal classrooms intended for practical magical applications that Twilight found Princess Celestia. As she had expected, Princess Celestia was teaching a lesson in magic, but unlike the small class Twilight had imagined, she found Celestia sequestered with a single student.

It was a young, pale red unicorn with a scarlet and slightly curly mane. She seemed barely older than a filly, although she did have a cutie mark, a comet with an arched tail. She and Princess Celestia were in the midst of an early exercise in magical control. The young unicorn was levitating six identical appearing metal balls, each with a different density and thus

weight. It had taken Twilight nearly a week to keep the heaviest of the balls off the ground while keeping the lighter ones from bouncing off the ceiling.

The little unicorn was staring at the metal spheres with rapt attention, a droplet of sweat slowly tracing its way down her cheek. All six spheres were levitating at about her eye level, and were all almost perfectly still. There were a few wobbles, but still it was an impressive feat for a pony so young.

"That's wonderful, Bay Breeze, you've improved a great deal," Celestia said encouragingly.

The six metal spheres slowly lowered to the recessed divots in the floor made for them. No longer concentrating on them, the young mare looked up to her mentor and joyfully replied, "Oh thank you Princess Celestia! It's all thanks to your wonderful teaching."

"Don't discredit your own hard work and dedication, Bay Breeze," admonished Princess Celestia. She looked down with a softly bemused smile at the small unicorn. It was a smile, a look, that Twilight Sparkle had seen hundreds of times, and had been cherished by her each time. It was a look of pride and gentle affection, of love. A look a mother might bestow upon her child after an accomplishment that was exceptionally important to their offspring. It had never failed to kindle a loving warmth in Twilight.

But Princess Celestia shouldn't be showing that look to anypony else. It was a look that had always been private between them, an act of communication that was special to her and Princess Celestia. It was supposed to be a reward for Celestia's favorite and most special student, her, Twilight Sparkle. To see Princess Celestia bestowing it upon somepony else ...

Twilight's analytical mind couldn't help but begin to put the pieces into place. The feeling and length of Princess Celestia's letters had become lacking, she hadn't personally visited Twilight in months at least. Now in addition to these signs of neglect, Twilight had found Princess Celestia personally tutoring a new student and bestowing upon her the praise that should belong solely to Celestia's most faithful student. The conclusion was as obvious as it was unpleasant. She had been replaced.

Somehow Twilight had done something to displease or disappoint Princess Celestia, and was no longer her star pupil, but simply a part of the common herd. She was no longer the pony Celestia doted upon, but merely one of her thousands of admirers. Twilight could feel a sharp crack shoot through her heart, and she gave out an involuntary gasp at the intense and novel pain.

The sound that had escaped her attracted the princess' attention and she turned to the open doorway where Twilight was lurking.

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student, what a surprise. What brings you to Canterlot today? I'm afraid that I must have missed your informing me of your trip in your letters. I've been rather busy as of late so I've not been reading them as diligently as I should."

Though her world was crumbling down around her, Twilight answered Princess Celestia's warm greeting with a passable smile.

"Hello, Princess Celestia. No, I didn't mention that I was coming to Canterlot today. It was something of a spur of the moment thing actually. I was just passing through when I saw you, so I stopped for a moment, but I don't want to bother you, so I'll be going now."

Twilight began backing out the classroom's door, but was interrupted by Princess Celestia.

"Oh you weren't bothering us at all Twilight. Please come in and meet a new student of the school, Bay Breeze."

Her withdrawal thwarted by the princess, Twilight's smile became wooden and she hesitantly entered deeper into the room and turned her attention to the red unicorn. "Hello, Bay Breeze, I'm Twilight Sparkle. It's a pleasure to meet you." It was nice to know that the long hours spend studying etiquette hadn't been wasted, and in times of stress her manners wouldn't abandon her.

Bay Breeze was staring up at Twilight with wide and unguardedly sparkling eyes. "Wow! You're Twilight Sparkle, the most famous graduate of Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns ever. I can't believe I'm meeting you!" She quickly closed the gap between them and enthusiastically began shaking Twilight's hoof.

With her pumping hoof shaking her entire body, Twilight confusedly admitted, "Oh, I wasn't aware that anypony knew who I was."

Bay Breeze finally let go of Twilight's hoof so she could throw both her hooves in the air as she exclaimed, "Of course you're famous. Everyone in school knows who you are, the pony who was Princess Celestia's private student, the pony who single hoofedly defeated Nightmare Moon and saved all of Equestria, the only pony to have ever defeated an ursa major. You're like the most famous unicorn ever."

"Well, it was only an ursa minor, and I had help with Nightmare Moon ..." demurred Twilight, but she was quickly cut off by a quill and piece of paper surrounded by a pale red glow, nearly smacking her in the nose.

"Can I have your autograph?"

Twilight looked past the blank page to Bay Breeze whose face was full of hope and admiration. How could anypony hope to say no to such an expression?"

"Sure." Twilight took a hold of the quill with her own magic. With deft strokes and precise calligraphy, she signed her name. "There you go."

Bay Breeze floated the paper over to herself and upon seeing Twilight's still drying signature, somehow seemed to become even more excited. "Oh my gosh, I can't wait to show this to the other students. My sisters are going to be soooo jealous!"

Princess Celestia interjected, "And your mother will be so worried if you don't get home soon."

Bay Breeze spun around and stared up at the wall clock in shock. "Oh no, is it already that late? I have to get going." She frantically began using her magic to stuff various papers from a nearby desk into a set of saddlebags that she loaded onto her back.

"It was so wonderful to meet you, Miss. Sparkle." She turned to Princess Celestia. "And thank you so much, Princess Celestia, for helping me with my lesson." Bay Breeze gushed as she quickly cantered from the room.

"It was nice meeting you too," Twilight called out after her.

"You're welcome, and be safe on your way home."

The regal alicorn chuckled lightly at Bay Breeze's antics and turned her attention to Twilight.

"Does she remind you of anypony? She's almost as powerful as you, Twilight, but lacks your dedication for studying. I'm afraid to say that she requires a bit closer attention than you did."

Twilight sighed and closely examined the ground.

"So, my faithful student, did you wish to speak to me about something? I'm afraid my schedule for the rest of the day is rather tight, but I can always make time for you."

Alone with Princess Celestia, undistracted by a fawning admirer, Twilight reluctantly turned her eyes to her mentor, and felt horrible. Unworthy feelings and suspicions filled her mind, but somehow she just couldn't reveal them. Not to Celestia. She couldn't just blurt out her suspicion that she had been replaced in Princess Celestia's heart. She couldn't reveal the hurt and jealousy she felt to the princess who had for so long meant the world to her.

So with an awkward smile, Twilight replied, "Oh, I know that you're busy Princess Celestia. I wouldn't want to take up your time. I just came back to Canterlot to catch up with my friends."

Celestia gave Twilight an odd look and Twilight realized her mistake. "I mean books. The library, yes, I came to visit my friends the books at the library. Of course I meant the books because I don't have any friends in Canterlot, that's why you sent me to Ponyville." She ended her nervous rant with an equally nervous laugh.

Celestia continued to regard her with an uncertain expression. "Yes. Well, while you don't have friends in Canterlot at the moment, perhaps now is the opportunity to make some. I sometimes fear that you spend too much time reading when you should be outside living." She smiled brightly. "Although I wouldn't want to dissuade you from your studies. Having a scholarly mind is something to be admired, but remember all things in moderation. How about we get together tomorrow morning and you can tell me all about what you've learned in the past few months."

Twilight smiled sadly up at Princess Celestia. "That sounds wonderful."

"Wonderful. It's a date then," Celestia called over her shoulder as she swept out of the room.

Twilight's face hurt from smiling so unnaturally but she was afraid of what might replace it if she stopped.

Twilight was nothing if not a realist, at least in her own mind. She knew that all over Equestria today was just like any other day for thousands of ponies. The fact that it just might be the worst day of her life wasn't and shouldn't be a concern to anypony other than herself. Twilight never enjoyed making a scene; she never liked being the center of attention, unless it came from Princess Celestia. Now that she was no longer Celestia's favorite, that just meant that she shouldn't make a scene in front of anypony.

She would just lock her feelings inside her and fix them somehow. So what if Princess Celestia had a new student? So what if that new student required more time and attention than Twilight? So what if she was here in Canterlot while Twilight had been exiled to Ponyville. Wait, had the princess been tired of Twilight for that long? Had she sent her away from Canterlot simply because she had grown bored with Twilight?

Twilight could feel tears welling up thanks to her traitorous thoughts and the pain they brought. She suddenly couldn't stand to be in that tiny classroom for a moment longer. She wanted to be someplace safe, where she felt at home. She chuckled in appreciation of the irony as a few errant tears slipped down her cheeks. Her horn glowed and she teleported to the one place she felt like she truly belonged, the library.

She reappeared in front of its massive doors. The librarians enforced a strict no teleportation rule inside the library proper. They were very particular with keeping track of which ponies were using the facilities.

Apparently they had become even stricter in their enforcement of their rules since Twilight had left. There were two guard ponies flanking the door, neither of which batted an eye at her appearance from thin air. Twilight was a bit discombobulated by the presence of the two guards for a moment, but gathered herself together upon recognizing the sturdy features of one of the guards.

"Good evening Quicksilver, is it alright if I go in the library?" Twilight hoped it wasn't obvious just how emotionally fragile she was.

"Of course, Miss Sparkle, you can go right in."

His companion gave Quicksilver a questioning glance, but remained silent under Quicksilver's stern stare. Twilight didn't notice this exchange as she pushed open the library's door and entered, silently closing it after her.

In the distance the librarian on duty, a grey earth pony with a rubberstamp in her mouth and thick glasses on her nose, looked up at Twilight's entrance. But she seemed to easily dismiss the purple unicorn and bent back to the stacks of books piled in front of her. There didn't seem to be any other ponies in the large reading area, but Twilight wanted to be sure of her peace for the breakdown she could feel coming on.

She turned to the shelves which stretched from the floor to the ceiling, crammed tightly with thick tomes. Further in, where the shelves became older and had been built at different times, they became maze-like in their complexity. Twilight had spent enough time as both a user of the library and as an assistant librarian that she knew where all the dark areas were. The places which few ponies went, save the couples who sought them out for their privacy.

Twilight made her way to what she considered the most secret of the secret spots, the place she had never seen anypony go. The shelves holding the tax documentation for years 480 through 690. From the sheer volume of documents, it was obvious that tax laws had been much more complex then it was now. The dust on the shelves and scrolls attested to how infrequently anypony delved so deeply into this section of the stacks. Assured of her privacy, and insulated from the world by thousands upon thousands of sound absorbing books and scrolls, Twilight sat down on the threadbare carpeting and finally let her heart break.

It hurt. Oh Celestia it hurt. Twilight's tears freely fell, leaving splotches in the previously undisturbed dust on the aisle's floor. Why did it hurt so much? Twilight knew that she wasn't the only unicorn whom Celestia had taught. There were many who could claim the princess as one of their teachers, but they had been mere students while Twilight had been ... more.

She had been the one that the princess doted on. The one who would race to the princess' side after every lesson learned, after every accomplishment, in order to be praised by Celestia. Celestia's smiles, Celestia's love had been hers alone, until now. Had she done something wrong, had she somehow annoyed Celestia? Was she no longer good enough for the princess' undivided attention and affection? Was she so easily replaced?

As lost in her thoughts as she was, wallowing in whatever it was that ponies wallowed in, Twilight failed to notice the approach of another pony.

"E-excuse me," a hesitant and quiet voice broke the silence. "Are you alright?"

Startled from her misery, Twilight jerked to her hooves, hastily rubbing at her eyes to ineffectually hide her tears. Ashamed that anypony had found her in such a pitiful condition, Twilight opened her eyes to find Princess Luna standing a few feet away.

"Princess Luna!" Twilight was shocked that not only somepony had found her, but it was the coregent of all Equestria. So shocked that for several long seconds Twilight's mind failed her.

Belatedly though she sunk into the low bow owed to royalty, and from her kneeling position, she attempted to explain, "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty, I thought that I was alone and I was just ..."

Luna interrupted her in a slightly embarrassed tone. "Oh, please rise, Twilight Sparkle. In a situation such as this there is no need for formality."

Twilight straightened up, but only briefly met Luna's eyes. "I'm honored that you remember me, Your Majesty."

"Of course I remember you. You're the pony who saved me from Nightmare Moon after all. As well as my sister's most faithful and talked of student. But I thought you were in Ponyville. How did you come to be here of all places, and in such a distressing state?"

Twilight winced at Luna's allusion to her relationship with Princess Celestia, and stared down at that ground as she attempted to reply, "Well, I was ... I ..." How could she possibly explain what she was doing there bawling her

eyes out like some heartbroken filly? She had never read of a similar situation. She had never picked up a book which described what she was feeling, much less why she was feeling it. How could she describe the feelings she had never known were possible, much less had known were harbored within her?

Twilight began to tear up again, this time in frustration over her inability to articulate what she was feeling. Her watery eyes fearfully looked up at Luna and found only calm, patient acceptance. It reminded Twilight of Celestia's all encompassing forgiveness, and she hung her head.

"I'm sorry, but you probably wouldn't want to know, Your Majesty. The reason I'm upset would just seem petty and stupid to you I'm sure."

Luna stepped closer determinedly and answered, "Of course I want to know what's wrong, Twilight. You're special, both to my sister as well as myself, and whatever the reason, if it has brought you to such a state, it can't be nothing."

Luna's tone grew remorseful. "I know all too well what it feels like to hide your feelings because you don't want to burden others with them. But that isn't healthy, keeping all your pain locked away. You simply can't repress what you're feeling without it changing you. So please, let me help. Tell me what's wrong, why you were crying so piteously." Her imploring and comforting tone grew somewhat fearful. "Unless ... have I overstepped myself? Should I summon my sister? I'm sorry, I should have realized that you'd be more comfortable opening yourself to her."

She took a step back, prepared to leave and find Celestia, but Twilight stopped her with a desperate, "No!" Twilight softened her voice and continued, "No, thank you, Your Majesty. Princess Celestia is about the last pony I can talk to right now."

Luna awkwardly scanned the nearby shelves in order to not meet Twilight's eyes as she replied, "Oh. Well, is there somepony else I could summon for you to talk to?"

Twilight sighed. Princess Luna seemed to genuinely care about Twilight being upset, and she appeared crestfallen that Twilight was unwilling to accept her help. This was why she hadn't made friends until forced to by Princess Celestia; dealing with other ponies was so difficult. She was

starting to feel bad for making Princess Luna feel bad about her feeling bad. It was enough to drive a pony crazy.

Twilight sat back down on the dusty carpet. "Actually, Your Majesty, now that I think about it, you're probably the best pony for me to talk about this. That is, if you don't mind hearing about my meager problems."

Luna settled down close to Twilight and smiled at her reassuringly, seeming to be happy at being of use to somepony. "I'd love to hear about them."

"Well, it's about Princess Celestia ... and me, I guess."

Twilight paused, but Luna didn't seem to want to interrupt her, so she went on, haltingly at first, but soon her words poured out.

"A few months ago, I began to notice that Princess Celestia's letters to me had started to change. They didn't have the same ... attention, the same affection that they used to. It was as if Princess Celestia hadn't written them with the same feeling she once had.

"I wasn't sure how to bring something like that up in a letter, so I decided to come to Canterlot unannounced and see if I could find out what was responsible for the change in Princess Celestia's writing. And I found out her name was Bay Breeze."

Luna seemed a bit confused.

"Princess Celestia has a new student named Bay Breeze," Twilight earnestly explained.

"My sister has many students..."

"But not like this! I saw them today. Together. And Bay Breeze was doing magic, practically begging for attention, and Princess Celestia, she ... she was looking at her! With that look!" Despite Twilight's emphatic gestures with her hooves to illustrate her point, Luna still looked confused. "She was looking at her the way she's supposed to look at me. With pride and, and wisdom and love."

The whine that had unknowingly entered Twilight's voice blossomed into a full sob as she admitted, "And I'm jealous. I'm jealous of a silly little filly who never hurt anypony. I'm jealous because she took my place in Celestia's heart, and it hurts, and I'm a horrible pony for feeling this way. I know I shouldn't be jealous, but I am. I can't help it. I've always wanted Celestia to look at me, only me, and she has, but now she's not."

Twilight finished her tear thickened tirade by hanging her head and letting her sorrow once again wet the carpet. She waited for Luna's judgment. She knew she was being mean spirited and petty. That was why she hadn't told Princess Celestia anything. That was why she had taken refuge in the library where nopony would disturb her. But now that Luna had seen just how ugly she was on the inside, Twilight knew that the alicorn would waste no time in washing her hooves of her.

"So you're upset because you've always been my sister's star pupil until now, and you feel that she's appointed a new star pupil, thus turning her attention away from you."

"Yes," Twilight sniffed out, still refusing to meet Luna's eyes.

"And you feel resentment towards her new pupil at the loss of my sister's favor, but recognize that this animosity is unwarranted, so you're further upset by this. However, though you feel the unjustness of your resentment, you can't help but continue to feel it. Is that correct?"

In a small and miserable voice, Twilight replied, "Yes."

Luna sighed deeply and Twilight tightened her shoulders in perpetration for the inevitable verbal lashing. But instead, Luna shifted closer to Twilight until they were next to one another and Luna gently said, "Long ago, before I was ... before I became Nightmare Moon, Equestria was a much different place than it is now. Back then there were no schools, none for magic, none for flight, not even ones for basic education. In fact there were few books or scrolls to learn from. The way ponies learned anything was by having an older, more experienced pony teach them individually." Twilight turned her still damp face toward Luna, who had a faraway look in her eyes. "The ponies who were experts on things were known as masters, and their students were known as apprentices."

"So I was Princess Celestia's apprentice?"

Luna smiled down at Twilight, who suddenly realized that she was heavily leaning against the princess for support as the alicorn's soothing voice lulled her out of her tears.

"Yes, you were. Now, the relationship between a master and apprentice is a deep and personal one. It usually lasted for years and years while the master taught, guided, and trained her apprentice. But eventually there would come a time when the master had taught her apprentice all she could."

"So then the apprentices became masters?"

"Well, no. They became what were known as journeymares. You see, there is something that all wise ponies have which can't be taught or learned of secondhoof, and that is experience. Having a great deal of knowledge is important, but having experiences where you use that knowledge is just as important. But such things can only happen to ponies who've left the shelter of their masters, or their books, and who've begun to face life's challenges with their own understanding as their guides."

Twilight cut her eyes away and sullenly asked, "But what if the apprentice doesn't want to be sent away? What if she doesn't want to be forgotten about and instead wants to stay with her teacher?"

Luna kindly smiled down at Twilight. "Just because an apprentice or a student leaves her teacher doesn't mean that they love each other any less. Or that their relationship is over. A student always has something to learn from her teacher, and will always turn to them for guidance when they encounter a challenge outside their understanding.

"I'm sure that Celestia cares just as much for you now as she ever did. But she's giving you the space you need to grow, to learn, to be your own pony."

Twilight sighed heavily. She understood what Luna was saying, and on an intellectual level accepted it. But it still hurt that her place had been taken by another pony. "Thank you for putting things in a new light Princess Luna, but I still feel badly for being replaced so easily."

Luna unfurled one of her wings and used it to lightly hug Twilight closer to her. Startled at the contact, Twilight looked up and found Luna's reassuring eyes.

"You weren't replaced, Twilight, nopony could ever replace you. You're special, Twilight Sparkle, and don't ever forget that. But my sister has lived a very long time and has a very big heart. You weren't her first student, and you won't be her last. However, just because she's had students before you, and will have others after you, doesn't mean that she loves you any less. Celestia's love is limitless, and she cares deeply for each of us. Even if we might not deserve it."

She turned her head away in remorse and her saddened visage caused Twilight's heart to go out to her. Twilight mentally berated herself over her insensitivity. Here she was lamenting over not being the most important pony in Celestia's life to the very pony who deserved that position above all others.

"I'm sorry, Princess Luna, for bothering you with my problems. But you did really help me, and I'm feeling a bit better." She loudly sniffed. "Really. Thank you for listening to me, and I'm sorry that I was being so selfish."

Luna smiled at Twilight wanly. "We're all entitled to be a little selfish sometimes, Twilight. Just remember, no matter how bleak things are, or how unloved you might feel, you're not alone. Your friends will always care for you, as will Celestia and I." Luna blushed slightly as she looked down at the floor. "And I hope that you'll think of me as a friend as well."

She seemed to finally realize just how close she and Twilight had become, and with a some embarrassment, put a little distance between them. "That is, if you'd like somepony like me for a friend."

Twilight was a bit startled by Luna's abrupt withdrawal, but quickly answered, "I'd love to have you as a friend, Your Majesty."

Luna seemed relieved. "Thank you. I'd like to be your friend too." Her expression changed to one of concern. "Are you certain that you're feeling better?"

"Yes, although I think it might take me a while to get used to Princess Celestia having a new student," Twilight admitted. She gave Luna a smile, one which lacked her usual brightness, but a genuine one nonetheless.

Luna smiled back at her, but her expression faltered when she looked past Twilight to see the long splash of light being cast by a distant window. "It's nearly sunset, I must be going."

However she seemed hesitant to leave, and after a moment of silence, her attention settled on Twilight's saddlebags. "It's getting late, where are you planning on staying tonight?"

Actually Twilight had been so focused on seeing Princess Celestia that she hadn't really considered the fact that she wouldn't be able to return to Ponyville the same day. But she quickly thought on her hooves.

"Well, there are several fine inns in Canterlot. I'm sure that I'll be able to get a room at one of them."

Princess Luna appeared upset. "That won't do at all. We have many spare bedrooms at the palace. I insist that you stay there, as my guest."

"I wouldn't want to impose ..."

Luna swiftly cut Twilight off. "I wouldn't be any imposition at all. We're friends aren't we? So as a friend, please let me give you a place to stay for the night."

"Well, alright. If you insist."

"Excellent. As I said, it's almost sunset, so let's go now and if you'd like, you can watch me raise the moon."

Twilight raised her eyes in surprise and felt a thrill of excitement run through her. Despite being the student of Princess Celestia for so long, she had never seen her raising the sun outside of Summer Sun Celebrations. "That would be wonderful."

She gathered her bags as Luna waited for her, then followed the princess out of the depths of the library. They passed the still busy librarian, who

gave them only the briefest of disinterested glances before dismissing them.

Upon exiting the library, Luna turned to the guards on either side of the doorway and announced, "I'm finished here. Could we please return to the palace, to the royal chambers?"

Quicksilver replied in his gruff but kind voice, "Of course, Your Majesty." The two guards began walking away, with Luna and Twilight following after.

"I didn't know you had personal guards, Princess Luna. Princess Celestia usually only takes guards with her during ceremonies or functions outside of Canterlot," commented Twilight.

"Yes, my sister assigned me my own personal guard to go with me everywhere in order to keep me safe. From my understanding there's never been an attack on Celestia, so I'm not sure what exactly they're supposed to be guarding me from, but I guess it's just Celestia's way of making sure that I'm safe. They are very useful though. Canterlot is a very complex place, and I'd be completely lost without them guiding me."

The group quickly made the short trip from the library to the palace, passing only a few other ponies en route, who all bowed low as Luna and her escort passed. Twilight noticed that the displays of respect seemed to make Luna feel a bit uncomfortable, at least more uncomfortable than Princess Celestia seemed to feel when ponies bowed to her.

Thanks to the rapid pace set by Quicksilver and his memorization of all the twists and turns of the palace, they easily navigated the labyrinthine halls and arrived at a massive double door. Its thick, ancient appearing wood had both the sun and moon carved deeply into its surface. Their deep recesses darkened by age. Luna's horn glowed brightly and the doors silently opened, revealing an enormous room which glowed brightly from the dying rays of the sun pouring in from windows which stretched from floor to ceiling.

"We'll wait for you here in case you need any further assistance, Princess," Quicksilver informed her. He and the other guard had halted near the doorway, apparently reluctant to enter the royal chambers.

Luna smiled at the substantial stallion and sincerely said, "Thank you." She walked through the door, and after she had given the guards her own nod of thanks, Twilight followed after her. She was a bit nervous though, while Twilight had often been in the palace on one errand or another, she hadn't ever been in the royal chambers before.

She didn't notice the door closing behind her, as awestruck with the beauty of the room they had stepped into. The floor was of a creamy marble, polished to perfection, rosy in hue at the moment from the red sunlight flooding the room. The wall opposite the door they entered was merely a series of tall arches which were open to the outside, their columns were of a slightly darker marble, and had ornate flourishes carved into their bases and capitals. The other walls were covered with tapestries depicting the sun and moon, as well as the symbol of Princess Celestia's rule of Equestria. Two large hallways faced each other across the impressive room and obviously led deeper into the royal chambers.

As Twilight took in the impressive surroundings, they were approached by a tan unicorn mare with a pocket watch cutie mark. She was levitating a clipboard in front of her and seemed relieved to see Luna.

"Princess Luna, I'm glad that you've returned. Based upon the seasonal time table, moonrise should be occurring in t-minus six minutes. Following moonrise there are several matters of state that Princess Celestia has deferred to you, which require your personal attention," the tan unicorn informed them in a clipped, no-nonsense tone.

"Thank you, Gimlet Lime. I'll see to raising the moon immediately. In the meantime, could you have one of the spare bedrooms prepared for my friend Twilight Sparkle?"

"Right away, Your Majesty." Gimlet Lime procured a quill from somewhere and noisily checked something off on her clipboard. She then smartly trotted away, disappearing into one of the impressively large corridors.

Luna sighed as Gimlet Lime left.

Twilight asked with concern, "Is something the matter Princess Luna?"

"Oh nothing, I hope. I just worry about that pony sometimes. She's my chief assistant, and I'm afraid that she takes her job much too seriously at times.

I hope that she takes the time to enjoy life every once in a while. But enough of that." Luna turned to Twilight. "Would you like to see something pretty?"

Twilight smiled as she answered, "I'd love to."

"Then follow me."

Luna glided silently across the highly polished floor, and Twilight wondered how she was able to move with such grace. Twilight's own hooves noisily clopped on the same floor, filling the room with an embarrassingly loud echo. But Luna didn't seem to notice what Twilight thought was an unbearably loud sound as she led her through one of the large arches and onto a small balcony without walls. It was capped by a high ceiling which stretched out past the end of the balcony, jutting far out into the air high above Canterlot.

The view was breathtaking, but Twilight wasn't able to appreciate it for very long. "This way," Luna called out to her. Twilight looked over to find the princess at the foot of a staircase carved into the stone wall next to the arches they had just passed through. It spiraled into the rock, and quickly disappeared from view.

She dutifully followed Luna up its narrow and somewhat worn steps which led them eventually to a large platform. It wasn't so much another balcony as it was a pony made plateau. It was so high up, that it was unbounded by any other part of the castle, save a single large tower close by which stretched even further into the sky.

Aside from that, the only other obstacle to their view was the sheer mountain face close by which climbed even higher than the tower. They seemed so far above the ground below that Twilight was reminded of her brief visit to Cloudsdale. The slightly rough textured platform she stood upon seemed to hang in the air by magic, and as Luna led her to the railed edge, all of Equestria spread out before them.

"This is one of my favorite spots," Luna quietly admitted to Twilight.

Twilight was honored that Luna had decided to share such a lovely place with her. "The view is quite breathtaking." And it truly was. Straight down, Canterlot appeared almost to be a map, every street and alley was

revealed to them. In the far distance Twilight could see the green fringe which was the Everfree Forest, and could almost believe that she saw her own home. Meadows and rivers covered the rolling hills surrounding Canterlot, and in another direction, the rays of the setting sun were reflecting off the glass of the tall buildings of Manehattan.

"Yes, I often come here to think about just how much Equestria has changed since I..." Luna awkwardly paused, but quickly collected herself. "But I brought you here to show you something even more special. Please watch."

Luna's eyes implored Twilight for a moment before she firmly shut them in concentration. Twilight, moved by the feeling in Luna's voice and expression, did watch her, not even paying the least attention to the spectacular palette of colors which exploded across the sky behind her as the sun sank below the horizon.

The sky behind Luna darkened from blue to indigo, then finally black. A few pinpricks of light, no longer hidden by the sun's brightness, burned into life. They seemed to Twilight as if they clustered closely around Luna's form. In the silent suddenness following the sun's disappearance, the moon burst above the edge of the world. It was full and bright, seemingly larger than Twilight had ever seen it before, and it perfectly haloed Luna. As it rose it leached away the world's color and flung it into the heavens to sparkle amongst a billion gleaming jewels.

Under the star's cold light, against the backdrop of the moon, Luna appeared to Twilight to be much larger and darker than she had been under the sun. She was briefly reminded of Nightmare Moon, but that unkind comparison was quickly discarded when Luna's thrown back head lowered and turned to regard Twilight. Nightmare Moon's eyes could have never shone so brightly, so guilelessly as did Luna's.

"Do you see it?" Luna anxiously asked. "Do you think it's pretty?"

Twilight Sparkle found herself awed and silenced by the celestial splendor Luna had summoned. Eventually though she did manage to gasp out, "Oh yes. Your night sky is beautiful." Her response caused Luna to smile kindly.

"Thank you. But actually I was speaking of Equestria."

Twilight was reluctant to tear her gaze away from the wonders of the night sky and the midnight hued alicorn who had created them, but at Luna's bidding, she turned to look downward. The land which had been spread out before them mere minutes ago, the forests, meadows, hills, and cities all had sunk beneath an ocean of darkness. But from the depths of this sea of shadows, mimicking the stars above, were constellations of light.

Close at hoof were the bright lights from the windows and street lamps of Canterlot, dispelling a bit of Luna's night and artificially lengthening Celestia's day. In the distance Twilight could see the cluster of tiny lights demarking Ponyville's buildings. Slightly separated from the main cluster of lights was a small trio which must belong to Sweet Apple Acres. Further out, away from the band of darkness which was the Everfree Forest, there were tiny dots of lights in ones and twos signaling farmhouses and other lonely pony buildings. Far in the distance there was a bright glow which could only belong to Manehattan, while Twilight could only catch a much dimmer glow from the corner of her eye which signaled where Fillydelphia was.

"It's quite pretty, isn't it?" Luna asked. Her voice sounded uncertain, but hopeful that Twilight would agree with her.

She had no reason to fear Twilight's reaction. "Yes. Yes, it's quite beautiful. I never imagined- that is, I've seen the lights of Canterlot from a distance, but I've never been up high enough to see so much of Equestria at once. There's so many lights, so many ponies. I never knew."

Relief flooded Luna's voice, and her posture relaxed slightly as she replied, "I hoped that you would like it. I always thought that while Equestria was wonderful during the day, it was just as pretty at night, but in a different way. I remember gazing down at it, and watching these lights slowly spread." Luna's voice lowered, almost to a whisper, as if she were speaking mostly to herself. "There were so few at first, they seemed so fragile against the black void. It seemed like it would be so easy for them to disappear, like you could blink your eyes and they would be gone.

"But slowly, at first oh so slowly, they began to spread. More and more lights shone through the darkness, they shot out in all directions, running free in some places, clumping together in others. One or two dots of light became dozens. They transformed from tiny islands into vast webs

stretching out and connecting to one another. I often wondered what kind of world could make lights such as these, what kind of world I'd be returning to."

Twilight was quiet as Luna's heartfelt musings lapsed into silence. She could vividly imagine what Equestria must have looked like from the moon, and was overwhelmed with the haunting sadness and loneliness which seemed to shadow Luna's words.

"So you were awake while you were on the moon?" Twilight cautiously asked.

Luna sighed softly before replying, "Sometimes. Not often, I think. Most of the time that I was Nightmare Moon I've forgotten. What I do remember blurs together into one long moment. But I do remember the lights. I thought they were as beautiful as my stars. I also remember the silence, and the cold." Twilight could feel Luna involuntarily shiver. "I'll never forget the cold."

Moved by the pain in Luna's voice, Twilight instinctively pressed against the other mare to share some of her warmth with her. Luna started a bit at the contact, but didn't shy away. She turned her head and smiled warmly at Twilight, who smiled reassuringly back at her. Together they turned their attention to the landscape of the night. The moon had cleared the horizon, and in the darkness, the separation between the ground and the sky had nearly disappeared, leaving only a field of stars beginning at their hooves and spreading in all directions as far as the eye could see.

Behind them, the quiet cough of somepony clearing their throat split the silence. Twilight leapt away from Luna in surprise and quickly turned around, hardly noticing Luna's near mirror actions. In the pale night's light the colors of Celestia's mane were muted, but still regal. She stood near the top of the stairs they had climbed earlier. The darkness made it difficult to tell her expression, but Twilight's brain catalogued it was bemusement. The rest of her was occupied with freaking out.

"Princess Celestia!"

"Sister." Luna's greeting was calmer than Twilights, although it was still tinged with surprise and perhaps embarrassment.

Celestia gently apologized, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you two. I was just coming up to have a breath of fresh air and enjoy the scenery."

Her calm voice seemed to panic Luna. "Oh no, I'm late aren't I. And Gimlet Lime said that I had so many things to see to tonight. I hope that she's not too upset."

"Please calm yourself Luna. One of the prerogatives of being a ruler is that you can attend to things at your convenience." Celestia turned her attention to Twilight Sparkle. "I see that you're putting the lessons you've learned about friendship into practice."

Twilight smiled nervously, the pain from earlier tempering her joy at seeing her mentor. "Yes, Princess Luna and I met in the library and got to talking. When she found out I hadn't settled on where to stay tonight, she graciously invited me to stay in the palace. She was also kind enough to share with me this wonderful sight."

Celestia regarded the night sky and commented, "It is wonderful isn't it." She looked back towards Luna and in a contemplative tone said, "I never could make it quite as beautiful as you." She seemed to recollect herself. "Speaking of wonderful sights, Luna, why don't you show Twilight Sparkle your room? I'm certain that there is much there she would find fascinating."

"My room? But I don't think she'd be interested in anything in there."

Even in the weak moonlight Princess Celestia's cocked eyebrow was easy to see. "Not even your Made Lx2000?"

Twilight's ears perked up and she almost put a crick in her neck from turning toward Luna so quickly. "You have a Made Lx2000? Those have a practical visual power of nearly one thousand. Only the telescopes at the royal pony observatory are more powerful. You really have one?"

Luna's nonplused reply was, "Um, yes. Would you like to see it?"

"Oh yes, yes, yes. Um, please."

Princess Celestia chuckled at Twilight's enthusiasm. "Well then, I'll let you two have your fun." She moved out of the way and Twilight practically raced behind Luna down the stairs. They passed through the impressive,

albeit sterile entry room, and entered the hallway whose entrance was opposite the one Gimlet Lime had taken earlier. The impressive architecture and ornately carved marble continued past several large and solid appearing doors.

The duo came to the end of the hallway and on either side of them were massive double doors which easily dwarfed those they had just passed. The ones to their left were inscribed with a large sun whose rays exploded across both doors and onto the nearby walls. Amongst the rays were stylized clouds, upon which tiny pegasi frolicked. Lower down the doors were rolling hills on top of which were several small unicorns and earth ponies as seemingly happy as the pegasi.

The doors opposite weren't as ostentatious, but were no less beautifully detailed. A large crescent moon was carved into the doors and rested upon a field of stars which spilled down the door and across the floor where they had been inlaid into the marble. There weren't any clouds or ponies, but Twilight thought the door was still quite pretty.

"It's in here," Luna quietly said. She sounded nervous for some reason. With a glow of her horn, the moon themed doors cracked open partially and she slipped through the narrow opening she had made. Twilight followed closely after, having to struggle a little bit when her saddlebags proved wider than the opening. After having pushed the door slightly further open to get through, Twilight paused just inside the door, unexpectedly awed.

The room was a large oval, with a high domed ceiling which threatened to disappear into the shadows left by the few heavily shaded lights spread about the room. The walls were dark blue, while the ceiling was colored dark indigo. Bright crystalline flecks set into the ceiling reflected the light of the lamps, giving the impression that the stars had been brought inside.

Several large windows interrupted the gently curving wall, but they were all covered with heavy midnight blue drapes, which didn't allow even a hint of light through. Between the windows were several large bookcases whose books were meticulously arranged. There were also several pieces of highly ornate furniture, including a vanity Twilight could swear she had seen featured in an old master's painting.

"Wow, your room is very impressive, Luna."

"Thank you. Please ignore the mess; I don't normally have guests, so I haven't cleaned up today."

Twilight ran her eyes once more across the room, searching for the mess Luna had alluded to, but wasn't able to see anything out of place. Aside from perhaps a few casually stacked books on a nightstand next to a very large and modern appearing bed.

"Well, the telescope is over here," called out Luna as she walked deeper into the room. Twilight was a bit nervous about invading Luna's private sanctum, but she obediently moved deeper into the room as well. Behind her the massive door sealed itself.

The floor of the room was covered with a thick and luxuriously soft blue carpet which seemed to massage Twilight's hooves as she crossed the room. A pony could get used to such luxury. But any thoughts about her comfort quickly left her head as Twilight joined Luna at a small raised platform of hardwood that occupied the relatively narrow corner of the room. On the platform was the largest, most elaborate telescope Twilight had ever seen in person.

It was pointed toward the large window which dominated the pseudo alcove they were in. A window which appeared immense despite the thick drapes covering it. Luna stepped forward and grasped a velvet rope with her teeth and pulled it away to reveal a window which curved with the wall and descended all the way from the ceiling to the floor. Moonlight flooded in through its crystal clear glass, brightening the room, but keeping intact the peaceful tranquility which seemed to stem from the soothing décor.

"There we are. We should have a wonderful view of Aponius this time of year." Luna's horn glowed and the protective coverings guarding the lenses of the telescope from dust floated to a nearby desk where they were picturesquely stacked. "Please go ahead, Twilight, you should have an excellent view."

Her eagerness overpowering her decorum, Twilight eagerly accepted Luna's offer. "Thank you, Luna." She stepped close to the telescope and pressed against the eyepiece. The stars making up Aponius suddenly were closer than Twilight had ever been able to see them before. However, they were much less crisp than she had expected. Instinctively she used her

magic to minutely adjust the controls of the telescope, bringing Aponius into sharp relief.

She gave out an involuntary gasp and whispered, "It's beautiful." With the stars so close, Twilight could easily see what had appeared from a distance to be a mere red tinge was in fact a brilliant shining ruby. The other stars were yellow, green, and of course white. No longer were they specks in the sky, but jewels ready to be plucked from the black velvet of the night.

"I've never seen them so close." After several long minutes Twilight reluctantly remembered her manners and stepped away from the telescope. She looked at it appreciatively. "It is a wonderful piece of machinery."

Luna appeared a bit embarrassed as she replied, "Yes, that's what they tell me. To be honest though it's the only telescope I've ever had. They hadn't been invented before I became Nightmare Moon. When I returned, my sister provided me with all the latest things she thought that I would enjoy. The bed for instance, it's supposed to be the newest and greatest bed in all Equestria, but I think it's a bit uncomfortable compared to the cushions we used to sleep upon a thousand years ago."

"It does look very comfortable," Twilight commented, turning her attention to the bed in question. It was quite large, large enough to probably fit her and all her friends from Ponyville at the same time. It was nearly chest height from the floor, and the dark violet blanket draped over it looked thick and inviting.

"Perhaps it is, but I'm afraid that I don't have anything to compare it to since it's the only bed I've ever slept in." An idea seemed to occur to Luna and she eagerly proposed, "You've slept in other beds I'm sure. Would you mind trying mine and giving me your opinion?"

Twilight was a bit hesitant. "Um, are you sure you want a strange pony in your bed, Princess Luna?"

Luna smiled reassuringly at Twilight. "You're not some strange pony, Twilight. You're my friend. Besides, if you think the bed is uncomfortable, then I'm sure that I'd be able to convince Celestia to have it replaced with something like my old cushion."

"Well, if it's that important to you, I guess I can try it." Twilight was having a hard time denying Luna anything when her eyes shone in just that imploring way.

"Oh, thank you!"

They both approached the large bed and Twilight's back suddenly felt cooler. She turned her head to find that Luna had taken her saddlebags and was levitating them to the floor near the nearby nightstand. Twilight turned back around to find that Luna had also turned back the sheets on the bed with her magic. Obviously she was a very talented and capable magician.

"Uh, thank you, Princess Luna."

"Think nothing of it. Now then, just lie down and tell me what you think."

Twilight felt horribly awkward as she climbed into the bed and settled down, resting her head on one of the satiny soft pillows just below the headboard. Unfortunately for Luna it was beyond a doubt the most comfortable bed Twilight had even been in. It felt as if she were floating on air. In fact it made her own bed back in the library feel like a cloth covered board.

Thinking about her library quickly led to thoughts of just how far the normally sedate Twilight had traveled that day. Suddenly she felt the full weight of her physically and emotionally draining day descend upon her. Twilight let out a great yawn, which was cut short when she felt the bed's blanket being folded over her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I must be more tired than I thought," Twilight said sheepishly to Luna who had moved closer to the bedside. "But this is the most comfortable be I've ever experienced. I'd better get up before I fall asleep for real."

Luna's expression was full of caring concern as she replied, "You do look exhausted, Twilight. Why don't you just rest there for a little while."

"Oh no, I couldn't. I'd hate to impose any further upon your kindness." Twilight began to struggle t get out of bed, but couldn't seem to gather the energy to move the thick and comfortably warm blanket.

"It's no trouble at all. After all, I don't use the bed during the night. Why don't you rest here? At least until your room is ready."

Twilight didn't want to be a bad guest, but her will to resist Luna's kind offer was quickly fading away with her ability to stay awake. "Well, if you're sure I'm not being a burden."

Luna smiled softly. "I insist."

Twilight settled back down, relaxing into the overstuffed pillow which smelled of soap, sunshine, and something else. Something faint but pleasant. She tried to keep her eyes open and watch as Luna moved about the room, dimming the lights, but all too soon the rigors of the day overwhelmed her and Twilight fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

A hot, bright beam of sunlight struck Twilight squarely in the face. She let out a soft whine as her sleep addled mind was threatened with consciousness. She never had been a morning pony, and ever since she had moved to Ponyville and had been allowed to keep her own hours, Twilight had come to enjoy not rising with the sun.

She knew she should wake herself up and set a good example for Spike, but the bed was so comfortable and warm that five more minutes couldn't hurt anypony. Twilight squirmed a bit, trying to hide from the insistent sun, but found her movements strangely restricted. Her quickly awakening senses informed her that there was a strange weight over her shoulder and quarters, and a very warm but soft object pressed against her back. It was about this time that Twilight realized the lulling sound she had unconsciously been aware of for some time, was the rhythmic breathing of somepony. A breathing which was gently rustling her mane and now that she was paying attention to it, causing her ear to flick every so often as the warm air passed across its sensitive skin.

Twilight's eyes shot open and she was confused for several seconds by finding herself in a much more elegant and somber place than her bedroom. Her sleep dulled brain finally began to recall the events of the previous day, the journey to Canterlot, Celestia's new student, her little scene in the library, and Luna's kindness.

To better explain her current situation, Twilight mentally did what she did best, make a list. It was morning; she was still in Luna's bedroom, more

specifically in Luna's bed. None of which explained why there was somepony else in the bed with her, and why they were, for a lack of a better term, snuggling Twilight.

Slowly and carefully, apprehensive of what she might find, Twilight turned over in the other pony's embrace and found herself nose to nose with Princess Luna.

Twilight felt that she was doing a decent job at not unnecessarily freaking out over the invasion of her personal space by the coregent of Equestria. Her analytical mind informed her that the princess wasn't wearing her crown, and her hair was in slight disarray, much more than Twilight had ever seen it before. Not that she had seen Luna all that many times, especially not enough times to warrant the position they were in. But Twilight had to admit that with the slight bed-head and with the morning's soft light filling the room, Princess Luna seemed like any normal unicorn pony and not the somewhat intimidating alicorn she normally was.

The tangent that Twilight's thoughts had escaped upon was quickly ended when Luna unconsciously squeezed her a bit tighter. This brought Twilight's attention back to the fact that as cute as Luna appeared, there was still the question of why she was holding Twilight so closely. Of course it made sense that Luna would use her own bed. It even made sense that she was too kind to wake Twilight up and kick her out before lying down to sleep herself. However Twilight was a bit confused with why Luna had decided to be so close to her. The bed was quite large. In fact it looked like there was plenty of room on the other side of Luna. Enough to comfortably fit a pony frame as large as Princess Celestia's in fact, and leave room to spare.

Twilight squirmed a little as she attempted to escape the compromising position before Princess Luna woke up, but her movements must have only roused her more quickly. Luna squeezed Twilight a bit tighter and dreamily muttered something about ... twinkle dots? She blinked open her eyes, her face mere inches from Twilight's.

Twilight's awkward and nervous smile was answered by Luna's dazed but genuine one. "Good morning," she greeted Twilight.

"Um, good morning, Princess Luna."

Twilight's strained salutation seemed to fully wake Luna. Her eyes widened and she quickly looked down to where her hooves were tightly grasping the purple unicorn. She gasped and quickly untangled herself, too quickly. Her frantic movements accidentally pushed Twilight away, right off the edge of the bed. Thankfully the trip to the very thick carpet was short.

Luna's head popped over the side of the bed and looked down at Twilight with anxious concern. "Are you alright?"

Twilight was more surprised than hurt. She shook her head to clear it, and then looked up to Luna. "Yes, I think so."

"I'm so sorry; it's just that I normally sleep alone, so I was a bit surprised when I woke up."

"You and me both," Twilight muttered to herself as she climbed to her hooves. In a louder voice she said, "Yes, well, that raises the question why were we sleeping together?"

Luna looked away sheepishly. "Well, last night was rather long and dull, so I decided to take a quick nap when Celestia woke up. When I went to sleep though I assure you I was on the other side of the bed. I must have unconsciously moved over to your side though. Celestia always teased me that I was a bit of a cuddler when we used to sleep together."

"If you were tired, why didn't you just wake me up? It is your bed after all."

Luna looked up at Twilight with innocent eyes. "The bed is so large; I thought we could share it. Besides, you looked so cute, I mean peaceful when you're asleep that I didn't have the heart to wake you up."

Twilight blushed lightly at Luna's praise and was glad that the princess turned her attention to the still open window through which the rising sun's light was pouring.

"If we hurry, we should be able to make it in time to have breakfast with Celestia." Luna's horn glowed and a nearby chest of drawers was surrounded by a glow of the same hue. One of the drawers opened and a heavy silver brush levitated out and over to Luna. As she began to brush her mane, Twilight stretched and walked over to where her bags had been

set. She placed them on her back and adjusted them so they sat comfortably upon her.

She checked her appearance in the nearby vanity's mirror and surprisingly found that her mane was only slightly disheveled. She noticed a fine toothed comb on the vanity, and magically ran it through her mane a few times until she appeared her normal self.

Luna left the bed and dropped the brush onto the vanity next to where Twilight had laid the comb. She then retrieved her crown and other royal accoutrements and soon appeared the picture of pony perfection.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked Twilight.

In answer, Twilight's stomach rumbled loudly, and she sheepishly said, "Yes."

They left Luna's room and passed through the hallways of the palace in companionable silence. Soon they arrived at what appeared to Twilight to be a rather normal room compared to the ostentatiousness of the rest of the palace. The only nod to luxury seemed to be the intricately mosaiced floor depicting the myth of Europony. Princess Celestia was seated at a long, low table which was covered with a wide assortment of fresh fruit and breakfast themed baked goods.

"Luna, Twilight Sparkle, good morning."

"Good morning sister," Luna easily replied.

"Yes, good morning Princess Celestia." Twilight's greeting was a bit more guarded than usual. She initially had felt a burst of pleasure at seeing her mentor, but it was quickly damped by the remembrance of their changing relationship.

"Please join me," Celestia invited them.

Luna quickly took a seat at the table, but Twilight was a bit hesitant as she approached the cushions spread out next to Celestia. There was a silence, which Twilight felt was awkward, while Celestia bent down to sample a plate of beautifully arranged sliced strawberries. Twilight thought herself too

anxious to eat anything, but her reticence was quickly overcome by the dull pain in her stomach.

She was on the cusp of choosing between the crepes and the cold cereal when Princess Celestia asked, "So, Twilight, did you have an enjoyable evening last night?"

Twilight blushed a bit as she admitted, "Yes I did. Although I'm afraid that I didn't spend as much time as I would have liked with Princess Luna's telescope. I was a bit tired from my trip yesterday so I went to bed early."

"Oh, that's a shame. But perhaps you'll be able to better examine the night sky tonight."

"Well, actually I need to return to Ponyville today. I don't want to leave Spike alone for too long. He is more responsible these days, but he's still a baby dragon."

Princess Luna eagerly interjected, "Are you sure you can't stay until tonight, Twilight? I'd really like to spend more time with you."

Twilight leaned forward a bit to better see the princess of the night and apologized, "I'm sorry Princess Luna, I'd like to spend more time with you as well, but I hadn't planned on staying very long in Canterlot when I began this trip."

Luna appeared crestfallen, but perked up a bit when Princess Celestia suggested, "Perhaps you can return and visit Canterlot another time then. Or perhaps Luna could take some time off and visit you and your friends in Ponyville."

"I'd love to have Princess Luna come and meet my other friends," enthusiastically replied Twilight.

Luna's expression of delight at Celestia's suggestion mirrored Twilights, but was quickly replaced with one of disappointment. "But Celestia, what of my duties? I'd love to spend more time with Twilight, but I'm just so busy."

Princess Celestia kindly but firmly dismissed Luna's concerns. "It doesn't really matter where you are in Equestria when you raise the moon, and I'd

be more than happy to see to your administrative tasks. I have after all been ruling Equestria by myself for quite some time.

"And I think it's a great idea for you to spend time outside of Canterlot, to experience more of modern Equestria. It would give you the chance to make new friends." Celestia looked toward her sister with concern.

"Honestly I was becoming worried that you were spending too much time focused on studying the history of Equestria. I've never seen you with anyone aside from your guards and attendants."

She turned toward Twilight with a small smile. "Which reminds me of a certain other pony who was perhaps a bit too studious for her own good. Maybe you could share a few of the lessons you've learned about friendship with my sister, Twilight."

Twilight bowed her head demurely. "It would be an honor to help Princess Luna in anyway."

Celestia beamed. "Then it's settled. I'll begin rearranging the royal schedule today and see when it would be possible for Luna to come and visit you."

Both Luna and Twilight smiled at one another, Luna's full of hope, Twilight's full of excitement. The joyful excitement that Twilight felt about Luna's upcoming visit and the thoughts of the wonderful time they would have with the rest of her friends swept away nearly all the discomfort Twilight had been feeling toward Celestia. After all, Luna was right. It was obvious that Princess Celestia still cared for her; she just had other matters which sometimes demanded her attention besides Twilight. Simply because she was distracted didn't mean that she loved Twilight any less.

The rest of the breakfast passed quickly for Twilight. With the dark cloud of her feelings toward Celestia lifted, she eagerly made plans with Luna on how they would spend their time in Ponyville. She assured her new friend that she would love all the ponies Twilight had come to care for, and that there was plenty for them to see and do around her new home.

For perhaps the first time ever, Twilight barely noticed when Princess Celestia excused herself and left to attend to her royal duties. The purple unicorn's entire attention was focused on Luna, which was why she easily picked up on the fact that despite her power nap, the monarch was showing signs of being weary.

Reluctantly they made their goodbyes and Luna left to return to her bed alone, while Twilight accepted her kind offer of a chariot ride back to Ponyville. Before the sun had even reached its midmorning height, Twilight found herself back in front of her library's door.

She thanked the pegasi who had transported her, and entered her home. Twilight had to admit, even though she had only been gone for a single day, it was nice to be back. She took off her saddlebags and hung them on a peg near the doorway, then called out, "Spike? I'm home."

There was a crash from her bedroom, and a few moments later, Spike's scaly form sleepily appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Twilight? You're back already? I didn't think you'd get home so soon."

Twilight smiled good naturedly up at the small dragon who had obviously just woken up. "Apparently." She used her magic to safely levitate him down the stairs, gently setting him down on a throw rug near where she stood.

"So, anything exciting happen while I was gone?"

"Nah, not really," Spike replied, wiping the sleep from his eyes and appearing a bit more alert. "Pinkie Pike came by and invited us to the anniversary of her semi-annual anniversary party for parties she's having tomorrow. Oh, and Rainbow Dash was practicing a new trick, something about a reverse aileron roll. Anyway, she crashed through one of the windows and knocked over a bookcase. I think I was able to put all the books back where they belonged, but if you can't find something, check that big bookcase next to the kitchen. I put all the leftover ones there."

"My, it sounds like you had a busy day."

"Yeah, nothing I couldn't handle," replied Spike with feigned nonchalance.

Twilight began walking toward the kitchen. "Well, since you have things so well in hoof, I mean claw, then you won't mind taking down a letter."

Spike deflated a bit and complained, "But Twilight, you just got back from Canterlot. Couldn't you have just told Princess Celestia whatever it is you want to write about?"

"Please Spike," Twilight asked while turning around and giving him her best Rarity impression.

"Okay, okay." Spike procured a nearby scroll and quill and looked up at Twilight expectantly.

Twilight assumed her dictating pose and clearly stated, "Dear Princess Celestia." She paused for a moment in thought. "Wait, Spike, start over."

"Aw, but Twilight, I didn't smudge the ink or anything."

"I know, but still, I'd like to start over. Please."

Spike grumbled a bit under his breath, but picked up another blank scroll.

Twilight smiled in appreciation at him, then turned her eyes upwards in thought. "Dear Princess Luna ..."

Chapter 2-1

With a sigh, Luna awoke. It was late evening, and despite the thick drapes covering the windows of her room, thin rays of sunlight still managed to invade through the gaps, leaving her room dim but not dark. In the gloom it was easy to make out the shadowy furniture and towering bookshelves of the completely silent room.

Tiredly, Luna turned over and gazed toward the spot where Twilight had slept so long ago. It had been only been a few weeks, but it felt like it had been much longer. To wake up next to somepony, especially somepony as wonderful as Twilight Sparkle had felt wonderful. Luna had been alone for so very long, that to simply see other ponies was a delight. But to touch them, hold them, feel the rise and fall of their chest, to listen to the soft sigh of their breath caused Luna a tremulous joy she couldn't quite describe. How much the feeling came from having such a close relationship with another pony, and how much it was from that pony being Twilight Sparkle specifically, Luna wasn't sure.

The brief time she and Twilight had spent together had reawakened a longing in Luna, one she had thought she had conquered long ago. A longing for a relationship with a pony closer than that of a courtier and a princess, closer than one forged only from duty. She wanted a relationship as close as the one she had shared with Celestia so long ago, but one untainted by her terrible mistakes. Luna hoped, that is, she wished with all her heart that Twilight could be the pony who would fill the hole she had felt for so long in her life. That she would be the pony who she would be able to call a friend.

Energized by her reflections on Twilight, Luna climbed out of bed. She left the sheets rumpled up and the pillows in disarray. No pony had ever taught her how to fold them properly like the maids did, and the one time she had attempted to make the bed herself, things had ended badly. But the next morning, like all mornings, Luna had found her pillows fluffed, blankets folded, sheets expertly creased, and the single marks all gone. She felt badly for having somepony come and clean up after her, but Celestia had explained to Luna that they had to bear with it because that was the way the ponies of Equestria expected their princesses to behave. Still, it didn't

sit well with Luna that she should leave a mess behind for other ponies to clean up. But perhaps it made them happy, somehow.

Luna brushed the tangles out of her mane and tail, and finished her evening ritual by donning her crown and other royal vestments. As she was checking her appearance in the mirror of her vanity, Luna received a reminder to the fact that she was running a bit late by the setting of the sun. She could feel the ball of light disappearing from the Equestrian sky, causing the light in her room to fade away and for true darkness to finally arrive. Luna closed her eyes and concentrated on her shadow covered crescent moon, pushing it up into the night sky to follow after the sun.

The cold light of the moon was insufficient to banish the darkness from her room, so Luna stretched out her magic once more and lit several of the lamps spread throughout amongst the various pieces of furniture. In their warm, subtle light, Luna checked her appearance one last time before navigating through her still somewhat unfamiliar room, and out the door. Celestia would be awake for only another hour or two, so if Luna didn't hurry, her sister might not have time for her.

With that in mind, Luna rushed out of the hall leading to the royal apartments and was quickly intercepted by her personal assistant, Gimlet Lime. The always earnest unicorn seemed to appear out of the ether as she fell alongside Luna with her ever present clipboard and quill.

"Good evening, Princess Luna. I hope that you've had a pleasant day."

"Yes, I did, thank you," Luna good-naturedly lied. She slowed down slightly, worried that with the clipboard in front of her, the other pony might run into something, but otherwise continued on her way towards the dining room where she usually met with Celestia.

"Wonderful. I'm glad you're well rested, because your schedule is rather full tonight. Moonrise has been completed." There was a loud scratch as Gimlet crossed off something on her clipboard. "Next, you're scheduled to dine with Princess Celestia for approximately forty-five minutes. Following that will be your nightly news briefing which will likely last for two hours. After which you will hear the arguments for and against the proposed dam project in the Ponysee Valley. Those are scheduled for three hours, and then we'll proceed to the midnight meal, which is being catered by Café Fleur, and is expected to last forty-five minutes."

"Following the meal will be the period of study you wished for, during which we've scheduled a few spontaneous breaks to relax through playing board games. According to the royal statistical data, Princess Celestia should arise at approximately 4:59 tomorrow morning, with a 98% probability she will wake between 4:40 and 5:18." Gimlet broke out of her monotonal recital long enough to impart an interesting fact to Luna. "The last time that there was an outlier, was 324 years ago when the princess woke rather late because she 'just didn't feel like it.'"

They had covered a vast distance through the wide and opulent halls of the palace during Gimlet's recital. "Thank you, Gimlet Lime, that was very ... precise." The door to the dining room was quickly approaching, and Luna was very eager to see Celestia, but she couldn't help making an observation, "I wasn't aware that my sister's sleep schedule was so closely studied."

Gimlet looked away from her checklist long enough to reassure Luna with absolute sincerity, "Oh yes, Princess Luna. We try to study and keep track of as much information about Princess Celestia as possible, so we can better serve her. And you of course."

Luna wasn't too sure how she felt about somepony charting her bed time and who knew what other daily routines. "Well, I'm sure that Princess Celestia is grateful for the attention to detail you and the others have had for her, but perhaps you can relax a little you don't have to be so precise all the time. It's not as if the sun won't rise and all of Equestria will be plunged into eternal darkness if you make a mistake."

Her unicorn assistant came to an abrupt halt and regarded Luna with a shocked and almost fearful expression.

"That was a joke," Luna explained, with an uncertain smile.

"Oh yes, of course. Very funny, Princess Luna. Ha ha."

With an apologetic smile that was almost a wince, Luna entered the dining room, leaving Gimlet on the other side of the thick door to do whatever it was she did when Luna wasn't around.

The room was brightly lit by artificial light, almost painfully so. The long table dominating the room's center was laden with food, but Celestia's

larger than life figure wasn't seated before it as was usual. Instead she was standing at one of the narrow windows which lined the nearby wall.

"Good evening, Celestia," Luna cheerfully called out.

Celestia seemed lost in thought, and it was a few moments before she roused herself and turned her head to smile down at Luna. "Good evening to you too, Luna."

"Is there something interesting outside?"

"Oh no," Celestia replied distractedly. "I was just thinking about things."

"Nothing too troublesome I hope."

"No. Nothing concrete really. I'm just hoping that the peace accords between the griffons and the dragons will last. I'd hate to have the months of effort and arbitration we've worked so hard on be for nothing."

"They won't," Luna reassured Celestia. "While the griffons are known more for their passion than their restraint, they are honorable. As for the dragons, they've always been true their words. Besides which, the settlement you came up with was fair to both sides, neither could possibly have a grievance with it."

Celestia smiled, but still seemed distant. "You're right. I know that I shouldn't be worrying over it. I'm sure things will turn out for the best, and now that the negotiations are over, I can turn my full attention back to the things which are truly important to me. Now then, let's put aside politics and have dinner, or breakfast, whichever you'd prefer."

Celestia gracefully settled down on one of the large cushions spread around the table and Luna took a seat on the opposite side of the table from her.

"Would you like sugar with your tea?" Celestia asked. She levitated a large silver teapot at the far end of the table and perfectly poured its dark and aromatic contents into two delicate porcelain teacups while she waited for Luna's reply.

"Yes please."

Two lumps of sugar were dropped into one of the cups, and as it floated through the air, a small silver spoon gently stirred the tea. Celestia placed the cups with barely a clink in front of them and Luna deeply inhaled the scented steam. The highly caffeinated and very sweet beverage had quickly become her drink of choice after her introduction to it shortly following her return. She waited for a few moments to let the tea cool, filling the time by appropriating a few rose petal pastries.

"So, have you had time to look over the schedule and decide when I'll be able to visit Twilight Sparkle?" Luna tried to phrase the question nonchalantly, but couldn't fully keep the eagerness from her voice.

"Twilight?" Celestia perked up for a moment before she fully understood Luna's question. "No, I'm afraid that I've been too busy as of late. But I'll see to it as soon as possible."

"Oh."

Sensing Luna's disappointment, Celestia was quick to add, "Now that the dragon and griffon treaty has been ratified, I don't believe that there are any other pressing concerns of state. I'm sure that you'll be able to go on your trip soon."

They were silent for a few minutes, each lost in their thoughts, both only picking at their food. Eventually it was Celestia who broke the silence by clearing her throat.

"Speaking of Twilight Sparkle, I understand that you two have been corresponding with one another."

"Yes we have," Luna eagerly replied. "She's been sending me letters describing Ponyville and her friends, all of whom sound like very interesting ponies. And I've been writing her about what I've been studying, as well as informing her about the news from around Equestria. Apparently the Ponyville local paper doesn't have as broad a scope as the news we receive."

"I'm glad that you two seem to be getting on so well." Celestia paused for a moment in contemplation before she awkwardly asked, "Does Twilight ever mention me in her letters?"

