

Fillystata

And

Mare in the Mirror

By Adcoon



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Fillystata

Prologue

Antecedent

"The Great and Powerful Trixie presents, live at the main stage of the Royal Pony Theater of Canterlot: The Fillystata - a magical puppet show! One time only! Come one, come all, and witness the story of the century!"

Ponies from all over Equestria trickle into the grand hall of the old, prestigious theater. A veritable buzzing of eager voices sends trembling echoes through the room as everypony settles in front of the large stage. As the lights dim, all voice fades to silence. Anticipation rises, until finally the curtains part and a lone unicorn in a purple cape and pointy hat steps out upon the floor in front of the audience. Bathed in a pale blue glow, like a star in the dark, she speaks.

"Good ponyfolk of Equestria, mares and stallions, fillies and gentlecolts. Tonight you will be witness to a story unlike any before told on this or any stage. A story both terrifying and true. A tale whose roots reach back through the mists of time. Yet we begin our tale in the fields outside the humble village of Dappleshore, at the Fabulous Fabled Filly Fair where our hapless heroine, Twilight Sparkle, and her ragtag pony friends of Ponyville have gone for a weekend of fun and festivities. But lo, behind the idyllic scenery of this countryside funfair, something sinister is weaving the first strands of its insidious web."

The blue unicorn raises her hooves in a dramatic gesture and the scene behind her lights up.

"And now, she shall make her puppets... dance!"



The smell and taste of apples, cinnamon and the sweetest crust, combined in perfect harmony, still clung to Twilight's nose and mouth, becoming less pleasant over time. "Ugh, when will I learn?" She sighed to herself as she reflected upon how silly she had been to enter a pie eating contest with the likes of Pinkie Pie and Soarin'. But who could say no to Pinkie Pie, or a famous – and quite handsome – Wonderbolts stallion? Twilight chuckled in spite of the stabs of pain each such chuckle caused to her over-filled stomach. She was so silly, but who said a pony couldn't dream?

She needed air, and to get away from the marketplace with all its food and temptations for a time. Maybe she could find Fluttershy somewhere in the fields outside the fair. Applejack had invited Rainbow Dash and Spitfire to the grand opening rodeo, while Rarity and Spike were entertaining the fillies. Breakneck action and loud cheering, or lots and lots of wild fillies romping about; None of that appealed greatly to Twilight's stomach right now. Fluttershy on the other hoof sounded like just the kind of medicine she needed. Rest... and quiet.

Twilight trotted off down a trail towards the edge of the festival area, passing by a tent from which a voice could be heard. Twilight paused and listened. The voice sounded vaguely familiar, very loud and dramatic. Ever curious, Twilight walked up and peeked inside the tent. A crowd of ponies were gathered there around a small scene on which a blue unicorn was in the middle of what seemed to be a kind of magical puppet show.

"Trixie?" Twilight muttered the name with a hint of incredulity.

"...but only the Great and Powerful Trixie saw the signs of the impending darkness." The voice came from inside the tent.

Intrigued, Twilight walked into the tent and found a spot where she could see the stage, and the unicorn. What could Trixie be up to this time? As Twilight glanced over the heads of the crowd, one of the other ponies turned to look at her. A cloak covered the other pony's head and body, casting her face in deep shadows. Twilight smiled a little uncertainly at the attention, and the mysterious mare quickly turned back to watch the show.

Only one puppet was on the scene at the moment, resembling Trixie herself. As her story unfolded, more puppets appeared to fill the roles of the

narrative as necessary, strings pulled expertly by magic. If nothing else, Trixie was quite the skilled showpony, Twilight had to give her that much. Too bad she was also such a terrible loudmouth.

"Too deep in their revels, the ponies of Ponyville were blind to her warnings. The Great and Powerful Trixie knew she had to take matters into her own hoof, if fair Equestria was to be saved." The lights in the room dimmed, and star-like points appeared on the scene around a bright glowing moon. "And so she watched the stars align, awaiting the final moment when the dark mare would make her escape and cover the lands in eternal night."

Twilight's curiosity and confusion grew as she began to recognize the tale. Was Trixie really foal enough to try what she appeared to be doing? The crowd murmured sceptically as well, but Trixie continued undeterred.

A puppet of a dark mare, Nightmare Moon, rose out of the shadow on stage. "With the wicked mare's return complete, Celestia nowhere to be found, and the ponies of Ponyville cowering in the darkness brought upon them, the Great and Powerful Trixie stood alone to defend the land." The Trixie puppet took over the stage again. "Realizing she needed the most powerful magic known to ponykind, the Great and Powerful Trixie had no recourse but to find the fabled Elements of Harmony and harness their raw power. Only that way could the evil Nightmare be vanquished. Facing great peril, but knowing she could not fail, the Great and Powerful Trixie went deep into the heart of the Everfree Forest in search of the ruins of the Ancient Pony Sisters where the Elements were last kept. With every step, the twisted Nightmare, realizing the threat to her rule, threw frightful creatures and obstacles at the Great and Powerful Trixie. Only one with her awesome magic could pass these challenges."

Puppets of manticores and vicious sea serpents danced around on stage, each destroyed in grand puffs of smoke as Trixie the puppet advanced through the story. Twilight watched in a mixture of disbelief and amusement at how immensely silly it was.

"Nothing could stand between the Great and Powerful Trixie and the Elements. And when she finally reached the ruins, Nightmare Moon, the wicked mare in the moon herself, appeared to challenge the might of the Great and Powerful Trixie. But the Great and Powerful Trixie was clever.

There, behind her enemy, were the elements, just sitting there. All she needed was to grab them and claim their power as her own. A plan formed in her mind, and knowing what she had to do, the Great and Powerful Trixie distracted the dark mare with a simple mind trick. It would indeed be a grave insult to Nightmare Moon to reveal just how simple the trick. With her enemy distracted, the Great and Powerful Trixie wasted no time. Using her mighty magic, she lifted off the elements from the pedestals, while keeping the mare unaware of what was transpiring behind her. A mere second later, as the elements flew through the air, the Great and Powerful Trixie showed her hoof. Leaping into the air, she grabbed the elements and their awesome power surged through her."

The puppet of Trixie was going wild on stage, and with a mighty thunderclap she smote the Nightmare puppet. "Vanquished! The Great and Powerful Trixie unleashed the awesome power of the Elements and brought the evil mare of the moon to her knees. As the Great and Powerful Trixie stood over her, the dark mare begged, promising a place by her side. But the Great and Powerful Trixie saw through her lies, and raised her hooves to deliver the final blow as the sun rose once more over fair Equestria."

The room lit up once again, and the Trixie puppet, standing over the Nightmare puppet, lifted her hooves when the grand figure of Celestia's puppet rose behind them both. "'Let her go, I think she has learned her lesson' the princess demanded, and the Great and Powerful Trixie bowed to the ruler of Equestria. The dark mare had been broken, but Trixie saw her wickedness went deep, and only through the pity of Celestia was she spared her well deserved fate. Thus ended the short reign of Nightmare Moon, at the hoof of the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

The blue unicorn bowed majestically. Twilight still couldn't believe what she had just heard. The crowd seemed equally confused and outraged. A few muttered about "lies" and "waste of time". Trixie looked out over the audience with that challenging look Twilight had come to know and expect.

"You don't believe the Great and Powerful Trixie? Were any of you actually there, hmm? If anypony thinks they can tell the story better, I hereby challenge you to come up here and do so."

Twilight didn't know if she should speak up. Trixie was clearly not aware of

her presence among the crowd, or she wouldn't have put out that challenge. Or so Twilight hoped. Yet it all seemed so stupid, and no pony appeared to actually buy into Trixie's lies this time. There was little to gain from challenging Trixie's tale.

Trixie laughed haughtily. "No? I didn't think so either. Every word I speak is the truth. The vile and twisted Nightmare Moon was defeated at the hoof of the Great and Powerful Trixie. That she now lives the high life in Canterlot is not on this unicorn's head, and she better not try her little games again while the Great and Powerful Trixie watches."

Twilight was just about getting enough, despite her best attempts to not let herself get riled up, when a gasp went through the audience who now stared at the stage in even greater disbelief. Up on the stage the puppets had freed themselves of their bonds, long threads which now whirled around and around. Faster than Trixie could turn around, the blue unicorn found herself dangling in the air, tied up like a calf in a rodeo show.

"What the..." Trixie yelped as several strings wrapped around her muzzle to silence her. Trixie struggled while the audience watched the Nightmare puppet jump up on Trixie's chest and walk up to look down into her confused eyes. Twilight thought she detected a hint of fear in those wide eyes.

"All talk and tricks! All you should be watching is your mouth, foal!" The puppet seemed to sneer at its prey. Trixie cried out with a muffled, pitiable sound. "Isn't this what you wanted? A dark and vengeful Nightmare Moon to vanquish? So vanquish me, then! Come on, you worthless piece of hide! Destroy me!" The puppet hissed as more strings swirled and wrapped around Trixie's neck. "Am I not but a stupid puppet to you? Fit only to be mocked and shunned?"

Trixie cried and closed her eyes as the strings tied around her neck. A slight trickle of blood ran down her neck as the strings tightened and cut into her flesh.

Twilight stared in shock. Trixie's face was growing red, her horn glowed but it was evident she couldn't focus her mind on her magic, or overcome whatever was commanding the strings. What was going on? Who was controlling the puppets? Twilight was as confused as the rest of the crowd,

who stood in helpless paralysis before the unfolding scene in front of them.

Trixie sputtered and whined as the puppet continued unabated. "Well, Great and Powerful Trixie? Will you really let a mere puppet defeat you?"

Twilight finally shook herself free of the stupor. Trixie was dying right in front of her eyes. She might never have liked Trixie, but this was too much. She couldn't stand by and not do anything. Knowing time was running out, Twilight's horn lit up and she felt her stomach churn as in an instant she found herself on the stage next to Trixie. Batting away the Nightmare puppet and grabbing Trixie, they both disappeared in a second flash of light. The crowd gasped at the disappearance.

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Twilight and Trixie appeared in a flash out in the open, in a small space between stalls on the outskirts of the fair. A few ponies stopped and stared, but Twilight paid them no heed. With heart racing, she snapped the strings around Trixie's neck and tried to get eye contact, but the blue unicorn didn't move or respond, her purple eyes staring blankly past Twilight. With a hoof against Trixie's neck she searched and found a weak pulse, but the unicorn was no longer breathing. Twilight pulled back Trixie's head, bowed down and placed her mouth over Trixie's mouth and nose, forming a seal as she repeatedly breathed air into the unicorn's lungs.

With a gasp, Trixie came to life, struggling against the binds on her legs.

"Easy... easy!" Twilight said, trying to calm and hold Trixie still.

"Twi... Twilight!?" Trixie looked up at Twilight, a confused mix of anger and relief on her face.

Twilight was too relieved herself to be annoyed at Trixie's show. "You need to lie still!" She said while trying to untie Trixie's legs.

Trixie scrunched up her face. "You! You did this, you tried to kill me!"

Twilight shook her head violently. "I saved you! I swear I would never hurt

any pony!"

Trixie looked like she was about to respond but instead fell limp and reached for her head with a shaky hoof. "I... I... just leave me alone!"

Twilight looked at her with concern and tried her best to be comforting. "You'll be fine. You just need to take it easy." Trixie didn't respond as two nurse ponies came running along with a few bystanders who had called for help. Twilight stepped back and watched them carry Trixie off. She decided not to follow; It had no doubt been a humiliating, not to mention frightening affair for Trixie.



Twilight glanced at the stalls around her. She had certainly left the main parts of the fair, this place looked like a hodgepodge of stalls selling Celestia only knew what. Walking along the paths between the stalls, Twilight looked over the various things being offered for sale, trying to get Trixie out of her mind. A stack of books in a nearby stall caught her eyes as she walked by. She had always enjoyed browsing through markets and antiquaries for unusual books, maybe she would be lucky this time. The old unicorn in the stall smiled as Twilight walked up to look at the books.

As Twilight glanced over the books, a familiar voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Kusalimiwa Twilight, what troubles tonight?"

Twilight looked up and smiled as she recognized the familiar stripes of the zebra standing next to her. She hadn't noticed Zecora sneak up on her while she was busy looking through the stack of books. "Oh, hello Zecora. What do you mean, trouble?"

Zecora nodded her head at Twilight, giving her a worried look. "Over your head are dark clouds, an ill omen are such shrouds."

Twilight only shrugged a little. "Oh, I had a little scare earlier, but it's all right again." Zecora nodded, and Twilight continued her perusing of the books. "I didn't know you were here at the fair, Zecora. I didn't think you were the festival type." A small book bound in black caught Twilight's eye

and she pulled it out carefully from its hiding place.

Zecora laughed. "My friend I am not as coy, these markets I quite enjoy. Great treasures you can find, things that ponies left behind."

Twilight smiled and nodded in agreement. She knew exactly what Zecora meant. She ran a hoof over the rough and worn cover of the book she was holding. It looked very old yet almost untouched. A word was stitched into the cover. "Fillystata" she muttered to herself as she read it. Something deep within her stirred, a kind of recognition but she couldn't place it. Carefully she opened the book and flipped through the pages. It appeared to be the journal of some pony. Every page was full of small, tightly written text, images and drawings of a great variety, cut-outs from papers, and copies of what looked like archival records. It was difficult to read or make sense of at a glance.

Inside the front cover, Twilight noticed a name scribbled in black. "Midnight Sparkle." Twilight read it again. Sparkle, there wasn't any doubt, the writing was clear. Could there be a connection to her own name and family? Twilight's mother had given her her name, and both her mother and grandmother were called Sparkle, but Twilight had never studied the family very deeply.

Twilight glanced up at the old unicorn sitting in the shadow, weaving a sweater peacefully. "Excuse me, do you know this book?"

The unicorn got up and walked slowly over, narrowing her eyes and adjusting her small, round glasses to look at the book Twilight was holding up. After a moment she looked up at Twilight with a smile and a gentle nod. "Ah yes... that little one. It turned up in my attic when my sister and her young ones were over to help me clean out. Oh, I thought it was a silly thing, but my sister insisted I get rid of it."

The old mare seemed eager to chat, but Twilight's eyes were more on the book than on her. "Oh? Why is that?"

The other unicorn gave a shrug. "I couldn't tell. My sister is easily spooked sometimes, believes in some silly things too. But she's a nice mare, just a little..." She trailed off before smiling sadly. "Still, I have no use for the book. But you seem interested. If you like, you can have it for two bits."

Twilight handed the old pony the coin eagerly and gazed back down at her new purchase. The unicorn took the coin with a smile.

Zecora looked at the old book over her shoulder. "A treasure both alluring and antique, beware what things of the past you seek." Twilight nodded, but she wasn't entirely paying attention. Who was Midnight Sparkle, was there a relation, and what would her journal reveal? Deep within her Twilight felt drawn to this little book and its secrets, in ways she had never felt drawn before.



It was late and beginning to rain as Twilight walked from the fair to the hotel room she had rented for the weekend. The area around Dappleshore was a vast marshland, and the local pegasus ponies ensured frequent downpours. Twilight would much sooner prefer a clear and silent night than a cold and stormy one, but it was not her job to dictate the weather. She hurried on through the rain, careful to protect her new book under a coat so it didn't get wet. She had barely been able to think of anything else all night since she found it, and she looked forward to finally having some time to read it. Rainy nights were perfect for reading.

Twilight rounded a corner and paused when she saw another pony walking through the rain with head bowed. She slowed down to a trot, then stopped as she watched Trixie walk along the street in the opposite direction. She looked sad and lonely as she walked with her head near the ground, her drenched mane clinging to her body. Only the thin wounds around her neck and hooves hinted at the earlier incident.

"Trixie?" Twilight called out to her.

The other unicorn looked up, tried to straighten up a little and gave Twilight a not very convincing haughty look. The rain washing down her face did little to conceal the fact that she had been crying. "Leave me alone, Twilight. Can't an honest pony walk through the rain without getting pestered any more?"

Twilight walked towards her. "Trixie, I'm not trying to be your enemy. I'm really worried for you, I just want to help."

Trixie sneered and walked on. "I don't need your pity, or your help. Leave me be!"

Twilight hesitated, debating whether to follow. Finally she called out as Trixie slowly disappeared out of sight. "I'm staying at the hotel in town, room 17. You can drop by any time."

Twilight picked off a note that had been stuck to her door, and closed the door behind her. She unfolded her book from the coat and placed it along with the note on the table next to the door while she dried herself. Once dry she read the note.

Dearest Twilight. Spike is sleeping in my room tonight. Poor thing fell asleep at the fair, and your door was locked when we got back. Your friend, Rarity.

Twilight smiled to herself as she thought of her number one assistant. Poor thing. Owlowsious was sitting on the window sill, preening his feathers. No doubt the owl didn't want to get out in this weather. Twilight offered the owl a little treat, picked up the book and threw herself on the bed.

She ran her hoof slowly over the cover and the single word stitched on it. "Fillystata" she muttered to herself, tasting the word and wondering why it seemed so... alluring. She opened the book and began to read the first page, slowly deciphering the small letters. A brief note graced the top of the first page.

For all my inquiries into this, my great grandmother's life and work remains largely hidden to me. Deliberately made so, I suspect, by those around me, past and present. I know not the source of this fascination of mine with Fillystata. Some would call it unhealthy, but something draws me on and I must redouble my efforts. I shall, for myself, keep account of my findings herein, lest my mind wanders and forgets.

Twilight flipped through a few pages of cut out newspaper articles, archive

records and handwritten notes. A light knocking on the door broke her out of her thoughts. Twilight looked up and stuffed the book under her pillow before opening.

"Yes?"

Out in the hall a cloaked pony looked at Twilight from the shadow under her hood. Twilight recognized her from Trixie's show, the mare in the audience who had looked at Twilight when she entered the tent. She seemed cold and a little timid as she reached up a hoof to pull back the hood from her face.

Luna's teal eyes didn't meet Twilight's as she bowed her head in shame. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

Chapter 1

Pedigree

"I'm so sorry! I never meant it to go so far, I never meant to hurt anypony! I'm so sorry, Twilight, please, just don't hate me like everypony else."

Twilight stepped aside to allow Luna inside, closing the door behind them as her mind tried to grapple with the situation and think of something to say. She had been thrown off a little by opening the door to find the young princess standing in the hall on the other side, and even more by her profuse apologies. Twilight hadn't seen or heard from Luna since that day in the ruins when Nightmare Moon was driven from her. Princess Celestia occasionally mentioned Luna in passing, but it almost seemed like she had vanished out of sight and mind after the events of that night. Twilight had never given it much thought prior to now. From Celestia she understood that Luna had always been a little introverted and preferred her own company, or the company of books as the case may have been, much like Twilight herself before Ponyville.

And now she was standing there, head bowed in shame. It took Twilight a moment to connect the events of the day. "Why would I..." She broke off but didn't get to continue as Luna broke out in tears.

"I swear, I didn't mean to! I just wanted to teach her a lesson, I never meant to hurt her. Those things she said... It's like that all the time, Twilight. Everypony hates and fears me, I can't show myself in public without ponies staring and whispering. You don't know how it is, how it is... to have no friends in the world!"

Twilight felt her stance harden. She was angry. She couldn't easily put aside the fact that Luna would have killed Trixie had she not been there to step in. "And you thought killing an innocent pony, however obnoxious she might otherwise be, in front of a crowd, was a good way to make friends?" A part of Twilight felt that her words had come out a little harshly, but another part didn't care.

Luna shrank a little in Twilight's shadow. "No! I just... wanted to make her see how much her lies hurt. But there's this side of me... a part of me enjoyed it, a part of me enjoyed... watching her die." Luna looked away, she couldn't bear to look Twilight in the eyes. "I try so hard to fight it, but when I'm so alone... when I see how every pony hates me, it tries to take over. I don't want it to take over, Twilight. I don't want to be like that, I don't want to be feared!" A long silence followed. Luna looked terrible. "I hoped we could be friends. I don't want you to hate me. Please, forgive me, Twilight. For everything. I can't hold back the Nightmare alone. I need your help, Twilight. I beg you, help me."

Twilight looked at Luna, it felt like forever. Her muscles relaxed a little and her face softened. The pain and loneliness was evident in Luna's eyes. You could almost see those thousand years of crushing solitude in her eyes. Twilight sat down next to Luna and placed a hoof around her shoulders. "Why didn't you come to me before?"

Luna looked at her, the expression on her face hard to decipher. "I sent you a letter. But you never replied. I thought you didn't want to see me. I thought... you hated me too."

It was Twilight's turn to be baffled. She couldn't recall any letter, not from Luna. "I never got any letter from you, Luna."

The princess wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at the owl sitting in the window. "But... the owl. I sent him to you with the letter. I thought... I hoped we could write to each other, like my sister and you. I thought you'd like the owl, he's been my only real friend since I came back." Owlowsious made a little affirmative "Hoo" at Luna's words, and she returned a sad little smile. "You indeed."

Twilight felt her heart sink, had she really missed a letter from Luna? She thought back to the night she had met Owlowsious. The owl had brought her the scroll she lost, had it lost its own letter in the wind and found her scroll instead, thinking it was the letter? "Oh Luna, I'm so sorry. I didn't know the owl was from you, he must have lost your letter in the storm. Had I only known I would have been happy to write back."

Luna looked at her. "You mean you didn't hate me?"

Twilight smiled and gently hugged the princess. "I never hated you, Luna. And I don't think as many ponies do as you think. They just don't know you."



Twilight sat back down on her bed. It was late when Luna had left, taking Owlowiscious with her on a night flight. But despite her eyelids feeling like lead Twilight found herself inexplicably reaching for the little book under her pillow. She sat for a time, staring at the word on the cover while thinking of Luna. It was hard to get the princess and her pain out of her mind, but finally with a sigh she opened the book. The first hoof-written note was followed by a few articles from local newspapers, many generations old but all from the same period. Each seemed to concern the same controversial character, a local business mare and philanthropist by the name of Mrs. Midnight Spindle. The header of an early article drew Twilight's attention.

Fillystata Funds Fillies

On Monday, local celebrity and colorful character Mrs. Spindle made a rare appearance to help celebrate the opening of the new schoolhouse and playground, the latest project funded by the local business mare for the betterment of Dappleshore and its growing community. The fillies in the school yard may whisper in childish fear about Fillystata the wicked witch, as she has come to be known to them, but they have much to thank the elusive yet generous Mrs. Spindle for. "Our fillies need the best care we can offer them. I am pleased that my fortune can help them grow and prosper, and through them also our fair town" she was heard speaking at the opening ceremony to much applause.

Indeed Mrs. Spindle is on everypony's lips these days. Between a reputation for being aloof and eccentric, and certain insidious rumors surrounding her unusual longevity and the rare and increasingly brief sightings of her husband, Mrs. Spindle has undeniably done more for the prosperity of Dappleshore in recent years than anypony else can claim, and many are willing, indeed quite happy, to let rumors be rumors and to vouch for her decency. "Elderly mares are so often the subject of silly rumors and ponytales. Mrs. Spindle is a fine and most upstanding citizen of our fair town, and we are ever thankful to her that she has done so much for our community and asked so little in return" the mayor spoke.

On the next page an official-looking letter bearing the seal of Canterlot's Royal Pony Court confirmed the official name change of one Nightwind, daughter of Midnight Spindle, to Daisy Sparkle. An unusually cheery name Twilight thought to herself. On the opposite page another official letter from a much later date denied a similar request from one Manna Sparkle to change her last name to Spindle. From the crumbled look of the second letter Twilight imagined the message from the Court had not pleased Manna, but why had they denied her the old family name?