"Of course. She often speaks of the lessons you've taught her, and the many enjoyable times she spent under your tutelage."

"I'm glad. But does she ever write anything more ... personal?"

Luna was confused by the odd line of questioning. "I'm not certain what you mean, but I don't think anything like that has come up. Do you want me to ask?"

"Oh no, you don't have to go out of your way, it was just idle curiosity."

They lapsed into another awkward silence that lasted for several minutes until Celestia abruptly announced, "Well, there were a few scrolls I would like to attend to before bed, so I'll bid you a good night, Luna."

"Good night, Celestia, don't stay up too late working hard."

Celestia smiled in gratitude as she replied, "I won't. I know that I leave Equestria in capable hooves every night."

Luna blushed at Celestia's compliment while her sister majestically exited the room through the door Luna had come in through. Alone, with a magnificent banquet still spread out before her, Luna remembered her impending duties and quickly finished one last cup of tea before quitting the room as well. She ran into Gimlet Lime who was patiently standing just outside the door, flipping through the many pages attached to her clipboard.

"Shall we move to the throne room, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, let's go."

They traveled through Equestria's halls of power, vast and opulent corridors which were usually filled with energetic and purposeful ponies. However, since it was night, only Luna, Gimlet, and the echoes of their hoofsteps traveled through the splendid halls.

They entered the throne room through the relatively plain door which connected it to the rest of the palace. The guards flanking it, as well as those next to the throne, and the other entrances, all came to attention as soon as they saw Luna.

To be honest, the royal guard sometimes intimidated her. They were all much larger and physically stronger than her, and their unflinching stoicism never betrayed their thoughts or feelings. Sometimes they seemed like little more than machines carved from stone and shaped into ponies. Thankfully they were all faithfully loyal to Celestia, Equestria, and to her.

The palace's entrance to the throne room was quite close to the throne, so Luna was quickly able to climb up the ramp to Celestia's impressive throne. Even after months of holding reign over the night, Luna felt that the throne was too large, or she was too small for it, to feel comfortable. Gimlet Lime had stopped at the foot of the throne, just beyond the guards. She waited until Luna had settled on the throne's large cushion.

"We're running a bit behind this evening, Your Majesty. But we are still within acceptable parameters. Would you like to hear the day's news now, or would you prefer to attend to other business first?"

Luna took what she hoped was a regal pose and announced, "I will hear the news first, Gimlet. I think I will be better able to make decisions with the latest knowledge of the kingdom."

"Very well." Gimlet bowed shallowly and turned away to summon Celestia's advisor who was responsible for compiling the various reports of interest from across Equestria. It had been Luna's idea that she should be as well informed as Celestia, so she would be able to rule as effectively as her sister.

While Gimlet and the pony appointed to inform Luna walked up the length of the throne room from the entrance where the attendants waited, Luna contemplated the transformation which night brought about to the throne room. The tall, narrow windows were black mirrors, reflecting the lights along the stone walls which were made dim by the enormous space they tried to illuminate. In their false twilight, the ceiling was lost to shadow and the tapestries were darker and more somber than they appeared during the day. In the silence, the small waterfall below the throne, made black for want of light, crashed loudly. On occasion it threw up a cool mist which caused Luna to shiver.

The whole room, guards, throne, shadows, and the endlessly echoing spaces, all seemed too much to Luna. She had never liked their throne room in the old castle either, but she would much prefer it to this one, which

was easily five times as large and intimidating. Ostensibly it was her throne room, but too often she felt like a stranger in it, like an interloper. The uneasy feeling it gave her often lasted through the night, and this one was no exception.

The major events of the day were recounted to her by an obviously nervous and quite young assistant to the pony who performed the same duty for Celestia during the day. Thankfully, very little of interest had occurred since the previous night. No conflicts, no murders, no major disasters or hardships. Just the news of simple ponies with simple problems. The mayor of Fillydelphia asking for additional bits to repair the buildings still damaged from their parasprite infestation. A new town had been founded in the foothills of the mountains which demarked Equestria's sothern most border. And of course there were the additional calls for the construction of a dam in the Ponysee River Valley to better irrigate the surrounding farmlands and towns, including the relatively new town of Appleoosa, allowing them to plant additional crops. Unfortunately there was a wide variety of wildlife in the area impacted by the dam, and many ponies felt that it was unconscionable to destroy their homes.

Luna spent the night mulling over the news, as well as reading the transcripts of the arguments both sides of the dam question had presented to Celestia earlier. Both camps had valid arguments, and Luna looked forward to discussing the issue with her sister. She also spent several hours poring over the books she had brought from the royal library concerning the history of Equestria. She broke up her hours of study with several games of chess with Gimlet.

She was in the midst of the twelfth game of the night, when she felt Celestia begin to move the sun. Luna eagerly turned her attention from the game; she had won the past eleven, and was probably going to win the last as well, despite not being a very good chess player. No matter how poor her strategy, Gimlet always seemed to lose. Luna closed her eyes in concentration and felt the familiar cold rush of her magic envelop her. With her senses magically heightened, Luna could easily feel the sun eagerly waiting just beyond the eastern horizon. With only a small push, she sent the moon past the western edge of the world, allowing the sun to break the dark of the night with the reds and purples of the morning.

Luna opened her eyes and turned to her assistant. "Well, Gimlet, the night is over, and it's Celestia's time to rule again. Let us retire."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Gimlet raised her hoof and knocked over her princess on the chessboard. "It seems you've won again, Your Majesty," she commented with a smile.

Luna's replying smile was rueful. "It seems so, Gimlet. Strange how that always seems to happen."

"It's not strange at all, Your Highness. It's simply a matter of having a more effective strategy than your opponent, knowing when to retreat and when to advance."

Gimlet put the chess set away and again took up her clipboard and quill. Several sheets of paper had been folded over the top, Gimlet's heavy hoofwriting bleeding through the backs in several spots. The guards, who had remained as still as statues the entire night, seemed to take no notice of Luna and Gimlet as they left the throne room. Luna resolved to speak to Celestia about them. It couldn't be interesting, or even healthy, to stand so still for so long. Perhaps they should change guards every six hours instead of every twelve.

The two ponies walked through the halls of the palace, and came to a junction of corridors, where a pair of guard unicorns seemed to be waiting for them.

"Princess Luna, Princess Celestia would like to convey her regrets, but she is very busy this morning with affairs of state, and will be unable to dine with you," the darker of the pair informed Luna.

"Oh. Well, if she's too busy to have breakfast, then perhaps I should go speak with her and see if there is something I could do to alleviate her burden."

"I'm afraid that the princess, er, Princess Celestia, gave orders to not be disturbed, Your Highness."

"Oh." Luna was certain that Celestia hadn't meant to keep Luna away specifically, but at the same time, there was realistically little Luna could do

to aid her older and much more experienced sister. So it would probably be best if she didn't force the issue and insist on seeing Celestia.

"If you'd like, we could escort you to your quarters, Your Highness," the other unicorn guard suggested.

"I'm sure that Princess Luna can find her way back to her apartments without your help," Gimlet Lime interjected.

The guard turned to Gimlet with a hint of annoyance. "We meant no disrespect, but simply thought that the princess would appreciate an escort."

"The princess doesn't need ..."

"Gimlet," Luna cut her off. "Thank you for your concern, but I'll accept these gentlecolts' kind offer. It's been a long night, and I'm certain that both of us could use our rest. You've been very helpful tonight, as usual. Have a wonderful day, and I'll see you tomorrow evening."

Gimlet looked at Luna uncertainly. "Are you sure, Princess?"

"Yes, thank you."

Gimlet sighed and lowered her head slightly. She turned and disappeared down the side hallway her tail hanging limply behind her, and Luna watched her go before remembering the guard ponies when one of them cleared his throat.

"Your Highness, would you care to take breakfast now?"

Luna thought for a moment before replying. She had eaten a light snack a few hours ago during her chess session with Gimlet, and should be feeling hungry, but for some reason her stomach was feeling delicate and unreceptive to the thought of breakfast.

"No thank you. I have no appetite for it, and if I can't see my sister, then I think I'll just go to bed early."

"Very well, Your Highness. We'll escort you to your room."

"Thank you." The guards turned and Luna followed after them, ruminating on just how polite everypony in the palace was. They were always willing to take the time to accompany her places and make sure that she didn't get lost.

In a few minutes they arrived at the familiar hallway leading to the royal quarters, and the guard ponies came to a halt. Luna left them with a parting nod. She entered her room to find it perfectly clean, without even a book out of place. Luna sighed as she closed the door behind her, sometimes her room seemed so sterile, as if she didn't actually live there.

She removed her regal regalia and pulled back the covers of her too large bed just enough to slide beneath them. She pulled one of the many pillows into a hug and tightly clutched it against her chest. It was a poor substitute for the warmth and comfort of another pony, but it was the best she had. With a final thought, Luna snuffed out the lights, and drifted off to sleep, as the dawn's pale light began to slip in through the windows' cracks.

"...ess Luna. Please wake up."

Groggily, Luna left behind her forgotten dreams and awoke to a sound she had very little experience with, somepony knocking on her door.

"Princess Luna, Princess Luna, please wake up now," an anxious voice called through the door.

Luna didn't need to consult her nearby clock to know that it was much too early for her to wake up. It felt like mid-afternoon if not earlier. Dazed, she stumbled out of bed and with her voice thick with sleep, she called out, "I'm awake, just a moment." She managed to make it across the room to her door without tripping over her hooves. She magically cracked it open and blearily peered out. "Yes, what is it?"

One of Celestia's ponies-in-waiting timidly looked back at her.

"Um, I'm sorry to interrupt your rest, Princess, but Princess Celestia wished to inform you that your nightly duties have been suspended for tonight, as well as the remainder of this week, so that you may travel to Ponyville."

It took Luna a moment to fully grasp what the other pony had said, but when she did, a burst of joy surged within her. However it was quickly tempered by a feeling of confusion.

"You mean Celestia decided that my vacation should start today?"

"Yes. In fact, the royal chariot has been harnessed and is ready to depart at your convenience."

Luna's burgeoning feeling of joy was squashed by her senses telling her that something was wrong. It was strange that Celestia would prepare for Luna's trip so quickly after they had spoken, and without any input from her sister.

"Thank you for informing me. Tell me, where is Princess Celestia this afternoon?"

"She's spent most of the day in her study, with standing orders to not be disturbed."

"I see. Well, I'll just pack a few things ..."

"Excuse me, Your Highness, but while you were asleep, Princess Celestia already bid us to pack a saddlebag with what you will likely need on your trip. It is already onboard the chariot, waiting for you."

"How ... expedient of you. Please give me a few minutes to make myself presentable, and I suppose I'll be ready to leave."

"Very good, Your Majesty. I'll just wait here until you are ready."

"There's no need for that. I'm sure I can find my own way through the palace, and you must have something more interesting you should be attending to then escorting me."

"But Princess..."

"It will be fine, just go ahead and return to your other duties."

"Yes, Your Highness." The smaller pony seemed somewhat relieved to leave Luna's presence, and she quickly departed back down the hallway.

Luna allowed her mask of pleasantness to slip into a small frown. All this haste seemed strange to her, something just wasn't right with this picture.

So, Luna hastily made sure she was presentable, and that her royal garments were perfect, before traveling through the palace, not to the royal concourse where the chariot would no doubt be waiting, but towards Celestia's apartments near the throne room where she retreated to reflect and study.

The halls were filled with ponies hurrying about their business, stopping long enough to bow courteously for Luna, before continuing on their way. A pair of pegasus ponies stood guard before the door leading into Celestia's chambers. They came to attention as Luna approached.

"We're sorry, Princess Luna, but Princess Celestia isn't seeing anypony today."

"I'm not anypony, I'm her sister, and I need to speak with Celestia."

Luna stepped forward and the two guards sharply crossed their wings to bar her way. She paused at their audacity, but drew herself up, buoyed by an anger that had slowly been building in her over the months of treatment by the royal guards toward her which seemed just shy of being outright hostile.

"How dare you raise your wings to me! Don't you know who I am? I am Princess Luna, coregent of Equestria, the ruler of the night, and your princess. To raise a hoof against me is treason to the throne of Equestria. Now step aside or face the consequences!"

The two guards looked nervously at one another before hesitantly folding their wings and moving away from the door, leaving Luna with more than enough space to open and step through it. She securely shut it behind her. Safe behind the doors thick wood, Luna let out the breath she had been holding; glad the guards hadn't called her bluff. Truthfully she didn't know what she would have done if they hadn't backed down.

Still a bit limp from relief, Luna looked around for Celestia, but didn't find her in the study she had entered. A room dominated by several tables overflowing with partially rolled scrolls and opened books. A large map of

Equestria dominated one of the wood paneled walls. Tucked into the corner next to it was a closed door leading to the next room.

Luna approached it, and as she did, began to hear the muffled sound of voices.

"...needs to be closely watched," declared a deep and masculine voice.

Luna easily recognized Celestia's voice as she replied, "As I've said, that's completely unnecessary. She did make a mistake once, but she has atoned for it. She deserves our trust and faith that she's learned her lesson."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, it was more than a little mistake. And madness in great ones must not go unwatched."

"She is not mad." The ice in Celestia's voice was clearly audible, even through the door. Luna winced in sympathy for whoever was on the receiving end.

"So you say, Your Majesty, but ..."

Deciding that she had eavesdropped long enough on Celestia's conversation, and not wanting to continue to listen to the conversation, especially if it was about the pony she thought it was about, Luna pushed open the door to find Celestia seated behind a large desk, facing Captain Blue Blazer, the commander of the royal guards. They both turned in surprise at Luna's sudden entrance.

Celestia was the first to recover. "Dear sister, It's a pleasure to see you so early in the afternoon." She turned back to Captain Blue Blazer. "I'm afraid I'll have to bring our conversation to a close, Captain. But be aware, I am certain about my course of actions. Your concerns are appreciated, but unnecessary in this case."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Captain Blue Blazer bowed low to Celestia, then walked out of the room, past Luna who had moved out of his way. He cast a suspicious glance down at her, although it was possible that his scared face had simply been permanently frozen into that expression. He had served Celestia loyally for over forty years, but he seemed unable or unwilling to separate Luna from Nightmare Moon at times. Luna never felt

comfortable around the pony, despite his unquestioning loyalty to her sister.

After the door had closed behind the captain, and his heavy hoofsteps had faded into the distance, Celestia stood up and walked around the desk to nuzzle her sister in a hug.

"And what do I owe this unexpected visit to, Luna?"

Luna leaned up to return Celestia's hug, exulting in the feel of the personal contact. However, as Celestia pulled away, Luna's face fell slightly.

"I believe that you know the reason for my visit. After all, you were kind enough to send one of your attendants to wake me, and inform me that not only were the preparations for my journey to visit Ponyville complete, but that my bags had even been packed for me."

Celestia's face also fell, nearly imperceptibly. "Did I act improperly? From the way you spoke last night, I was under the impression that you wished to leave as quickly as possible to visit Twilight Sparkle. In fact I've already dispatched a letter to her informing her of your pending arrival. She should be expecting you at any moment."

Luna wasn't certain, but she could almost swear that Celestia had put the slightest emphasis on Twilight's name.

"I do want to leave as quickly as possible," she admitted. "But I don't want to go away without speaking with you first."

Celestia turned away and strode over to one of the large windows flooding the room with light.

"What is there that we need to talk about? You are going on a trip to visit your new friend, my most faithful of students, Twilight Sparkle, and I will continue ruling here in Canterlot. Looking after the needs of Equestria, thinking of everypony before myself."

Luna walked a little closer to her sister, but not too closely. The intense sunlight streaming in through the wide open window caused her sensitive eyes to ache as they slowly adjusted.

"You've been acting strangely recently, Celestia, and I'd like to know why."

Celestia stared out of the window for several long silent moments, before she sighed deeply.

"I've been under pressure arbitrating this peace agreement between the dragons and the griffons for the past several months. It would be a terrible to have them descend into a physical confrontation, especially on the borders of our kingdom."

"But that's over now, the agreement has been signed, and if both sides aren't exactly happy, then at least they aren't openly angry," Luna pointed out.

"Yes, but I'm afraid that by concentrating so much energy on an issue which was so important to Equestria as a whole, I inadvertently ignored ... certain things which are important to me personally." Celestia looked back to Luna, whose face obviously betrayed her confusion, for Celestia attempted to clarify.

"You know of course that Twilight Sparkle has been my student for many years. She is beyond a doubt one of the most impressive unicorns I've ever known. Not only in magical ability, but in her dedication to knowledge, to learning for the sake of learning. She wants to know positively everything about everything known to ponydom, and to accomplish that end, she's sequestered herself in a library for much of her life. I feared that she had spent too long alone, learning about the world through the lens of books, and not actually experiencing it. Her secluded life has left her more knowledgeable than most ponies, but at the same time, as left her innocent in many ways." Celestia smiled wistfully. "Her innocence and naiveté are quite enduring at times actually."

She looked at Luna almost guiltily, before composing herself. "But I digress. As I was saying, I was afraid that Twilight had spent too much time alone, insulated from the outside world by her books. So, I sent her out to make friends, and to gather the elements of harmony, to fix the mistakes we made so long ago."

Luna winced at the allusion to her transformation into Nightmare Moon, and the conflict which had followed. Celestia either failed to notice Luna's reaction, or pretended not to at least.

"As part of her assignment, I asked her to report on what she learns about the magic of friendship. Mostly as a means to make the transition from her previous life of study to a more social life easier for her."

Celestia lapsed into silence once again, and looked downcast. Luna regarded her sister patiently. She still wasn't sure what exactly the problem was yet, but she would help Celestia in any way she could.

"But lately, they've been just that, reports. Before, Twilight's reports were more expressive, and she would send me letters in-between the reports full of explanations and questions. You could feel her enthusiasm, her happiness, her confusion, or whichever emotion she had been laboring under while writing. But now, she seems to treat writing to me as a duty rather than something to be enjoyed. A few weeks ago, she sent me a document on her efforts at Winter Wrap up administration, over 20 pages long. Yesterday, she sent me a report on friendship which was only two sentences in length."

An edge of frustration had wormed its way into Celestia's voice, and Luna attempted to sooth her by explaining, "Well, perhaps she was busy with some other important task, and only had enough time to jot down a couple of sentences."

"What I learned about friendship this week was that sometimes it's best to speak up and tell your friends the truth, even if you know it's going to hurt them. It's better to hurt them a little with the truth, then to hurt them a lot with lies," Celestia recited from memory. "That was it, no in-depth explanation, no humorous recounting of her adventure, no insight into her life, nothing."

Luna felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. The passion Celestia was exhibiting while speaking about Twilight was revealing the depths of her feelings for the unicorn, and just how much Luna had perhaps underestimated their bond. "It is a good lesson for a pony to learn..."

"Yes. But normally there would be a follow-up report detailing just how she learned her lesson. Probably with diagrams attached, very detailed diagrams." Celestia raised her hoof and clenched it to accentuate her point. "You've never seen such diagrams as Twilight can prepare."

She lowered her hoof and sighed deeply. Celestia seemed to shrink in upon herself as she left the window and slowly made her way back to her desk and wearily sat down. "But now, I fear that she's forgotten about me. That she's too busy with her new friends, like you, to have time for me anymore."

Luna drew a breath to rebut Celestia's claim, but the elder princess smiled a battered smile at her sister. "I don't blame you Luna. It's nopony's fault. Relationships change over time, and I guess I just let my relationship with Twilight Sparkle drift away from me."

The flutter in Luna's stomach had transformed into a full blown queasy feeling. "But what about your new student, Bay Breeze?"

"Bay Breeze?" Celestia looked puzzled for a moment, before she seemed to recognize who Luna was talking about. "Oh, yes, Bay Breeze. What about her?"

"Isn't she your new student?" Luna asked with near desperation.

"Well, she is a student of my school. She's very gifted, but I'm afraid she lacks true dedication. I've been giving her a few afterschool lessons, but she lacks the drive, the passion, the desire to truly learn. I'm sure that she'll be very talented in whatever path she chooses, but she doesn't have that spark for magic that I look for in my personal students."

Luna was flabbergasted. How could she and Twilight have been so wrong?

"But, Celestia, Twilight ..."

Celestia perked up. "Yes?"

Luna hesitated. She should tell her sister about Twilight's mistake, about how Twilight had thought Celestia's distraction had been neglect; how she had felt that she had been replaced. She should probably even tell her about Twilight's touching scene in the library, revealing just how deeply she cared for Celestia.

But Luna was afraid.

Twilight's belief that Celestia had abandoned her had been what had driven her to Luna. If the cause for Twilight's distress vanished, would that invalidate Luna's comforting as well? If Twilight went back to adoring Celestia, would there be enough room in her heart for Luna too? Twilight was the first friend Luna had made since Celestia. If she stopped being Luna's friend, that would leave Luna with ...

"Nothing," Luna said quietly, turning her head so she wouldn't have to see her sister's disappointed face. "Nevermind. I'm- I'm sure that things aren't as dire as you seem to think they are. Twilight likely has just been busy lately, a bit distracted. Perhaps she is just so busy learning about friendship, she doesn't have time to write about it in-depth. Anyway, I should be going, the royal chariot has been waiting for me for quite some time, as well as Twilight Sparkle. I'll give your regards to her."

"Thank you, and have a safe trip. I hope that you have a wonderful time, and make lots of new friends."

Luna smiled weakly as she left the room.

"I'll try."

Her trip to the Royal concourse seemed longer than usual, as Luna was plagued by self-recrimination. It was painful to see her sister so upset, so despondent. But at the same time, she didn't want to give up her newfound friend Twilight Sparkle so soon after finding her. Besides, perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps it was time for Celestia to let go of Twilight, and for Twilight to grow as a unicorn. Despite her justifications for her actions, Luna's heart was still heavy when she arrived at the royal chariot where a team of guards had already been harnessed.

Surprisingly Gimlet Lime was also waiting for her.

"Good afternoon Princess Luna, are you ready for your journey?"

Luna attempted to hide her inner thoughts with a smile as she replied, "Good afternoon Gimlet. Yes, I'm ready to go."

"Well, if you're certain that you want to go on this trip, then the chariot is waiting for us."

The two ponies took their places on the chariot, and the lead pegasus whistled to the others, signaling the team to take off. Gimlet must have seen through Luna's façade. They were both silent through the short trip, but Gimlet cast several worried glances Luna's way.

The day was bright, and Luna had to admit, beautiful. It was a different beauty from the dark and muted night, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

As the chariot began to descend toward the picturesque village of Ponyville, Luna began to feel anxious. She had been looking forward to seeing Twilight again, enough to hide the truth from Celestia, but was Twilight going to be happy to see her? And what about Twilight's friends, the other elements of harmony, who had so valiantly fought against Nightmare Moon and had freed her. What if they held her responsible for Nightmare Moon's actions? What if they hated her? The only thing that could be worse than Twilight's friends disliking her, would be if the purple unicorn did as well.

Luna's present nervousness and the guilt from earlier must have been apparent. Gimlet looked concerned as she quietly asked, "Princess, are you alright? Are you sure that you want to go through with this trip? We can turn back if you want to."

Luna put on a brave smile for her assistant. "I'm fine, thank you. I'm just feeling a bit unwell from being up so early. It's refreshing to leave the palace every once in a while, and I've been looking forward to this trip for quite some time."

"Well, if you're certain ..." Gimlet shuffled a bit anxiously. "If you like, I could take up lodgings nearby and keep you company while you're in Ponyville," she hurriedly suggested.

"Thank you. I mean no offense, but I think it will be more of a vacation if I didn't have any reminders of Canterlot with me."

"Oh. Of course."

Gimlet looked dejected, and Luna was worried that she had hurt the other pony's feelings, but didn't have enough time to properly berate herself before the chariot's wheels contacted the ground. The pegasi pulling them came to a brisk stop in the wide thoroughfare in front of a large tree which

had not only a door in its trunk, but several windows amongst its leaves as well. From Twilight's detailed letters, it was obviously her home.

"Thank you very much for transporting us," Luna said to the pegasi as she hopped down from the chariot. While she was levitating her small traveling bag that had been prepared for her from the chariot, Gimlet leaned down with an earnest expression.

"If you're sure that you want to go through with this, Princess Luna, remember that I'm just a note away. Feel free to contact me day or night, and I'll rush over and take you back to Canterlot in no time at all."

"Thank you for being so concerned, Gimlet, but I'll be fine," she hoped.

Gimlet regarded her with an unconvinced expression as the pegasi took off. As the chariot dwindled into the distance, Gimlet continued to watch her until the very last.

Luna looked around her and found that her arrival had drawn some attention. Several ponies had paused in their daily activities to gawk at her. They obviously knew who she was, as soon as she looked in their direction; they would bow shallowly before returning to their business. Luna's apprehension on how her subjects would feel toward her after the return of Nightmare Moon welled up within her. True, none of them were acquiring either pitchforks or torches, nor were they assembling into a mob, but they weren't tripping over themselves to fawn over her as they seemed to do for Celestia. Although that might not necessarily be a bad thing.

Deciding that at the moment there was only one pony's opinion that mattered to her; Luna picked up her bag with her mouth and approached the tree house. She rapped on the door with her hoof. Several seconds passed, and Luna was on the point of repeating her knocking, when Twilight Sparkle, with a hint of annoyance, called out from the other side of the door, "Yes, Pinkie, I'll bring her over as soon as she comes, but right now I'm trying to clean up for..." Twilight's voice had grown louder as she approached the door, and when she jerked it open, she loudly exclaimed "Princess Luna!" in a completely different tone of voice.

Twilight smiled broadly though perhaps a bit woodenly, and a few hairs from her mane suddenly leapt away from the others at an awkward angle. "You're early."

Luna gently set down her bag and asked, "I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

"Oh no, no, no, I was just sprucing the place up a bit. I love to spruce." Twilight laughed nervously, then seemed to recollect her manners. She stepped aside and eagerly said, "Please come in, Princess Luna."

Realizing that Twilight was as nervous, if not more so than she, Luna smiled at her reassuringly before picking up her bag and entering the tree. She found herself in a spacious but warm and welcoming room. She placed her bag on a conveniently placed table as she contemplated the massive bookshelves which stretched high overhead. Unlike the ones at the Canterlot library, these didn't seem imposing, but were somehow welcoming. Scattered amongst the shelves and tables were various knickknacks, statues, and busts.

"The bedroom is up here," Twilight called to Luna. She was standing at the bottom of a staircase Luna had overlooked in her initial survey of the room. Luna picked her bag back up and followed Twilight up the stairs and into a room which, if possible, seemed even more crammed full of books than the library below. Though it still managed to have a lived in feel thanks to the many personal effects scattered around, such as the saddlebags Luna recognized from Twilight's trip to Canterlot, as well as several unbound scrolls haphazardly perched atop a writing desk, and several books scattered across the floor open to seemingly random pages.

"I brought out a guest bed for you," Twilight said, pointing with her nose toward an alcove above them. "But if you'd like, I'm sure we can find someplace more comfortable for you to stay. My friend Rainbow Dash could bring over a cloud. I hear that they are very comfortable to sleep on. In fact, I'll go get her right now."

"I'm sure your guest bed will be fine," Luna reassured the obviously nervous unicorn before she could gallop out of the room. "Besides which, I never really developed the knack for sleeping on clouds. Rollover once too often in your sleep and you're in for a rude awakening."

Twilight seemed to calm down a bit, although there was still a slight edge to her smile as she replied, "Heh, yeah. I can see how that would happen."

Deciding to stretch some of her underused muscles, Luna flew up to the alcove Twilight had pointed out earlier and deposited her bag on the simpler, more temporary appearing of the two beds. Even here, where most ponies would keep their most personal of possessions, there were even more shelves of books. Luna smiled to herself; she doubted that there had ever been very many ponies who enjoyed reading quite as much as Twilight did. The small smile still on her face, Luna swooped down and rejoined her host.

"What's so funny?" Twilight asked.

"Oh nothing. I was just admiring the amount of literature you have here."

"Well, it's not as extensive as the libraries at Canterlot, but I like to think that the Ponyville collection covers all areas of pony interest, and rivals any other library in Equestria." Her tone turned from prideful to resentful as she added, "Although not too many ponies here take advantage of that fact."

Luna thought that she held in her laughter well at Twilight's expression of displeasure over the other ponies' slight to her books. "Oh, I'm sure that they take pride in the fact that their library is so extensive. And I'm sure they're grateful to have a pony so dedicated to their library. But I'm afraid most ponies simply don't have the same appreciation for books you do, Twilight. Most ponies tend to only read books when they need to learn something new, and unfortunately few ponies enjoy learning for the sake of learning."

"But you like books too, don't you, Princess Luna?"

"Yes, of course. I enjoy novels and poetry, as well as books and scrolls on Equestrian history and science. But I fear I lack the appreciation you have for the more ... dry reference books. I was reading a treatise on the reasoning behind the modern weather schedule, and I'm afraid that I've been unable to get far into it. Average dew point this, and seasonal versus cyclical precipitation that."

"Oh, you're reading Sazerac's treatise aren't you? I have a wonderful primer on the history of weather patterns by Lime Rickey which does a much better job of explaining the evolution of today's weather schedule than Sazerac." Twilight leapt into action and barreled down the stairs to the

library proper. Surprised by Twilight's sudden exuberance, Luna hurriedly flew after her.

"It's called 'A short history of weather,' and does an excellent job of not only covering the history of weather, but the history of Cloudsdale as well. It really goes in-depth about how modern weather is a product of post neo-formist ideas which advocated the non-ironic inclusion of the forms of weather patterns along with their function."

Not really following exactly what Twilight was saying, Luna sat and watched as the excited unicorn began pulling books off the shelves with her magic.

"Of course this was fully supported by the Rainbow Party and, oh that's not it, the Clear Sky Coalition, that's not it either." She was picking up and setting down books almost faster than Luna could follow, becoming ever more frustrated. "And this isn't it either. Why can't I ever find anything? Spike!"

Twilight slowed her perusal of the books as she waited for a reply. Several seconds of silence later and she quietly murmured to herself, "Oh yeah, I sent Spike to help Pinkie over at..." Suddenly all the books which had been floating through the air, crashed to the ground and Twilight twirled around to face Luna with a panicked expression. "Ohmigosh, I forgot. Pinkie Pie is holding a party in your honor, Princess Luna, and I promised to bring you as soon as you arrived."

"A party?" Luna's delight at seeing Twilight so enthused quickly faded, leaving only apprehension in its wake. Luna wasn't much of a party pony, she had always felt out of place at the celebrations held in Canterlot, with nopony she knew there, and nothing for her to discuss with the strange ponies who were. "I'm not sure I brought anything appropriate to wear for a party," Luna demurred.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Pinkie's parties are always laid back, it doesn't matter what you wear, or bring, just as long as you show up."

"But still, I'm afraid that I'm still not that very good at social interaction yet. I'd hate to offend any of your friends at the party."

"Don't worry about that, the only way you could offend any of my friends is by not coming. Or by loudly proclaiming that you are the greatest and most

powerful pony ever. And I know what you mean about not being ready to interact with other ponies well. I mean I read a ton of books about interpony communication, and I had thought that I was fairly proficient in it. But when I came to Ponyville, I learned all sorts of things the books had never mentioned. In fact I've become quite the social butterfly if I do say so myself. So there's nothing for you to be worried about, all the ponies here are really friendly."

"I'm sure they are, but..."

Twilight interrupted her, "Please come, Princess Luna. It would mean so much to Pinkie, and to me."

How could anypony resist a face like that? "Alright, Twilight, if it means so much to you, I'll go."

"Thank you so much." Twilight leaned in and surprised Luna with a quick hug before stating, "We should probably go now. I promised Pinkie to bring you as soon as you arrived, and she's probably heard that you landed in Ponyville by now. Sometimes she gets a little worried if you don't show up at her parties when you promise to."

"Well then, we'd better go, I suppose," Luna said dazedly, still stunned by Twilight's abrupt contact.

Seemingly unconcerned with the mess of books littering the floor, Twilight led the way out of the library and down the nearly empty street. Apparently the citizens of Ponyville were already becoming used to Luna's presence. The few they passed gave her respectful bows, but otherwise minded their business and didn't gawk at her. They arrived at a rather whimsically decorated building in the shape of a multitude of confections. Without hesitation, Twilight entered through the building's double doors, and after a moment's pause to take a deep breath, Luna followed her.

Immediately Luna knew she wasn't in Canterlot anymore. Instead of ponies spread out across a vast space, quietly conversing with one another in small groups, unimpeded by the soft strains of chamber music floating from the orchestra, it seemed as if everypony in Ponyville had been crammed into a single room. The music was loud, but not obnoxiously so, and very upbeat. Luna could see several ponies dancing to it, using a style quite strange to her. Several more were bobbing their heads in time to the

rhythm of the lower notes. Instead of waiters constantly moving around the room with trays of tasteless hors d'oeuvres, or equally banal cider, it seemed as if every flat surface had been covered with a profusion of food and drinks.

Luna had only a few seconds to take all this in before a loud and boisterous voice called out, "Twilight, Princess Luna, welcome to the Parrr-tay!" A pink earth pony, who Luna remembered as the element of laughter, leapt out from the crowd and bounced over to them.

"Hey Pinkie," Twilight called out jocularly.

"Hello," Luna echoed.

"I'm so glad you two could make it to the party," Pinkie exclaimed while pulling Twilight and Luna into a group hug, the first that Luna had been in since ... ever. "Especially you, Princess Lunie. I mean you're the guest of honor and everything, and how weird would a party be if the guest of honor didn't show up? But then again, maybe that would be fun too. We could have a surprise party where there reason was so big a surprise that nopony would know why they were partying. We should totally try that next time! But look, we got you a banner and everything this time!"

The pink hoof fondly wrapped around Luna's neck pointed up to where a large banner read, "Welcome Princess Luna." Although the a in Luna was written in different hoofwriting on a smaller piece of white cloth which had been tacked on the end of the banner which was light blue. Twilight put her head on her hoof and muttered something that sounded a lot like, "not again."

"That's a ... lovely banner. Thank you."

"I know, isn't it awesome? Carrot Top and Berry Punch worked super duper hard on it. Oh! You know what we should totally do? Games! Come on, we were just about to play pin the tail on the dragon."

Pinkie Pie eagerly pulled Luna deeper into the crowded party, giving up her hold on Twilight who seemed to be trying to hide her face after seeing the banner for Luna. As they passed several ponies, Luna was pleasantly surprised that they weren't prostrating themselves before her. Instead of the rigid and sterile politeness of Canterlot, the ponies here were all

enjoying themselves. Those that did pay attention to Luna merely smiled and nodded politely toward her. Instead of placing her on a pedestal, separated from ponykind, the citizens of Ponyville seemed to be welcoming her not as a princess, but as just another pony. Luna felt her chest tighten, and for some reason tears threatened to well behind her eyes.

"Here we go," declared Pinkie as she stopped in a less densely packed area of the party. "Time to play pin the tail on the dragon!"

"Aw, Pinkie, I told you I never wanted to play that again," complained a small purple dragon who was standing on a nearby table, next to a large bowl of punch. "My scales aren't thick everywhere," he commented while rubbing his flank.

"Okie dokie then. We can just play regular pin the tail on the pony then. Now, where did I put the board for that?" Pinkie asked with a hoof tapping her chin in thought. Abruptly she dropped down, low to the ground, and began to sniff the floor like a dog, moving off through the crowd. Luna could track her progress across the room by the expressions and jumps of startled ponies.

"You'll have to pardon Pinkie Pie, she's a bit... eccentric," Twilight said as she joined them.

"Twilight, there you are," the small dragon said. "Rarity told me to get her some punch, but only if it was the kind that didn't stain." He eyed the bowl of dark purple liquid critically before turning back to Twilight. "Do you think this is stain resistant punch?"

"Uh, probably not. But more importantly, Princess Luna, this is Spike, my assistant. Spike, this is Princess Luna."

"Oh!" Spike dropped into a courteous bow. "It is an honor to formally meet you, Your Majesty."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well."

Spike straightened up and looked around the crowded room. "There has to be some non-staining punch somewhere here, I'm going to go find it."

"Good luck with that, just remember not to stay up too late," Twilight said. As the small dragon hopped off the table and disappeared into a forest of pony legs, Twilight scanned the room until she saw a pony she recognized. "Look, there's Applejack, I'll introduce you."

Twilight led Luna over near the small stage where a white unicorn was producing the energetic music, toward a familiar blond pony who seemed uncomfortable despite her immaculately combed mane.

"Hey Applejack," Twilight called out loudly to be heard over the louder music.

The pony, Applejack, turned their way, and upon seeing Luna, seemed to become even more nervous. "Princess Luna, this is Applejack, Applejack, Princess Luna."

As Twilight was introducing them, Applejack fell into a low and slightly awkward bow.

"Please, you don't have to bow," pleaded Luna as she hastily looked around, hoping nopony was paying attention to them. "We're all friends here. At least, I'd like to be your friend." Having seen the new custom of equals greeting one another, Luna hesitantly put forward her hoof. Applejack looked up, first at Luna's outstretched hoof, then at the princess' uncertain expression, and broke into a wide grin. She leapt up off the floor and clasped Luna's hoof with both of hers and began to vigorously pump it.

"Well then howdy, Miss Luna. I'm Applejack, of the Apple family, of Sweet Apple Acres. Maybe you've heard of us. We're famous for having the tastiest apples you ever did eat."

"Oh, yes," Luna replied politely. Honestly she had little idea where any of the food prepared for her originated from. She would have to ask when she returned to Canterlot. Applejack finally decided to let go of Luna's hoof, for which the princess was grateful. Nopony had ever greeted her so enthusiastically, and Luna could feel her shoulder pop as she put her hoof back down.

"Say," said Applejack in a more serious tone, closing one eye to better examine Luna. "You're not one of those fancy ponies who think eatin apples and apple treats is below them are ya?"

"Oh no, I quite enjoy apples. Although I'm not certain I've had these 'apple treats.'"

Applejack smiled enthusiastically. "Well good, I'm glad somepony from Canterlot has a bit of sense. You just come on over to Sweet Apple Acres and we'll show ya what apples can do. We've got so many apples and apple accessories, we'll be sure to find somethin you like. Then maybe when you go back to Canterlot you can tell your friends just how great our apples are, and we could open up a new Apple branch in Canterlot."

Twilight spoke up, sounding outraged. "Applejack, are you trying to get Princess Luna to advertise for you?"

"Aw, it ain't like that."

"It's alright, Twilight," Luna interjected, attempting to calm things down. She'd hate to be the cause for an argument between friends. She turned to Applejack. "I'd love to sample your apples, and if they're as wonderful as you make them sound, I'll be sure to praise them wherever I go. Although I'm afraid you've overestimated my influence with other ponies."

Applejack appeared a little ashamed of her earlier entrepreneurial spirit as she replied, "Oh, Miss Luna, that's alright. We'd love to have you over and sample our apples, and so long as you're happy, the Apple family is happy, even if we satisfy just one extra pony."

Luna was about to reply to Applejack's obviously heartfelt sentiment, when they were interrupted by a voice from above.

"Hey Applejack, Twilight, you guys seen Pinkie? She was ..." A blue pegasus who had landed near Applejack trailed off as she noticed Luna. "Hey, you're Nightmare Moon right? Name's Rainbow Dash. You might not have caught it last time, but I bet you remember my awesome moves, right?"

Luna lowered her head as shame and regret welled up within her.

"Rainbow Dash!"

"What? She was Nightmare Moon right?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"It's alright, Twilight." Luna looked toward Rainbow Dash. "Yes, I was Nightmare Moon, but I'm afraid that I can't remember very much before you and Twilight defeated me and returned me to the form you see now. I hope I didn't harm you while I was Nightmare Moon, and if I did, you have my sincerest apologies."

Rainbow Dash nonchalantly dismissed Luna's apology with a wave of her hoof. "Nah, don't worry about it, all water under the bridge."

An exuberant voice rang out over the din of the party. "Found it!"

Luna and the others looked up to find Pinkie Pie somehow hanging upside down from the ceiling, tugging at the small banner with the a on it. She pulled it from the nails holding it up and turned it around to reveal a drawing of a tailless pony on the back. Unfortunately, without it acting as an anchor, the rest of the banner welcoming Luna began to fall, draping itself over several ponies. Pinkie lost her adhesion to the ceiling and happily screamed out, "Pony pile!" as she fell into the confused crowd below.

Twilight turned to Luna with a stiff and pained smile. "How about we go meet my other friends? I'm sure they're someplace much quieter."

"Yeah, you guys do that," Rainbow Dash said loudly. "I'm going to see what craziness Pinkie's causing, it looks like fun." She zipped off toward the thickest part of the party.

Applejack sighed and her hair seemed to become frazzled as she commented, "I guess I ought to go and make sure they don't get into too much trouble. Things tend to get out of hoof when Pinkie and Rainbow Dash get involved."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," Luna called out as the earth pony began making her way toward where a very excited and familiar voice was crying out, "Woohoo!" Luna turned to Twilight. "Perhaps we should go and assist them as well. I'd hate for anypony to be hurt, especially at a celebration in my honor."

"I'm sure Rainbow Dash and Applejack have things under control." There was a loud explosion from the direction Pinkie had last been seen, and the

air was filled with confetti. Twilight ignored the spectacle though as she almost forcefully began nudging Luna in the opposite direction with her head. "Besides, there're other ponies I'd like you to meet, and I'm certain they're someplace far away from the excitement, and crowds, and loud noises, and stains."

Luna began walking in the direction Twilight wanted her to go in, leaving the chaotic epicenter of the party behind. Eventually they found themselves in a pleasant kitchen attached to the room the rest of the party was happening in. It was much quieter, and there were few ponies. In fact, there were only two, a white unicorn in a fanciful dress, and a Yellow pegasus who was speaking animatedly to the unicorn across the short counter they were standing at.

"There you are, Rarity, Fluttershy, I'd like you to meet Princess Luna," Twilight called out as they approached.

The white unicorn positively beamed as she turned to meet them. "Why hello, Princess Luna, I am Rarity, the local clothing designer and seamstress." She dipped into a shallow, but respectful bow, which was quick enough not to embarrass Luna.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Rarity. Twilight Sparkle has told me so much about you, and how much effort you put into your creations. Is that dress you're wearing one of your designs?"

"Oh this old thing? Why yes. Although I must admit it was something I just threw together. It does look rather fetching if I do say so myself."

"Yes, it's quite beautiful."

"Thank you. Perhaps you could come by my little store, the Carousel Boutique, during your stay and I can show you a few of my other designs."

"Certainly, that sounds wonderful." Luna looked for the other pony who had been with Rarity and found her hiding behind the voluminous hem of Rarity's dress. And you're Fluttershy, I believe, correct? It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance as well."

Rarity respectfully moved away to clear the space between Luna and Fluttershy, revealing that the yellow pegasus' mane had draped over her

face, leaving only a narrow slit through which one of her large cyan eyes cut between Luna and the floor.

"You'll have to forgive Fluttershy, she's a bit ... well, shy sometimes," Twilight explained to Luna.

Rarity kindly turned to her friend. "Come now, Fluttershy, there's no reason to be afraid, darling. Princess Luna is a friend of Twilight's. She's not some stranger, there's no need to be so aloof."

Fluttershy looked at Rarity, then to Luna, and back at the floor. She said something, but it was said so softly that Luna couldn't make it out over the background noise of the party in the other room.

"I'm sorry, dear, didn't quite catch that," Rarity said kindly.

Fluttershy hung her head lower, narrowing the slit in her mane further, and might have said something else, but Luna couldn't be certain. However, she was certain that she was causing the other pony quite a bit of distress, so before Rarity could try to coax her friend into speaking again, she quickly interjected, "Well, it was quite nice to meet both of you, and I look forward to furthering our acquaintance during my stay." She nodded in the ponies' direction, then turned to Twilight. "Perhaps it's time to avail ourselves of the refreshments?" she suggested.

Twilight planted her hoof over her face. "Refreshments, right, chapter three. How could I forget?" She quickly composed herself. "Please follow me, Princess."

They plunged once more into the mass of ponies at the party, making their way through the tightly packed crowd to a table laden with several sweets as well as a large punch bowl with a light pink and slightly frothy liquid. Twilight served them both a glass of punch, and Luna found the beverage to delightfully tickle her nose as she sipped at it. Soon she was on her second cup, and then her third.

The rest of the party however was something of a blur to Luna. She remembered feeling like the bubbles from the punch had gone to her head, making it feel rather light. She also remembered the music beginning to sound like something she could move to, no, something she had to move to. There had been a crush of bodies on the dance floor as Luna tried to

match the movements of the other ponies, but she only really remembered Twilight's as they had danced close to one another. She could also remember them holding each other and laughing uproariously at something, although for the life of her she couldn't remember what.

Eventually though, the party wound down and Luna found herself walking through the deserted streets of Ponyville leaning against Twilight Sparkle. The cool night air a pleasant contrast with her heated body.

"I'm sorry about my friends," Twilight apologized while balancing a sleeping Spike on her back. "They're actually quite nice ponies."

"I thought they were charming," Luna reassured her friend. For some reason she seemed to be having a tiny bit of difficulty maintaining her balance. "It's refreshing to meet some normal ponies for a change."

"Well, I wouldn't say that they're normal exactly ..."

"I wouldn't know," Luna declared hotly. "I really wouldn't know what normal ponies act like, because I haven't met a single one since I returned from the moon." Her tone quickly became sober. "I'm surrounded by guards who seem to expect me to go on an Equestria destroying rampage at any moment, and attendants who walk on eggshells in order to not upset me. The only pony who doesn't treat me like I could become Nightmare Moon at the drop of a hat is Celestia, and even she ..." Luna's voice thickened. "Sometimes, I can see it in her eyes, like she's scared. Not of me, but of herself I think. She still isn't sure why I transformed into Nightmare Moon, I'm not even sure. But she surrounds me with ponies all the time, so that I won't be lonely. But somehow, I feel more alone now than I did before being banished."

Luna's mood was swaying almost as much as the nearby buildings were, from frustrated anger to introspective sorrow. But her drunken reflections were interrupted by Twilight quietly asking, "Do you still feel lonely? Even with me?"

Luna steadied herself and met Twilight's heartbreakingly beseeching face, and had to restrain herself from collapsing on the unicorn's neck and sobbing. Instead she put as much sincerity in her voice as she could, and answered, "No. When I'm with you, I feel ... wonderful. I'm happy and grateful that you're my friend."

Twilight smiled sappily in a way Luna found quite endearing. Just as Luna was beginning to lose herself in the depths of Twilight's violet eyes, the unicorn hurriedly turned away and loudly announced, "We're here." Her horn glowed as she opened the door to the tree house that had lurched out of the darkness. Luna followed her inside, and a few uncoordinated minutes later, the two ponies had made it up the perilous stairs leading to Twilight's bedroom.

Twilight tucked Spike into his basket that she had moved to the lower floor of the room while Luna prepared herself for bed. She slipped off her crown and hoof bracers, as well as her chest piece, carefully placing them on an empty shelf nearby. Lacking her royal accoutrements, Luna slipped in-between the sheets of the guest bed. A short while later and Twilight extinguished the lights and settled into her own bed, illuminated by the now bright moonlight pouring in from the nearby window. Luna didn't remember raising the moon, perhaps Celestia had taken charge of it. Although it was entirely possible that she had performed her duty as usual. There was a lot about that night she didn't entirely remember.

It was late night, early morning actually, and still quite early for Luna to go to bed, despite her early awakening. She tried to drift off to sleep, first facing one direction, and then flipping over to face the other. A few moments later and she tried lying on her back, shortly before attempting to find comfort on her stomach. However, all her attempts to find a position to sleep in were in vain. It seemed that no matter which one she tried, the bed was just plain uncomfortable. She didn't even have the aid of being tired to alleviate the uncomfortableness of the stiff mattress and painfully protruding springs of the bed.

"Princess Luna, are you alright?" Twilight's voice called through the darkness, causing Luna to pause mid-turn. She had though her host was already asleep. Otherwise she would have been sure to keep her thrashing around respectfully quiet.

"Sorry for keeping you up, Twilight. I'm just trying to find a comfortable position to rest in."

Luna could see Twilight sitting up in her bed and peering into the dark in her direction.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing, Princess. I forgot you weren't used to beds, and I know that mine is nowhere near as well made and comfortable as the ones in the palace. I should have remembered that and found you a better place to sleep during your stay."

"Don't fret so much over it; I've slept in far less comfortable places I assure you. Although I usually had Celestia with me then, whenever I slept wither her, I could always manage to sleep easily, no matter what I was sleeping on."

In a voice barely louder than a whisper, Twilight suggested, "Well, I might not be Princess Celestia, but maybe you'd feel more comfortable if you slept with me. You know, like a sleepover."

Luna tried not to sound too eager as she replied, "Are you sure? I'd hate to impose any further on your generosity."

"It wouldn't be any trouble at all."

Luna didn't need any further invitation. She slipped out of her bed and into Twilight's. Truthfully, it didn't feel any softer, but Twilight's warmth and presence seemed to envelop Luna, even though she made certain to lie with her back to the other pony. There wouldn't be any awkward cuddling this time.

"Good night, Twilight, and thank you."

"You're welcome. Good night, Princess Luna."

The room was silent save for the gentle breathing of two ponies which quickly settled into a slow, deep, and synchronized rhythm.

Sometime later, Luna almost returned to full consciousness as she felt a familiar pressure. She didn't bother to get up though as she reflexively lowered the moon to make way for the sun. Her duty done, Luna snuggled closer to the soft source of warmth that she was entwined with. Her pillow murmured softly but settled down. Luna returned to her deep and restful sleep.

Hours later, and Celestia's sun ruthlessly shone upon Luna's face, causing her to groan as consciousness was thrust upon her. She cracked open her

eyes to find a brilliantly blue sky filling the window a few feet away. Knowing that further sleep was futile, Luna stretched her hind legs, unkinking her muscles, while squeezing the fluffy purple pillow she was holding tightly. Aside from the pillow, Luna was alone in the bed. She rolled off of it, and spotted a mirror nearby. She trotted over to it, once again jealous of Celestia's eternally perfect hair. After so much tossing and turning the previous night, Luna's mane was sticking out in all directions and her tail was a tangle of knots.

Picking up a nearby brush with her magic, Luna spent the next several minutes trying to look presentable. Just as she was finishing, a delicious aroma wafted up the stairs, causing her stomach to remind her that it was quite empty.

She navigated down the stairs and followed the lovely scent through a small door squeezed in-between two bookcases, and into the kitchen. There Luna found Twilight Sparkle bent over a book with a partially eaten muffin floating nearby.

"Good morning," Luna called out to announce her presence.

Twilight looked up, startled, with a blush quickly spreading across her cheeks for some reason. She hastily lifted her book up to cover her face. "Good morning, Princess Luna. I hope it's not too early for you."

"It's several hours before the time I normally wake, but I feel very well rested nonetheless. Besides which, what kind of visit would it be if I spent all my time sleeping while you were awake, and were awake while you were asleep?"

"That's true. By the way, I picked up some muffins for breakfast this morning. They're over on the counter if you'd like one. I'm afraid that I don't have very much other food. I'm not that great a cook, so I eat out a lot."

"A muffin would be wonderful." Luna walked to the nearby counter where she found a plate with several large and puffy muffins studded with voluptuous blueberries. She selected one and returned to the table, where Twilight was reading her book with dogged determination. Luna demurely sampled her muffin and found it to be delectable.

"What is it that you're reading, Twilight?"

"Diotima's meditations on the nature of love. It's really quite fascinating. She's separated love into four distinct types, the love we call affection, or fondness, the love that's selfless or charitable, the love we have for our family and close friends, and of course the intimate or romantic love."

Luna enjoyed watching Twilight as she spoke. When she was interested in the subject, her eyes shone brightly and her face became animated as she lost herself in explaining the latest fact she had learned. It was obvious she enjoyed understanding new concepts, and her unabashed and innocent enthusiasm resonated somewhere deep in Luna, and she found herself warmly smiling in response.

"It sounds like a fascinating subject. Have you been studying it long?"

"Oh no, I just felt like reading up on it recently."

"And why the sudden interest in love?"

Twilight hid behind her book once more before replying, "No reason really. I just had the urge to look into it."

Before Luna could inquire any further, they were interrupted by the front door slamming shut loudly.

"Hey, Twilight, I'm back," Spike called out from the other room. He entered the kitchen carrying a large paper bag. "I got that tea you wanted. Oh, hello, Princess. I like your new look."

New look? Luna was certain she had brushed her mane and tail into the same style she had always worn them.

"Good morning, Spike. Thank you for running an errand for me so early. Now could you do one more tiny favor for me and prepare the tea?"

"Aw, but Twilight, I have some important stuff to do. You know, guy stuff. As in not girly tea stuff."

"Please, Spike, no pony can brew tea like you."

Twilight leveled a pleading look at Spike, and under its influence, Spike threw up his claws and hotly replied, "Fine. I'll make your tea, but you're just using me because I can breathe fire."

"And because you're my number one assistant," Twilight cheerfully called after Spike as he traveled deeper into the kitchen. She turned back to Luna and closely scrutinized her. Luna was beginning to feel extremely self-conscious when Twilight finally decided, "He's right, your new look does look good."

"What new look?"

"You know, the regular pony look. Well, as regular as a pony with both wings and a horn can look. Without your crown and other royal vestments, it's easier to focus on your face and your beautiful hair."

Luna knew there had been something she had forgotten to do that morning. But perhaps that hadn't been a bad thing if Twilight's expression was any indication.

"Do you really think so?"

"Oh yes, you look wonderful."

Luna blushed at Twilight's compliment and looked away from the other pony bashfully. She cleared her throat and tried to change the topic.

"So, what do you have planned for today?"

"I was thinking that it would be nice to visit Sweet Apple Acres and for you to meet the rest of the Apple family. They were the first friends I found when I first came to Ponyville, and they're all very nice ponies."

As the energizing aroma of brewing tea filled the room, Luna smiled and replied, "That sounds wonderful. I'd love to get to know Applejack better, and I'm sure it would be enjoyable to meet the rest of her family."

"Good, then after lunch, er, breakfast, we'll head over and I'll introduce you to them."

Chapter 2-2

Luna had helped clean the few dishes they had dirtied while eating lunch. Although perhaps helped was too strong a word. She had levitated them over to the sink, where she had watched Twilight quickly clean the two cups and single plate, leaving the teapot still mostly full to refill the cup that Spike was sipping from, despite his earlier declaration that the drink was unmanly.

Before they left Spike to look after the library, Luna had debated with herself whether to put on her crown and other royal accessories. But with Twilight's compliment fresh in her mind, and taking into account that she was on vacation after all, Luna decided to go out unadorned. Energized by the caffeine from the tea, and her slightly scandalous decision, Luna soon found herself walking alongside Twilight Sparkle as they left Ponyville.

The day was idyllic as the two ponies crossed a small bridge demarking the boundary of Ponyville. Celestia's sun was just past the midway point of its slow arch, and the weather pegasi had cleared the sky of any hint of clouds threatening to obscure the azure sky overhead.

"You're not feeling too tired from waking up so early, are you, Princess Luna?" Twilight asked her a bit anxiously.

Luna quickly reassured her, "Oh no, I feel refreshed actually, especially after that wonderfully brewed tea. It was so mild that it hardly needed any sugar at all."

"Spike does know how to brew an excellent pot of tea, despite his grumbling. Back when we lived in Canterlot, I found that most ponies preferred a stronger, bitterer blend, which I never really liked." Twilight screwed up her face in remembered disgust. "But I needed the caffeine for all the late night study sessions I had, so I found a milder blend. I also researched a gentler brewing method that I taught Spike so he could make tea for me and I wouldn't have to take a break from reading."

Luna smiled to herself in amusement at the picture Twilight painted. Truly Spike must have had a hard time living with Twilight. "I'll be sure to give my

compliments to Spike when we return. And you'll have to divulge your secret blend when I have something to write the recipe down with."

"It would be my pleasure, Princess Luna. I actually found it in a text on early pony alchemy. Apparently a pony discovered it while searching for the secret to eternal life."

Twilight chuckled a bit at the thought of the many failures of the ponies who had sought out a lifespan comparable to the immortal princesses. There were a few moments of silence as they walked along the well kept road companionably.

The silence was broken by Luna as she looked around awkwardly for a moment before turning to Twilight with an earnest expression and a hesitantly uncertain voice. "Twilight, if you don't mind, do you think that you could call me Luna? Everypony in Canterlot addresses me as princess, and I just don't feel right with my friend calling me by my title, as if they were just any other pony."

Twilight seemed a little surprised by her request, but quickly replied, "If you're sure you want me to..." Luna smiled at her encouragingly. "I'd be happy to call you Luna." She glanced around, as if to check and see if anypony had heard her being so familiar with royalty, or perhaps to make sure that she wasn't about to be struck down by divine lightning.

"Thank you, Twilight. Sometimes it feels like I'm placed on a pedestal by my title, and I don't want there to be a distance like that between us," Luna admitted.

Twilight laughed a little before kindly replying, "To be honest, I think it's the fact that you control the moon that makes most ponies respect you. I mean, it's not everypony who can say they have even a fraction of the power you have in a single hoof. You're probably one of the most powerful creatures in all Equestria, and I think that ponies who don't know you very well are probably a bit intimidated by that."

Luna bowed her head and concentrated on the tightly packed dirt of the road they were following as she quietly replied, "Just because I have so much power doesn't mean I'm better than anypony. I make mistakes, just like everypony else." She half-heartedly and self-mockingly chuckled. "When I do make a mistake though, it's often several magnitudes larger

than most pony's. " She sighed deeply. "Celestia is revered, as she should be, not simply because she's the most powerful pony ever, but because she's the wisest. Sometimes I feel that the ponies of Equestria respect me only because I'm her sister."

Luna was knocked, quite literally, out of her quickly developing funk by Twilight leaning over and bumping her. Surprised, Luna looked up to find Twilight regarding her with a serious but compassionate expression.

"That's not true. You're more than just Princess Celestia's sister. You're Luna, the princess who gave us the moon and the stars. It's true that the day is important; it gives us light and allows us to work and grow crops. But the night is just as important. It gives us time to rest and dream. And like the poet Orange Tundra once said, 'What value are these days I trudge through without the dreams I gallop towards?' The gifts you've given us are just as important as Princess Celestia's, and you're important not because of Princess Celestia, but because you're Luna," Twilight hotly declared.

Luna blushed at the intensity in Twilight's eyes and voice, and stared back down at the ground, not wanting Twilight to see just how happy her words had made her feel, nor how guilty. Every time Twilight spoke of Celestia, Luna felt an electric jolt pass through her. She could all too easily remember her sister's face, pensive, morose, and perhaps a bit resigned, as she had spoken of Twilight Sparkle and her new friendship with Luna.

She hadn't said anything explicitly about how her sister's friendship had come at the cost of Celestia's own relationship with Twilight, but she didn't have to. Her relationship with the special unicorn had waned and Luna's had waxed. Luna could picture her sister trapped in a melancholy routine of duties, seeing to the needs of the kingdom and suffering the insipidness of her courtiers while languishing in an ennui that could be swept away with a single sentence from Luna.

What was it that kept her silent then? If she truly loved her sister she should be willing to do anything to relieve her suffering. And yet ...

Luna glanced back toward Twilight Sparkle and found her avoiding eye contact, cheeks slightly reddened, perhaps from the emotion behind the heartfelt sentiment she had revealed a few moments ago. Luna smiled, albeit somewhat sadly. Twilight was sometimes just too cute for words. Silently Luna asked for Celestia's forgiveness and promised to reveal the

truth to her sister after her return to Canterlot. At least, after she'd had the taste of having a friend for a little while. With her self-promised pledge, Luna attempted to banish the thoughts of Celestia from her mind, for at least for the moment.

"So, that was some party last night, huh?" Twilight awkwardly asked, attempting to break the even more awkward silence that had fallen upon them.

"Oh yes," Luna replied reflexively. However she quickly warmed to the subject. "It was a delightful celebration. Even more enjoyable than the festivities I've attended in Canterlot, in my opinion. I must admit that I had a few trepidations at first, but I'm glad you convinced me to go, Twilight."

"I'm happy you enjoyed it." Twilight's reply was tinted with a touch of relief. "I was worried that it would be a bit ... simple compared to what you're used to."

Luna's reply was rueful. "While it wasn't as formal as the parties in Canterlot, it wasn't as boring either."

"I hope that my friends didn't upset you last night. Rainbow Dash is a bit brash sometimes, and Applejack works hard growing her apples, so she's a bit enthusiastic about everypony liking them."

"I found them all quite charming, really," Luna reassured her friend. "Though, I'm afraid that I scared poor Fluttershy. I hope I didn't ruin her evening."

"I don't think it was you, Luna. It's just that it's a little, um, difficult for Fluttershy to meet new ponies. I'm sure that once she gets to know you as well as I do, you two will be the best of friends!"

"I hope so," admitted Luna. "I'm finding that having friends is nice."

The two ponies had arrived at a fork in the road, with a narrower path branching off from the road they were following. Twilight led Luna down the new path and through a stand of trees standing atop a hill. As they cleared the trees and stood looking down into the valley below, Luna had to admit that she was impressed by the sheer size of the farm spread out before them.

Evenly spaced apple trees, expertly plowed furrows, and well tended fields covered the valley, as well as the rolling hills in the distance, stretching out in all directions as far as the eye could see. The path they were on led down through a simple white fence and up to a picturesque barn.

Twilight had paused alongside Luna who had stopped to appreciate the scale of the farm. "Is something the matter, Luna?"

"Oh no, I was just marveling at just how large Applejack's farm is. She must have a whole herd of ponies helping her to maintain it."

"Actually, I think it's just Applejack and her brother Big Macintosh who take care of most of the farm, at least the apple related parts. There are other ponies who live here, but they look after other areas." She lifted a hoof to point out a carrot themed house in the distance. "A pony named Carrot Top lives over there, but I think she mostly just works on the carrot fields." She turned to Luna apologetically. "I'm actually not too sure how Sweet Apple Acres is run, I just know that it seems like Applejack and Big Mac are busy all the time."

"Well, I hope that we won't be bothering her too much by dropping by."

"Oh, Applejack always makes time for her friends, especially if they're willing to lend a hoof with her apple trees," Twilight reassured her.

The two ponies set off again, quickly descending the hill and casually strolling through the gate decorated by a cut out of an apple. As they approached the large barn, Luna and Twilight found Applejack just leaving the building with what appeared to be a bundle of sticks covering her back and extending almost out past her tail. She seemed deep in thought, but her face brightened when she caught sight of Luna and Twilight.

"Howdy you two," she called out as she ambled over toward them. "What brings y'all out to Sweet Apple Acres today?"

"Hey Applejack," Twilight greeted her friend. "I thought that it would be interesting to Luna to see your farm since it's one of the main attractions of Ponyville."

"And you made your apples sound so delightful, that I couldn't waste the opportunity to try some," Luna added.

Applejack smiled brightly and puffed her chest out slightly as she replied, "Well, ah don't know about our lil ol' farm bein' an attraction, but if you're here for apples, you've come to the right place." Her face turned contemplative and she glanced off into the distance. "Though right now ah'm on my way to go do some work on the other side of the farm. Ah'd hate to put it off for too long..."

"That's no trouble at all, perhaps we could help," Luna offered, remembering what Twilight had said earlier. She was also ready to make a new friend, and she had heard that working together was one of the best ways for ponies to get to know one another.

Applejack ran a critical eye over Luna and drawled, "Ah don't know ..."

Twilight cleared her throat and looked at Applejack pointedly, causing the orange pony to flush for a moment before she decided, "Ah mean, ah'd love to have some help. Come on and ah'll take ya across the property and we can have a bit of a tour as we go."

She led the way to the nearby tree line, Twilight and Luna following closely behind her. The early afternoon sunlight, which had been warming Luna since they had left Ponyville, filtered through the canopy overhead. The ponies were dappled with spots of shadow and sun, and the cooler air was a welcome relief from the almost oppressive warmth. In the distance, there was a steady drone of insects that Luna hadn't noticed until she had begun to focus on their surroundings. The gentle breezes that buffeted the treetops overhead and occasionally drifted down to the trio of ponies smelled faintly of fresh apples.

In an attempt to strike up a conversation, Luna broke the stillness of the afternoon. "You have a rather large farm Applejack. How long has the Apple family owned it?"

Applejack turned her head back to better hear Luna while she spoke, then tilted it in thought as they continued to walk. "Well shoot, ah guess the Apple family's been in these parts since about the time Ponyville was founded. They owned a lot of farms over the years, but Sweet Apple Acres didn't come round till about five, six hundred years ago when a lot of the ponies were leavin' Ponyville and sellin' cheap."

"What happened back then to cause ponies to leave Ponyville?" Twilight asked. "I mean, it's a pretty nice place."

Applejack craned her neck to look around the bundle of wood on her back in Twilight's direction. "That was 'bout the time when Princess Celestia moved to Canterlot permanently. Ya see, back a thousand years ago, or thereabouts, Princess Celestia ruled Equestria from the Castle of Two Sisters. But after the, uh ... late unpleasantness," Applejack shot Luna an apologetic glance, "she started travelin' round Equestria, rulin' from wherever she was at the time. Eventually though she settled in Canterlot, and a lot of earth ponies moved on out of Ponyville."

A root leapt out and tripped Luna, causing her to stumble slightly, which drew the attention of Twilight and Applejack.

"You alright there, Princess?"

"Are you hurt, Luna?"

Both ponies spoke out at the same time, and Luna, despite her reddening face, reassured them, "Yes, I'm fine. I suppose I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Yeah, you need to watch out for those roots," Applejack good naturedly admonished her. "And the low hanging branches, and sometimes those trunks'll sneak up ya too. Ah know that walkin' through an orchard might be new to a city pony such as yourself, but ah'll try and point out the dangerous parts."

Luna wasn't sure how to respond to Applejack's teasing, but Twilight interjected, "And I'm sure that the next time you're in Canterlot, Luna will return the favor. But I still don't understand why so many ponies left Ponyville so long ago."

"Well, Ponyville was originally started by a group of earth ponies from Mesopotamia who wanted to be close to Princess Celestia's capital to make sure that earth pony concerns were heard, same as everypony else's. Course the Apple family don't have much use for things like that. We just came along to make sure everypony got enough to eat. But as my dad used to say, 'This here's good soil. So long as the sun rises in the mornin'

and sets at night, we'll get along just fine.' So when most ponies left for greener pastures, we stuck here in Ponyville."

Luna felt a surge of guilt. The time before she had transformed into Nightmare Moon seemed both like a distant, hazy memory, and as if it had happened just the other day. She could easily remember the envy she had felt toward her sister, and the under-appreciation from their subjects. When she had attempted to bring about eternal night, she had only been thinking of her own feelings, not about the difficulties it would cause for anypony else.

Applejack didn't seem to notice the effect of her words on Luna, but Twilight looked toward the princess with a questioning and somewhat concerned expression. Luna appreciated her friend's sensitivity and concern, and tried to smile in reply, nodding her head to show she was alright.

"Yep, the Apple family leaves the politics to other ponies," Applejack declared proudly, unaware of the silent communication going on behind her. "Course as the other ponies spread out some of us went with 'em and started farms across Equestria. Now, just about anywhere you go, you can find an Apple or an Apple relative."

They emerged from the artificial apple forest into a grassy avenue which ran through the orchard, its ends lost to sight behind distant hills and stands of trees. Across its relatively thin width were more trees, although to Luna's inexperienced eyes, the trees were slightly different from the ones they had just left. The trunks were thinner and further apart, and the leaves were darker and shinier. The tiny apples peeking out from the leaves also seemed slightly larger.

As they walked across the sun drenched grass, with a few daisies underhoof perfuming the air, Luna inquired, "Is there a reason why your orchard is separated like this?"

Applejack stopped and turned around to better face the princess before she responded. "Well, those trees back there," she explained while pointing her hoof back the way they had come, "are some of the oldest trees on the farm. They're mostly Baldwins, a good all round apple. You can eat'em, cook'em, bake'em, juice'em, what have you. But while they're good, they aren't the most flavorful apple you ever tasted, if you know what I mean."

She turned and pointed toward where they were going. "Now these trees here were planted by my great, great, great, great grandpappy." She narrowed her eyes in thought and tapped her chin with her hoof. "Or was it my great, great, great, great, *great* grandpappy? Hmmmm... ah'll have to check the family tree when we get back. Anyway, most of these trees were planted decades after the other trees, and these are mostly Pearmains. They're a lot sweeter, but they don't store as well as Baldwins, and they're a might larger too."

Applejack set off again, with Luna and Twilight quickly falling into step. "Yep, ever since Sweet Apple Acres was started, each generation's added their own trees to offer the ponies of Ponyville and Equestria a wider variety of apple. And to prove that their apples taste better than the last generation's too."

As they entered the shade of the next stretch of apple trees, Twilight asked, "You keep saying that most of the trees are of one variety or the other. Does that mean you have different species in each section? Wouldn't it be simpler to have trees of the same type together to make it easier to catalogue them?"

"To be honest, it would make things a might easier if all the trees in one area were the same type, but ah'm afraid it just don't work that way. Ya see, havin' a bunch of trees that grow the same kind of apple together, is kinda like havin' a room full of mares. When it comes time to pollinate, they can have a heap of fun together, but without a stallion, they can't exactly get down to business, if'n you know what ah mean." Applejack laughed at her own joke for a minute, but she quickly sobered and her cheeks colored slightly as she twisted her neck to look toward Luna. "Pardon my coarseness, Your Majesty."

Luna cleared her throat lightly, and could feel her own face warm a bit at the provocative image. "It's all right, Applejack. It was quite a, uh ... descriptive simile. And please, I thought I told you last night, call me Luna, just Luna."

"Yes ma'am, Miss Luna. Ah guess ah forgot." The farmer seemed rather uncomfortable as she spoke.

Twilight appeared ignorant of her friends' reactions, as she contemplatively remarked, "Actually, there were a series of studies conducted by the great unicorn Red Lotus into sperm-less fertilization which had promising –"

Applejack blushed even brighter and quickly cut Twilight off. "Aw hay, Twilight, it was just a metaphor. What ah mean to say is that for every dozen or so trees of one type, we gotta plant a crab apple tree of another type that blooms round the same time so they can cross-pollinate one another."

"So the different species of apple bloom at different times of the year?"

"Eyup, and they need to be harvested at different times too. Heck, sometimes it feels like ah'm bucking all year long."

Applejack continued to share a surprisingly vast amount of information about the many different breeds of apple, as well as the history of the Apple family, and even of the history of Equestria. During which, it felt to Luna as if they had walked for miles upon miles, far past what she was used to when traversing the halls of her palace. The leaves of the trees overhead provided a great deal of shade, but still, Celestia's summer sun made the day sweltering. Luna found that she had begun to sweat in a rather unregal manner, and was hoping that Applejack was going to take a break from her tireless pace soon.

In time, they passed through endless rows of apple trees and finally emerged into a wide and open field. It was empty, save for the rows of slender saplings barely as tall as a pony, bending under the weight of the oppressive sun.

"...and that hill over there was planted by Great Uncle Wickson. He was tryin' to make an apple specially suited for hard cider. He says he planted the trees to maximize the amount of water they got from it runnin' along the contours of the land, but ah think he was sippin' a bit of his own product a lot of the time," Applejack confided to her friends. Luna was becoming a tad jealous at the earth pony's ability to walk such a distance and still have the energy to continue to talk.

She looked over to the hill that Applejack had pointed out, and found that it was covered with trees planted in a rather confusing and seemingly random pattern of short zigzags, and long curving lines.

"Course, he did manage to breed the best cider apple you ever did taste; makes a punch that'll knock the shoes off your hooves and the mark off your rump." Again she sheepishly turned to look at Luna. "Pardon my Griffon, Miss Luna."

Luna tried to hide her exhaustion from being so out of shape as she replied, "It's alright, I'm used to the heated rhetoric of the various diplomats who come to Canterlot." She noticed that Applejack was slowing down, and couldn't hide the eagerness in her voice as she asked, "Have we reached the end of our journey?"

"Eyup, these here are the apple trees me and Big Mac planted just this year. They're just saplings right now, but give 'em a few years and they'll be makin' the sweetest apples you ever did eat. We're plannin' on callin' 'em Honeycrisps, on account of their bein' as sweet as honey, and of course crispy."

Applejack released the rope that was holding the poles to her back, and with a crash they fell to the ground, revealing a pair of saddlebags that had been hiding underneath the bundle. In a few moments more they had joined the stakes on the ground.

"So, why exactly are we out here," Twilight asked. Luna noticed that while she wasn't as winded as her, the unicorn was still breathing a bit more heavily than normal.

"Well, these trees here are just babies, and if we let 'em grow all wild like, they'll be sendin' branches every which a way and growin' in all directions. So what we're goin' ta do is plant these here stakes in the ground," she pawed at the bundle of poles she had been carrying. "Then we tie these trees to them so they'll grow up relatively straight. We'll also put a couple of light weights on some of their branches so they don't get all tangled up with one another as they grow."

Luna looked across the field at all the small, almost fragile plants which supposedly would one day be trees. There had to be three score of them at least, lined up in straight rows, with wide spaces separating them.

"All of these trees?"

"Yes ma'am. I wasn't plannin' on finishin' today, but ah did want to get as many done as ah could."

"It should go faster with all us helping out, right, Luna?" Twilight enthusiastically declared.

In admiration of the unicorn's enthusiasm, Luna smiled and agreed, "That's right."

"And I sure do appreciate the help. Now, let me show you what it is we need to be doin'." Applejack bent down and picked up one of the stakes with her mouth, effortlessly standing it up on its end. The wooden pole was half again as tall as she was, with the end closest to the ground sharply pointed. With practiced ease, Applejack carried it to the nearest tree and grasped the pole firmly with both her hooves. She began thrusting it into the ground, driving it deeper and deeper with a continuous twisting movement, until a third of it was buried in the earth. "Now, we just get our twine and tie it off."

She walked back over to the loose bundle of sticks and retrieved a ball of fibrous string from one of the saddlebags. She bit off a few short pieces, then returned to the tree where she tied its slender trunk to the stake with a series of farmer knots.

"And finally, we weigh it."

Applejack once again returned to the saddlebags, this time fetching a small cloth sack. It had a long, thin strap that she neatly flipped over her head, easily clearing her hat, allowing the small bag to dangle around her neck. She cantered over to the tree she had just tied, and studied its thin branches for a moment. After coming to a decision, she bent down to the bag and with her mouth, retrieved a small but thick metallic ribbon which she wound around one of the tree's branches. The weight caused the branch to droop lower to the ground and away from the other branch it had been pointing toward originally. To be honest, Luna had no clear idea as to why Applejack had chosen that particular branch, but she seemed happy with it.

"And that's all there is to it. Pretty simple huh?"

"I'm not too certain about the criteria used in the weighing part, but the other steps do seem straightforward enough," Luna admitted.

Wanting to help her new friend, Luna attempted to emulate Applejack's movements by picking up one of the stakes with her mouth, but found it much denser than she had expected. She had only managed to lift the heavy piece of wood a short distance from the ground before she lost her grip on it. Reflexively she was able to hug the pole with her forelegs and catch it before it fell too far. However the sudden weight unbalanced her and almost dragged her down to the ground with it. Not wanting to fall flat on her face, Luna began to flap her wings, and finally stopped the stake's descent. After a few awkward moments of struggling, she managed to stand the pole on its end. Her hooves grasping the wily piece of wood tightly, and lightly panting from the exertion, Luna looked up at the end high in the sky.

"Um, maybe I should handle the stakes," Twilight offered in a tone similar to the one Celestia liked to use whenever Luna suggested that she could handle preparing breakfast on her own.

The pole Luna was holding was encased in a glowing purple patina and gently lifted up and out of her grasp. Without any apparent effort, Twilight floated the stake over to the next apple tree in line and rapidly shot it down into the dirt, exactly matching the depth that Applejack had driven hers to.

For a moment, Luna pouted. It seemed a bit unsporting to use magic. Applejack and the other earth ponies couldn't use unicorn magic, and they seemed to do just fine farming. Besides, if she had known magic was permissible, she would never have made such a fool of herself trying to physically lift that heavy pole. On the hoof, Luna had to admit that she was already tired from the extreme hike Applejack had led them on. If she had to wrestle with heavy equipment for too much longer, she'd probably faint from exhaustion.

At the same time, Luna wondered why Twilight had only handled a single stake. With their magic, either she or Luna could have quickly finished the entire field in a matter of moments. If using magic was permissible, then why wasn't the talented unicorn using her magic to its fullest? Luna glanced over to Applejack for a possible explanation, perhaps it was some sort of farming thing that she was ignorant of. However, she found the earth pony

regarding her friend with an expression that was equal parts geniality and resignation. Abruptly the princess understood. It had to be irritating to see somepony perform the same task as you, but faster and with more ease than you ever could. If Twilight used all the power she could to finish a job in seconds, a job that would otherwise take Applejack hours if not days, would surely cause the plainspoken farmer to feel frustrated. Obviously while it was alright to use magic, it wasn't alright to flaunt it.

"I'll handle the tying process then," Luna volunteered. Using only the tiniest fraction of her magic, she picked up the ball of string and after unraveling a suitably long piece, she burned through the fibers of the twine to create three equally proportioned pieces. With only the lightest of thoughts, she levitated them over to the sapling Twilight was standing next to, and tied the darkly glowing threads into perfectly identical bow ties.

"There," Luna said admiringly of her hoofwork.

"Well, that went a might faster than I thought you two eggh- uh, I mean intellectual ponies would do it."

Deciding to take her words as a compliment, Luna smiled toward Applejack and replied, "Thank you. But I'm sure that we can do the next one faster. We can probably stake all these trees in only a few hours."

"Then what are we standin' here for, chompin' the hay? Let's get going. The sooner we finish, the sooner y'all'll be able to enjoy some old fashioned Apple cooking. Twilight you can put in the stakes, Miss Luna, you can tie the trees up, and I'll handle directin' the branches."

Soon they had settled into an easy pace, the steady thump of Twilight driving the poles melded with the incessant background noise of the summer insects, creating a rather relaxing melody.

Cutting and tying the thread didn't require too much concentration, so Luna found her attention wandering. She looked back and found Applejack a few trees behind her. Despite not having the advantage of magic, the farmer was deftly shaping the branches of the trees with her flexible weights. Luna could easily imagine the tiny saplings grow tall and strong under the orange pony's care, their canopies growing wide and providing barrels upon barrels of apples in the distant future. Briefly she wondered about what the

world would be like when these trees had matured. Where would she be? Or Celestia? What about Twilight?

Her ruminations were interrupted as Applejack finished with her tree and looked up, meeting Luna's eyes. She smiled at the princess encouragingly, as if the two shared a secret. Luna found herself smiling back. She had to admire the seemingly boundless energy the other pony had. Despite the sun high overhead, pouring down heat, and the arduous hike they'd had, Applejack appeared unfazed.

Luna turned back and finished tying off the last knot of the tree she was working on and trotted over to the next, floating the ball of twine next to her. As she walked, she watched as Twilight focused on the pile of poles far behind them. With a single-minded focus, she levitated one of them across the pale blue sky. Her unwavering attention was likely more appropriate for a potentially explosive magical experiment than a simple levitation spell, but Luna had noticed that whatever Twilight did, she did it whole-heartedly. Once the stake was close to the tree she was next to, far ahead of where Luna was, Twilight shot it into the ground with a precision that the marksmen guard ponies would envy.

As she turned her head and selected another stake from the pile, Luna found herself noticing the subtle movements of Twilight's muscles as they flexed and moved along her slender neck. Like Luna, Twilight obviously wasn't used to such demanding work as this. There was a thin sheen of sweat highlighting her coat, and her mane and tail hung heavily from the mugginess of the afternoon air. She was likely unconscious of it, but Twilight's face scrunched up adorably every time she absently blew her slick bangs from her eyes.

"Everything alright, Sugarcube?" Applejack's voice startled Luna from the reverie she had fallen into, and she hastily spun around to find the orange pony only a few paces away with a kind but questioning expression on her face. Apparently Luna had been watching Twilight for longer than it had felt like.

"Oh no, everything's fine," Luna hastily replied. "I was just taking a break to ..." Luna wracked her brain for an excuse which wasn't cliché. Unfortunately she failed. "Admire the scenery," she lamely finished.

Applejack looked past Luna, to where the princess' attention had been fixed moments ago.

"Ah can't blame ya, it sure is a pretty sight," Applejack remarked wistfully. "Even though I know it's full of a lot of fru fruness and namby pamby manners that don't make a lick'o sense, it still feels ... magical."

Shocked that Applejack would speak of their friend that way, Luna turned her head to try and see just where Applejack's outrageous impressions stemmed from. She closely examined the distant figure of Twilight, but couldn't discern any of the flaws Applejack alluded to.

Perhaps feeling their scrutiny, Twilight turned around and after a moment, hesitantly waved at them. Luna smiled brightly and energetically waved in return. However her hoof abruptly stopped moving when she realized what Applejack had been talking about. Past Twilight, far away across the rolling hills, made delicate by the distance, Canterlot stood rising from the short but majestic mountains. The sun reflecting off the afternoon's haze lent the city of towers a mystical appearance, as if it were a mirage, or a dream.

Luna's smile fell, and her heart sank. What was she doing? She had allowed herself to become lost in the moment. Her new found fixation with Twilight would possibly be permissible if they were going to be friends for all time. But faced with a reminder of Celestia's presence, Luna knew that she had only a few more precious days to spend with her newfound friend. Once she revealed her duplicity, no doubt Twilight would want nothing to do with her.

The more she took delight in being around Twilight, the harder it would be for Luna when Twilight and Celestia reconciled. And what did it say about her that she was able to be so happy spending time with Twilight, while the pony who truly deserved the wonderful unicorn's affections was most likely despondently holding court only a few minutes away by air?

"Yes, it is quite lovely," Luna agreed sadly. "But I imagine that to somepony looking out of the city in this direction, your verdant fields are every bit as beautiful."

Applejack regarded Luna with some surprise. "Really? You think so?"

Luna smiled sadly to herself. "As the saying goes, 'the grass is greener on the other side.' Like you said, Canterlot is full of high class, and quite honestly, boorish snobs. We like to romanticize that which we don't know, ignoring the drawbacks the lives of others have. I'm sure that there are many ponies in Canterlot who desire to live the simple life in a small town like Ponyville. Just as I'm certain that there are ponies here who yearn for the exciting life they envision must be found in a place like Canterlot."

"Ah reckon you're right. Ah remember when ah was a filly, ah thought Manehattan was some wonderful place where anything could happen. Where ah'd find my cutie mark, discover fame, and fortune, all in a week." Applejack chuckled self-deprecatingly. "Boy howdy was ah wrong. City life, y'all can keep it. Ah guess it's kinda like one of those impressionistic paintings. Real pretty from far away, but just a bunch of splotches of color that don't look anything like you thought it did up close."

Luna looked toward Applejack impressed. "I didn't take you for a pony interested in the arts."

"Ah like to think ah enjoy them as much as the next pony. There always seems to be an art museum next to the convention center the Equestrian Farmer's Society books for its meetins. So after a while, ah got curious and decided to see what was inside 'em. Ah guess ah liked what ah saw."

"Hey you two, what's the hold up?" Twilight called out as she briskly walked toward them. Luna looked around and realized that while she had been speaking with Applejack, Twilight had very nearly completed planting the stakes next to all the trees.

"We got a little distracted ruminatin' on the philosophical and artistic nature of ponies is all," Applejack replied good naturedly.

"Sorry, Twilight."

"Oh," Twilight remarked, a bit discombobulated by Applejack's reply. "Well then, I guess I'll help you, Luna, so we can get through this more quickly."

Luna felt a warm jolt run through her as Twilight's magic slid over and around her own, struggling for control of the ball of twine. She felt an instinctual urge to push the other magic away, to subjugate the weaker power, but she quickly squashed that reaction and instead released her

hold on the string. Twilight's relatively light purple magic surrounded the ball and unwound a significant portion of it. She seemed unaware of the effect her magic had on Luna's.

The unraveled length of string stretched until it broke under the strain. Twilight rolled the unwound twine into a small ball. "There we go. I'll take this one and you can keep using this string." She floated the larger ball back toward Luna, offering it to the alicorn.

Luna dryly swallowed, and felt the cold rush pour through her body that indicated her magic was being released. She struggled with it for a moment in a way she hadn't had to in years, attempting to rein it in and not use more than was necessary. Carefully she reached out with only the tiniest fraction of it and gingerly grasped the offered ball of twine, ghosting it along Twilight's power. The glow surrounding the ball darkened to the familiar hue of Luna's magic, and thanks to her close scrutiny of Twilight, Luna was able to see the unicorn shiver slightly as the transfer of control took place. Perhaps she wasn't the only pony to feel the strange sensation arising from mingling magic.

"Th-thank you, Twilight." Luna turned back to the task at hoof, determined to push the thoughts of Twilight and her mentor, Celestia, from her mind through concentrating on doing the job.

In a few hours more, the three ponies had covered the entire field of saplings. All sixty-eight of them. Luna had counted. Even though she had been using magic to do her work, Luna's hooves were hurting from being stood on for so long, and the heat and humidity had sucked nearly all the water and energy from her.

Applejack looked down at the final tree like a mother would regard a favored child. "There ya go Colbert, you're all set. Now you're gonna grow up into a fine tree, ah just know it." She paused for a moment to blink back a tear, wiping the slight excess moisture from the corner of her eye with her hoof. She then looked up and back at the long field of now well maintained trees. "Looks like we finished 'em all. Good job girls. Now we can head back to the barn and sample some of our fine apples and apple accessories."

Luna was relieved that their arduous task was over, and she shared an exhausted smile with Twilight Sparkle. Neither of them seemed to have the energy left to speak.

They paused long enough for Applejack to collect her saddlebags and the remnants of the other tools she had brought with her, before they began the long trek back to the barn. For a moment, Luna flirted with the thought of resting her aching hooves by taking flight. However, she quickly discarded the tempting thought. It seemed unfair of her to hover around, showing off her ability to fly when neither Applejack nor Twilight could follow her into the air. So she decided to be polite and continue to keep pace with the two earthbound ponies. She was an alicorn and a ruler of Equestria after all. If a unicorn and an earth pony could walk such a monumental distance, she could as well.

By the time they reached the Apple family home, Luna was on the verge of collapse. Only the desire to save face in front of the other two ponies, neither of whom seemed fazed by the magnitude of their jaunt, kept her walking.

As they approached the barn, Luna attempted to appear nonchalant by striking up a conversation. "That was certainly an interesting and surprisingly enlightening experience, Applejack."

Applejack regarded Luna with a warm smile. "Ah'm glad y'all came by, and thanks again for the help. I was plannin' on workin' on those trees for a few days more, but thanks to you and Twilight here, I can get back to the more difficult work we need to get through before applebuckin' season starts."

Luna was almost afraid to ask, "More difficult work?"

"Eyup, the early bloomin' apples will be ready for buckin' in a few weeks, and there's still a heap of apples in the cellar from last season that need to be brought up to make room for this year's crop. Why, by this time next week, we'll be hock deep in apple pies, apple cobbler, apple cakes, apple crisps, apple preserves, you name it and we'll make it. Gotta use up the last of those old apples. Though this year won't be near as bad as last year. Last year we still had somethin' like twelve tons of apples we had to get through. Big Mac ate so much he said he had applesauce comin' from his ears. This year though I think we only got about two tons left on hoof."

"Two tons of apples. And you'll be carrying them all by hoof?" Luna asked incredulously.

"Yes ma'am," Applejack proudly replied. "Just a little exercise to help us limber up for applebuckin' season." Her tone grew somewhat annoyed as she continued, "So long as nopony goes and does a foal thing like falling out of the apple loft this year."

Luna shook her head in amazement. She had often heard of the physical labor farmers were subjected to, but she had never fully realized its true extent. Perhaps that was why so many farming ponies were earth ponies; they might be the only ones who could stand up to the physical stress of such a lifestyle.

They were close to the Apple home, when an elderly mare came out and caught sight of them. "You done with that new plot already? That was quick. Good thing I had a feeling I needed to get supper ready early today."

The three ponies walked closer, and Applejack addressed the older mare, "Eyup, thanks to my friends, we were able to get through those trees lickity split. Speakin' of which, Luna, this is Granny Smith. Granny, this here is Miss Luna, my new friend. I hope you don't mind, but I invited her and Twilight here to supper."

The faded green pony squeezed her eyes tightly and peered in Luna and Twilight's direction. "Afternoon Miss Twilight, and hello Miss Luna. It's a pleasure to meet you." She tremulously held out her hoof toward Luna. The princess blankly looked down at it for several moments before she realized that Granny Smith was offering to shake hooves. Luna walked forward and gently took the other pony's hoof in hers, concerned with not using too much force and inadvertently hurting the old mare. However, Luna quickly found out where Applejack had learned to shake hooves as her leg was vigorously pumped by a strength belied by the other pony's delicate frame.

Granny Smith eventually let go of Luna's hoof, although it took Twilight's help for Luna to stop her leg from shaking up and down. Luna had just gingerly put her hoof back on the ground when a pair of ponies, a young filly and quite possibly the largest stallion Luna had ever met, turned the corner of the building. Upon seeing Twilight and Luna, the stallion stopped short, while the filly eagerly closed the gap between them, only stopping when she was close to Applejack, peering curiously at Luna.

"There y'all are," Applejack said. "Come meet Miss Luna." She turned to Luna and introduced the two new ponies. "Miss Luna, this is my brother Big Macintosh, and my little sister Applebloom. Applebloom, Big Mac, this is Miss Luna."

The cute little filly with her hair held back by a bow and with a smudge of dirt along her nose, was obviously trying her hardest to be polite as she approached Luna in measured steps and asked in a voice nearly devoid of the accent shared by Applejack and Granny Smith, "How do you do, Miss Luna?"

Matching the filly's solemnity, Luna bobbed her head in reply. "Very well, Miss Applebloom. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Applebloom held her head high and succinctly replied, "Quite." However she couldn't keep up her façade any longer and broke into a fit of giggles.

Her warm, childish laughter was interrupted by Granny Smith loudly saying, "That's enough of your silliness, Applebloom. Get inside and wash up for supper."

"Yes, Granny." Applebloom's voice now held an accent every bit as thick as Applejacks. Luna watched the filly as she obediently trotted into the house, a smile on her face from the innocent antics of the young pony.

Still smiling, she turned her attention back to Applejack's brother, who seemed even larger now that he had stepped closer to her. She noticed he was wearing a rather substantial plowing collar around his neck, and supposed that he had just returned from some back breaking labor that she was better off not even imagining in her exhausted condition.

He was easily larger and more massive than the many guard ponies who infested the palace. Unlike them though, the red stallion's size wasn't nearly as intimidating. Still, it was with a bit of trepidation that Luna walked to him and offered her hoof in the now familiar ritual of greeting. His sister had nearly wrenched her leg off, what would a hoofshake from such a powerful stallion be like?

"Mr. Macintosh, I believe. It's nice to meet you. I've had a wonderful time today on your family's farm."

Unlike Granny Smith or Applebloom, Macintosh looked first at Luna's horn, then at her wings, and finally down at her outstretched hoof. He glanced over to Applejack with a somewhat conflicted expression on his face. She waved her hoof back and forth, signaling him to get on with it.

Luna was beginning to feel a bit awkward just standing there, sticking her hoof out, but finally Macintosh grasped it as if it were made of delicate crystal, and shook it gently a few times before hastily dropping it.

"It's nice to meet you too. And I'm glad you had a good time, Princess," the stallion drawled around a sprig of wild grass in his mouth.

Luna's smile became a bit wooden at Macintosh's obvious discomfort, as well as his attempt at formality. "Please, just call me Luna. I'm on vacation right now."

"Yes ma'am," Macintosh acquiesced without appearing anymore at ease.

"Well, now that we all know one another, let's get inside afore the food gets cold and the cider gets warm," Granny Smith loudly declared.

With a speed surprising for such a large pony, Macintosh left them and disappeared through the door leading into the house. Applejack, Luna, and Twilight though waited for the slow moving Granny Smith to enter before they passed through the door. As they entered the warm, apple and cinnamon scented building; Twilight leaned in close to Luna and confidentially whispered, "Try not to eat too much pie. Trust me."

Luna looked askance at her friend, but before she could ask her about the cryptic remark, they found themselves in the Apple kitchen. Her first impression was that it was a very cozy room. It was by no means small, but the profusion of cooking implements covering the counters and walls caused it to feel comfortably snug.

The table in the center of the room dominated the space. It was a regular rectangular table, but it was covered so completely in baked goods that Luna could practically see the strain of the legs attempting not to buckle. While she was no stranger to bounteous offerings, this was something else entirely.

As Granny Smith slowly crossed the room, she apologized over her shoulder, "Sorry it's only a light supper tonight, but I woke up from my afternoon nap a little late, and only had time to whip this up." She gingerly lowered herself onto the well worn pillow at the head of the table. Applebloom reappeared through a nearby doorway, her face and hooves freshly scrubbed and lacking the smudges of dirt they had been sporting. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled toward Luna while she took her place at the opposite end of the table from Granny Smith.

The filly's cleanliness reminded Luna that she was feeling a bit sticky from all the heat and exercise she'd been through that day. "Excuse me, Applejack, but is there a place where I may wash my hooves before dinner?"

Applejack had taken a seat next to Applebloom, leaving an open space between her and Granny Smith. Luna noticed that even though they were inside, she hadn't removed her hat. Perhaps she was so used to the weight that she'd forgotten it?

"Yep." Applejack pointed to the door Applebloom had come through. "Straight down the hall, last door on the left."

"Thank you." Luna passed through the doorway and found herself in a wide hallway that narrowed where a flight of stairs leading upwards met it. The décor was just as rustic and charming as the kitchens had been. Luna easily found the bathroom and quickly washed her hooves and face, cleaning off the dust that had been clinging to her all afternoon.

After levitating one of the hoof towels close and drying her face, Luna glanced into the mirror behind the sink and was surprised by her reflection. The bangs of her mane, which usually threatened to cover her eye, had been swept back by the wind, or a hoof wiping away the sweat from her forehead. With her mane pulled back, more of Luna's face was displayed than she was used to. Early in the morning she had felt somewhat naked without her crown, but through the course of the day, Luna had forgotten about its absence. Perhaps it was the slight change in her hair, or the lack of her crown, or maybe even the small but genuine smile she found she'd been unconsciously sporting, but in some way, Luna thought that she looked almost like a different pony. Not Luna of the ignored night, or

Nightmare Moon, or even Luna the apologist, but Luna ... the farm pony maybe?

She scrunched up her face in distaste at the thought. While she had found a new respect for the hard working farmers of Equestria, Luna knew that she wasn't cut out for so much physical labor. With a final check in the mirror to make sure she hadn't missed a spot, Luna left the bathroom and walked back towards the kitchen, nearly colliding with Macintosh as he came down the stairs.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Macintosh quickly apologized as he even more quickly backed out of Luna's way.

"It's quite alright." Luna noticed that the red pony had lost both the sprig of grass he had been chewing on, as well as the harness he had been wearing earlier, which in no way made him seem any smaller. "And please, there's no reason to be so formal. My friends call me Luna, and I'd like you to be my friend."

"Sorry, ma'am. I'm afraid I'm not used to royalty showing up at my farm unannounced. We're not the most gentle of ponies, if you know what I mean."

Eager to reassure the larger pony, Luna began to hastily speak. "Manners alone aren't necessarily what make a gentlepony. Some of the most dislikable ponies I've known have also been amongst the most polite. All the manners and sophistication in the world can't make up for lacking a noble heart. From what I've seen and heard of your family so far, you're all honest and very hardworking ponies. You should have confidence in yourself, and not worry so much about how others perceive you. While you're perhaps not the most refined ponies in Equestria, I think that anypony who matters can easily see that you have a gentle heart."

Macintosh looked thoughtful for a moment before he asked, "Really?"

Her amusement at the stallion's artlessness bled into Luna's voice as she replied, "Yes. In fact, I'd be proud to count you and your family as my friends. If you'd be willing to accept such a title."

The thought of him being her friend seemed to warm Macintosh. He smiled as if it were one of the more humorous jokes he'd heard. "Thank you kindly,

ma'am. I'd be honored to be your friend, Luna. Now I suppose we'd better head to supper. Applejack gets a bit ornery when she gets real hungry." He swept his hoof toward the kitchen. "After you, ma'am."

Luna took his invitation and preceded him into the kitchen.

"... then she told us that when that happens, we need to use sine over cosine," Applebloom was energetically informing the other ponies at the table. "So Diamond Tiara asked Miss Cheerilee just when we were goin' ta use this in the real world. And Miss Cheerilee said it was important for ponies to have a broad understandin' of things, even if they don't necessarily use 'em." The young filly threw up her arms emphatically as she asked, "But what kind of sense does that make? Learnin' somethin' you'll never use?"

Macintosh squeezed into the space between Granny Smith and Applejack, who seemed to be paying more attention to the food placed tantalizingly in front of her than to her little sister.

Luna took the last remaining cushion between Twilight and Applebloom as the purple unicorn, clearly mildly scandalized by the filly's lack of appreciation for trigonometry, began her earnest rebuttal. "But you don't know what information you'll need in the future. For instance, what if you wanted to build a ramp with Scootaloo and needed to calculate the best angle of its incline for her to achieve the desired height and distance on her scooter? Or what if you need to determine the dimensions of a triangle while building the frame for a new building?"

Applebloom respectfully paid attention to the older pony, but appealed to her sister, "Applejack, when was the last time you used somethin' like that?"

Applejack distractedly replied, "Ah can't honestly recollect." She looked up and noticed the look Twilight was shooting her across the table, and quickly added, "But that don't mean it isn't important."

"Applebloom, you pay attention in school and get good grades, you hear. There's more to this world than just farming apples, and if you don't learn as much as you can, you're only hurtin' yourself. So mind what your teacher says and work hard," Granny Smith decisively said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now that's settled, let's give thanks."

Somewhat uncomfortable with her uncertainty, Luna watched as everypony save Twilight and herself bowed their heads in respect.

"Thank you Princess Celestia for providing us with your sunlight, allowing us to grow and enjoy our bountiful harvest," Granny Smith rotely intoned.

Luna noticed the slightly fearful glances Macintosh and Applejack gave her as they raised their heads, and even Twilight surreptitiously gauged Luna's reaction. Luna offered them a small, reassuring smile. She wasn't a stranger to hearing her sister praised, and honestly, what benefits farmers derived from the moon and the stars paled in comparison with their dependence upon the sun. Luna could easily understand why they would prefer to offer her sister praise over herself.

Hoping to stave off any awkwardness, Luna emulated the oblivious Applebloom next to her and leaned down to sample the apple turnover on her plate. She was prepared for it to taste good, but was pleasantly shocked with just how wonderful it turned out to be. The flaky, buttery crust seemed to melt away on her tongue, leaving only a slightly buttery flavor which melded perfectly with the sweet apple paste in the confection's center. The warm tastes played beautifully across her palette, and it was with complete sincerity that she looked up the table and complimented Granny Smith, "This is wonderful. It is beyond a doubt the best apple pastry I've ever had."

Granny Smith smiled appreciatively at Luna's honesty. "Thank you kindly. It's an old family recipe we've perfected over the years. But I think what makes it special is the apples we grow here. Best apples in all Equestria, ask anypony."

"I'm certain they are." Luna turned back to her plate, and allowed the hunger she had developed working in the fields to overcome the table manners that had been instilled in her. In only five more bites, she had finished the turnover. Guiltily she looked around to see if anypony had noticed her breach in etiquette, and was astonished to find that there were already several empty plates stacked next to Applejack, and Macintosh appeared to be quickly devouring his fifth pie. Even young Applebloom had

dispatched her apple cakes and had moved on to a plate of apple tarts. Apparently being a farm pony required a massive amount of calories which needed to be replenished.

Luna looked over at Twilight, who, even though she was delicately nibbling at her food, had also far outpaced Luna. Not wishing to be seen as ungrateful, or as if she didn't enjoy the meal, Luna levitated a few nearby baked apples to her plate and set about slicing them into smaller, more manageable portions with her magic.

She had only managed to make her way through one and a half of the succulent treats before she found her appetite more than sated. In fact, she was in danger of becoming uncomfortably full. Thankfully though, the rest of the diners, after having made a substantial impact on the many foodstuffs on the table, had slowed down as well.

Noticing that Applejack was attacking her plate with less ferocity, Luna decided to try her hoof at casual dinner conversation. "You have quite a large farm, Applejack. I noticed that there were other areas besides the apple orchard. Do you take care of them too, or are there other ponies that help with them?"

Applejack looked up at Luna, a bit of applesauce staining her cheek, and she noisily swallowed before answering, "Yep, we've got one of the largest farms in these parts, and we grow just about everything, like apples, carrots, celery, colorful flowers too. There's actually a lot of ponies who work on the different parts of Sweet Apple Acres, each one kinda specialized at what they're good at growing. But we all lend a helping hoof when we need to. Heck, Big Mac here's probably plowed every acre of Sweet Apple Acres least once."

"Eyup," Macintosh agreed wearily.

"Course when it comes to apples, Macintosh and me have it pretty well covered. Between the two of us we can buck all the apple trees round here."

"Don't forget me," Applebloom hotly interjected. "Ah'm gonna help this buckin' season. Ah'm big enough now to buck, honest."

"We'll see. But don't forget, Applebloom, even the strongest tree used to be a saplin'. You might still have some more growin' up to do before you can buck."

Applebloom looked down at her plate and grumbled, "Ah'm not a saplin'. Ah'm a pony, and ah'm big enough to buck."

"Well, if you need any help, don't hesitate to ask," Twilight offered. "Your friends are always ready to help you, and we wouldn't want a repeat of last year."

"Ah appreciate the offer, Twilight, and you don't worry any, ah learned my lesson. If ah need the help, ah'll ask for it. But, no offense, havin' y'all help durin' the harvest feels a bit like if all of us went over and helped you reorganize your library."

"Now that you mention it, it would be helpful if —"

Applejack interrupted Twilight quickly. "What I mean is, it's not everypony that can buck a Sweet Apple Acre tree. I just feel more comfortable with keeping it in the family as much as ah can."

"But it seems like such a large amount of land to cover with just yourself and Macintosh," Luna observed. She noticed Applebloom's heated glance in her direction and quickly added, "And Applebloom."

"We did have more family helpin' us out a while back," Applejack admitted. "But they moved to other parts of Equestria to help other farms and start a few of their own. It's a bit harder with just us now, but we'll just have to make do."

"You ought to do what I've been telling you to," interjected Granny Smith. "Find a nice stallion to settle down with, and have a few colts and fillies, and you won't have to worry about there not being enough hooves around during applebucking season."

A blush quickly spread across Applejack's cheeks as she hotly said, "Granny! Ah already told you, ah'm not ready to settle down yet. I'm still lookin' for that special pony, and anyway, shouldn't you be after Big Mac about this? He's older."

Macintosh regarded his sister with an expression which clearly indicated he wanted no part of the conversation. Luna could feel her own face heating up in sympathy, but a part of her was fascinated by this familial scene so different from the one she was used to.

Granny Smith turned her attention to the large red pony and asked, "How about it Big Mac, why haven't you found a nice filly yet and given me some great grand children to have running around underhoof? Why by the time I was your age, I already had one foal with another on the way."

Macintosh held up his hooves placatingly, while his face wore an expression like he'd tasted something sour. "Well, I –"

"What about that carrot girl across the way?" Granny Smith asked, ignoring whatever Macintosh was about to say. "She seems like a nice enough mare, a little feisty maybe, most orange heads are, but that might be good for a down to earth pony such as yourself."

Macintosh's coat turned several shades brighter as he answered, "Uh, that's-"

This time he was interrupted by Applejack, who had noticed how uncomfortable Luna and Twilight were becoming, neither of them used to such an intimate conversation. "Granny Smith, we have guests. Ah don't think that now is the time to be havin' this discussion."

The frail green mare seemed to either mishear or misunderstand Applejack's message. She looked over at Twilight and Luna and loudly said, "Oh no, they wouldn't do at all. Well, maybe Twilight. She's a hard worker, but I can't see her running a farm. And Miss Luna's hips are too narrow for an easy foaling. Trust me; if there's one thing I know about, it's hips. No offense girls."

Luna could swear that her face felt as hot as Celestia's sun, and she noticed that Twilight seemed almost as embarrassed as her. However the unicorn was able to find her voice, which was more than Luna could claim. "Oh, no offense taken. I'm sure that whomever Big Mac ends up with will be one lucky pony. But I agree with you that neither of us are probably the filly for him." Twilight's voice, and the nervous chuckle that succeeded her statement, were rife with mortification.

Luna glanced surreptitiously down at her lower body. There wasn't anything wrong with her hips, was there? Certainly she couldn't claim to have the wonderful proportions of her sister, but that didn't mean that there was anything wrong with the way she looked. Did it?

"Twilight I..." began Macintosh in his slow drawl and a strange expression on his face while looking down at the smaller pony. But he was once again interrupted by Applejack.

"Twilight, Luna, don't worry none about what Granny Smith said. Sometimes she just gets a bee in her bonnet about somethin', and says some things she doesn't mean."

"Hmph, you're going to have them not believe a word I say."

Applejack looked at Granny Smith a bit incredulously. "Well, some things just shouldn't be said. Especially about two ponies as nice as Twilight and Luna here. Besides which, I think Twilight would make a wonderful partner for anypony, and Miss Luna has some of the nicest hips ah've ever seen."

Luna had no idea when the discussion had made a turn for such awkward territory, but she appreciated the sincerity behind Applejack's words. "Thank you, I think."

Luckily, before the conversation could become even more embarrassing, Applebloom spoke up with a long suffering tone. "Ah'm finished; may I be excused to go play with Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle?"

Applejack looked down at her sister. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes."

"And your chores?"

"Yes."

"Then you can go play. But make sure you're back before seven. You still need to take a bath before you go to bed."

"Okay, Applejack." Applebloom sprang away from the table and out the door, obviously anxious not to waste a second of her time with her friends.

Granny Smith sighed and commented, "I don't know about you youngins, but I've just about had my fill."

The food on the table had been fairly well decimated. There was a final bastion remaining between Luna and Twilight, but the Apple family had finished off the rest. Frankly, Luna was amazed at how hungry she had been, and how much food she had eaten. Why she had nearly finished off two whole plates by herself. "I'm quite full as well, thank you, that was a wonderful meal."

Granny Smith eyed the surplus of food before Luna. "You sure you've had your fill?" she asked unconvinced. "We've got some caramel apples, and some candy apples if you like, for dessert."

"No thank you, I think we're both done," Twilight said, glancing at Luna to make sure she was speaking for both of them.

"Alright, if you say so. But I really think you should have some more. You girls hardly touched your food."

"No thank you, really, we're full."

Granny Smith sighed to herself resignedly. "Well, if you're sure. I suppose we can clear the table then."

Luna began to stand, ready to help clean up the mess. After all, even though she'd never cleaned dishes before, she was certain that it couldn't be that difficult. She probably wouldn't even catch anything on fire this time.

Applejack had also risen, and seeing Luna getting up, she quickly said, "Don't you worry none about cleanin' up the table, Luna. Me and Granny can handle it."

"Are you sure? I'd hate to trespass upon your kindness any further. I am a guest in your house after all."

Applejack smiled wryly. "Yep, you are a guest, and you've already helped us out a bunch today. What kind of hosts would we be if we forced you to do every little thing?"

Luna sank back down onto the cushion. "If you're sure..."

"Positive."

Applejack began stacking dirty dishes atop one of the larger platters on the table. Once the stack was unnervingly high and unstable, she picked the platter up with her mouth and carried it over to the sink where Granny Smith had begun running water. Macintosh hurriedly finished the last few bites of an apple crisp before his sister returned and confiscated his plate.

Without the distraction of the food in front of them, Twilight, Luna, and Macintosh shared an awkward silence, broken only by the background sound of running water and the delicate clink of crockery.

Uncomfortable with the silence, Luna attempted to break it. "So, you certainly have a large farm, Macintosh."

"Eyup."

Obviously it was going to be a bit difficult to develop a dialogue with such a terse conversationalist.

"You were wearing a harness earlier. What were you working on today?"

Macintosh looked around, as if to see if anypony was going to interrupt him, before he slowly answered, "I was over plowing on the beet field, so we can get 'em planted before applebucking season."

Luna thought she hid her distaste well, but Twilight screwed up her face reflexively. "Yuck, beets. I don't like those too much."

Macintosh chuckled at Twilight's obvious dislike for the vegetables. "Not too many ponies do, I reckon. But these won't be for eating. We sell them to a company over in Fillydelphia that processes them to make sugar."

Twilight's ears and faced perked up at the mention of the sweet substance. "Sugar? But I thought that sugar came from sugarcane."

That information was more than Luna had known. She had only the vaguest notion of where sugar came from. Actually, she had assumed that it was mined like salt.

Macintosh leaned back comfortably as he rumbled, "Well, some of it does. But sugarcane can only grow in a small part of Equestria, where it's hot most of the year. These beets can grow in a lot more places, so even though they don't make as much sugar per pound, most of the sugar we use comes from 'em."

"Huh, I never knew that," Twilight said contemplatively.

"Neither did I," admitted Luna. "But I must admit that there has been much that I've learned today that I didn't know before. I never imagined that so much knowledge was needed to run a farm."

"I reckon it's like any other profession, you need a bit more education then what you get in school. Though I suppose it's slightly different in that a lot of what me and AJ know, we learned from our parents and other farmer ponies. Not a whole lot of it's written down. But every once in a while, we all get together for an Equestrian Pomological Society meeting and trade tips and news about how to grow apples and whatnot."

Luna was intrigued by the word which rolled so expertly off the stallion's tongue. "Pomological?"

"Yeah, as in pomology. It's a type of botany that's mainly about apples and other fruit like cherries, dates, peaches, things like that."

Twilight broke in excitedly, "I never knew that there was a branch of science dedicated to apples!"

Twilight's excitement must have been infectious, or perhaps the red pony had warmed up to the subject matter. Eagerly, well as eagerly as Macintosh seemed capable of being, he replied, "Yep, pomology is a pretty interesting subject, least in my opinion. There's even an orchard run by the Royal Equestrian University where they crossbreed different species of apples to come up with new kinds. There's other branches of science that are kind of like it, but they focus on things like wheat, corn, and other crops too. Trying to figure out ways to make them grow bigger, stronger, and in more places."

He paused and ran his tongue over his lips, as if searching for his sprig of grass. "I think it's like anything else. Weather ponies study about clouds and weather, unicorn ponies study magic, and farming ponies study

farming. No matter what a pony does for a living, there's a lot of stuff you have to know in order to do it. Just because a pegasus doesn't know how to grow an apple, or a unicorn doesn't know what kind of cloud does what, or I don't know how the unified theory of magic works, doesn't mean that one pony's smarter than the other. Just that' they've chosen to learn about something important to them."

Luna had never considered it quite that way before. She had been aware that some occupations, such as weather patrol required specialized training, but she had assumed that jobs, such as farming, could be accomplished with only a minimum of education. However, as Applejack and Macintosh had demonstrated, farming appeared to require a wealth of knowledge just as in-depth as the more prestigious occupations. Perhaps the world wasn't as quite the simple place Luna had thought it was.

Her ruminations on the complexity of farm life were interrupted by the sounds of dishes being washed coming to a halt, and Applejack wandering back over to join them moments later.

"Ah'm mighty glad you came by today, Luna. Ah 'preciate the help." She seemed a bit nervous as she asked, "So, what'd you think about our apples?"

"They're simply wonderful," Luna gushed. "Absolutely the finest apples I've ever tasted. When I return to Canterlot, I assure you that I'll be speaking with the palace's chefs about changing their supplier."

Applejack beamed proudly, and Macintosh's smile was nearly as large. Before either sibling could say anything though, Granny Smith hobbled past the table. "All this cooking and cleaning has got me tuckered out. I'm going to go take a short nap before going to bed. You youngins don't stay up too late. And Big Mac, if somepony wanted to go a-courting and accidentally stayed out late for some reason, the parlor window's unlocked and real quiet."

"I'll keep that in mind. Have a nice nap, Granny."

The rest of the ponies echoed their well wishes, and Twilight and Luna profusely thanked the tired old mare for the wonderful dinner. Granny Smith nodded happily in reply, then disappeared deeper into the house.

Applejack sat down at the table, resting her forelegs on its now cleared top. With open sincerity she said to Luna, "Ah'm glad you liked our apples. We put a lot of work into growin' them, and it feels great when somepony else appreciates 'em."

Luna's legs were still aching from the inordinate amount of exercise they'd been subjected to. The dull pain caused Luna to remark sympathetically, "Yes, I think I can appreciate just how much effort you have to put into this farm. But thank you for caring enough to produce such wonderful fruit." Luna's eyes fell from Applejack's green ones, to study the newly interesting grains on the surface of the table. "And that's why I feel I have to apologize. I'm sorry."

Applejack's voice betrayed her confusion as she leaned low over the table, trying to look up into Luna's face. "Sorry? For what?"

"There's nothing I see that you need to be apologizing for," Macintosh stated. His deep voice almost daring Luna to come up with a reason she should be asking for his forgiveness.

Luna sighed. "I'm sorry for trying to bring about eternal night, twice. At the time I was only thinking about myself, and didn't spare even a moment's consideration for how the absence of the sun would affect the ponies of Equestria." Well, other than the thought of how it would force them to start appreciating her as much as they celebrated Celestia. "You work so hard, and produce such wonderful things, and I would have destroyed all that simply because I was being selfish."

Applejack reached across the table and tilted Luna's chin up with her hoof until the mares' eyes met one another. "Luna, don't fret about that. From what ah understand, that was Nightmare Moon talkin', not you. 'Sides which, I think I can understand a bit how you felt. Ah know what it's like to work hard on somethin' you're proud of, then share it with somepony and have them throw it back in your face. Why, ah reckon if ah'd been in your shoes, ah might have acted the same way you did."

Luna's eyes were a bit dewy at just how large the orange pony's heart was, and how easily she was forgiving her, as she choked out, "Really?"

"Eyup. Knowing AJ, she probably would have replaced all the food in Equestria with apples."

"Or maybe she would have turned all the plants into apple trees until everypony loved apples," Twilight suggested.

Applejack cut her brother and Twilight a less than amused glare. "Harr de har harr." Her expression softened as she turned back to Luna. "The point ah was trying to make, is that you made a mistake. One that ah think anypony could have. Course not everypony could pull off what you tried, but you don't need to apologize for it. Just so long as you know you made a mistake, and realize you were wrong. 'Sides, you've already been punished for it enough in my opinion. There's no sense in beatin' yourself up further over it."

Twilight leaned over and rested a hoof on Luna's shoulder. "She's right, Luna. We're your friends, and we've already forgiven you. You just need to forgive yourself now."

Luna looked around the table, her tears threatening to overwhelm her. "Do you really mean it, are we friends?"

There was a chorus of, "Why of course we are," "Eyup," and, "The best of friends!"

Faced with such an outpouring of goodwill, Luna smiled warmly and gratefully at Twilight, and then turned to the Apple siblings. "Then, as my friends, I hope that the next time you come to Canterlot, you decide to stay in the palace, as my guests. I believe that there's going to be a festival in the next month or so, and I hope that you'll attend. I've never been to a festival with my friends before. Perhaps it will give you a chance to better understand city life, and possible you'll be able to teach the gentleponies what it is to be noble."

Macintosh appeared as if the thought of him in Canterlot was the funniest thing he'd heard all night, while Applejack leaned back contemplatively. "At this festival, will there be any buffets?"

"I-I'm not sure." Luna wracked her brain, but such a question had never occurred to her as needing to be asked.

Applejack looked over at her brother. "We'd better take an extra cart of apples then, just in case. We might need them to make some fancier food for the ponies that think they're too good for regular appletastic treats."

"Well, we'll let you two figure out the logistics of your trip," Twilight spoke up. "But right now, we'd better be going. I left Spike alone at the library, and while I trust him not to get into too much trouble, you just never know."

Twilight stood up from the table, and regretfully Luna did as well. Her body had appreciated resting on the soft cushion, and now seemed to ache even more than before she had sat down. "If we must be going, then we must be going. Farewell Applejack, Macintosh. Thank you for a wonderful and most memorable day."

"Goodbye, Luna, goodbye, Twilight. Thanks for all your help today." Applejack came around the table and gave Luna a surprise farewell hug. "And don't be surprised when we show up on your doorstep, Luna."

Luna smiled kindly. "I'm looking forward to it."

With a small wave in Macintosh's direction and their farewells made, Twilight and Luna left the Apple home and began to retrace their steps from Sweet Apple Acres to Ponyville. The sun was swollen and low on the horizon as they walked along the compacted dirt road.

"Uh, I always eat too much whenever I visit the Apples during mealtimes," Twilight complained.

Luna looked compassionately over at her companion and saw that Twilight was a bit more ... rotund than normal. But in Luna's opinion it wasn't a bad look for the unicorn. Perhaps Granny Smith was right in her feeling that the unicorn wasn't eating enough. "They certainly do provide an enormous amount of food. I suppose it takes a lot of energy to keep a farm running as effectively as they do."

"More energy than it takes to study," Twilight agreed. "I usually only have a daffodil and daisy sandwich or something light like that for dinner."

"No wonder Mrs. Smith thought you were undernourished," kidded Luna.

"I didn't notice you eating your share."

Luna puffed herself up with false self-importance. "I'm afraid that I have to carefully monitor what I partake of. All of Equestria looks up to my sister

and I, and it wouldn't do at all if we simply let ourselves overindulge and enter into an unhealthy lifestyle."

Twilight rolled her eyes as she replied, "Of, of course not, Your Highness."

Luna maintained her haughty attitude for a few seconds longer. But Twilight's disbelieving expression and disingenuous tone caused a spurt of laughter to bubble out of her, breaking her façade. A moment later and Twilight's laughter joined hers, causing Luna to laugh more, which in turn egged on Twilight's laughter. Truthfully, Luna wasn't even sure why she was laughing. Other than the fact that Twilight's reaction had been adorable, and for some reason she felt happy and warm. She was laughing because she naturally had to, like she had to breathe, or had to blink. At that moment, she had to laugh.

Eventually though, their laughter calmed down, although there were a couple of false ends which led to brief jags of further laughing. Finally Luna caught her breath, though a large smile was indelibly left on her face.

"You know, I think that's the first time I've heard you laugh," Twilight mused.

"Really?" Luna thought back over her time with Twilight. Surely there had been a previous occasion when she'd laughed. It wasn't as if she were a naturally somber pony or one prone to bouts of depression. Thinking upon it, she was surprised with just how little time she had spent in the gifted unicorn's company. For some reason it felt as if she'd known Twilight for all her life. Or at least the part of it after she'd been released from her nightmare.

"Yes," stated Twilight with certainty. "I'd definitely remember it if I'd heard something so enchanting before. You should really laugh more often."

Luna hoped that the fading light from the setting sun hid the blush she could feel rising from Twilight's compliment. It was several seconds before she trusted herself to speak without her voice betraying her. "I suppose I just didn't have much to laugh about before now. But right now, I just feel ... happy." She laughed a little, mostly at herself, because she couldn't explain the way she was feeling clearly. She felt warm and bubbly, like all was right with the world, and no matter what happened, things would turn out fine.

"I know what you mean," Twilight said with a sigh and a distant tone. "Before I came to Ponyville, before I met my friends, I spent nearly all my time studying. All day and well into the night, only taking a break for classes. I locked myself away from everypony and surrounded myself with my books. I was so caught up in learning that I didn't have time for friends or for fun that didn't involve reading and studying. In fact, I didn't realize it until later, but the only time I felt true joy, the only time I was deeply happy, was the time I spent with Princess Celestia."

Twilight's tone grew wistful, and her tongue practically caressed Celestia's name. The warm feeling that had suffused through Luna moments before quickly contracted. Her insides knotted as she prepared herself to listen to Twilight sing her sister's praises.

"Don't get me wrong. I thoroughly enjoy books and learning. There's a sense of satisfaction, of accomplishment, a certain sense of happiness that you get from them that I haven't found anywhere else." She sighed. "But at the same time, sometimes that isn't enough. The wonderful times I've spent with Princess Celestia, and later with my friends here, they've given me a joy and happiness that I never knew I was missing until I found it. Now, I wouldn't trade that feeling for anything in the world."

Twilight's gaze had drifted to a place or time where Luna couldn't follow. But as she finished speaking, Twilight blinked a few times and returned to Equestria. She looked over at Luna a bit sheepishly. "Sorry. I got a bit sappy there. I don't often do that, and Spike usually catches it when I do."

The cold knot in Luna's stomach had eased somewhat, but still she felt like a terrible pony for hiding the truth from Twilight. What further happiness, what fond memories was she denying her friend out of selfishness?

"It wasn't sappy at all," Luna reassured her friend. "In fact, I think it was a lovely sentiment. I well know how fleeting happiness can be when you search for it alone."

The two mares lapsed into a silence that lasted for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. They were nearly at the outskirts of Ponyville, with only a single hill separating them from the bridge leading into town. Luna knew that she had broken the jocular mood she and Twilight had been sharing, and had chased her friend's mirth away. She wished she had the skills that other ponies seemed to come by naturally to lighten the

mood. She was sure that if any of Twilight's real friends had been there, they would know exactly what to say.

As Celestia put away her weary sun, a random idea floated into Luna's mind. Twilight might not be her friend in a few days when she learned of Luna's selfish actions, but at least the princess would be able to give her something memorable in the meantime to make up for the memories she was missing out on by being with her.

The stars revealed by the absence of the sun's light rained down their ineffectual glow as Luna slowed to a stop. Twilight continued walking for a few feet before she too stopped and looked questioningly back at Luna.

Luna commented tremulously, "Ceclestia has been planning a new holiday. The Winter Moon Celebration, to be held on the longest night of the year. She wants to hold it to honor the moon, and me. I've been practicing something for the festival, and I was wondering if maybe you could watch it and tell me if it's any good."

"Of course, Luna."

"Just stay right there."

As the sun had set, Luna had noticed a pair of trees at a distance from the side of the road that would hopefully be suitable for her purpose. She trotted over to a spot she thought was roughly between Twilight and the trees, and slowly let out a breath. She was nervous, and her heart was beating rapidly, anxious over not making a mistake in front of her friend, and what the unicorn's judgment of her performance was going to be. She closed her eyes and flexed her magic like a well used muscle. Far away, but as close as her heart, Luna could feel the moon patiently waiting. She unfurled her wings and opened her eyes long enough to rest them on the dark shadow that was Twilight. She closed them tightly and sprang into the air.

As she pushed herself up, pumping her wings vigorously with the effort, Luna pulled up the moon, attempting to match its movements to the beat of her wings. With a final thrust, she propelled her body high into the air, throwing out her hooves to embrace the sky as the moon burst out from behind the thick foliage of the trees, partially haloed by the curve between them.

Below her, Luna could hear a single pair of hooves stomping in appreciation, and in her mind the sound became the adulations of thousands. Leaving the moon to continue its trek across the sky, Luna glided down to where the now midnight purple unicorn waited for her. Softly alighting next to Twilight, Luna was buoyed by how enthusiastically her friend was responding to her display.

"Wow that was great, Luna!"

"Do you really think so? I was afraid that I still didn't have the timing exactly right. I've been practicing, but I've been too embarrassed to let anypony see me do it."

"It was wonderful." But her voice became contemplative as she added, "although ..."

"Yes?"

Twilight's tone turned strict and analytical. "Well, taking into account the fact that you were performing in an environment you had no control over, you did very well in my opinion. However, I think that it could have been more impressive if you take into account the angle that your audience will be spectating from. You might want to bring the performance to a climax while the moon is lower in the sky and you're closer to the watching ponies, creating the illusion that you're larger and the moon is more magnificent than normal. I also think that perhaps you raised your hooves a bit too early and tempered the dramatic impact of the image." Finished with her analysis, Twilight seemed to recollect who she was speaking to, and apologetically offered, with a nervous smile, "But still, it looked great."