Twilight flipped the page and paused, running her hoof over a page adorned with a rough family tree. Near the bottom, the name Midnight Spindle had been supplemented with Fillystata in parentheses. Her lone daughter's name had likewise been altered with "born Nightwind" added under the name Daisy Sparkle. Twilight read it twice, before her eyes continued up through the tree where the name of one of Daisy's grandchildren, Manna Sparkle, had been scratched and replaced with Midnight Sparkle. She in turn had a daughter, and as Twilight's eyes paused there she recognized it to be that of her own grandmother. Twilight sat for a while, staring at the family tree in silence, before forcing herself to turn the page with a shaking hoof.

The old picture of a large mansion on the outskirts of the town, surrounded by marshy fields, almost leaped out at her from another newspaper cut-out. Twilight glanced over the brief notice beneath the image, reading the report.

On Saturday evening at least three presumed robbers broke into the mansion at 110 Pedigree Lane, Dappleshore, home of local business mare Mrs. Spindle and her husband. The robbers woke up the residents and fled before they could be apprehended or identified. Nothing was reported stolen, but the elderly couple described the incident as "disturbing."

Twilight's eyes remained on the ancient picture of the house until she succumbed to sleep.



Twilight spent the next day at the fair with her friends, barely aware of what

went on around her. After managing to escape the watchful eyes of her friends, she spent a time in the shade of a large tree on the outskirts of the fair, absorbed once again by the book. There were more accounts of strange events surrounding Mrs. Spindle and the house at 110 Pedigree Lane, more family records confirming among other things Manna's name change to Midnight after her initial failure, and a strangely brief obituary announcing Mrs. Spindle's unfortunate passing at the unusually respectable age of 47, but little more than this. The recordings in the book seemed to end abruptly with Fillystata's obituary. Had Midnight Sparkle abandoned the research of her ancestor, or had she perhaps hit a dead end? Disappointed yet still undeterred in her pursuit, Twilight resolved to continue the digging where the book left off. She needed to know. She couldn't turn back now.

As the evening came, Twilight greeted her friends goodnight and walked back towards town. But instead of heading back to the hotel room, she took a turn down one of the old lanes. She had to see for herself, was it still there? Pedigree Lane had no doubt grown more crowded since those early days, but as it winded its way towards the edge of town the houses grew sparser. As Twilight trotted along with determined steps, she almost felt like walking back through time, and as she stopped and looked up at the mansion she almost felt like she was now looking at the old photograph again.

The place had sustained a great deal of wear and tear over the generations since the photograph was taken. It was obviously long since abandoned, yet there it was, 110 Pedigree Lane, home of Fillystata. Windows had been broken and barred, the roof was full of holes, the garden was a jungle, and in all ways the place looked miserable. It was a wonder, Twilight thought, that no pony had done anything to repair it, or tear it down. It was a sorry sight indeed, once the home of one of Dappleshore's finest residents, now left to ruin. What had happened?

Twilight approached the overgrown lot. Something drew her to it, and as she looked at the broken windows she thought she spotted a shadow moving behind the wooden bars of one. Startled, but unable to resist the pull of mystery, Twilight moved closer, forging a path through the grass and weeds of so many ages. A faint orange light sprung up in the window, causing Twilight to pause and shiver. Was it just the cold of the night, or something more? Admonishing herself for her childish fear, Twilight

continued up to the window and peeked through the bars, narrowing her eyes at the light while her heart raced in anticipation.

In the light of a small kindling fire in the old fireplace, a blue unicorn was trying to drive out the cold from her bones. Draped in her cape and lying on a bed made of leaves and old newspapers, she seemed almost as poor as the house within which she had sought shelter from the night. But it was not this that drew Twilight's immediate and total attention. Mounted above the fireplace was the portrait of an elderly mare, and through ages of neglect and grime it seemed still to Twilight as if she was staring now upon a near perfect picture of herself!

Chapter 2

Restoration

The elderly mare in the portrait glanced back at Twilight with a dignified, dispassionate look. The unicorn was undeniably older than Twilight, her deep eyes suggestive of even greater age than was apparent from her face. Yet the resemblance was truly uncanny. A black spider in its web graced her flank, but beyond this mark the similarity could not be mistaken. Twilight stared with wide open eyes at what could have almost seemed like a mirror into her own future.

A cry broke her out of her reverie. "Damn you, Twilight!" Too late did she see the blue unicorn charging at her. In a shower of splintered wood Trixie threw herself through the window, and with all her weight she crashed into Twilight who stumbled back with a pained cry and fell on her back with Trixie above her. "Won't you just leave me alone!" the other unicorn cried, but Twilight didn't hear her any more.

The soothing warmth of the fire and the soft if somewhat crude covering of leaves and papers greeted her aching body as she woke again. As her senses returned she realized her legs were tied with rope. "Trixie?" she called but received no reply. Her head was aching, she must have hit it hard in the fall. In the dim light of the fire she glanced around the room. There was no sign of Trixie, but her eyes soon fell upon a piece of paper stuck under a rock just within reach of her head. Stretching her neck she pulled the paper free and held it up in the light of the fire.

Dear Twilight

I'm sorry I hurt you. I should be thankful that you saved my life yesterday, but I keep thinking it had been better if you hadn't. I know you just want to help me, but I don't want your help. I don't want your pity. Look at what the Great and Powerful Trixie has been reduced to... I spent everything on that last show. I've nothing left. I'm a failure.

I'm going to the woods, to find peace.

I'm sorry for the bonds. By the time you get free I hope to be gone. If your concern is at all genuine, I ask only this: Bury me in an unmarked grave. I don't want to be remembered.

Trixie

Twilight felt the tears well up in her eyes. "No... she can't..." she whispered as she dropped the letter. She closed her eyes and focused, ignoring her pounding head as she disappeared in a flash, reappearing a second later, still tied. "Curses!" She muttered. She had to get free, quickly. Glancing around for anything to help her, her eyes fell on the flames of the fire. Biting her lip, she focused once more. A piece of burning wood rose from the fire and levitated towards her. She took a deep breath and brought the flame closer. The flame licked against her hooves as she held the burning wood under the rope. Twilight cried and grit her teeth, the searing pain was almost unbearable, but she had to get free.

The smell of burning hair and flesh mixed with that of the rope, until finally the rope burst and she was free. Twilight threw the piece of wood back into the fireplace and got up. The pain in her legs was terrible, but she could worry about that later. Forcing herself on, she ran out of the house and glanced around in a panic. Woods. She had to find the woods. Running around the house she spotted a line of trees to the south. "I'm coming Trixie, please don't let it be too late..."

Twilight stormed through the dark woods, her horn lighting the way while her eyes darted from side to side in the vain hope of spotting Trixie. But she knew it was no use. Trixie could be anywhere. Twilight stopped under a large tree, trying to concentrate, trying to think of something. Rarity's gem finding spell, could it find ponies too? She knew she was grasping at straws. A distant sound barely registered in her desperate mind. "Hoo". Twilight looked around, ran a bit, stopped again. "Hoo!". She began to cry, she would be too late. It was hopeless. "Hoo!" Twilight looked up, the insistent call finally reaching through to her conscious mind. "Hoo!" Feeling

a spark of hope ignite within her, Twilight turned and rushed towards the sound as fast as her wounded legs would allow her. It was her only chance. "Hoo!"

Twilight stormed into a small clearing of trees and tripped over her own hooves as she tried to stop. "No! Please don't..." She fell face first on the ground, rolling several feet before coming to a halt.

Trixie turned and stared at the other unicorn. She was sitting on a branch, a long piece of rope around her neck was tied at the other end to the thick branch. "Twilight!?"

Twilight jumped back on her feet, covered in mud and bruises. "Don't jump, Trixie, I beg you. Let me help you!"

Trixie looked away, hiding her face and tears. "Don't stop me, Twilight. I don't want to live with this shame. I could never be as great as you, and now everypony knows what a big failure I am. I can never show my face again... I can never..." Her voice broke.

Twilight tried to walk in a circle around the tree to look the other unicorn in the eyes. "You're not a failure, Trixie! You have great talent, I don't possess a fraction the showmareship you do, you just made some silly mistakes, that's all. Everypony makes mistakes."

Trixie didn't reply. She looked up at the night sky through the leaves, her voice faltering as she sang quietly. Twilight didn't recognize the song, but the sadness pulled at her heart like strings. "Please come down, Trixie. I can help you... I'll get you back your show, I'll..."

Trixie looked down at her, tears trickling down her cheeks like pearls in the light of the moon. "The show is over, Twilight. I'm sorry." Twilight cried in horror as Trixie bowed one final time and let herself fall off the branch.

The rope around Trixie's neck tightened with a snap, and her body came to a sudden stop mid-air. She hang there for a few seconds, before opening

her eyes. Twilight dug her hooves into the ground and grit her teeth, the glow from her horn shining like a little star to engulf the blue unicorn dangling from the tree.

"Let go of me!" Trixie demanded.

Twilight stomped the ground, beads of sweat on her brow. "No! I will not let you kill yourself! Take off the rope, now, or by Celestia I'll tear up this tree root and all! You know I will!"

Trixie looked away with a pained sigh as she took off the rope around her neck. Twilight let out a deep breath of relief as she brought the blue unicorn back down to the ground. Her entire body was shaking from pain and exertion, but she paid it no heed any more. Trixie lay on the ground, hiding her face under her hooves.

Twilight walked up to her and lay down next to her. "Trixie..." The blue unicorn sobbed quietly. "Trixie..." Twilight continued and placed a hoof on the other unicorn's shoulder. Trixie lifted a hoof and looked at Twilight. "Trixie, I don't think I'll be able to walk back on my own. Will you help me?" Trixie looked at Twilight's burned hooves and slowly nodded. Twilight sighed. "It'll be all right, Trixie. We'll help each other."

Trixie helped Twilight back up, and together they made their way back towards the old mansion. Twilight humped along, leaning on Trixie, her hooves pained and shaking under her weight. Trixie walked with bowed head. Once in a while she glanced at Twilight as if to say something, but paused and turned back to staring at the ground. Twilight didn't want to push her, even if she hadn't been too tired to speak. They walked in silence, and when they were back inside Twilight collapsed on the rough bed in front of the dying flames of the fireplace. Trixie sat down on the cold floor, watching the portrait hanging above Twilight in silence.

"Family of yours?"

Twilight woke as Trixie broke the long silence. She wasn't sure how long she had been lying there. Had she fallen asleep? Blinking at the darkness she glanced up at Trixie, then up at the portrait. She nodded.

Trixie sat there like a gargoyle, looking at the old mare in the picture. "Your

family must be proud of you, Twilight." Twilight wasn't sure what to respond. She sat up and turned to face the blue unicorn. "My parents never wanted me. I promised them I would become something great one day, that every pony would know my name, that I would make them proud. They never believed in me, or anything I did. When I left they disowned me, but I didn't care. I knew deep in my heart that I could make it on my own, that I didn't need their support. I would become something great, on my own."

Trixie lowered her head. Twilight dragged herself up and walked over to sit next to her. "I wish I was like you, Twilight. I wish people would look at me like they look at you." She lay down on the floor with her hooves under her head. Twilight sat and watched her sadly as Trixie sang quietly to herself.

Trixie wiped a tear from her eye as she finished.

"What is that song?" Twilight asked quietly.

Trixie sighed and looked away. "When I was a filly, I would spend a lot of time in my room. There was a single window, and from it I could look into the room of another filly who lived next to us. Her mother would sing this song to make her sleep. I would lie under my window and pretend the song was for me... that I had a mother who cared too, that there was somepony who loved me."

Twilight lay down next to her and nuzzled her light blue mane a little. "You don't have to be alone, Trixie." The blue unicorn blushed and looked unsure, turning her head away again. "I'm investigating my old family legacy. I think I'll be staying here in Dappleshore a while, maybe I'll buy this old place... spruce it back up. Would you like to stay, maybe help me?"

Trixie turned back to look at Twilight. "I... I would like that."

Twilight gave Trixie a tired smile. "Then it's a deal" she said and rested her head on her hooves with a tired sigh.

Trixie watched her for a time, before nodding at her hooves. "I'm really sorry about those burns, Twilight. I thought you could... get free of the ropes easily."

Twilight looked at her burnt hooves, then up at Trixie, blushing. "I've...

never been good with ropes." Trixie smiled for the first time that night and lay down, with her head propped against Twilight.

There was a soft "Hoo" from the broken window. Trixie looked up at the owl as it flew in through the hole and landed next to the two unicorns, holding a small package of leaves. Twilight was breathing calmly in her sleep and didn't stir. Trixie took the little bundle the owl had dropped, careful not to wake Twilight. "Hello little one. Are you one of Twilight's friends?" The owl gave a happy "Hoo" in response and fluttered off back through the window.

Trixie watched the bird until it was out of sight, then turned her attention to the leaves. They smelled strongly, but the scent made Trixie feel relaxed and warm. Unfolding the bundle, Trixie found a small dollop of light green salve. "Do your friends stalk you or something, Twilight?" the blue unicorn muttered, wondering who the package was from as she gently treated Twilight's hooves with the salve and bound them in the long, soft leaves. "I hope this helps. It's the best I can do, I guess" she whispered and lay back down next to Twilight. With a long sigh, Trixie closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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The following day was the last day of the fair. Twilight did her best to deflect all questions about her burnt hooves, or where she had been all night. Everypony was so terribly concerned for her, but she reassured them that she was fine. She spent most of the day at the market, resting her legs and drinking apple cider with extra ice cubes. Holding the icy cold drinks in her hooves dulled the pain a little, at least for a time. Trixie insisted on staying back in Twilight's hotel room. She refused to show herself at the market, or even step a hoof outside the door until nightfall, despite Twilight's offer of introducing her to the others.

A troupe of dancers was performing nearby when another pony settled down next to Twilight. She was so engrossed in watching the dance that she didn't notice the cloaked pony until she spoke. "Oh my, Twilight, what happened to your hooves?"

Twilight jumped a little and turned around. "Oh, hi, I didn't see you there..." Luna looked at her from under her hood. Twilight looked down at her hooves. "Oh right... it's nothing. I'll be fine."

Luna didn't look convinced, but decided to leave it be for the moment. She looked down a little timidly and placed a small present on the table in front of Twilight. "I uh, got you a little gift."

Twilight looked at Luna with surprise. "What for?"

Luna blushed and looked a little uncomfortable. "I just wanted to say thanks, and I... I... I'm sorry if it's inappropriate, I'm really not very good at social customs. I just want you to know that I think about you, that you mean a lot to me." Luna looked down, biting her lip.

Twilight smiled and picked up the small present, carefully unwrapping a small, beautifully carved, wooden box. She looked at Luna who smiled nervously and gestured for her to open it. She lifted the lid of the box gingerly and peered inside. The inside of the box was lined with a coating of soft, protective fabric, and carefully placed in the middle was a small, gray rock. Twilight looked back at Luna, confused.

"It's a moon rock... a little piece of the moon" the princess explained.

Twilight stared back at the treasure in her hooves, speechless for a moment.

"Do you like it?" Luna asked.

Twilight looked back at Luna with a grin. "Oh Luna, it's wonderful. Thank you! I'll treasure it."

Luna beamed under her shadowy cloak.

"Do you want something to drink, or eat perhaps? I know the fare is not very royal here, but what kind of friend would I be if I didn't offer?"

Luna chuckled softly and nodded at Twilight's drink. "Whatever you're having will be just fine, Twilight. Celestia likes to drag me to all these silly, frilly, formal gatherings and I... well, it's just not me. I don't really think it's her either, but she's really, really good at pretending. You'd be surprised at the faces she can pull off." Luna sighed as Twilight ordered her a glass of apple cider. "I think we both wish we could spend more time with real ponies, not those snobby nobles with their strange ideas of propriety. That's why I like coming here among regular pony folk, even if I have to hide under a cloak to avoid attention. Have you been enjoying the fair, Twilight?" A young, cheerful pony brought over the frosty drink, and Luna took it with a thankful nod.

Twilight shrugged a little. "I haven't quite been able to enjoy it as much as I thought I would."

Luna looked at her. "Oh? Why is that?"

Twilight fiddled with the little wooden box, recalling how hectic this weekend had proven to be. "So much has happened. I found out I have ancestors who lived here in Dappleshore. Between you and... everything else, I've just been consumed by this discovery. I think..." she paused, a thought occurring to her. "Luna, you have access to the Canterlot archives don't you?"

Luna nodded between sips of cider. "Of course, I'm a big important pony."

Twilight chuckled, she couldn't help herself, then paused anew before continuing. "I feel I need to get to know this ancestor of mine, and I think some of it may have been covered up by later relatives. I won't be returning to Ponyville tonight, I need to stay here to investigate. If you could find what you can in the archives, I would be grateful for it."

Luna smiled. "Anything for you, Twilight. I'll send what I find with Owlowsious."

As Twilight had predicted, her friends were not eager to let her stay behind in Dappleshore. She had to assure them that she would be fine, and that she would write as often as she could. She was a little sad to see them go, but she knew she had to stay. At least she had Owlowiscious, and her two new friends, Trixie and Luna, to keep her company and help in her studies. She soon learned that Zecora was still in the area as well, gathering rare herbs from the fertile marshes around Dappleshore. The zebra seemed concerned for her, and frequently sent her herbal salves for her wounded hooves along with cryptic letters of everything from random rhymes to strange warnings. Twilight was thankful for the salves; Zecora's herbs were a great relief and their fresh scent always cheered her up a little, but Twilight suspected the zebra of being a bit superstitious at times.

With the fair over and her friends back in Ponyville, Twilight intensified her studies of Fillystata. She and Trixie scoured the village and its archives, and Luna sent her frequent letters with information she had dug up in the archives of Canterlot. She soon realized that the inhabitants of Dappleshore were of little help in her investigation. The few who might know anything were reluctant to speak to Twilight, and the local archives were not much more helpful to her. The bits and pieces scraped together, especially from Luna's tireless work, formed only a crude picture of events.

The rumors surrounding Mrs. Spindle had continued to spread and grow, and her appearances became ever more rare. There were some reports of unseemly sounds from the mansion, but none of the papers or records mentioned anything specific and everything seemed very hushed up. As for Mrs. Spindle's tragic death, most papers simply agreed that she had died in a fire and was buried with no great ceremony. Only some vague remarks suggested that a group of locals had broken into the mansion on the eve of her death and might have been behind the fire, if indeed there had been a fire at all. Twilight seemed at first disappointed by the lack of details, but over time appeared to accept it.

A week after the fair, Twilight acquired the old house at 110 Pedigree Lane. No pony had lived there for generations, and the ponies of Dappleshore now whispered of it as haunted. Twilight got it for a trifle, and with Trixie's

help began restoring the old mansion to something at least close to its former self. Twilight had never been one to believe in ghosts or old mares tales, and nothing seemed unusual to her about the old house.

But as time went on, Twilight seemed less and less as her former self to those around her.



Trixie opened the window to let Owlowiscious in. The owl dropped a letter on the desk and sat down on its peg, preening its feathers. Trixie closed the window and looked at the letter. Another message from Luna. The blue unicorn frowned and looked around the room. She was alone. She took the letter and held it for a time, dreaming as she gazed into the flames of the fireplace. She had frequently been tempted to throw Luna's many letters into the fire, but Twilight would just get concerned if Luna stopped writing. Trixie sighed and put the letter back down. What did Twilight see in her? Was it the wings? The royalty? The power? Trixie lay down, looking sadly at the moon through the window. How could she, a simple poor unicorn, compete with that?

What was Twilight doing up there anyway? Trixie saw her less and less as the days went by, and when she was around it was like she was different, like she was obsessed, but not with Trixie. Trixie closed her eyes and imagined if only Twilight would be as obsessed with her, but the image of Luna always intruded, invaded her beautiful dream and made it ugly. Sometimes, when Twilight was in the attic, where she always worked alone and didn't allow anypony else, Trixie would lurk outside the door. She would sometimes think she heard voices behind that door. Did Twilight meet with somepony else, was it Luna? Of course it was, it had to be. Who else? The image of Twilight and Luna together... Trixie cursed under her breath. It was all Luna's doing... it had to be. That wicked mare wanted Twilight for herself, she was turning her against Trixie. All those letters, and the gifts. Trixie couldn't afford such gifts. All she had left was her old cape and hat.

Trixie stood up and grabbed the letter with an angry stomp. Curse Luna, and her letters. She was about to throw the letter into the flames when she heard the attic door open and hoof steps on the stairs. She quickly dropped the letter back on the desk and pretended to be watering the flowers as

Twilight walked into the room.

She didn't seem to even notice Trixie as she walked up to the desk and opened the letter. "Oh Luna..." she muttered while reading the letter.

Trixie clenched her teeth and tensed, burying her anger and frustration deep inside... "that wicked... evil... whore!" Oh how she wished she could scream that out loud to the heavens above. She would make the celestial foundations themselves tremble at her voice.

"I'll be out tonight. Is there anything I can get you from the village?"

Trixie broke out of her dark thoughts at Twilight's voice. She seemed so dispassionate, so uncaring, Trixie felt it like a stab in her heart. "Where are you going? You're always gone. I could come with you, I could help you..." she blurted out.

Twilight folded the letter up and smiled at her, but to Trixie the smile looked unsatisfying, almost fake. "I'm sorry, Trixie. You know I'd love to spend more time with you, but I'm just so close to a breakthrough, I can't stop now. I need to push on, but I promise it won't be long now. I'm nearly there, I think."

Trixie pouted. "What is it you're working on anyway? You've never said anything. Please Twilight, even I can see that this isn't healthy. You need to put this... work of yours aside and think of something else."

Twilight wrapped an old traveling cloak around her neck and walked past Trixie to open the door. "I'm so close, Trixie. I promise, I'll let you know as soon as I know if I'm correct. I just need to be sure." Twilight walked out the door. "I won't be gone long. I'll bring you something good from town, okay?"

Trixie stomped the old wooden floor in frustration as Twilight disappeared into the night.

Trixie woke up feeling like a great big hole had swallowed her stomach. She had fallen asleep waiting for Twilight and hadn't eaten. She blinked at the light of the sun shining through the window. "Won't be gone for long my

flank!" she grumbled and got up. There had to be some hay around. It would do.

Days passed without word. On the evening of the third day, Owlowiscious brought a batch of letters from Ponyville. Always for Twilight, Trixie thought with a sigh as she flipped through the letters. Never anything for her. And where was Twilight now? Trixie had slept on the floor outside the attic door, hoping Twilight would return, but the blue unicorn hadn't heard a sound for days. A terrible thought kept imposing on her mind, and wouldn't let go. Had she abandoned Trixie? Had she gone to be with Luna instead and left Trixie on her own? Trixie frowned and wiped off the tears that welled up in her eyes at the thought.

She looked at the letters. Perhaps she could sneak a peek at them, pretend they were for her. She picked one up, hesitating, then carefully opened it. It was from Spike, asking why she hadn't sent him any letters lately, and when she would come back to Ponyville. Trixie read all the letters. It was all the same. They all wanted her to come back. Trixie sighed. "So do I..." She put the letters back down and looked out the window.

"Where are you, Twilight? Won't you come back?"

Chapter 3

Unburied

There was a tapping at the door. Trixie looked up from the letters she had been reading. Could it be Twilight? No, Twilight wouldn't knock on her own door. Trixie hesitated. She peeked out the window, but couldn't see anything through the heavy rain. The tapping became a knocking. "Pull yourself together, pony! Are you Great and Powerful, or just a frightened little filly?" Trixie shrank a little at the voice in her mind, then straightened up, proudly stretching her head up high. No! She had cowered long enough, she didn't need Twilight. She didn't need anypony! If they didn't notice her, she would make them notice her. She would make them love her!

The knocking had stopped. Trixie looked up from her thoughts at the window. A dark face appeared in front of her and Trixie jumped back with a shriek.