Luna felt a bit disappointed by Twilight's quite honest critique. But she reminded herself that there was a reason she was practicing the maneuver. She wasn't perfect at it yet, and Twilight was simply giving her opinion. "Well, there's several months left before I'm going to perform it for all Equestria. I'll keep practicing, but I'm not sure how well I'll improve without somepony watching and giving me advice. Perhaps you could come to Canterlot and help me practice?"

"But, Luna, surely there's other ponies who could help you. You don't need me."

"I don't feel comfortable practicing in front of other ponies. When I'm with somepony, I always feel so self-conscious, afraid that I'll do or say something that will make them think less of me," Luna admitted. "But when I'm with you, it's different. I feel ... comfortable around you. I don't think it can be any other pony. Please say you'll come."

Twilight searched Luna's moonlit eyes for several seconds before she bashfully turned away and softly agreed, "Alright."

"Thank you, Twilight."

The two ponies began to walk towards Ponyville once more. A silence fell between them again, but this time it was soft and companionable. As the lights of Ponyville came into view, Luna reveled in the feelings of companionship she felt in the warm summer air, and resolved to put away her fears and concerns until tomorrow.

There were few ponies on the street as they passed through the town. Most of the residents were likely already preparing for bed. Some of the ponies they passed nodded politely or even waved to them. Twilight and Luna nodded and waved in reply, and soon found themselves back at Twilight's tree house. The many windows of which were warmly and welcomingly lit. Twilight opened and held the door for Luna before securely closing it behind them.

"There you are, Twilight," Spike greeted them. "I thought you were going to be back hours ago."

Twilight brushed past Luna and walked over to her assistant who appeared in the doorway leading to the kitchen, his arms crossed in displeasure. "I'm sorry Spike, but we got caught up helping Applejack, and then one thing led to another and we stayed for dinner."

"Hmph. It's nice to know someone got to eat dinner at a reasonable time at least."

"Didn't you find the grass and hay sandwiches I left out for you?" Twilight asked anxiously, obviously concerned for the baby dragon.

"Well yeah, but I'm tired of that pony stuff," Spike complained. "I know we have some sapphires, but I can't find them."

Twilight's concern evaporated and she rolled her eyes before giving Spike a somewhat annoyed look. "There's a reason for that you know. Every time we get sapphires, you sit down and eat the whole bag in one sitting."

Spike threw up his arms emphatically. "I can't help it! They just taste so good. Please, Twilight, I've been smelling them all day and it's been driving me crazy. Please, let me have just one. Please!" Spike fell to his knees in front of Twilight as he begged her.

"WeeeeeeeIIIIII ..." Twilight said as she looked upwards contemplatively. A smile graced Luna's face at the cute scene. She could tell that Twilight was just pretending to deliberate with herself. She knew that the unicorn had already decided to give into the demands of the diminutive dragon. "Alright. But just one. And afterwards, you need to get ready for bed."

"Aw, but, Twilight, I'm not tired yet," Spike whined.

Despite his objection, Twilight leveled a stern glare down at the dragon, and after a few seconds of silence, he slumped in defeat. "Okay. But I get to choose the sapphire," he said in an attempt to save some face at least.

"Deal." Twilight's horn glowed, and on a nearby bookshelf, a rather nondescript tome unshelved itself and floated toward her. She held it low to the floor, just in front of Spike, and opened it, revealing that it was actually a wooden box split evenly down the middle, disguised as a book. In its hollow cavity was a small velvet bag that Twilight spread open to reveal several large blue crystals.

Spike's eyes grew wide and he unconsciously licked his scaly lips as he stared down covetously at the bounty spread before him. He spent several long, agonizing moments examining each of the jewels before he selected one of the larger sapphires.

As he took a satisfied bite from the precious stone, Twilight snapped the faux book closed and whisked it away to the higher shelves, out of sight of the dragon. "There, I hope you're happy."

"Oh yeah," Spike said through a mouthful of gem.

"Good. After you're done, make sure you get ready for bed. I need to go draw a bath. We worked up a sweat at Applejack's today." She turned to

Luna and apologetically continued, "Although my tub is a bit small, so we'll have to take turns."

"That's alright." Honestly, Luna would have felt a bit uncomfortable bathing with somepony else. True there wasn't anything about it that should make her feel uncomfortable. But for some reason, the act of cleaning oneself seemed intimate to Luna, and something that should be shared only with somepony that she trusted without reservation.

Twilight led Luna down a twisting staircase to a room in the bowels of the tree. It had a long but narrow window close to the ceiling, made of frosted glass; its cool light bathed the room in dim shadows. With a flick of her magic, Twilight lit several squat candles spread throughout the room. Their warm light and pleasing aroma quickly spread throughout the small space.

Luna had never thought about it before, but if she had pictured what a library's bathroom would be like, it probably would have been similar to what she found in Twilight's. There were thick root-like wooden ribs lining the walls, in-between which were squeezed several bookshelves. The many candles Twilight had lit were perched on the shelves alongside stacks of pastel colored towels, brightly colored bottles, a wide variety of soaps and lotions, and the occasional stern bust of pony philosophers long dead.

The only thing that felt a bit odd was the fact that there weren't any books on the shelves. In fact, the only books in the room were in a short stack on a table next to the low and wide bathtub. A stack which was quickly surrounded by a purple glow and forcefully shoved into the cabinet beneath the sink before Luna had the chance to read any of the titles.

"Sorry if it's a bit messy, I don't clean up in here as often as I should," Twilight apologized with a suspiciously innocent air as she straightened a few of the nearby towels.

It actually wasn't messy at all in Luna's opinion. The bathroom's fixtures were solid wood, highly polished, with stylized gryphon clawed feet gripping the floor. The only hint of disorder came from the many bottles in the room partially filled to different points, jumbled together in a dizzying array of color.

"So, did you want bubbles in your bath?" Twilight asked as she turned the tap over her tub.

"Oh. Yes, I suppose so." Luna's reply was a bit distracted as she surveyed Twilight's bathroom.

Tendrils of steam were beginning to rise from the rushing water as Twilight plucked up a pink glass bottle from the shelf across the room. She floated it over to the bath and dropped a dollop into the rapidly filling tub. Soon a thick layer of bubbles was pushing upwards toward the rim of the tub.

"I'll let you have the first turn, and I'll go make some tea. I always love having a cup after a nice bath, it makes me feel warm inside and out."

Luna was about to protest against the preferential treatment, but she was feeling a bit uncomfortable with being so dirty. So with soft sincerity, Luna replied, "Thank you, Twilight."

"You're welcome. There's some conditioner and shampoo next to the tub, but if you want a different kind, there's lots more on the shelf over there." She pointed with her hoof at a shelf under the far window. "Rarity brought them for one of our sleepovers, and she told me to try them out to find one that I liked."

Luna eyed the profusion of bottles as she said, "Thank you. I think that I'll be able to find something I like. Rarity must have brought a sample of every shampoo in Equestria."

"Probably," Twilight laughed good naturedly as she walked over to the door. "I'll come back to check on you in a few minutes."

"Alright."

After Twilight had closed the door behind her, Luna stepped closer to the wooden tub to better examine it. It wasn't that bathtubs were a novel experience for her; it was simply that this was the first time that she had used one quite so small. The bathtub in her bathroom back in the Canterlot palace was easily ten times as large as Twilight's. In fact, it was more a private heated wading pool than a bathtub. It's deeper end rose over Luna's head and she had to actually swim when she ventured to that side.

Despite Twilight's bath being much smaller, it felt positively delightful as Luna slowly stepped into it, and the heat from the water began to ease the tight muscles in her leg. The water was hot, but not uncomfortably so. So Luna stepped fully in and slowly sat down in the relatively shallow water. Her movements pushed the foamy bubbles up to her chin, and a few of the larger ones broke free and began to float away.

A childish impulse ran through her and Luna smiled guiltily. She looked around to make sure nopony was watching, then leaned forward and popped the nearest bubble with her horn before it could float beyond her reach. She giggled as its soapy residue splashed against her forehead, and began aiming for the next closest bubble. The next couple of minutes were filled with the sounds of Luna's partially stifled giggles interrupted by the soft pops of soap bubbles and watery splashes as she moved around the tub to try and better reach the escaping airborne menace.

Eventually Luna ran out of bubbles. She tried blowing on the foam still in the bath, but the bubbles were too small and simply scattered, falling back into the water. She was a bit disappointed that her bath time fun was over, but she supposed that she should start bathing in earnest. Twilight was waiting her turn after all.

She turned her attention to the row of bottles on the shelf next to the tub. With her magic, Luna randomly lifted a light purple one which was labeled with a large strawberry. She uncorked the bottle and brought it close to her nose, and found that it smelled pleasantly sweet and fruity.

Luna levitated a nearby luffa over and applied a small stream of the viscous soap to it. Soon she was quickly building up a sweet smelling lather as she scrubbed herself. The heat from the water felt wonderful as she stretched out her limbs to reach everything. She still ached, but it was a pleasant ache rather than the overused and abused ache her muscles had been suffering from before.

Starting to feel the tiniest bit wrinkly, Luna rinsed herself off, and somewhat regretfully left the bath behind. She dried herself, using a trio of towels to simultaneously dry her mane, body, and tail. She had just hung up the towels to dry and picked up a brush and comb to tackle her mane, when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Twilight opened the door and glanced toward the bathtub before resting her gaze on Luna. She appeared almost disappointed for a moment, but Luna attributed the impression to her imagination. Twilight's tone and expression were cheerful as she asked, "Finished already?"

"Yes. I stepped out of the tub just now." Luna turned to the mirror over the nearby sink. With its help she began to hastily run the brush through her mane and the comb through her tail as she admitted, "Though I was tempted to linger for a bit longer. The hot water felt wonderful."

Twilight's hoofsteps were muted on the hardwood floor, and Luna watched her reflection cross the room as Twilight offered, "Well, if you'd like, you can take some more time and have another bath."

"I couldn't possibly do that. You haven't had a chance to get clean yet, and it's your bath. What manner of guest would I be if I monopolized your bathroom?" Luna's hair appeared more or less as it normally did, both ends. She set the grooming tools down as she turned to face her host. "Besides, after all that manual labor today, I fear that if I stayed too long in the bath, I'll fall asleep. I'm certain that you don't want an unconscious, waterlogged princess in your bathtub."

"I guess you're right." Twilight turned her head and began to magically gather various bottles from around the room. "If you'd like, the tea is ready in the kitchen, and there's still some grass and hay sandwiches left in case you were feeling hungry."

Luna let out a short laugh that caused Twilight's ears to turn in her direction. "After that meal at Sweet Apple Acres, I'm not sure that I'll ever be hungry again. But a cup of tea sounds wonderful."

"If it's cold, just tell Spike to warm it up for you," Twilight called out after Luna as she made her way toward the door.

"Take your time bathing. If you're feeling anywhere as sore as I was, the water will feel delightful." Luna quietly closed the door behind her and climbed the stairs leading up to the rest of the library. She easily found her way back to the kitchen, which she entered just in time to find Spike with his claw in the jewel jar.

He had frozen when Luna walked into the kitchen, standing on a stool next to the counter, his arm outstretched and plunged deep into a clay jar with the word 'GEMS' etched into the side. They stared at one another for a few long seconds. Spike's wide eyed guilt was palpable.

Luna broke the tableau by quietly stating, "I thought that Twilight said you were allowed only a single sapphire before bed."

"Well, yeah. But she didn't say anything about rubies, emeralds," he pulled his claw out of the jar and looked down at the stone he had retrieved, "or topaz."

"Hmmmm. I believe that what Twilight meant was that you weren't allowed to have any more jewels before bed."

Spike began to look even more worried as he nervously asked, "You're not going to tell her are you?"

"WeeeeeeeIIIIIII ..." Luna drawled in her best Twilight imitation.

"Please don't tell her," cried Spike as he hopped off the stool and rushed over to cling to Luna's forelegs. "Please, I'll do anything. You don't know what she's like when she gets 'I'm not angry, just disappointed.'"

Luna smiled down at the dragon and couldn't resist his adorable eyes. "I suppose I can keep silent about it this time. But you'd better hurry up before Twilight gets out of the bath."

"Thank you, Princess Luna!"

"No, thank you, Spike. The tea you made this morning was excellent. I'm sorry that I haven't had the opportunity to thank you for it earlier."

Spike waved his claw dismissively as he replied, "Aw, after the hundredth or so time making it at two in the morning, anyone could do it as well as I could."

"Perhaps, but it wasn't anypony who made it. It was you. Thank you."

Spike blushed with pride and simply answered, "You're welcome," before he made his exit toward the bedroom.

Luna smiled as she watched him go. She then settled down at the kitchen table and prepared herself a cup of tea. She had barely drunk a third of it before Twilight made her appearance. She appeared fresh and refreshed from the bath, and in companionable silence she joined Luna at the table, pouring a cup of tea for herself.

Though the warm water of the bath had curbed most of the aching in her muscles, Luna still felt somewhat physically exhausted. Her body was crying out for rest, but her mind was wide awake thanks to the early hour. But what better place to rest the body and exercise the mind than a library?

"I'm not feeling tired at all," Luna confessed to Twilight as they were cleaning up the teacups. "Would it be alright if I studied in your library for a few hours?"

Twilight smiled and replied, "That's fine. In fact I was planning on staying up myself, to catch up on my reading."

They left the kitchen and entered the library proper. Twilight walked toward the stairs leading up to the bedroom, calling out over her shoulder, "I'll just go put Spike to bed and come back to join you." She paused on the first step as an expression of dawning realization washed over her. "We can be study buddies! I've never had one before, but I read about them when I was studying the proper methods of studying. I always thought it sounded like fun, peers helping on another to learn a subject. But I never had the opportunity before." Twilight cantered over to Luna eagerly. "So, what topic were you planning on studying?"

In the face of such exuberance, and with Twilight's large purple eyes sparking excitedly at her, Luna balked a bit as she replied, "Uh, well, I hadn't actually settled on a definitive topic as of yet."

"Oh, then we should totally study love. I think I have a good grasp on the basics, but I still don't understand everything about it. Why don't you gather all the books you can find on love, relationships, friendships, and maybe even enemyships. Wait, is that a word? Anyway, they say that a good way to learn about something is to study its opposite." She looked away and tapped her chin thoughtfully with her hoof. "Although, is hate really the opposite of love? Wouldn't it be apathy?" She turned toward Luna with an excited grin and shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well, I guess we'll find out! Right, study buddy? I'll be right back."

Luna couldn't help but smile wryly as the energized unicorn raced up the stairs. It wasn't everypony who could get so excited by the prospect of a night full of reading. She turned her attention to the massive bookshelves lining the walls, and began browsing their titles. As she walked beside the shelves she pulled the occasional promising book from its brethren with her magic. By the time Twilight returned, a rather substantial stack of books was floating next to Luna. She split the stack in two and set the books down on a nearby table while taking a seat next to a conveniently placed oil lamp. "I think these should provide enough material to get us started."

"Definitely. With this many books, we should get a good foundation at least." Twilight took a seat across the table from Luna and slid one of the stacks of books closer to herself. She then conjured up a stack of blank paper and retrieved an inkwell and a quill. Twilight floated the top book off the pile, and after a cursory examination of the title, eagerly cracked it open. Soon she was lost to the literary world, only pausing long enough to jot down the occasional scratchy note.

Luna didn't immediately delve into her own stack of books. Instead she spent a minute or two observing her friend. The purple unicorn was once again focusing on the task at hoof with the same single minded determination that she had shown while working earlier. Luna was quickly coming to find the expression charming, and she hoped that someday somepony would look at her with such intense focus.

Abandoning her study of Twilight, Luna opened the first book of her own stack, and soon was lost in its pages. It turned out to be far more interesting and much less academic than she had expected, and completely engrossed her for quite some time. It was with surprise that she looked up from it to find that the nearby lamp had almost burned through its oil. She also noticed that a cup of tea had been stealthily placed near her elbow, and that Twilight was no longer reading, but was resting her head on her hooves and watching Luna contemplatively.

"You know, you get this little wrinkle between your eyes when you're concentrating on something," Twilight said conversationally and with a hint of amusement.

Luna was flummoxed by the random comment for a moment, but she quickly and hotly replied, "I do not!"

Twilight smiled, her eyes twinkling in merriment. "Yes you do. And sometimes you stick your tongue out, just a little bit."

Luna flushed in embarrassment. Sometimes when she was focused on something, she did bite her tongue between her teeth, and possibly, on rare occasions, she had allowed it to protrude slightly. Hoping to hide her embarrassment from Twilight's malicious slander, Luna picked up the conveniently placed cup of tea and took a deep sip. As the warm tea coursed through her, Luna raised her eyebrow in surprise. Instead of the jolt of energy she had been expecting, the mellow tea filled her with a relaxing warmth.

"What's this?" She asked as she floated the cup back down to its saucer.

"Cammel-mill tea. It's a special kind of tea that helps you relax. Princess Celestia introduced me to it years ago when I stayed awake for three days straight studying for my advanced eldritch magic final."

The warmth left behind by the drink was heavy and soothing. Luna stifled a yawn as she asked, "What time is it?"

"Nearly one in the morning."

A bit early, but then she had woken up early. "Do you think it's too early to go to bed?"

"Not at all." Twilight raised her hoof to cover her own yawn. She glanced down at the books strewn across the table. "We can pick up where we left off tomorrow."

"Alright." The rigors of the day must have crept up on Luna while she had been occupied by reading. Her eyelids were becoming too heavy to keep open for any length of time. The two tired ponies stumbled up the stairs, Twilight extinguishing the lights as they went.

Luna carefully maneuvered around Spike's basket, trying to let the sleeping dragon lie, as she walked to Twilight's bed. With a sigh of relief, she slipped under the covers, turning to face the large window through which the starry night was on display. A few moments later and she felt the now familiar weight of Twilight settling into the narrow bed with her. With the other

pony's comfortingly warm presence at her back, Luna quickly drifted off to sleep.

She was awakened from her dreamless slumber by an urgent pressure. Luna opened her eyes to find that several hours had passed and her moon hung low in the sky. The tingling pressure of Celestia's sun waiting to be raised roused Luna out of the bed. It was time for her to put the moon away in order to make room for the sun, but before she did, Luna wanted to admire the final minutes of night.

Outside Twilight's window the pale moonlight bathed Ponyville in a sea of black and grey. Shadows softened the contours of the buildings, and the streets were paved with molten silver. Despite the early hour it seemed that many of the residents of Ponyville were awake. Several of the buildings had lights in their windows, and from time to time Luna could see the dim figures of the early risers going through their morning rituals as they prepared for the day ahead. Far in the distance, the edge of the horizon was faintly discernable thanks to the light of the impatiently waiting sun.

Luna turned away from the window and contemplated the soundly sleeping mare she had left in the bed behind her. The moon's light fell across the bed, highlighting and accentuating the sinuously curving lines of the sleeping unicorn's body tangled in the sheets. During the night, Twilight had turned over in her sleep, allowing her peaceful, innocent face to be revealed in the waning moonlight. Her delicate eyelashes flickered as she dreamt the dreams of the innocent.

As she watched her friend sleep, in the darkest moments of the night, those just before dawn, Luna asked herself why. Why did she have to sacrifice her own happiness again? Why did she have to give up her friendship for the sake of Celestia's? Her sister had lived amongst their ponies for a thousand years without her. She had enjoyed the company of friends, students, and apprentices. She had never known the loneliness that Luna had felt, the isolation of being ignored by all of Equestria.

Surely Luna deserved one friend. A friend who would be there for her, no matter what happened. Celestia had a whole kingdom of ponies who almost literally worshipped her. Couldn't she spare a single pony, just one small unicorn, who would look toward Luna instead of her sister? Did she

really need to tell Celestia how Twilight Sparkle felt? Did she need to bridge the gulf that was growing between her sister and her friend?

Abruptly, Luna recognized the burningly cold sensation that was pulsing through her. Its heady sting was both familiar and frightening. She was jealous. Of her sister. Again. A thousand years ago she'd been resentful of her sister's popularity with the ponies of Equestria. Now she was jealous of her sister's popularity with a single young mare.

Hot tears began to slip down Luna's face. It just wasn't fair. Why did everypony love her sister? Why did she love her sister? After everything she'd been through, the jealousy, the lies, the strife, the imprisonment, after everything, Luna still couldn't bring herself to hate her sister. Perhaps it was simply because Celestia was better than her.

No. She was just as good as Celestia, just as powerful. In fact, she was more powerful. Was she not the mistress of the moon and the stars? Was she not even at that moment denying the sun its place in the sky?

An all too familiar and tantalizing power coldly raced through Luna's frame. But at the moment that she merely had to reach out and reclaim her title as the Queen of the Night, Luna's eyes fell upon the unconscious, guileless face of Twilight. Did any of it matter? If she defeated her sister and proved that she was more powerful, that she was better, would that mean Twilight would like her any better? No. In fact, it would likely only push Twilight away.

With an almost physically painful sensation, accompanied by a magical howl of rage, Luna let go the power she had been drawing in, and let her hateful jealousy slip through her hooves. Despite the enormous power at her command, Luna couldn't force anypony to love her. She had tried it once, and had failed rather spectacularly. Her friendship might be based upon deception, but she wouldn't threaten what little she had by repeating the mistakes of a millennia ago.

With a heavy heart, Luna shooed her moon away and emptied the sky for Celestia's sun. It would doubtlessly burst impressively over the horizon, filling the world with warmth and light. But Luna didn't stay to watch it. Instead she settled back into the narrow bed that was permeated with Twilight's warmth. Unsure of what the next day would bring, Luna pressed

her face into the pillow that was suffused with Twilight's scent, and in the grey dawn light, surrendered herself to what dreams may come.

She groggily awoke hours, perhaps days later, with a feeling that all was not right with the world. Her right wing and foreleg were numb in the uncomfortable way that indicated their circulation had been cut off. She could also feel the dried remnants of a line of drool running down her cheek, indicating that she had slept with her mouth open. Which meant she'd probably been snoring.

Blearily, Luna opened her eyes and was confronted by a wall of purple. She raised her hoof to wipe it out of her way, but found that somepony else's hoof was restricting her movements. Luna looked down, through a gap in the purple, and found that what was impeding her sight was part of Twilight's mane.

Somehow, sometime during the night, she and the unicorn had switched sides of the bed. Luna found herself lying on her back, on the side of the bed closest to the door. Twilight was laying half on top of her, with her head on Luna's chest and her body trapping Luna's leg and outstretched wing.

Just as she was coming to grips with the situation, Luna was startled by the door banging open and Spike loudly proclaiming, "Twilight, they were out of —" He stopped suddenly, and Luna regarded him with the one panicked eye she could turn in his direction without moving her head and disturbing Twilight.

"Uh, I'll, uh, come back later," Spike decided in a quieter tone. He hastily made his exit, swiftly but quietly closing the door behind him. The manner of his exit, as well as his expression, betrayed the fact that the dragon believed he had interrupted something he shouldn't have. Luna wondered to herself, was it strange for two friends to share a bed?

The thought, as well as any others she might have had, quickly fled as Twilight unintelligibly muttered something, then repositioned her head, burying her nose in the crook of Luna's neck. Feeling the other mare's warm breath on her sensitive skin, Luna pushed away all thoughts of propriety, or of the horrendous pins and needles she'd be feeling in her wing. Secure in her friend's hooves, she drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 2-3

The next time Luna awoke, it was to the sensation of her hair being tugged on. She tried to ignore the pull toward consciousness, safe and secure in a cocoon of warmth. However, just as she was settling back down into a deep sleep, the pulling sensation on her hair started again. Luna resignedly opened her eyes and found herself staring into a pair of lovely but panicked purple ones. Twilight's distraught face was mere inches away from hers, and their foreheads were nearly touching.

"O-oh, you're awake. This isn't what it looks like," Twilight declared in a voice somewhat higher than normal.

"Um, good morning." Luna wasn't quite sure what was going on, and even less sure of what the appropriate thing to say was when you've woken up and your best friend is straddling you.

It was apparent from Twilight's distressed expression that she was feeling even more uncomfortable with the situation than Luna was. With their faces so close, Luna could easily feel the other pony's breath as she quickly explained, "Y-you see, last night my horn and your hair got tangled together somehow. I woke up this morning and we were sleeping really close together again, so I tried to get up without waking you, but my horn was caught in your hair. So I tried to untangle it, but then you woke up at the worst possible time" Twilight was babbling, no doubt because she was feeling embarrassed by being in such a compromising position.

"It's alright," Luna reassured her nervous bed partner. "I roll around a lot at night. That's probably how I ended up ensnared by your horn. I'm sure that with both of us working on it, we'll be able to quickly extricate ourselves."

Luna looked upwards to gauge the severity of the hair snag. Unfortunately it was just out of her visual range and all she managed to accomplish was to nearly cross her eyes while looking up. Twilight let out an amused snort and Luna refocused her eyes to look at her friend enquiringly. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," Twilight said with an innocent lilt while studying something across the room with a rather amused expression.

Luna mentally shrugged and tried looking up again, slowly tilting her head. She ignored Twilight's stifled laugh and attempted to find the tangle. But it was of no use. Her view of Twilight's horn was blocked by her own, and the sensations from the two horns brushing against one another weren't helping her to concentrate.

"Perhaps if we both stood up and simply tried to pull away from one another, the issue will resolve itself," Luna proposed.

"Okay." Twilight shifted to the side to give Luna enough room to carefully maneuver to her knees. A task made difficult not only because of her caught hair, but also because her right foreleg and wing were numb from where Twilight had slept on them.

Luna ignored the tingling sensation that was running through her limbs as she and Twilight faced one another across the rumpled blankets of the bed. Twilight lowered her head slightly, and the two ponies began to pull away from one another. For several seconds it seemed that they were stuck fast, but with a sudden tearing sensation and a brief but sharp pain for Luna, she and Twilight flew apart.

Twilight crashed against the headboard loudly while Luna tumbled over the end of the bed and landed on Spike's basket. It flew up and into the air, flipping before landing upside down on her head. Her ungainly fall to the floor was more surprising than painful, so Luna was able to quickly recover and levitate the basket off her while she looked around to make sure that Twilight was alright.

The unicorn in question was gingerly rubbing the back of her head, but otherwise appeared unscathed. Wrapped tightly around her horn was a clump of long bluish hair, with several more strands lying on the rumpled bed sheet between the two ponies.

"Are you hurt?" Luna asked with concern.

"No, I think I'm okay." Twilight stopped rubbing her head and rolled off the bed. "I didn't think I was living in a hardwood though," she joked as she walked around the bed toward Luna. She looked up at Luna, about to say something, but the words died on her lips as Twilight fully saw Luna's hair for the first time that morning. Her mouth curled into an involuntary smile and she tried to smother another amused snort.

Seeing her reaction, Luna lifted a hoof to her hair fearfully and asked, "It's not that bad, is it?"

"It's worse actually," replied Twilight with a giggle permeating her voice. "What did you do last night to get it so messy?"

"Well, I have been known to move around in my sleep," Luna admitted. "But I don't recall being the pony to have their horn caught in somepony else's mane."

While Twilight was busy blushing at Luna's reminder, Luna picked herself off the floor and turned to the nearby mirror to gauge the damage to her mane. It was extremely disorganized. Strands were sticking out in several directions they normally wouldn't be, and it was obvious that it had been her bangs that Twilight's horn had been caught in, thanks to the snag and curling tangle that the exercise had left that section of her mane in.

"It is a bit ..." Luna trailed off, at a loss for quite the right description.

"Frizzy," suggested Twilight, a playful smile bleeding through her tone.

"Yes, I suppose that sums it up best." Luna levitated the nearby brush close to her, and began attacking her tangled mane. A few minutes later and she asked, "Twilight is there some spell you know concerning hair management? My mane is being rather uncooperative."

"Sorry, Luna, but Trichology isn't one of the areas that I've studied extensively yet."

"Trichology?"

"The study of the mane, tail, and hair follicles in general," Twilight explained as she walked to a nearby cupboard and began to rummage around in it.

Luna paused in brushing her hair and looked askance at the lavender unicorn for a moment. "Is there a field of study for everything these days? As I remember it, the few specialists who were around a thousand years ago were primarily mathematicians."

Twilight replied in a thoughtful tone, her head still buried in the cupboard. "Hmm, well mathematics is still a popular field of study, but there are

specialists in just about everything you can think of. Although I don't think anypony has delved too deeply into space exploration just yet. But speaking of specialists, Rarity loaned me a few sprays and gels that are designed to hold and shape hair. Maybe one of these will help with your mane." She stood up with a hoofful of jars and canisters hugged to her body.

After a rigorous round of brushing, combing, spraying, and rubbing pleasant smelling ointments into her hair, Luna's mane appeared close to normal. Although her bangs were slightly thinner and a bit shorter than they had been last night, and the end had been radically curled thanks to Twilight's impromptu curling iron horn technique.

As Twilight spent time in front of the mirror, fixing her own lightly disheveled mane, Luna ruffled her wings a few times, trying to shake out the last vestiges of the prickly feeling she still felt. But she knew that it would still be a while until her leg and wing felt completely normal. In addition she was feeling rather peckish. Thankfully, the smell of something delicious being made wafted up from the library below. "Now that we've gotten that all straightened out," Luna allowed herself a small smile at her pun, "perhaps it's time for breakfast."

"Definitely, we can't skip the most important meal of the day," Twilight agreed. She set down the brush and the two ponies made their way downstairs and into the kitchen. There they found Spike in the midst of making waffles.

"Good morning," he greeted them as he removed a waffle from the iron. He turned around and met Luna's eyes for the briefest of moments before he quickly turned away in awkward embarrassment. "Er, afternoon. Whatever time it is." He ladled batter into the waffle iron, then closed its hinged lid and breathed flame around it.

"Good morning, Spike," Twilight greeted her assistant. "It's surprising to see you up so early." As she spoke, she and Luna took seats at the kitchen table opposite each other.

"I'm not up early; you're just getting up late. In fact I think this week has been the first time I've gotten up before you in months, maybe even years."

Spike didn't appear too pleased with the new development, but Twilight seemed to ignore him as her magic surrounded the plate of waffles at his elbow and floated them over to the table.

"Sorry," Luna apologized to both her and the small dragon.

Twilight flew a pair of empty plates through the air and halted them just in front herself and Luna. At the same time she was sorting several of the waffles into two hovering stacks. She spared enough attention in Luna's direction to cluelessly ask, "What for?"

Luna's face betrayed her surprise at Twilight's not understanding of the simple matter. "For forcing you to keep such odd hours of course."

"Oh don't worry about it," Twilight replied with a dismissive wave of her hoof. The plates landed and the stacks of waffles that had been placed on them had their edges perfectly aligned. "I'm actually a night owl by nature. Back when I was studying in Canterlot I stayed up late most nights. In fact I even tried to get the school to reschedule their classes to late afternoon and early evening instead of beginning so early in the morning."

"You almost got them to do it too," Spike added as he retrieved another waffle from the iron and ladled more batter onto the hot griddle. "That two hour presentation of yours on all the good things about late classes, and how waking up early was bad for learning was awesome. If I were in charge of the school, I totally would have done what you told them." With another jet of flame, the final waffle was cooked, and Spike placed it with the rest of the short stack he had made. He set the iron out to cool then waddled over and sat at the table next to Twilight, still avoiding Luna's eyes.

"Yeah," Twilight said with a regretful sigh. She poured syrup over her waffles before setting the glass container in front of Luna. "I almost had the faculty and administration convinced to adopt my plan, until Princess Celestia put an end to it. 'A pony shouldn't force others to change simply to make her own life easier. Equestria doesn't revolve around a single pony.'" Twilight made air quotes with her hooves as she repeated her mentor's words.

Luna smiled, but was able to hold back her chuckle at Celestia's ironic statement. "Still, I'm sorry that I've upset your schedule to such an extent,

Twilight. I promise that from now on I shall attempt to be a bit more respectful of the rhythm of your day." Luna's smile grew wider. "I promise to keep you up no later than two, two thirty."

Twilight laughed lightly at Luna's joke. "You promise?"

"To you, I will never be untrue."

"Heh, you sound a bit like Zecora saying it like that," commented Twilight as she finally began to eat her breakfast.

"Who?" Luna didn't remember Twilight mentioning a pony named Zecora in her letters. Although admittedly their correspondence was still fairly young.

"She's a friend of mine who lives in the Everfree Forest. Somehow everything she says rhymes. She knows so much about herbs, as well as almost everything in nature, it's amazing. I often consult her when I have a question about something that I don't understand, but isn't important enough to bother Princess Celestia with."

"I see," Luna said curtly. The burst of jealousy she felt was irrational she knew. But just how many friends did Twilight Sparkle have? How many claims on her attention and time were there? And who was this strange pony that Twilight spoke of with such respect? "Well I hope that now we're friends, you'll look to me on occasion when you need some advice. I may not be up-to-date on all aspects of modern life, but I do have an extensive knowledge of the mystical arts."

Twilight smiled eagerly at Luna's offer. "Of course I will, Luna. Although I'm sure that your time is just as valuable as Celestia's. I wouldn't want to bother you over every little thing."

"Please, Twilight, you could never be a bother to me."

Luna put aside her unaccountable irritability and bit into the perfectly prepared waffles in front of her. The remnants of her dark thoughts were wiped away by her surprise at how delicious they turned out to be. The breakfast treats were only lightly sweetened by a touch of syrup. They tasted of buckwheat and some other flavor Luna couldn't readily identify, but rendered them light and fluffy.

"This is wonderful, Spike," she exclaimed joyously.

The dragon in question puffed up pridefully at Luna's complement. "Well, I have been practicing my cooking for a few years now. Someone around here needs to know how to boil water. Besides, a dragon has to have a lot of talents, be a real 're-nay-sauce' man if he wants to impress a modern girl."

"Renaissance, Spike," Twilight absently corrected him.

"Yeah, that too." The young dragon finally met Luna's eyes again as he boasted. Although thanks to the red in his cheeks, it was plain to see that he felt uneasy with whatever he had thought he'd seen earlier. They shared an awkward moment of silence between them, Luna unsure of how to even start explaining the situation he had found her and Twilight in, or even if an explanation was necessary. It wasn't as if they had been doing anything wrong after all. It had just been two friends sharing a bed, admittedly rather closely, but it had been wholly innocent.

By mutual silent consent they turned their attention to their plates and silently continued breakfast. The meal passed quietly, and quickly, although Luna failed to finish her portion. She had been enjoying the meals in Ponyville perhaps a bit too much, and had resolved on cutting back. It would be insufferable to return to Canterlot and have her figure commented on by Celestia.

Noticing that both ponies had finished with their breakfast, Spike hopped down and began clearing the table without being asked. In fact, judging by Twilight's non-reaction, it was expected of him. Soon the sounds of Spike washing the few dishes they had used filled the room.

In the warm and sedate atmosphere, Twilight leaned forward onto the table and asked, "So, study buddy, did you learn anything about love last night?"

There was a wet crash as a soapy dish fell through Spike's claws into the sink. With a shocked expression he looked over his shoulder at Luna and Twilight, who were giving him questioning looks of concern.

"Are you alright, Spike?" Twilight asked.

"Heh, sorry," he said while picking up the undamaged plate and turning back to clean it. "You know how dishes can be."

Twilight seemed a bit off put by Spike's attitude, but she turned back to Luna without asking the dragon why he was acting a bit strangely. Her eager expression shook Luna out of her own embarrassed silence.

"Yes and no," Luna replied to her earlier question. "To be honest, what I read last night wasn't so much a treatise on the subject as it was a collection of poems about the emotion. While they were quite entertaining, and provided an interesting insight into the subject, they weren't the best source material to be hoped for. That being said, I'm not entirely certain just what it is about love that you're trying to learn."

Twilight frowned contemplatively and looked off into the distance in thought. "Everything I guess. I want to know what love is, how it works, why it is, when and where it comes from. It's easy to understand an emotion like fear or anger because whenever I feel them, it's easy to point out just where they begin and where they end. But with love it's different. It can creep up on you, slowly building overtime, or it can suddenly spring on you. In a way you never thought it could, over a few days or weeks." Twilight looked back at Luna with a blush. "And then to complicate things, there are different kinds of love; for family, for friends, for ... lovers."

Luna thought deeply before she spoke. Although her experience with the emotion wasn't as extensive as she would have liked. Thus far the only ponies she had felt any truly deep feelings of affection for were Celestia and Twilight. Nonetheless, two heads were better than one, so she offered her opinion.

"I feel that love is such a subjective emotion, that it can't be explained in the detail that you seem to be looking for. At least not by anypony other than yourself. All the poets, the artists, the novelists in Equestria can expound on love all they'd like, but in the end, all their words, all their forms of expression fall short of the actual emotion. For each pony love is different, so the only pony who can fully define love is the pony who feels it. At least that's what I think."

Twilight mulled over Luna's words as the clink of dishes being washed continued in the background. Without meeting her eyes, Twilight quietly but insistently asked Luna, "Have you ever loved anypony?"

"Well, I love Celestia. But if you mean romantically, then I have to say that I'm not certain whether I have or haven't."

With a ruefully sad attempt at a chuckle, Twilight admitted, "I know what you mean."

"There, I'm all done with the kitchen," Spike loudly declared with no delicacy for the atmosphere that had settled between Luna and Twilight.

Luna looked up from her contemplation of Twilight's face, and examined the room. She had to admit that it was immaculately cleaned. Perhaps she should look into getting a dragon assistant.

Enjoying the warm and pleasant company, Luna was loath to get up from the table and truly start the day. Apparently Twilight in shared this sentiment since she roused herself enough to ask her assistant, "Spike, would you mind making us some tea? A cup or two would be wonderful now."

The dragon let out a put upon sigh and shot a sharp glance in Twilight's direction, but he replied, "Okay." And immediately retrieved the teapot and other utensils to brew the tea.

As he was bringing the water to a boil, the sound of the library's door opening and closing came to them, and a voice called out, "Twilight dear, are you in?" It took Luna a moment to place it as belonging to Twilight's friend Rarity. At the sound of the voice, Spike nearly vaporized the water in the pot with a great blast of flame, and took a moment to check his scales for blemishes.

"We're in the kitchen," Twilight called out, sitting up a bit straighter.

"I was passing by and was wondering if you were finished with my copy of ..." Rarity's voice had grown louder as she had approached, and Luna turned in her seat to greet her friend's friend. Upon seeing Luna, Rarity trailed off for a moment before she loudly and jubilantly exclaimed, "Good afternoon, Princess Luna! Why, I thought it would be far too early for you to be awake. From my understanding you seem to be a dusk to dawn sort of pony."

"Good afternoon, Rarity. Usually I am," Luna admitted with a smile. "But I didn't feel right forcing Twilight to keep my hours, so I've been going to bed early this week." Luna shot a glance at Twilight's still somewhat sleep muddled state before she wryly added, "Although I'm afraid that I've had an adverse effect on Twilight's sleeping schedule."

"So I see," commented Rarity as she walked deeper into the kitchen, revealing that she was sporting a pair of fetching saddlebags. "But both of you must be careful. If a pony changes their sleeping habits too much, too quickly, it can have all sorts of icky side effects. Like a limp mane, bad skin, or even, ugh, baggy eyes," she said with a shiver.

Spike had placed steaming cups of tea in front of Luna and Twilight, and was fetching another cup for Rarity. Twilight had lifted her cup and was sipping from it while Rarity spoke, and she rolled her eyes at Luna, obviously not as concerned with the dire threat of baggy eyes as her friend was. She placed the cup back on its saucer and politely inquired, "Would you like to join us for breakfast, or lunch I guess, Rarity?"

"Yeah, these are my special Spike waffles," Spike eagerly declared as he placed a cup and saucer in front of Rarity with all the practiced grace of a professional server. "They're the best tasting waffles in all Equestria, as voted by the Canterlot Castle Newsletter. I can make you as many as you like."

"Oh thank you, Spike, but I've already eaten. A cup of tea is more than enough for me."

"Oh," Spike said disappointedly. He had sprung across the room ready to make more waffles, but trudged back to the table without the spring in his step that had been there before.

"Actually, I just dropped by because I was planning on taking tomorrow off, and I was wondering if you'd finished with my copy of —"

"Your book!" Twilight hastily and loudly interrupted Rarity. She leapt up from the table with an energy that surprised and confused Luna. "Yes I, um, finished it. I'll go get it. Right now." Clearly but unaccountably flustered, Twilight left the room, her hooves loudly and rapidly crossing the library.

Luna and Rarity shared a questioning and slightly concerned expression as they looked after the rapidly retreating lavender unicorn. Luna had to wonder just what kind of book it was that made Twilight so obviously uncomfortable to talk about it in her company. Spike however seemed unfazed by Twilight's behavior as he poured himself a small cup of tea. Apparently her excitability wasn't anything new to the young dragon.

Deciding that Twilight was likely going to be a few minutes at least, Rarity sat down at the table and daintily lifted the teacup before her with a pale azure magic much lighter in color than either Luna's or Twilight's.

"So, Princess Luna, how are you finding our little town thus far," she pleasantly asked after a few moments of companionable silence.

"Oh, it's quite lovely."

"Isn't it? It's quite a charming place really, but sadly it pales in comparison to a city like Canterlot or Manehattan, I'm sure. All the style, the sophistication, the glamour! It makes a pony feel so alive. Don't get me wrong, Ponyville has its charms, it's quite quaint. But for a pony to be anypony, I think that they need to spend some time in the city that never sleeps. Don't you agree?"

Luna took a deep sip before she replied, "I actually don't spend too much time following the latest fashion trends, so I'm a bit out of step with the culture of places like Manehattan."

Rarity seemed genuinely surprised by Luna's admission. "But why ever not, my dear princess? A pony with your poise, your grace, could be a trendsetter with only the barest of effort. Why if you set your mind to it, I'm sure that you'd be the princess not only of Equestria, but of the fashion world as well."

Not wanting to delve into the reasons why Luna purposely alienated herself from most other ponies, she attempted to divert the conversation. "You know, Rarity, you can just call me Luna. You don't have to call me princess."

"Of course, princess, of course," Rarity said distractedly, her mind obviously envisioning the great fashion based future that Luna had before her. Strangely though, the sting of her title only lightly pricked Luna when

Rarity said it. Coming from the fashionable unicorn, princess didn't sound so much like a title, as a term of endearment.

Rarity abruptly turned to look more closely at Luna, her eyes full of fiery enthusiasm. "In fact, speaking of fashion, while you're in town, perhaps you'd be willing to assist me with a small design issue."

"Of course," easily replied Luna, eager to help any of Twilight's, and now her friends. "Although I hope it isn't anything requiring too much skill. As I've said, I don't have much experience with fashion."

"Oh, I'm sure that you'll do fine," declared Rarity with a wave of her hoof. "I'm in the middle of coming up with a new line of clothing for winter, and I sorely need a pony of your refined taste to give me their opinion on it. And it would be wonderful if you'd agree to let me take your measurements for a new dress I'm in the midst of designing. I'm thinking of calling it, 'Midnight Empress,' and I need some pony with your natural elegance, your grace, your ..." she twirled her hoof around for a moment as she searched for the proper description. "Your *je ne sais quoi*. You simply exude a regal air, and that's precisely what I want this dress to do. The more I think on it, the more I simply must have you model for me and provide inspiration. Please say you'll do it, princess. For me? Please?"

Faced with such a forceful appeal, Luna readily agreed, "Certainly, I'll help you, Rarity."

"I'll help too," Spike chimed in. "Who knows when you'll need a mobile pincushion, or ... something set on fire. I'm awesome at setting things on fire."

"Oh, thank you!" Rarity said exuberantly, dramatically lunging over and embracing Luna for a few moments. "Thank you both," she added as she settled back down and reached over to ruffle Spike's spines.

Luna was unsure whether it was simply the modern age, or perhaps it was just Ponyville, but ponies were much more ... physical than she remembered. Both Applejack and now Rarity had embraced her, not to mention how close she and Twilight had become. As Luna was busy musing, Twilight returned. She quickly levitated a book into Rarity's saddlebag before Luna noticed she was even in the room.

"There you go, Rarity," she said with obvious relief.

"Thank you, Twilight darling. I've been looking forward to reading this all week. But enough about pleasure, let's get back to business. Although when talking about fashion it's impossible to separate the two. Princess Luna has been kind enough to agree to help me this afternoon, so I'm afraid that I'll be stealing her for a bit."

"Oh," replied Twilight, casting a confused gaze in Luna's direction. "But I assumed that we were going to be spending today studying some more ..."

Luna, not wanting to disappoint her friend, quickly reassured her, "We can do both."

Rarity quickly spoke up as well. "Yes, of course you can. It's not as if I were planning on monopolizing all the princess' time today. You two will have ample opportunity to be cooped up together reading musty old books I assure you, darling. I just need the princess for a few short minutes so she can help me realize my vision!" Rarity said with a dramatic wave of her hoof.

"Well I suppose we could put off our studying for a while," Twilight said contemplatively.

"Just for a little while," Rarity quickly agreed. "And if it makes you feel any better, you are more than welcome to come along and help too. The more the merrier I say!"

Twilight seemed reenergized by Rarity's invitation and happily said, "Okay then. Let's just clean up the kitchen and we can go."

"Already on it," Spike called out from the sink. Luna looked down in surprise at the table the dragon had quickly and stealthily cleared. Apparently he was quite eager to go. In a matter of minutes the kitchen was once again spotless and the tea service had been put away. Spike hopped onto Twilight's back and then she and Luna followed Rarity out of the library.

As they walked through the bustling streets of Ponyville, Rarity called out greetings to several of the ponies they passed.

"Good afternoon, Buttercup, that saddle looks absolutely stunning on you. Hello, Medley, that taffeta finally came in so I'll be able to put the finishing touches on little Orange Blossom's dress. Daisy, so good to see you! I just received a new shipment of velvet just perfect for your coloration. Come by later and we can pick something out for you."

"You're quite the popular pony," Luna observed.

Rarity finished waving at a mare just beyond earshot and with a rather rakish smile in Luna's direction replied, "Well, last year during one of my near brushes with fame, I realized that I wasn't as well known in Ponyville as I thought I was. So I've been working on my 'social networking,' as it were. After all, how could I possibly become famous throughout Equestria if there are ponies right here in town who've never heard of me?"

Spike eagerly piped up, "You'll always be popular with me, Rarity."

"Why thank you, Spike. But while I appreciate your unflagging adoration, it will take more than a simple dragon to spread my name and designs far and near. Speaking of which, we've arrived."

They had come to a rather splendidly decorated building which wouldn't have seemed out of place in Canterlot. Rarity opened the door for them, causing a bell to tinkle inside the shop.

"Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where everything is chic, unique, and magnifique," Rarity announced as she led them inside. Spike leapt off Twilight and as they stepped further into the store, artificial lights sprang to life, revealing an interior decorated in a dizzying array of fabrics. Between the tubs and mirrors for mane care and makeup, the partially dressed ponyquins spread everywhere, and the heavy drapes separating the room and giving it a certain air of stylish mystery, Luna wasn't quite sure where she was supposed to be looking.

"This is quite an impressive shop, Rarity," she commented.

"Oh yes, well I do try. It's amazing what a little paint and a bit of sateen will do. But what I'd like your help with is up here."

Spike closed the boutique's door as Rarity preceded them up a staircase tucked behind a curtain Luna had missed during her initial assessment of

the store. Soon she found herself in an open room, brightly lit by large windows. There were tables and ponyquins scattered about, as well as bolts of cloth and bobbins upon bobbins of thread. But they seemed to have been categorized more or less, and if there was any chaos in the room, it was organized.

As Rarity approached the largest of the tables, up from which sprouted an elegant sewing machine, Luna took the opportunity to browse through a selection of outfits hanging from a nearby rack. Familiar with the room, Twilight headed over to a small table upon which was an assortment of glossy magazines.

Luna would be the first pony to admit that she had no head for fashion. Even before her banishment to the moon other ponies were finding her taste in togas a bit dated. But Luna did know what she liked, and as she browsed through the many outfits on display, the word which kept coming back to her to describe them was gaudy.

She truly wanted to be able to compliment Rarity's designs, but it appeared that most of them had been made in white or a pastel color, and while the layouts of the outfits were by no means offensive, the myriad of jewels that had been sewn into them seemed to detract greatly from their overall appeal. The jewels sparkled prettily in the afternoon sunlight, and if there had been one or two, they would likely have made the outfits somewhat fetching. But there were simply too many precious and semi-precious stones crowding each suit and dress, attempting to outshine one another in a mass of conflicting colors. The outfits were far too busy in Luna's untrained opinion.

"How do you like my summer collection, princess?" Rarity called from across the room.

Luna let the clothes fall back against each other with a clink, and faced Rarity with a nervous smile. "They're very ... colorful. Although perhaps not in quite the style I would have chosen."

"Oh no, of course not. Those are meant for the midmorning tea parties that are all the rage this season. They're supposed to capture and beautify the light of the sun, dazzling everypony with the delicate interplay between the ethereal sunlight and the earthly energy of the gemstones. No pony would be caught dead wearing them after noon."

She bent back over the table, moving about several colored grease pencils heavily across a sheet of paper. "No. For you, I see something simple, but elegant. Not something that blinds with rays of sunlight, but is closer to a cool whisper of a late autumn breeze stealing through the room. A dress reminiscent of the shiver of night air, of the moon and stars made concrete. Something beautiful, something subtle, something simple, something, like this!"

Rarity pressed down hard enough with the pencils that Luna could hear their scribbling from across the room, then with a final flourish, she ripped the paper off the table and floated it over toward Luna. It was a fairly stark and quickly drawn sketch which nevertheless easily displayed Rarity's artistic talent. Its bold lines showed a figure obviously representing Luna clothed in a sable dress made up of sharply defined lines and colored in dark blue and deep purples. It was both subtle and deceptively complex. In lieu of a riot of gemstones, its dazzling brilliance was in the cut and interplay of the dress' lines. It was a dress that Luna would not only feel proud to wear; it was a dress she yearned to wear.

"It's lovely," she simply said.

"Wow, Rarity, that looks just as good, maybe even better, than our Gala dresses," commented Twilight who had joined Luna to appraise the sketch.

"Isn't it? It's only a very rough idea of course, but I think it's a step in the right direction, wouldn't you agree?"

Twilight turned her head to Luna and narrowly regarded the princess for a few long seconds, causing Luna to begin to blush under the scrutiny, before she declared, "I think you'd look lovely in it."

"I think so too," gushed Rarity. "In fact, Princess Luna, I demand that you let me make this dress for you. Oh, I can see it now. You sweeping down the stairs into the ballroom at Canterlot, floating along the brilliantly polished marble, causing everypony's head to turn in your direction asking, 'who is she?' for of course it will be a masquerade." Rarity mimicked her day dream by draping herself with a loose piece of cloth and bowing to Spike, who played along by offering his claw and bowing to her like a perfect little gentleman. "And the only clue they'll have will be your natural elegance and the Rarity original you'll be wearing. With the whole room whispering about how stunning you look, you'll find the stallion of your

dreams standing there in awe of your fabulosity and you'll sweep him off his hooves for a night full of dancing and enchantment." Rarity lifted Spike with her magic, and the two began to twirl around the middle of the room.

Luna raised an eyebrow at the odd sight, and tried to speak up to correct a few of the white unicorn's fallacies. For one thing, there were no stairs leading into the main ballroom back in the palace.

"Actually –"

But Twilight put out a forestalling hoof in front of Luna. "Just let her go with it. She gets like this sometimes."

Rarity abruptly stopped twirling across the room and hastily dropped Spike, who continued to spin for a few seconds looking a bit dizzy. She rushed back over to Twilight and Luna and loudly said, "So therefore I must insist that you let me make this dress for you. I simply won't take no for an answer."

Faced with such an intense pony, Luna attempted to demure, "Well, I wouldn't want to impose ..."

"It wouldn't be any imposition at all, dear. In fact it would be a greater imposition to not allow me to do this. All I ask is that you wear it with the natural pride and dignity that you'll certainly feel for it when it's completed."

Luna shot a quick glance to Twilight, whose casually interested expression was of little help. She turned back to Rarity and decided, "If you feel so strongly about it, then of course I'll wear your dress, Rarity."

Rarity let out an excited squeal and hopped up and down gleefully. "Oh I always knew that I'd be royalty someday, or at least design for them. Princess Celestia hasn't worn a dress since the fabulous designer Piscola nearly five hundred years ago. Just imagine me, little old Rarity, designer for the royal family. Oh, I'm so excited! Now you just stand right there and I'll take a few quick measurements, princess."

As Rarity raced around the room pulling various tapes, papers, and bolts of cloth off the shelves, Luna exchanged a slightly nervous glance with Twilight. Perhaps she'd inadvertently gotten over her head with the agreement she'd just made. "She certainly seems excited."

"That's our Rarity, she's always happiest when she's working on some monumental project, usually with an imminent deadline."

Recovered from his earlier ordeal, Spike spoke up, "Don't worry, Princess Luna, Rarity's the best designer in Equestria. Whatever she makes for you will look great."

Not very reassured by Spike's blind faith in the frantic unicorn, Luna had to admit that it was somewhat gratifying to see somepony who was so excited to be doing something for her. Although as Rarity rushed back toward her with several items floating beside her, Luna amended her thoughts to gratifying and a bit frightening as well.

In a matter of moments she found herself in the midst of a storm of cloth, paper, and measuring tapes. She gave a little yelp and a slight jump as one of the tape measures ran up her leg and into an unexpected spot.

"Nothing to worry about, dear, just getting your inseam," Rarity explained. The unicorn was engrossed with a floating sheet of paper upon which she was rapidly recording Luna's various measurements. Far too engaged to spare Luna anything but the briefest of glances.

Luna was somewhat awed by just how quickly Rarity was able to switch from being a pleasant socialite to laser focused designer. She looked over to Twilight to see if she had noticed the abrupt change, but found the lavender unicorn too busy being amused by Luna's discomfiture at Rarity's invasive measurement devices to notice much else.

Her amusement was short lived however. Without turning away from Luna, Rarity called out, "Twilight, would you be a dear and hold these for me?" She didn't wait for an answer before dropping an avalanche of cloth onto Twilight, literally driving the unicorn to the floor.

A few of the smaller cloths atop the pile floated off and toward Luna as Twilight shakily struggled to stand back up. Rarity held up a parade of fabric swatches next to Luna's eyes as a dark bluish violet cloth was wrapped around her withers.

"Hmm, glaucous, azure, navy, palatinate, no, royal? Spike dear, could you go and fetch my glasses from the other room? The good ones, not the ones with the old frames, you know the pair. Oh, and can you bring back a few

more pins too? Thanks," Rarity less asked and more demanded distractedly.

Instead of protesting, Spike smartly saluted and cheerfully announced, "On it!"

More fabrics were draped over Luna and Rarity pinned them in some places, and marked other areas with a thick piece of chalk. Spike quickly returned with a pair of glasses carefully cradled in his claws and a multitude of pins stuck amongst his scales. Rarity used her magic to relieve him of both the glasses and the pins without as much as a thank you. But judging by his blissful expression, the dragon didn't seem to mind the somewhat harsh treatment. Perhaps being Twilight's assistant for so many years had acclimated him to the whims of bossy unicorns.

The next hour or so passed in a blur of cloth being thrown about the room, scissors cutting, chalk marking, and Rarity making comments such as, "Please keep still, princess, I need to pin this in my mind just right so that it doesn't ride too high." Or, "Yes, yes, yes! No! Oh how can I work under these conditions?" and "Oh yes, I am the mare! If I do say so myself." All the while she kept a rather unnervingly single-minded focus on Luna and the cloth around her that was slowly but surely forming into a rough approximation of the sketch Rarity had drawn earlier.

Luna had braved a few attempts at casual conversation, but Rarity's intense concentration had caused them to quickly fade into silence. She was apparently in the "zone," wherever that was, and refused to be disturbed. Compounding the problem, Luna was slightly frightened to breathe too hard and adversely affect the dress making process. Rarity was so focused, so tied up in creating the outfit, that Luna was certain that even minor distraction was sure to cause something untoward to happen.

As the amount of fabric on Luna had increased, the pile atop Twilight had decreased, and she'd returned to the small table she'd been at earlier. She appeared good naturedly bored, and had picked up a magazine to peruse. Its cover read, "Cosmoponytan, 19 ways to please your mare."

Spike was roaming around the room doing anything that Rarity asked of him through her brief bursts of orders that broke out suddenly from time to time. Though there were only a few times when she made use of the small

dragon. It seemed like nearly everything Rarity needed was in the room, and everything in the room was within her magic's reach.

Finally though, Rarity gently lifted the patchwork of pinned together pieces of cloth off of Luna and softly set them down on a nearby ponyquin. "There, that should be a good starting point, I think. Though I'll probably tear it all to pieces and start again," commented the fashion designer pony.

Luna felt physically drained from simply standing there under Rarity's ministrations for so long, and had a nearly physical pang at Rarity's words. "You won't need me to come back and model for you again when you do, will you?" she anxiously asked.

"Oh no," Rarity said with a dismissive wave of her hoof as she began to float her materials back to their designated areas. "Now that I've got a ... a feel for your build, I'll be able to do most of the work myself. I'll just need you for the final fitting. Although I have to ask, are you planning on wearing you mane that way with this dress?"

"Why? Does it look bad?" Luna asked anxiously. Perhaps she'd missed a spot earlier in the morning and had gone around all day with a cowlick or something equally embarrassing.

"Not at all. In fact I think it's quite elegant, especially with that wonderful little curl you've adopted. I do so enjoy finely coifed manes," Rarity replied with a toss of her head, causing her own tightly curled hair to bounce. "I was simply asking because someponies like to wear a different hairstyle when they wear formal attire. A change in the way you wear your mane changes the lines of the dress, which is something that I need to take into consideration.

"It would be a good excuse to try something different with your mane," Twilight said over the top of her magazine. "I think that you would look wonderful with your mane up."

Rarity looked over at Twilight and agreed, "Yes, formal occasions are excellent excuses for us to step out of the styles we normally wear. Which is why I wish you'd of allowed me to fix your hair a bit more for the Grand Galloping Gala."

"My mane looks fine just the way it is," Twilight protested, reaching up a hoof to protectively stroke it. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Of course there isn't, dear, that simple, no-nonsense style just screams librarian. But perhaps it would be nice to experiment a bit with other styles from time to time."

Twilight angrily set down the magazine and stubbornly lifted her head high. "I'll have you know that Princess Celestia herself complimented my hairstyle."

Rarity chuckled and with a stage whispered to Luna said, "Yeah, when she was ten."

Luna could barely contain her laughter, it was probably true. But seeing the hurt on Twilight's face caused her to sober quite quickly. "You're right, Twilight, your mane does suit you. It's quite becoming, and gives you a classical sort of beauty which transcends trends."

Twilight began to appear a bit mollified, and Luna was prepared to say more to make her friend feel better, but Rarity took up the attempt to soothe the upset unicorn.

"Really, Twilight, we didn't mean to make you feel self-conscious about your mane. I, more than anypony perhaps, can appreciate finding that perfect style that just screams you, and keeping it because it's so fetching. However that doesn't mean that you should immediately dismiss all other manestyles out of hoof. I've always thought that your bangs were a bit on the short side, and I think you would look positively delightful with a chignon."

Twilight seemed calmer and less ready to combust in anger, and looked down a bit at the carpet as she only slightly resentfully replied, "Maybe. If Luna agrees to wear her hair up, then I'll think about doing it too."

Rarity turned to Luna with excitement making her eyes sparkle, and she was on the verge of saying something, but was interrupted by the sound of the door downstairs being thrown open, its tiny bell jingling with a frenzied energy. Moments later several hoofs were heard loudly pounding upon the stairs. Suddenly three small fillies burst into the room, and after scanning

the inhabitants for a moment, their leader, an orange pegasus, cried out, "There she is." Pointing a hoof straight at the princess.

"Oh no, school must be out," Rarity said with a sigh and a defeated mutter.

The three fillies, one of whom Luna recognized as Applebloom, noisily stormed into the room and raced to Luna, peppering her with questions.

"Are you really a for real princess, like for real?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were a princess yesterday?"

"How'd you turn into a princess? Were you a unicorn or a pegasus first?"

Overwhelmed, Luna began to back up to give her a little space as she attempted to answer the questions as best as she was able. "Yes, I am a real princess, like my sister Celestia. I'm sorry, Applebloom, but I thought that you knew. I was born this way; I've always been an alicorn."

"Are you sure you're a princess? You don't have a crown or anything like that," observed the group's little unicorn who had narrowed her eyes as she closely examined Luna.

"Girls!" rarity called out hotly. "Leave Princess Luna alone. We were having an adult conversation, and you know it's rude to interrupt other ponies when they're talking. Now if you'd all please quiet down and stop bothering Princess Luna, I'm sure that we can discuss what it is you'd like after we're finished with what we were speaking of."

"Aw, but this is important, sis," complained the younger unicorn.

"Yeah," piped up the tiny pegasus. "We're here to get official royal cutie marks. If anypony can give us our cutie marks, it'd be a princess."

"I want a cool one like the rising sun or something," Applebloom said excitedly.

"I want one with stars and lighting, like a lightning storm in space. That'd be so cool," the pegasus declared.

"I want one that's a bunch of emeralds."

Her two friends looked over at the unicorn with flat expressions.

"Emeralds?" Applebloom asked, "Sweetie Belle, what are you thinking?"

"What? Emeralds are pretty, and you know, regal"

"You mean royalily. Regal isn't a word."

"It is so!"

"Girls," Twilight broke in. "I've already told you that magic can't make cutie marks appear before their time. They'll come when they're ready, when you've found that one special thing that you love to do."

"No offense, Twilight," The orange pegasus said. "But your magic might not be enough to give us cutie marks, but a princess is powerful enough to do whatever she wants. I bet she can give ponies really cool cutie marks nopony's ever seen before."

Twilight's distress at the rebuff was easy to see, and it wounded Luna, but still these were simple fillies, they probably didn't know better. "I'm sorry girls, but Twilight's right. Even though I'm a princess, not even I can give you your cutie marks before you're supposed to get them. Nor should I. A cutie mark is something special to everypony. It's a symbol of what they enjoy, what they're good at, what makes them special and unique. If a cutie mark could be given, or taken, that would cheapen your special talents. Or worse, cause you to try and live up to a cutie mark that you don't like. You just have to be patient and figure out what it is that makes you happy and what you're good at. Even I had to wait for what seemed like forever to receive mine."

Applebloom and the little white unicorn, Sweetie Belle, seemed to be hanging on Luna's words, but the small pegasus seemed doubtful.

Before she could continue her assault on the princess though, Rarity spoke up. "Girls, if you leave Princess Luna alone, I'll let you help me make a few dresses for an upcoming order. How does that sound?" she offered.

Applebloom turned to Sweetie Belle and excitedly said, "Maybe we can get a fashionista cutie mark!"

Together the three fillies shouted quite loudly, "Cutie Mark Crusader fashion designers yay!"

Their attention successfully diverted, the three excited fillies began racing around the room knocking over and unrolling bolts of cloth, unwinding spools of thread, and somehow getting a long piece of ribbon wound through the inner workings of the sewing machine. Rarity simply stood still staring at the destruction which was being wreaked upon her shop, her eye involuntarily twitching.

Luna's heart went out to the obviously shocked unicorn, and though she was unsure of how to help, she was more than willing to offer her services. However she was intercepted by Twilight.

"Well, it looks like you have you hooves full," the lavender unicorn observed. "We'll just see ourselves out, Rarity." She began pushing Luna toward the stairs, herding her out of the store.

Rarity's only reply was a pained groan as the three young ponies knocked over a ponyquin which caused a chain reaction somehow resulting in the curtains of the window being pulled down with a long and loud rip.

"You coming, Spike?" Twilight called over her shoulder as she continued to push Luna out of the room.

"Nah, I'm going to stick around here for a while, just in case Rarity needs something."

"Suit yourself Romeo."

As they left the shop, Luna could clearly hear Rarity finally finding her voice. "Sweetie Belle, what have I told you about touching my things? Scootaloo, put down those scissors this instant and ... good heavens, what have you done?"

Luna shot Twilight a concerned glance, but Twilight just smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure that she'll be able to handle them." Quite honestly, Luna was a bit glad that Twilight had gotten them out of that chaos. She was still feeling positively drained from modeling for Rarity, and didn't think she had the energy to keep up with three exuberant fillies.

The two ponies walked down the street leading from Carousel Boutique, turned a corner, and found themselves in the midst of a still busy Ponyville market. The bright afternoon sunlight rained down upon the many stalls and shops lining the market, causing them and the ponies gathered about them to appear vibrant and full of life. Few of the ponies took special notice of Luna, and the ones who did merely smiled or waved in her direction. Luna warmly returned their greetings, and in a happy excitement perused the many carts and stalls of the market, her earlier fatigue quickly dropping away.

But, as she was browsing through rows of artfully crafted pony dolls on display atop a small cart, Luna noticed that Twilight was watching her closely, and her expression had transformed from cheerful gaiety to a thoughtful frown.

"What's the matter, Twilight?" Luna lightly asked, her voice easily betraying just how great she was feeling spending time window shopping with her friend. "You're not still upset over what Rarity and I said about your mane are you? We didn't really mean it. You're beautiful the way you are, and I'm sure your hair would be lovely no matter how you wore it."

"No, it's not about that," Twilight quickly replied. Although she did reach up a hoof and tucked a bit of her bangs behind her ear. When they fell back to their normal place a moment later, Twilight didn't seem to notice. "I was just thinking about things."

"Oh, like what?"

"You. And me." She said unguardedly. But upon realizing just what she'd said, Twilight hastily explained, "You're just so happy right now, smiling and making jokes, even laughing a little. I want to see you like that more often. But most of this visit it seems like you've had something on your mind, something that makes you frown and sigh."

Knowing exactly what Twilight was alluding to, Luna's face fell and Twilight quickly spoke up.

"There, you see, you're thinking about whatever it is right now." She softly sighed, then moved closer to Luna and laid a comforting hoof on her friend's shoulder. "Luna, I know that there's probably a lot on your mind. Things you're not comfortable talking about. But I don't like seeing you like

this. I want to see you enjoying yourself. I know what it's like to be so lost in your own thoughts that they begin to eat away at you. But no matter what it is that's weighing on your mind, just know that I'm always here for you. You can tell me anything and maybe if you shared your burden, it will feel lighter and you'll feel better."

Luna gazed into Twilight's trusting eyes, and could feel the cold knife of guilt turning inside her. How could she ever tell Twilight what was bothering her without driving the unicorn away in anger, hatred, and disgust?

She shrugged off her friend's hoof and offered her a wan smile. "Thank you, Twilight. You really are the best friend a pony could ask for. I'm sorry that my troubles have been so transparent, and I appreciate your offer to share them. But I'm afraid that it's best that I carry them alone for a little while longer. I promise that I'll share them with you, but please let me be the judge of when I do so."

Twilight broke eye contact and looked down at the ground as she replied, "Oh, of course, Luna. I didn't mean to press you on something you didn't feel comfortable talking about. Please, take all the time that you need. I'll be here whenever you feel ready."

Luna smiled a small, real smile at Twilight's generosity. "Anyway, let's make the most of the time left to us. I promise to keep my sighs away and my thoughts happy for the rest of our time together."

Twilight smiled in reply and decided to play along with Luna's attempt at lightening the mood. "Then let's grab something to eat and head back to the library so that we can get some studying done, study buddy."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea."

The two mares continued on through the market, their delicate happiness quickly transforming into real joy as they delighted in the sights and sounds of Ponyville on such a charming day and in such charming company.

As they were approaching the town's library, and the market's stalls were beginning to thin out, they came across Applejack who was in the midst of folding up an apple themed cart.

"Good afternoon, Applejack," Luna hailed her.

"Howdy, Luna, Twilight."

"Are you already done for the day?" Twilight inquired.

"Yep, just about sold my entire stock and Applebloom should be here any minute to help me pack up and head on back to the farm."

"Actually, we just left Applebloom and her friends over at Rarity's store, and she seemed a bit preoccupied."

Applejack tilted her hat up contemplatively. "All three of 'em at Rarity's huh? Ah guess ah'd better head over there and give her a hoof. Those three can be a bit rambunctious, and Rarity's not the most patient of ponies."

"Before you go," Luna spoke up, "are you certain that you sold out of everything? Twilight and I were looking for something nourishing before we returned to the library and it would be delightful to sample your baked goods again."

"Well shoot, ah can't let two ponies go hungry. 'Specially when they're my friends." Applejack kicked the side of her cart and a latched lid popped open revealing a pair of apple pies. "There we go two pies for two hungry ponies. Now if y'all'll excuse me, ah'd better get over to Rarity's before those fillies tear the place down, or Rarity blows a fuse."

Luna and Twilight each levitated a pie toward them, and Twilight called out after the retreating orange earth pony, "But we haven't paid for the pies yet."

Applejack didn't stop, but replied over her shoulder, "Ah'll just put 'em on your tab."

Twilight turned to Luna and guilelessly asked, "I have a tab?"

Luna chuckled at Twilight's befuddled expression. "I suppose so. Now let's get these home and get back to studying." It was only minutes later, as they were approaching the tree house, that Luna realized she'd called it home. And what's more she had meant it. Unsure of how exactly that made her feel, but fairly sure it was mostly good; Luna eagerly stepped into the library, confident that she would enjoy her fragile happiness with Twilight for as long as possible.

Amare et sapere vix deo conceditur

Celestia hid her disinterest behind a mask of pleasant inquiry that she had perfected over the centuries. Even if she had felt more upbeat and less troubled, she likely would have been soundly bored by the final audience of the day.

"... So, as you can see from my ninety-eight point briefing, it's my conclusion that the previously unregulated apple market should have a price floor put into place. Currently the near monopoly the Apple family has on the supply of apples allows them to flood the market with low cost fruit, which creates an environment toxic to competition."

Celestia smiled patiently and wisely down at the young pegasus supplicant. She'd labeled that particular smile number 17 a few centuries earlier, and it was her go to expression when dealing with ponies who'd strayed a bit too far into the absurd. "You present a very convincing argument. Although I must ask, do you truly believe that it's the cost difference alone which prevents farmers from growing produce in the clouds?"

The sandy coated pegasus appeared stunned at his princess' question. "What else could it be? The current apple market is geared toward apples produced terrestrially. We need to radically alter our current system in order to promote alternative apple sources. Some ponies believe we can accomplish this simply through subsidies for the cloud farmers, but I believe increasing the price of apples to the point that aero-grown fruit is comparably priced is the best course of action."

It was almost physically painful to Celestia to hold in her sigh and to keep herself from simply asking the well educated and well intentioned foal to leave. Instead she attempted a different tact. "And how many apple trees are there currently growing in these 'aero-environments?'"

"Well, none so far," the pegasus admitted. "But once other ponies see that the market is ready for alternative apples, investors will be lining up, and we'll be able to establish our first fully cloud based farm. After all, who could pass up an opportunity based on such a simple yet effective

premise? Why wait for the rain to water your trees, when they'll have all the water they need already in the clouds they're growing in?"

Celestia could feel her smile slipping and a slight headache beginning, as she politely answered, "Yes. Well, thank you for bringing this issue to my attention, and I assure you that it will be given all the attention that it merits. Feel free to leave any supporting materials you'd like with the steward on your way out."

Seemingly confident in how well his application went, the young stallion bowed deeply to Celestia before he jauntily exited the throne room, his head held high.

Celestia allowed herself a small sigh through the nose, quiet enough to not reach the guards at the foot of her throne. She loved her subjects, truly she did. But sometimes, on occasion, their petty and somewhat shortsighted concerns grew tiresome.

"I believe that was the last of the petitioners scheduled for today," Celestia half asked, half stated to the attendant hovering just past the guards.

The courtier hastily checked a sheaf of papers on the small table near her before answering, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Excellent. Then, if there's nothing else..." Celestia paused, but no pony spoke up. "We're done for the day. Have a wonderful evening everypony, and I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow."

Normally Celestia would wait for the throne room to empty before making her own exit. But she just didn't feel like sitting up on the throne any longer then she absolutely had to that day. In a matter of moments she gracefully descended the daises and swept out of the room through the royal entrance leading to the private areas of the palace.

She passed several courtiers and guards who respectfully bowed to her, and she smiled and nodded her acknowledgement of their existence. Celestia was able to keep the smile on her face until she reached her private study, where it slipped away in the security of solitude. She paused only briefly in the anteroom before continuing on to her personal office, firmly shutting the door behind her.

Safe in her sanctum, Celestia settled down behind her large desk, whose top was covered by a slew of reports and petitions awaiting her perusal. Finally she allowed herself to wearily sigh. She leaned heavily over the desk and looked toward the only corner kept carefully clear. It was occupied by a small horn painting that Twilight had made years ago when she had been learning how to control her magic with some semblance of finesse. It was a simple picture really, stylized and brightly colored representations of Twilight and Celestia standing close together on a green hill with a childishly yellow sun high in the sky above them. Twilight had been so proud when she'd shown it to Celestia, and had been speechless with happiness when Celestia had asked to keep it.

The picture's frame was a silvery wood, well aged, and around which was wrapped a grey silk ribbon. It had belonged to Luna a millennium ago, though Celestia could only remember her sister having worn it once. She had found it stuck in-between the cushions of their old throne months after Nightmare Moon's banishment, and had kept it ever since, as a reminder of the little sister she had failed.

Celestia pushed aside a report emblazoned with an impressively noble seal and rested her head in her hooves, massaging her temples. In truth, she didn't know why she was so sad, but it wearied her. It was troubling not only that she didn't know how she'd come by it, but that it revealed how much she had yet to learn of herself.

She turned her head to look out the nearby window. It was late afternoon, with perhaps an hour left until her sun was scheduled to set. Its low position in the sky flooded the room with its rays, the windows creating columns of shadow and light stretching the breadth of the room.

Usually at this time of afternoon, Celestia would visit her school for gifted unicorns, but that day she simply didn't feel like it. Normally, she would sit in on some of the last classes of the day, observing both the students, as well as the instructors, to make sure that they were following the lessons which would allow them to tap into their true potential. She had established the school in order to have a facility to train and mold the most powerful unicorns in Equestria, so that they would be able to learn to live with their gifts rather than be controlled by them.

At first it had been a wonderful and engaging project. Each new day bringing fresh and interesting challenges. It had been about experimentation and learning from mistakes, of forging an institution the likes of which Equestria had never seen.

However, as the centuries passed, the vivacity and excitement of those nascent years slowed and transformed into a rigid curriculum where ponies learned by rote more often than by experimentation. Not that such a turn of events was necessarily bad. An ambitious pony with a curiosity unbridled by morals was a very dangerous thing. Thankfully though the Rainbow of Darkness had been defeated and buried in the sands of time.

Over the years the school had become an institution, and the institution had become prestigious. For the last few hundred years, her school had come to be regarded as little more than a finishing school for the older unicorn families. Most of the students attended not so much to refine their own abilities, but rather to make their parents proud, and to have an educational resume that would allow them into the coveted administrative roles in Canterlot.

It was only once in a very long while that a student attended her school who caught her attention. Even more seldom did that unicorn show enough promise to merit becoming her personal student. That was why it had been so wonderful to teach and nurture Twilight Sparkle, slowly molding her into the mare she had become.

Celestia unconsciously smiled warmly as her thoughts turned to her protégé. She could still clearly remember the awesome display of power that had attracted her attention to the young filly, as well as Twilight's energetic celebration of her acceptance and her cutie mark which had followed. It hadn't been long after that when Celestia had begun to learn just how special Twilight really was.

It was rare to find a pony who was so intelligent, determined, curious, innocent, and passionate, not to mention powerful. Celestia had quickly come to care for the young pony, and had looked forward to their lessons together. She had always been somewhat surprised and impressed with just how quickly the unicorn learned and progressed through her studies, always thirsty for the next bit of knowledge, the next piece to the puzzle that was life.

Sadly, when Twilight had left for Ponyville, she had taken away the shining star of Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. The other students were capable and nice unicorns, but they weren't her Twilight. Even the most promising student, Bay Breeze, lacked that certain something that nopony, save Twilight, had possessed in what seemed like centuries.

With her head still lightly resting on her propped up hooves, and staring out the windows at the reflection of the sun off the roofs and spires of Canterlot, Celestia frowned slightly. She had just been discussing Bay Breeze with somepony, and a nagging part of her brain was telling her that the conversation had been important. But who had it been? There were so many ponies that she spoke with each day, that sometimes it was difficult to remember ... Luna. It came to her in a flash. It had been with Luna.

But what could be important about a conversation she'd had with her sister about one of the many students who attend her school? As far as Celestia could recall, Luna had made the mistake of believing that Bay Breeze was her new personal student, but Celestia had quickly corrected her.

Celestia sat up straighter, a thoughtful and questioning light coming to her eyes. How did Luna know about Bay Breeze, and how had she come to the conclusion that she was Celestia's new star pupil? Luna had never shown anything more than a casual interest in Celestia's school, at least to her knowledge.

With a flick of her magic, Celestia rang the bells magically connected throughout the palace. Before the last quiet chime tinkled away into silence, there was a polite knock on her office's door. "You may enter," she called out loudly enough to carry through the thick wood.

By the time the fuchsia earth pony had opened the door; Celestia had straightened her posture and cloaked herself in the regal air of a princess. The attendant bowed low to the ground and respectfully observed, "You rang, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. Please inform my sister's steward that I would like to speak with her," Celestia ordered in her 'I'm not angry, but please do what I tell you as quickly as possible' voice.

"Right away, Princess Celestia!"

Celestia would have felt bad for intimidating the poor pony, but her mind was racing too fast with other concerns. If there was anypony who knew the habits and interests of her sister, it would be the pony who had been firmly asked to be as close to Luna as possible. It had been Celestia's idea that if Luna were never alone, she couldn't be lonely again, and the past wouldn't be repeated. So Gimlet Lime should be able to shed some light on the mystery that was eating at Celestia.

Almost before the door closed after the retreating earth pony, it was rapped upon sharply. There was only one pony who used such a heavy hoof on Celestia's door.

"Come in, Captain Blazer."

The captain of her guard entered with a clipboard tucked under his wing. He saluted her smartly before picking up the clipboard with his mouth and placing it on her already cluttered desk.

"I've brought the list of this year's graduates from the Equestrian Military Academy, Your Majesty."

Thoughts about her sister were foremost in her mind, but Celestia feigned interest as she politely asked, "And how are this year's recruits?"

Blue Blazer huffed in annoyance. "As usual, the Wonderbolts stole the best pegasi candidates, while the unicorn and earth ponies were picked over by the Special Forces. But still, you won't find a braver, more loyal bunch of ponies in all Equestria," he finished with pride.

"I'm sure they are." They always had been; every year since the military academy had been established seven hundred years earlier. However, Blue Blazer's appearance afforded Celestia with another possible source of information on her sister. Albeit one she wished she didn't have to use. "So, Captain, how has Princess Luna been these past few days?"

The scarred pegasus had the decency to look not only surprised but clueless as well. "I-I'm not sure what you mean, Your Majesty."

"I'm simply asking about how my sister is doing. Surely your spies have reported back by now. I'd think that you'd want to be kept abreast of her actions as quickly as possible."

Blue Blazer laughed nervously before he hastily replied, "But, Your Majesty, you expressly disapproved the decision to continue surveillance on Princess Luna with Royal Guard ponies while she was in Ponyville."

Celestia smiled a bit condescendingly. "Yes, I did. Which is why you used ponies from other parts of the government instead, I believe."

His attempt at ignorance exposed, Blue Blazer decided to attempt to explain himself. "Your Majesty, I assure you that I only have your interests in mind. I did set a watch upon your sister, but only because I feared she is engaged in a plot against you."

Celestia arched an enquiring eyebrow. "And what subversive acts has she been engaging in?"

Blue Blazer appeared rather uncomfortable as he replied, "Well, none. So far. At least from what my observers can tell." He met Celestia's eyes with renewed energy as he added, "But she has been acting in a manner unfitting for a princess! Maybe she's attempting to discredit the royal house of Equestria!"

"I believe Prince Blueblood beat her to that plan by about ten years or so," A small smile of amused disbelief appeared on Celestia's face as she humored the captain. "And how is my sister going about discrediting the noble monarchy?"

"For one thing, she was openly intoxicated in public," replied the captain hotly.

Celestia had to fight to keep her face relatively stoic. But the mental image of Luna being drunk made her want to laugh out loud. She supposed that Luna technically was over the physical legal drinking age, if not the emotional. She could easily picture her sister intoxicated, and it was very cute. She made a mental note to come up with an excuse to celebrate something in the near future that would be an appropriate occasion to combine Luna and alcohol.

Sadly, Celestia's thoughts had to return to less pleasant matters as Blue Blazer continued, "She's also attempted to connect with the more ... common ponies by going so far as to engage in physical labor unbefitting a pony of her station."

That was something Celestia wished she could have seen. Her sister was by no means lazy, but at the same time Luna was one of the most powerful magical creatures in all Equestria. Celestia had never seen her do anything more physically straining than fly for a few hours without rest. For her to do manual labor, she must have had an important reason. Perhaps there was some truth to what Blue Blazer was saying. Perhaps Luna was trying to engage with other ponies. Although not necessarily for the reason the pegasus had suggested, but rather perhaps because Luna wanted to make friends.

With a sigh, Celestia stated, "Captain Blazer, if that's the extent of my sister's crimes against Equestria, I feel confident that my reign will last another day or two."

Blue Blazer flapped his wings in a burst of frustration as he replied, "You Majesty, she's not –"

However, he was interrupted by his monarch. "She's not the pony you think she is, Captain. I'm disappointed that you can't seem to trust her, and even more disappointed that you went so far as to attempt to countermand my decision in secret ..." There was much more that Celestia wished to say, but they were interrupted by a hesitant knock. "Come in," Celestia loudly called out, her eyes informing Blue Blazer that their conversation wasn't over.

A tan unicorn with puffy eyes and a hastily brushed mane entered and dropped into a low bow. "You sent for me, Your Highness?"

Celestia smiled warmly, attempting to put the young unicorn at ease. "Ah yes, Gimlet Lime. Thank you for coming so quickly. I had a question that I wished to ask my sister, but since she isn't here, I was hoping that you could answer it for me in her stead."

"Of course. If I can," quickly replied Gimlet, eager to help.

"Recently my sister asked after one of the students of the School for Gifted Unicorns. I didn't think much of it at the time, but I was wondering if she'd spoken to you about her interest in the school at all. I think it would be wonderful if she felt willing to perhaps help teach there." It wasn't technically a lie, Celestia would love it if Luna took a more active role

around Canterlot, and she believed her sister would benefit a lot from being exposed to the youth of the nation.

Gimlet scrunched up her face in thought. "No," she said with a hint of confusion. "I don't think that the subject's ever come up before."

"Oh, I see," Celestia said with a slight disappointment that was only partially feigned. "Do you think perhaps she spoke about it with somepony else, one of the guards perhaps?"

Gimlet cast a disapproving glance in Blue Blazer's direction, which he answered with his normal friendly scowl, before she answered. "I don't think so. I've been following your 'suggestion' and I've spent nearly every minute of the night with Princess Luna. She's never spoken to me about the School for Gifted Unicorns, much less anything about a particular student. Besides which, Princess Luna is a bit withdrawn, and it's hard for her to build a repartee with the guards since the ones assigned to her are changed so frequently."

Blue Blazer gruffly interrupted to defend himself, "I have to constantly change the guard roster assigned to Princess Luna because after a few nights of her 'woe is me' routine, they start getting soft and feeling sympathy for her. I don't need any of my colts with divided loyalties the next time the princess has a temper tantrum and tries to destroy Equestria."

Gimlet Lime was obviously shocked, and stared at the captain of the guard for a moment incredulously before she hotly replied, "Well perhaps Princess Luna would be happier and less moody if somepony wasn't trying to turn her palace into a prison, and all of us into her jailors."

Blue Blazer was about to retort when Celestia gently interrupted, "My little ponies, please stop arguing. I'm sure that we all want what's best for Princess Luna." Blue Blazer rolled his eyes and sulked. Celestia had much to say to him about his attitude toward her sister. But it would be unprofessional to dress him down in front of Gimlet Lime. She turned to her sister's steward and asked, "So, are you certain that you're with Luna all the time when she's not resting?"

"Yes. Well, mostly. Princess Luna prefers to be by herself when she goes to the library. She says my 'hovering' disturbs her reading."

The mention of the library caused several nebulous thoughts in the back of Celestia's mind to begin to coalesce. There was another pony close to her heart who was fond of the library. Who had been with Luna shortly after having mentioned her planned trip to visit her friends the books.

"Tell me, Gimlet Lime, when was the last time that Luna visited the library?"

Gimlet uncertainly answered, "About two weeks ago, I think."

"It was the day Twilight Sparkle came to visit the palace," Blue Blazer said with certainty. "Princess Luna was escorted to the library by my stallions. Half an hour later, Miss Sparkle entered the library. The guards on duty noted that she seemed upset. Two hours later and they escorted both Princess Luna and Twilight Sparkle from the library to the private area of the palace."

Gimlet Lime appeared scandalized by Blue Blazer's statement. Whether because he seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of Luna's movements or because he had kept a better track of Luna than she had, Celestia was unsure. It didn't matter to her though. Celestia had discovered the information she had wanted. The pony who had told Luna about Bay Breeze had obviously been Twilight Sparkle.

"Thank you, Gimlet Lime," Celestia said pleasantly. "You've answered my questions very well. I'm afraid that I disturbed your rest. I know that many of my sister's attendants are still asleep this time of day. Feel free to go back to bed."

Luna's steward appeared as confused at her obvious and abrupt dismissal as she had been at her abrupt summons. "Thank you, Princess Celestia. I'm glad I was able to be of service." She dropped into another low bow as she spoke. When she stood, she shot a final contemptuous glance at Blue Blazer before silently leaving Celestia's office.

Blue Blazer waited a few moments after the door had closed behind Gimlet Lime, to make sure that the other pony was safely away, before he turned back to Celestia. "If that's all, Your Highness..."

Celestia's mind was nagging her that there was something important in the information she'd just heard, and she'd long ago learned to heed her gut

feelings. She desperately wished to be alone so she could turn her full attention to the situation between her, Luna, and Twilight.

But first things first. She looked down at Blue Blazer with a neutral, yet stern expression. It was a look that had cowed dragons and wyverns in the past. The few ponies who had earned it either had cowered in fright, begged for her forgiveness, or in rare cases, had begun to cry. Blue Blazer did none of these. Instead he looked up at her, his face impassive, though there was a slight tremor in his wings and rear legs.

"Captain Blazer, how long have you been a member of the Royal Guard?"

"Forty years, Your Highness. Twelve as captain," he answered immediately and proudly.

"I see. That's quite an impressive record," Celestia mused. "Your predecessor, Captain Blenheim, was in the guard for only thirty years before he retired. Perhaps it's time that you considered retirement yourself."

Shock and dismay played out over Blue Blazer's face as he sputtered out, "Y-your Majesty?"

Celestia placed her elbows on her desk and contemplated Blue Blazer over her crossed hooves. "You see, Captain, I fear that you've been in the service for too long. I think that you've become blinded by your devotion to your duty. While in most cases that is commendable, I have made it clear on multiple occasions that my sister is not to be judged on her past actions, but is to be treated as my equal. In fact I've had several conversations about that subject with you specifically. Yet despite this, you seem to have not only regarded Princess Luna with continued suspicion, but you've deliberately created a hostile environment for her in the palace. A place which she should think of as her home, her sanctuary. In addition you've circumvented my direct orders about keeping watch on her."

"But, Your Majesty, Princess Celestia, I only thought of your well being," explained a panicky Blue Blazer. "Princess Luna tried to destroy Equestria once. She tried to usurp your place, what makes you think that she won't try again?"

"I trust her. She's learned from the mistakes of the past. We both have. And neither of us will let them happen again I assure you." Celestia sighed and looked down at Twilight's picture and Luna's ribbon for strength before she turned again to Blazer.

"Captain, the main reason I feel that it's time for you to retire is because of the length of your service. As the saying goes, 'familiarity breeds contempt.' By disobeying me, by continuing your vendetta against my sister, no matter how well intentioned, you've put your own ideas and opinions above mine. A good royal guard pony must always remember that I am your princess and my orders are final. While I welcome feedback and differing points of view from all of my subjects, I need to know that when I give an order, it's followed. When I tell a pony to forgive my sister and to treat her as a princess, equal in power to me, I expect them to forgive her and treat her as they would treat me. I do not want them to suspect her of treason, and I certainly don't want them to spread that point of view to the rest of the guards. Especially after I've made myself clear on the point on multiple occasions. Do you understand?"

Blue Blazer was sullen as he replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"You're a good guard pony, and a great captain. One of the best I've ever had. But I simply can't allow anypony in such an influential position to question the legitimacy of Princess Luna's reform and current status as co-regent of Equestria." Celestia paused as she saw how bent and pained Blue Blazer had become. As if she had just robbed him of his most important possession, but he couldn't get angry about it. "Cheer up, Blue Blazer, most ponies look forward to retirement. Just think, you'll be able to take up hobbies, travel the world, see, smell, and taste things few other ponies ever have."

In a sullen grumble Blue Blazer replied, "But I won't be serving you."

Celestia stood up and walked around her desk to place a delicate hoof on Blazer's shoulder. "So long as you keep the sun in your heart, you will always serve me, just as faithfully and dutifully as you have in the past. I believe in you." Blue Blazer looked up at her with tears in his eyes, and Celestia smiled down benevolently at him. "I'll give you a few weeks to announce your retirement, and to propose your replacement. Never forget though, you were always one of the best."

Blue Blazer stepped away from her, and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you, it's been an honor." As he straightened, Celestia bowed her head regally, and with tears threatening to fall, the captain of her guard quietly left her office.

Finally alone with her thoughts once more, Celestia sank down onto a nearby cushion as she mulled over what she'd learned.

Her sister had no prior interest in her school or its students. Her sister had met with Twilight in the library, and soon afterward had revealed that she thought that Celestia had taken Bay Breeze on as her new personal student. The simplest and therefore most likely scenario was that Twilight had been the one to tell Luna about Bay Breeze. But why? And for that matter, why had the guards thought that Twilight had been upset?

Celestia thought back to the day in question. She had been a bit distracted. The griffon ambassador had found an addendum to the treaty that hadn't been worded as clearly as he had liked. So he had been threatening to throw away the entire document unless he had his way. Celestia had spent practically the whole day trying to smooth down the feathers on both sides.

She had allowed herself a short break from the negotiations only because she had promised the dean of her school much earlier that she would spend time with the students. So she had spent her short free time observing Bay Breeze perform an elementary magical lesson that Twilight Sparkle had mastered in a fraction of the time, and at an earlier age. She remembered that it had been around that time that her favorite and most faithful student had appeared.

Celestia had felt revitalized by meeting and speaking with Twilight Sparkle. In fact, she had gone back to the negotiations and had shortly forged an agreement between the dragons and the griffons that very night.

Although, thinking back on it, it did occur to Celestia that Twilight had seemed a bit more ... awkward than normal. Later in the evening she had seemed much more relaxed around Luna, and there had been a bit of distance between her and her student. In fact, that was about the time that Twilight's letters had become less heartfelt and animated. And it had been shortly after that when Luna had asked about Bay Breeze taking Twilight's place...

Celestia chuckled disbelievingly at her epiphany. Twilight had been the one to tell Luna about Bay Breeze, and she probably was the one who had given Luna the idea that the filly was Celestia's new student. Twilight wasn't distancing herself from Celestia because she was growing up. It was because she thought that she'd been replaced.

Celestia's happiness for such a simple problem with an equally simple solution was short lived. Luna had known what Twilight had thought, and how Celestia felt. Yet she hadn't done anything to solve the problem. In fact, it appeared to Celestia that the gulf between her and Twilight was only growing wider. Why would Luna allow something which hurt both her sister and her friend to go on? Celestia could think of a few reasons, but few of them were pleasant.

Perhaps Blue Blazer's suspicions were still lingering in the air. Her first thought was that Luna might be deliberately trying to break apart Celestia and Twilight because Twilight was the key to the elements of harmony, the power that had defeated Nightmare Moon twice before. It could be an attempt to subvert the elements, to take them out of the equation. If that happened, then there was little else in Equestria which could be used to thwart any bid for power Luna made.

Such a sly and subtle scheme was at odds with what Celestia knew about her sister. But then again, she hadn't been aware of the depths of Luna's feelings a millennium ago until Nightmare Moon had appeared. There had been a time when she had understood the workings of her sister's mind intimately. But now, Luna was more often than not a mystery to Celestia. Gone was the happy, carefree alicorn she had known. In her place was a moody and somber pony that had the entire palace walking on eggshells.

Another, less alarmist reason behind Luna's silence was that perhaps Twilight Sparkle had forbidden her from telling Celestia. Celestia smiled fondly at the thought. In many ways Twilight was still a filly, and she could easily see her student swearing Luna to secrecy for reasons clear only to herself.

Or perhaps Luna was simply taking her time to gather information to fully understand both sides of the issue. She had never been one to leap into things, preferring to study and think things over before choosing a course of action.

Or possibly Luna was feeling resentful that Celestia wasn't paying as much attention to her as she thought she deserved. Maybe she was deliberately trying to steal Twilight Sparkle away from Celestia in order to hurt her older sister.

As the scenarios running through her mind became ever more outlandish, Celestia reigned in her thoughts and fears. The simple facts were, Twilight had seen her with Bay Breeze, and for one reason or another had come to the conclusion that she had been replaced as Celestia's favored pupil. Twilight had gone to the place she felt safest in, the library, where she had met Luna and had told her about Bay Breeze and her presumed new position. Luna had calmed the unicorn down and apparently had established a rapport with Twilight which had blossomed into a friendship. Luna had then found out the truth of the matter from Celestia, but had failed to clear up the misunderstanding, and instead had left for Ponyville to deepen her friendship with Twilight Sparkle.

The possible reasons for Luna's actions were endless, but they fell into three broad groups. Either she was plotting to eliminate the elements of harmony as a possible enemy, or she was deliberately trying to hurt either Celestia or Twilight, or there was some benign reason which made sense to somepony.

The first option was the direst. The two times that Nightmare Moon had been defeated, it had been because of the elements of harmony. Celestia was arguably more powerful than her sister, and undeniably more experienced. But Nightmare Moon was much more powerful than either Luna or Celestia. Besides which, Celestia wasn't sure that she had the heart to fight Nightmare Moon or Luna again. She reflected on the battle they had waged against each other a thousand years ago. The blows that had been struck, the wounds that had been inflicted, the oaths and curses made which could never be unsaid. They all reverberated through time and their sharp pain still pierced Celestia's heart. No. While Celestia loved Equestria and all her little ponies, if Luna was planning on resurrecting Nightmare Moon, and bringing about eternal night, Celestia wasn't sure if she would be able to stand up against her again.

Celestia sighed and lowered the sun. In the brief minutes between sunset and moonrise, when the sky was rainbowed in red, purple, and black, Celestia mulled over the second possibility. That Luna was deliberately

sabotaging Celestia's relationship with Twilight not because she was planning on usurping Celestia's place, but simply out of spite.

The Luna Celestia had once known would never act so pettily. But perhaps being treated simply as the "other" princess for so long had caused the resentment in Luna to build up and change her. Certainly Celestia could understand how grating the way other ponies treated her must be. Few if any supplicants during the night, a staff afraid of you, guards suspicious of you, and the only pony who could truly understand you only having a few hours of each day at best to meet with you. Exacerbating the problem was the fact that Luna was a bit less outgoing than Celestia, and that shyness meant some ponies took liberties with Luna that they would never have thought of taking with her older sister.

Celestia shook her head ruefully as she realized that she'd been as guilty as the other ponies. On multiple occasions she'd dumped simple but tedious administrative asks on Luna's lap simply because she didn't feel like doing them. Could Luna's actions be her passive-aggressive way of getting back at Celestia? Or maybe it was a cry for help?

The moon's silvery light stole over Canterlot, breaking the city of towers into columns of black and grey.

Finally, Celestia considered the last possibility; the one she hoped was the truth. The one where Luna was remaining silent not out of hatred or spite, but because of a reason more innocent in nature. Something that Celestia was unaware of, but made sense to Luna.

With all her heart Celestia hoped that the third possibility was the actual case. If Luna's actions were born out of some benign but mistaken emotion, then it would be a simple matter to rekindle Celestia's relationship with Twilight. And with Luna's newfound friendship with the young unicorn, perhaps between them, the princesses would be able to coax the wayward scholar to visit Canterlot more often.

Twilight's experiences in Ponyville had been wonderful for the once somewhat antisocial pony. With help from her friends, Twilight had learned many invaluable lessons in friendship and of life in general. She had grown as a pony in new and exciting ways, blossoming from a bookish filly into an intelligent, beautiful young mare.

But while her pupil had grown as a pony, freed from the structured world of the magical academy, Celestia couldn't help but miss Twilight's eager and excited energy. Certainly the princess had sycophants aplenty, innumerable servants, guards, attendants, nobles, and countless other ponies at her beck and call. But none of them were Twilight Sparkle. None of them had shown the talent, personality, power, dedication, or charming innocence that had made her apprentice unique. Without Twilight, Canterlot seemed a duller place, Luna's presence notwithstanding.

Celestia almost smacked herself in the face with her hoof. How had she allowed herself to get so far afield? She still had to determine what Luna's actual intentions were. Luckily, Celestia knew an excellent way to do just that.

If there was one thing about Luna that had stayed constant, it was that she was a poor liar. Unless she simply omitted a fact, it was usually fairly obvious to Celestia when her sister wasn't telling the truth. If Celestia were to send Luna a message that came just short of outright stating her conclusions about Luna's silence, she would probably be able to determine Luna's thoughts based upon her reply.

So Celestia flexed her magic and lit several of the nearby lamps. She also opened her writing desk across the room and levitated a quill, inkpot, and several pieces of parchment to where she sat. After only a few moments of thought, she dipped the quill in the ink, and began to write:

"Dearest sister,

I hope that this letter finds you well, and that you're enjoying your vacation. I also hope that you are finding Ponyville and its residents as pleasant as I know them to be. Please give my regards to Twilight Sparkle and all of her friends. Although I'm certain that they're all doing well.

Things are much the same here in Canterlot as when you left. Of course sometimes it seems like things never really change that much here. Not that such consistency is a bad thing. But watching over a nation of such peaceful ponies allows one considerable time to reflect, and feel lonely. I must admit that though you've been gone for only a few days, I miss you terribly, and look forward to your return.

But enough about me. I'm sure you don't want to hear about your sister's loneliness. How are you and Twilight getting along? I'm certain that by now you've come to recognize how special and talented she is. In fact, she was the first pony in centuries to capture my attention so thoroughly. She was such a joy to teach, and it was both exciting and entertaining to watch her explore her powers and to grow into the young mare she is today.

I know that as everypony grows, they must leave some of their relationships from the past behind. But I also know that while I've lost a student, you've gained a valuable friend. And nopony could ask for one finer.

I'm afraid that I must cut my letter short, the day is over and the night is quickly passing. I still need to begin on the paperwork for Captain Blazer's retirement. After many years of valuable service, the good captain has decided that his work for Equestria is finished. When you return to Canterlot, we can discuss his replacement, as well as perhaps a new organization for the palace guard. I like to mix things up every few decades to keep them on their hooves.

Please don't forget to give my love to Twilight, and I'm counting the days to your return.

Celestia"

Celestia looked over her the letter for a few minutes, hoping that her play to send Luna on a guilt trip wasn't too obvious. She knew it wasn't the finest piece of writing she'd ever produced, but she hoped that its slight awkwardness would give it an authentic feel. Deciding that it was good enough to draw out Luna's true feelings, Celestia rolled the paper into a scroll and sealed it with her crest. She concentrated slightly and in a bright flash of white hot light, the scroll disappeared.

It was getting late, at least for Celestia. While most ponies would be awake for hours to come, the early rising Celestia's self imposed bed time was fast approaching. She did actually need to get started on the paperwork for Blue Blazer's retirement, but resolved to see to it first thing in the morning.

She turned off the lights spread across her office and left the darkened room behind, locking the door after her. She trusted her ponies implicitly,

but Celestia knew that sometimes curiosity could overcome common sense.

The hallways of the palace were empty as she passed through them on her way to her bedchamber. The change between the day and night shifts had taken place nearly an hour previously. Even though Celestia had increased the palace's night staff threefold since the return of her sister, it was still a fraction of the size of the day staff. The hallways which saw so much bustling activity during the day, were eerily still at night.

Celestia didn't want to unfairly force some of her subjects to go against their circadian rhythm, but perhaps she should look into hiring more night owlish ponies to augment the number of ponies awake during the night hours. While it seemed few ponies took advantage of Luna's court, it would be nice for the palace to appear as busy for her sister as it did for Celestia. She filed the idea away as she reached the hallway leading to the royal sister's private apartments. Celestia cast a lingering glance at Luna's star strewn door before sighing and entering her own bedroom.

It was a room only lightly touched by the passing centuries. A large and nearly garishly decorated vanity constructed when mirrors and gilding were the height of fashion, four hundred years previously, stood next to a plain but substantial bookcase she had brought from their last castle. One end of the room was dominated by a large and luxurious bed only fifty or so years old. Across from it were a large fireplace and a cushion specially made for a pony of her size. Scattered throughout the room were various knickknacks of days and adventures long past.

There was an intricately engraved drinking horn that had once been the tooth of the largest, most terrible dragon to ever plague Equestria. A golden apple from a tree long lost to myth. A portrait of her by Leonardo da Pony; his last piece in fact before his unfortunate end. These and other priceless treasures littered the room.

But perhaps the feature which Celestia enjoyed the most were the walls. The ones on which had the door leading to the palace, and led over to the fireplace, were of the close fitting stone as the rest of the palace. But the others had been enchanted to be transparent, from the inside of the room at least. Celestia had done it a few centuries earlier in a fit of boredom, and couldn't be happier with the result.

From her vantage, it seemed as if all of Canterlot, as well as all of Equestria were spread out at her hooves. Every night she went to bed her vision full of the star painted night, and every morning she awoke and welcomed the colorful beauty of her sun. The illusion was so well done, it was difficult to tell where the wall ended, and the tall rounded window which led out onto a small balcony attached to her room began.

Celestia's hoofmaidens had been through her room. The bed's cheerful white and yellow sheets had been turned down, the scrolls she had left strewn across the floor had been placed in a neat stack, and despite it being a summer night, there was a roaring fire in the fireplace. It's well intentioned heat was actually somewhat stifling, so Celestia rearranged the logs to reduce the size of the fire, then stepped out onto her balcony to enjoy the night air while waiting for her bedroom to cool down a bit.

Far below the lights in the streets of Canterlot created a small sea of warm illumination. But the towers which stretched into the night sky were dark columns of inky blackness, only made slightly lighter by the cold moonlight. A few of their windows were lit, and the small squares and circles of artificial light were beacons in the dark sky.

There was something pretty about the night that had only come back when Luna had taken her duties over again. Celestia wasn't sure what it was, couldn't quite name it, but she knew it had been lacking when she had been responsible for both the day and the night. For a thousand years Celestia had simply copied what Luna had once done, and propelled her sister's moon across the unchanging night sky, and it had been enough. But ever since Luna's return, the night felt more ... alive. The stars wheeled and danced far above, while the moon made its slow circuit full of pale fire and dark shadow. Yes, Celestia mused to herself, something had changed.

She had spent several long minutes outside admiring not only the night, but the city before her, when a dark wisp of magical smoke, only slightly brighter than the dark night, curled up around the edge of the balcony. It stopped just in front of Celestia and began to rapidly twirl, compacting in on itself. There was a faintly audible pop, and the smoke transformed into a scroll bearing Luna's dark blue seal. With a heart full of nervous apprehension, Celestia levitated the scroll up before it could fall to the ground, and broke the seal.

Luna's normal hoofwriting was an elegant calligraphy incorporating many flourishes and artful decorations absent in most modern writing. It was a beautiful script which seemed more suited for an illuminated manuscript than a simple note. While Celestia could see a similarity between Luna's normal hoofwriting and that in the letter she received, it was difficult.

Usually Luna wrote neat and evenly, each word crafted to be passed down through the ages. This letter though had been written very poorly. Some lines were thin and slanted together, as if Luna had been racing to get them onto the paper. Others were wide and shaky, the ink blotted, as if Luna had been reluctant to write and had rested the pen against the paper for several long moments. There was even a spot near the end of the letter where Luna had pressed down so forcefully that the nib of the pen had broken and sent out a spray of ink.

Even before she began to read, Celestia knew that her sister had written while under an emotional strain.

"Dear Celestia,

I was surprised to receive your letter. To be honest, I hadn't thought our separation to be long enough to necessitate correspondence. That being said, I must admit that I have often found my thoughts with you in Canterlot during this journey, and was most delighted to receive your letter. I'm glad you felt the urge to write me, your letter allowed me to organize my own thoughts. Things are much clearer for me now.

I'm sorry that you're feeling so isolated and despondent, but know that I miss you very much. Upon my return, I have a confes some news to share with you which hopefully will alleviate the reasons behind your melancholy. It will likely be something of a bittersweet revelation, but ultimately a pleasant one I hope believe.

Twilight is doing well. She is one of the most amazing She is as talented and knowledgeable as you've informed me in the past, and it's quite apparent why you chose her as your pupil. Her power is only surpassed by her intellect, yet what little hubris she has is charming in its innocence. She often frets about appearing mature and capable in front of everypony, and myself in particular, but I readily admit that I enjoy her unguarded moments. The ones in which she reveals herself as normal as any other pony, perhaps more so.

I find that Twilight lacks the protective emotional shell most other ponies have. Even the most off the cuff remark or unintended slight can wound her deeply. She's so very strong, yet at the same time quite fragile. Anypony would be lucky to have her as a friend, no matter how much or how little time they spend with her.

As I already wrote, I have something of great importance to discuss with you upon my return. But I would like I believe that it can wait until then.

I look forward to returning to Canterlot and relieving you of your sadness, Luna."

Despite the relative brevity of the letter and the jumble of emotions behind it, Celestia smiled. Whatever Luna's reasons behind her actions, they weren't malevolent. If her sister had been attempting to negate the elements of harmony and try to claim the throne for herself, her letter would have been calm and collected. It would have reassured Celestia, insincerely soothing her into widening the rift between her and her student.

If Luna had been merely attempting to separate them from spite, her letter would have been triumphant and aggravating. However, Luna's tone had been almost apologetic. Her mind and emotions were unsettled, enough so that she seemed to have missed the section in Celestia's letter about Blue Blazer, or had thought it not important enough to address.

Instead, Luna had focused her attention entirely on Twilight, and to a lesser extent Celestia. She had alluded to news she felt Celestia should know which could only be the revelation about Twilight's true feelings. She had even gone so far as hint at Twilight's sensitivity and how easy it was for there to be a misunderstanding with the young unicorn.

It was obvious that Luna was aware of the state of affairs between Celestia and Twilight, and was upset over her part in it. So Celestia smiled because Twilight still loved her, and as soon as Luna worked up the courage to face her fears, Celestia could show her that they had been entirely groundless, whatever they were. Celestia loved Luna, and could forgive her anything.

With a bounce in her step, Celestia walked back into her room. Her sleep that night was easy and full of wonderful dreams about the future. A future with her, Luna, and Twilight in that endless summer field from the picture on her desk.

Chapter 2-4

The sun burst over the horizon, flooding the world with light. The vibrant dawn was an eruption of azure blue, rosy pink, warm yellow, and soft white. The beautiful colors mixed and blended with a thin line of clouds hovering just above the horizon, painting the sky with joyful, endless pastels. As the dawn spilled across the landscape, it seemed as if warmth and life were returning to Equestria.

Celestia must have put extra effort into raising the sun that morning, Luna mused. She watched the spectacular display through the downstairs windows of the library, noting as the streaming morning light burst through the window and spilled across the room. After a few minutes it reached the table she had been sitting at for the past several hours. With slightly bloodshot eyes she watched as the light reflected off dust motes, causing them to dance in the otherwise still and silent library.

With a wry and humorless smile, Luna contemplated just how much difference a single night could make in a pony's life. Yesterday she had been happy. As happy as she could remember being in quite a long time. There was just something about being with Twilight that caused her cares to slip away. When they were together, Luna could forget everything else.

But the morning found her in the throes of a guilty debate that had wracked her mind the entire night, keeping her too occupied to find any solace in sleep. The cause of her restless and agitated thoughts, though not the very root, had been the letter from Celestia.

It had seemed innocuous enough when it had appeared. Although Luna had noticed a brief flash of covetousness and pain cross Twilight's face at the sight of the letter before the unicorn could school her expression. Her smile had been forced as she excused herself and dragged away the recently returned Spike to give Luna some privacy as she read the letter.

Luna had prepared herself for the various possibilities contained in the missive from her sister. Perhaps there had been a new development back at court and Celestia needed her to cut her trip short. Or possibly it was a message asking for her advice on a point of policy or jurisprudence that

Celestia felt Luna would be more experienced in. Or it could possibly even be a letter for Twilight that Celestia had accidentally misdirected.

But what Luna had found was a message that pierced her to the very core and had torn at her delicate heart. On the surface, the letter had been a simple and friendly update from Celestia. But Luna could easily read between the lines of what her sister had written. She knew Celestia better than anypony, and the feelings behind her sister's words had left Luna in despair.

Celestia cared for Twilight, perhaps more deeply than Luna had suspected. And now, thanks to a simple misunderstanding, as well as Luna's silence, her normally unflappable sister was obviously falling into a depression. A lessening of spirits likely unnoticeable by the layponies, but one which was all too apparent to a loving sister.

Celestia's unguarded affection and longing for Twilight as a student, and as a friend, had begun an internal debate within Luna which had lasted all night. She scarcely knew what she had written in response to Celestia's letter. Hopefully it hadn't been anything too revealing. In addition, she couldn't quite remember what she'd said to Twilight to appease her when she had tried to coax Luna to bed.

But what Luna did remember was sitting all night long at the well-worn library table, mentally waging a war with herself and continuously chasing her thoughts in a vicious circle. Her guilty conscience and her love for Celestia were at odds with her feelings toward Twilight and her still lingering resentment over the fact that Celestia always seemed to get whatever Luna wanted. Truthfully, the argument was simple. Whose happiness was more important, Luna's or Celestia's? This wasn't the first time the issue had come to dominate Luna's thoughts. But this time there was the added complication of considering Twilight's happiness as well.

The solution of course was simple enough. Luna would just tell the truth, and Twilight would go back to adoring Celestia, likely only sparing the other princess the occasional burst of anger over having been befriended under false pretenses.

Luna silently admonished herself. Twilight would never act so pettily. She was far too good a pony to view Luna with resentment for too long. Certainly she'd feel angry at first, but after a while her anger would either

turn to pity or apathy, and Luna wasn't sure which would feel the worse to be the target of.

What she was sure of though, was that all of Twilight's love, affection, and attention would be devoted to Celestia again, once she learned that the princess hadn't really been trying to push her away. And why shouldn't that be the case? After all, Celestia had been her teacher, her mentor, her idol, for the majority of her life. Under Celestia's gentle hoof and loving eye, Twilight had grown into a wonderful mare and an exemplary pony. It was only natural that Twilight and Celestia would have deep feelings for one another, somewhere between those of a mentor and a student, and those of a mother and child.

What pony wouldn't have developed similar feelings in such a situation? It was only natural. Even Luna could admit that Celestia was as close to perfection as a pony could ever hope to be. Her beauty, wisdom, power, kindness, and generosity were unmatched. Luna knew just how demanding it was to rule all of Equestria, how lonely it could be as an alicorn. Yet Celestia had ruled alone for a thousand years, and her generosity, her kindness, her love for life, and her love for her little ponies were all untarnished by the years. If anypony deserved the happiness of having a friend like Twilight, it was Celestia.

And Twilight ... Well, Twilight was the most wonderful pony Luna had ever met; even counting those from before her exile. There was something about her that caused her to stand out from the herd. Certainly she was beautiful and powerful, but those aspects only added to her inherent charm. Twilight as a whole was captivating, but what had first drawn Luna to her was her innocence.

Twilight knew volumes upon volumes of information, but it had all been obtained through reading about the studies and experiences of other ponies. She'd never gone out and experienced the world in the way that most other ponies did. That had left her with a certain precious vulnerability, which instinctively made Luna want to protect her from the dangers and hurts that the world could callously visit upon a pony. Twilight seemed so strong because of her magical abilities and her knowledge, but really she was delicate. In some ways, even more delicate than ponies half her age.

Despite her wish to be the guardian of Twilight's innocence, Luna knew that Celestia was infinitely better suited for the role. After all, her sister had been Twilight's protector all her life. What room in such a relationship was there for Luna?

No. When Celestia and Twilight rekindled their relationship, Twilight's heart would be too full to have any space left over for her. So Luna would once again return to being alone, the same as before, and perhaps it would be better that way. They did say that it was better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all.

Luna was used to being alone, so very alone. Even though she hated it, she wouldn't wish that feeling upon anypony else, especially Celestia. She well knew the feeling of being alone in a crowd, and she knew the hurt that Celestia must feel as she labored under the belief that Twilight had turned her back on her. As the dawn's gentle light flowed over her unmoving form, warming Luna's skin, she came to the conclusion that despite wanting to be happy herself, the only logical resolution to the problem was for her to tell the truth, for Twilight and Celestia to be happy once again. It would be better than to continue hurting both of the ponies who meant so much to her.

She had just made the vow to come clean, when Luna heard hoofsteps above her, breaking the early morning's silence. She looked up to find Twilight frozen on the stairs leading to the bedroom, examining Luna with concern in her eyes.

"Did you sit there all night?" Twilight blurted out.

Luna's voice was thick from disuse. "No, I ... Yes. I had a lot on my mind last night." She turned her head away so she didn't have to stare into Twilight's innocently caring eyes. She had just resolved to tell Twilight the truth only moments before, yet faced with such a sudden opportunity, Luna couldn't force herself to speak. She wanted to tell her the truth, she really did. But she just couldn't stand to see those ridiculously large and trusting eyes filled with the anger and betrayal that Luna knew would be her due.

"I see," Twilight said sadly as she completed her descent down the stairs.

Luna hoped her inner turmoil wasn't apparent in the morning gloom as she attempted to assume a pleasant façade. "You seem to be up rather early, Twilight."

"I didn't sleep well last night," Twilight admitted with a small shake of her head. "I just couldn't get comfortable."

Feeling that Twilight's discomfort was somehow her fault, Luna sincerely apologized, "I'm sorry."

Twilight quietly walked through the shadow-strewn library, coming to a stop near where Luna was sitting. Her voice was somewhat admonishing as she inquired, "I tried to stay awake last night, waiting for you to come to bed. Did you really stay down here all night long? Aren't you tired?"

Actually, Luna felt surprisingly rested for having been awake for the entire night, as well as most of the previous day. At least rested physically. Mentally though, she was quite weary from having chased her thoughts in fruitless circles for the past several hours. She had examined all sides of her self-created dilemma so thoroughly and so often, that she was content with at last having reached a decision. So much so that for the moment, it was inconsequential that she hadn't acted on it yet. Simply coming to a resolution was enough, for now.

Luna's wan smile didn't quite reach her eyes as she replied, "I'm sorry for keeping you up. I had meant to go bed, but I was so lost in thought that time slipped away from me. But for some reason, I'm not all that tired."

"It was Princess Celestia's letter that kept you up all night, wasn't it? Was there some troubling news, or..." Twilight's voice rose in anxiety, then fell into an unsure whisper as she asked the question which had obviously been plaguing her. "Maybe something about me?"

"No. Well, yes. But not what you think," Luna unthinkingly replied, eager to reassure her friend. "Celestia asked how you were doing, and sent you her love. The rest of the letter though is what occupied my mind last night." The parts left unwritten, but no less real, which had also concerned Twilight.

"Oh." Twilight sounded much less distraught, and her wandering eyes met Luna's once again. "I see. I hope that whatever it was wasn't anything too troubling. I know that affairs of state can be complex and delicate."

Luna rested her head on one hoof and sadly smiled. If only it was a problem of state, things would be so much simpler. "It's nothing like that," she assured Twilight. "It's something more personal. Something that doesn't really affect Equestria as a whole, just us."

Twilight apparently misunderstood Luna and assumed that the "us" she had referred to meant Celestia and Luna alone. "Well, I can't say that I know much about sibling relationships since I was an only child. But if you need a pony to bounce ideas off of, or just somepony to listen, I'm here for you."

This was it, Luna's golden opportunity to tell the truth, to reveal to Twilight the dilemma that had been occupying her thoughts for so long. To heal the breach between her and Celestia, and to return the happiness she had borrowed for a little while. All she had to do was to speak, and Twilight could once again bask in Celestia's attention as her closest and most faithful protégé.

Luna breathed in deeply, sitting up straighter as she steeled her resolve. She looked up into Twilight's eyes, and the words that would reveal her depravity, her duplicity, her true self, caught in her throat.

The morning's sunlight was gently caressing Twilight's features, causing her to positively glow with an ethereal beauty. Her face was unguarded and trusting, and her eyes ... Her amaranthine eyes, clear and depthless, were guileless, caring, and perhaps even loving. Only one other pony had ever regarded Luna with such tender openness, and that pony had been Celestia. The Celestia of Luna's youth, before so many things had gone wrong, before an unbridgeable, but understandable gulf had opened up between them. Tears threatened Luna's eyes and her heart ached with a swelling pressure. How could she possibly bring herself to destroy something as heartwarmingly beautiful as Twilight's simple, unalloyed trust?

Luna had pledged herself to tell the truth. She knew that it would be hard when she did, and the longer she waited, the worse Twilight would feel, and the worse she'd feel in turn. But perhaps she'd waited too long already. It hurt her to remain silent, but she knew it would hurt even worse if she broke that fragile moment with the truth, and lost the trust, the faith of the one pony who unquestioningly trusted her, who truly cared for her.

Despite not being the most socially experienced pony, Twilight seemed to pick up on Luna's distress. She flattened her ears and looked away from Luna in embarrassment, or perhaps disappointment. She cleared her throat and switched to a different, safer topic of conversation. "Well, it's pretty early. Spike probably won't be up for several hours. He usually sleeps in late, and the Cutie Mark Crusaders apparently ran him pretty ragged yesterday too. Anyway, I don't think there's much in the way of breakfast food left in the kitchen, so I was thinking of going over to Sugar Cube Corner and picking something up. Does that sound good to you?"

Luna was ashamed of the relief that flowed through her at being left off the hook so easily. "Yes. That sounds wonderful. Although, are you certain it's alright to leave Spike alone?"

"We won't be gone for long. I'll just leave him a note telling him where we went." Twilight smiled reassuringly at Luna before she turned to go back upstairs. With the other mare's back turned, Luna took the opportunity to hastily wipe the moisture from her eyes, hoping that the sleepless night and her melancholy thoughts hadn't combined to make them appear too puffy.

While Twilight was busy upstairs, Luna made her way to the bathroom where she quickly checked her appearance. Thankfully no sleep meant no bed mane. Although it seemed that there might be some truth to Rarity's warning from yesterday. Luna's eyes were circled by slightly darker rings which promised to develop into bags if she subjected herself to too many more sleepless nights. Other than that hopefully easily overlooked imperfection, Luna appeared as she normally did. Just plain, simple, not exotic like her sister, Luna. She paused long enough to wash her face with some refreshingly cold water, before she returned to the library just in time to meet Twilight descending the stairs again.

"Spike's still asleep. I don't think anything short of a hurricane can wake him up right now. So, you ready to go?"

Luna returned her friend's eager smile with a small, only partially fake, one of her own. "Yes. More than ready actually. It will feel wonderful to stretch my legs after so much sitting." Luna said in an attempt to substitute over-enthusiasm for sincere happiness. She would tell Twilight the truth; she just needed time to prepare herself. She needed just the right moment to come

along. A small part of her worried that the right moment had already passed, and the rest of her feared that the small part was right.

Nonetheless, Luna was sick and tired of her internal debate, so she simply tried as hard as possible to put it out of her mind as she followed Twilight out of the darkened library and into the quiet morning. The morning dimmed as the sun passed through the narrow gap between the horizon and the clouds that had reflected its light earlier.

"It's somewhat overcast this morning," Luna observed with an inquiring glance at the sky. In the dim recesses of the clouds, she caught the shadowy forms of ponies flittering about through above, gathering the wispy clouds together into something more substantial. "Is it scheduled to rain today?"

Twilight paused, also looking up at the white-grey clouds. "I'm not sure. I forgot to read this week's weather plan. But it sure looks like it, doesn't it? They probably have a copy of the weather schedule at Sugar Cube Corner that we can look at."

With unspoken agreement, the two ponies, the only ponies in the street at that hour, began to walk toward Sugar Cube Corner again, moving a bit more quickly through the still darkened streets than they had before. By the time they had reached the whimsical building that had hosted Luna's welcome party, the clouds overhead were thicker, covering the sky in all directions with a uniform dark grey.

The door to the bakery was wide open, and from it wafted a medley of wonderful aromas. Sugar, cinnamon, butter, and rising yeast, all mingling together to produce a symphony of fragrances, which were carried by a warm breeze coming from the well lit store. With the almost tangible promise of baked goods before them, Twilight and Luna eagerly left the overcast day behind them and stepped into the warm and inviting building.

Gone were the banners, streamers, balloons, and other party accoutrements that had festooned the shop the last time Luna had been there. In their place were counters and tables full of baked goods of every type. From simple golden-brown baguettes pouring from baskets, to sugar encrusted tarts, to turnovers oozing their sweet fruity paste stacked hoof deep atop large platters.

Amidst the myriad of baked goods stood a rotund blue earth pony with pastel pink hair and a cupcake themed cutie mark. She was in the middle of carefully sliding a tray of muffins into a covered cart which already held several other racks of pastries. The earth pony noticed their entrance out of the corner of her eye, and after pushing the tray of muffins into place; she discreetly spit out her potholder and turned to greet them.

"Good morning, Twilight! I wasn't expecting anypony this morning ..." she trailed off as she looked in Luna's direction, fully taking in the alicorn for the first time. She immediately dropped into a hasty and awkward bow. "Oh my, Your Majesty, I didn't realize –"

"Please, stand up, there's no need to be so formal." It seemed odd to be so deferentially treated by such an obviously matronly pony.

"Luna, this is Mrs. Cake. Mrs. Cake, this is Lu-Princess Luna." Twilight introduced them, with a graceful wave of her hoof from one pony to the other.

Mrs. Cake slowly stood up, and beamed at Luna. "It's a pleasure to meet you, dearie, er, I mean Your Majesty."

"The pleasure's all mine," Luna assured Mrs. Cake with what she hoped was a disarming smile.

Mrs. Cake firmly closed the rear of the cart she'd been loading with a hoof, as she thoughtfully said, "Oh, you girls must be hungry if you came all this way right before the big storm. When Princess Celestia was here, she just loved our apple cupcakes. I don't think we have any made right now, but if you wait just two shakes, I can whip a batch up for you."

She squeezed behind a counter, but paused when Twilight asked, "So, is it going to rain today?"

Mrs. Cake looked at Twilight incredulously, obviously surprised by the unicorn's ignorance. "Of course it is, dearie. Today's storm was announced weeks ago. It's going to be a doozy, with lots of rain all morning. Didn't you get a copy of this month's weather schedule?"

Twilight chuckled nervously, as she examined the wooden ceiling overhead. "I uh, must have not got gotten this month's, no."

"Well, what about the reminders at city hall and at the post office?"

Twilight's ears lowered in embarrassment, and she changed to examining the floor as she admitted, "I really haven't gotten out of the house much lately."

"You didn't even see the leaflets the weather patrol dropped yesterday?" Mrs. Cake pressed.

"Well..."