The mare on the other side looked just as surprised for a moment, then frowned. "Are you going let a princess stand out in the rain, or do I have to break down the door?"

Trixie cursed herself for her cowardly display in front of the princess and got back up, facing Luna with a haughty sneer. "And what does the oh so high and mighty princess want?"

Luna returned the sneer with a cold stare through the glass. "I'm here to see Twilight."

Trixie didn't flinch, she didn't want to show any weakness in front of Luna. She had been weak for too long, but no more. "Twilight is not here."

Luna's face remained hard. "Is that the truth, or just another one of your lies?"

Trixie felt the anger bubbling inside her. "I haven't seen her in days, and I

bet it's all your fault too! You and your fancy gifts! I guess you couldn't get her any other way, eh? Well congratulations, it seems you can buy somepony's heart after all." Luna's face had disappeared from the window. "Yes, that's it, go back to your castle you royal bitch!" Trixie felt the warmth spread in her face and body as she let go of the big ball of frustration and jealousy in her chest. It felt great. No, better than great! "I'm sure Twilight will be waiting there to grovel at your hooves like a good little slave, probably just yet another poor pony for your gilded harem!"

The door exploded in a rain of splinters, throwing back Trixie and knocking all the air from her lungs as she hit the wall. A large splinter streaked past her, leaving a bloody trail beneath her eye. Luna stepped through the door like something out of every little filly's worst nightmares. Her dark, stormy eyes pinned down Trixie, who felt herself getting pulled up against the wall as if by an invisible hand around her neck. She struggled to fill her screaming lungs.

"You insolent wretch! Do you even care about Twilight, or is it all about you?! Did it ever occur to you that others may care about Twilight too? Look at you..." The princess stopped in front of Trixie, their faces inches apart. A terrible darkness shrouded Luna's face. The young, insecure filly inside Trixie wanted to disappear, to hide away. If she couldn't see it, it couldn't hurt her. "What are you but a worthless gnat! A pathetic little cretin! You were never worthy of Twilight!"

Trixie's muscles tensed, every nerve in her body screamed. No! She was not worthless! She was not a frightened little filly, hiding under her bed! No more! A power she had never known surged through her mind and soul, her horn flared, and with her last breath of air she opened her eyes and stared into Luna's. "I am not pathetic... I am... the great... and... Powerful... TRIXIE!" There was a bright flash of intense light. Trixie felt air flushing back into her lungs as the invisible hand holding her fled like darkness before the light of day. She fell on her haunches but quickly stood up on shaking legs.

Luna took a step back. "Oh look, it grew a spine."

Trixie breathed heavily. "Leave!"

Luna held her head up defiantly. "Oh? Are you going to make me?"

Trixie straightened herself up. An old feeling of pride filled her again, and she couldn't help but smile. "No Luna, because the Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't go around attacking ponies, or trying to kill them! But she may just have to humiliate you."

Luna gazed furiously at Trixie, but the blue unicorn didn't shy away. She walked confidently up to Luna, looking her in the eyes. "Why, I bet your sister would love to hear of this. Or are you going to shut me up?" Luna hesitated and took another step back. "And what about Twilight? Would she love a brutish thug like you? Why, I can't believe she ever would. Twilight wants someone with class. Someone... like me."

Luna's face darkened, for a moment Trixie thought she would attack again, but instead she lowered her head and looked away, a pained expression crossing her face. "I'm... sorry" she whispered.

Trixie smirked, savoring the delightful taste of victory. "What? I didn't hear you, did you say something?"

Luna glared at her and almost hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm sorry!"

Trixie held up a hoof to her ear. "Speak up, or did you lose your tongue?"

Luna stood up with a light stomp of her hoof. "You're pushing it..." She sighed. "look, I just want to know where Twilight is. She hasn't written in days, and I got worried."

Trixie felt an urge to say something sarcastic, but not before now had she stopped to consider the realization that Twilight was not with Luna. Then where could she be? Trixie sat down. "She's not been with you?"

Luna stared at her in disbelief. "How... just how slow are you?"

Trixie gave Luna a cold stare. "Well fine, I didn't exactly put two and two together. I'm sorry, we're both sorry. Great!"

Luna shook her head. "So where is Twilight?"

"Great Celestia, whatever happened here?"

Luna and Trixie both turned at Twilight's voice. The purple unicorn stood in the shattered doorway, staring at the room. Trixie only now noticed the destruction around her. The shattered door, but also the walls, everything was charred and blackened by fire. She blinked. Had she done that? She didn't remember doing that.

Luna jumped up and embraced Twilight. "Twilight! We were so worried, where have you been?" Trixie gave Luna a piercing glance.

Twilight smiled at them both with a bewildered face. "Never mind that. What happened here?"

Trixie gave Luna a hoof in the side. "We were just having a little talk, girl to girl you know. Luna was just about to leave, too."

Luna glared at Trixie and rubbed her flank. "I most certainly was not!" she replied before turning back to Twilight. "We were just having a little argument. That's all. I'm terribly sorry about the door."

Twilight looked between them. "Oh girls, forget the door, I'm just glad you didn't kill each other! I'm sorry for disappearing like that, I never expected it to take so long. Just let me drop these bags off." She gave the saddle bags hanging over her shoulders a little shake. "And then I'll make it up to you, I promise. What do you say we all go out and have a good night together?"

Twilight disappeared up the stairs with her bags, while Luna and Trixie exchanged icy stares.

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Trixie didn't sleep that night. Twilight had returned and seemed uncommonly happy. More lively than she'd been in a while at least, but she blankly refused to talk about her disappearance or her work, despite both Trixie and Luna trying their best to convince her to give up her studies.

Trixie was glad to be out of the mansion for once. Ever since her failed show at the fair, she had been afraid to go out, afraid of the stares and whispers she knew she would get. Now she didn't care. She would rebuild her name and honor, and she would have Twilight too, Luna be damned. Despite having to drag along the princess, this night had been the best one Trixie could remember having in a long while. Yet she couldn't help but notice that Twilight remained a little off, her eyes frequently growing distant as if her mind was elsewhere.

As the evening dragged on, Luna had to return to Canterlot. Trixie could hardly say she was sad to see the alicorn leave. She and Twilight decided to call it a night too, and turned back towards the mansion. Trixie walked beside Twilight, occasionally giving her a glance and a smile. Twilight seemed oblivious to Trixie's glances, perhaps even her presence judging from her distant look.

Trixie felt a stab of disappointment. "Come on, Trixie. This is it. You've gotten rid of that skank Luna, you're alone with Twilight, it's a beautiful night. If she's not going to notice you, you've got to take the first move! What's the worst that can happen?" Trixie winched a little at the thousand nightmarish possibilities racing through her mind. Maybe Twilight would turn her into something small, ugly and slimy and leave her in a bog somewhere. She looked at Twilight, the object of her greatest passions. The last light of the day made her violet eyes twinkle like little stars in the growing darkness. Her face looked relaxed, content – despite the mildly vacant look. Trixie edged a little closer to her. The purple unicorn smelled of the fresh soil and the fallen leaves of the woods, with a trace of tree sap.

"t... Twilight?" she finally dared.

Twilight paused and turned her head at Trixie. "Yes?"

Trixie looked down at the ground, scraping her hoof against the stone a little as she found words hard to summon. "Damn it, Trixie, come on... just do it!" she thought to herself. With a final breath she looked back up, her eyes meeting Twilight's. She felt herself falling into a sea of violet as she leaned forwards. She just hoped she could swim. "No regrets!" She closed her eyes, and their lips met in a brief kiss.

When she opened her eyes again, Twilight was staring at her. The vacant

look was gone, replaced by... something else. Was it confusion? Doubt? Probably both. Trixie took a step back and looked down "I'm..." No she wasn't sorry. It had felt so right. She tried to breathe normally, tried to steady herself. Was she thinking straight? Twilight looked away, then back at Trixie. The blue unicorn took a deep breath. No, she couldn't be weak. She was the Great and Powerful Trixie, if she couldn't be true to herself and stand by her actions, then Luna had been right about her being nothing. She straightened herself up and tried to look Twilight in the eyes. "Twilight... I love you. I have since the moment I saw you stand up for your friends in the face of terrible danger, though I tried to deny it for the longest time. I know it's... sudden, and I understand if... if you don't feel the same. I'm not sorry, this is how I feel and..."

Twilight looked down, then took a hesitating step towards Trixie and held up a hoof to Trixie's lips. Trixie stared at the purple unicorn, feeling every word escape her. Twilight looked down again, then leaned forwards gingerly. Their lips met once more, and a spark of magic jolted through their souls as the last rays of light sank beneath the horizon. Trixie felt herself losing her grip on the world, her mind. She couldn't tell if she had died of joy, but she didn't care.

Stars sparkled across the heavens like pearly tears, but no moon rose that night.

Trixie looked at Twilight and ran a hoof through her soft mane, watching her peaceful face and listening to her soft breathing while she slept. The blue unicorn had never been happier than in this moment, but a nagging fear and doubt remained and would not let go of her. She had been awake all night, unable to sleep. As the first rays of dawn broke through the window and fell on their entwined bodies, Twilight opened her eyes and smiled at Trixie.

The blue unicorn smiled back, but her emotions showed through and Twilight reached a hoof out to touch her cheek. "What's wrong?"

Trixie took Twilight's hoof in hers. "Twilight... I want to know... I need to

know that you won't leave me."

Twilight lowered her eyes a little. "I'm sorry for disappearing like that, I know you must have been worried sick. But I'll never leave you, Trixie."

Trixie looked at her seriously. "Twilight, this work of yours..." Twilight sighed and looked away, but Trixie pulled her back and looked into her eyes. "I want you to give it a rest. It's doing something to you, and it frightens me."

Twilight looked sad. "I can't. Please don't ask me this, Trixie. Surely you understand there are some things, certain things, that you just have to do."

Trixie closed her eyes and sighed. "Will you at least tell me what it is? I get worried, Twilight. You're not yourself sometimes."

Twilight smiled. "Oh Trixie, you clearly don't know me well enough. I just get a little absorbed by my studies from time to time, I always have. I am almost there, it won't be long, I promise. I'm so close, please don't ask me to stop now."

Trixie sighed, a little hopeless. "Just promise... that you'll never leave me."

Twilight touched her horn against Trixie's, a little spark lighting up between them. "I swear."

Trixie sat down at a table at the café, as a waiter brought her a cup of tea and a freshly baked bran muffin. She thanked the waiter and picked up today's paper, paying no heed to the looks she occasionally got from people. Twilight had spent all morning answering concerned letters from Ponyville, and had now gone to do some shopping. Trixie wanted to take the time to relax and enjoy some of the local fare. She hadn't had anything but hay and water for days now, it was nice to finally get something more refined again. She inhaled deeply at the fresh scent of the baked goods and took a sip of her tea. Turning to the paper, her eyes caught something and she read it quickly.

Grave Robbers Strike Again

Another sighting yesterday at the Dappleshore graveyard is the third in a week. The latest witness, a local resident, says she saw the grave robber flee into the forests south of the city in the early morning. Hoof marks were found and one grave had been disturbed, say investigators.

Trixie put down the cup as she read it again. "Grave robbers? What an unseemly thing" she muttered to herself. She looked up as another pony sat down at her table. For a second she thought it was Twilight, but the stranger looked nothing like Twilight. Trixie gave the black and white striped mare a confused look. "Can I help you?"

The zebra smiled. "I didn't mean to offend. Twilight Sparkle is your friend?"

Trixie blinked at the stranger, the unusual speaking throwing her off for a second. "What? Oh, uh, yes. Why do you ask?"

The zebra held out a hoof in greeting. "Zecora is my name, from Ponyville I came. Worried for Twilight I have been, odd things I've seen."

Trixie shook the hoof a little uncertainly. "Odd things?"

Zecora nodded. "In the forest she's been at night, running from my sight. Warned her I did at the fair, but she wouldn't listen there."

Trixie sighed. "Well, she won't listen to me either. What did you want me to do?"

Zecora looked at her as she stood up. "Keep an eye on her, through the owl we may confer."

Trixie sighed and shook her head as the zebra disappeared around the corner. "Your friends are almost as strange as you, lately, Twilight. What's going on with you?"

It didn't take long for Twilight to revert back to her strange, secluded self.

She no longer disappeared without a word, but she was often gone for a while, and she spent hours, even days locked up in the attic. Trixie often slept on the floor outside the attic where strange sounds and - Trixie thought – voices kept her awake. Twilight, on the rare occasions when she showed herself, refused to speak of what was going on in there and forbid Trixie from entering.

Many of the sounds frightened Trixie and sent shivers down her spine, but Twilight assured her that it was all necessary and that she was almost there, that it would soon be over. Trixie was beginning to doubt if she could believe her. She wanted to believe Twilight, she wanted to trust her, but with each passing day it became harder. What was she doing in there, and who, or what, was she talking to? Trixie had never seen anypony other than Twilight come by, was Twilight growing mad and talking to herself now? Twilight remained quiet on the topic.

Letters kept coming from Ponyville, and Twilight answered each one, assuring her friends of her well being. Trixie noted, with some wonder despite a general satisfaction, that no letters had arrived from Luna since Twilight's return.

And then, after a particularly loud night in which Trixie had felt herself terrified to her core at the sounds coming from the attic and nearly broken down the door in despair, that new mare had appeared. Trixie didn't know what to call her, and she didn't like her. The sounds had stopped suddenly while Trixie was banging on the door of the attic. Twilight had opened it a crack and, all sweaty, pale and bruised, had assured Trixie that everything was all right, that she could go back to sleep. Trixie didn't sleep that night, and barely closed an eye for several nights after. Every time she began to drift off to sleep, she heard those screams in her mind and felt the icy cold run down her spine once more.

The following night Twilight had come down from the attic, along with that hellish mare covered as she always was in a black, concealing cloak. They had left together, Twilight assuring Trixie that she wouldn't be gone long. Trixie was shivering for hours after. Something about that mare in the cloak freaked her out something fierce, but she couldn't explain it.

That was also when the disappearances began.



Trixie opened the letter from Zecora. The zebra was growing concerned, even paranoid. Trixie couldn't blame her. Zecora had been following Twilight and her new friend, the mare that Twilight had only deigned to call Gray, but the two always eluded the zebra. Gray only showed up rarely. Twilight occasionally spent some time in the mansion with Trixie, but it was becoming less and less as time went on.

Trixie picked up today's paper and flipped through the pages. She didn't get out much any more, she didn't want to be away in case Twilight decided to make a rare visit, but she had the local mailmare bring the paper and the most basic necessities every morning, especially since the chilling news began to appear. She almost hoped there would be nothing this time, but her hopes were dashed.

Two More Missing in Hoofington

The recent string of filly disappearances continues, as two fillies are reported missing near Hoofington. They were taken from their home by one or more unknown assailants who entered the house through a window during the night. Police are interested in hearing from any pony who may have information which could lead to the missing fillies, or the arrest of whoever is behind the fillynapping.

Trixie sat down heavily. Sure Twilight had acted strange and obsessed, but she'd never do something like that, Trixie tried to assure herself. But what about her new "friend", this Gray. That pony just wasn't right. Trixie looked up as she heard the clip-clop of hooves outside and saw Twilight through the window. Quickly she hid the letter from Zecora and picked up the paper. As Twilight stepped inside, Trixie threw the paper in front of her, opened on the page of the missing fillies article.

Twilight looked at her, then down at the paper before looking back up. "Yes, I've heard. I do follow the news, you know..." She sighed. "I'm sorry I've been gone, alright?"

Trixie gave her a cold look. "That's not it, although that bothers me too. Tell me what's going on."

Twilight looked hurt. "What are you implying here?"

Trixie pointed at the paper. "Fillies disappear, you're acting strange, and..."

Twilight broke her off angrily. "Are you suggesting I would do such a thing?" Trixie hesitated just long enough for Twilight to pick up on it. "I see. Well if that's how you think of me, then I guess I'll just be getting my things."

Twilight disappeared up the stairs before Trixie could respond. She returned a minute later with a saddle bag over her shoulders and gave Trixie a hurt look.

"Twilight, please..." Trixie tried, but Twilight broke her off.

"Goodbye, Trixie... I thought..." She looked down as she walked out. "I thought you knew me."

Trixie ran out after Twilight, but she was gone. The blue unicorn collapsed on the street outside, crying.

Days passed without word, and fillies continued to disappear. There had been no letter from Zecora since the day Twilight left. It worried Trixie. The letters from Ponyville had likewise stopped coming. Had they given up? The owl still came and went. Trixie wondered why it stayed with her, but she was thankful for the company, even if all it ever said was "Hoo".

Trixie had long since searched the attic now that Twilight had left, in the hope it held answers, but it seemed Twilight had taken everything of note. Some burnt pieces of paper, and a few obscure but unhelpful books were all she found. She occasionally wandered the city now, but never saw Twilight, or Zecora. She began to feel terribly lonely, even wished on rare occasions that Luna would drop by, or send a letter. Why hadn't the princess sent any letters to Twilight?

It was a week after Twilight had stormed out and left Trixie, when a letter arrived from Ponyville. It bore the usual stylish markings of Rarity, though

the writing on the envelope was frantic and nothing like the fashionista's usual careful strokes. Trixie opened it and read the rushed scribblings.

Twilight

Sweetie Belle has been missing since yesterday. Several other fillies have vanished around Ponyville. We're searching high and low, but there's no trace. Please, I beg you, come back. We need you. Why have you abandoned your friends?

Rarity

Trixie sat down and read the letter over and over. She looked up at the darkening sky through the window, then stood up with a determined frown, pulled a blank paper out and began to write.

Dear Luna

I apologize for our last meeting, all the things I've said. You asked me then if it had occurred to me that others might care about Twilight too. You haven't sent any letters of late, but if you still care about her, as I do, I hope you'll answer this one. I fear Twilight is not in her right mind. I fear she's in danger. I even fear, though I hesitate to believe so, that she has something to do with the recent fillynappings.

Please, I don't know who else to turn to. I need your help.

Trixie.

She rolled up the paper and gave it to the owl who disappeared into the night with a single "hoo".

Chapter 4

Revenant

The burnt piece of parchment drifted in front of Trixie's eyes, held up by her magic. The pale light of the moon drifted through the ancient glass of the small window in the dark attic, as the unicorn focused her mind on the flow of magic around her. It had been three days since she sent her letter to Luna, yet still there had been no response from the princess. Trixie had no intention of sitting idly by in case Luna never responded. She had scoured the village for everything on the matter of the missing unicorns, but she couldn't draw any helpful conclusions from the vague writings of the newspapers or the rumors floating around the village.

She had walked around the village and countryside, mostly at night, in the hope of catching sight of Twilight or her friend Gray, with no luck so far. She had even asked Owlowiscious to keep an eye out for them too, even though she wasn't sure the owl fully understood her. She was beginning to feel useless. This was her last hope, other than pure dumb luck. The pieces of burnt paper she had found in the attic, perhaps Twilight had burnt them for a reason. If only Trixie could restore them, perhaps they held important clues.

Trixie wasn't even sure if it was possible. She recalled back when she was but a filly, where a street magician had performed a wonderful trick. He had asked for a valuable possession from the audience and received a silken shawl from a reluctant old mare. He burnt the shawl right there in front of the shocked audience, only to restore it moments later from the ashes, to much cheer and relief. It had taken Trixie a long time to get it right herself since the magician refused to teach her, and it was a long time since she had performed it. Even worse, restoring the actual information instead of just the blank paper was an entirely different matter.

Ever since her last argument with Luna, she had felt her magic grow stronger, as if a dam once holding it back had been cracked. She felt stronger than ever, yet still she had tried several times now to restore the paper, each time getting tantalizingly close only to have her hopes dashed. It was exhausting, but the thought of Twilight being in danger forced her to

drive herself to the very limit of her ability. Trixie closed her eyes in concentration once again and felt the magic surge through her and into the burnt fragments of paper. She could feel the raw magic coalescing in front of her. She felt herself lose touch with it, felt her mind slip. With a hopeless cry she collapsed, exhausted.

A small piece of paper landed on her nose. Trixie opened her eyes and stared at the product of her spell. Had it worked? Did it finally work? Despite having spent herself to the last, the blue unicorn sat up on her haunches and lifted the paper carefully in the light of the moon. The paper was mostly intact, and there was writing. Feeling her heart skip a beat, Trixie narrowed her eyes. A smile broadened her face as she collapsed again with a sigh.

"I did it!"

The writing was faint, as if the ink had been watered down. Trixie blamed her lack of mental strength for this, but was pleased that she could read most of the previously burnt note.

...only temporary. My own blood can sustain for only a few minutes at a time. It is odd, is it something wrong with me? I thought I was strong, Celestia always thought I was. I would give more, but I dare not lose concentration from blood loss during the spell. I must remember the warnings; never call forth that which you can not put down again, lest it should command you. Perhaps Trixie? Or Luna, surely an alicorn's blood... No, it is too risky, my own simply must suffice for now.

The last subject was most helpful... at last, with the location of her grave in hoof, I must...

Trixie shivered. Blood? Had Twilight been playing with blood magic? Were she really considering using her and Luna as... donors? And whose grave did she seek, and for what unseemly purpose? Perhaps the other notes would help, once restored, but she was too exhausted to try now. She closed her eyes, trying to clear her mind and rest, just for a moment. She

couldn't waste too much time...

A tapping at the window woke her up. Bleary eyed she glanced up and squinted before getting up to open the window. There was a flutter as Owlowsious landed on the window sill with an urgent "Hoo!", then took off again, hovering in the light of the moon as if waiting for Trixie to follow.

"What? What is it?" Trixie tried, still sleepy and confused. The owl gave another "Hoo!" and flapped his wings. It took Trixie a moment to understand, then she was bolting down the stairs and out the door into the night.

Trixie galloped after the owl through the dark streets of Dappleshore. She stopped, panting as the owl landed on a roof and looked down at her with its large, round eyes. Trixie shivered a little and glanced around, then back at the owl with a questioning look. The owl turned its head to stare down a small alley and nodded its head. Trixie hesitated, then warily walked down the alley.

Soon a pair of hushed voices reached her from up ahead.

"I just... I'm not sure about this." Trixie recognized the voice. It was Twilight's. She edged closer, staying within the shadows. Up ahead she spotted Twilight and somepony else. She couldn't make out the face of the other mare, but the cold running down her spine left her no doubt about the mare's identity. It was Twilight's odd friend, Gray.

"And why is that, child?" Trixie shivered at that voice. She couldn't tell, but there was something very wrong about it.

Twilight looked uncertain, even a little afraid. "I don't... don't know, I'm just..."

The other mare held up Twilight's head with a hoof to look in her eyes. "You're starting to doubt, Twilight. That is unwise. You must remain focused, you must know certainty." Twilight stared at the other mare as if

petrified. "You have been very helpful, Twilight. Don't change that."

There was an ominous sound to those last words, Trixie felt. Twilight nodded and looked down. Gray smiled and looked up, Trixie seeing the row of white teeth in the dark. "You go on, and do what you must. I will be along shortly to assist you, I need to take care of a little private matter."

Twilight nodded again and trotted off into the darkness. The mare watched her disappear, then pulled her hood over her head and trotted down a side alley. Trixie felt her heart beat, almost fearing the other mare would hear it in the quiet of the night as she crept along in the darkness, following just far enough away to keep Gray in sight.

They walked for what seemed to Trixie like an eternity, through streets and over fields until they reached the woods. Trixie's throat was dry and her heart racing, but she couldn't give up now. She needed answers, and there was only one way to find them. With her heart in her throat she followed Gray into the forest, staying at a distance and hiding behind everything she could find to not be seen. Gray thankfully seemed oblivious to her lurking presence and walked with purpose through the dark forest. Trixie began to wonder where they were going, what she would find, and if she would be able to find her way back.

After perhaps half an hour of walking, Gray finally stopped in a small glade dotted with large stones, like teeth of a giant strewn about the forest floor. Trixie crept closer, trying to see what she was doing, but the other mare was simply standing there, glancing up at the canopy as if in thought. Trixie was close now and peeked out from behind an ancient oak.

She almost jumped as Gray suddenly spoke without turning. "A trap most deviously wrought, a little insect in the web is caught..." Trixie stared, a faint purple glow emanating from under the mare's hood. Suddenly struck by immense dread, Trixie began to back away but froze in her tracks as the other mare turned, her deep purple eyes staring straight into Trixie's. The other mare smiled under the hood and walked slowly up to Trixie, who felt herself powerless under the gaze.

"The last little insect enjoyed rhymes, I thought you might too. Did you like it? I'm no poet, I admit." The mare stood right in front of her now. "You know, I believe Twilight told me about you. Such a fine unicorn, such potential... such a shame. Let me tell you a secret, Trixie..." Trixie stared as the mare let her hood drop, revealing her face. A gasp escaped Trixie's lips. Gray smiled, a wicked grin, white teeth shining in the blackness of the night.

"I prefer younger fare, untainted by experience, but for you I shall make an exception. Tell me, Trixie, what happens to little insects caught in the spider's web?"



Luna landed in front of the old manor and looked at the door with a sigh. She didn't want to see Trixie again. She wasn't even sure she wanted to see Twilight again. The memory of seeing them together, on that night, still tore at her heart. For some reason Luna had turned around, perhaps feeling that she hadn't said properly farewell. It was a silly thing, but she wished she could forget the moon for one night, maybe let Tia deal with that, just so she could stay with Twilight. She had flown back, only to see Twilight kissing Trixie outside the manor. She should have known better, she shouldn't have dared to hope.

Luna lowered her head, trying to fight back tears, then stepped up to knock on the door. "Trixie?" She called and pushed the door. It hadn't been closed properly and opened with a creak. Luna stepped inside and looked around, but the mansion was quiet and there was no sign of Trixie or Owllovisious. She felt uneasy as she walked from room to room. The house had always been a little odd to her, as old houses sometimes were, but now it seemed positively wrong. It was something few others could sense, but as an alicorn, and one previously so attuned to dark powers, Luna felt her skin crawl at the touch of magic lingering here as she ascended the stairs towards the attic.

The door to the attic opened and Luna felt herself trembling a little. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before stepping inside. The lingering darkness was strong here, but whatever had caused it was now gone and the effect was fading. She looked around, spotting the scattered

pieces of burnt paper. Walking up to take a look, she picked up the only piece that seemed intact, slowly reading the troubling words. "Oh Twilight... I have to find you, I just hope it's not too late for you." She picked up the rest of the papers and ran back down, placing the burnt remains on the desk before running outside and pausing to glance around.

There came a "Hoo" from somewhere in the distance. Luna's ears perked and she looked up, responding with a little whistle. A moment of silence, then another "Hoo!", now more urgent. Luna listened before unfolding her wings and with a mighty beat set off in the direction of the sound. She saw the woods appear behind the mansion and grow closer as she flew. A small pair of eyes looked back at her from among the trees, lit up by the light of her moon. "Hoo!" the night bird called, the eyes blinking as it turned and disappeared among the trees. Luna followed, gliding silently through the woods on her wings.

It was not so much the faint purple glow amidst the trees ahead, as it was the sudden waves of almost tangible wrongness emanating from it, that drew Luna's attention and forced her down close to the ground with a slight gasp. As her hooves touched the ground again she thought she heard a voice up ahead.

"Tell me, Trixie, what happens to little insects caught in the spider's web?" At first she thought it was Twilight speaking, but doubt soon took root in her mind. She moved closer, suddenly hesitating despite growing urgency.

Luna stumbled forwards, feeling herself tremble. "Tia help me..." she whispered. The sickening purple glow grew stronger, the voice she had mistakenly attributed to Twilight broke into a dark, chilling laughter. Luna thought she could hear a faint cry, a long, pained sound like a dying bird, and something collapsing heavily on the ground. The sound of the cry cut through her heart and broke her out of her brief stupor. She ran forwards, beating her wings before standing up on her hind legs as she lifted from the ground. Her horn glowed and in its light, clashing with the purple glow, she saw a shadowy figure leaning over a unicorn lying among the leaves under a large oak. The cloaked pony hissed and backed away at the sight of the princess. Luna felt the dark power recede slightly and took the opportunity to advance, trying to conceal her trembling.

"Begone! I know not what manner of creature you are, but you will not lay your claws upon an innocent pony!" She hovered over the body of the unicorn now, as the cloaked figure stepped back then laughed. Luna backed away an inch, despite her best effort to remain strong. She kept her eyes firmly on the figure, whose purple eyes met hers for a brief second. A tense second of staring, then the figure turned and fled among the trees like a shadow with a chilling laughter.

Luna breathed heavily and sank down on the ground next to the pony. She gasped when she lowered her head to glance upon the unfortunate unicorn. "Trixie!" she called, but the unicorn did not respond. Her blue coat had turned a pale and faded color, almost gray like ashes, but was stained a deep crimson by the blood still pouring from the deep cut in her neck. Her eyes had lost their hue and now stared blankly into the darkness of the forest.

Luna gasped. "Oh no..." There was blood everywhere. She pressed a hoof hard against the wound, hoping to stall the flow of blood, hoping to buy herself a few seconds. The tip of her horn glowed brightly as she lowered her head. Beads of sweat trickled down her face as she concentrated, forcing the flesh of the wound to seal up. It was crude, but it was the best she could do in the situation.

"Don't worry, Trixie, I'll save you..." she said as she lifted up the unicorn and placed her on her back, between her wings. "I'll take you home... maybe it's not too late." Luna spread her wings and rushed back towards the mansion, careful not to drop Trixie on the way.

Luna placed Trixie gently on a bed of blankets in front of the fireplace. Her horn glowed brightly as she lit the fire and called several things to her side. Trixie was breathing only faintly, showing no signs of improvement. She had lost a lot of blood, Luna just hoped it hadn't been too much. While a pot of water was heating over the flames, Luna examined Trixie closely. She had only a weak pulse and she was growing cold quickly.

Luna soaked a piece of cloth in the hot water and carefully washed Trixie, hoping to bring some warmth and life back into her body. There was no

detectable response, but Luna kept working. "Don't die on me, Trixie. I know we... haven't been the best of friends, but I never meant for you to get hurt. And I need you. Twilight needs you." She closed her eyes, trying to clear her mind, then gently placed the tip of her horn against Trixie's. She focused, extending her senses, trying to feel Trixie, trying to feel the unicorn's wavering life force. She could barely sense it any more. It was as if the unicorn had been sucked dry, and not only of blood, leaving behind only an empty husk save for the barest trace of life.

"A spark of life... just a little, just... enough" she whispered to herself. It wasn't exactly her strength, the magic of life and light was more her sister's area of expertise, but she had to try. "Better to try and fail..." Luna took a breath and felt the flow of magic gather at the tip of her horn, before releasing it. A brief, bright spark jumped between their horns, causing Trixie's body to shudder with a slight gasp. Luna opened her eyes slowly, glancing down hopefully. A faint hint of color returned to Trixie's coat, and her eyes cleared a little, but it soon faded again. Luna lowered her head. "I'm sorry Trixie... I was too late for you..."

Luna opened her eyes. She hadn't moved, for how long she didn't know, while her mind drifted oceans of night. Blood. The thought of blood emerged out of the dark. Twilight's note in the attic. Had she been dreaming? She looked down. Trixie was still lying there, motionless. Was she dead? Luna placed a hoof against the unicorn's neck. There was a slight pulse, very faint. She looked up at her moon through the window, then back down at the floor in front of her, hesitating, biting her lip. After a moment she looked back up at the sky.

"I'm sorry Tia... I know..." She looked down. "I shouldn't. Such magic... forgive me."

Luna held up a hoof as a small knife levitated off the floor. With a quick breath she clenched her teeth and placed the blade against her leg, making a swift cut. The deep crimson blood of the alicorn trickled down Luna's hoof and fell as drops upon Trixie's lips and tongue. A bright glow surrounded them both as Luna closed her eyes, giving herself over to the magic enveloping them both.

With a gasp of exhaustion, Luna collapsed on the floor next to Trixie. Her wound had stopped bleeding, she had given everything she dared, and the magic had been draining on her. Barely able to sit up, Luna simply lay there, watching Trixie. Color began to return, little by little, to the unicorn's features. Her eyes cleared, even blinked before closing. Her breathing grew stronger as she seemed to lapse into a deep sleep. Luna sighed with relief and closed her eyes as well.



The light of the sun filtered through the window and lit up the desk where Luna was standing, flipping through papers and letters. This was around the time she would normally get some rest, but despite being drained and having stayed up all night watching over Trixie, she couldn't find rest. The blue unicorn was improving, and now Luna found her mind struggling to puzzle out the situation. Something was going on, and Twilight could be in grave danger, if she wasn't even at the heart of it all. She had gathered everything she could find in the house, all the letters and papers Trixie had collected since moving in with Twilight. She had also done a little research in the archives of Canterlot before coming here. Luna thought she had found some patterns, but she wasn't sure yet what they meant.

She looked up and turned her head as Trixie stirred a little. Pausing in her work, the princess walked over to the blue unicorn and knelt down to examine her. The color had almost returned to Trixie's coat and her breathing was normal. The wound in her neck looked bad, but seemed to cause no trouble. Luna wondered if she would make a full recovery, or suffer permanent scars.

Trixie stirred again, slowly opened her eyes and turned to look up at Luna who was kneeling next to her. Trixie's eyes had cleared and regained their color, like her coat, but they were filled with confusion.

"Trixie? How are you feeling?" Luna asked quietly.

Trixie looked at her and the room around them for a time as if trying to remember. "What... happened? I remember..." She paused, clearly unsure of something. Luna sat down, deciding to give the unicorn as much time as she needed. Trixie furrowed her brow, thinking. "I... sent you a letter. Did... did you get it?"

Luna nodded. "I did, a few days ago."

Trixie stared at her, then looked down. "A few... days? I... remember little after that."

Luna smiled sadly at her. "If hazy memories are the worst you come away from this with, consider yourself lucky. You were in a very bad condition when I found you."

Trixie sighed and lay her head on her hooves. "I feel... strange. Empty."

Luna nodded and stood up. "You seem to be recovering well enough. Just try to rest and I'm sure you'll be fine."

Trixie lay quietly as Luna returned to the desk. "What about Twilight?" she asked after a while.

Luna glanced over her shoulder. "I'm not sure... I found this in the attic, it may be a clue." Luna held up the piece of paper Trixie had previously restored, while she searched through the other papers on the desk. Trixie was silent for a few seconds, then let out a shriek. Luna jumped and spun around, staring at Trixie's horrified face. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Trixie's eyes were tearing up, her face twisted in exertion. "My magic! I can't... I have no magic!"

Luna stared at Trixie, then at the paper she was holding up and which Trixie was evidently trying to pick up with her magic, to no effect. Trixie collapsed and burst into full tears. Luna stood for a second, before sitting down next to the distraught mare. "I'm so sorry, Trixie! Maybe... maybe it'll return, maybe you just need time to recover fully."

Trixie looked up at Luna through tears. "And what if it doesn't?"

Luna sank a little and placed a wing comfortingly over Trixie. The thought of a unicorn losing her magic was a painful one. "I... I'm sorry, Trixie. I know it may not mean much coming from me, but I mean it!"

"I talked with the investigators in Canterlot before coming here, and they confirm that all the missing fillies were unicorns, young ones, most still without their cutie marks. I see one is the sister of Twilight's friend, Rarity." Luna glanced at Trixie who just nodded silently, still looking at the paper from the attic which, after having read it, she was trying to levitate off the floor to no effect.

Luna continued, holding up a map of Equestria filled with dots. "All disappearances happened within a day's flight of Dappleshore, most were closer. I don't know what the significance of all this is, but that's what I have been able to find."

Trixie sighed, giving the map a uninterested glance. "It's more than I could tell."

Luna looked at her sadly. "You did what you could, Trixie. You didn't have access to the official reports in Canterlot, but I'm impressed with your restoration of that letter. It could prove an important clue."

Trixie sighed and lay her head down on the floor, staring at the paper in front of her, still not moving the slightest bit. "That's not much consolation if I can't get my magic back. Only makes the tragedy greater. The Great and Powerful Trixie, finally beginning to live up to her name, only to lose it all."

Luna watched Trixie sadly, then turned back to her papers with a sigh. "I also found something else in the records. Turns out Twilight bought another place here in Dappleshore, not long ago. An old farm in the fields outside the city."

Trixie looked up. "Oh? I bet that's where they're staying then."

Luna nodded. "I bet it just might be. I think we need to check it out, in any case. You should stay here and recover. I'll go take a look and return with what I find."

Trixie frowned and stood up. "No deal! I have no intention of staying here while you run around and do all the work. Magic or not, I'm not useless,

and I won't be treated as such!" Luna opened her mouth, but Trixie gave her a cold stare. "Don't you dare change my mind. I'm coming along!"

Chapter 5

Mesmarerized

Luna paused on the road outside the farmhouse, located on a large, deserted lot of land. "It looks abandoned to me" she said as Trixie came to a halt beside her. The farm was old and decrepit, much like the mansion had been before Twilight and Trixie had shined it up a little. If Twilight lived here now, she hadn't done much to make the exterior look inviting.

Trixie gave the place a glance and felt a slight shiver. "It looks creepy, is what it does. I can't imagine why Twilight would live here, if that is what she does."

"Only one way to find out if she does" said Luna and approached the house. Trixie followed, glad that the sun was still high on the sky. The mere thought of going here in the darkness of night made her uneasy. Luna glanced through a few old windows and shook her head. "It looks empty."

"Should we knock?" Trixie gestured at the door.

"Maybe that's best..." Luna murmured and gave the door a few hard knocks. There was no response, everything was silent save for a distant bird chirping; an oddly ominous sound.

Trixie looked through the window. "I don't like this, even in broad daylight."

"Maybe it's our luck they're not home..." Luna mused. "I'd like to take a look around inside and you can't do that very well with people there."

"What if they return and find us snooping around?"

"We just say the door was open, that we were looking for Twilight."

Trixie nodded a little, not feeling too good about the plan but unable to think of anything better. "Alright, how do we get in?"

Luna considered the door and the old, rusty lock. "Piece of cake." Her horn glowed slightly and there was a click from the lock before the door opened with a long creak. "I didn't sneak around the castle when I was young without learning a thing or two about locks. My sister liked to put locks on everything."

"I can't imagine why." Trixie snickered and followed the sneaky princess into the house. While Luna checked out the living room, Trixie took a look in the kitchen. "Somepony's been making tea recently" she called and took a smell of the pot on the kitchen table. "Twilight's favorite, too, if I'm not entirely mistaken."

Trixie opened the pantry door and peeked inside. "Oats and hay. Pots and pans...." She paused in her brief summary of the room's contents, her eyes falling on a pile in the corner. "And a lot of rope!" She stepped into the small room and poked a hoof at the pile of ropes. Her eyes narrowed as she thought she saw something. Digging through the pile her heart skipped a beat and she took a step back. A slight smear of red covered some of the ropes, and now her hoof. Trixie stared down at her hoof and the drops of scarlet. Hesitantly she took a sniff and wrinkled her nose at the coppery tang. "There's blood on some of these..." She whispered and backed out of the pantry.

A hollow sound as of something hitting the floor caught her attention from the other room and she spun around, ears perked. "Luna?" she called as she hurried out of the kitchen.

Luna turned to Trixie as she came through the door. "Oh, I just... dropped a book. Are you... alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Trixie stopped and glanced around the room. It looked like a fairly nice study, given the otherwise decrepit state of the house. A few bookcases, a small fireplace, a desk. Luna was standing in front of the bookcases, a large and old looking book on the floor in front of her. "I could say the very same of you, Luna. I found rope in the pantry, a lot of it. Some of it had blood on it."

Luna picked the book up again and dusted it off a little. "Are you sure it was blood?" Trixie simply nodded. "That's troubling. But maybe there's a harmless explanation. This is harder to explain." She gave a nod at the

book.

Trixie walked over to look at the cover. "Quirts and Irons? Maybe I have a dirty mind, but..."

Luna tilted her head at Trixie, her expression one of mild amusement. "Yes I think you do... but as disturbing as that image is, it wasn't what made me drop the book. Look." She opened the book and flipped through a few pages of ancient writing, esoteric diagrams, and disturbing imagery, none of which seemed to have anything to do with whips or stirrups. "The title doesn't fit the content. I know this book... Celestia has a copy in the royal library, under very heavy guard ever since..." Luna stopped and looked away. "I shouldn't be looking at this, Celestia will banish me again if she finds out! I had no idea there even existed other copies."

"I don't follow... what is this book?" Trixie looked confused. She had never been much of a book worm, and what she had gleaned from the book was totally incomprehensible to her.

Luna glanced down at the book again. Trixie thought there was a hint of curiosity and desire, even lust, in her eyes, as if something within her drew her to peruse the ancient lore in front of her. "The Neighcromicon... and it's better if you don't know. The fact that Twilight has this kind of book in her possession makes me ill."

"It could be her friend Gray's. That pony freaks me out." Trixie felt an icy chill run down her spine at the thought; or was it something more?

"Can I help you two?"

Both Luna and Trixie jumped and turned around at the voice. Luna swiftly returned the book to its place on the shelf. "Oh... I... we were just looking for Twilight."

Gray, her face concealed by shadow under her cowl, looked at them from the doorway. The silence felt like it lasted for ages before she spoke again.

"Twilight is not here at the moment. Perhaps I can help instead?"

Luna looked at Trixie, who stood there as stiff as a statue. "Just uh, tell her we were here."

Gray gave a brief nod and stepped into the room towards the two.

"Certainly. But perhaps you would like to stay, your majesty? It is not every day we get royal visits, and I don't think we have been properly introduced. I am called Gray Ashes," the cloaked pony stopped in front of the two and bowed slightly, somewhat formally "and of course I already know the two of you, from miss Sparkle. I apologize if I have seemed unfriendly, I am simply unaccustomed to these lands."

"Pleased to... meet you." Luna stammered slightly, feeling uneasy around the mysterious mare. "You're not from around here?"

Gray smiled, rows of white teeth visible under the hood. She seemed accommodating and friendly, or at least acted so, Luna thought. "I am but passing through these lands, yes. Twilight is a distant relative of mine you see, and she has been most courteous in allowing me to stay with her briefly. Such a bright young mare she is, very studious and clever."

"Yes... very." Luna murmured and glanced at the frozen Trixie. "We should really go, miss Gray... it's been nice meeting you, but we wouldn't want to impose."

"Nonsense, your majesty, it is no imposition at all. Perhaps I could offer something to drink while you wait? I'm sure Twilight will be back soon and happy to see you." The dark mare walked over to a small cabinet and opened it, three glasses and a bottle floating out in a faint glow of purple. "Not quite royal standards, mind you, but we have a passable malt whiskey if you like." She glanced over her shoulder at the two.

Luna had given Trixie a nudge and begun edging towards the door. She stopped when Gray turned around to look at them. "Oh, we'd love to stay, but we really have to get going. Just... tell Twilight we were here."

"Of course, princess." Gray said and bowed, a hint of disappointment in her voice, although Luna suspected it was faked like the rest of the mare's friendly demeanor. "Let me at least follow you out" she said and gestured

them through the room and out the front door. Luna gave a nervous smile in parting and hurried off with Trixie. As she glanced back she thought she saw a pair of purple eyes observing them from one of the windows. She shuddered and quickened her pace.

Luna stopped outside the mansion and looked at Trixie. "Are you OK? You look as pale as a ghost."

Trixie shivered and looked over her shoulder. "I'll be fine... that mare just freaks me out something fierce. I don't know what it is, but she's just... wrong."

Luna lay a hoof around Trixie's shoulders. "I know... she makes me uneasy too. Come on, let's get inside, get something to eat. You just need to take it easy."

Trixie nodded and pushed the door open. A pair of purple eyes stared at them from inside and Trixie nearly screamed. Twilight looked almost as shocked herself. "I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to..." Her voice broke. "Come in, quick... close the door!"

Luna and Trixie walked in, and Luna closed the door behind them. "Twilight?! We've been so worried... what's going on? Are you alright?"

Twilight glanced out the window nervously. She looked completely frazzled. "I'm so sorry... I'm in way over my head! You must help me, please!" she cried.

Trixie walked up to Twilight. "Sit down, Twilight... take a deep breath."

Twilight fell down on her haunches heavily and breathed deeply. Luna stood a bit away while Trixie sat down next to her and tried to comfort the panicking pony. "Just calm down, Twilight."

Twilight didn't seem to calm much. "It's terrible... and it's all my mistake. Please you must help me." She looked up, staring at Trixie and Luna. "You must help me kill Gray! We must kill her and... and..." She freaked out and jumped up, but Trixie quickly pulled her back down. "And acid! We need

acid, lots of acid! It's the only way! We need to kill her and get rid of the body!"

Luna and Trixie exchanged concerned glances. Luna knelt down next to Twilight and looked her deep in the eyes. "Twilight, calm down, do you hear me? Let's get something to eat, all of us, and you'll tell us everything. I think it's high time we learned what you've been doing all this time."

===

"It began when I was investigating my ancestor. I hit a dead end, as you remember. But just as I was giving up, by chance I stumbled upon something..."

They were sitting in the kitchen. Luna had made tea and sandwiches, while Trixie tried to calm down Twilight. Something had made the purple unicorn freak out, and it had taken a long time for her to relax enough to speak coherently. She was sitting, staring into her tea as she spoke, occasionally looking up with a start at the slightest sound outside. Trixie was sitting next to her, holding her and trying to comfort her.

"You remember the old portrait out in the hall? The one of my ancestor... Midnight Spindle. It has a hidden compartment behind it. It was there I found what I was looking for... documents, books, and... other things she left behind, for me... for her descendants." She lowered her cup of tea, resting it on the table. "Fillystata... Midnight, my ancestor, I mean... she was an accomplished sorceress in her days. She described her work in those documents, and I became... obsessed with it. I learned all I could from her notes and books. But it was not enough, I knew there was more... much more. And I knew there was only one way for me to learn of it."

Luna and Trixie looked at her in silence, waiting for her to continue her story. Twilight stared into her tea. It had probably grown cold by now, but that seemed to be the last worry on Twilight's mind. "Midnight... had found a way to..." she glanced up at Luna and Trixie briefly, as if trying to determine if she should really tell them this. "...call the spirits of the dead, to... learn from them. Imagine how much you could learn... so much is lost when a pony... passes away. It's a tragedy, but... Midnight could learn from them. And I knew I could... learn from her. I just needed her..." Twilight sank, a lump forming in her throat "... her ashes. I had to find her grave,

and... I did."

Trixie looked at Luna, then back at Twilight. "You were the grave robber?"

Twilight nodded, clearly uncomfortable admitting such a thing. "I had to! And I thought I could... I thought I was... strong enough to do what I had to do. Oh Celestia... what have I done?" The purple unicorn slumped over, hopelessly. It took her a while to continue. "There were rumors in those days, that Midnight was... a witch. The fillies called her Fillystata, because of her cutie mark of a black spider in its web, and because it sounded... ominous I guess. They whispered of how she took away fillies and did... awful things to them. I don't know, silly filly tales, maybe they thought she ate them."