Luna finally decided to save Twilight from further embarrassment by changing to subject. She stepped forward, drawing Mrs. Cake's attention. "Mrs. Cake, while it is most kind of you to offer to bake confections for me, I'd hate for you to go out of your way on my behalf." She waved a hoof toward the dizzying array of baked delights on display. "I'm sure that we'll be more than capable of finding something delectable already prepared. Besides which, while my sister and I have many things in common, in some cases our tastes differ," she stated with a glance sideways at Twilight.

Twilight met Luna's gaze, and for some reason her cheeks flushed red.

Mrs. Cake waved away Luna's argument, and cheerfully stated, "Oh, it wouldn't be any trouble at all, Princess Luna."

"Really, we wouldn't want to impose upon you, Mrs. Cake," Luna said earnestly.

"It wouldn't be any imposition-"

"I would not like apple cupcakes!" Luna exclaimed in exasperation, her nostrils flaring in agitation. From Mrs. Cake's shocked and somewhat frightened expression, Luna realized she'd perhaps spoken a bit too loud and forcefully. Sheepishly, in a calmer tone, she added, "I'm sure that what you already have prepared will be more than adequate."

"Oh, o-okay," Mrs. Cake stuttered out, still a bit shaken from Luna's show of force.

"Honey bun, is everything alright?" a masculine voice called out. A lanky yellow stallion with an orange mane came out of a nearby door wearing a

heavy rain resistant poncho and galoshes that extended nearly all the way to his knees.

"Just fine," Mrs. Cake hastily assured him. "I was just talking with Twilight Sparkle and the Princess here..."

The stallion looked over at the two ponies and after a moment his eyes widened with surprise and apprehension. "Oh! Uh, Princess ..."

"Luna," his wife supplied in a stage whisper.

"Luna. What a pleasant surprise to have you visiting our simple store." He looked down at himself, obviously attempting to figure out the logistics of properly bowing in his unwieldy rain gear.

Luna preempted him by warmly replying, "It's my pleasure, Mr..."

"Cake," the stallion replied.

He must be Mrs. Cake's husband. Luna smiled to herself at the cute contrast the two ponies made with one another, the one tall and lanky, the other short and plump. With good humor, Luna greeted him again, "It's wonderful to meet you Mr. Cake. And please, don't sell your store short, it's quite charming, and your wide selection looks wonderful."

"Oh, well, thank you," Mr. Cake said with unreserved gratitude.

"So, what brings you girls out so early?" Mrs. Cake inquired.

Before they could reply, a pink earth pony with voluminous hair poked her head through the door Luna remembered leading into the kitchen. "Mrs. Cake, where's the good chocolate? Not the kind you hide from me, I already ate that. But the kind you use for brownies."

Pinkie Pie, one of the easier of Twilight's friends to remember, noticed the visitors to the store, and her eyes lit up. "Twilight, Lunie, I haven't seen you guys in forever!"

Pinkie exuberantly leapt at Twilight and Luna, and pulled them into a tight embrace. A very tight embrace. So tight in fact that Luna could practically

tell exactly what she'd been baking from the scent left on her coat. Sugar, flour, butter, ... vanilla?

"Pinkie ... too ... tight," Twilight gasped out as she tried to pull herself out from under Pinkie's hoof. Abruptly Pinkie let both of them go, almost causing Luna to topple over from the sudden release. "It's only been a few days since we saw you at the party, Pinkie," Twilight griped as she rubbed at her sore neck with a hoof.

"Really? But it feels like it's been months since we last got together." Excitement lit up Pinkie's face. "Oh, you know what we should do to celebrate our getting-back-together-ness?"

"Party?" Twilight hazarded.

Pinkie put a friendly hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "That's a great idea, Twilight. But we can't. It's too short notice to plan a good party, and I'm having a rainy day party later today. A pony can't be at two parties at the same time. That's called the party exclusion principle. It's one of those laws of physics that nopony can break, I know, I've tried. But since we can't party, we should do some baking!"

Twilight was silent for a few moments as she pondered something, before she replied, "You mean the Pauli exclusion principle?"

"Nah, that's for fermions, not ponies, silly."

Twilight opened her mouth to say something, but closed it with a snap, and rolled her eyes while shaking her head at Pinkie being Pinkie. With a sigh, she said, "Pinkie, maybe we could bake later. Luna and I just came over to pick up something for breakfast. We didn't intend to stay for too long."

"Oh, why didn't you say so?" Pinkie asked as she bounced over to a nearby table laden with baked goods. "We've got cinnamon buns, honey buns, iced buns, all sorts of buns for your buns."

"Well, it seems like you have everything in hoof, Pinkie, I'd better be going, dear." Mr. Cake announced. "These deliveries won't make themselves you know. And neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, will stay the Cakes from the swift completion of their appointed rounds," he said while standing a bit straighter.

Mrs. Cake moved closer to her husband, and anxiously said, "Be careful out there, dear. I don't want you to be blown away by the storm."

"Don't worry, I'll stay safe, honey bun." Mr. Cake leaned down and planted a chaste yet heartfelt kiss on his wife's cheek. Mrs. Cake blushed a bit as she lightly nuzzled her husband in turn.

Luna found herself smiling warmly at the wonderfully domestic scene. The cakes obviously loved each other very much, and their heartfelt regard for one another seemed to overflow and spread throughout the entire store.

All too soon, Mr. Cake straightened and turned his attention to the cart full of baked goods. With Mrs. Cake's efficient and practiced aid, he was soon harnessed and began to pull the cart out of the shop. But before he left, Mr. Cake paused on the threshold. "Goodbye dear, Princess Luna, Twilight, Pinkie, I should be back in a few hours, but if you're gone before I get back, I hope you have a wonderful day." He nodded his appreciation for the chorus of well wishes that answered him, and pulled the heavily laden cart out into the ever-darkening morning.

As Mr. Cake disappeared through the open door, Luna noticed the first few raindrops of the day fall and soundlessly hit the dusty ground. Still hoping to return to the library before the rain began in earnest; Luna turned her attention to the glass display case Twilight was perusing. Pinkie was busy shuffling the many flaky breakfast pastries between the display and the tables around the store.

Mrs. Cake had watched her husband until he could no longer be seen through the shadows of the gloomy morning. But she quickly roused herself and cast off her somewhat fretful countenance in favor of a more businesslike attitude. "Pinkie, the chocolate for the brownies is where I always put it."

"Oh!" Pinkie said wonderingly. "I didn't even look there because you try to hide it, so I was looking for it in all the places you usually hide the chocolate." She bounced across the room and back into the kitchen crying out, "Forward, for brownies!"

The other three ponies watched her exit with similar expressions of resigned wonder. With a rueful shake of her head and a small smile, Mrs. Cake asked, "Well girls, is there anything you see that you like?" She

moved over to stand behind the glass counter, helpfully waiting for them to order.

"It just all looks so good," Twilight complained good-naturedly. Luna had to agree with her assessment. The multitude of sweet baked goods, some flaky, some moist, all mouth watering, was simply staggering.

As they continued to weigh the merits of each of the offered breakfast options, Pinkie returned from the kitchen. "You were right, Mrs. Cake. But don't worry, next time I need chocolate, I'll check there first, and third." She joined Luna and Twilight in their hungry appraisal of the store's wares. "Boy, all these look sooo good, don't they?" she asked conversationally.

"Oh yes," Luna easily agreed.

"Too good. I can't decide which one I want," Twilight groused.

Pinkie leaned in companionably and asked, "Well, what kind of taste do you want? I know when I wake up first thing in the morning, I really want sugar, and lots of it."

Twilight contemplated Pinkie's advice for a moment and replied, "Sugar could be good, but those baguettes smell wonderful, and I'm kind of wanting something buttery now instead of just outright sweet."

"And light," Luna chimed in. She hadn't forgotten her resolution to watch her intake on her vacation. Pinkie's earlier reference to their flanks had been a helpful reminder.

Pinkie tilted her head and thought out loud. "Hmm, something buttery and light ..." Her ears shot up and she joyfully announced, "Oh, I know!" She hastily trotted around the counter and leaned down behind the glass. When she straightened, she had a basket in her mouth that she slammed on top of the counter. It was overflowing with popovers, one of which tumbled out, thanks to Pinkie's rough treatment, and it bounced off of Luna's nose.

"Popovers!" Pinkie cried. "They're buttery and light, and fluffy, and so, so good."

"Pinkie!" Mrs. Cake cried out in horrified mortification. "That's no way to treat a customer, especially a royal one!"

"Aw it's okay, right Luna?" Pinkie asked, popping back up over the top of the counter.

"Oh. Yes. It's quite all right, Mrs. Cake. Pinkie Pie is our friend." Luna glanced at Twilight, waiting for her to chime in her agreement. But Twilight remained silent, and her painfully wooden smile was at odds with the intense glare she was casting at Pinkie. After a brief hesitation, Luna turned back to reassuring Mrs. Cake. "Besides which, her suggestion seems like the answer to our breakfast dilemma. These popovers look wonderful."

Luna used her magic to select one of the puffy pastries from the basket and floated it close enough for her to take a petite bite from it. Her appreciative smile, meant to assure Mrs. Cake that everything was fine, was completely unfeigned. Silently Luna wondered if all ponies in Ponyville were naturally adept at cooking.

"Well, I suppose if you're alright with it dearie, then everything's fine." Mrs. Cake sounded mollified, but she was still shooting Pinkie a look that promised they would speak about the matter again sometime.

Luna levitated another of the popovers, sending it toward Twilight, though the pastry was so light it almost floated by itself. Twilight recovered herself enough to smile appreciatively at Luna and murmur, "thank you," before taking hold of the muffin with her own magic. Luna could feel a shiver running up and down her spine as Twilight's magic caressed her own. She hid discomfort from the not entirely unpleasant feeling by focusing intently on the basket of puffed pastries and audaciously selecting another popover. They were just so good, and so light, that she had to have another.

While she guiltily helped herself to a second pastry, with Mrs. Cake looking on with pride, Luna became aware of a soft pattering that was quickly growing in intensity coming from behind her. Thoughtfully chewing on the popover, Luna turned back to the still open door and found that she and Twilight had tarried for too long. The storm had begun in earnest, and in a few minutes, the rain intensified to the point that it was pounding down in loud and heavy torrents.

"Yay, rain!" Pinkie cried excitedly. "Time to party!" She hopped over the counter and quickly embraced Luna and Twilight before she retrieved a pointed party hat and a noisemaker from seemingly empty air. After

fastening the hat on her head, she joyously blew the noisemaker and flung a small hoofful of confetti into the air.

"Pinkie, no parties downstairs during business hours," Mrs. Cake reminded the exuberant party pony sternly. Well, as sternly as the obviously good-natured pony could manage.

Pinkie wilted slightly and her noisemaker deflated. "Sorry, Mrs. Cake. I forgot." She did sound genuinely remorseful as she removed her party hat, and returned both it and the noisemaker to wherever she'd summoned them from.

"That's alright, Pinkie. Just remember that not everypony likes having parties all the time. Especially ponies like poor Mr. Breezy after that time he came in to pick up a cake and you accidentally hit him in the eye with a frozen cream pie."

"Yeah," Pinkie Pie agreed mournfully. "I guess we can't have a party right now. Even though I don't know why some ponies don't like parties, they're so fun!" Talking about her favorite subject had perked Pinkie back up, and she turned to Luna with an excited twinkle in her eye. "Ooooh, you know what else is fun that ponies can do together? Baking! And it's later now, you said we could bake later, and it's later. Besides, you guys can't leave in weather like this."

Twilight looked longingly out of the door at the near solid wall of water, as if contemplating whether it was truly impossible to leave. There was a flash of light, and a loud rumble of thunder washed over them. With a defeated expression, she decided, "Well, I guess since we can't go home in this weather, we could try our hooves at a little baking. If it's alright with Mrs. Cake of course." She silently implored Mrs. Cake with a pleading expression, but if she was looking to the older mare to save her from working in the kitchen, Twilight was doomed to be disappointed.

"That sounds like a good idea," Mrs. Cake said warmly. "Today's going to be slow, with everypony staying at home because of the rain. But we do need to get started on the cookies for Starlight's birthday party the day after tomorrow. I'll just hold down the store in case somepony does come by, but you girls can get started on those cookies."

Pinkie Pie squealed in excitement and bounced over to hug a somewhat downcast Twilight. "Yay! The only thing more fun than baking is baking with friends. Well, that and parties. But like Marie Ponyette said, 'if the ponies can't party, let them all bake.'"

Despite her being fairly certain that Pinkie had misquoted whomever she'd referenced, Luna couldn't help but find her excitement infectious. She began to look forward to getting her hooves dirty with a bit of cooking. Though her excitement was checked by Twilight's obvious lack of enthusiasm, which was honestly somewhat confusing to Luna. Surely baking wasn't all that difficult. After all, Luna was fairly sure that there were lists and instructions on how to proceed. She would think that Twilight would be thrilled at the opportunity to follow written instructions.

"Well you girls have fun, and don't forget to clean up after yourselves. Oh, and Pinkie dear, don't forget to taste everything before you give it to another pony."

Pinkie smartly saluted and promised, "Don't worry, Mrs. Cake, we won't let any baked bads get out this time." She then quickly herded Twilight and Luna into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Luna's attention was quickly captured by the oven, which had tendrils of thick black smoke escaping from it. "The oven's on fire!" she cried out.

"Of course it is, silly. How else could it bake things?" Pinkie asked as she gaily skipped over to the oven, throwing open its door with her hoof while she picked up a potholder with her mouth. A black cloud of smoke billowed from the oven, but it dissipated unnaturally quickly. Pinkie leaned into the oven and retrieved a glass dish, in which was a charred black mound of ... something.

A sudden gust of wind passed through the kitchen, and the pile of ash swirled up and disappeared as it scattered into the air.

"What exactly was that, Pinkie?" Twilight asked dubiously.

Pinkie set the now empty dish on a trivet next to the sink before she cheerfully informed them, "That was just a batch of my oven cleaning brownies."

Twilight's eyebrow rose skeptically as she repeated, "Oven cleaning brownies?"

"Yep. It's my own special recipe, guaranteed to get your oven squeaky clean."

Luna angled her head a bit to examine the still open oven, and despite the billowing clouds of smoke it had been emitting earlier, the interior of the oven was spotless. "It is quite clean," she observed.

"It's guaranteed to clean off even the most stubborn of stains, or your bits back," Pinkie confided to them. "But enough about cleaning, it's time for some reading."

Pinkie gently slammed the oven door shut with her rear hoof as she traipsed across the kitchen and retrieved a stained and battered book from the built-in shelf there. Twilight's ears had perked and her face had lit up at the mention of reading. But upon seeing the title of the book, "Betty Hocker's Cookbook," her expression became somewhat pained.

"Hmmpf mēth auh gmpth rmthng mph," Pinkie said around a mouthful of book.

"Try putting the book down, then talking," Twilight suggested.

Pinkie placed the book down on the counter near where Twilight and Luna were standing. "Huh, that book tastes like almonds," she commented to herself while running her tongue over her lips. "Anyway, what I said was that this is a good starting book. It's got all sorts of recipes, including the basic one for the cookies we need to make. Once you guys make the batter, we can add the secret Sugar Cube Corner ingredients, and they'll be perfect."

Pinkie swept over to Luna and leaned in, placing her face uncomfortably close to Luna's. Pinkie had adopted a rather serious expression and overtly examined the room, shifting her eyes back and forth as if she were looking for somepony while she leaned in even closer to Luna. Still glancing from side to side, Pinkie threw a hoof around the back of Luna's neck, pulling them closer still.

In a whisper she asked, "Do you want to know what the secret ingredient is?"

Not entirely certain that she did want to know, Luna nervously nodded nonetheless.

Still on the lookout for eavesdroppers, Pinkie waved Luna closer with one hoof, while she pulled herself closer with the other. Obliging Luna turned her head to better hear, and Pinkie leaned in, her warm breath causing Luna to fight the urge to flick her ear.

"The secret ingredient is," Pinkie paused dramatically in order to check on last time for spies. She lowered her head, but in a loud whisper announced, "love." Pinkie released Luna and hopped in front of the very confused princess. "Now, you have to promise never to tell anypony what the secret ingredient is, Luna. It's super duper important."

Luna wasn't sure just how much of a secret it was, but it was obviously important to Pinkie Pie. So with all due gravity, Luna promised, "I swear that I will never tell anypony what the secret ingredient is, Pinkie Pie."

"Do you Pinkie swear?" Pinkie asked while eyeing Luna sternly.

Before Luna could ask what a Pinkie swear was, Twilight interrupted with an exasperated sigh. "No, she doesn't Pinkie promise, Pinkie. She's a princess, a royal promise trumps a Pinkie promise."

Pinkie shook her head in disappointment, as if Twilight had just failed an important lesson. "Nothing trumps a Pinkie promise. Except maybe an oath of the moment, but really, who does those anymore?" Pinkie shrugged rhetorically, then narrowly examined Luna. "But if you vouch for her, Twilight, then I guess it's okay."

"Yes. She's Princess Luna, one of the rulers of all Equestria. I think we can trust her," Twilight replied, as if she were explaining the obvious to a small child. She went so far as to gesture toward Luna with her hoof as if to make sure that Pinkie knew which alicorn in the room they were talking about.

Luna smiled in appreciation of Twilight's trust. But internally her mood soured a bit. She wasn't nearly as trustworthy as the unicorn believed, and

all too soon Luna was going to have to reveal to twilight just how duplicitous she was.

Pinkie continued to examine Luna for a few seconds longer before she smiled brightly and said, "Okie dokie artichokie." She then turned back to the cookbook she'd set down, and nimbly flipped it open with her nose. The book opened up to a well-used page near the middle, spattered with stains and crusty remnants of recipes past. "That's the recipe. I'll go get you guys a bowl so you can get started."

As Pinkie moved away to hunt down the bowl and other accoutrements they would need, Luna looked at Twilight a bit anxiously. She'd made her displeasure at being forced to cook fairly easy to pick up on. "Is everything alright, Twilight?"

"Yes. Mostly." Twilight sighed. "It's just that this book brings back some memories. Unpleasant ones. There was a copy in the Canterlot library, and it was the first cookbook that I ever read. At first it seemed wonderful, a book that had immediate practical applications. I was so excited to try it out that I ran all the way to the kitchens. At first the chefs were really supportive of me learning how to cook, but then things got a little out of hoof. There was a little fire, and well, there's a reason why everypony in the castle calls the kitchens the new kitchens," Twilight said with a nervous laugh.

Luna sided up to Twilight and bumped her comfortingly. "It couldn't have been all that bad."

"I'm never allowed to touch a pot or pan in Canterlot again, without direct supervision by a palace chef or Princess Celestia herself."

A bit stunned at the draconian rules imposed on Twilight, Luna was silent for a moment. "Oh. Well, what exactly was the problem? It seems to me like cookbooks are just a collection of lists and instructions. I would think that a pony like you would be a natural at following them."

"That's the problem," Twilight groaned. "They seem like a bunch of steps that should be easy to follow, but they're too easy. They're so ambiguous that they're entirely unscientific. I mean, what is the exact measurement of a 'smidge' anyway?" Twilight asked, stabbing her hoof toward the line the offending measurement was printed on in the open cookbook.

"Five milliliters," Pinkie said as she plopped down a large metal bowl. Her sudden reappearance caused Luna and Twilight to jump away from one another. Pinkie didn't seem to notice their movement as she dumped several measuring cups, spoons, and other cooking instruments with a clatter on the counter.

"What?" Twilight asked confusedly, a delicate blush on her cheeks. Luna could feel a matching blush on her own.

"A smidge, it's five milliliters. A pinch is two point five," Pinkie explained. "If you have any more questions, don't be afraid to ask. This order is super duper important to Mr. and Mrs. Cake, so I need to make as many batches as possible, so I won't be able to help you guys too much."

Twilight exchanged a nervous glance with Luna, neither of them entirely comfortable with being given near free reign in the kitchen. Luna the untested cook, and Twilight the pony who apparently had burned down a kitchen. "Are you sure, Pinkie?"

"Yep. I'm sure two super smart ponies like you can get this done in no time at all," Pinkie replied confidently before she turned and retreated to the other side of the kitchen.

Twilight breathed in deeply and seemed a bit more confident than before. "Maybe today is the day that Twilight Sparkle will be able to make something sweet, something edible, something unquestioningly non-sentient."

Luna looked at her quizzically. "Wait, what was that?"

Twilight blushed in embarrassment, and with forced bravado replied, "Never mind. Let's get started. What's the first ingredient on the list?"

Luna turned to the book, and through a dark smudge on the page read off, "Two cups of sugar."

"Hmm. That's simple enough," Twilight commented. She lifted one of the measuring cups up and dipped it into a nearby bag that was slumped against the wall, labeled sugar. She poured the powdery substance into the bowl and asked, "What's next?"

"A cup of butter."

"Butter, butter, butter," Twilight muttered to herself as she looked around the kitchen. "Ah, here's some." Two sticks of butter were wrapped in a purple field of energy and floated through the air and dropped onto the mound of sugar.

"Now it says to cream them," Luna said, reading ahead. She furrowed her brow in confusion. "But does that mean we're supposed to add cream? I don't see a measurement for any cream."

"I think the book is using cream as a verb," Twilight clarified. She picked up a whisk with her magic and began to slowly, inexpertly stir the butter and sugar together. "Which means to beat into a creamy texture. So I think that we're supposed to mix this together until it's ... well, creamy."

"Oh." Luna watched Twilight move the sugar-encrusted butter around the bowl, for a few seconds before she hazarded, "You wouldn't by chance read dictionaries for fun? I only ask because that definition sounded as if it came from a reference book."

Twilight blushed under Luna's questioning eyes and the tempo of her whisk hitting against the sides of the metal bowl drastically increased. "Yes. But only when I'm really bored. Or when I've run out of other books, or when I'm taking a break from reading other books. Besides, if I didn't, then how would I have learned words like strabismus?"

"Or antimacassar!" helpfully added Pinkie, who appeared from thin air, causing both Luna and Twilight to jump slightly.

"Pinkie, I didn't see you come over, what are you doing?" Twilight asked, her voice made higher by surprise.

"Baking, duh. I needed to get some eggs, and I thought you'd need some too." Pinkie jiggled her head back and forth, causing a large white egg to pop out of her impressively curly hair and roll down her forehead and off her nose. It flew across the short gap to the bowl, and landed on Twilight's whisk, causing the egg to cleanly break in half, depositing the yolk and white into the mixture.

"Thanks," Twilight said flatly as she levitated the now empty eggshell from the bowl.

"No problem!"

"That was rather impressive, " Luna complimented Pinkie.

"Thanks, it took me forever to learn that trick. Like two whole weeks at least. There were eggs all over the place, which didn't make Mr. and Mrs. Cake too happy. And that's why I'm not allowed near unripe coconuts anymore."

Luna tilted her head, attempting to understand what, if anything, coconuts had to do with the conversation. Meanwhile Pinkie began humming to herself and skipped back across the room to where she was busy with her own bowl.

"Uh oh, we've got a problem," announced Twilight anxiously.

Luna turned to her friend with concern and asked, "What is it?"

Twilight planted a hoof on the cookbook, highlighting the list of ingredients. "It says here that we need two small eggs, and we used one extra large egg instead. We've deviated from the recipe!" Twilight cried as she thrust the remnants of the eggshell at Luna, stamped on the white shell was indeed a label that said "extra large."

"Well, perhaps an extra large egg is equivalent to two small ones."

"But what if it isn't? What if an extra large egg only equals one and a half small eggs? I can't find an egg conversion chart anywhere in this stupid book." A note of panic crept into Twilight's voice as she began to hastily flip through the pages of the cookbook.

Luna was a princess, a ruler, a natural arbiter of policies and procedures, so she was well versed in thinking outside the proverbial box. "What if we take the egg out and start over with two small eggs?"

"We can't," Twilight practically wailed. "I'd already started stirring before I checked the recipe again."

Luna frowned in thought as she wracked her brain for a solution to their problem, but short of using powerful and questionably benign magic, she couldn't seem to find a ready answer. "I suppose that we're going to have to hope for the best, Twilight. That an extra large egg does in fact equal two small eggs."

Twilight seemed pained, and resignedly answered, "I guess." She looked forlornly at the bowl and began to mix the ingredients once more, but with less energy than before. "What's next on the list?"

Luna flipped through the cookbook until she found the recipe again. At least she was pretty sure it was the recipe. It was difficult to tell with all the smudged hoofprints all over the pages. The title definitely had the word cookie in it. Probably.

"A third of a cup of lemon juice." It took a few minutes of searching, but there was a bowl of fruit on display atop one of the bookshelves. Amongst the fruit was a single lemon that Luna retrieved with her magic, floating it down to the counter next to the measuring cup.

However, Luna realized they had a new problem. How were they supposed to get the juice out of the lemon? She poked at the unhelpful fruit with her hoof, causing it to roll over. Not seeing any obvious solution, Luna asked Twilight, "How exactly does one juice a lemon?"

Pinkie called over from her side of the kitchen, "You've got to squeeze it, silly filly."

"Squeeze it?" she asked dubiously while skeptically examining the fruit.

"Yep, like an orange, or a grapefruit, or a turnip."

Luna looked from the lemon to Pinkie's smiling face, and back to the lemon, her skepticism apparent. The fruit didn't appear to be all that malleable, at it occurred to her that Pinkie might be having a joke at her expense. But she picked the lemon back up with her magic and hovered it over the measuring cup, giving it a gentle squeeze with the energy field surrounding it. However, the stubborn fruit refused to give up any of its liquids, so Luna squeezed it a tad bit harder. Still no lemon juice appeared. So Luna increased the pressure, beginning to grow a bit frustrated with the

lemon. Soon the lemon had been compacted down to a fraction of its original size. And Luna was glaring at it with outright hatred.

Twilight had stopped stirring, and looked on with concern. "Uh, Luna, did you use a field which completely surrounds the lemon, or did you leave a gap to allow the juice to escape?"

Luna felt like planting her hoof in her face for having made such a foolish mistake. "Thank you, Twilight," she said with a light laugh. "I completely forgot about a release valve. If you hadn't of said something, I probably would have just continued to squeeze until it had collapsed into a singularity."

With a flick of her magic, Luna opened up a small hole in the field around the lemon, and the fruit exploded through it. Thankfully, most of the blast was directed downwards and some of it even managed to make it into the measuring cup. Though a small jet of the stinging juice hit Luna in the eye, causing her to wince at the burning pain and slam her eyelid shut instinctively.

"Wow, unicorn cooking is fun!" Pinkie commented. "I wonder why there aren't that many unicorn chefs. I bet they'd be awesome at those flashy restaurants where they make the food in front of you."

"Pinkie, don't you have your own baking to be doing?" Twilight asked with an unamused tone as she picked a piece of lemon rind off her nose.

"Yep, I was getting some salt, just a pinch." So saying, Pinkie turned back to her own bowl.

Luna blinked several times, trying to flush the stinging juice from her watering eye. Eventually the burn was at a tolerable level, and she wiped away the tear that had fallen down her cheek. She turned her attention to the measuring cup, and noticed that even with the pieces of rind, pulp, and seeds floating around in it, there was still less than a third of a cup of lemon products present. "Twilight, do you see another lemon around? We don't seem to have enough lemon juice."

"Hmm," Twilight vocalized. She quickly looked around, under the counter, on the nearby shelves, in the various cabinets around the room, but came up empty hoofed. "Nope, I don't see any more lemons."

Luna frowned in slight muddlement. Baking was much more difficult than she had expected. "I suppose we'll have to be satisfied with the amount of juice we have, and hope that it's enough."

"No," Twilight stated with conviction. There was a strange light in her eyes as she stared intently at Luna. "We've already made a sacrifice with the amount of eggs listed. We're not going to be short of lemon juice as well. The recipe calls for a third of a cup of juice, it's going to get a third of a cup."

"But there aren't any more lemons," Luna said unsurely. The strange energy that seemed to be running through Twilight was honestly somewhat alarming.

Twilight smiled a crooked and creepy smile as she confidently replied, "Then we'll just have to find a substitute."

She closed her eyes tight and her horn glowed with a surge of power. A moment later and a thick brown glass bottle popped into existence and landed on the counter with a loud thump. "Citric acid and acetic acid are both carboxylic acids, so they should be interchangeable," Twilight commented seemingly to herself. She was completely and somewhat maniacally entranced with the bottle as she unstopped it. A pungent and biting smell assaulted Luna's nose, causing her still irritated eye to water further.

"Are .. are you certain about this, Twilight?" Luna asked hesitantly.

Twilight chuckled darkly before she replied, "We need lemon juice, and this is the closest to it that we can get. When life refuses to give you lemons, you have to make your own." Twilight poured the acrid smelling clear liquid into the measuring cup, and Luna watched as the seeds and detritus of the lemon peel began to dissolve. She cocked an eyebrow at the causticity of the mixture, imagining what it would do to a pony's stomach.

But then she mentally shrugged. Twilight did have more experience with baking. And Pinkie was supervising, in her own way. Luna looked over to where the pink pony was bouncing on her hind legs to music only she could hear while somehow holding a bowl in one hoof and a spoon in the other. Surely she wouldn't let them concoct something dangerous. Besides which, the other ingredients to the recipe would probably dilute the acid.

"Uh oh, I'd better keep stirring. The acid is starting to cook the unmixed parts of the egg," Twilight commented, sounding calmer and more like her normal self. She began to furiously stir the concoction, while Luna turned back to the cookbook and moved on to the next ingredient on the list.

Over the course of the next half hour, they followed the recipe as best they could, but on several occasions the cookbook had demanded ingredients that simply weren't available, and Twilight had made a few more substitutions of dubious edibility. In addition, Luna wasn't sure if they were still making cookies. She was decidedly a novice when it came to baking, but she was fairly certain that there were few cookie recipes which called for tomatoes.

In the end, they had been left with a bowl of purplish-grey sludge which, while quite viscous, managed to bubble ominously. By this point, Luna was sure that they'd made a mess of the recipe.

"Uh, Twilight," she ventured while staring uneasily at the concoction. She was somewhat afraid to take her eyes off of it lest it begin moving in a threatening manner. "Are you quite certain that this is safe to consume?"

Twilight was contemplating the cheerful picture in the cookbook of what the batter was supposed to look like, comparing it to the purple emulsion they'd prepared, dismay apparent on her face. "I'm not sure. But maybe it'll look better once it's cooked" she said with forced optimism.

Luna however was fairly certain that no amount of time in the oven could redeem the fruits of their labor.

"Hey, are you guys done?" Pinkie asked as she bounced over to them excitedly.

Luna continued to eye their creation warily as she dubiously replied, "I believe so." A large bubble slowly formed on the surface of the batter and popped with a sound that Luna could only describe as wetly malevolent.

"Yay!" Pinkie cried out ecstatically and threw two hooffuls of confetti into the air. "Now it's time for my favorite part, licking the spoon. Well, it's not really my favorite part, but it is my favorite part of this part. Really they're all my favorite parts." As she babbled, Pinkie squeezed past Luna and picked up the wooden spoon that Twilight had traded the whisk for when the batter

had become too thick. Luna was still unsure how she was using spoons with her hoofs. She lifted up her own hoof and looked down at it, but it appeared as it always did, completely unsuitable for wrapping around and holding something as narrow as a spoon handle. Perhaps there was some sort of earth pony magic at work here.

Pinkie leaned over the counter and stirred the thick mixture a few times before she pulled the spoon back out to reveal that the portion which had been in the batter had for the most part disappeared. The remnants were blackened and crooked, resembling a used matchstick.

Luna frowned in confusion at the odd sight. The mixture was undoubtedly low on the pH scale from all the acids they'd been forced to include, but it couldn't be so toxic that it could destroy a wooden spoon that quickly, could it? Not to mention that Twilight had just been using that same exact spoon only moments before, and other than a thick patina of the vile sludge coating it, it had been undamaged. The batter surely couldn't have become that caustic in such a short time.

"Ooooh, this looks like a good batch," Pinkie commented appreciatively. She tossed the remainder of the spoon over her shoulder, and from somewhere produced another large wooden spoon identical to the one that had been destroyed. This time however, when Pinkie dipped it into the batter, it suffered no ill effects as she stirred the concoction a few times before lifting out a spoonful of the grey substance.

"Uh, Pinkie, maybe you shouldn't try it," hazarded Twilight. "I mean, we followed the recipe, mostly, but still, that doesn't look like it could possibly taste good."

"Don't worry, Twilight, I'm sure it tastes fine." Pinkie assured her friend as she continued to slowly lift the spoon to her lips.

While Luna was as concerned as Twilight for Pinkie's safety, she had an equally important question that needed answering. "Wait a moment. Why did the previous spoon wither away, but this one appear unaffected by the cookie batter?" She pointed an accusing hoof at the offending utensil.

"Because that was the stirring spoon and this is the tasting spoon, of course. How could you taste test something if the spoon dissolves?" Pinkie explained patiently.

That only raised further questions in Luna's mind. But before she could ask them, Pinkie lifted up the spoon, and as Twilight put out a restraining hoof and fearfully said, "Pinkie, I don't think —" the pink pony stuck out her tongue and licked the spoon clean.

Twilight fell silent and slowly lowered her hoof as she and Luna looked on uncertainly, concerned frowns marring their expressions. For a brief moment, Pinkie appeared fine, although she did seem frozen to the spot.

Without warning, her curly mane shot out in all directions away from her head and neck in jagged spikes, while her teeth audibly gritted together in one of the most painful grimaces Luna had ever witnessed. Her eyes unfocused and seemed to drift in different directions, and her entire body began to not so much shake as violently vibrate in place. Luna was terrified that Pinkie was having a seizure or a stroke, that her and Twilight's actions had unwittingly harmed or even killed their friend.

"Pinkie, are you alright?" Twilight anxiously asked. She took a few hesitant steps forward, but Pinkie abruptly stood stock still. Her hair fell back into its normal springy curls, and her painful grimace had transformed into a beaming smile that she focused on Twilight.

"It tastes like magenta," Pinkie cheerfully informed them.

Twilight sighed a deep sigh of relief, which echoed Luna's own joy at not being responsible for having irreparably harmed one of her newfound friends.

Pinkie raised her hoof to her chin and tapped it in a thoughtful manner. "Hmm, it needs something though ... Oh, I know!" She ducked down under the counter and straightened up a moment later, a large scoop clamped between her teeth. "Some baking soda to help it rise," she said through her clenched teeth.

"Sodium bicarbonate," Twilight murmured softly to herself while tilting her head as if trying to remember something. Suddenly her eyes widened in panic and she cried out, "Pinkie, no!"

But it was already too late. As Twilight spoke, Pinkie had tilted her head and a generous helping of white powder cascaded into the bowl below.

Luna wasn't sure what the consequences of adding baking soda would be, but judging from Twilight's body language, it was unlikely they were going to be pleasant. Time seemed to slow down as the innocuous powder clumped into a mound in the middle of the batter. For the length of a heartbeat, Luna held out the hope that whatever Twilight expected to happen wouldn't materialize.

But then a frighteningly loud concussion caused Luna to instinctively close her eyes and fold her ears back. When she dared to open them, she found that her ears were ringing, and that the mixing bowl had disappeared. The batter it once held had been spread across seemingly every area of the kitchen. It looked like Pinkie had been right about the baking soda though, the batter that was splattered across every visible surface was no longer a sickly grey, but bright, a vibrant magenta.

Speaking of Pinkie Pie, she was still standing in front of where the bowl once sat, its scorched outline clearly visible on the counter, the remains of the scoop still clenched in a grin that seemed even larger than before. She was covered head to hoof in the bright magenta mixture, and her mane had been blown back into a straight shock of hair shooting out from the back of her head.

Twilight was nearby, but not quite as covered by the batter as Pinkie was. However there were thick clumps of it slowly dripping from her bangs as she leveled an unamused glare at the earth pony. Luna could feel some of the warm, wet mixture covering herself as well, though she had been partially protected from the splatter by Twilight's body. Her eyes crossed as she focused on a glob that had covered her nose. Without thinking of the repercussions, Luna swiped the batter off with her tongue, managing to get most of it. Truthfully it didn't taste too bad, a bit salty perhaps.

"Boy, that really was a good batch," Pinkie said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them and letting the abused scoop fall to the floor. "Did you guys see that explosion? It was sooo cool. We should totally try that again for the next party we have. We can make a lot of batches with different colors, and we can call them 'surprise cupcakes,' and they can literally explode with flavor! We wouldn't even have to decorate for the party because they'd do all the decorating for us!"

Twilight was on the verge of replying, and Luna could tell that that she was upset by the way she was clenching her teeth. But before she could express her feelings for Pinkie's idea, a worried voice called out from the main store, "Are you girls alright? I heard a ..." Mrs. Cake trailed off as she appeared in the doorway, taking in the devastated kitchen. Her eyes traveled across the still beaming Pinkie, the upset Twilight, and the wide-eyed panicked but apologetic Luna, finally resting on the ceiling. Luna followed her gaze and found an irregularly shaped hole there that was probably new since it was right over where the mixing bowl once was. Mrs. Cake sighed heavily and with resignation said, "Just make sure you clean up, Pinkie."

Pinkie regarded her employer with a serious expression, as serious as a pony could be covered in magenta cookie batter, and declared, "Yes sir-e bob, Mrs. Cake. We'll have this place spotless by the time the cookies are done!"

Mrs. Cake smiled faintly and replied, "That's nice dearie." As she turned away, she shook her head, and Luna thought that she could hear the matronly pony quietly talk to herself.

Luna sincerely hoped that her attempt at cooking hadn't just strained the relationship between Pinkie Pie and Mrs. Cake. "Pinkie, I'm so sorry that we caused such a monumental disaster. Is there any way I can make it up to you?"

As Luna spoke, Pinkie opened a drawer, removed a kitchen towel, and began to remove the worst of the batter splatter from her. Breezily she answered, "Usually I don't get the kitchen this dirty until after lunch, so you shouldn't feel bad. If you think about it, we're ahead of schedule. And the first batch of cookies is done."

A bell chimed near the stove, and Pinkie went over and opened the oven's door. She picked up a potholder with her mouth, then removed a sheet of perfectly baked cookies from the oven. After setting the sheet down, she gazed at the golden cookies in rapt adoration. "Oh man, those look sooooo good. But I can't have one," she said sadly, turning around to Twilight and Luna. "They're still way too hot." Her mood lifted as she walked over to a nearby drawer and began to rummage around in it. "I remember the first time I tried to eat a cookie right out of the oven, and I burned my tongue on

the cookie sheet. It left this really neat scar. Wanna see?" she asked brightly.

"Uh, no thanks, Pinkie," Twilight replied. "I think we should go get cleaned up now, right Luna?"

Luna, who was being pushed toward the door by Twilight, decided to agree. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Okay, I'll keep on baking , you guys get to bathing."

Twilight let Luna walk under her own power once they were out of the kitchen, passing by her to lead the way to the stair ascending to the second floor. Luna smiled nervously at Mrs. Cake as they passed, fully aware of what a sight the two batter covered ponies must present. But Mrs. Cake simply smiled kindly and a bit pityingly in response.

They quickly climbed the stairs and entered a bedroom which seemed surprisingly normal compared to what Luna had imagined Pinkie's tastes would have tended to. Not that she had much time to examine the décor beyond a cursory inspection of the comfortable bed, the sturdy, well used furniture, the brand new hole in the floor, and the clump of magenta stuck fast to the ceiling above it. Without pausing, Twilight continued through another door and Luna followed after. She found herself in a relatively large bathroom, with a bathtub much larger than the one back at the library.

"I'll run the bath, you see if you can find some washcloths, or maybe some brushes." Twilight lifted her foreleg to better display a large patch of magenta. "I'm not sure just how adhesive this stuff is, but I want it off me as soon as possible." Twilight seemed to recollect who exactly she was speaking to, and she hastily put her hoof down. She looked over at Luna almost fearfully. "That is, if you don't mind, Luna."

Luna smiled disarmingly at her friend. "Of course not, Twilight."

Twilight smiled warmly in response, then purposefully approached the bathtub. Meanwhile, Luna began to hunt amongst the nearby cabinets and shelves for the proper bathing accessories. Soon the sound of running water filled the room, followed shortly afterward by a few tendrils of steam. While the tub filled, Luna discovered a stack of washcloths, all of which were pink with little yellow ducks embossed near the corners. Nearby she

also found a long handled scrubbing brush, which also had a cute young little duck pictured on the handle.

Charmed by the somewhat juvenile decorations, Luna selected a few of the cloths as well as the brush and floated them back over to the tub where Twilight was waiting.

"I located a few washcloths and a brush," Luna informed her, freezing them in the air next to the bathtub.

"Good. I found the soap." Twilight brandished several bars of soap and levitated them over to the washcloths and brush. They were bright yellow, and Luna noticed that they had the outlines of ducks stamped into them.

Her curiosity piqued, Luna asked, "Twilight, does Pinkie have a particular fondness for ducks?"

Twilight lifted a questioning eyebrow in confusion and replied, "No, I don't think so. At least not more than anypony else. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just curious about why everything seems to be decorated with ducks."

Twilight shrugged her shoulders noncommittally. "Huh, I hadn't noticed."

The gurgling of the water as it inched ever closer to the top of the tub occupied both ponies as their conversation languished into nonexistence.

"It'll be nice to clean this stuff off," Twilight commented, finally breaking the silence as she wiped a trickle of the gooey batter from her forehead. "It's starting to get cold and sticky. I hope it doesn't stain." She fretfully began to run her hoof through her mane, checking for any indication of discoloration.

"I'm sure if it does, Rarity wouldn't mind dying us our proper colors."

Twilight shot a flat glare at Luna. "I'm never trusting Rarity with dying my coat or mane ever again. Not even if there is a first-time buyer discount."

Luna's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Obviously there was an interesting story to be told about a previous misadventure in mane coloration. But it was

also equally obvious from her expression and tone, that Twilight wasn't going to be the pony to tell Luna about it.

Without any further comment, Twilight turned her attention back to the tub and firmly closed the tap. Tendrils of steam rose from the mostly still water, with only a few ripples spreading out across the surface.

"Well, shall we get in?" Twilight invited, inclining her head toward the bath, wearing a nervous smile.

Luna was flabbergasted for a moment, and she quickly glanced back and forth between the warm water and Twilight. The tub was significantly larger than twilight's, and could easily accommodate both ponies. But the thought of bathing together hadn't crossed Luna's mind until that moment.

Her silence had lasted too long, and Twilight's smile had faltered. "Or we could take turns again. You can go first. I don't mind waiting."

It was obvious to Luna that Twilight was bravely trying to hide her disappointment. Just a few minutes previously it had been equally obvious to her how much Twilight had been looking forward to getting clean. And though she'd never bathed with anypony other than Celestia, really, what was strange about two friends bathing together?

Assuming a smile that hopefully belied the nervous flutter of apprehension she felt, Luna replied, "Oh no, it's fine. We can bathe together. We wouldn't want the water to get cold."

And it would be alright. After all, it wasn't as if they had to disrobe in front of each other to bathe. They were usually nude. A fact which hadn't occurred to Luna much before she'd come to stay with Twilight, though it had been swimming to the forefront of her mind from time to time increasingly of late.

In addition, they were friends, good friends. And friends did things together like this all the time.

Twilight climbed into the tub while Luna averted her eyes for some reason she couldn't name. Then she gingerly maneuvered over the lip of the tub herself. Once in the water, Luna sunk down into it as far as she was able, discretely keeping a wide swath between her and Twilight.

She pretended as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. As if she bathed with other ponies every day, and selected a few of the washcloths, as well as a couple of bars of soap. Soon she was working up a pleasant smelling lather. Luna was simply taking a normal bath. There just happened to be another pony in it with her. A pony who she respected, and who she cared for, as a friend. A pony who was making rather distracting splashes at the other end of the tub, sending gently undulating waves of warmth in Luna's direction. However, Luna studiously ignored Twilight's gentle splashing, as she intently concentrated on scrubbing herself clean.

Luna began to feel comfortable with the situation, going so far as to dunk her head into the bath in order to clean out the last of the cookie dough from her mane. She'd just surfaced, sending out a wave of water in all directions, when a wretched voice spoke up, "I'm sorry."

Surprised by the raw emotion in Twilight's voice, Luna forgot to not look over at her friend.

Twilight was a beautiful pony no matter the circumstances. But with her mane sinuously slicked down, and with the bath water giving her coat a shimmering gleam highlighted by the shadowy light coming from the window, she appeared almost otherworldly. Even in the dimly illuminated bathroom, the glistening drops of water in her mane caught what little light there was, transforming into bright diamonds that accentuated her innate beauty. Suddenly Luna knew why ponies wished for such outlandish outfits as she'd seen in Rarity's shop. It was so they could have a fraction of this effect. For a moment, the thoughts were driven from Luna's mind, and she forgot everything but the light playing upon Twilight's glistening form.

However, Twilight's morose frown and beseeching eyes recalled Luna from the abstract appreciation she'd drifted into. "Sorry? Sorry for what?" She belatedly asked. Quickly she began to cast about for a place to rest her eyes that wasn't quite so distracting. She eventually settled on a spot of cookie dough still on Twilight's cheek, just below her eye.

"I'm sorry for messing everything up. I knew I shouldn't have tried baking again. I always do something wrong whenever I try." She said self admonishingly.

"It wasn't really your fault, Twilight. We both were to blame. We stopped following the recipe, then things got out of hoof, and then ... well, nopony

was hurt, and that's the important thing." Luna stated, her friend's obvious dejection emboldening her to close the gap between them and put a comforting hoof on Twilight's shoulder.

"But it's just so frustrating!" Twilight cried, throwing her hooves up to reflect her frustration, accidentally knocking Luna's hoof aside and splashing her with a rather vigorous spray of water. "I should be good at this. I've studied dozens of cookbooks. I've read all the biographies of the greatest chefs and culinary groundbreakers in Equestrian history. I know every facet of the evolution of the modern pony meal, but I can't bake a stupid batch of cookies!" She growled and furiously rubbed her head, musing her mane, before she flung out her hooves and dramatically cried to the world in general, "Why can't I bake a stupid cookie?"

Luna thought she heard a distant thump and Pinkie's muffled voice, but ignored it as she used her hoof to brush her bangs from her eyes where they'd fallen following Twilight's last wet outburst. "Well, how often do you practice baking?"

"Practice?" Twilight lowered her hooves and regarded Luna quizzically. "I don't have time to bake. I'm usually far too busy studying, so I pick something up, or get Spike to make it."

"Well, perhaps that's the problem. Maybe you simply need more experience actually baking and you will improve. Like if you picked up a musical instrument. All the knowledge in Equestria wouldn't make you a good player unless you practiced."

Twilight cut her eyes away and grumbled, "Yeah, I'm not too good with musical instruments either."

Luna looked down into the depths of the bath water sadly and shifted her weight. "Anyway, I'm just as culpable as you. I'm sure that Pinkie Pie meant well when she invited us to help, but it was apparent that you felt cooking wasn't your forte. I should have respected your opinion. Especially since it turns out that it isn't my forte either. Perhaps even less so, since I lack even your understanding of the culinary arts. That actually was my first time attempting to bake anything."

Luna's heart fluttered when she felt the water shift as Twilight leaned over and gently nuzzled her cheek, drawing her back out of her funk.

"I guess we should both practice our baking then and get better," Twilight softly said into Luna's ear before pulling back a little from the now blushing princess. A blush rose on her cheeks as well, while she looked away from Luna's unconsciously sultry eyes. "So, that was your first time?" She asked breathlessly.

Thankful for the change in topic, Luna admitted, "Yes it was. And despite how it ended, I'm glad that my first time was with you." She smiled at Twilight, and couldn't help but notice that the spot of batter on her cheek was still there, and just how close their faces were. She could practically feel Twilight's soft breath on her nose.

Twilight glanced up at Luna shyly. "Well, I'm honored that your first time was with me, too."

Her earnest gaze accentuated Twilight's inner beauty, and acting on impulse, Luna leaned forward to remove the one spot of imperfection. With a deft and tender swipe of her tongue, she licked the errant bit of batter from Twilight's cheek. It was sweeter than when she'd sampled it before, but that might just have been due to Twilight's natural flavor.

As she pulled back, Luna met Twilight's shocked and confused eyes. The poor unicorn's face was flushed dark red. "There was some cookie dough on your cheek," Luna explained.

Twilight raised her hoof up to where Luna had licked her, still apparently stunned. "I ... oh. Uh, thanks," she awkwardly stammered out.

Luna hoped that she hadn't overstepped her bounds as a friend. Perhaps she'd inadvertently stumbled into impropriety. If so, then most likely the best course of action would be to quickly move on and pretend that the friendly lick hadn't happened.

"Well, I feel remarkably clean, so I believe that's enough bathing for me." Luna began to climb out of the tub, picking up a couple of nearby fluffy, duck covered towels with her magic.

"Yes, that's a good idea," Twilight hastily agreed. "We should definitely get out of the bath and go see what Pinkie's doing. She's probably wondering what's taking us so long," Twilight rambled a bit as she literally leapt from the tub toward the other side of the room, away from Luna.

Luna had paused to watch Twilight's frantic actions as the unicorn began to vigorously rub herself dry. With a barely audible sigh, Luna lifted herself out of the bath. However, she noticed that her tail was weighed down with something heavier than mere water. She swished her tail, and turned her head to get a better look at her rear, and found a small green reptile latched onto the end of her tail.

Considering the circumstances, Luna thought that she handled the situation quite well. She jumped into the air, her horn brushing the ceiling, and swung her rear hard enough to hurl the offending creature off her tail and across the room. Just before it slammed into the wall at an assuredly terminal velocity, it was plucked from the air by a familiar magical aura.

"It's alright, Luna, please calm down," Twilight pleaded as she lowered the green animal onto a stack of towels. Luna noted that its beady eyes asymmetrically blinked, seemingly unperturbed by its harsh treatment. She was still hovering near the ceiling, reluctant to alight and discover what other creatures might be lurking in the bathroom.

"It's just Gummy, Pinkie's pet alligator. Nothing to scream about. He doesn't have any teeth, so he's perfectly harmless," Twilight explained as she cautiously approached the still spooked Luna.

Luna hadn't screamed. Much. And it was perfectly normal for anypony in her situation to give out a dignified yelp of alarm. She was however mollified by Twilight's tone, and began to descend, careful to keep Twilight between her and that creature. "An alligator? What pony in their right mind would keep an alligator as a pet?" she demanded.

Twilight shrugged her shoulders. "Well, she is Pinkie," she said, as if that simple statement explained everything. And perhaps it did. "Luna do you ... not like reptiles?" Twilight asked, turning her head to ask the alicorn who was narrowly watching Gummy over Twilight's withers.

"Who does?" Luna asked rhetorically while frowning in distaste and suspicion at the deceptively small alligator. "Who can tell what those cold blooded creatures are ever thinking?" The alligator again blinked one eye, then the other, its expression unchanging otherwise. It could be contemplating lunch, or it could be plotting the demise of all ponies in Equestria, starting with Twilight and herself.

"Don't worry, Luna, I'll protect you from the big, mean alligator," Twilight condescendingly promised with a role of her eyes.

Her pride bruised by Twilight's playful verbal jab, Luna stood up straighter and stopped cowering behind the other pony. She feigned disinterest in whatever reptilian activities the alligator was engaging in as she haughtily replied, "Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. I'm sure that your services will be adequate. And rest assured, when we come across something that frightens you, I'll protect you as well."

Twilight thought for a moment before offering, "Well, I don't really like snakes."

Luna energetically pointed a hoof at Twilight and triumphantly exclaimed, "You see! Even you dislike reptiles. They can't be trusted. Even ones as seemingly innocent as ..." Luna swung her hoof to point at the spot where Gummy had been, but his perch atop the towels was vacant.

"Where did it go?" Luna asked with a shade of panic tingeing her voice. She stood on tip-hoof, ready to take off once again, as she hastily scanned the room for signs of the green menace.

"I'm sure he just got tired of being around a new pony and went back to wherever he sleeps," Twilight reassured Luna.

"Yes, you must be correct, undoubtedly." Luna continued to scan the room discretely, falsely agreeing to Twilight's naive assessment of the situation in an attempt to lull the alligator into a small sense of security. If it believed it had won this round, it would likely be less anxious to go on the offensive. "But we should get back downstairs anyway," she said to hasten Twilight.

The two ponies quickly finished drying off, then drained the bathtub and cleaned the spilled bath water. As they headed downstairs, they carefully avoided the hole in the floor, as well as the ominous lump of magenta on the ceiling above it, and Luna continued to keep an eye out for the diminutive alligator.

Mrs. Cake was no longer behind the counter as they walked through the store. There were the sounds of loud stamping and wet cloth being removed, accompanied by the quiet murmur of pony voices coming from an

area of the shop that Luna hadn't been in yet. Likely Mr. Cake had returned, and Mrs. Cake had gone to help him out of his cart and clothes.

Inside the kitchen, Pinkie was happily humming as she pulled a final sheet of cookies from the oven and set it on a clean area of the counter. She expertly wielded a spatula and with a finesse Luna had to admire, transferring the cookies to a nearby cooling rack where dozens of identical cookies already waited.

"There you two are," Pinkie greeted them as soon as she'd spit the potholder out. "I was wondering what you two were up to when I heard that scream." Luna blushed and looked away. She hadn't really screamed, it had been a shout at most. "But I was in the middle of putting this last batch in the oven, and besides it didn't sound like the bad kind of scream, so I decided to leave you two alone in case it was the good kind of scream. Because I know when I scream, I don't like to be interrupted, unless it's a good kind of interruption, or if it's the bad kind of scream where somepony's chasing you because they don't want be friends or something."

Twilight seemed much more capable of withstanding the deluge words from Pinkie, and obviously ignored the entirety of what she just had said.

With casual curiosity, she asked, "Pinkie, how'd you get clean?"

Her attention called to it by Twilight, Luna noticed that while the kitchen was still in shambles, Pinkie herself was spotless, which was odd considering that she'd borne the brunt of the batter explosion.

"Why? Am I not supposed to be?" Pinkie reached out a hoof and scooped up some of the stickily congealed magenta goo from the wall and flung it into her own face. "Is that better?"

"No, what I meant was ..."

Pinkie picked up another hoofful and smeared it in her hair. "How about now?"

Twilight shook her head in exasperation and tiredly replied, "It's fine, Pinkie. Anyway, all the cookies are finished for Starlight's party?"

"Yep, all baked or accounted for. They just need to cool, and then Mrs. Cake can decorate them. I wish I could help her, but Ponyville ordinance 11 subsection 1 says I can't decorate cookies, even with adult supervision."

Luna could see that Twilight was itching to ask Pinkie about the particulars of why they'd made a law against her decorating a baked good, but Luna had come to realize that when it came to Pinkie, on occasion ignorance might be bliss. Unless of course you were willing to be confused and led around in circular conversation. With that in mind, she looked around for something to steer the conversation in a new direction, and noticed through a nearby window that the rain was merely pattering against the pane instead of its earlier pounding.

"It appears the storm is lessening," she observed.

Pinkie bounced as she eagerly replied, "Yep. I had a nose twitch and an ear flinch a few minutes ago, so the rain should be over in an hour. Give or take a leg shake."

"Well, while we wait for the rain to let up, we'll help you clean up, right Luna?" Twilight said.

"Of course."

Pinkie Pie appeared genuinely touched. So much so that she stood still and looked tenderly at Twilight and Luna. "Aw, you guys don't have to. I'm used to cleaning up the whole store all by myself."

"We insist," replied Luna firmly. "After all, it was our actions which caused this mess, so it is our responsibility to clean it up."

"That's right," Twilight backed up Luna, stepping closer to her to show her solidarity.

"Well, if you guys want to," Pinkie sprung across the room and threw open a cabinet revealing several kitchen towels and other cleaning supplies. "Then let's clean!"

In a few minutes, all three ponies were cleaning the kitchen in earnest. Luna found that it wasn't all that difficult, merely time consuming. The batter

had landed in the strangest places it seemed, and it was somewhat challenging hunting down every globule and splatter.

At first Luna had carefully emulated Twilight, gingerly picking up a kitchen towel and dampening it in the sink, then carefully squeezing out the excess moisture. The damp cloth then was able to wipe away several globs of cookie batter before having to be rinsed out once more. She did everything slowly and with exaggerated care, using only the barest whisper of her magic. Her previous attempts at dealing with household chores hadn't ended all that well, and she'd experienced enough explosions for the day already.

However, as she grew more comfortable with the mechanics of cleaning, Luna became confident enough to control nearly a dozen of the kitchen towels at the same time. She would have attempted more, but between her dozen and the four Twilight had claimed, they'd exhausted the supply in the cabinet. Luna did find it a bit difficult to focus her attention in twelve different directions; she was a bit out of practice. But if a few of her washcloths sat idle for a few minutes, or doubled up on one particular spot, neither Twilight nor Pinkie commented on it.

Pinkie was happily humming to herself as she cleaned the floors, holding down a damp towel with her forehooves and leaning on it as she ran back and forth across the kitchen. She had claimed the floor and the lower parts of the counters, while Luna was responsible for the tops of the counters and the walls, and Twilight focused on the ceiling.

They worked in companionable silence for several minutes until Pinkie's energetic humming burst into song.

"Oh you gotta clean, clean until it gleams.

And while you clean you gotta sing

Clean, clean everything, who knows what you'll find

Just scrub, brush, and wipe, don't sit there and gripe

But clean till everything shines

Just sing and you'll be done in no time!"

Luna wasn't sure of the veracity of Pinkie's song, but with the three of them cleaning together, soon the kitchen was cleaner than it had been when they'd arrived.

Unfortunately, Twilight wasn't as clean as the kitchen. There had been quite a lot of batter on the ceiling, and while she'd cleaned it, some of it had fallen, covering her head and back in a spattering of magenta.

As she and Luna were wringing out the last of the damp kitchen towels, Twilight craned her neck to examine her back. "Great, I need another bath," she observed unenthusiastically, with her eyes narrowed and her ears flat.

Luna was loath to return to the alligator infested bathroom, and had been careful to avoid dirtying her coat again. However, out of friendly obligation, she offered, "I could go with you if you like."

Twilight smiled at her with wan appreciation. "Thanks, but I'll just go rinse off real quick. There's no reason for both of us to go up, I'll be done in a few minutes. While I'm up there, I'll take care of that spot of batter too."

"Alright, then," Luna replied with gratitude evident in her voice.

Twilight walked across the kitchen and disappeared through the doorway. When she was out of sight, Luna let out an involuntary sigh.

"You know, you need to tell her," Pinkie remarked.

Luna jumped a bit at how close the earth pony had gotten to her without her noticing. Caught flat hoofed and with her heart racing, Luna blurted out, "Tell her? Tell her what?"

With a serious tone Luna felt was ill suited for the bubbly pink pony, Pinkie replied, "Whatever it is you need to tell her. Some secrets are meant to be kept, but others are meant to be told. Losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend forever. I know that Twilight likes you, so I'm sure that whatever it is you need to tell her, she'll be able to handle it."

Pinkie looked at Luna with sad compassion. "But if you wait too long, then it might be harder for her to forgive you, and you might lose her, forever. I know how hard it is to tell somepony something awful." Pinkie reached up

and put a comforting hoof on Luna's shoulder. "Just remember, we're your friends too, and we'll stand by you no matter what."

Her eyes took on their usual mischievous glint, and the warmth returned to her voice as she continued, "Unless you deliberately hurt Twilight, or you turn into Queen Meanie again, or unless you start canceling holidays and stop giving us reasons to party. But other than that, I'll always be there for you. Except when I can't thanks to that darn party exclusion rule. You should really get around to fixing that. I mean you control pretty much everything right? So I bet you can bend the laws of physics to make them a bit more fun if you really want to."

Pinkie launched into a tirade of other natural laws that could be bent to make the world a more interesting place, but Luna's thoughts drifted away from Pinkie's monologue. She was deeply touched by Pinkie's support, as well as her sage advice, even if it was wrapped in inane commentary. Luna eyed the hyperactive pink pony with a new appreciation. Underneath the bubbly and gregarious clown was a pony with unplumbed depths.

By the time that Twilight came back downstairs however, Luna was beginning to question her earlier assessment.

"... so with all that gravity, we could make the most super-duper-tastic waterslide ever. EVER!" Pinkie declared as she shook an unresponsive Luna who had taken a seat on the kitchen's floor.

Her unamused face greeted the refreshed Twilight, and the unicorn was quick to loudly say with exaggerated cheer, "Well, it looks like the rain's stopped, so I guess we'll be going, Pinkie."

"Awww, do you have to?" Pinkie asked, still hanging off of Luna.

"Yep, we only came for breakfast, and we should really be getting back to the library." Twilight used her magic to lift Pinkie up and off of Luna, setting her down a few feet away.

"Oh well. I guess if you have to go, you have to go," Pinkie stated. "Bye Luna, bye Twilight."

Luna stood up and faced Pinkie. "Goodbye, Pinkie Pie. This was a ... unforgettable morning. Thank you."

Pinkie leapt across the room and tackled Luna in a hug. "Aw it was fun for me too. Feel free to come back anytime."

With a hesitant smile, unsure of just how much Pinkie Pie she could handle, Luna extricated herself from the other pony's grip and quickly left the kitchen. As she and Twilight walked through the store, they passed by Mr. and Mrs. Cake who were busy putting away the now empty sheets that had been in Mr. Cake's cart earlier.

"Goodbye Mr. and Mrs. Cake, thank you for having me," Luna called out to them.

"Anytime, dearie," Mrs. Cake called back with a smile and a wave of her hoof.

"Don't forget to tell your friends about us," Mr. Cake added.

As they left through the door, Luna murmured, "I think they all already know."

Twilight bumped Luna and Luna turned to see a playful smile on her face. "Surely you have more friends than the ones in Ponyville."

Luna pretended to think for a moment before she saucily replied, "Maybe one or two. And don't call me Shirley." The joke was as old as she was and caused Twilight to groan. But they shared a good-natured chuckle at just how bad the joke had been.

As they stepped into the street, the mood turned a bit somber though as they looked up to the sky, which was still a ceiling of near featureless grey. The spent storm clouds continued to hover thickly over Ponyville. Luna and Twilight paused on the doorstep of Sugar Cube Corner, neither of them anxious to step into the puddle strewn quagmire the streets had become.

"That was certainly a torrential downpour," Luna observed.

"Yeah, but I wonder where the weather ponies are," Twilight replied, scanning the sky above. "They should be up there clearing away the clouds so the sun can start drying all this out."

Luna raised her eyes to the heavens to try and catch a glimpse of winged ponies overhead, but it was difficult to pick them out amongst the dark clouds. After searching for a few moments, she noticed a ribbon of rainbow darting from cloud to cloud, marking a circuitous route from the edge of the storm to its center. Before she could point it out to Twilight, Rainbow Dash had swooped down from the dense clouds and effortlessly alighted only a few feet away from them.

"Hey Twilight, hey Night-I mean, uh, Luna," she greeted them, as she pushed up the goggles she was wearing to rest on her forehead. Her multihued mane was slicked back and her coat was covered in perspiration or moisture from the clouds. With a small but satisfied groan, she stretched first one wing, then the other, continuing to slowly flap them asymmetrically as she spoke. "Man, I love to fly and all, but I've been going at it since before the sun came up today."

"I didn't think you woke up that early," Twilight quipped.

Rainbow Dash was oblivious to Twilight's tone as she turned her head to preen one of her wings for a few seconds. When the feathers were back in their rightful place, she turned back and hotly replied, "I don't. But Cloud Kicker, Drizzle, and Sunburst all reported in sick today, so we were underponied for this storm. The rest of us had to pick up the slack, and it wasn't easy, let me tell ya. I've been on perimeter duty all day, keeping the edge of the storm clean. You know what it's like trying to keep the anvil squished down while getting hit by downbursts all the time?"

Twilight blinked in slight astonishment as she replied, "I can't say that I do."

Rainbow Dash walked over and lightly poked Twilight in the chest with her hoof to drive home her point. "Well, it's not fun. In fact it's pretty dangerous. You're supposed to have three ponies in a lasso formation to keep control of the perimeter for a storm this size. I was able to pull it off solo only because I'm such an awesome flier. If it had been anypony else ..."

Rainbow Dash whistled as she lowered her hoof shaking from side to side before slamming it on the ground, "Splat!" She kicked up a splash of mud, which coated her hoof, and Rainbow Dash gingerly tried to shake it off.

Clearly unimpressed by her friend's boasting, Twilight asked, "So are the clouds going to be cleared away soon, or is it going to be overcast all day?"

Rainbow Dash gave up on trying to shake the dirt off her hoof. "Actually, the clouds were supposed to be cleared by now, but we had some nasty wind currents from the Everfree Forest the last couple of hours, and all the weather ponies are beat from trying to keep everything under control. So we're taking a break for a bit, and I'm here to get something sugary to keep me going. After that, I'll clear the sky, and then, it's nap time."

Rainbow Dash took a few steps past them toward Sugar Cube Corner when Luna asked Twilight, "Those clouds seem quite dense and far too difficult to be managed by just one pony. Do you think Pink Gin's spell of transparence could be used to clear away some of the cloud cover?"

Twilight considered for a brief moment. "Well, Pink Gin's spells were developed for fluids, so they should work on clouds. But I think that Mint Julep's dissipating spell would probably work better. Although it does take longer to cast."

"Oh, I'm not familiar with Mint —"

Rainbow Dash turned around and pushed herself between Luna and Twilight. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are you guys talking about using magic on those clouds? On my clouds? No way! It'll be a sunny day in Seaddle before a pegasus' job gets done by a unicorn, or an alicorn, or a whatever-icorn."

"Dash, we just want to help," Twilight replied, backing away slightly as Dash began to hover and infringe upon Twilight's airspace.

Rainbow Dash swooped back and forth between Twilight and Luna and confidently declared, "When it comes to weather, there's no magic that can beat a pair of pegasus wings. Watch this!"

Luna expected Rainbow Dash to bolt off into the sky. But instead she almost leisurely flew up to the clouds, kicking out her legs as if she were trotting on thin air. Once she was in the clouds, Luna lost sight of Rainbow Dash, but after a few short seconds, a streaming rainbow streaked out of the cloud cover. It banked sharply, causing a flash of light, and a few of the lower hanging clouds exploded into water vapor.

Rainbow Dash paused and checked to make sure they were watching, then launched into a series of high speed, complex maneuvers that simply

defied description. They produced a shockwave with lightning bolts bursting from it , clearing a large fraction of the remaining clouds. Luna could feel her jaw drop from the display of aerial acumen and maneuverability.

Dash then began to fly between the remaining clouds at high speed, slaloming between some, and grabbing others while she flew around them, causing them to spin like fluffy tops. As she darted amongst the dizzily moving clouds, Rainbow Dash began to energetically buck them. For the next few minutes, the sky was filled with a whirling tempest of spinning clouds, bouncing off one another, being split asunder by a streak of rainbow and an expertly placed azure hoof.

Quite soon Celestia's sun was once more shining happily down upon Ponyville. The sky was clear save for a hoofful of pegasi who flew around in a dizzy and disorganized manner, unexpectedly upset from their resting places by Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash sedately descended, and though she was obviously out of breath, with a cocky smile she asked them, "How was that?"

"It was amazing," Luna said, her voice full of admiration. "Your movements were so deft, so precise, yet so fleet."

Rainbow Dash rubbed a hoof against her chest and nonchalantly examined it. "Heh, yeah. I'm awesome."

Twilight rolled her eyes before she tartly replied, "It wasn't exactly ten seconds flat this time, was it?"

"Hey, sometimes it's not all about speed. Sometimes an artist has to take her time. Did you see my Fantastic Filly Flash, or my Buccaneer Blaze? Not just anypony can pull those off at the drop of a hat."

Luna gushed, "Yes, those were quite impressive, especially the one maneuver that ... where you ..." she couldn't find the words to describe it, and her hooves flew around trying to demonstrate it, but Rainbow Dash seemed to know exactly what she was trying to say.

"Oh yeah, the Buccaneer Blaze," she said with pride. "It's no Sonic Rainboom, but it's still pretty cool. After that though, I just kinda went freestyle. You know, just focused on the basics."

"Your basics are most impressive, especially your ability to pitch so quickly and steeply. Tell me, have you had your wings enchanted, or is it your own natural ability?"

"Enchanted? You mean like use magic on my wings?" Rainbow Dash stretched out her wings and looked back at them questioningly.

Luna was a bit surprised at Rainbow Dash's apparent ignorance of the practice. A thousand years ago while it hadn't been ubiquitous, it had been used by quite a number of pegasi. "Well on any part of your body really, but yes. You could enchant your wings to make them stronger or more rigid for banking at high speed or for long distance gliding. Or you could enchant your body to make it lighter for better maneuverability, or certain parts heavier for a more impressive dive. Most of the spells are fairly easy for a practiced unicorn to create for you. In fact, Buck Fizz used to make extensive use of enchantments for his tricks."

Luna blushed a bit as she admitted, "I bring it up because on occasion I enchant my own wings to supplement my natural ability, but I've never been able to bank quite so tightly as you just did."

Rainbow Dash's eyes had grown larger and more luminous as Luna had spoken, and she eagerly burst out, "You knew Buck Fizz? He was like one of the best fliers ever! He used magic in his stunts?" Dash turned to Twilight and roughly shook her in excitement. "Twilight, why didn't you ever tell me? Think of all the awesome moves I could pull off with magic." She gasped and began to shake Twilight even more forcefully. "If I could get my speed up, I could even pull off a double rainboom, do you know what that means?"

Twilight's horn glowed as her head bobbed back and forth in Rainbow Dash's grip. She telekinetically lifted her friend away from her and brushed herself off. "I thought you didn't want magic interfering with your flying. You seemed pretty upset earlier."

Rainbow Dash hovered as she moved her hooves from one side to the other. "That was weather, this is stunt flying. Those are two completely separate things, Twilight."

Twilight still seemed upset for some reason as she visibly calmed herself down before replying, "Well, while I was aware that pegasi once used

talismans enchanted by unicorns, the practice fell out of favor following the rise of the naturalist school of thought which –"

"Yeah, yeah, naturalist, smaturalist," Rainbow Dash said dismissively. She flew over and gently hugged Twilight's neck with one leg, throwing the other hoof out in front of them. "Don't you see, Twilight? I'm already awesome, but with your magic plus my wings, that equals like, double awesomeness."

Twilight sighed heavily and lowered her head in annoyance at the futility of trying to educate her friend. "Fine. When we get back to the library, I'll start researching spells that can help you fly better. But didn't you say you were getting something to eat? Luna and I were on our way home."

Dash's stomach loudly growled and she let go of Twilight to ruefully rub her head and laugh a bit.

"I too am hungry," Luna admitted. "Although I'm afraid I'm not in the mood for anymore of the fine goods from Sugar Cube Corner." The memory of the exploding batter was fresh in her mind, leaving a slight distaste for baked goods.

"Hey, why don't we head over to Chez Hay?" Rainbow Dash suggested. "We can grab something to eat and you can tell me about how cool Buck Fizz was."

"That sounds most agreeable," Luna replied. "It's been quite some time since I've had the opportunity to discuss flying."

Twilight shot Luna an indecipherable look, but obviously wasn't pleased with the decision, though Luna couldn't tell why. Nonetheless, even though she sighed, Twilight followed after them as Rainbow Dash led the way through town.

She flittered around Luna and Twilight, racing ahead excitedly, then slowing down to wait for them to catch up. "So, did you really know Buck Fizz? That's so cool! Did he really do the Buck Knot? A lot of ponies say that it's a myth because he's the only pony to ever pull it off."

"Yes I did, and yes he did," answered Luna. She was amused by just how excited Rainbow Dash was. Dash even did a few aerial back flips in

simulation of Buck's Knot. Luna found herself smiling at the simple joy Rainbow Dash exulted in.

"Wait a second, you didn't know who Star Swirl the Bearded was, but you know who Buck Fizz is?" Twilight broke in. "They were contemporaries. In fact Buck Fizz is older than Star Swirl."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and let out a loud, "Pft. Like I could remember some ancient unicorn. Buck Fizz though, he had a statue in the Garden of Greatest Fliers up in Cloudsdale. It's the Junior Speedsters' job to go by every week and clean up the statues, since they're clouds and like to drift away. After you have to hoof-sculpt somepony's mane like a hundred times, you start to remember who they are."

Twilight appeared upset over Rainbow Dash's casual dismissal of unicorn history, and Luna was quick to change the subject.

"Yes well, Buck Fizz was indeed quite an impressive flier," Luna said, turning her attention back to Rainbow Dash. "When he flew, he left behind him a trail of lighting filled clouds. And when he performed his knot, he'd start out at a high altitude and dive straight down to pick up speed. At the bottom of his descent, he would begin to make extremely tight kulbits, one right after the other, stringing them together in a giant loop, creating a large knot in the sky. After he'd closed the knot, he would pull it tighter and tighter until it compressed down so far that it exploded back out across the sky with a burst of lighting that lit up the night from horizon to horizon."

Rainbow Dash had listened to Luna's recounting with bated breath, completely engrossed in the story. "That's so awesome," She squeaked out when Luna had finished. "If I pulled that off, there's no way the Wonderbolts wouldn't take me. I'd have to rename it something cool though, like the Dashing Knot."

Twilight broke Rainbow Dash's enthusiastic rambling by flatly observing, "Oh look, we're here."

Luna had been so engrossed in reminiscing that she'd failed to notice that they'd walked through the center of Ponyville and all the way to Chez Hay. The streets they'd passed had been mostly deserted thanks to the morning's rainstorm. However the restaurant was apparently popular since there were already a few ponies visible in it through the large windows. A

rather severe, slicked back pony with a stylish moustache stood in the open doorway in the process of mopping up the mud that had been tracked into the entryway. He came to attention as they approached and surreptitiously kicked the rag he had been using out of sight.

"Table for three?" he asked with a hint of an accent.

"Yes please," Twilight answered for the group.

"Right this way." He picked up a trio of menus and led them into the restaurant. Soon they were safely ensconced at a small table partially secluded from the other diners, but next to one of the large windows, which was allowing the sunlight to pour in. The maitre de left them, and Twilight began to peruse the menu. Rainbow Dash however hardly glanced at it before she turned her attention back to Luna.

"So, Buck's Knot. How was he able to do it? I mean I know how he did it, but how did he do what he did? No pony can pull a kulbit tight enough while going into a vertical loop. The closest was Golden Dream when she made the Golden Daisy."

Luna tilted her head in remembrance. She hadn't known Buck Fizz too well, but they had met on multiple occasions, and she wracked her memory to recall as much about him as possible. "Well, Buck wasn't the fastest pony, nor was he the most maneuverable. But he was certainly one of the most experimental fliers in all Equestria. At least a thousand years ago he was. While most ponies simply focused on attaining more speed," Rainbow Dash laughed half heartedly and looked away for a moment while Luna spoke, "Buck Fizz focused on the opposite, what happens after a pony stalls."

The maitre de reappeared and interrupted their conversation. "Are you ready to order?"

Twilight snapped her menu shut. "I'll have the tulip and romaine salad."

"I'll take a sunflower sandwich with extra sprouts," Rainbow Dash said uncaringly.

Luna hadn't even glanced at her menu and was caught flat hoofed. She blurted out, "I will have the same."

The stylish earth pony nodded and collected their menus, silently leaving Rainbow Dash to return to what was important.

"Stalling?" She asked incredulously.

Twilight helpfully supplied, "That's when lift is no longer provided as the angle of attack for an airborne surface increases. It's part of the Bernoulli principle that -"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Rainbow Dash said with a dismissive shake of her head. "It's when you angle up too high and you can't fly anymore. Trust me, Twilight, when they were talking about flying, I paid attention. Mostly. Of course when you've got a pair of these, most of it is second nature anyway." Rainbow Dash flapped her wings to illustrate her point.

Rebuffed, Twilight crossed her hooves and leaned back in her seat.

Luna wanted to say something to wipe away her frown, but before she could, Rainbow Dash spoke up again. "But I don't get it. How does practicing not flying turn you into one of the greatest fliers ever?"

"From what I understand, Buck was interested in learning how to fly while not flying, to borrow your expression. You see, he was convinced that even in a stall, it was possible for him to continue to maneuver. Apparently, he was eventually able to discover just how to accomplish that."

Rainbow Dash leaned heavily on the table, and commented, "I still don't see how stalling would help him any."

Luna also leaned forward, becoming engrossed in discussing the dynamics of flight. "To put it simply, Buck's Knot is a series of maneuvers that use high speed stalling. Buck Fizz came up with a technique that allowed him to vector his thrust in such a way that even at extreme angles, where normal wings would be useless, he could control his flying and pull extremely tight turns."

Rainbow Dash's attention was caught and she asked, "But how is that possible?"

Twilight spoke up with a lecturing tone, "Well, in essence, when he was at the bottom of his dive, and at his fastest, Buck Fizz could enter into a high

speed stall, and continue to have control over his flight. I would expect that it could be explained by taking into account the change in fluid density as his wings changed their angle of attack, affecting the pressure of the air he was traveling through while the force he was generating for the most part would remain constant and –"

"Yeeeeahhhhh," Rainbow Dash again interrupted. "I have no idea what you just said, Twilight. I'm sure that all that sciencey stuff is important to you eggheads, but I'm a hooves on kind of pony."

Twilight began to sulk again, and Luna was quick to attempt to support her friend, even if she only had the vaguest understanding of what Twilight had been explaining. "She's right though. The key to Buck Fizz's stunts was his ability to stop flying, but keep control, and that's much more difficult than it sounds."

The conversation was put on hold once more as their food arrived, and Luna discovered that she'd ordered a rather monumental sandwich, which towered over the relatively small plate. Rainbow Dash quickly wolfed hers down, but Luna was unsure of where to begin with the high calorie meal. She took a few moments to examine it, before she leaned forward to nibble at it. Twilight glared at her salad and stabbed at it with her magically controlled fork.

Rainbow Dash, being the first to finish, was also the first to speak. "So if this stall, but still flying technique is so great, then why didn't anypony else use it?"

Luna could already feel herself filling up after a few bites of the admittedly delicious sandwich. "I don't know. I would have thought that Buck Fizz's research would have been continued since it was so revolutionary. But obviously it wasn't." Luna looked to Twilight for a possible explanation. She'd come to expect the purple unicorn to take full advantage of the opportunity to educate her fellow ponies, but this time Twilight remained stubbornly silent.

With a shrug, Luna turned back to Rainbow Dash and theorized, "Perhaps because his stunt flying was so successful, Buck Fizz kept his secrets to himself. I don't know the exact specifics of his techniques, I suppose nopony does anymore, but I do know how he accomplished them in a general sort of way. Buck Fizz flew with a wide assortment of enchanted

talismans that he had worked into his costume. One of which allowed his remiges to become as stiff as steel, and another that allowed him to angle them at quite an unnatural angle from the rest of the wing." Luna unfurled one of her wings to point out the particular feathers she was describing. "With the correct speed, and just the right conditions, and the proper curvature of his wings, Buck Fizz was able to put himself into a stall at will, then pull himself out of it just as quickly. I admired his skills, and actually attempted to emulate his style of flying, but I never had much opportunity to practice, and to be honest, I'm an indifferent flyer. While I'm quite capable of flying for very long distances, I can't perform stunt flying on a level anywhere near the level of the Wonderbolts or a pony such as yourself."

Rainbow Dash fluttered up from her seat in excitement. "Aw, I bet that's not true at all. Your problem is that you've been focusing on all this theory about how flying works and you haven't put enough flight hours in. Flying isn't something you can learn from a book, it's something you gotta feel."

"Do you really think so?" Luna couldn't help the excitement that bled into her voice. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd labeled herself as merely an adequate flyer. The idea that she could possibly outperform Celestia when it came to aerobatic flying was enchanting.

"Heck yeah! With me as your coach, I'll guarantee that you'll be the second best flier in Equestria, right after me of course. Why wait? We should go grab some sky time right now and you can show me some of that fancy flying magic, and I can give you a few pointers."

"Didn't you have someplace else to be?" Twilight asked in a somewhat angry tone. "A nap or something?"

"Eh, I can catch a nap anytime," Dash said dismissively.

"Are you certain you don't need to rest?" Luna pressed. "You have been flying all day already, and under quite severe conditions."

Rainbow Dash did a short aerial back flip, narrowly missing the ceiling of the restaurant. "I'm good to go, see? I'm plenty rested and refueled from lunch. Let's go!"

Luna looked over at Twilight to find the unicorn shooting Rainbow Dash a somewhat angry glare. Not sure why Twilight was upset, but not wanting to

see her in such a state, with concerned eyes and an unsure frown, Luna asked her, "Is it alright if I go?"

"Sure! Of course it is. You're a grown mare, you can make your own decisions," Twilight replied loudly, turning to stare intently at her salad she hadn't eaten so much as shredded.

"Well, if you're sure ..." Slightly uneasy, Luna rose from the table. Rainbow Dash sped out of the restaurant, and Luna eagerly followed, though at a much more sedate pace. Once outside she unfolded her wings and took to the air.

Luna hadn't flown for an extended period of time for quite a while, so she was looking forward to her time with Rainbow Dash. As the pegasus sped ahead, Luna flapped her dark wings and climbed up after her. After several minutes of steady flight, they eventually came to a stop and began to tread air far above the empty fields on the outskirts of Ponyville. There weren't any other ponies at their altitude, only a few wispy clouds that had begun to develop from the remnants of the storm from earlier.

Below them, Ponyville and its environs were spread out in a carpet of green interrupted by streams and stands of forest, from which erupted tiny pony-built buildings. Sweet Apple Acres, with its ordered rows of trees and other crops, seemed to spread across a wide swath of the land below them, stretching all the way to the curvature of the horizon.

"Okay, this should be high enough that we don't get bothered by anypony, or accidentally crash into anything. Now show me your moves, PL."

"PL?"

Rainbow Dash crossed her forelegs and explained, "Short for Princess Luna. Anyway, show me what you've got." Luna wasn't sure what exactly Rainbow Dash meant by her 'moves,' and the other pony noticed her hesitancy. She swooped closer to the princess and comfortingly said, "Just relax, PL. Let's start off with seeing how fast you can go. Speed's the key to most of the really good tricks."

Luna looked down at the tiny Ponyville below them, and took a deep breath. She pointed her head down and retracted her wings, falling into a dive toward the picturesquely green pastures below. She could feel her

mane and tail stream out behind her, and she tucked her head down and hooves in, picking up speed. In a few seconds she'd dropped several thousand meters, and the ground had grown larger and larger, until through her narrowed and watering eyes, Luna could distinguish individual trees and even the way the long grass in the fields was swaying in the breeze.

She slowly extended her wings and gracefully pulled out of her dive. Unused to the stresses pushing down on her, Luna began to pump her wings and flew level for a few seconds before she angled up into a long, gradual curving ascent. With the pressure bearing down on her lessening, Luna turned her head to find Rainbow Dash, and found a long streak of stark blackness filled with points of starlight trailing out behind her. It was as if somepony had torn a hole in the pale blue sky, letting the darkness of the night through. Continuing her climb, Luna slowly spiraled up to where Rainbow Dash was patiently waiting for her.

"Well, you're not the fastest flier I've ever seen, but I think you've got enough speed to pull off a few cool tricks," Rainbow Dash bluntly informed her. Before Luna could begin to feel crestfallen though, Rainbow Dash began to look around searchingly. "Uh, wait right here." With a characteristic burst of speed that continued to surprise Luna, she dashed over to where the thin clouds had begun to reform and began to shove them together. In a few minutes she'd shaped them into five tall fluffy pillars which she moved around until they lined up in a relatively evenly spaced row.

She darted back to Luna and bled off speed by making a couple of tight circles around the princess. "Okay, now we've got ourselves an obstacle course. The good old fashioned slalom, great for working on high speed turns. Now, PL, all you gotta do is to weave in and out of those clouds. Simple Right?" Rainbow Dash explained, wiggling her hoof to demonstrate the maneuver.

It did seem like a simple enough task, and with a regal grace, Luna leaned forward and beat her wings, picking up a little speed. With fierce concentration she carefully navigated the slalom, precisely flying through the dead center of the gap between each of the clouds. After the final cloud she continued her turn and flew back to where Rainbow Dash was treading air and observing. "How was that?" Luna called out to her.

"Eh, it was okay. But try it again, and this time go faster, and bank when you turn, really throw your body into it." Rainbow Dash spun in a tight circle, illustrating what she meant by putting one's body into it. She was banking so sharply that her wing tip pointed at the ground and her hooves pointed toward the horizon.

Not wanting to disappoint her newfound coach, Luna lined up with the clouds once more, and with a heavy pump of her wings and a short dive, gained much more speed than her previous attempt. Her heart began to speed up as the clouds quickly loomed in front of her. She twisted her body in imitation of the steep bank that Rainbow Dash had demonstrated, and shot through the gap between the first two clouds. She was flying too fast though and nearly overshot the second gap. She slowed down a bit as she twisted her body in the opposite direction and barely missed kicking the third cloud. This time she anticipated the third opening between the clouds and banked too hard, causing her to lose even more speed before she lined herself up with the final gap. She ended her slalom with much less speed that she'd started it with, and sedately flew back over to Rainbow Dash.

Before she could ask how she'd done, Rainbow Dash congratulated her, "That was way better. But you need to work on keeping your speed up, and moving your body without thinking about it." Rainbow Dash shot over to the clouds and pushed them all closer to one another. "Do it again, but faster," She yelled over to Luna from the other end of the line of clouds.

Luna's eyebrows shot up in surprise. She was already breathing harder than normal from the last run. But she knew that Rainbow Dash wouldn't be pushing her if she thought Luna couldn't accomplish her task.

Trusting in Rainbow Dash's faith in her, Luna gained a little altitude, then dived as she pumped her wings to propel her to a speed just shy of leaving a contrail. This time the clouds shot toward her, and as she leaned into the first bank, she noticed that she no longer felt as if she were flying through the air. Instead it felt as if the air was flowing around her, she wasn't fighting against it to stay aloft, rather it was holding her up and pushing her along.

In a flash the first two clouds passed, and before they were even gone, Luna had smoothly shifted her body and blasted through the second gap.

Another twist and another cloud behind her, though she did feel a wet and cold spray on her tail. Keeping up her speed, Luna powered through the final opening, and as she did she acted on impulse and continued her bank, turning it into an aileron roll. She transitioned that into a large loop that took her up to Rainbow Dash. Her heart was pounding, her adrenaline was surging, and Luna couldn't keep the wide smile bourn from exhilaration from her face.

"Wow, you're a fast learner," Rainbow Dash complimented her, obviously impressed. "You did that run almost perfectly. You just nicked the third cloud, but with a little more practice I'm sure you'll get the hang of it."

Luna was panting heavily, unused to such exercise, but she replied, "It's easy to learn when the lesson is this ... fun."

Rainbow Dash laughed. "I know, right? There's nothing like pulling off a stunt perfectly, knowing you're only barely in control, and one wrong move can send you crashing into the ground. But when you pull off something amazing, something nopony's done before, and your heart's racing, and your blood's pumping, and you look around and everypony's going crazy over how awesome you are, it's the best feeling ever." She said while wearing a somewhat goofy grin.

Having tasted a shadow of what Rainbow Dash was describing, Luna could only reply with a lopsided grin of her own and a quiet, "I can imagine."

Dash's eyes sparkled as she focused on Luna once more, and they shared a brief unspoken connection. Two ponies terrified of failure, but ever striving for success.

Dash was the first to break eye contact. She embarrassedly rubbed the back of her mane with one hoof and tried to sound a bit more serious. "So, about these enchantment thingies that help you fly better ..."

"Oh yes," Luna said, recollecting their earlier conversation. "Well, for me, it's easy enough to cast spells on myself. But most pegasi would store a spell in a tangible object and activate it when they needed." Luna cast about, but she hadn't brought anything with her on their flight. It appeared that Dash hadn't either, with the exception of the goggles that she'd pushed up to ride on her forehead. "Your goggles for instance."

Dash raised a questioning hoof to her eyewear. "My goggles?"

"Yes. I could store the spell in them and then you can activate it on demand. Though it will only last for a short while, and would have to be recharged if you wanted to use it again."

"Oh." Dash pulled off her goggles and looked at them speculatively. "So you can make me stronger, or faster, or what?"

Luna mentally ran through her repertoire of spells, thinking of ones that could be adapted for their purpose, and would benefit Dash's flying. Casting several aside for their complexity, or only slightly beneficial results, her eyes lit up in excitement as she remembered Sundowner's spell for frictionless surfaces. It didn't truly create a frictionless object, but it did greatly decrease the drag of an object through a fluid environment.

"I have just the thing," Luna excitedly informed Dash. "Just hold the goggles out like that."

Dash held her goggles up in both hooves uncertainly., while her wings continued to rhythmically pump, holding her up in the crystal blue sky. Luna smiled at her reassuringly before she closed her eyes and gathered a substantial amount of magic within her, concentrating it in her conductive horn.

Humming with energy, Luna reached out with her senses and explored the magic surrounding her. It was easy to find Dash, she was the only other living thing in the area, and living things had a way of twisting up the currents of the naturally occurring magic in the environment. She exhibited the normal magical aura for a pegasus, as if somepony had gathered together several streams of wind and had tied them together. Though Luna did notice that Dash 'tasted' differently than any other pegasus she'd encountered. Beneath the insubstantial torrents that flowed around her, there was a core of familiar light and heat. A tiny portion of Luna recoiled from the power that had imprisoned her so long ago, but the rest of her embraced the element of loyalty as one of her saviors from the darkness within her own soul.

Concentrating, Luna searched through the currents that represented Dash and located the small bubble caused by her goggles. Because they were ordinary, non-magical goggles, Luna couldn't 'see' them with her magic, but

she could 'see' their outlines as they interrupted Dash's normal flow of magic. Her target acquired, and with more than enough power built up in her body, Luna concentrated on the steps not only for Sundowner's frictionless spell, but for Pink Gin's spell of binding as well in order to embed the spell in the goggles and make it voice activated.

With a surge of energy, Luna wove the two spells together and released them, opening her eyes just in time to see the eyewear in Dash's hooves sparkle with dark violet energy. The glow around them faded in a moment, and Luna let her unused energy dissipate away from her. "There, that should do."

Dash looked from her goggles to Luna, seemingly unwilling to put them back on. "What exactly did you do to them?"

Remembering that Dash was a 'hooves on kind of pony,' Luna kept her explanation simple. "I gave your goggles a spell that should allow you to fly faster, or at least not use as much effort while you fly."

Dash nodded appreciatively but still looked unsold on the idea. "So, how do I turn it on?"

"You say the verbal command, 'Excelsior!'"

Dash snorted and broke into peals of laughter. "Excelsior? That sounds so dorkish! Why can't you eggheads ever come up with something cool?"

Luna could feel her cheeks heat up in embarrassment as Dash wiped her tears of hilarity away. "I thought it would be beneficial to use a word you wouldn't be likely to say. Besides which, I thought it was fitting considering the nature of the spell."

Her laughter seemed to have overcome Dash's earlier reticence. "Yeah, yeah," she said with a large grin as she donned her goggles once more, letting the rest on her forehead again. "So do these need to be over my eyes to work or what?"

"So long as they're touching you, the spell should work."

"Cool." Dash seemed uncomfortable again, but she took a deep breath and with confidence said, "Okay, let's do this. Excelsior." She flapped her wings a few times, then looked over at Luna in confusion.

"You have to say it like you mean it," Luna explained, feeling a bit better with the small payback for Dash's earlier mocking.

"Seriously?" Dash somehow slumped in midair and sighed. "Fine." She snapped into a heroic pose, her eyes staring into the distance, one foreleg flung out before her, the other bunched up near her body. "Excelsior!"

Dash's wings flashed with a brief sheen of white light which transformed into a whirl of rainbow colored sparkles that highlighted her remiges. Without warning, Dash shot off in a blur of rainbow light. Luna had to turn quickly to keep her in sight as the excited pegasus launched into a series of aileron rolls, sudden dives, and unbelievably steep climbs. For several minutes the stream of rainbow she left in her wake tangled around itself before Dash swooped over to where Luna was waiting for her.

"This is amazing!" Dash shouted with excitement. "It's like there isn't any air, like I'm flying through nothing at all!" She circled Luna several times in the blink of an eye. "This is so great, thanks Luna!"

Luna could feel her heart swelling with happiness over her efforts being so well received. With a large, almost sappy smile, Luna replied, "You're welcome, Rainbow Dash. I'm glad you like it."

"Hay yeah I like it. Just thinking of all the great stunts I can make better with this is getting me pumped." Dash finally flew still as a thought occurred to her. "So how long is this supposed to last?"

"I'm not sure," Luna admitted. "I've never done an enchantment like this for another pony before, and the time limit is dependent upon both my own strength, as well as yours."

Dash did a spontaneous loop as she replied, "Well, I guess I better get as much out of it as I can then. But first..." She shot over to the clouds that had begun to drift away and quickly remade the obstacle course, but with the clouds even closer together than before, and she'd made a new cloud in the shape of an empty circle she situated perpendicular to the other

clouds. "Do it again, but faster. And this time you have to dive through the donut before you hit the slalom."

Energized by Dash's faith in her, Luna didn't question whether she'd be able to perform the stunt. Instead, she squared her shoulders and dived down toward the clouds, gaining enough speed to leave a dark trail of night behind her.

For the next hour or so, Dash danced across the sky, testing the limits of her newfound speed. Meanwhile, Luna continued to work on her maneuverability by running the obstacle course over and over, pausing only when Dash came over to rearrange it to make it more challenging. Each time the azure pegasus would tell her, "Good, but do it again, and faster."

By the end of the hour, Luna was covered in sweat and gasping for breath. Dash must have noticed how tired Luna had become because after arranging the clouds one final time, she called up to Luna, "Okay, this'll be the last run for today, so make it awesome!"

Luna looked down at the course. It seemed simple enough, a slalom of ten clouds preceded by two 'donuts.' However the 'donuts' were at nearly a ninety degree angle from one another and were far too close for comfort.

"RD, are you sure about this?"

"Relax, PL, you got this. I've been watching you fly all day. You're better than you think."

Luna examined the course once more, and still the angle between the two 'donuts' looked physically impossible. No pony could make such an extreme turn midair. But ... Perhaps Dash was right. Perhaps a pony never really knew their limits until they surpassed them. A part of her mind pointed out that made no sense whatsoever, and the rest of it point out that she'd already started to dive.

She passed Dash as she dove, picking up speed, squeezing her body tighter and tighter to cut down on air resistance. The 'donut' that had appeared fairly small from her previous height grew until it filled her entire vision. Just as she hit it, Luna threw open her wings and arched her back, desperately trying to make the turn. She could feel the air catch her wings

and try to wrest them away from her. Muscles all along her back flexed and strained as she pulled her momentum from one direction to another. Feeling the strain all the way to her hooves, Luna shot through the second 'donut.'

Immediately she faced a cloud pillar and using muscle memory she threw her body sideways into a bank without even thinking about it. She sliced through the first and second gaps with ease, when she noticed a bright rainbow zoom in and easily catch up to her, slaloming through the clouds in the opposite direction from Luna. Every time they came to a gap, Luna and Dash would pass within inches of one another. Weaving in and out at such a high speed, dodging her friend as well as the clouds, adrenaline pumping and her blood surging, Luna couldn't help but throw her head back and laugh, though she was traveling so fast that nopony could hear it.

Distracted by all the fun she was having, Luna failed to bank as sharply as she should have, and instead of passing the final cloud, she plowed straight through it, covering her in a brisk dew and scattering it into a thousand tattered pieces. But that imperfection in her performance didn't matter. Dash was still with her, flying just below Luna. She shifted her weight and effortlessly sailed into a barrel roll over Luna's head. Not to be outdone, Luna launched into a barrel roll of her own, and soon the two ponies were flying in a rolling scissors. A rolling scissors that turned vertical as Luna followed Dash's lead and they dove toward the ground. They quickly picked up speed and tightened their spiral until they were once again mere inches from one another. Spinning around each other, the tips of their wings nearly touching the other pony's.

Suddenly Dash broke the formation and shot away from Luna. Confused, Luna looked down and noticed that the ground was much closer than she'd thought. She too leveled off and bled speed as she traveled away from Dash on a course that took her through Ponyville. She looked over her shoulder for signs of her friend and caught sight of the trail they had left behind. It was a ribbon, a double helix of starry night and bright, vibrant rainbow. It was a rainbow in the dark, a truly impressive sight against the blue sky of the afternoon.

Dash had slowed down to the point she was no longer leaving a trail, and Luna lost the azure pegasus amidst the pale blue sky. But she looked

ahead and noticed she was approaching a park, and underneath a large tree was a familiar purple unicorn.

Luna alighted nearby and suddenly noticed just how sore her wings were. She achingly stretched them as she began to walk toward Twilight. Without warning, Rainbow Dash landed next to her and excitedly said, "Hey, PL, that was awesome! Give me some hoof!" Dash held out her hoof expectantly and hesitantly Luna raised her own. Dash tapped her hoof against Luna's. "Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. What'd I tell you? A little more practice and you'll be the second best flier in Equestria in no time."

"Well, it looks like you two are having fun," Twilight said archly as she walked toward them.

"You know it, Twi," Rainbow Dash eagerly replied. "Today was so awesome, I got to learn a new trick, and practice more stuff than I ever have before, and I got to coach a princess. It was so cool."

Dash eagerly looked around to make sure that everypony was excited as her, but then she did a double take. Her carefree laughter stopped and her face transformed to outraged realization. Luna turned her head to find what had caused such an abrupt transformation, and found dark yellow pegasus with an orange mane carrying a basket in his mouth and trotting alongside a light blue unicorn with a dark blue mane.

Dash sprung into the air and pointed an accusing hoof at the stallion, shouting, "Sunburst, you said you couldn't fly today because you broke your leg, again!"

Sunburst turned his attention from his delightful companion to where Rainbow Dash was angrily flying. Upon seeing her, his eyes dilated and with a gasp he dropped his basket, and left it behind along his confused path as he quickly flew in the opposite direction. Luna could swear that his coat had turned from yellow to grey in an instant.

"You get back here!" Rainbow Dash yelled. A rainbow shot away from Twilight and Luna as Rainbow Dash rapidly ascending into the sky after the departing pegasus stallion.

"Well, that's something you don't see every day," Twilight commented evenly as they watched the departing Dash. She looked at Luna and said, "Are you ready to head back yet?" There was a strange undercurrent in Twilight's tone that Luna hadn't heard before, but put her on edge. Absently, she wondered what Twilight had been doing in the park while she and Rainbow Dash had been flying.

While they walked side-by-side back to the library, Luna could tell that Twilight's mood had soured. She was obviously upset over something, and for the life of her, Luna couldn't figure out what it was. They passed a few minutes in tense silence as Luna waited for Twilight to reveal what was on her mind, but eventually Luna realized that she would have to be the one to take the verbal plunge.

"Twilight, are you alright? You seem upset."

"Upset? Me? Why would I be upset?" Twilight rhetorically asked as she increased her pace a bit, forcing Luna to take longer strides to keep up.

With an uncertain voice, Luna replied, "I don't know. You just seem ... angry over something."

"Well excuse me for not being as carefree as some ponies. We can't all be so flippant when it comes to life. Some ponies actually have more important things to do than to fly around all day, lazing around on clouds like Rainbow Dash."

"What does Rainbow Dash have to do with anything?" Luna asked in confusion.

"Nothing. Everything," Twilight clarified with a frustrated toss of her head. "You two seemed to be having such a great time together, talking about flying, and flittering around all afternoon. I didn't want to interrupt you. Since, you know, I don't have wings, so I couldn't possibly have a clue what it's like to be a pegasus like you two."

Luna began to have an inkling of why Twilight was so upset. She smiled with bemusement at Twilight's foalish emotion as she admonished, "Twilight, just because you don't have wings is no reason to be angry at Rainbow Dash, or me." She ruffled her wings just a bit in order to relieve some of the tension in her back.

Twilight finally turned to look fully at Luna, and in a voice loud enough for half the street to hear, she hotly declared, "I'm not angry with you, or her! I'm j-"

She bit off what she was about to say, mid-syllable, and her eyes widened in surprise. She raised a hoof up and covered her mouth with it, whether to keep what she was about to say inside, or because she'd made a shocking discovery, Luna wasn't sure. Luna waited for her to continue, as did several nearby ponies, who'd stopped what they were doing to witness the latest antics of the town's librarian. But they lost interest when all Twilight did was to search Luna's face speculatively for a few seconds before she turned and silently began walking toward the library once more.

Her fiery anger had transformed into a contemplative introspection so quickly that Luna had no idea what was going through the other pony's mind. Belatedly she realized that Twilight had gone ahead without her, and she raced to catch up.

"Are you certain you're not mad?" Luna asked again. She hated seeing Twilight upset, especially when the cause for her temper might be Luna herself.

"No, I'm ... I'm not," replied Twilight very distractedly, seeming to be lost in her own world.

Luna was about to press her friend on the fact that there was something she was obviously thinking about heavily, but before she could ask Twilight about her strange mood swings, something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Luna felt a flood of instinctive dread as she turned her head to quickly find what had attracted her attention, but all she saw was a busier than normal corner of the Ponyville market, crammed with Ponyville residents. Luna wasn't sure what it was she'd seen. It had been a familiar movement, or perhaps a face she'd seen often enough before for it to leave a rather unpleasant sensation in its wake. But there were few ponies that Luna actively disliked, and none of them lived in Ponyville.

Twilight was apparently so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed Luna's odd jerk of her head, or the depression in the road until she tripped over it. Twilight's momentary stumble drew Luna's attention, and she put the partially glimpsed whatever it had been, and the accompanying

unpleasant sensation out of her mind. It had likely been a trick of the light, or possibly the many hours she'd been awake finally catching up to her.

Anxiously, Luna looked over her friend, but Twilight seemed unharmed from her near fall, just very preoccupied. The rest of the journey to Twilight's tree was short and silent. Each pony lost in her own thoughts.

"Good morning," Spike greeted them with a yawn as they entered. It was easily apparent that he'd just woken up based on his hooded eyes and the rumpled sleeping cap he was still wearing. Obviously Twilight wasn't the only one who was keeping later hours thanks to Luna's visit.

"Good afternoon, Spike," Luna cheerfully replied.

Twilight grunted in acknowledgement, then apparently came to a decision. She turned to Luna and said, "I need to go ask Rarity about something. Do you mind being by yourself for a bit?"

Luna was feeling quite weary from her sleepless night, and action packed day, but she gamely offered, "I could go with you."

"No!" Twilight hastily said, then in a lower tone explained, "I mean, no, thank you Luna. But I need to talk to her about something ... personal. Something private. Really private, and I need to speak with her alone." Twilight tried to remove the sting from her words with a strangely awkward and nervous smile.

"Oh." Luna had to admit that she was disappointed. She had hoped that she and Twilight had built a friendship where Twilight could feel comfortable sharing everything with her. But then she felt a stab of guilt at her double standard. After all, Twilight wasn't the only pony keeping secrets from her friend.

Some of her emotion must have made itself known on her face because Twilight's expression softened and she seemed truly apologetic. "Though if you really want to, you're welcome to come along Luna."

Luna didn't want to force Twilight to change her plans out of pity, and quite honestly she was quickly fading. "Oh no, you go on ahead, Twilight. I'm actually quite fatigued. I think I'll just take a short nap while you're gone."

Luna tried to ignore the obvious relief that spread across Twilight's features at her decision to stay behind.

"Hey, if you're going to Rarity's, can I come?" Spike asked. His cap had disappeared and he seemed infinitely more awake and eager than he had a few moments before.

Twilight shook her head. "Not this time, Spike. I need you to catalogue the books we have in sections K through M and P through T."

Spike deflated and moaned, "Oh man, that'll take all day."

"Sorry, Spike," Twilight said apologetically, walking over to nuzzle her number one assistant. "But it would be a really big help if you did this for me. And, just for you, I'll see if Rarity has anymore star sapphires that I can bring you."

The mention of the jewel perked Spike right back up. "A star sapphire? Well, I guess I could go visit Rarity tomorrow. I wouldn't want her to think that I'm desperate or anything by showing up every single day."

"Oh no, we wouldn't want that," Twilight agreed with a playful roll of her eyes.

Luna let out an involuntarily large yawn that she was only barely able to hide behind a discrete hoof. "Oh, excuse me. I believe that my body is attempting to inform me that it's time to rest. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go turn in."

"Good night, Princess," Spike said. "Or morning, or afternoon, or whatever time it is."

"Sweet dreams," Twilight simply wished. Luna could feel her eyes following her as she made her way up to the bedroom.

Twilight's room was bathed in sunlight, and though there were many personal items tucked away around the room, nothing was out of place. Luna flew up to the bed, and found it's impeccably made sheets glowing in the warm light from the window; she easily gave into their inviting allure. Luna slid between the sheets and buried her face in the pillow, blocking out Celestia's sunlight, and breathing in the scent that had permeated the

fabric. The comforting smell which belonged uniquely to Twilight. In a few short moments, lulled by the warm bed, the soft sheets, and the faded presence of the bed's owner, Luna fell into a soft slumber.

The welcome rest though was short lived. After perhaps an hour, when her eyes had begun to twitch behind her tightly closed eyelids, Luna began to fitfully toss and turn. Soon her voice, spurred on by her dreams, broke through her sleep long enough to let out a whispered word of softly murmured broken phrase. As her dreams deepened, Luna began to thrash wildly about in the bed, clearly having unpleasant dreams of the demons that haunted her.

She finally awoke with a frightful gasp and she nearly leapt from of the bed. Luna was sweating and her heart was racing, while her mouth was painfully dry. She'd had a rather bad nightmare. In fact one of the more unpleasant ones since her return from the moon. It was rapidly fading, but she could still remember it had been about Twilight and Celestia laughing unpleasantly and she'd been back on the moon, or maybe incased in stone, unable to move or speak, only to watch and, and, and it was gone. Whatever terrible vision she'd seen had slipped away as silently as it had arrived, leaving nothing behind but a general sense of disquiet and dread.

There was a shuffle of hooves and Luna turned her head to find Twilight standing quite close to the side of the bed, concern filling her impossibly deep eyes. "Are you alright, Luna? I came to wake you up because it's almost time to raise the moon, and you were thrashing around, murmuring in your sleep."

Luna raised a hoof and brushed the hair from her face as she asked, "I didn't say anything unusual, did I?"

The delicate blush that played across twilight's cheeks as she refused to meet Luna's eyes informed her that yes; she'd said something quite embarrassing.

"Oh no, nothing intelligible."

"Good." Luna agreed to go along with Twilight's little white lie as she climbed out of bed.

The dream had left a lingering unpleasant feeling, and Luna felt trapped, as if something catastrophic were about to happen. The walls of the library were too close, and they were closing in on her. She shot a glance out of the window for relief, and found that the sun had traveled far while she'd slept and was now touching the horizon. Night was on the cusp of descending, and the thought of the crisp night air flowing around her body, soothing her heated thoughts, filled Luna with the urge to race outside. "I'm sorry, Twilight, but I need to get some fresh air."

Twilight stepped closer and quickly offered, "I'll go with you."

But this time it was Luna's turn to rebuke her friend. "No. I feel that it would be best if I were alone for a little while," Luna stated more harshly than she intended.

Twilight's face fell, and she appeared crestfallen as she sadly replied, "I understand."

Luna's heart went out to Twilight, but a vague memory of horrible laughter shot through her mind, and she could no longer endure the stuffiness of the room. Not bothering to traverse the entire library to get outside, Luna burst out of the glass doors leading to the balcony. She paused long enough to impatiently raise the moon, uncaring that the sun was still in the sky, and both celestial bodies would be visible at the same time.

With a graceful leap, and despite her still tired wings, Luna took to the sky. She was too scared to look back as she flew into the darkening night.

Chapter 2-5

Luna wasn't really sure where she was flying to. Nor did she really care so long as it was away. Away from the troubles and fears that refused to leave her no matter how fast or high she flew. Though that didn't stop her from trying to out-fly them, for a little while at least.

There were a few other ponies sharing the evening sky, but Luna gave them a wide berth, not feeling up to holding a conversation with somepony else and having to pretend that everything was alright, even for a moment. She sped through the night, quickly passing the environs of Ponyville, the carefully kept parks and gardens, until she'd entered the wilder, fallow fields and pastures that separated Ponyville from the Everfree Forest. Her over-exerted wings began to ache terribly, and as she neared the end of the pastures, she alighted on a small hill in the shadow of the dreaded forest. So close that the tall grass rolling away toward Ponyville was shorter and patchier, choked off by the wild growing plants nearby.

As the sun sank behind her, she gingerly sat down, modestly folding her wings back. The evening's shadows lengthened, and Luna turned her face up to the waning moon. In the fading blue sky, trapped between two horizons, one vibrant red, the other dank blue, the dull moon seemed worn out and nearly transparent as the day's twilight chased after the still brilliant sun. Luna could sympathize.

An errant breeze sighed out of the Everfree Forest and Luna closed her eyes in appreciation, imagining that it might be able to cool her heated emotions as it did her skin. However, her thoughts refused to settle from the disarray her dream had scattered them into. Though she couldn't remember any specific detail from it, the swirl of emotions it had left in its wake caused her to feel even more fatigued than before she'd slept. As she tried to remember what had been so disquieting about her dream, brief flashes of directionless anger and jealously assailed her, but their intensity was smothered by an even heavier emotion dredged up by her subconscious, an overpowering fear that had suffocatingly wrapped itself around her.

It was an old and achingly familiar fear that she'd thought she'd banished time and time again, the fear of being alone, of being an outcast, of being unlovable.

With one eye on the waning moon and the other on the fading sun, Luna shifted slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position on the hard hilltop. Of course she and Celestia were different from their subjects, and that created an unavoidable gulf between them, isolating the royal sisters. But while nopony else, other than Celestia, could know the loneliness of being an alicorn, Luna had almost always felt that there was a further, subtler difference between how she and Celestia were treated by their little ponies. For some reason, whether due to her more introspective nature, or simply because she was younger and thus constantly overshadowed by her elder sister, Luna had never been as popular as Celestia. In fact she'd never really been popular by anypony's standards.

When Equestria had been much younger, Luna had believed that she'd come to terms with the fact that everypony preferred Celestia to her. She'd believed that while nopony ever expressed their thanks for the night sky, some ponies somewhere were sure to admire the moon and stars, if not the amount of effort she'd put into them. For many years she'd ushered in the night, and each evening her certainty that there were other ponies enjoying it lessened just a little, until one night her solitude and isolation had driven her to engage in ... unsound methods.

Following Nightmare Moon's imprisonment in the moon, Luna had again contended with loneliness. While she hadn't been aware for most of her banishment, and the brief flashes she did remember were filtered through the murky eyes of Nightmare Moon, Luna did remember the bleak solitude, and the longing for the companionship of another pony. Of course Nightmare Moon had been focused on having somepony else to subjugate and bend to her will until they did nothing but compliment her and stroke her already grandiose ego, but still, even Nightmare Moon had felt the pangs of being the only living thing on the moon for a thousand years.

Both Luna and Nightmare Moon had thought their loneliness had been conquered upon their return to Equestria, when for the first time in a millennium they'd been able to see, speak to, and even touch other ponies. Following her second encounter with the elements of harmony, Luna had rejoiced in reuniting with her sister, and with the rest of Equestria as well.

However, all too soon the familiar loneliness that stalked Luna overtook her once again. Ponies no longer ignored her, but now they kept their distance out of fear for her power and uncertain temperament. Luna knew that their actions were justified, after all she hadn't been the most emotionally stable of ponies in the past, so she certainly couldn't fault them for being wary of her now. Even though her isolation was self-inflicted this time, Luna found that it was just as distasteful as it had been a thousand years earlier. But this time she was determined to earn her subjects' forgiveness and with a penitent resignation she endured their fearful glances, the crossing of hallways to get out of her path, and the harsh silences that heralded her entrance into every room.

And then Twilight Sparkle had stumbled into her life, and everything had changed. It no longer mattered what the other ponies said or thought, only how Twilight felt about her. For the first time in centuries, Luna knew once more the overwhelming joy of no longer being alone. For the first time since she'd turned her back on Celestia, Luna had a friend, a real friend who genuinely cared about her.

She couldn't help but smile as her thoughts turned toward her favorite unicorn. But as another, harsher wind ripped out of the nearby forest, Luna's expression became pensive and her bright eyes became dull as her head bent under the weight of her guilty thoughts. Now she was afraid once more because she knew that her time with Twilight was nearly over. Already it was past time for her to tell the truth, that their relationship was predicated upon a lie. And then, she'd be alone again.

The sun finally sank below the edge of the world, and the red glow it left behind began to cool into tepid darkness. Luna was the princess of the night, and as the night settled once more over Equestria, she knew her time in the sun was destined to be short-lived, no matter how afraid she became, it was her duty, her obligation, to both Celestia and Twilight to go gently into that good night, to be alone.

She sighed and hung her head in defeat, closing her eyes wearily for a few minutes. The moon had been made a little brighter by the sun's absence, but its pale light did little to dispel the gathering shadows. The vibrant daytime Equestria faded into a world of black and grey. In the distance the darkness was held at bay by the cheerful lights of Ponyville, and far beyond that, the twinkling lights of Canterlot outlined the steep side of the mountain

it nestled against. The small hill that Luna sat upon had become merely another swell in the sea of shadows that rolled out of the plumbless depths of the Everfree Forest.

Most ponies, normal ponies at any rate, likely would be a bit apprehensive being alone on such a dark night, especially so close to where the wild things were. After all, ponies were originally prey for the many nocturnal predators known to prowl through the Everfree.

But Luna felt safe. In fact she welcomed the night and the darkness it brought, no matter where in Equestria she was when it fell. Often, during the few times she was awake during the day, Luna found the sun too bright, burning away the shadows that made the world comfortable. It was only in darkness that Luna had come to feel free. In the dark nopony could see her try to live up to her potential, and fail.

Luna's ruminations were scattered as a disquieting feeling slithered down her spine. She was no longer alone.

The still and silent night hadn't changed from a few moments ago, but instinctively Luna knew that somehow, somepony or something had penetrated the veil of darkness around her and was silently watching, weighing her.

She suddenly felt quite exposed on the hilltop, the shadows that had comforted her only moments before now proved their insubstantial nature as they were easily pierced by an intensely focused gaze.

Slowly, surreptitiously, Luna opened her eyes and turned her head to and fro, scanning her surroundings. The darkness only slightly hindered her vision. Even with the wane glow of the moon and stars as the only illumination, Luna quickly assured herself that there was nopony in sight; both the fields and the sky were empty.

Beneath the dense foliage of the Everfree Forest though, the gloom had deepened to the point of featureless black. Even Luna's excellent eyesight could barely penetrate the absolute darkness. But now that she was focusing her attention on it, she felt certain that the gaze which pierced through her was coming from the wild forest, and that it was decidedly unfriendly.

Luna's skin crawled as the naked hostility and hatred of the unseen eyes washed over her, and her breath was loud in her ears as she tensed for a possible confrontation. She was Luna, Princess of Equestria, Ruler of the Night. No matter the threat, she was more than equal to it.

She called forth her magic, causing her horn to glow brightly, and turned a determined face to the forest. She warily stood, her muscles taunt and prepared for anything. The light given off by her horn was inadequate to penetrate the depths of the forest's shadows, but Luna thought that she was able to see a patch of shapeless shadows shift against the darkness of the forest.

"Who's there? Reveal yourself!" Luna called out commandingly. She waited a few heartbeats, but nopony stepped forward. Determined to not back down, Luna stepped toward the forest, and she thought that she saw the light from her magic reflect off something metallic. She channeled even more magic into her horn, increasing the light, and called out once again, "I am Princess Luna, identify yourself at once, or face the consequences!"

Just as she was on the cusp of releasing her magic in a blast powerful enough to destroy a large swath of the forest, eliminating whatever was causing the unpleasant sensation, a great swarm of chittering darkness leapt up into the sky a few hundred meters away. The cloud of bats, screeching and swirling around, grabbed Luna's attention and broke her fierce concentration.

Caught by surprise, Luna stared dumbfounded at the swarm of bats while the feeling of being watched slipped away. Abruptly, Luna realized just how silly she was being, quite literally jumping at shadows. The shadows of the Everfree Forest were just that, shadows, nothing more. With a rueful and humorless attempt at a chuckle, Luna let her magic flow back out of her and calmed her pounding heart, certain that she'd cut quite a foolish figure shouting at nothing.

The bats continued to cry out and dive in circles over the part of the forest where they'd erupted into the air, and Luna frowned at the odd behavior. Years of nightly solitude had made her quite familiar with the creatures of the night and their habits, and normal bats did not continue to swoop and dive in one location for very long. Her curiosity piqued, she silently leapt into the night despite her still sore wings and quickly covered the distance

to the bats, intent on finding out what horror they'd encountered to get them to behave so strangely.

As Luna drew closer, she found that the target of the bats' ire was a pony huddling on the ground. Even in the dim moonlight, the pony's yellow coat and pink mane were vibrant and easily stood out from the muted shadows. Finding one of her ponies in danger caused Luna's adrenaline to surge, a fierce determination settling over her features as her wings shot her forward with a sharp snap.

In a burst of speed, Luna shot across the remaining distance in an instant and landed like a bolt of lightning. "Desist this attack at once!" Luna thundered. Her shout struck the cloud of bats like a physical blow. They wheeled about in confusion for a moment or two longer, but they all hastily found perches in the nearby trees. They eyed Luna with respect and fear from their upside-down perspectives, a few of the bolder or less intelligent ones darting from tree to tree in agitation.

Satisfied that the bats had been sufficiently cowed, Luna turned her attention to the pony who was still huddled on the ground, her legs, wings, and head tucked down close to her body, and her eyes squeezed tightly shut. The trees of the Everfree were only a few steps away and the darkness of the still young night had given them a sinister aspect, causing them to appear to loom over the cowering pony like great claws or teeth waiting to devour the helpless mare.

Without the screen of bats swirling around the pony, Luna could better make out the long pink mane and gracefully delicate features of Twilight's timid friend, Fluttershy. Remembering the other pony's reaction to her presence at the welcoming party, and not wanting to frighten her any further; Luna carefully approached "Fluttershy," she quietly reassured the still shaking pony, "it's alright. The bats have halted their attack, so there is nothing to be afraid of."

Fluttershy cracked open an eye. Finding Luna looming over her, she let out a small squeak and slammed it shut again, so tightly that a few drops of moisture were squeezed out and rolled down her cheek. She somehow managed to tuck herself into an even tighter ball.

Concerned and a bit hurt by Fluttershy's reaction, Luna backed up, giving the pegasus some space. Fluttershy continued to try and fold herself into a

smaller ball until Luna heard a squeak of protest from under the hooves of the yellow pony. Fluttershy's eyes shot open and she hastily sprang up from the ground, her wings fluttering rapidly like a hummingbird's. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Bat," she said apologetically to a furry shadow on the ground. "I hope I wasn't hurting you." The bat, still lying on the ground, let out a series of short squeaks and Fluttershy appeared relieved. "I'm glad that you're okay. Now wait right there and I'll fix your wing."

Luna had been forgotten for the moment, and as she watched on, Fluttershy used her teeth to pluck out several strands of her hair and combined them with a few sticks from the ground to fashion a tiny splint for the injured bat. Luna marveled at Fluttershy's oral adroitness as she delicately crafted the makeshift splint. The bat was still and silent for the most part as Fluttershy worked, but it let out an involuntarily pained screech when Fluttershy straightened out its wing to properly strap it to her impromptu creation. The mass of its batty brethren in the nearby trees began to chirp angrily and flutter their wings in preparation for takeoff, but they were silenced by another stern glare from Luna.

"There we go, all better," Fluttershy cooed with a bright smile for the injured bat. She leaned down and gently picked it up with her mouth and turned to set it above her shoulder, where it happily snuggled into her mane, obviously pleased with its new perch. "We'll get you home in no time at all and get you all rested up and feeling better."

She smiled as the bat nodded in agreement, but her face fell as she looked up and noticed Luna again. She lowered her head and the long strands of her mane curled around her face, protecting her behind a curtain of hair. Her one visible eye turned to towards the ground and she slouched down, attempting to appear as small and non-threatening as possible.

Feeling the need to break the awkward ice between them, Luna ventured, "Fluttershy? You are unharmed, I hope."

Timidly Fluttershy glanced up at Luna and just as quickly looked away. "Yes." If the night hadn't been so silent, Luna likely wouldn't have been able to hear her reply.

"That's good. That you're unharmed," Luna wasn't comfortable with being the one to initiate small talk. She shifted her weight from hoof to hoof, unsure of what the appropriate social protocol was for this situation, and

what would best put Fluttershy at ease. A few of the bats flew from one tree to the next, and Luna seized upon the convenient topic. "It's unusual that bats would swarm you in such a manner, isn't it?"

"Yes," Fluttershy replied, slightly louder than before, her eye firmly planted on the ground as she lightly kicked her hoof back and forth, pretending it was the most interesting thing in the world, seemingly unwilling to be pulled into a conversation. Another long, awkward silence stretched out between them before Fluttershy mustered up the courage to explain, "I was gathering some mint when I found this poor little bat on the ground. Apparently he got distracted and flew into a tree. I was trying to help him, but the other bats must have thought I was attacking him. I tried to explain that I just wanted to help, but they wouldn't listen ... and well, thank you, Princess Luna."

Luna raised a demurring hoof and waved away Fluttershy's thanks as she replied, "It was nothing at all, and please, call me Luna."

"Oh, um, a-alright, Luna."

Another lengthy silence descended and Luna began to wonder if their conversation had come to a close and she'd simply missed the cue that it was time for her to walk away. The many luminous eyes staring back at them from the forest were beginning to become a bit unnerving, so she raised her voice and called out to the multitude of bats, "As you can see, your companion is being well treated. Fly free, knowing he is in the most capable of hooves."

Twilight had mentioned Fluttershy's affinity for animals, and Luna herself had seen how expertly the pegasus had dressed the injured bat's wing, so she had no doubt that what she'd said was true. The bats were in turn convinced by Luna's declaration and as they filled the night with screeches, they cart-wheeled up into the sky.

"Oh my, I didn't know anypony else could talk to animals like I can," Fluttershy commented, forgetting her fears for a moment as she watched the horde of bats wheeling out of sight, her upturned face fully exposed in the soft moonlight.

"My sister and I have a special connection for the lower order animals," Luna explained, managing for a moment to catch the other pony's moon-

filled and limpid eyes. "Though admittedly she is more closely tied with the diurnal animals, while I more easily communicate with those that are nocturnal."

"I-I see." Fluttershy once more became a wilting flower, hiding behind her mane, and Luna was tired of forcing herself on somepony who obviously didn't enjoy her company.

"Well, if you're certain that you're alright, Fluttershy, I shall leave you to enjoy the evening, though I would suggest being careful while being so close to the Everfree Forest at night." Fluttershy didn't respond, and Luna sighed deeply. She looked down at her hooves for a moment as if somehow they held the answer to an unasked question. Then she turned her head towards Ponyville and contemplated its lights and the ponies who made them.

Perhaps an echo of her confusion and sadness over the situation with Twilight made itself known on Luna's face, and for the first time Fluttershy's quiet voice broke the silence without being prompted. "Um, Princess, um, I mean, Luna, is ... is everything alright?"

Luna attempted to banish the sorrow from her eyes as she turned back to Fluttershy with a shaky smile that she quickly gave up on. "Alright? Yes, everything is fine. Why wouldn't it be?"

Fluttershy had come out of hiding and intently searched Luna's face for something. Under such intensity, it was Luna's turn to feel a bit shy and withdrawn. "Oh," replied Fluttershy thoughtfully, as if she had just found out something new and interesting. She cut her eyes away in thought for a few moments, then seemed to come to a decision and stood up straighter. "Well, w-would you like to come to my house and have some tea?"