She finally took a sip of her tea, grimacing a little at the cold drink. Luna offered her a fresh cup and she took it with a sigh. "Eventually others, not just fillies, began to whisper. She was growing quite old, but didn't show it. She was older than most ponies could ever dream of, yet still looked like a mare in her prime. Such things breed jealousy and suspicion, but there were other whispers... about her husband, who grew more and more secluded as time went on and finally simply disappeared. No wonder Midnight was the subject of much gossip."

Twilight sighed and lifted her cup to take a sip. "Finally, a group of Dappleshore citizens decided to take matters into their own hooves. Midnight was well respected in Dappleshore, for all her donations and civil work. She did much for the little community, and despite being eccentric and aloof she did seem quite pleasant to many. There was no official evidence of anything amiss, only stubborn rumors. So these ponies decided to break into her mansion, and find the evidence. If the police wouldn't look into her dealings, they would do it themselves. I am not sure what they found, or what exactly happened, but I know how it ended. There was a fire, and Midnight died. Her burial was quietly and quickly performed, in secret, and everything about the whole incident was hushed up. Her daughter changed her name in shame, and so on. What is important is that I managed to find out who was behind the raid, and the burial, and I found their graves." She paused, silent for a long time. "From them I learned where Midnight had been buried. I found her grave, recovered her ashes, and..." She stopped, staring into her tea.

Both Luna and Trixie were staring at her. Luna broke the silence first. "What are you saying?"

Twilight fiddled with her cup a little. "I brought her back. At first I could only keep the spirits of the dead for a few minutes at a time, with my own blood. But Midnight remains and I... I fear I know how she sustains herself."

Trixie broke her off. "Wait, wait... you're saying, Gray is your dead ancestor?" Twilight nodded. "And you think... that she's behind the filly napping?" Twilight nodded again.

Luna stood by the desk, looking out the window at the night sky. She had arranged for Celestia to handle the moon for a few days. She'd have to make up for it later, but right now she knew she had to be here, for Twilight. She sighed. Maybe she had failed Twilight, maybe she should have paid more attention... She looked up as she heard Twilight step into the room. She lowered her head again with a faint sigh.

Twilight stopped in the doorway. "I'm sorry. You must be disappointed..."

Luna turned to look at her, shaking her head gently. "I know better than most how it is to fall prey to such spells... it's all too easy, even for the best of us. I'm not disappointed, Twilight, not in you..." She lowered her head. "... I'm just..." She paused, feeling Twilight looking at her and waiting for her to continue. She sighed. "I guess it's also far too easy to fall prey to jealousy." She glanced up at Twilight as the purple unicorn walked up next to her. "You and Trixie... I should be happy for you..."

Twilight lay a hoof on her shoulder. "Luna... you know I care about you deeply, and I will always be your friend. But it would never work... you're a princess, you're immortal, I'm... just another unicorn. My entire life is but a drop in the ocean of yours."

Luna glanced down at her hooves. She knew it was true, but her heart rebelled against all reason. "I could... If you asked, I would..."

Twilight stopped her, pulling Luna's head up to look in her eyes. "But I won't ask for that! Don't even think that thought, Luna. That is one gift I would

never accept from you... I am not worthy of such a sacrifice."

Luna closed her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. Twilight pulled her close. "My heart belongs to Trixie... if she'll ever forgive me for what I've done now. But you'll always be my friend, Luna, and I shall never forget you. One day you'll find some pony who can be more to you... some pony you can spend eternity with, and perhaps you will remember me as a friend long after I am gone to whatever awaits me beyond."

Luna buried her face in Twilight's mane. "I will never forget you either, Twilight, no matter what happens. That I swear."

Trixie lay on her bed of blankets, staring into the darkness. She heard Twilight walk in and felt the sadness of the purple unicorn, but she didn't turn or say anything. She wasn't sure how she felt any more. She loved Twilight, but the other unicorn had let her down repeatedly now. She could hear Twilight sit down nearby; even without looking Trixie knew she was ashamed and sad.

"Trixie?" Trixie didn't respond, but Twilight knew she was awake. She looked at the blue unicorn lying in the dark with her back to Twilight. "I'm really sorry. For everything. I know I may not deserve it, but I wish you would forgive me. I let you down, I just wish I could make it all good again." Trixie didn't say anything, but Twilight thought she heard her crying. "I... heard about your magic. I can't say how sorry I am... I should have been there for you. If I could, I would give you all of mine. It's all my fault... I can understand if you hate me."

Trixie stirred a little and turned her head at Twilight. "I don't hate you, Twilight. Perhaps I'm disappointed, perhaps I don't know if I can trust you yet, but I'll never hate you. I know where to place the blame for all this, and it was never on you." She turned around fully and sat up. "I love you, Twilight, and no ghoul from the past will ever change that. Together we'll deal with this mistake of yours." She reached out a hoof to Twilight who took it and smiled a little.

Trixie leaned forwards and the tip of her horn touched Twilight's briefly. A tiny light, like a little purple star, lit up between them as their lips met.

Twilight sighed in Trixie's embrace and closed her eyes. "Whatever happens, I will always be with you."



Trixie opened her eyes. Something was wrong. The sun had not yet risen above the horizon, but Trixie was wide awake. Twilight wasn't resting next to her. In her place was a small note. Trixie strained her eyes to read it in the darkness.

Dear Trixie

Don't worry, I'm fine. Please come and see me at the farm when you have the time. I'll be there all day.

Your Twilight

Trixie cursed loudly. Loud enough for Luna to poke her head in from the next room. "You alright in here?"

Trixie nodded at the note. "Twilight has run off again."

Luna took the note and read it with a sigh. "We need to find her, now. I have a bad feeling about this."

Trixie stood up. "Do you think she's decided to face Gray on her own?"

Luna shook her head. "I don't know..."

Luna and Trixie hurried out the door and down the street towards the farm. The red glow of the sun was just rising above the horizon as the old house came into sight. A bit of smoke rose lazily from the chimney and a faint light flickered in one of the windows. "Looks deceptively idyllic, in a creepy way" Luna muttered as they stopped outside.

Trixie frowned. "Do you think Gray is in there? Do you think it's a trap?"

Luna considered. "I don't know... but we should be ready for anything." She looked at Trixie. "Be careful, stay behind me." She then walked up to the door, preparing herself before knocking. Barely had she knocked before the door opened.

Twilight smiled out at them and gestured for them to step inside. "You're early. I'm sorry if I made you nervous, please come in, and I'll explain."

Luna and Trixie exchanged concerned glances as they followed Twilight inside. The sudden change in mood from the night before, when she had seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown, was troubling.

Twilight lead the way into the kitchen where she quickly prepared three cups of tea before gesturing for them to sit down. "I'm really sorry about last night, and for my negligence before that. I have been so terribly busy, so consumed by my studies, I have barely slept for what seems like weeks. I hope you'll disregard my crazy talk last night. Stay awake long enough and you'll go crazy sure enough, and start having trouble distinguishing between dream and reality. I should have known better, but..." She smiled and shrugged. "You know how I am once I get started, once something catches my interest. It's so hard for me to let go again."

She sipped her tea while Luna and Trixie stared at her. Noticing the stares she looked up and sighed. "I really am sorry for my behavior these past weeks. I've been a terrible friend, and I hope I can make it up to you again. Anyway, Gray left this morning, returning home to continue her own studies. I wish you could have said farewell to her, I really think you got off on the wrong hoof with her, but I didn't want to wake you. I'll be doing some cleaning up here today, but maybe we can all go out tonight and have some fun? I really want to make it up to you."

Trixie looked at Luna as they left the farm. The princess appeared deep in thought as they walked back towards the mansion. "What do you think?"

Luna glanced over her shoulder, then back at Trixie. "I think something is wrong. And I think we need to find out what it is."

Trixie nodded. "She was acting weird. And I don't just mean the sudden change of mood. There was something about her that seemed off. What do you think it means?"

"I don't know, Trixie. Maybe she's brainwashed. Or maybe what she says is true and she just needs a good night's sleep, or two."

"I don't believe that. In fact I don't think I believe a word she says any more. What do you suggest we do?"

Luna thought for a while, then stopped and turned to Trixie. "You go with her tonight, as planned. Have dinner, chat with her and see if you can get anything out of her. I'll come up with an excuse to not go... shouldn't be hard, I'll just say Celestia requested my presence in Canterlot. While you're out, I'll have a look around the farm."

Trixie bit her lip nervously. "What if Gray is still there?"

"I can handle myself, and it'll be easier to snoop around if it's just me. I'll be fine. If I can sneak past my sister's watchful eyes and all her guards and locks, I think I can handle one unicorn."

Luna didn't seem entirely convinced of her own words, but Trixie knew there was no point arguing it. She couldn't think of a better plan herself, and they needed to get to the bottom of things. "Just... be careful, Luna. I don't want to be alone if something happens."

Luna smiled. "I will, Trixie. I promise."

Chapter 6

In the Flesh

The moon peeked above the horizon as Luna landed in the garden outside the farm. She glanced up and watched the pale orb and the thousands of stars sparkling in the black sky. This was the time when she felt most comfortable, but there was little consolation in the sky tonight. She didn't know how much time she could expect to have before Trixie and Twilight returned, and she had no idea what she was even looking for or what she should expect to find. She turned her gaze to the farm. There was no light in the windows, or smoke from the chimney; the place seemed completely abandoned. She hoped it wasn't merely a ruse.

With slow steps, Luna walked up to the old door and focused on the lock. A click and a creak later the door stood open before her, a portal into the darkness and the unknown. She stood for a brief minute, listening breathlessly, but everything was dead silence. Finally she braced herself and stepped through the door.

The kitchen looked like it had when they were there earlier. It obviously wasn't here Twilight had done her "cleaning", the cups of tea were still standing out on the table. Crossing the room, Luna pushed open the door to the small pantry. Trixie had mentioned rope and stains of blood, but all Luna could see was bales of hay and sacks of oat. Nothing out of the ordinary for a pantry.

The study was no more helpful. The book she had found earlier was gone, and none of the others seemed out of place. Luna searched the desk but found nothing. She paused, sighed, then went back out into the hall. A pair of rooms followed, obviously the rooms of Twilight and her guest. Luna had no trouble picking out Twilight's room; it was overflowing with books and parchment, the obvious product of an obsessive mind. Luna searched through the piles of books and papers. Most of the books appeared to come from the local Dappleshore archives; long records of local matters dating back to the founding of the village. No doubt it all had to do with Twilight's original research into her family.

Gray's room on the other hoof gave the impression of having never been used. An old mattress and an empty desk was all the room had to offer. Maybe Gray had left as Twilight said, and taken everything with her. Luna stood in the dark hall and watched the room in silence. No, the more she thought about it, the more it began to seem like a facade. This room had not been used in ages. The mattress and desk had been put there simply for show. But if not here, where then had Gray been spending her time?

Luna continued down the hall, past the bathroom, to a single door at the end. She pushed it but found it locked. The keyhole revealed nothing but darkness beyond, as expected. Carefully Luna focused on the lock, a faint light glowing from the tip of her horn. There was a click as the bolt moved, unlocking the door. Luna paused briefly to listen, and when she heard nothing she slowly pushed the door open and looked down a short flight of stairs into a small cellar. Luna descended the stairs with wary steps, and glanced around the room of cold stone walls and rough floor. She took a few steps into the virtually empty room, and struck a hoof against something hard. Previously concealed by sand and dust, a metal ring now revealed a large trap door. With beating heart, Luna pulled open the hatch to find more stairs leading down into the ground. The steps looked ancient, the stone rough and crumbling in places, but the dust and cobwebs had been disturbed, proof that it had been used frequently of late. Glancing back over her shoulder nervously, Luna then began her descent into the ground.

The stairs ended in a long tunnel. Luna paused at the last step and glanced down the pitch black corridor. Hesitantly she summoned a faint light, shining ahead of her as she walked. After a few steps she stopped suddenly, holding her breath. The faint light fell upon a cloaked figure in a niche ahead, casting long, flickering shadows on the wall. When it didn't move, Luna dared to move closer. She drew a breath of relief when the specter revealed itself to be a black coat thrown upon a torch set in the wall. Still, the discarded piece of cloth left Luna wary. It looked like Gray's cloak that she had always been wearing, but if her coat was here that meant Gray could be nearby as well. Luna gave the niche and the cloak a wide berth as she moved on down the corridor.

A strong, metallic scent wafted up from somewhere ahead. Luna edged closer and stopped where the tunnel took a turn. Peeking around the corner, Luna stared into a small room with a large slab of stone in the center. Something was lying on top of the stone. A lump formed in her throat as she rounded the corner and stepped into the room, shining a light upon the stone. For a while she didn't dare to look, keeping her eyes shut, but finally she opened one eye slightly. The gray stone slab and much of the surrounding floor was smeared in layers of dried blood. On top of the stone lay a small figure, huddled together like a newborn foal. Luna knew instantly that the filly was beyond saving; she was already long dead. Her light gray, almost white coat and rose and purple mane lacked all luster, her skin was stretched taut over her bones, and a deep wound cut across her throat like a wide red grin from ear to ear. Luna felt her heart sink and turned her eyes away, fighting back tears, only to have her gaze fall on a large stone furnace set into the wall. Blackened bones and skulls with tiny horns mixed with the now cold ashes of what Luna assumed to be all the missing fillies of recent weeks.

"May you all rest in peace..." Luna bowed her head. She wished she could do something for them, give them a proper burial at the very least, but such concerns would have to wait. She gave the scene a last sorrowful look, then walked up to the only door in the room and slowly pushed it open. She paused as she thought she heard something, but after a while of breathless listening everything was silent. Luna looked around. Up ahead the corridor split off in two, one continuing straight ahead, while a side passage lead off to the left. Luna sneaked closer and took a peek around the corner. The side passage ended in a heavy wooden door with a small, barred window. It was barred from the outside. Luna glanced through the window. The light from her horn fell upon a figure lying motionless in the corner. This one was much too large to be a filly, but Luna had no doubt that it too was dead.

The latch on the door was easy to open from this side and Luna gently pulled the heavy door open and took a step inside. No sooner had she set a hoof through the door than something small crashed into her side at great speed and with a loud cry.

"For Sweetie Belle and Applebloom!"

Luna lost balance and fell over, knocking her head against the stone wall.

Her light flickered before going out. Struggling to retain consciousness, she tried to fend for herself in the resulting darkness as small hooves beat down on her.

"You won't touch her! I won't let you!" The young voice cried and Luna felt a sharp pain as strong teeth sank into her neck and held fast.

"Please... stop... please... I don't mean you harm!" Luna cried and her horn lit up brightly. The orange coated, purple maned pegasus blinked at the bright light and closed her eyes, but didn't break her hold on Luna.

"Scoot... Scoot! It's not her!" The voice came from one of the corners where a pale yellow pony was lying, holding up a hoof up against the bright light. Luna finally got a grip on the pegasus and tried to pull her off.

The young pony let go and stared at the princess. "Whoa..." then narrowed her eyes "Are you real?"

Luna let go of her and sat up, pressing a hoof against her wounded neck with a groan. "I think my blood on your snout says 'yes'". Scootaloo backed away, placing herself in front of Applebloom protectively. Luna looked up at them, letting her light fall upon them. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you. Are you hurt?" Applebloom cringed but neither filly replied. Luna glanced over at the larger figure she had originally seen through the bars. The black and white striped pony was lying perfectly still on the cold floor. Luna only now noticed how her neck was turned in an unnatural way, her head staring into the wall making it impossible to see her face.

"She... she's dead!" Applebloom cried. "Twilight killed her!"

Luna looked back at the two fillies. "Twilight? Are you sure?"

Scootaloo frowned. "Yeah, we're sure! We followed the trail when Sweetie Belle disappeared. We found Twilight, we thought she would help us, but she just locked us up in here."

Applebloom sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "I don't understand! Zecora was Twilight's friend... why would she do this?!"

Luna thought of Trixie. If Twilight was really behind this, if she had really

gone mad, then Trixie might be in danger. She took a step towards the two fillies, but stopped as Scootaloo beat the ground angrily.

"Don't come closer, I don't trust you! You'll hurt us like she did!"

Luna paused, then lay down, placing her head on the floor, looking up at the small but fierce pegasus. "I swear I won't hurt you. But we're all in danger here, do you think you can make it out?"

Applebloom cringed again. "I think my leg is broken... but I can still stand on the other three!"

Scootaloo glanced at her. "I'll get you out, and I won't let any pony hurt you again!"

Luna remained on the floor, not wanting to scare the fillies. "You should get out. There's a mansion in the village, 110 Pedigree Lane. Go there and hide, and if you see Trixie, warn her of Twilight, will you?"

The two fillies glanced at each other. "Trixie? That silly magician?"

Luna nodded as well as she could in her position on the floor. "You can trust her. And if you see Twilight's owl, tell it to find my sister too. Now go, before Twilight returns."

Scootaloo helped Applebloom up and supported her as she staggered towards the door. Applebloom stopped in the door and looked back at Luna. "What about you?"

Luna turned her head and smiled. "Don't worry about me... I'm going to get to the bottom of this." With that, the two fillies were gone. Luna lay for a minute, regaining her breath, then stood up and walked back out. She might not have much time left.



"It's a shame Luna couldn't be here." Trixie watched the waiter walk off to get their order. Twilight was sitting on the other side of the table, smiling at her. Truthfully Trixie would rather have been alone with Luna, though she didn't say that. Something about Twilight made her uncomfortable tonight,

and everything that had happened lately didn't put her mind at ease either.

"Just the two of us tonight." Twilight smiled. Trixie gave a nervous smile back, eyes trying not to look into Twilight's. The purple unicorn watched her silently for a time before she spoke again. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Trixie straightened up and tried to not look too concerned. "It's nothing, it's just that so much has happened of late." She knew she had to buy Luna as much time as she could, and if she could get something out of Twilight, however little, all the better.

Twilight didn't say anything. The waiter returned with two plates; trefoil sandwiches with roasted alfalfa seeds and hay fries on the side. Trixie picked a little at the fries as the waiter poured glasses of sparkling spring water for them. Despite being rather hungry she didn't quite feel like eating. The waiter left and Twilight sipped her water while looking at Trixie, who began to feel a little uncomfortable at the silence.

When Twilight didn't seem about to speak, Trixie gathered her courage and looked up to meet her eyes. "Twilight... I need to hear the truth. With everything that's happened, I feel like I don't know you any more."

Twilight sighed. She hadn't touched her food yet either. "I know I owe you a better explanation, but I had hoped we could just enjoy tonight together. I know I shouldn't think of myself in this situation, but I had looked forward to putting all this behind me for just one night. Will you give me that? Just for tonight?" Trixie stared into her glass. Twilight reached out a hoof to her. "Tomorrow I'll wrap up my business here, I'll sell the mansion and the farm, and then we can return to Ponyville. Does that sound good?" Trixie smiled a little and nodded. She wasn't sure, but at least getting away from this dreary place might raise her spirits a little. Twilight smiled back and gave Trixie's hoof a slight stroke. "Don't worry. Tomorrow all this will be behind us."

The evening progressed slowly but quietly. Twilight took her time eating, ordering both seconds and deserts. Trixie was mildly perplexed by the purple unicorn's unusual appetite, but didn't complain; if it meant giving

Luna more time, Trixie would be the last pony to complain. They didn't speak much. Trixie still felt concerned, but Twilight seemed happy to just enjoy the evening in silence.

Twilight pushed the rest of her desert – rich chocolate cake with strawberry and cream – to the side with a sigh. She had been poking the remains for a while, clearly full but eyes wanting more. Trixie hadn't been able to finish hers either, but for entirely different reasons.

Twilight looked at her, still smiling. "Sorry. I've been so distracted lately, it's just nice to finally relax and enjoy a night out. The food is quite nice here." Trixie nodded in silent response. Twilight gestured for the waiter to bring them the bill. "We have the night ahead of us. Is there anything you'd like to do?"

Trixie didn't respond immediately. It was getting late, surely Luna would have searched the house by now. On the other hoof, it wouldn't hurt to be on the safe side.

Twilight paid the waiter and when he left she turned back to Trixie. "I know a nice, quiet place where we could go, if you like. It's not far." Trixie hesitated, feeling suddenly nervous, but finally nodded. Twilight smiled brightly and stood up, offering Trixie a hoof. "Come. Tonight it's just you and me."

Trixie walked next to Twilight as they trotted down the streets towards the fields outside town. As the forest came into view, Trixie felt her throat narrow and her heart beat faster. Luna had told her how she had found her in there, nearly dead. Trixie didn't remember anything of the incident, but something deep within her fought to make her turn around and run.

Twilight looked at her and placed a comforting hoof on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Trixie, we won't go far in and I'll be with you the entire time." Trixie continued, though slowly. She didn't know why, but the looming forest brought up a sense of absolute terror within her.

Trixie fought to keep herself under control as Twilight lead the way into the

forest. As Twilight had promised, they didn't have to go far in the shadows of the trees before Twilight stopped at the foot of a small hill poking up above the canopy. Twilight looked at Trixie, smiling, then lead her up the hill to the top. "The view from up here is wonderful."

Trixie looked around. Twilight was right, the view was quite spectacular up here. The forest and swamps stretched as far as the eyes could see without interruption, except in the direction they had come from where the faint lights of the village shone.

Twilight sat down and pointed a hoof up at the starry sky. "I've come here a few times, but it's always been a little lonely." She smiled at Trixie, watching her silently. Trixie looked up at the sky. Luna's moon was full tonight, shining brightly down upon the two ponies on the hill top. Twilight reached out and stroked her mane. "Won't you sit down here with me?" Trixie looked down again and smiled sadly at her before sitting down next to her. Twilight lay a hoof around her shoulders and glanced up at the sky, watching the stars in silence.

It was a perfect night, yet Trixie couldn't stop feeling a deep sense of unease. She closed her eyes, trying to relax, trying to clear her mind. When she opened them again she noticed that Twilight was looking at her. She turned and looked into Twilight's deep violet eyes. For a moment she sat there breathlessly. Twilight smiled and leaned closer, meeting her lips. Trixie closed her eyes and remembered their first kiss, outside the mansion on that night. It had felt so right. Something lit up within her, a tiny spark, a fragment of something familiar. As her horn grazed Twilight's and the sensation of magic that she had almost forgotten coursed through her, something else welled up inside her. With all the suddenness and force of a lightning strike, a sense of utter dread filled her and consumed her. Their first kiss had felt so right, but this... this was so very wrong!

Trixie pushed Twilight away and jumped to her feet, breathing frantically and staring at the confused mare now lying on the ground looking up at her.

"Trixie? What's wrong?"

Trixie stared at her in absolute shock and disgust, then spun around and galloped down the hill.

"Trixie! I'm sorry! Please..."

She didn't hear Twilight's plea, or look back as she ran. Her hooves barely touched the ground as they carried her through the forest, faster than she had ever run before. A power that she had never known coursed through her veins, and for the briefest moment all four hooves left the ground as her body shot forwards on the beats of phantom wings.

All Trixie could think of was getting away, and finding Luna!

Trixie landed outside the mansion and stormed through the door. "Luna!" she called as she glanced around frantically. Her eyes fell upon two small figures huddled behind the desk, frightened eyes staring back at her. Trixie took a deep breath, the rushing of blood calming a little.

"Are you two OK? What are you doing here? Have you seen Luna?" Seeing that they were still too frightened to speak, she reached out a hoof to them. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you. Please, it's important that I find Luna, she may be in danger... we may all be in danger!"

"She... she was in the dungeon. She told us to go here" Applebloom stammered.

Trixie looked between the two. "Dungeon? Where? When?"

Scotaloo looked at Applebloom, uncertain. "We were looking for our friend... she disappeared and the trail lead to a farm near here. We met Twilight and she... she locked us in a dungeon."

Applebloom nodded, crying. "Luna broke us out and told us to go here. But we've been here for..." she looked at Scotaloo who finished the sentence for her.

"...really long."

Applebloom nodded and wiped her eyes. "We were so afraid."

Trixie walked over and sat next to them. "Don't worry... we need to find Luna. Are you hurt?"

Applebloom nodded at her leg. "I think my leg is broken."

Trixie looked at the leg and nuzzled the young pony gently. "Come, I'll carry you on my back. I won't leave you here, it's too dangerous." Trixie lay down and allowed Applebloom to crawl up on her back, with Scootaloo's help.

Applebloom clung to Trixie's neck. "Are we going back to that awful place?"

Trixie nodded "Be brave, my little ponies. You will need all your courage now." Trixie turned around and trotted out the door.

"She... she killed Sweetie Belle... and Zecora." Applebloom cried into Trixie's mane.

Trixie looked at them as they ran down the street. "Who?"

Scootaloo frowned, trying to keep up with Trixie. "Twilight! She killed them, and locked us up."

Applebloom continued to cry. "Why would she do that?! Poor Sweetie Belle..."

Trixie bit her lip. "She's not Twilight! She just... looks like her."

The two fillies looked up at Trixie. "But... where is Twilight, then?"

Trixie lowered her head, holding back tears. She couldn't get herself to say it, she still hoped that she was wrong, even though deep inside she knew.



Luna glanced around the room at shelf upon shelf of vials, each laboriously labeled with numbers. She picked one up at random, with the number 417, and carefully unscrewed the lid. The vial was full of a fine, gray dust. Cautiously, she poured a little amount out on her hoof and looked at it. It looked like ash... Luna shivered, the image of the furnace and the bones of

fillies forcing itself to the front of her mind. The vial dropped and clashed against the stone floor, shattering. Luna stepped back and stared at the ashes on the floor and the hundreds of vials on the shelves. Were these...?

She forced herself to look away and quickly moved across the room and into the small study beyond. A long desk was overflowing with scrolls and books. A single vial, like the others, was standing alone on another desk along with a small bowl of silver and an open book. Luna ignored that table for now, and walked over to the many scrolls and books littering the first desk.

One book was open, it seemed to be a catalog of the vials in the other room, each line containing a number, a name and a pair of dates. Luna flipped back a few pages, unconsciously searching a particular number:

417: Mandrake Meadows, June 6, 710 – September 20, 731

Luna shivered and nervously flipped to the last page, but there weren't any recent records. She closed the book and put it aside, turning her attention to a small black book placed under a bottle of ink and a pen. Luna carefully pulled the book free and opened it. It looked like a journal. She flipped to the last few entries and began to read with growing dread:

Day 1 Since Restoration

My spirit has returned to the lands of the living once again! After the last embarrassing failure with that foal of a descendant, Midnight Sparkle, I am eager not to repeat past mistakes. My latest descendant, Twilight Sparkle, may well bear that cursed name, but she has proven most useful so far and I think I shall be quite pleased with her.

Day 3

My descendant has been very helpful in reacquiring my former residences. I have no use for the mansion, but it is good to see these old catacombs still stand after all these years. The loss to my studies appears to be minimal, all things considered. The foalish ponies of Dappleshore must have assumed it all collapsed during the assault.

Day 8

The supply of young unicorns in the area is unsatisfactory! I had to make do with an older pair last night. They both had their cutie marks already. Their blood was enough, but it loses vitality as it ages. My descendant's inability to sustain the spirits for more than mere minutes on her own blood is a testament to just how strong she is, as one should expect of one of my own line. With such talent and will there is little left of the raw potential residing only in the very young and inexperienced. I may be forced to travel further to get what I crave, until I have regained enough strength to take the final step.

Day 10

That rhyming zebra is at it again. I believe I need to do something about her. Twilight seems to like her, but I can't have an outsider nosing around and getting too close.

Day 14

Went as far as Ponyville last night in my hunt for the much needed blood. At the risk of upsetting Twilight, but my options are limited.

Day 17

My descendant is starting to question a little too much. Perhaps the news from Ponyville upset her more than I expected. She has been a great help in my restoration, and will soon provide me with the greatest gift of all. For now I will have to keep her appeased a little longer. She can not be allowed to ruin my plans.

Day 18

Found Twilight's little lover snooping around in an alley and had to deal with her. Unfortunately we were interrupted most rudely by the young princess of the moon. I am not yet strong enough to face such a power. I must be more cautious. They will be dealt with in time. I may consider playing her sister against her if everything goes as planned. It might be interesting to see who the princess trusts most, her faithful student or her own sister. What a delightful scheme.

Day 20

Success! I have cast aside my cloak and embraced the living, breathing flesh once more! And not a moment too soon. Oh to feel the beat of the heart in your chest and the breath of air in your lungs, the flow of the life's blood so potent in my veins! Twilight struggled mightily, but I wouldn't have

it any other way from a descendant of mine. She is the perfect heir, indeed. Celestia has raised her well for me, and provided me a unique opportunity. A student of the princess herself, the perfect ticket into Canterlot.

Oh to have waited so long for this. And with the flesh comes all the old urges I thought I had forgotten; I must indulge them as soon as convenient. Why, I haven't had a proper meal in generations. Ah, how I suddenly crave all the old sweets... what a bliss to taste and smell again.

Luna sank a lump in her throat and dropped the journal on the table. Twilight had told the truth the other night... and they had failed to protect her. They had failed her, and now she was... Luna closed her eyes, unable to hold back the tears. "I'm so sorry, Twilight!"

It took her a while before she opened her eyes again and turned to the other table, with the vial and bowl. The vial had no number, simply marked by an X, and its contents – fine gray ashes – had been emptied into the silver bowl. Luna walked up to glance into the bowl, then let her eyes fall upon the pages of the open book next to it. A small passage had been underlined:

From the ashes of the dead, properly prepared, may be called up the forms of their spirits.

And in the margin was scribbled a note:

Never call forth that which you can not put down again, lest it should command you.

A piece of parchment had been attached to the page. Luna carefully picked it up and read it. The closely written script and diagrams described a spell... Luna had seen similar magic once, long ago. Forbidden magic, that she had studied behind Celestia's back. She felt a shiver as she read over the spell. It was impossible to tell what it was meant to do.

A noise broke Luna out of her thoughts. She turned and listened with her heart in her throat. Was it a door, or hoof steps? Everything was silent again. Luna stepped quietly over to the door and peeked through into the room with the vials. Everything was as it should be. Luna hoped that it was just the place playing tricks on her frazzled nerves. She needed to get out, she had seen enough, and she had to make sure Trixie and the two fillies were OK.

Luna hurried out of the vial room and through the corridors, as quickly as she could without making noise. The ancient tunnels bent and split in several places. Luna tried to recall the path she had taken when she came, but nearly ran into a wall as the tunnel came to a dead end. She turned around and froze, as she heard hoof steps back the way she had come from. Quickly dismissing her light she stood perfectly still in the darkness and listened. She knew there was no way to run except through whoever was coming, but this time she wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Luna braced herself for a fight as she listened to the hoof steps get closer, her keen eyes staring into the darkness. But even she couldn't see in this total and utter blackness. The steps were now very close. Luna focused, the magic coursing through her horn. A faint light sprung up far down the hall, not very strong but just enough for Luna's sharp eyes, and – Luna hoped – enough of a distraction to give her the edge she wanted. The steps came to a sudden halt and in the faint illumination Luna saw a cloaked figure standing up ahead. Wasting not a second, Luna lashed out at the specter, sending it flying through the tunnel. She stormed after it and was upon it in a beat, her glowing horn lowered threateningly and her teeth clenched. She paused, confused. Beneath her lay Gray's old cloak, but it was empty. Luna poked it with her horn, then turned around, casting her light in every direction, frantically trying to spot anything.

As she looked up, the cloak suddenly moved and pulled her legs away from under her. Luna fell over, her jaw hitting the floor painfully. Her vision blurred and she could taste blood. Before she could regain her senses, something wrapped around her head and neck and tightened swiftly. Blinded and struggling to breathe, Luna waved about frantically.

"Inquiring minds wish to know if alicorns can die. Are you truly immortal, or just long lived?" Luna struggled and wheezed under the strangling cloak. The voice got closer and she felt a hoof kick her in the side. "I must confess, your majesty, I find myself disappointed. I had hoped for more."

Luna's muscles relaxed, her wheezing stopped. The princess lay sprawled on the cold floor, her head wrapped in Gray's cloak. She didn't move. The purple pony standing above her smiled darkly. A knife flashed in the dark and the unicorn bowed down over the limp body of the princess, untying the cloak to expose the neck. The blade pressed against Luna's throat. "Good night, princess."

Luna's body tensed, and in one powerful movement her back arched and her hind legs shot out behind her. The sharp blade cut into her neck, then clattered against the floor as her hooves sank into the soft flesh of the unicorn's exposed stomach. Twilight gave a pained cry as she flew back and rolled up on the floor. Luna was on her shaking hooves in a split second, the loose cloak falling off her head. She spun around and her horn flared, taking hold of the fallen unicorn and pulling her into the air. Luna staggered, her vision blurred and her head was swimming. She had stood up too quickly.

Her magic faltered and she lost her grip for a second, long enough for Twilight to respond with a brief but powerful strike to the head. Luna just barely managed to block the magical force and staggered back. She was feeling weak. Blood poured from the cut in her neck and it seemed her enemy had managed to gain the upper hoof from the start. She grit her teeth and took a deep breath, magic coursing through her body and flaring intensely at the tip of her horn as she charged. She would not go down quietly!

Trixie stumbled, feeling the ground tremble violently under her hooves as dust and small pieces of rock fell from the ceiling. She stopped and glanced around nervously.

Scotaloo came to a halt behind her. "Whoa! What in Equestria was that?!"

Trixie frowned, she could barely see anything in the crushing darkness of the tunnel. Since her flight from Twilight on the hill top she had felt a spark of magic inside her, but only a trace was left now, barely enough to light up the tunnel ahead of them. "I don't know..." she muttered but stopped as a long cry broke the silence, sending chills down her spine. Applebloom shivered and hid her face in Trixie's mane.

"Come on... quick! That way!" Trixie said and charged down the tunnel with Scotaloo following behind as fast as her small legs could carry her.

Luna stomped her hooves against the shattered floor and breathed heavily. Her eyes were obsidian orbs of night, and black flames swirled around her, licking her sleek coat like a mane of living fire. The purple unicorn in front of her stared back intently; purple, unblinking eyes burning with a cold, otherworldly light as the two enemies observed each other, waiting to find a weak spot, a moment to strike.

Celestia had always said Twilight held immense power, but this was not Twilight. Luna recognized the bleak, eerie power swelling within those purple eyes. Luna had once resorted to similar powers, and had lost herself in the process. She felt it even now, clawing within her to get free. She felt her mind fracture, felt opposing powers battling for control within her.

"Let go! Why are you holding back? Unleash the power, beat the foal into the ground, crush her under your hooves like the bug she is! Why do you let yourself get beaten?" But she couldn't. She couldn't loose herself, not again. She had to resist. "Think of Twilight! And Trixie, and every pony who depends on you! They have no hope without you, you can not fail! It is justified, you know what you must do!"

Tears of rage streamed from her eyes, down her cheeks as she lowered her head and set off in a flash of lightning, sending stone and dirt flying in every direction with each strike of her hooves as she closed in on her target. Twilight disappeared in a flash a split second before impact, and

Luna crashed into the ground with an agonizing cry as she felt a sharp pain in her hind leg and heard the sound of shattered bone. She scrambled to get back up, but a hoof beat her back down.

"Pathetic! You have such potential, and you squander it even when your life is on the line!" The purple unicorn stood above her, a derisive sneer on her face as she forced Luna's head down into the ground. "You would be a magnificent beast, if you were not so afraid of yourself, of what you could be! You would deny this power? Then you are a foal, and I shall take it from you!" She lowered her horn at Luna's head. Luna closed her eyes, awaiting the final strike that would crush her skull.

But it never came. A terrifying shriek reverberated between the walls of the catacombs and Luna felt warm blood spatter over her as the hoof let go of her head. Opening her eyes she saw the purple unicorn stumbling back, a deep wound in her flank. Trixie charged again, her horn striking Twilight between the ribs and sinking in deep. A small orange pegasus pounced upon Twilight and pulled her mane, the violent jerk causing Trixie's horn to tear a long, bloody gash in her side as she stumbled. Twilight screamed in panicked fury and threw off the filly, burning eyes of purple fire turned against Trixie.

"You will pay for this! You will all pay!" Her horn lit up like a violet sun. The walls and ceiling of the tunnel trembled and Trixie fell back, losing balance as dark waves of force crashed against her. Luna held her hooves over her head protectively and closed her eyes tightly. Something within her reacted, instinctively, or perhaps it was merely all her panicked mind could think to do. Her horn flashed with dark flames. A memory, an unknown spell from a slip of paper, a desperate last call.

Luna stood up, leaning against the wall with her broken leg hanging in a painful and unnatural position. She cried, but focused all her energy on the magic. Waves of black flames clashed against the purple inferno. The light flickered, and the purple flames died with a sudden cry and an infernal hiss. The earth shivered as Twilight's charred corpse fell to the ground and crumbled to ashes. Luna collapsed as everything fell apart in a shower of rock and earth. The earth groaned like a mighty titan, and swallowed up the tunnels and the farm in a crushing maelstrom of stone and dirt.

The moment Twilight's body dissolved to dust, a jolt ran through Trixie's body and a voice whispered in her ears. "If I could, I would give you all of mine." Trixie rose to her feet, her horn shining with a tangible flame. She cried as raw power surged through her veins like a raging flood of fire. Her body wracked with pain as a pair of azure wings unfolded protectively over the two terrified fillies holding on for dear life to her legs. White flames erupted around her, a blazing aura melting stone and earth as everything came falling down around them.

Ponies from all over Dappleshore were rushing to the site of the crater where once a farm had been. Hushed whispers and cries were quickly replaced by reverent silence as the regal figure of Celestia landed gracefully in front of the gathering crowd, flanked by her ever present royal guard. The princess glanced sadly over the ruined land and lowered her head.

A slight tremor caused a frightened commotion among the gathered ponies. The rumbling grew and every pony stared as the ground cracked and shivered, finally bursting open in a flare which, for a brief moment, left the early morning as bright as the day. As the light faded away a bright figure hung in the air above the crater, wings outstretched and horn glowing. Two frightened fillies were clinging to her legs, and beside her floated the bloodied and unmoving body of Luna.

Epilogue

The lights in the grand theater dim and Trixie stands alone on the stage, the audience breathlessly quiet. The blue unicorn looks up, tears blinking in her sorrowful eyes. For a moment her voice falters and she falls quiet before speaking again.

"So ends the story of Fillystata, and of Twilight Sparkle's greatest mistake for which she paid the highest price. But when I tell this story tonight, it is to tell the truth that you all deserve to hear, and to allow us all to put it behind us. Let us not dwell on the evil, or the unfortunate deeds of a lone unicorn driven by forces beyond her control. Tonight I want every pony to give a minute's silence for all the young fillies who died, and for Zecora, who lost her life trying to help a friend."

Trixie lowers her head and every pony in the audience follows. A deep and extended silence falls over the hall, as tiny candles light up in the dark, one for each of the dead. Finally Trixie looks back up.

"It has taken weeks to recover all the bones of the dead from the site of the farm, but they deserve a proper resting place. Princess Celestia herself will oversee the official funeral this night. Let us never forget those who died, and may they be in our hearts forever. But let not grief so consume us either, that we forget each other and those who yet live." She glanced out over the audience. "Tonight I wish to thank a very special pair of fillies. Two fillies who saw their best friend taken away and killed, and who showed unbreakable loyalty and bravery till the very end. Please come up here, Applebloom and Scootaloo." Two young ponies rise from the audience and make their way to the stage as the audience applauds solemnly.

"Another who gave everything to save those she cared about..." Trixie turns as Luna walks out from behind the curtain, standing next to Trixie with a sad smile. "She just came out of the hospital last night. Give her a warm thanks. Had it not been for her this tragedy may have been greater still." The audience breaks out in applause again and Trixie gives Luna a sad smile back.

"There is another pony who we should not forget, and she is here with us today, in spirit at least. Twilight Sparkle. If this story has a moral, it must be that even the best of us can be led astray by forces we do not comprehend. Twilight deserves to be remembered for who she was, not for what her ancestor did. She was a friend to many, a friend whose sacrifice will never be forgotten."

"And finally..." Trixie's hat and cloak floats off and the blue unicorn unfolds a pair of azure wings, a hushed whisper of awe running through the audience. "I wish to give my personal thanks to our princess Celestia, for accepting me..." She turns to Luna with a smile "into her family." Trixie and Luna lean forwards, their lips meeting in a long kiss as the curtains fall.

~~ *The End* ~~

Mare in the Mirror

Chapter 1

The bleak and clinging darkness of the moist earth wrapped around her body like a tomb. Her unblinking eyes saw only the deep blackness of the void, but down here she had no need to see. Down here she was in control, down here nothing escaped her notice or the reach of her strings. Motionless she lay, as she had lain in wait for ages too long to count. It was only a matter of time, she had no need for action. Everything would come to her, and when that time came...

The slightest tremor, and her mind snapped to attention. A desperate twitching and pulling of strings signaled the moment she had been waiting for. Her long, sensitive legs moved, feeling ahead of her as she crept forth; the glacial advance of a true predator on the hunt. The smell of fear excited her, set fires of lust alight within her black heart, but she was in no hurry to get to the conclusion. No, there would be no escape now. She would enjoy every moment of this.

Her legs touched something soft and warm in the dark. The twitching froze immediately and the soft bundle turned hard, every muscle and fiber in its body tensing at the touch of something unknown, something unseen and sinister. She pulled back her legs and crawled in an arc around her victim. She could sense the frantic beatings of its heart, pounding in abject terror as it listened with bated breath for its invisible hunter. How it exhilarated her! Coming to a halt she lay down, waiting in silence. Soon... soon it would dare to look. Dare to hope for an escape.

A hesitant glow, shining from the tip of a horn, sprung up in the dark, fearful of what it might reveal. A pair of violet eyes peeked out into the tunnel, wide with terror. The lavender unicorn breathed heavily as it twitched and fought against the sticky strings wrapping around its adrenalin pumped body, strings holding it with no hope of escape. Cold sweat ran down its body in streams.

"I've... never been good with ropes." A familiar voice, a broken memory,

random and unimportant. She shed the thought from her mind as she crept closer, an inch at a time, moving up from behind on the unsuspecting pony. Her shadow fell upon the pony, and it stiffened like a board as its eyes turned upwards. The pony shrieked and fought as she grabbed it swiftly between her legs, but no one would ever hear its cries for help, no one would ever know its final fate.

The pony struggled and fought, tears soaking its cheeks. She held it, felt its soft, warm body and the pounding of blood just beneath the skin. It was almost sensual. So fragile, so helpless in her grip. Her fangs pierced the skin and sank deep into its tender flesh. She felt it twitching one last time before it went limp in her deadly embrace. She held it close and gingerly stroked its mane as she spun her web tightly around its body. It was already growing colder, soon it would feed her, soon she would feast upon its delicate flesh...

The life's blood flowed freely as she tore the softened flesh and crushed the bones in a euphoric frenzy of savage lust. She felt how it filled her up, felt her body swell, bloated and black. A void had been filled, and the pony had served its fateful purpose. Soon only splintered bones and sinews would remain, but she... she was not done yet.

Trixie woke with a shriek and sat up in the bed. Her heart was pounding and her breath frantic as she looked around the dark room in a panic. It took her mind a few seconds to realize what was happening, and where she was. A pale light filtered through the circular window in the star-covered ceiling, giving the appearance of looking up at the full moon in the night sky. It was the only source of light, and while it was day outside, only a faint light came through the painted glass. Antique furniture and endless curiosities and memorabilia filled the room; bookcases stuffed full with old tomes, an old desk overflowing with scrolls, and the large semi-circular bed all featured prominently. Waking up in these luxurious but admittedly completely disorganized settings still left Trixie feeling like she had awoken in a different age. An age of chaos and entirely too many impressions. But this was Luna's private quarters, a little look into the princess' life that very few ponies ever witnessed.

"... dear?" Trixie's mind only now registered the teal eyes looking at her

with concern. Luna sat up next to her and gently rubbed her back. "It's OK, you're safe... it was just a dream."

Trixie glanced down at herself. She was a total mess, wrapped in sheets and drenched in cold sweat, but thankfully she had only four legs and no fangs. She closed her eyes and sighed. She felt little comfort despite Luna's presence, but slowly regained her breath a little. The ghastly visions of the nightmare still burned clearly in her mind. What did they mean? It had been almost two months since the tragedy in Dappleshore, more than two weeks since her grand performance and the official funeral for the victims. She and Luna had spent almost all the time since then together, trying to comfort and help each other move on, but she couldn't put Twilight out of her mind. The memory still plagued her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Luna's voice was steeped in genuine concern, and the princess moved a little closer to her, placing a wing around her back.

Trixie shook her head a little and buried it in Luna's thick mane as she let the tears flow freely. She just wanted to cry, to let go of it all for now. Luna's soft hair and coat smelled faintly of Echinopsis flowers, the sweet and exotic fragrance that Luna favored and which Trixie had come to long for whenever she felt sad. She hated feeling like this, so Small and Weak. She did her best to appear strong and confident in public – she was a princess now, for the first time in her life truly Great and Powerful – but whenever she was alone with Luna she just let it all go. It was all she could do to stay sane.

"It seemed so real," she muttered, the voice muffled and weak.

"The important thing is that it wasn't," Luna whispered and gave her a loving squeeze. Trixie sighed and turned a little, opening her eyes to glance at some point in the distance, past the collection of favorite socks and an old plush Celestia with more patch than pony, barely recognizable in fact. She had found both rather funny a few weeks ago when Luna came out of the hospital and they moved back here, but she couldn't even manage a weak smile now. Luna rubbed her shoulder and kissed her cheek, "Go get a little water in your face, while I get some fresh blankets. You'll feel better in the evening."

Trixie untangled herself from the bedsheets and crawled out of bed, staggering across the room and into the adjacent bathroom while Luna remade the bed. Walking as if halfway in a trance, she turned on the faucet and dipped a hoof in the cool, refreshing water as it began to fill the glass basin. She stood for a while with eyes closed, breathing slowly while the water lapped softly, singing its song to her. When it was full she leaned over and let her face dip below the surface for a brief instant. Pulling back up she let out a long sigh as she buried her face in a thick hoof towel. The water was refreshing and she felt a little better, but it didn't put her mind at ease.

With another sigh, Trixie looked up into the old, silver framed mirror hanging above the water. As her eyes fell upon the reflection before her, Trixie froze in an instant and dropped the towel with a choked shriek. Looking out at her, with large sorrowful eyes, was a young lavender coated unicorn still without her cutie mark. Trixie stumbled back in panic, slipping on the floor and falling on her haunches as she held up her hooves over her eyes.

"Trixie...." the young filly called out, her voice shivering.

"Trixie!"

Trixie shuffled the alfalfa around her plate. The light purple flowers suddenly reminded her a little too well of Twilight, the thought making her feel sick deep inside. She sighed and pushed the plate away. She would have to tell the kitchen to find something else for her in the future, though she doubted it would make much of a difference. The image of her poison-dripping fangs piercing purple skin and sinking into Twilight's soft flesh had burned itself into her mind and left her with no appetite.

"You should eat something," Luna said as she looked at the untouched alfalfa. They were sitting together in the private dining hall. The massive table was much too large for two ponies, but it was one of the most quiet places in the castle. Only on rare occasions did anypony other than the three alicorns and their personal servants come here, and the drapery and other decor seemed to have a muffling effect on the room. "You'll feel better, trust me. I could have Silver Plate prepare something else for you, if

you like. He's always happy to help, and to get a chance to be creative."