To say that Luna was surprised by Fluttershy's offer would have been a vast understatement. It had been painfully obvious that until that moment, Fluttershy hadn't enjoyed her company, and seemed nearly terrified of the princess' presence. Luna's wide eyes and shocked, questioning eyebrows caused Fluttershy to bow her head a bit once again and nervously add, "Um, that is, if you want to of course."

Realizing that her opportunity to get the skittish pony to open up to her was quickly slipping by, Luna hastily answered, "Of course I want to. I'd love to have tea with you, Fluttershy."

"Oh, good," Fluttershy's head shot back up and she graced Luna with a wide and honestly delighted smile. "Well then, my cottage is right this way." Fluttershy began to gracefully walk away from the Everfree Forest, careful to not jostle the bat she was carrying, and Luna was quick to catch up with her.

Despite Fluttershy's generous invitation and Luna's ready acceptance, they spent the next few minutes in a tense silence, each pony retreating into their own thoughts. However, Fluttershy must have begun growing used to Luna's presence, because she was the first to speak. "It's, um, a nice night."

Luna spared a glance upward to where the partial moon hung amongst the twinkling stars. "It is, thank you." In reality though, the compliment was a bit generous. Luna had been preoccupied that evening and hadn't expended any energy to make the night sky truly spectacular. Faced with her bland work, Luna sighed and concentrated on the ground, looking for safe places to put her hooves. They had passed into a pasture with taller grass, and they weren't following a path, so every once in a while a gopher hole or some other depression lurched out of the darkness, threatening to twist an unwary pony's hoof.

"Are ... are you alright, Luna?" Fluttershy hesitantly asked again, following the princess' deep sigh.

Luna turned her head to regard Fluttershy, braving a small smile that died a quick death. She was careful to keep her tone calm and pleasant. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I just thought that you seemed to have something on your mind, but if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay," Fluttershy kindly replied. Luna noticed that while avoiding obstacles on the ground, they'd begun to walk closer to one another.

Luna did have a lot on her mind, but she didn't want to burden Fluttershy with her self-inflicted problems. She was silent as she thought of what best to say to put Fluttershy at ease without revealing her innermost thoughts.

Fluttershy silently watched Luna for a while as they walked, before she tilted her head back to look up at the stars. Conversationally, almost as if she were speaking to them and not to Luna, she said, "You know, when I was younger, I was much less outgoing."

Luna's eyebrows rose in surprise and she looked up to regard Fluttershy incredulously. It was difficult to imagine her even more reserved than she was now.

Luna's surprise went unnoticed by Fluttershy as the pegasus continued to look up with resolute cheerfulness. "In fact, I hardly talked to anypony, so it was hard for me to make many friends. When something happened to make me feel sad, well, sadder than normal, or angry, or upset, I'd just keep my thoughts to myself, no matter how badly they hurt, and I'd tell myself that if I just waited long enough, the pain would go away. But sometimes ... sometimes, it never did."

Fluttershy's mouth turned downward in remembrance, and her eyes became distant and misty for a little while. But she quickly collected herself with a small shake of her head and a friendly smile in Luna's direction. "But when I started making friends, first with all the wonderful animals around Ponyville, and then with other ponies, I found out that just by talking about my feelings and the things that made me feel bad with others, I felt better. And usually, when I talk with my friends about my problems, they can help me see them from a different perspective and can help fix them since they're so much smarter and more outgoing than me."

Luna steps faltered for a few heartbeats from the shock she felt at the sincerity in Fluttershy's voice as she nonchalantly put herself down. She hastily interrupted, leaning closer to the yellow pony to emphasize her point. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. You seem like quite an intelligent and loving young pony."

Fluttershy blushed under Luna's praise and looked away as she bashfully replied, "Oh, thank you." Her easy acceptance of Luna's compliment convinced the princess that Fluttershy hadn't really believed her. Likely she'd brushed aside Luna's words as mere banal pleasantries. Luna wanted to say something meaningful, something to raise Fluttershy's sense of self-worth, but before she found the right words, they crested a low hill and

arrived at a large cottage surrounded by several enclosures housing a wide variety of slumbering animals.

In the darkness, the cottage seemed lonely and forlorn, especially with the distant lights of Ponyville as a backdrop. It struck Luna as odd that Fluttershy would choose to live so far from other ponies, and as a pegasus, would want to live so close to the ground. But she couldn't think of a polite way to bring the subject up, and didn't want to risk alienating her new friend.

"Here we are," Fluttershy cheerfully but quietly announced, careful not to wake the sleeping animals as the two ponies made their way to a door nestled at the base of the cottage's foliage. "Hmm, the house is still dark, Angel must still be out. I hope he gets home soon, it's nearly his bed time." She opened the door wide and boldly strode into the darkness beyond; dispelling it a few seconds later by lighting a lamp perched on a small table near the door.

Fluttershy moved deeper into the house, turning on lights as she went. However, Luna paused on the threshold, taking in the cottage's rather cozy interior. The sitting room, which opened just off the entryway, was filled with an eclectic collection of quaint furniture and a wide variety of homes for small animals. From the many birdhouses along the ceiling and walls, to the holes in the baseboards for mice and other small terrestrial creatures, there were several eyes glowing in the light, blearily watching the two ponies entering the house.

A bit overwhelmed at first by just how crowded Fluttershy's home was, Luna belatedly followed after her, closing the door and shutting out the night behind them.

"There we are, home safe and sound," Fluttershy called out in a lilting, singsong voice as she carefully untangled the bat from her mane and set it down on a padded table. Over her shoulder she called out to Luna, "Feel free to make yourself at home, Luna. I just need to fix up Mr. Bat, and then I'll get the tea ready. If that's okay with you of course."

"Oh yes, that will be fine, Fluttershy," replied Luna as she distractedly drifted further into the house, pausing next to a well-used and comfortable sofa.

Fluttershy leaned down and gently nuzzled the injured bat. "Now you stay right there, Mr. Bat, and I'll be right back with the things to make you feel all better." It chirped happily as she trotted out of the room, but otherwise dutifully stayed still.

Luna made a slow circuit of the room, paying particular attention to the lower holes in the wall where one could expect a reptile to be lurking. However, no snakes or any other cold-blooded monstrosities appeared, and the few curious animals who did poke their heads out upon her arrival quickly deemed her a non-threat and retreated back into their nests and burrows. Her turn around the room complete, Luna settled down onto the well-worn sofa, and found that it was just as comfortable as it had appeared. It felt good to rest her hoofs and wings as she waited for her hostess to return.

Before too long, Fluttershy's light steps could be heard returning, and she reentered the room with a large white case with a thick red cross emblazoned on the cover, hanging from her mouth. She set it down next to the bat, and hummed to herself as she opened it and began to take various bottles and rolls of gauze out. Not having anything more interesting to occupy her, Luna watched as Fluttershy gracefully worked, expertly removing her makeshift splint, then cleaning off the bat's wound. With practiced ease, she wrapped a new, more substantial splint made of gauze and wide slats of wood around the bat's wounded wing, after rubbing in a pungent ointment.

"All done," Fluttershy joyfully announced as she bit off the last bit of gauze. She quickly packed her medical kit back up and nuzzled the bat once more. "Who's my brave little bat?" The bat in question chirped excitedly and Fluttershy smiled widely as she happily replied, "That's right, you are!" She gently picked the bat up and held it in her hoof; she then hovered across the room to where a series of perches were mounted into the wall. As she helped the bat cling to one of them, she admonished it, "Now try not to fly around for the next few days, or you'll hurt your wing again, okay?" The bat squeaked happily in reply and Fluttershy smiled down at it before she flew to the nearest lamp and dimmed its light. "Would it be alright with you if we have tea in the kitchen, Luna?"

Luna answered Fluttershy's question as softly as it had been asked. "That would be fine, Fluttershy. I wouldn't want to disturb the rest of your

animals." Although she did feel a bit of reluctance as she left the sofa. Its cozying comfort had reminded her just how fatigued she was feeling, and it seemed almost as if every time she blinked, it was just a bit more difficult to open her eyes again. But she shook off her lassitude and followed Fluttershy through another doorway into a small and cozy kitchen.

"Just sit down right here, and I'll get the tea ready," Fluttershy said in the same tone of voice she'd been using with the bat earlier, as she gestured toward the seats surrounding the kitchen's table. She quickly added in a much less confident tone, "I mean, if you want to that is."

Luna quickly took a seat at the table and shot a reassuring smile at the pegasus. Fluttershy shakily returned the smile and turned her attention to the nearby stove. She soon had it lit, bringing a kettle of water to a boil. As the water was heating, she flittered around the kitchen, collecting various canister, cups, jars, and several delicate sandwiches that she placed on a tea service next to the stove. She'd just finished assembling everything when the kettle began to whistle.

With careful but deft movements, she picked up a pot holder with her mouth and filled the teapot with the boiling water from the kettle. It seemed to Luna that it would be painful to hold a heavy kettle at such an odd angle, craning her neck like that, but before she could offer her assistance, Fluttershy had replaced the kettle on the stove and had carried the tea service over to the table.

Fluttershy carefully picked up the saucer one of the cups rested on and placed it in front of her, while Luna levitated the other cup toward her, plucking up a couple of sugar cubes from the small sugar dish nestled amongst the other tea things. She slowly stirred her cup, and watched as the dark tea swirled and the lumps of sugar melted away into the dim whirlpool.

Lost in thought, Luna was abruptly recalled to reality by Fluttershy quietly asking, "So, have you been having a good time in Ponyville so far?" Luna looked up, caught a bit off-guard. Under her bewildered stare, Fluttershy wilted a little, her half-raised wings drooped down, and she looked away. "Um, I mean, I know it's not as big as Fillydelphia or Cloudsdale, and there's not as much to do here, but um, I ... I like it." Her voice had steadily lowered as she spoke, until it had tapered out as a whisper, and it was her

turn to stare into her teacup as if it held the answers to all of life's questions.

Luna set her spoon down and replied, "Oh yes, I've enjoyed myself very much here. Perhaps it's not the largest, or most lively of towns, but Ponyville has a unique charm to it." Luna chuckled slightly and Fluttershy smiled timidly in shared amusement. Lost in thought, idly contemplating a nearby vase of purplish flowers, Luna wistfully continued, "Yes, Ponyville has an attraction I don't think any other town could possibly offer."

Fluttershy leaned forward and rested her hooves on the table as she asked, "Because this is where Nightmare Moon was defeated?"

"In part, I suppose you could say that," Luna thoughtfully admitted as she too leaned forward and studied her hooves which she had placed on either side of her teacup. "But I was actually alluding to the fact that this is where my friends reside. Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash... and you, I hope."

"Me?" Fluttershy asked, her eyes going wide with surprise and her wings fluttering slightly in excitement. "You want me to be your friend?"

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Luna's face as she replied, "Well, yes. At least, if you think that I'm worthy of being your friend. I know that I have done many reprehensible things in the past, and you'd be more than justified to hold them against me." Her brow furrowed slightly as she somewhat bitterly added, "I know that other ponies do."

"Oh no, I mean, yes! I mean, I'd never judge you for the things Nightmare Moon did, and I'd love to be your friend." Fluttershy excitedly declared, leaning further over the table, nearly putting herself nose to nose with Luna. She hastily pulled back and in a calmer, more dejected tone, said, "That is, if you're sure that it's okay for somepony like you to be friends with somepony like me. I mean, you're a princess, and I'm nopony special."

Luna tilted her head in consideration of the pegasus across from her for a moment, weighing her words, before she replied, "But you are somepony special, Fluttershy. You're one of the ponies who I'd be more than honored to call a friend. One who helped me overcome what I was and become somepony better. I can't ever thank you enough for that, and I ... well," Luna's face clouded as she thought of the many ponies she'd met after her

release from Nightmare Moon. "You and the other ponies of Ponyville have been the kindest and most understanding of ponies I've met with. You don't treat me as some sort of monster or a threat to be locked away." Luna's eyes hardened as she looked into the past, at all the other ponies who hadn't been so kind.

Across the table it seemed as if Fluttershy couldn't decide between being concerned, anxious, or happy, but she reached her hoof across the table and took one of Luna's in hers. "Luna, I'd love to be your friend," she said in flustered happiness, her voice louder and more confident than Luna had ever heard it before.

A bit surprised by the contact, Luna looked down at the hoof holding hers, then up at its owner. In Fluttershy's warm smile and unguarded eyes she found only acceptance and caring. It surprised her, how hard, and yet how easy, it was to make a new friend. Had it always been this way? Could she have perhaps reached out her hoof all those years ago and found somepony else reaching back for her? Would she have always been fated to be so lonely?

As the warmth from Fluttershy's acceptance of her friendship mingled with the chill of her dark past, Luna's eyes misted with the unshed tears of chances long lost and mistakes long beyond repair. Slowly she pulled her hooves from Fluttershy's, and politely cleared her throat as she turned her attention back down to her teacup. "Thank you," she whispered down at the table. The next few minutes were filled with a companionable silence broken as both ponies turned their thoughts inward, sipping at their tea and sampling the simple sandwiches Fluttershy had laid out.

Luna found herself relaxing in the comfortable company of a pony who seemed to appreciate quietness, and didn't feel the need to fill the silence with inane chatter. She was reluctant to break the pleasant atmosphere, but at the same time she wanted to know her new friend better.

She took a final sip of tea before setting down her cup and observing, "So, Fluttershy, you seem to enjoy taking care of animals very much." She gestured with a hoof toward a nearby set of birdhouses built into the wall.

Fluttershy looked up from her own cup and glanced over at the birdhouses with a smile. "Oh yes, I just love all of my animal friends. They're just so cute and friendly; they just need somepony to look after them sometimes."

"I would have thought that a pegasus pony wouldn't be all that interested in the more terrestrial animals. Most of the pegasi I've met have little concern for what goes on at ground level," Luna said with a small, surprised shake of her head.

"I guess I'm not a very good pegasus," Fluttershy cheerfully admitted as she sat up straighter. "Ever since my first visit to the ground, when I met all the wonderful creatures down here, I couldn't help but fall in love with them right away. Back in Cloudsdale there were only clouds and other ponies. But here in Ponyville, there are so many animals to see and to meet. Almost every day I find a new animal friend, and they're almost as good as my pony friends, but I usually don't have to worry about whether they like me or not, like I do with other ponies."

Fluttershy's eyebrows rose in surprise at what she'd let slip and she paused to take another delicate sip of her tea, her eyes probing Luna's for a reaction. Luna was intrigued by just how much the normally reticent pony had to say, and silently implored her to continue with a gaze over the rim of her teacup.

Fluttershy blushed and cleared her throat. "Anyway, I like it a lot here in Ponyville. Back in Cloudsdale I was just another pegasus, and I didn't have many friends because I wasn't that great a flier. But here, I have so many friends, both pony and animal, and they rely on me for things, at least the animals do, and it feels nice to help others and to be needed."

"If Twilight's letters are any indication, I'm sure your pony friends depend on you just as much."

"Oh, that's kind of you to say," Fluttershy had a strange smile that pulled at Luna's heart, but the mood of the room had chilled and she could sense that they had entered into an area of conversation that Fluttershy wasn't comfortable with, so she moved to a safer topic.

"You must encounter all manner of strange creatures by living so close to the Everfree Forest."

"Oh yes," Fluttershy eagerly said, her face brightening, and the mood in the room lightening as a result. "There are all sorts of animals who live around Ponyville and in the Everfree Forest. Although most of the larger predators usually star far away from town, so we don't see them too often. Though I

have had to give a stern talking to some of them, a few grumpy lions, and tigers, and bears."

"Oh my." Luna was quite impressed by Fluttershy's off-hoofed comment. Despite her reluctance to speak up for herself in front of other ponies, she seemed to possess a strength and courage that few could claim. It wasn't everypony who could casually mention that they'd stood up to a wide variety of carnivores, all much larger than the petite pony.

Fluttershy seemed unaware of her own feats as she nonchalantly continued, "But even with all the wild animals in the Everfree Forest, there are some species in Equestria that I've only heard about. Animals from places I've never been, and ones who are so rare that only a few ponies have ever seen them. I'd love to meet an alicanto or a bennu, I've heard all about them, but there're so few that I don't think I'll ever get the chance to see one."

After a moment of thought, Luna helpfully suggested, "Have you tried the Canterlot Zoo? From what I've heard they pride themselves on having a wide range of Equestrian fauna."

Fluttershy's face fell and her voice was subdued as she replied, "The zoo's ... nice. But it's just not the same. I'd like to meet them face to face, not just watch them from behind a fence. Besides, I can't help but feel sorry for the poor animals there, I can't imagine that they could be happy being stuck in the same little pen day after day."

Not wanting to see her new friend upset, Luna quickly suggested, "Then how about the Royal Gardens? I don't believe that our collection is as extensive as the zoo's, but from what Celestia has told me, she's gathered a wide range of animals and plants representing all of Equestria."

Instead of perking up at the suggestion, Fluttershy actually seemed to duck down lower in her seat. "A-actually, I uh, I've been there already. But the animals there didn't seem to like me too much."

"Oh?"

"Yes. At the last Grand Galloping Gala, I visited the Royal Gardens to meet the animals there, but I got a little frustrated and only managed to scare them away." Fluttershy shamefully admitted. "I was expecting them to love

me right away, like my animals here in Ponyville do, but I forgot that it takes time to get to know one another and become friends."

Fluttershy's heartwarming admission prompted Luna to offer, "Well, if it's only time that you need in order to befriend the animals in the Royal Gardens, feel free to come to Canterlot as often as you'd like to visit them."

"Really?" Fluttershy asked with cautious hope.

Luna thought over her offer for a moment. Truthfully the gardens were Celestia's, not hers, but she saw no reason why her sister wouldn't allow such a nice pony to visit them. And she couldn't let herself disappoint the hopeful pony across from her. If Celestia did have any reservations, then Luna would just have to have a firm conversation with her.

"Of course, Fluttershy, you're my friend, and as such you're welcome to the Canterlot Palace as my guest whenever you care to visit. That way you'll have all the opportunities you could wish for to become better acquainted with the palace's animals. And if anypony takes exception to that, then I promise you, they'll answer to me."

"Oh, thank you!" Fluttershy cried out exuberantly as she darted around the table to warmly embrace Luna. Her soft legs gently but tightly wrapped around Luna's neck, causing the princess to blush in embarrassment for a moment before she relaxed enough to tentatively reach up and wrap her own legs around Fluttershy, careful to not accidentally crush the pegasus' wings.

She relaxed her neck and laid her head down on Fluttershy's mane, breathing in her rather herbal scent.

After a few moments, Fluttershy pulled away and held Luna at leg's length calming down from her momentary euphoria. "That would be wonderful, thank you, Luna." Once more her bashful self, Fluttershy fluttered over to the seat next to Luna's.

Her face still flushed from being so close to Fluttershy, Luna's thoughts turned to the other pony she'd been so intimate with lately. A bit tremulously, Luna observed, "Fluttershy, you seem like you know much about friendship."

Fluttershy smiled demurely and replied, "Who me? Oh no, I've only had friends for a little while. I'm still learning about what friendship really means."

"I think the same could be said for us all," Luna sighed. She turned an inquisitive glance toward the pegasus. "But, nonetheless, I'd like your opinion on a relationship."

Fluttershy's smile fell a little as she realized how serious Luna had become. "Well, if you think I could help..."

Luna studied the table for a moment, trying to best formulate her thoughts in order to not betray that it was her relationship that she was concerned about. "Hypothetically speaking, let us say that there are two friends, and they enjoy each other's company a great deal. But one of the friends has a secret that she's been keeping from the other. A secret that she knows she should tell, and one she knows will hurt her friend to hear. Now the friend with the secret wants desperately to tell the other pony because she knows the longer the secret is kept, the more it will hurt both her and her friend with the truth is revealed." Luna grimaced as she studied her hooves, knowing if she looked up her eyes would betray her feelings. "But she's scared that the secret's gone untold for too long already and when she reveals the truth to her friend, her friend will be so hurt that she won't want to be friends any longer. So, what do you think the friend with the secret should do? Hypothetically speaking of course."

She stared down into the tepid remnants of her tea, afraid to read Fluttershy's expression during the long silence that stretched out after she ceased talking, while Fluttershy thought over the problem.

Eventually though, Fluttershy's soft voice filled the quiet kitchen. "Well, it seems to me that this 'friend' has already made up their mind to tell the secret, right?" Luna nodded weakly. "Then she should tell her friend as soon as possible. Even if the truth will hurt for a little while, it will hurt worse later on." She reached over and put a comforting hoof on Luna's shoulder, causing the princess to look up into Fluttershy's warm and comforting face. "Besides, if they're really friends, and they're both good ponies, then I know they can work through whatever this secret is. Friends always forgive each other, eventually."

"Do you really think so?" Luna beseechingly asked.

There was a twinkle in Fluttershy's eye as she confidently replied, "Yes. Hypothetically speaking of course."

Luna chuckled lightly at Fluttershy's joke, feeling relieved by her words. With a renewed resolve, she silently promised herself and Twilight to reveal the truth as soon as possible.

Their peace was brought to an end by a loud crash that reverberated through the house, causing Luna to jump and pull away from Fluttershy. The pegasus was much calmer than Luna, and merely smiled sweetly, saying, "Oh, Angel's home."

She swooped over to the door leading back to the parlor, and Luna reluctantly followed after her hostess, her heart still racing from the unexpected interruption, but unwilling to let the gentle Fluttershy face an unknown danger alone.

However, instead of the huge, hulking creature she imagined would have created such a loud commotion, Luna found a small white rabbit walking through the front door which had been thrown wide open, escorted by Spike.

"... So then I say, 'Topaz, are you crazy?'" The rabbit seemed to be absently nodding at whatever Spike was saying, but upon seeing Luna, he came to an abrupt stop. He ran his eyes appraisingly over the princess, and then cocked an eyebrow at Fluttershy before questioning looking back at Luna once more.

"Welcome home, Angel," Fluttershy greeted him warmly, flying over and gently cradling him in her forelegs. She flew back over to Luna and introduced them. "Luna, this is Angel, my pet bunny. Angel, this is Luna, my new friend."

Supposing that Fluttershy cared for this rabbit as much as Celestia cared for her phoenix, Luna took the introduction seriously and stated, "Hello, Angel, it is a pleasure to meet you."

The rabbit looked at her for a few long seconds, clearly unimpressed, then squirmed out of Fluttershy's grasp and hopped away. He paused only long enough to snap in Fluttershy's direction and jerk his head toward the kitchen before disappearing through the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Luna, Angel gets a little upset when he's hungry. I'll just go get his dinner ready and I'll be right back."

"That's quite alright," Luna replied though it did feel strange to be so easily brushed off by such a small creature. As Fluttershy darted back into the kitchen, Luna tried to forget the rabbit's slight, and turned her attention to the small dragon that had paused to wipe his feet on the mat in front of the door. "But what are you doing here, Spike? It's starting to get late. Shouldn't you be back at the library with Twilight?"

"She kicked me out again," he grumbled. "Hey, Fluttershy, is it okay if I spend the night with you again?" he called into the other room.

Fluttershy floated into the doorway and replied, "Of course it is, Spike. I'll go get the guest basket ready." She gracefully swooped up the nearby stairs, and the soft click of a door latch being opened echoed back down to them.

Luna's eyebrows raised in surprise at Spike's news. "She kicked you out?"

"Yeah, it's happened a couple of times before, when she gets real moody and upset and 'wants to be alone,'" Spike nonchalantly replied, doing air-quotes with his claws. "She doesn't really kick me out; I just usually try to find someplace else to sleep for a day or two. Have you ever been around a moping unicorn? It's kind of a pain."

The thought of Twilight moping, of being upset in anyway, caused a small, dull ache in Luna's chest. A pain which promptly led to thoughts of why Twilight would be upset, why she should feel sad, and how Twilight's current condition was her fault. "I-I think I'd better go check on Twilight if she's feeling upset," Luna announced to the room in general, no longer really seeing Spike, her thoughts too full of Twilight to be concerned with the present.

"Hey, it's your funeral," Spike helpfully chimed in.

Fluttershy descended the stairs and informed Spike, "Your basket's all set up, Spike."

Luna quickly turned to Fluttershy and hastily said, "I thank you for your hospitality, Fluttershy. Your tea was most excellent. However I feel that I must leave, there are a great many things I must discuss with Twilight."

Fluttershy looked down at Luna from her vantage still on the stairs, and warmly said, "I think that's a good idea, Luna. And I hope that you – I mean, your friend and her friend, work everything out."

Luna leveled a calculating gaze at Fluttershy for a moment. She could swear that the yellow pegasus knew that the situation she'd outlined earlier wasn't hypothetical at all. Could she have figured out that Luna hadn't been speaking hypothetically at all? She'd used a similar gambit many times with Celestia and her clever sister had never seen through it, or so she'd thought. But Luna put aside her dawning realization; there were more important matters at hoof.

"Thank you, so do I." she quickly brushed past Spike and strode through the front door. Almost before she had cleared the threshold, she'd taken flight, silently beating her wings against the cooling night air, the lights of Ponyville reflecting in her eyes.

The night was still young and most of the buildings in Ponyville blazed with light. There were even several ponies out walking the streets, but Luna paid no mind to them as she swiftly flew through the town and landed in front of the darkened library. She paused in front of its door and took a steadying breath. Whatever the next few minutes held for her, she knew that her life would never be the same.

A cloud of butterflies seemed to be bumbling around in her stomach, and for the briefest of moments, she flirted with the idea of leaving things as they were. Would it really be all that terrible of her to keep the truth hidden? But looking up at the unusually dark library windows, and recalling Spike's words about Twilight's sadness, allowed Luna to screw her courage to the sticking place and banish all unnecessary thoughts, worries, and concerns from her mind, allowing her to focus on Twilight, and the truth she deserved.

Her pre-battle jitters under control, Luna stood straight and tall. She confidently opened the library's door, or at least she tried to. It was locked, possibly dead-bolted too. This unforeseen difficulty hadn't really been in her plan. In her mind's eye, she had seen herself confidently throwing the door

open, striding into the library, announcing the truth to Twilight, and then donning a metaphorical blindfold in preparation for whatever punishment Twilight meted out for Luna's transgression. She wasn't sure what she could do to make it up to Twilight, but she was prepared to perform any task, any penance that Twilight demanded.

Thankfully for the current dilemma of getting past the door, while Celestia's magical talents tended toward the extravagant and flashy, Luna's were more subtle and subdued. Instead of forcing the door open as undoubtedly Celestia would have, Luna sent a tiny tendril of starry magic through the keyhole, pushing the tumblers out of the way, and continuing through to unbolt the deadbolt. And unfasten the door's chain. And pull up the hoof bolt. Whatever Twilight was feeling, she had apparently wished to be uninterrupted.

Silently Luna eased the door open and slipped through into the solid darkness beyond. She just as quietly closed the door behind her and stood still for a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkened room, illuminated only by the faint glow coming from the windows. Twilight wasn't in the library proper, but as she waited for her eyes to adjust, Luna's ears picked up a faint sound coming from the direction of Twilight's bedroom. It sounded like the skid of a hoof or a hastily sucked in breath. On silent wings Luna few up the stairs.

Unlike the heavily secured front door, the door to Twilight's room was cracked open and a dim purplish light shone through the gap. Noiselessly Luna nudged the door open a bit further, and after taking in the sight beyond, felt unbidden tears spring to her eyes.

Twilight was sitting on the floor in the middle of the lower half of her room. A single candle was trying its best to illuminate her surroundings, but its light was overpowered by the purplish glow of Twilight's magic. She was sitting only partially facing away from the door and under normal circumstances she would have easily caught Luna's nudging it open in her peripheral vision. But though Luna could trace the sorrowful contours of Twilight's face and the track of each of her tears, Twilight was heedless of Luna's presence; far too engrossed in the dozens of unrolled scrolls she had fanned out before her, held aloft by her magic.

Even from the door it was possible to make out the opening sentences of many of the letters, written in a slightly larger hoof than the rest of the tiny but elegant writing. A hoofwriting that was as familiar as Luna's own. "To my faithful student, Twilight Sparkle; To my beloved student, Twilight; To my most cherished student ..." They were all from Celestia, and judging by the disarray the room was in, as if Twilight had ransacked it in search of them, as well as by the sheer number she had spread out before her, it was quite possible it was every piece of correspondence her sister had ever sent Twilight. And here Twilight was, sitting in the dark, crying over them like a love struck filly.

As Luna watched, a tear rolled off Twilight's cheek and fell onto the letter she was reading, soaking into the paper and blotching the ink, and Luna felt as if a monumental weight settled down onto her heart. As if somehow the entire moon had been squeezed into her chest and was crushing the air out of her lungs.

Before the next tear could fall, Luna rushed into the room and tightly wrapped Twilight in her hooves, folding her wings around them, to offer her friend some semblance of safety and protection.

"Shhh, it's alright, Twilight, it's alright," Luna murmured comforting nothings as she nuzzled Twilight's mane.

"Luna, you came back?" Twilight was hastily trying to rub the tears from her eyes, hide her letters, and awkwardly return Luna's surprise hug, all at the same time. Predictably she wasn't able to do any of them very well.

"Of course I came back, why wouldn't I?" Luna whispered into Twilight's ear.

Twilight's voice was thick with tears and Luna couldn't help but wonder how she could still look so adorable even with her nose leaking slightly. "Well, Princess Celestia got tired of me, and then you ... well, I – I thought ..."

Luna shushed her again and gently said "Don't worry, Twilight, I'll always be by your side. As long as you want me there." Luna could tell that Twilight was still discombobulated by her abrupt appearance, but the mention of her sister's name had been enough to cut through the instinctive protectiveness that had obliterated all her other thoughts. In its place a now familiar dread began to settle.

Slowly, and with reluctance, Luna separated herself from Twilight. She tilted her head down and stared into Twilight's luminescent eyes. "Twilight, you still care deeply for Celestia, don't you?" Twilight tried to sputter a reply, but Luna held up a forewarning hoof and with a significant glance at the scattered letters sadly continued, "You don't have to answer. I – I know." She could feel her throat tighten and her voice rose a little in pitch as she searched for the right words. "Twilight, I know how it feels to love someone who never seems to have enough time for you, but just because they have many claims on their attention, I think ... I think ..." Luna sighed, knowing what she had to say, but unsure of just how to get there. "Well, I think too much sometimes to be honest. And I ... Twilight..." This was harder than she had thought it was going to be, but as she gazed into Twilight's steadfast but tearstained eyes, Luna knew she couldn't ever let Twilight feel bad enough to cry again. So she took a calming breath and said, "Twilight, Celestia loves you very much. She always has, and always will, no matter what. I think the best thing for you to do is to write her a letter and tell her everything. Explain to her your fears, your hopes, and most importantly your feelings. Tell her about your last visit to Canterlot and what you saw there. Tell her about how you feel about being replaced, and how you feel for her. Hold nothing back. Tell her the complete and absolute truth, no matter how silly or unimportant or painful you think it is. Just tell her ... tell her everything."

"But Luna, are you sure? I mean you said –"

Luna cut her off angrily, angry at herself, not Twilight, never Twilight. "I know what I said, and at the time I thought I was right. I thought I was giving you good advice, but I wasn't." Luna sighed deeply and closed her eyes, afraid to even look at her friend any longer. "Just, please, Twilight, write Celestia and tell her everything you've told me, and everything you haven't too."

Twilight stared intently into Luna's eyes, and seemed to find something there. She was much more composed when she simply said, "Alright."

Luna smiled a broken and desolate smile, and pulled further away from Twilight, giving the mostly recomposed unicorn the space she needed to collect her thoughts and prepare her most important letter to Celestia. Feeling she was now only in the way, Luna continued to back away, until she reached the door leading to Twilight's balcony. With a final look at the

now completely occupied Twilight, who was going about straightening papers, lighting candles, and gathering quills, Luna walked through it and back out into the lonely night. With cold resolve she turned her back to the now well-lit glass doors and tried to take what cold comfort she could from the impossibly distant stars.

Twilight would know everything soon, but she'd had enough unmitigated sadness for one night, enough in Luna's opinion for the rest of her life. She deserved at least a moment of happiness that Celestia's reply would doubtlessly bring her, untempered for at least one precious instant by the news of Luna's betrayal. And perhaps the sting of Luna's actions wouldn't be as hurtful once Twilight was buoyed by Celestia's reavowal of her feelings for her student.

The lights of Ponyville began to fade, one by one, and the stars overhead began to twinkle, waver, and blur from the unshed tears welling up in Luna's eyes. How could she have been so heartless, so cruel? How had she been able to sleep at night knowing that her friendship with Twilight was a lie? Luna snorted in self-derision. She had been able to sleep so easily because she'd been wrapped in Twilight's hooves, and somehow she'd been able to delude herself that she could supplant Celestia's place in Twilight's life. As if a lifelong relationship such as theirs was easily cast aside when somepony new came along.

Luna bowed her head and felt her tears begin to trickle down the length of her nose. Truthfully, she hadn't known the depth of Twilight's feelings for Celestia until just a few short minutes ago. Could she possibly be excused for her ignorance? Was it alright to be happy so long as her eyes were closed to the suffering of her friend?

The image of a bent and defeated Twilight mournfully poring over the remembrances of her favored instructor easily came back to Luna's mind. Indeed, it was hard to be rid of it; the painful sight had been indelibly seared into her thoughts. Luna deserved no excuses, anypony who could bring a mare as wonderful as Twilight to such a miserable state was unquestionably guilty.

As her tears for what was, and for what could have been flowed more freely, they coursed down her face and fell to the balcony floor, disappearing into the night's darkness. If there was one tiny thing to be

grateful for, it was that her heart hadn't been broken under the sun's watchful rays. The shadowy night seemed made for hiding the tears of the lost and the lonely. Sorrow, especially the bittersweet pain Luna was feeling, was a private and personal experience. Under the harsh glare of the sun everything a pony said or did was shared with the world, but under the comforting and obscuring blanket of night, when a pony was alone with their thoughts, misery could be best experienced alone. After all, when you laughed, the world laughed with you, and when you wept, you wept alone.

The door behind her clicked open and a few hesitant hoofsteps ventured out onto the balcony.

"Luna," Twilight called out to her with uncertainty, "I wrote the letter, but Spike's not here, so there's no way to send it."

With a tiny brush of magic Luna dried her eyes and composed her face, then turned to Twilight with a painted on smile. "You're finished already? Wasn't that rather quick, Twilight?"

Even with almost the only source of light spilling from the doorway behind her, throwing her face into shadow, it was easy for Luna to see Twilight's demure blush as she embarrassedly replied, "Well, I guess I had a lot to say, and when I began to write, I just kept writing and writing as fast as my quill could go."

"I see. Well, don't worry, my sister and I have a special connection to one another which allows us to send objects back and forth. I'd be more than happy to send your letter to her."

Twilight turned her head and floated a rather thick packet of papers out of her room, and Luna cocked an eyebrow at just how much Twilight had written in such a short amount of time. "You have been busy it seems."

Twilight blushed again and ducked her head a bit. "Well, you told me to write what I felt, and when I started to write about that, I just couldn't stop until I'd written everything."

"I ... know how that feels," Luna quietly admitted. For a moment she simply contemplated the massive letter, still being held up by Twilight's magic. A mocking laughter reverberated through her mind as she realized that in the end, she would be the instrument that would help bring Celestia and

Twilight back together after all. It would have hurt so much less if she'd simply done it a few days earlier. Almost angrily she sent out a wave of magic, vaporizing the papers into a thick cloud of smoke that churned for a moment before it slinked off the side of the balcony, moving toward Canterlot. Brusquely Luna turned around, away from Twilight, ostensibly to watch the message's progress.

"So," Twilight's voice was taut with concern poorly hidden beneath forced cheerfulness. "Do you really think this is a good idea, Luna? I mean, I know that Princess Celestia's a busy pony and I'd hate to interrupt her with the petty problems of a single pony."

Was this a good idea? From the perspective of Luna's personal happiness, no it wasn't. But this wasn't about Luna, it was about Twilight. Refusing to look back at the other pony, Luna quietly but earnestly said, "Celestia will always have time for her ponies, especially you, Twilight. Don't be so quick to discard your feelings, or your pain, as meaningless. After a time, the affairs of state and the insipid personalities that drive them become boorish. But when it comes to our friends, to the ones we love and care for, their thoughts and feelings take on an importance beyond measure."

"But still, what if it's like you said?" Twilight could no longer hide the anxiety from her voice as she walked around Luna to catch her eyes. "What if Princess Celestia's been pushing me away because she thinks I'm capable of being on my own? What if this is a test to prove that I'm good enough to be her student? What if I just failed by telling her how much I missed her and how I'm jealous of her new student, and how sometimes I wish she'd never sent me to Ponyville and it was still just the two of us?"

Luna was surprised by just how much it hurt to hear Twilight admitting her preference for her older sister. It felt as if some malevolent creature had reached into her chest and mercilessly squeezed down on what it had found there.

Twilight must have noticed something in Luna's silence and quickly added, "Though I only felt that way when I first came here, before I got to know my friends as well as I have. I mean it would be great to live in Canterlot with you and Princess Celestia and study magic every day, but I don't think that I could leave my friends behind." Her voice rose a few octaves and regained its anxious tone. "But that's not the issue here. What if I've failed,

what if I've disappointed Princess Celestia by admitting that I'm not as strong or as independent as she thinks I should be?"

Luna sadly watched Twilight as she began to burn off her nervous energy by pacing back and forth across the balcony as she spoke. Had anypony ever been so concerned with Luna's thoughts or acceptance? Celestia was lucky to have such a devoted student.

"Twilight," she continued to pace and Luna sighed before raising her voice enough to intrude upon Twilight's thoughts. "Twilight, you aren't in school anymore. There aren't any more tests, other than the ones we set for ourselves. The letter you sent Celestia wasn't an admission of failure, and Celestia won't think any less of you for sending it. If anything, she would have been disappointed if you hadn't sent it. Feelings are something nopony should be ashamed of, only of hiding them." Luna noticed that Twilight had stopped pacing and was avidly hanging onto her words with a naked hopefulness. Luna cut her eyes away, uncomfortable with the role of Twilight's trusted advisor. "Just remember, you're a grown pony now, just like the rest of us. The fears and doubts you have are the ones we all share. We all think and feel, love and hate, but none of us know everything with absolute certainty, and all of us are fallible." Especially me, she silently added.

Twilight considered her word for a little while, but further conversation was prevented by the appearance of a tiny but impossibly bright dot of light that flamed into existence in front of Luna. It rapidly grew larger and larger until it exploded in a blinding flash accompanied by a deceptively quiet popping sound. In the space it had occupied, there was a bound scroll still shedding a bit of sundust. Before it could fall to the ground, it was snatched up by Twilight's magic. She stared at it fearfully, but her momentary pause was more than made up for by how quickly she broke the seal and unrolled the scroll, holding it up to read.

Luna could tell it was significantly shorter than the letter Twilight had sent to Celestia, but it was longer than the majority of Celestia's correspondence. She watched Twilight's face as she quickly read the letter, and could feel an oppressive weight settling on her as Twilight transitioned from anxious fear, to astonished hope, to disbelieving joy, and finally to tearful happiness as she reached the final line.

"Good news, I hope?" Luna asked in a voice scarcely more than a whisper. Any louder and she wouldn't trust her voice to not betray her pain at having Celestia not only win once again, but at something so precious.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" Twilight gleefully exclaimed as she hopped around Luna with unbridled excitement. "This is the best news ever!" She calmed herself and stayed still long enough to once more read the letter, her face so close to it that Luna was certain that her nose would be stained by the ink.

"Listen to this, Luna, 'My dearest and most beloved student, Twilight Sparkle,' You were right, Luna, she does still care! 'I've just read your letter, and I must admit that it has left me with a sense of relief that I've not felt in some time. To be honest, I had believed that it was you who was pulling away from our relationship, Twilight. That you had simply outgrown your boring old teacher. But I'm glad, so very glad, that I was wrong. Know this Twilight, no matter what happens or how much time passes; you will always be somepony special to me.'"

Twilight gave out a high pitched squeal and her dancing eyes turned toward Luna long enough for her to ask, "Isn't that great, Luna? We were wrong about Princess Celestia, she wasn't trying to push me away or give me space."

"That's ... wonderful."

Luna's less than enthused tone was lost on Twilight as she quickly turned back to the letter and pointed out, "And here she says that Bay Breeze isn't her new apprentice, merely a student at her school, and down here she explains how she was distant because of the tough negotiations between the griffons and the dragons. Oh, this is so wonderful, Luna, everything is alright again, Princess Celestia still loves me!"

Suffused with happiness, true unadulterated happiness, Twilight was radiant. Her eyes danced and glowed with an inner fire, a spark of life that only now in its presence, could Luna appreciate that it had been absent for the past few weeks. It was like seeing a favorite painting in a new light and realizing you'd never truly seen its beauty before. The soft light emanating from the bedroom seemed to grow brighter as it haloed Twilight, perfectly accentuating her joyous smile and soft curves.

Luna tore her gaze away and mournfully stared into the depthless shadows of the night. With a whisper, unable to trust her voice to remain firm under the monumental weight she felt pressing down on her, Luna asked, "Twilight, could you forgive me if I did something horrible?"

For a moment Luna thought that Twilight hadn't heard her softly spoken words, but she didn't dare to face her friend to see.

"Haven't we already gone over that?" Twilight asked with slight exasperation blunted by the cheerfulness she couldn't seem to contain. "Everypony's already forgiven you for becoming Nightmare Moon. That's all in the past, and I think it's time that you moved on, Luna."

An involuntary bark of laughter escaped Luna, as harsh as it was brief. Nightmare Moon and her promise of eternal night had been swept from her mind. For some reason, her attempt to overthrow her sister and doom all of Equestria to eternal night paled in importance to her having lied to a single pony, and how that pony would feel once she learned the truth.

Still peering into the darkness, Luna replied in a defeated, yet somewhat conversational tone, "I wasn't referring to Nightmare Moon actually. But then again maybe I was. Perhaps my past reveals my future. I don't think I'll ever be a good pony." A lump rose in Luna's throat and she found it impossible to go on. Dimly she heard Twilight's hoofsteps coming closer.

The joy in Twilight's voice was gone, replaced by concern as she asked, "What do you mean, Luna? Whatever it is you did can't be all that bad. I know you, and I know that you're not a bad pony. I'm sure that if we talk about it and work together, we can fix whatever it is."

Twilight's simple trust, her faith in Luna, felt like a knife twisting in the alicorn's chest. She brusquely ducked her head further away from Twilight, facing back toward her wing, as she almost savagely cried out, "I lied to you!" Her voice fell into a choked, sobbing whisper. "I ... lied." It was cathartic to finally reveal the truth in its terrible glory, to expose just how ugly she was. The emotions she'd locked away tumbled over one another as they rushed out in a torrent of words.

"I knew the truth, of how Celestia felt about you, of how you hadn't been replaced in her heart by anypony else. Though not when we first met in the library. Then I was as ignorant as you of her true thoughts and feelings. But

later, I learned the truth. How she didn't mean to be distant, but was merely overworked. The entire time I've spent in Ponyville I've known the truth. But for my own selfish reasons I hid it from you. I ... I'm sorry, Twilight. I know that's not enough, but it's all I can think of saying. I'm sorry, so sorry for not telling you sooner and for causing you to feel so much pain. I hope ... I hope that you two will be happy together."

Luna could feel her tears finally break free, and with a silent sob she tucked her face into her wing to hide her sorrow and despair from the world. She expected Twilight to explode on her at anytime, to vent her rage and anger in a justified tirade, Luna waited for it as if she were expecting a physical blow. But aside from Luna's restrained and muffled sobs, the night was silent.

Full of dread, but compelled by curiosity, Luna controlled her emotions and attempted to school her features long enough to fearfully turn her head back in Twilight's direction. The unicorn was obviously shocked and didn't seem to be staring at Luna so much as through her. With a loud thump she sat down heavily and in an emotionless voice she beseeched Luna with a simple, "Why? Why would you ..."

Twilight couldn't complete her thought, and now that their gazes were locked, Luna couldn't pull her eyes away as she watched Twilight's fill with questioning betrayal.

"I was selfish, and-and I was afraid. I didn't want to hurt you or Celestia, but for the first time I knew what having a best friend was like, and it was wonderful. I knew that once you and Celestia realized each other's feelings, you'd go back to her and wouldn't want to be with me anymore." Luna sighed deeply, feeling both lighter and heavier somehow as she confessed. "I always was going to tell you the truth, but I wanted to be friends with you just a little longer. If I had known the extent of the misery my silence was causing you, I would have spoken up much sooner." Again a lump rose in Luna's throat and she thickly said, "I'm sorry, Twilight Sparkle, and I hope ... I hope that one day you'll be able to forgive me."

Twilight still seemed stunned by Luna's revelation, but she was obviously attempting to gather her thoughts as she disjointedly responded, "But why would ... I mean you ... friendship doesn't work that way! Did you really think I'd abandon you for your sister, Luna?"

With some surprise that the question needed to be asked, Luna answered, "Yes, it would be the most sensible thing to do after all. You've known Celestia far longer than you've known me, she's wiser, kinder, nicer, and more beautiful than me, and you didn't seek my friendship until after you thought that Celestia had abandoned you. So it would only make sense that when given the choice between us, you would naturally choose my sister over myself. Like everypony else."

Confused, Luna watched as Twilight's expression changed from hurt anger to ... pity? Under Twilight's searching gaze, Luna could feel her tears begin to fade.

"Is that what you really think, Luna?"

Another painful lump had formed in Luna's throat and she could only manage a broken nod as she squeezed her lips and eyes tightly shut.

Twilight stood up and stomped her hoof before she began to pace again, this time her attention never wavering from Luna, her voice angry, though Luna wasn't entirely sure that the anger was fully directed at her. "That's terrible. I mean, I know that I'm still learning about friendship, but even I know that isn't really a choice. You don't just brush off a friend when a new one comes along. Not if you were really friends in the first place. I've heard of vain and shallow ponies doing things like that, but do you really think that I only became your friend because Princess Celestia ignored me, and once she paid attention to me again I'd forget you and go back to her?"

When Twilight put it that way, it did cast Luna's fears into an unpleasant light. "No," squeaked out past the lump in her throat. As she cleared her throat and sniffed back her tears, she changed her mind. "Well, yes. But I don't think you're petty or shallow or a bad friend. I simply assumed that when you have the opportunity to give your love to a better pony, it would make sense to give them as much of your love as possible."

Twilight leveled an assessing gaze at Luna, as if to ascertain whether she was being wholly truthful, if she truly believed her own words. Under the intense scrutiny Luna could feel herself begin to perspire.

After several long seconds, Twilight sighed deeply and her anger seemed to evaporate. "Luna, is that how you really see relationships? Like they're

some sort of mathematical equation where in order to increase one side you have to decrease the other?"

Luna was quite confused; this line of questioning wasn't at all what she'd expected. "Well, aren't they? After all, when it was just Celestia and I, we loved each other very much. But as we turned our attention to other things, our friendship dwindled as we poured our love into other areas. For me it was the night sky, and for Celestia, it was our subjects." For some reason pity returned to Twilight's countenance, and Luna was quick to add, "Neither of us were truly at fault, we simply grew apart, as you and I will now that you know how much Celestia cares for you again."

Wordlessly Twilight had stopped pacing, and now she quickly closed the distance between them, leaning forward and wrapping her hooves around an astonished Luna, resting her head on the surprised princess' neck. Sadly she murmured, "You've been left alone for far too long, haven't you?"

Luna was stiff with shock at first, but gradually she relaxed into Twilight's warm embrace and went so far as to rest her head atop Twilight's. The hug lasted for quite some time as Luna lost herself in the feeling of Twilight's warmth pressed against her, taking the news of her betrayal much better than she had ever hoped.

Eventually though, Twilight pulled away from the embrace and held Luna at hoof's length. "Alright," she announced with a determined voice. "I'm going to have to show you just what friendship is all about, and how wrong you've been about it. To start off, I forgive you."

"Y-you do?" Luna asked incredulously.

"Yep, because that's what friends do."

"But Celestia-"

Twilight quickly cut off Luna, "Celestia doesn't have anything to do with us, the way I feel about you, or the way you feel about me. A pony's heart isn't a set size with only so much love to go around. Friendship isn't a zero-sum game, Luna. When you make a new friend your heart grows a bit bigger to make room for them, and it can keep getting bigger as you become better friends, or it can become smaller if you move away from each other, but once that part of your heart is there, it won't ever go away. I do have

feelings for Princess Celestia, she's been my teacher, my mentor, the one who's always pushed me and driven me to new heights, and was there in case I fell from them. I'd do almost anything to gain her approval, but you're my friend too, Luna. You make me feel ... happy, whenever we're together. I love to hear your voice and I love the sound of your laughter. I look forward to seeing you when we're apart, and I hate to see you frown. Just because I have other friends doesn't make us any less friends, and friends forgive each other. Besides, I can forgive you anything. I know you didn't mean to hurt me, and you did tell me eventually. Better late than never, right?"

Luna was astonished. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected that Twilight could forgive her so unconditionally. She searched Twilight's face for any sign, any hint of resentment or duplicity. But all she found was open warmth, a fierce resolve, and a questioning hope.

"I'm sorry I wasn't a good friend to you before, Twilight, but I promise you that I'll be a better one from now on." Luna cried with sincerity as she wrapped her best friend in a tight embrace.

Twilight leaned into the hug and murmured into Luna's ear, "You've been a great friend, Luna. You're just a bit out of practice. Just because you made a mistake doesn't mean I don't want to be your friend anymore. I know everypony makes mistakes, I'm not perfect either. If it hadn't been for my mistake about Princess Celestia, this whole mess wouldn't have happened. So what do you say, friend, let's help one another learn what friendship is all about."

Luna laughed in relief into Twilight's mane, and the lump in her throat dissolved into a hiccup. "If I'm going to help you through your mistakes, and you're going to help me through mine, I don't think we can ever be separated. We both seem to make some rather monumental messes. Though to be honest, I'm glad that you did misunderstand Celestia. If you hadn't, we might not have met the way we did, and I might not have become your friend."

She could feel the heat rolling off Twilight and with her heart aching, but in a good way this time, Luna leaned into Twilight, pouring as much feeling and appreciation into the embrace as she could. Wrapped tightly in Twilight's hooves, their bodies pressed close together, and with her nose

buried in the unicorn's mane filling her head with her friend's calming scent, Luna felt her cares simply vanish. The dread and anxiety she had been carrying for so long evaporated in the face of Twilight's unconditional friendship, and in its place a crushing exhaustion settled upon Luna. The many hours of missed sleep made themselves felt now that her mind was no longer trapped in agonizing circles. With a sigh she closed her eyes and leaned even more heavily into Twilight.

"Whoa, Luna, are you okay?"

"Just fine," She softly replied. "Everything's fine so long as you're here with me. But I am quite tired. I was so worried about how you would react to the truth, I haven't been able to sleep for days."

"Then we need to get you to bed," Twilight stated with kind intensity. She twisted around and Luna found herself leaning heavily on the other mare as they slowly made their way off the balcony and back into Twilight's room. Luna barely remembered the journey up the stairs, but she regained her senses for a short while when Twilight pulled back the comforter, and helped Luna climb up onto the now familiar mattress. She tucked the princess in, but instead of following after her to bed, she walked over to her writing desk, dimming the lights in the room as she went, save for a single lamp perched on her desk.

Luna was horrendously tired; her exhaustion had crashed down on her all at once, and seemed to be increasing exponentially somehow. It felt as if she hadn't slept in weeks, and had run all the way from Canterlot to Ponyville besides. But despite her fatigue and the inviting warmth of the bed, she was uncomfortable, and through half-lidded eyes she watched Twilight cross the room. Almost plaintively she mewed out, "Twilight, what are you doing? Please come to bed, I can't sleep without you."

The single dim light and Luna's drooping eyelids made it difficult to properly examine Twilight, but the unicorn's voice had an odd lilt to it as she answered, "I'll be there in a second, Luna. I need to write a quick note to Princess Celestia."

Luna groaned, hopefully quietly enough that Twilight didn't hear her. It had been less than an hour since Twilight's last missive to Celestia. Certainly they had much to catch up on, but couldn't it wait for morning?

Whatever Twilight wrote, it was very short. After only a few minutes of listening to her pen scratches cutting through the room's silence, Luna heard Twilight's hoofsteps approaching the bed again, and she lifted up the leg she'd thrown over her face to watch Twilight's approach. Apologetically Twilight asked, "Spike still isn't back yet, so would you mind sending this for me?"

Twilight had stood by Luna when few other ponies would have; she had forgiven her for her mistakes, and had promised to always be her friend. So even though she could hardly gather the strength to lift her head from the pillow, Luna easily answered, "of course." It was difficult to gather her thoughts, it felt as if her mind were swimming in wooly molasses, but Luna concentrated and was able to gather her magic for just long enough to transform Twilight's scroll into a swiftly moving puff of smoke drifting towards Canterlot.

With a flare of her magic, Twilight turned off the last light, and smiled down at Luna before she climbed into her side of the bed. She squirmed just a little trying to find a comfortable spot, and when she'd settled down, Luna reached out with a hoof and a wing, wrapping them around Twilight. At the touch, Twilight sighed softly and leaned back into Luna's chest. The close physical contact, close enough for Luna to feel Twilight's heart beat, as well as the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest, reassured the princess. Luna buried her face in Twilight's silky mane, breathing in her essence, before she allowed herself to drift off to sleep.

Amor caecus est

Celestia hummed unconsciously to herself as she read once more through Twilight's letter. She couldn't have hidden her smile even if she'd wanted to as she lingered over the artfully artless sentences. Twilight certainly had a way with words, somehow going into great detail without falling into the trap of tedium. Through her writing, it was easy for anypony familiar with Twilight to not only glean her thoughts and feelings, but to also clearly hear her speech patterns, the voice of a pony who took herself a bit too seriously at times, yet was still uncertain of herself outside the realm of her magical studies.

The letters and reports Twilight had sent Celestia over the past few weeks had lacked the spirit, the spark of life that she knew her pony had in such abundance. Through the obviously hastily written but still precise and neat words on the page, Celestia felt as if she finally had her Twilight returned to her.

Celestia was a bit surprised by the section of the letter explaining how Twilight had mistakenly believed that Celestia had replaced her. Obviously Celestia needed to do a better job of conveying her feelings to Twilight in the future. No pony could ever take the little lavender unicorn's place in her heart. The raw emotion betrayed by Twilight's somewhat choppy sentences near the beginning of the letter, where she was describing her last visit to Canterlot had choked Celestia up the first time she'd read through it. But now she could smile fondly at the amount of affection Twilight betrayed by being so brokenhearted over having been ignored. Celestia mentally promised to make up for her negligence to Twilight the next time they were together.

Luna's advice to Twilight when she'd been consoling the distraught pony in the library had been sound, and Celestia could easily see how Luna had drawn such logical conclusions from the facts presented to her. To be honest, Luna's words hadn't been too far from the truth. Celestia had originally sent Twilight to Ponyville in order to awaken the Elements of Harmony, but after seeing just how happy her protégé had become, and just how much she'd blossomed after so short a time, Celestia had decided to give Twilight the freedom to expand her horizons beyond the library walls and experience life for herself.

However, in the months following Twilight's departure, the castle had seemed a bit darker and more echoing. It had felt as if there was a vacuum waiting to be filled by some pony. Of course Luna's return had gladdened Celestia's heart for quite some time, and still did, even though they had begun to see less of each other. But even with the return of her sister, Celestia felt that there was something missing, as if the victory over Nightmare Moon was somehow incomplete.

When the letter had first appeared, Celestia had believed it to be an unexpected but not unwelcome missive from Luna. However, when she'd seen just how thick it had been, as well as Twilight's seal on the outer layer, her heart had quickened with hopeful anticipation. The first time

she'd read it, she'd felt saddened, flattered, and warmed in turn by Twilight's words. Now in the midst of the seventh or eighth reading, Celestia found a warm, excited hope filling her, matching the eager and naked hope revealed in the final section of Twilight's letter where she plainly spelled out her feelings and fears. Clearly stating that she hoped her mentor hadn't cast her aside, and was still as full of love and affection as she ever had been. Surely with such a longing sentiment, Twilight wouldn't be content to merely exchange letters. She would want to return to Canterlot, at least for a short time, to discuss with Celestia all she'd learned and seen.

Celestia's reply to Twilight's letter had been written almost as soon as she'd finished the first reading, while her blood and imagination had been fired from the incontrovertible affirmation that Twilight still deeply cared for her, perhaps more than anypony else. Celestia hadn't attempted to reign in her emotions as she wrote and in no uncertain terms she'd explained the truth behind her actions, as well as her true feelings toward her student. Celestia hoped that their letters would mark the start of a new period of friendship between herself and Twilight, an open and honest friendship where they would be able to more freely share their feelings and concerns with one another.

The second letter from Twilight had been as unexpected as it had been brief. It had simply stated that Luna had been under an exhausting emotional strain for the past few days and would be too tired to lower the moon, so Twilight was hoping that Celestia could take over for Luna just this once in order to allow her sister to rest.

Celestia could well imagine the cause of Luna's emotional exhaustion, and though it felt a bit unpleasant to share Twilight's affection with anypony, she couldn't begrudge her sister what comfort she could find after her return from the moon. So, needing to awaken just a few hours earlier to take care of both the moon and the sun, Celestia read through the heartwarming letter only once more before she folded up its reassuring pages and tucked it under her wing to take it back to her bedroom with her. Such a touching and personal document didn't fit in with the rest of the paperwork in her study.

As she began to turn out the lights of her study, a wonderful thought came to Celestia, and she detoured to the study's door. She reached out with her

magic and shook one of the near silent summoning bells. By the time she'd opened the door, a servant was already standing there attentively.

"Your Majesty?"

"Please fetch the captain of the guard, I'd like to have a word with him about an upcoming trip," requested Celestia.

"Right away, Princess Celestia." The attendant hurried away, and lacking anything better to do with her time while waiting for Blue Blazer, Celestia perused a few of the more unimportant letters littering her desk. By the time the sound of hoofsteps reached her ears, signaling the captain's arrival, Celestia had actually accomplished more paperwork than she had in nearly the past month.

Her study's door was still open, so as Celestia magically organized her papers for a final time that night, she called out, "Captain Blazer, my sister is scheduled to return from her vacation in two days. I'd like to surprise her by going to Ponyville, along with the Royal Entourage in order to pick her up. I'm quite anxious to see her again and ..." Celestia had finished shuffling her papers and finally had turned to face the door where she found a mature and well built unicorn guard paying her professional, rapt attention. "You're not Captain Blue Blazer," Celestia stated questioningly. She quickly racked her brain and was able to dredge up the unicorn's name. "You're Quicksilver, I believe."

The muscular unicorn respectfully bowed and Celestia noticed his ceremonial armor had a newly minted captain's badge soldered onto it. "'Yes, Your Majesty. As the highest-ranking officer in the Royal Guard, I've become the acting captain until you appoint a replacement. Unless, of course, you'd prefer somepony else to be in the position until you make your decision, Your Majesty."

Celestia was rather confused, but hid it behind her public mask. Quicksilver heard only her customarily kind, regal tone as she replied, "You may rise, Quicksilver. I'm sure that you'll perform your duties as acting captain quite well. I don't think that there's any need to replace you until my sister and I've had the time to select the new permanent captain. But tell me, what happened to Blue Blazer? It was my understanding that he was going to remain in his position until a replacement had been found."

Captain Quicksilver stood straight, but shifted his weight from hoof to hoof, perhaps still ill at ease with and perhaps a bit overawed by his new rank and importance in Celestia's presence. Or maybe he just wasn't looking forward to informing Celestia about Blue Blazer's whereabouts. He cleared his throat slightly before replying, "Well, Your Majesty, after your, uh, dismissal of Captain Blazer, he returned to the barracks a bit ... upset."

Despite her best efforts, Celestia could feel her mouth fall into a slight frown of worry. "Was he angry with my decision?" Even though she knew her orders had been correct, being right never softened the hurt and guilt of causing somepony pain. She never enjoyed making hard decisions like Captain Blazer's dismissal, and often feared that the reason she had to make such difficult choices that so drastically impacted somepony's life was because she'd failed them in some way. Perhaps if she'd grasped the situation earlier, she could have somehow changed things without causing such binding and life-altering results. Every time she did make such a tough decision, she experienced a pang of guilt. Even now she felt that Luna's banishment was her fault, and now Captain Blazer's forced retirement was also somehow her fault, even though she had acted properly and had made the right choice.

"No, he wasn't mad. At least not at first. When he came in, he looked..." Quicksilver looked away from Celestia, searching for the right words. "... well, he looked like his best friend had just bucked him right in the gut, if you'll pardon the expression, Your Majesty. He just sat down and was real quiet for almost an hour. Me and the other stallions gave him his privacy, and when he stood back up, I guess he'd figured out what he needed to figure out. That was when he seemed a bit angry, though not at you, Your Majesty, and he was pretty determined about something. He told us all that he was retiring, and we tried to cheer him up, but he just kind of brushed us off. He appointed me acting captain, then got his personal belongings from the armory and left."

"I see," Celestia said thoughtfully, mostly to herself. She wasn't sure what to think of Blue Blazer's abrupt departure, something about his actions seemed a bit off to her, but it was understandable for him to act strangely under an emotional strain. Perhaps the old soldier had decided to treat retirement like removing a bandage, best ripped away quickly in order to avoid a lingering pain. But thoughts of Luna and Twilight quickly crowded

out the concern she had for Blue Blazer and she hoped that the former captain would have a pleasant and stress-free retirement.

"Thank you, Captain Quicksilver, for being so candid," she said. "I hope that Blue Blazer will find joy and happiness in his new life."

"As do I, Your Majesty."

Celestia's thoughts turned back to Ponyville and she turned the topic of conversation back to Luna's upcoming return. "As I was saying before, Captain, my sister is coming home soon and ..."

As Celestia and Captain Quicksilver made their best-laid plans, overhead the stars silently twinkled, and miles away, Luna and Twilight blissfully slept on, dreaming the dreams of the innocent.