Trixie's eyes lingered on the plate. She felt a lump form in her throat as she uttered the words going through her mind. "Maybe... maybe I already ate."

Luna looked confused. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes, trying to force the image from her mind. "I feel like, perhaps I betrayed Twilight. I let her down, and maybe... in a way, I... ate her." Luna was staring at her, or so she imagined. It must have sounded crazy. She opened her eyes, but instead found Luna looking at the alfalfa with an expression on her face suggesting she was trying to figure out a connection. Trixie sighed and continued, "I failed Twilight, maybe I could have done something, instead I waited. Too long did I wait. And then, when she died, I... took her magic, her... soul. I ate her, like... some kind of vampire? Maybe I lost my own soul... that's what vampires are, isn't it? Soulless monsters."

The deep concern on Luna's face was evident. She pushed her own plate away and reached out to take Trixie's hooves in hers. "Trixie, you are not a monster! And you didn't let Twilight down, or... eat her. She loved you dearly, and she gave you her very soul when she died. It was a gift, it was given not taken. I know if she had felt you let her down, she would never have given you such a gift. Her soul lives on through you, and I'm sure she would want nothing else than for you to be happy."

Trixie lay her head in Luna's hooves and closed her eyes. "I could have done something... should have done something, but I came too late to save her. Far too late."

Luna nuzzled her cheek a little. "If anypony failed her, Trixie, it was me and me alone. I should have listened to my sister when she warned me not to delve into Twilight's family. Instead I continued behind her back. I should have talked to her the instant I noticed something was up, but I didn't want her to know I had been lying to her. If anything..." Luna sighed, "if anything, you should be blaming and hating me." Trixie gave Luna's hooves a little comforting rub. It wasn't much, but her heart felt too heavy. Luna responded with a gentle sigh. "I know I certainly blame myself all the time, but I also know there's nothing I can do to change the past. And even the wisest cannot tell what may have been. Maybe it wouldn't have made a

difference..."

Trixie looked up at her, it was almost too much effort just to lift her head. "Celestia knew about Twilight's family?"

Luna shrugged. "She warned me when I was digging through the archives here in Canterlot. Said some things were best left in the past. I think it may just have been because of my own history, I think she just wants me to not get too tangled up in things of the past, whether it's my own or somepony else's. And I now see why... it's not healthy to dwell too much on the past, Trixie."

A dull, heavy silence settled over the room. Trixie thought about how Twilight had become obsessed with the past. Perhaps Luna was right, but it didn't ease her pain. "Do you think Celestia could have done something? If... If she had known, I mean."

"I don't know," Luna said after a while. She didn't seem sure of what to say and Trixie felt a little sorry for asking such a painful question. "Maybe, but... the thing you have to understand about Celestia is that everypony likes to think she's perfect and that she's all powerful. In their eyes, she's a goddess. But really, I think many would be disappointed by the truth."

Trixie tilted her head, "What do you mean? I always thought..."

Luna smiled softly, "Celestia raises the sun, that's her special talent after all, and she has a knack for the magics of warmth and light. She's also a passionate teacher and a skilled regent, as well as a wonderful pony in general. But... beyond that, she's not all that special. I don't think Twilight quite grasped how much she impressed Celestia with her magic, because outside her own special niche which is the sun and the lands of Equestria, Celestia is just like any other unicorn. In particular, she's very much not a fighting mare, and not just because it's something she's had little need to practice."

Trixie blinked, letting her mind grasp what Luna was saying. It actually made sense, but she – like everypony else, no doubt – had never thought of Celestia that way.

Luna nodded, as if reading her mind. "Remember, I defeated her not once

but twice as Nightmare Moon. The first time she had to get the aid of five other ponies and an ancient relic, because she couldn't stand against the Nightmare on her own. The second time it was Celestia's student and her friends, not Celestia herself, who defeated Nightmare Moon. Maybe she could have convinced Twilight to give up her obsession with Midnight, but beyond that... once it started to go really wrong, I don't know if she would have been able to do anything more than what we did. Who knows..." Luna paused with a sigh, "maybe by not involving her, I saved her from becoming yet another casualty in that tragic mess. That tiny possibility is how I try to cope with my past choices. That, and you," she smiled at Trixie, "in which at least a little part of Twilight lives on."

There was a gentle knock on one of the doors to the dining hall. They both looked up as Celestia peeked in and smiled at them. "I'm not disturbing anything, am I?"

Luna smiled brightly. "Oh, not too much, we were just having a bout of Alfalfa Wrestling in the nude. I thought you were busy with the Zebrica dignitaries this evening. That was today, was it not?"

Celestia chuckled, "Yes, I came to let you know that they requested your presence during these deliberations. I told them you would attend. I don't think they mind it being... in the nude, but you may want to leave out the alfalfa."

"Way to ruin my evening, sis." Luna gave Trixie a kiss. "Duty calls, dear. Maybe you should go see Silver Plate about the food? I'll be back later... for a dress-up, maybe." She winked and grinned at Celestia who rolled her eyes.

Trixie smiled a little as Luna got up and followed Celestia out. As the door closed behind them she slumped back down over the table, closing her eyes. Luna's words seemed to have calmed her. Perhaps she was right, perhaps it was best to put the past behind her. Maybe things could have been worse after all. She hoped that thought would make her feel better and let her rest easy. After a while she got up and trotted out of the door towards the kitchen. Maybe something sweet wouldn't be too bad.

"So how is Trixie doing?"

Celestia was walking slowly as they made their way through the corridors of the castle towards the meeting with the zebras. The dignitaries were enjoying a break from discussions, and it was clear that Celestia wished to take the time to talk with her sister. Luna walked next to her, trying to put on her most professional face for the meeting ahead. She still preferred to leave such things to Celestia, who was by far the more experienced diplomat than her. "I think everything that's happened has affected her deeply. Twilight's death really haunts her, but I think she just needs more time."

"It has been a terrible experience for us all." Celestia's eyes betrayed the deep wounds Twilight's death had left, and the grief she obviously felt from the mention of it. "No doubt her transformation, and being thrown into the life of royalty so suddenly has also affected her. It can't be easy, but I'm glad to hear you think she'll manage. Still," The princess looked at Luna, "I want you to keep an eye on her."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Keep an eye on her? Why, if I didn't know you better Tia, I'd say that sounded quite underhoofed. Shall I brief the secret service about her?"

Celestia smiled and paused in the hallway, turning to Luna. There were no others around. Most of the staff were busy with their duties elsewhere. "I didn't mean it like that. But with everything that's happened... and we still don't know the full effects your blood magic may have on her, or yourself. I'll just rest a little easier knowing that you're both well," Celestia placed a hoof on Luna's shoulder "and I hope you both know that you can always come to me if there is anything. Anything at all!"

Luna gave her sister a knowing smile. "You didn't really want to talk about Trixie, did you?"

Celestia chuckled gently, though it was tinged by a serious undertone. "I'm not that transparent, am I? No, I really hoped to talk about you." Her features turned grave, the lightheartedness vanishing like dew before the sun, but the hint of kindness remained in her eyes. "I'm worried for you, Luna, and I'll be quite blunt. The things that happened in Dappleshore, and the things you did. It hurts me that you went behind my back, and that you

dabbled in those kinds of magic after everything we've been through." Luna was about to respond, but Celestia stopped her. They had been over that already. "I want you to know that you can trust me, sister. I don't want you to fear me, you know I'm not going to punish you for what you do. I just want to help you. I know these things draw you, I know the shadows you fight with in your heart. They are things that no pony should have to deal with alone. And I know you have Trixie now, but she has her own things she's dealing with."

Luna's eyes were a little harder than usual as they met Celestia's. "You still have doubts about our relationship?"

"I am not opposed to you and Trixie, I really hope you don't think I am. I admit I still find it odd to see my little sister with another mare, but it does not bother me. It truly warms my heart to see you have found love, and I'd be joyed to see it bloom. But I have concerns. It just seems rather sudden."

"Tragic events tend to bring people together," Luna said, defensively.

Celestia nodded. "Yes, and you have shared much in the short time you've been together, I can not deny that. But," she paused as a servant came trotting down the hall carrying a large flower decoration. When the pony saw the two princesses, and the look on Celestia's face, she quickly turned around and hurried back the way she came. Celestia waited a moment before speaking again, "I can not help but fear that when you look upon Trixie, who you're really seeing is Twilight."

Luna took a little step back. "That's not true!" Celestia watched her reaction with concern. A few tears gathered in the corners of Luna's eyes. "I love Trixie! Don't... Don't say I don't!"

"Luna..." Celestia stepped up to her and drew her close, wrapping her wings around her. "You owe it to Trixie to be honest with yourself. I'm not saying you don't love each other, but I am saying you need to give yourself, and her, enough time, and that you both need others in your lives, too. You hide from the world, from those around you, and from yourself. You need to start opening up to yourself, and others."

Luna remained silent in Celestia's embrace, holding back tears.

"Please, Luna. At the very least you can always come to me. No matter what. But I really hope you will consider what I have said."

The royal kitchen was buzzing with activity, as everypony were busy preparing the special dinner in honor of the Zebrica visitors. Despite this, the ponies milling about all stopped to bow as Trixie pushed the door open and looked inside. The gesture was only brief, however, as they all went back to work as quickly. The foreign visit left little time to waste. Trixie couldn't deny enjoying being shown such respect. During her days on the road she had always dreamed of ponies bowing in respect or cheering loudly whenever she showed herself. But they never had, especially not after the Ursa incident. She straightened up and smiled as she stood tall.

An elderly, gray coated, silver maned earth pony came out from one of the side rooms and bowed upon seeing her. "My Lady, what do we owe this visit to the kitchen?"

Trixie had met Silver Plate, the royal master chef, many times since she came to the castle, but never really spoken with him. She kept her appearance of royal dignity as she gave a simple nod. "Yes. I came by to hear if you have something sweet and... not purple, definitely not purple."

Silver Plate merely confirmed with a nod, displaying no surprise at the request. His job, aside from overseeing the normal duties of the kitchen, was to accommodate the royal whims as best he could, and he had no doubt had plenty of unusual and unexplained requests from the royal sisters in his long career. "Of course, my lady. May I ask if something was wrong with this day's alfalfa?"

Trixie shook her head. "Oh no, I simply find myself with no appetite for alfalfa lately. In fact, while I am here, I would like to request a change of the evening menu in the future. Nothing purple."

The chef nodded again. "As the Lady wishes. So then, what may we treat you to today? If you desire something sweet, we are having a wonderfully exotic desert of bananas in a sweet and sour orange liquor with coconut topping, on the occasion of the Zebrica visit. Nothing purple, I assure the Lady."

Trixie resisted the temptation to lick her lips. It sounded unusual and delicious, and Trixie didn't think she had ever had anything as exotic as bananas and coconut. On the other hoof, it sounded awfully unwieldy for what she had in mind. "That sounds delicious, perhaps later, but do you perhaps have something suited for a snack in the gardens?"

The chef considered the request patiently. "We have the usual selection of cupcakes and other treats available, of course, and on this occasion we also have an assortment of cupcakes with orange and lime frosting, if that could tempt the royal tongue. And if the Lady desires something more fancy, we can certainly make it."

"Cupcakes will be fine, sir. Orange and lime sounds perfect," she paused, "and I would like a hay smoothie on the side, thank you."

"As you wish, my Lady." The chef bowed deeply and walked back into one of the side rooms. He came back a little later with a collection of cupcakes and a hay smoothie on a plate. It was all a lot fancier than what Trixie had been used to in her travels, and way too fancy for a picnic, but Trixie fully enjoyed the service. "Is there anything else we can get you?"

"These will do nicely, thank you, and be sure to give my compliments to the kitchen." The old stallion smiled and bowed again, as Trixie walked out of the kitchen with her cupcakes floating beside her.

Trixie wandered through the grand royal gardens with her cupcakes, looking for a quiet place to sit and relax. Trixie had spent a lot of time in the garden with Luna, who had shown her all the flowers that bloomed during the night. It was usually a quiet place at night, but during the day there were ponies tending the many flowers and all the animals. They all bowed their heads to her as she passed, and Trixie couldn't help but bask in the attention.

Finally, after several minutes of wandering around, Trixie found a quiet section of the garden surrounding a small decorative pond. She walked down towards and around the water, trying to settle on a good spot to sit down. As she was trotting along, her eyes settled upon the calm water. She

could see the surrounding trees reflected in its dark surface quite clearly, but something caused her to pause. She stopped, and blinked. Carefully she edged closer to the pond, leaning her head over the water. As she stared into the watery mirror, she felt the fear of earlier grip her heart. Staring into the calm blue surface of the water, Trixie saw no reflection of herself.

Trixie closed her eyes and tried to breathe calmly. Maybe it was just a trick of the light. It had to be, what other explanation could there be? She opened her eyes again and nervously peeked into the water. She nearly screamed as a young filly with large violet eyes now stared back at her where before had been emptiness. She stumbled back and sat down, with her heart pounding in her throat, eyes fixated upon the spot where she had been standing. She couldn't see anything from where she was now sitting. "Calm down Trixie... maybe there's a perfectly good explanation. Maybe... maybe she just wants to talk..."

She stood up on shaking legs and hesitated for a long time, then stepped over to the water and peered down into the mirror. The purple filly looked back up at her with sadness in her eyes. Trixie tried to be calm as she spoke with the most confident voice she could muster. "Who... who are you?" It wasn't very confident at all. Her voice sounded hollow and nearly drowned in the quiet of the garden, or swallowed up in the abyss of those deep purple eyes.

The filly sat there in the water, looking at Trixie. Even before she spoke, Trixie knew the answer. The voice was as familiar as the face, despite her youth. "I'm Twilight... Twilight Sparkle."

"H... Hello Twilight. My name is... is Trixie."

Chapter 2

"Are you afraid?"

Trixie leaned over the edge of the water, staring into the purple eyes reflected in the surface. Her mind struggled to find an explanation, an answer, anything to hold on to, but in that instant she found herself without any. She didn't know what to say or even do with herself. Was she afraid? Of what? The filly in the pond waited silently as Trixie opened her mouth, hesitatingly asking in return, "Should I... be afraid?"

The purple unicorn lowered her head until her chin almost touched her chest, her eyes searching some dark corners Trixie could not see. "Sometimes I'm afraid. It's so dark and cold... all the time."

Trixie looked around herself. The skies were reddening as the sun began its descent below the horizon, but it was still bright enough. She bit her lip a little as she turned back to address the young Twilight. "What are you afraid of?"

"There are things out there... sometimes they make noises in the dark. Don't you hear them too? Mother used to tell me that you have to face your fears. Sometimes... sometimes I try to find them, to talk to them, because maybe they aren't so bad and maybe they know where mother is. But they hide where it is darkest, and I get lost. It's so cold and dark here."

Trixie was silent. She didn't know what to say to the young pony. She didn't know what to say to herself. She sat down heavily and closed her eyes. What was happening to her? Why couldn't she see her own reflection, and was she really speaking to Twilight's lost soul... or was it something else? What had really happened in Dappleshore, and what was it doing to her? She felt the fear grip her again, this time stronger. She tried to focus her attention on the feeling, tried to understand it.

Her thoughts were broken by Twilight's shivering voice. "What are you afraid of?"

Trixie opened her eyes and looked at the reflection. For a long time she simply sat there. Finally she said with a low voice, "I'm afraid of myself, of what is happening to me."

"What is happening to you?"

"I... don't know, and that's what scares me."

"Can't you find out? Maybe somepony knows and you could ask them."

"I don't know how, or who. The only one who..." Trixie broke off, suddenly struck by a mix of hope and despair. Midnight's work, if there were answers to be found anywhere it was with that infernal mare and her cursed work. But it was too dangerous, too risky. Was it no Midnight's notes that had driven Twilight to do the things she did? Would she really risk making the same mistake?

The young filly in the water looked up at her. "Sometimes you need to face your fears. Maybe you need to go into the dark places where they hide."

Trixie sat there, staring into the water. She needed to know. If something was happening with her, then she needed to understand it before it became too late. And there was only one place she could find answers. Trixie shivered.

"I'm afraid to lose sight of myself in the dark."

"Sometimes I frighten myself too..."

The new voice was tiny and shy, yet it still made Trixie jump, almost causing her to lose balance and fall into the pond with a yelp. She balanced briefly on the edge before regaining herself.

The yellow pegasus who had spoken shied away from her with a low squeak. "I'm... I'm so, so sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, your highness," The pegasus whispered as she peeked out at Trixie from behind a pink mane. "You... you just looked like you could use somepony to talk to. And..." She held up the sad remains of a lemon frosted cupcake which,

from the looks of it, had been gnawed upon by some animal, "raccoons ran off with your lunch. I tried to stop them, but the animals here are just..." she trailed off, staring at her hooves timidly.

Trixie felt herself smiling a little at the shy pony and the shredded cupcake, but it quickly faded as she glanced back down into the water. The dark surface was now blank, showing only the looming trees around the pond. She sighed. "It's OK, I wasn't very hungry anyway."

Fluttershy pushed the hair out of her eyes and followed Trixie's gaze into the dark waters of the pond. Trixie felt a sudden rush of panic and moved to block the pegasus' view of the water. What would the other pony not think if she saw Trixie had no reflection? But the yellow mare simply looked depressed and shuffled her hooves. "Oh, I'm so sorry I scared your fish away. I'm such a loudmouth sometimes!"

Loudmouth. Trixie had been called that more than once, and maybe she had deserved it then, but it was certainly not the first word that she would have associated with the pegasus in front of her. "F... Fish?" She asked, confused.

"Oh yes. I talk to animals all the time too.... um, not the animals here, I think I spooked them once and now they flee from me." The pegasus held her hooves up to her mouth as if a sudden realization of impending doom had struck her. She looked even more depressed, if such a thing was even possible, as she glanced up at Trixie with wide, pleading eyes. "Oh... oh, please don't fire me, your highness! I promise I'll do better, I really need this job! I promise I can handle it!"

Trixie felt completely at a loss. "Calm down. Just... calm down, OK? You say you work here, in the gardens? What is your name?"

The pegasus looked away. "I'm... I'm Fluttershy, your highness. Princess Celestia hired me a week ago, to tend her beautiful gardens, but I'm making a real mess of it already."

Trixie paused. The name sounded familiar. It took her a few seconds to remember the connection. "Fluttershy? Weren't you by any chance a friend of Twilight Sparkle? I think I remember you from some of the letters she got."

Fluttershy glanced back up. "Y... Yes, your highness. She was one of my best friends..." she looked back down, tears filling the corners of her large cyan eyes. "I wish she was still here. Everything has been just awful without her!"

"I miss her too," Trixie said and sighed. "And please, call me Trixie."

Fluttershy sniffed. "Oh... OK." She looked between the cupcake and the water. "I'm really sorry about the fish. And your cupcakes."

Trixie watched the pegasus. Did she think she had been talking with the fish in the pond? Had she not seen Twilight, or heard her? And didn't she see the lack of a reflection in the water, or had she simply not noticed? "Don't worry about it, Fluttershy. Maybe the fish would like the cupcake."

Fluttershy looked at Trixie, then nodded and sat down, carefully and slowly breaking the soft cake into tiny pieces which she then scattered into the water. A few large, silvery carps tentatively nibbled at the crumbs. This seemed to bring a sad smile back on the pegasus' face and for a while the task of feeding the fish seemed to make her forget about Trixie.

Trixie watched her feed the fish for a time. What was happening to her? Was she going crazy? If only she saw those things in the mirror, if only she could see Twilight, what did that mean? She had to know, had to find out.

Trixie sat at Luna's overflowing desk, glancing between a heavy tome of old, yellowing pages and a small hoof-held mirror, both of which she had managed to dig out of Luna's mess after returning from the gardens. The mirror was empty, aside from the room around her reflected in its polished surface. The book might as well have been empty too, for all the good it did her.

She looked up as she heard the door open and saw Luna step in. The princess paused in the door and tilted her head with a smile, "Since when did you become the resident bookworm, dear?" Getting only a sigh from Trixie, Luna walked over and nuzzled her gently. "Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's OK, you're right. I've never been one to read much." She flipped a few pages idly, not really knowing where to start or what to look for. "How was your meeting with the zebras?"

"Utterly boring, and entirely pointless if you ask me." She sat down behind Trixie and rubbed her neck with soft strokes. "They just requested the remains of Twilight's friend, Zecora, returned to her homeland for burial. Turns out the zebra was the daughter of some chief of theirs. Purely a formality. They could have just sent a letter and saved themselves a trip across the ocean. I'll never understand these kinds of things."

Trixie closed her eyes, trying to enjoy the massage, trying to leave her worries for a while.

"So if you never were one to read much, why begin now?" Luna peeked at the book "And why that old thing? I have much better books if you want something to read..."

Trixie sighed deeply, as she opened her eyes and levitated the small mirror up in front of her. "Tell me, what do you see in the mirror?"

Luna leaned her head over Trixie's shoulder to peer into the mirror. She smiled and gave Trixie a peck on the cheek. "I see a pony who would benefit more from a massage than from dusty old books. Really, the wizened old scholar look doesn't suit you, dearest."

"You don't...?" Trixie slumped over a little. It didn't come as a great surprise. Deep down she had probably known from the start that this was how it was, but it was still a blow to actually have it confirmed. "You don't see anything odd at all?"

Luna peered back into the mirror once more, remaining silent for a while as she tried to see something. Trixie didn't need to hear the answer, the mere fact that it wasn't blatantly obvious to Luna was answer enough. "I'm sorry," she said "I don't see anything. Why? What do you see?"

Trixie threw the mirror down, a little too hard, and stared at the desk. Luna had stopped her gentle rubbing and looked at her with concern. Trixie rubbed her eyes tiredly with a hoof. "I see nothing."

Luna seemed confused. "Nothing? So... then what is the problem?"

"The problem is, I can't see myself in the mirror!" Trixie half shouted, more in frustration at that fact than at Luna. She picked the mirror back up and felt a stab of regret at seeing the long crack now running across the surface. She wondered how much the old mirror meant to Luna. "I see you, I see the room... and that's it. No Trixie." Luna was silent. Trixie could see her in the mirror. The princess' face seemed frozen in some expression of deep worry and shock. Trixie looked down. "And then... sometimes... sometimes I see Twilight where my own image should have been. But she's young, still a filly. And... we speak." Trixie lowered the mirror a little and glanced into it, past Luna's frozen stare to some point in the back of the reflection. "I fear I'm going crazy. I fear something is happening to me, and I have no clue what it is."

Trixie turned to look at Luna. The princess was staring into the mirror with a serious expression. Trixie suddenly felt nervous. Had she said too much? What was Luna thinking? Maybe she was truly going crazy... already insane.

Finally Luna seemed to notice that she had stopped speaking and was now looking at her. She glanced at the book and took a few seconds as if to consider her words. "I... I'm sure you just need to get over the loss of Twilight, and the many changes in your life. It's a lot of change for one pony. Maybe you don't thrive here in the castle, maybe you feel lonely? We could go out more, would you like that? Maybe meet some other ponies."

Trixie watched Luna with growing dismay. "So it's true, I'm crazy. You think I'm crazy."

"No!" Luna looked a little desperate. "No, I don't think you're crazy." She wrapped her hooves and wings around Trixie in a tight hug. "I love you Trixie, and nothing is ever going to change that, do you hear?" Trixie sighed and closed her eyes. A low growl from her stomach broke the silence of the moment. Luna kissed her softly. "You haven't been eating all day? Didn't you go see the chef?"

"I did... raccoons stole my cupcakes" Trixie muttered, barely audible.

"Well, no wonder you're not feeling well. Just try to relax, and I'll go get something for us both. It was a long and boring meeting for me, I could use something to eat too."

Trixie nodded. She was admittedly rather hungry. "Just, please, nothing purple."

Luna smiled and kissed her again. "Don't worry. I'll be back soon."

Celestia sat up in her bed as a loud and insistent knocking woke her from her sleep. She blinked a few times and got up, "Yes?"

"Sis, it's me! We need to talk."

Luna's voice sounded nervous through the thick wooden doors of Celestia's bedroom. Celestia opened the doors and looked at her sister as she pushed her way inside. The look on her face made it clear that it could not wait until the morning. "Luna? What's wrong?"

Luna closed the doors behind them and turned to Celestia. "It's Trixie. I think... I think I gave her more than just my blood when I saved her out there in the forest. I think..." Luna looked down, a mix of despair and shame in her voice, "I think I gave Nightmare Moon another soul to torment."

Celestia looked at Luna seriously. The topic of Nightmare Moon always put her on edge. Losing her only sister to that monster once had left a deep wound in her heart which would never heal. The prospect of losing her again haunted her every night. "What are you saying, Luna?"

Luna sighed, sitting down heavily on Celestia's large bed. "She just told me that she cannot see herself in the mirror, and that she sometimes sees Twilight... a young Twilight, and they talk. When I... When I first became Nightmare Moon, I felt lonely, unloved and... invisible. I would look myself in the mirror and see nothing, and then she would come to me. I fear I've given Nightmare Moon a hoofhold in Trixie's mind and now she's playing on Trixie's sense of loss."

Celestia gnawed on her lip as she gazed out the window, a rare sign that what Luna was saying worried her greatly. "Are you certain of this?"

Luna stood up restlessly. "I can't think of any other explanation, Sis. It would be too unbelievable that she just happens to have exactly the same experiences as I did."

"And you've never told her about your experiences?"

"We've talked about it, but I've never mentioned those... details. It's never really come up. Unless I gave her bits of my memories too, when I gave her my blood, but I've had no indication that this is the case."

Celestia walked around the bedroom a little, trotting back and forth as she thought. She stopped and looked at Luna. "I'm glad you came to me. I need to think this over, and maybe we need more time and information. Stay with her, Luna, try to cheer her up, maybe take her out somewhere. And maybe... perhaps you should speak with her about these things. I think it is better for her to know what she's dealing with, and for her to know that you stand by her."

Luna nodded and opened the door. She paused in the doorway and turned to Celestia. "Thank you, sis."

Celestia smiled. "You know I'll always be there for you, sister."

Trixie listened as Luna walked out the door. She sat for a time, staring at the mirror and the book, then closed the book and got up. She walked out the door, into the large hall. Luna's private quarters were quite expansive, befitting a princess, but most of it was little used. Luna spent most of her time in the smaller study and bedroom, when she wasn't out and about. Trixie found it a little odd when she had all this space to roam in, but Luna said she liked it cozy.

She walked up to one of the doors leading out onto the balcony overlooking the gardens and pushed it open. Stepping out into the cool night air she let her eyes drift out over Equestria below her. Somewhere out there were the answers to her questions. She stepped up to the edge of the balcony and

spread her wings, then hesitated. With a sigh she sat down, gazing into the distance. She couldn't do this alone. But could she convince Luna to go along with it, and how far?

The sound of the door opening broke her out of her thoughts. She listened as hooves walked towards the bedroom, then paused and turned around, coming her way. Luna poked her head outside. "Oh, there you are. I found some scraps from the zebras' dinner." She walked out and sat next to Trixie, offering a plate of various treats.

Trixie took the food, admittedly happy to get something to eat after going a day without anything. Luna smiled and sat down next to her, eating a little herself while watching the stars. Trixie could sense that something was on her mind, but the princess remained silent. After a while, Trixie decided to break the silence. "I... I need to go back to Dappleshore. Tonight."

Luna almost choked on a piece of dessert. She coughed a little and looked at Trixie with concern. "Why? There's nothing to go back to, and I thought we agreed it was best to put it behind us."

Trixie considered the plate before her. "Something is wrong, Luna. Something is happening to me, and I don't know what it is. I need answers. I need to know what exactly we're dealing with." She idly turned the plate a few times. "There are so many questions about what happened, with Twilight and with me. What drove Twilight to do what she did? What did Midnight do to her, and what did she plan on doing if she hadn't been stopped? What happened to me out there in the forest, and what exactly did your blood do? What happened to Twilight and me down in the dungeons, and what happened to Midnight? And what was that magic you performed near the end?" She paused, and sighed as she looked back across the skies. "I know you have no more answers than me. You said you didn't know what the spell was, that it was a desperate call. You said you didn't know your blood would have this effect on me, and that it must have been sparked by what happened with Twilight. And I'm sure you are right, and that's why I... why we must know more!" She looked at Luna, pleadingly "But I don't want to do it alone. I need you, Luna. I need you to support me in this, because I don't want to lose myself like... Twilight."

Luna stared down into the floor. "You know I'll always be there for you, but... there's something I need to tell you, about the things you see in the

mirror. I think... I think it's Nightmare Moon." Trixie looked at Luna, who quickly continued, trying to explain. "The things you described to me, that you can't see your own reflection, that's exactly like I felt before becoming Nightmare Moon all those ages ago. I felt invisible, empty and alone, and she filled that emptiness and gave me false comfort. And I fear... I fear I may have given you a part of her, or a link maybe, when I gave you my blood."

Trixie was silent for a long time, digesting the news. After a time she nodded a little. "Isn't that just more proof that we are woefully ignorant of what exactly your blood, and all the other magic, did to me?" She looked up at Luna "Please Luna, I must return to Dappleshore. We must learn all that we can, before it's too late, and I don't want to be alone."

Luna sank a bit. "Maybe we should speak with my sister."

"She's asleep at this hour. There's no immediate threat right now, we're just going for a brief visit to the place where it happened. We'll talk to her tomorrow, I promise. I'm not trying to go behind her back or anything."

Luna sighed deeply. She didn't want to tell Trixie that Celestia was almost certainly awake, because Luna had just been there. She looked Trixie deep in the eyes. "We'll go to Dappleshore, then talk to Celestia in the morning. But I need you to promise me something. I want you to promise that you won't speak with Ni... with Twilight, in the mirror. I don't think you can trust her."

Trixie frowned a little. "It's going to be a little difficult to avoid all reflective surfaces."

"Please, just... try to ignore her. Don't speak with her if she appears. That's all I ask." Luna pleaded.

Trixie looked down, sighing. Something inside her felt bad about having to ignore the little purple filly, ignore Twilight. What if she wasn't bad? What if she was lost too and needed help?

Luna reached out to her. "Please, for me."

"I... I promise."

The mountains and trees of the Whitetail Wood rushed past below them as they made their way almost directly south from Canterlot towards the bay. Trixie had never flown before Luna's blood transformed her, and the thrill of gliding effortlessly through the air was enough to bring the first significant smile to her face since waking up that day. The cool night wind under her wings and in her mane was amazing, she could see why all the pegasi always seemed so spirited.

It was not without some relief that she spotted the marshy fields of Dappleshore, however. She wasn't exactly in good shape yet, and it was a long flight from Canterlot to Dappleshore. They touched down upon the hard stones of Pedigree Lane. Trixie stood for a time, staring at the barren lot of land in front of them. Only two months ago an old mansion had stood there, now it was gone, torn down piece by piece and everything burned at Celestia's decree. Trixie had been happy to see it all gone, cleansed by the fires and forever removed from the face of Equestria. But now she worried how much had been lost in the fires. How many important answers.

Luna placed a comforting hoof on her shoulder, and together they walked across the scorched fields. Trixie felt a deep sadness as she walked in silence upon the ground where, a few months ago, she had spent her days with Twilight, where everything had finally started to go right for her, for once in her life, only for it all to plummet to the earth like a young bird thrown out of the nest too early.

The edge of the woods came closer and Trixie felt the sadness joined by a sense of dread. She stopped a few yards from the line of trees. "I nearly died in there... and you saved me, gave me your blood." Luna didn't say anything. "Do you think... do you think she intended to finish the job when she brought me to that hilltop?"

Luna shook her head a little. "I don't know. But if she had intended that, I don't see why she would have waited or hesitated. Whatever it is, I'm just glad you survived."

Trixie nodded faintly. "I just wish Twilight hadn't... died."

"We all do," Luna said and squeezed Trixie gently.

Trixie sighed deeply and looked into the darkness of the forest. With a moment to gather her nerves, she walked into the woods, walking slowly among the trees. Luna followed quietly next to her. Somewhere an owl cried its eerie cry. Trixie paused and looked around, as if listening to the forest around her. "Luna, do zebras have magic?"

Luna stopped and brushed her mane away from her eyes with a slight shake. "No, they are much like earth ponies. Quite knowledgeable about the natural world, but no magic. The rhinos have magic."

"Rhinos?" Trixie quirked an eyebrow. She had admittedly never worried much about the wider world and its cultures. Maybe it was different for pegasi, who could more easily travel about, but to her Equestria had always seemed very large, and the idea that there were other lands beyond its borders never really occupied her mind before.

Luna nodded, smiling "Yes. They are very large creatures, with horns on their noses. They are not as many as the zebras, and they stay mostly to themselves, but the two races do have an old relationship of sorts. Mutual respect, I suppose you could best call it. I'm afraid I'm not quite up to date on this, however. Last time I spent any significant time with the zebras was thousands of years ago when I was young and Celestia sent me off on a 'diplomatic' visit. I was so bored," Luna chuckled at the memory "Hearing the locals talk endlessly about agriculture and herbs just didn't thrill a young princess I suppose. I think the zebras still tell tales about that visit."

Trixie tried to imagine all the disastrous scenarios she could involving Luna in the lands of the zebras. The silly ideas made her smile briefly as she continued her walk, dodging a few low branches.

Luna followed calmly. "Why did you ask?"

"It just occurred to me that that zebra, Zecora, seemed remarkably prescient about Twilight. She appeared to have concerns before anypony else noticed anything amiss. I wonder... I wonder what she might have known. And... why did Midnight kill her? She must have come too close to something."

Luna nodded a little. "I doubt we'll ever know. But the lands of the zebras are steeped in old magic and dark mysteries. Perhaps she simply noticed some warning sign that we missed."

Trixie walked on silently until Luna stopped her and pointed at the glade in front of them. "This is here. This is where I found you." Trixie felt an icy chill and a sudden desire to turn and run. Even now something about this forest, and this place in particular, made her feel weak. Luna nuzzled her gently, "Don't worry, it's in the past now."

Trixie breathed slowly and deeply, then glanced around. The rain had no doubt washed away the blood long ago, and for that she was thankful. Her eyes wandered over the large, pointy rocks strewn about the glade, like... teeth. A glimpse of white teeth in the darkness flashed in her mind, a sudden memory previously locked away in the dark depths of her mind. Trixie stumbled but Luna caught her. Her legs trembled and she spread her wings. "I don't want to stay here! Let's go, I've seen enough, there's nothing but bad memories here."

Luna followed as Trixie set off in flight. Rising swiftly over the canopy of the woods they flew back towards the village, leaving the glade behind them.

The land upon which the farm had been was a dreary, depressing wasteland as Trixie and Luna touched down on the muddy, trampled ground. This was where most of Celestia's efforts had been focused. For weeks, large teams of ponies had scoured every inch of the place, dug the whole field up and carefully searched every ounce of dirt. Bones and ashes – such as could be recovered - had been gathered for burial elsewhere, while everything else had been collected, under the strict and watchful eyes of the royal guard, to be burned. For weeks the great pyres had burned away, leaving only ashes and coal.

The sight of the ruined and charred fields was utterly depressing, and the thought that this was where Twilight had met her final fate made Trixie lose her breath and almost fall over in tears. Had she been alone she might have given in to the grief, but Luna's presence gave her strength.

Trixie walked slowly between the pyres, which the rain had only managed

to condense into black hills dotting the landscape. Why had she come here? She had known that she would find nothing but ashes. Frustrated, she sat down on the cold, wet ground and stared at the pile in front of her. Luna stood beside her, staring sadly into the ground.

Idly, Trixie began to dig in the pile of ash and coal with a large flat stone, her horn glowing stronger as a hope, a faint prayer, formed somewhere in her mind.

Luna looked up with a slight start. "What... what are you planning?"

Trixie didn't pause. "I have to find answers!"

Luna whinnied nervously, but Trixie continued, digging deeper and deeper into the pile, searching, letting her magic feel through the ashes for something... anything to restore. With a sudden rush of energy and determination she sifted through the pile, then the next one, and the next one. And there, amidst the black sludge, something emerged, a tiny fleck of burnt paper. Trixie's eyes narrowed and beads of sweat gathered on her brow as her horn burned brightly in the night.

Luna shifted uncomfortably as paper began to grow from the tiny flake. "Celestia is gonna kill us! She'll kill us, and then send us both to the moon!"

But Trixie didn't listen. She smiled as she gazed upon the intact piece of paper. She turned it and tilted her head. "An envelope..." she muttered, a hint of disappointment that it wasn't more, and held it closer. It was addressed to one Gray Ashes, Dappleshore, and a seal had been stamped on the front. Trixie narrowed her eyes and read it out aloud.

"Hoofswell Insane Asylum."

Chapter 3

Luna arrived on the balcony outside her quarters back at Canterlot. It had been a long flight to Dappleshore and back, and the sun had just begun its rise above the horizon. She looked back as Trixie landed behind her. "Let me talk to her first," Luna said as she opened the doors and stepped inside, "Also, I think it would be best if we don't mention this little trip to her, or anything about the envelope." Trixie nodded silently as she walked in behind Luna.

"You know what I think would be best?"

Both Luna and Trixie let out a squeak at Celestia's voice. Luna seemed to grow smaller as she turned to where the voice had come from. "S... Sister! You scared us," she tried to smile, but it didn't quite work and ended up being a rather nervous quiver instead.

Celestia stood up slowly from where she had been sitting. All her usual warmth had drained from her face, a look of disappointment rather than anger. "Every day I hope that you will talk to me. That you will come to me when there is something. I try to be your friend, I try to help you, but you continue to repay me with secrets and lies. I am truly disappointed in you, Luna."

Luna looked down in shame. After a long moment of silence Celestia sighed and continued. "Moving on to business, however. I received several missives not long ago, from reliable sources, about a certain two ponies walking around Dappleshore, digging in things best left buried. Perhaps you wish to tell me what you were doing there, and how in Equestria you could possibly believe I wouldn't know of it?"

Luna opened her mouth, but Trixie interrupted her before she could speak. "It wasn't Luna's fault. She wanted to see you first, but I didn't want to disturb your sleep. But I can explain."

Celestia sat back down on the couch where she had been sitting before. "Then explain."

Trixie began telling of her experiences, which unknown to her Celestia had already heard from Luna. Celestia remained silent throughout, however, listening with a steely gaze which made Trixie uncomfortable. She tried not to show it, however, and moved on to tell of their visit to Dappleshore and the envelope she had restored from the ashes only hours ago. She held the envelope out for Celestia, but the princess didn't take it.

"I thought you knew I had everything there burned for a reason. I thought you both understood and agreed with that decision, even welcomed it," Celestia said after a while. "Was I mistaken?"

"No. We did," Trixie muttered. "But what's happening to me..." she paused, taking a deep breath to face Celestia, looking up to meet the princess' unflinching gaze. "I, no we need answers! We need to know what we're dealing with, we need to understand what happened in Dappleshore, and what it means for us all. We need to understand it. And..." She broke off but quickly straightened back up and continued, "and burning those things may have been a mistake. It may have been the only place to find these answers."

Luna nodded. "I agree, we can't afford to stay ignorant of a potential danger like this. What's done is done, but we must move to remedy our mistake before it is too late."

Trixie gave Luna a small, thankful smile. She was glad to not stand alone in trying to convince Celestia, who remained silent. The silence made Trixie nervous, and she decided to continue, arguing with herself that she might as well plunge headlong in rather than prolong the torture. "Midnight's work is gone, even if I tried I don't think I could restore much more from those ashes this long after. But that envelope... maybe she had correspondence with somepony in that asylum. At the very least somepony there must have known about her. I... need to go there. It's the only hope we have right now."

"And I'll not let her go alone," Luna added quickly. "Please, Tia. This is important. I'm sorry we didn't come to you right away, but I swear we didn't intend to leave you out of this. I just didn't want to mention the letter, and our little trip, because I feared it would complicate the issue."

Celestia sighed. "I am still disappointed that you didn't come to me immediately. You both know you can come to me any time. And," she paused and looked away, "I don't think it is a good idea for you two to visit that asylum, or dig in any more ashes. The knowledge you seek is too dangerous, you know this Luna. It is what lead to all this in the first place, both with Nightmare Moon and now Midnight."

Luna stood up and walked closer, narrowing her eyes at Celestia. She knew her sister well, and knew when something was on her mind. "Tia... there's more to this than what you're telling us, is there not? Who's the one hiding things now? I know this is dangerous, but ignorance is even more dangerous. And if you know something that we ought to know, then I would hope you would share it like you keep telling me to do."

Celestia looked up, keeping her regal posture. "There are ponies there who are best left alone, in the care of their designated guardians. Not just for your sake, but for theirs as well. The ponies there are not kept like that only to keep the outside world safe from them, but also to keep them safe from the world. Visits are strongly regulated in such places, for very good reasons."

Luna kept her eyes on Celestia, not entirely satisfied. After a while Celestia sighed in defeat. "If you must know, a young and troubled pony was admitted to the Hoofswell Asylum... many years ago. She was... much like Twilight, and has suffered greatly. She is very unstable, and I would not want to see her hurt further. For her sake, as well as for yours, I can not allow you to go."

Luna frowned, as she and Trixie asked almost in one voice. "Who is this pony?"

Celestia stood up and shook her head firmly. "I will say no more. I am sorry. This is too dangerous, and I will not allow you to go, and I don't want to find out again that you have been digging in things you shouldn't. And that's final. Am I making myself clear?"

Luna scowled but didn't say anything as Celestia turned and left the room.

Trixie sat down heavily on the bed. She felt exhausted like never before from the journey to Dappleshore and back, and deeply worried about the events of the past day and what awaited ahead. She wanted nothing more right now than to sleep, but the thoughts churning in her mind left her restless. Trixie could hear Luna hum quietly in the bathroom, her voice mixed with the gentle sounds of running water. Trixie still felt conflicted about not talking with the young Twilight in the mirror. She understood Luna's concerns, but part of her felt terrible about betraying the filly like that. How could she leave the pony she once loved all alone in the dark?

Luna poked her head back into the bedroom, a warm smile on her face as she trotted over next to Trixie. "I covered the mirror for you, dear," she said and sat down on the bed next to Trixie, running a hoof down Trixie's back.

Trixie sighed a little at the touch. "I feel terrible. I can't stop thinking about everything, even though I think I could fall asleep standing. What are we going to do, when Celestia won't let us? It won't be easy to go against her will if she's determined to keep us from digging."

Luna leaned in close to her and kissed her neck softly. "We'll work something out, trust me. But let's worry about such things later, there will be plenty of time for that in the evening. I readied the bath for us," Luna gave Trixie a gentle nudge and whispered in her ear, "I bet I could still show the Great and Powerful Trixie a trick or two of my own." Trixie's old hat lifted itself off a hook nearby and settled on Luna's head.

Trixie couldn't help but smirk a little. "Oh?"

Trixie lay on the large bed next to Luna, watching her calm breathing. She wasn't as much thinking as simply lying there, watching the mare she loved as she slept peacefully next to her. She felt exhausted and the worry still lurked in the back of her mind. Yet simply being here, with Luna, in the silence and darkness of her room made her feel better. Trixie realized just how much comfort she drew from Luna. She kissed the princess and closed her eyes with a little yawn, gently stroking Luna's soft mane as she drifted off to sleep.

Trixie wasn't sure if she had awoken, or never quite fell asleep. It seemed

like she had only just closed her eyes. She was sitting in the bed, her heart beating in her chest and with a bitter taste of blood in her mouth. Had she bitten her tongue in her sleep? She sank and tried to calm her breathing. The room was dark and she could only just make out Luna's face in front of her. The princess looked – no, stared - back up at her, her mouth slightly open and her eyes wide. Something wasn't right...

"Luna, dear?" Trixie whispered and rubbed Luna's shoulder with a sudden sense of panic growing in her chest. Trixie glanced down as she felt something warm and wet on her hoof. With a breathless gasp she pulled her hoof out of Luna's mane and stared at the deep crimson stain. "No!" She cried and nearly choked as the taste of blood in her mouth and throat returned to her attention. Drops of blood fell from her lips upon the dark sheets and ran down her neck in slow streams.

"NO! Luna! Luna..." She cried desperately as she shook the blood-soaked body next to her. "Somepony help me! Please help! Please.... Luna, please wake up!"

"WHAT in Equestria happened!?" Celestia shut the door behind her as she stepped into the small room.

Trixie sat, rigid as a stone, staring blankly at the floor in front of her. "I... I don't know..." she whispered, her voice hoarse from screaming and crying. The taste of Luna's blood refused to leave her lips even now. "I don't know..." she repeated to herself, barely audible under her breath.

"You don't know?!" Celestia stopped in front of her. The white alicorn looked like she didn't know what to make of herself, much less Trixie. "You were found screaming over my sister's body, covered in her blood! It looked like you had been trying to eat her, after stabbing her repeatedly in the neck with a piece of a broken mirror! And you tell me you don't know what happened!" Celestia yelled, seemingly on the verge of exploding. It was a rare, and terrifying sight.

"Will she... be alright?" Trixie couldn't think of much else. The whole castle had been in a state of panic after they had found her and Luna in the bed. Luna had been rushed to the hospital, while Celestia had thrown Trixie in

here to wait. She had waited alone for hours before Celestia returned, and she hadn't heard any news in that time. The only thing she wanted to know was whether Luna would make it. Nothing else mattered to her.

Celestia took a deep breath and turned around. "She will recover. Apparently your aim with that shard was terrible, and you better thank your stars for that!" Celestia stood for a few seconds as if she considered sending Trixie to some distant star, or whether she should roast her right here, then she simply walked back out of the room and shut the door behind her without saying more.

Trixie didn't move or say anything. A guard had brought her a bowl of water and some towels that she had used to clean herself up with, although it did little to get rid of the taste. The bloodied water and towels now lay in a corner behind her, where she couldn't see them. In her mind, Trixie kept hoping she'd wake up, any moment now, but she knew it wasn't going to happen. She was already awake, it hadn't been a nightmare, it had been all too real. And she had nearly killed the one she loved in her sleep.

The day passed in solitude. Trixie didn't move from where she sat. At some point a guard brought her some soup and a piece of bread, but she wasn't feeling the least bit hungry and the soup had long since grown cold. She wondered what would happen to her. Maybe Celestia would banish her, or have her hanged, or at least lock her up somewhere. She sighed.

Celestia stopped her pacing and turned to Luna. "She nearly killed you, how can you..."

"How can YOU just abandon her?!" Luna winced as a jab of pain shot through her neck at the agitated movement. She was half sitting in the bed at the private hospital, her neck wrapped in tight bandages which made breathing a bit of an effort, and angry outburst quite painful. She grit her teeth and took a few deep breaths. She wasn't feeling too good thanks to the blood loss, and getting herself riled up didn't do her any good. "Trixie needs our help and support, the last thing we want to do is abandon her to Nightmare Moon and whatever else torments her."

Celestia stalked back and forth in front of the hospital bed. "I am simply

trying to protect you, sister. Because I couldn't bear to lose you. What if you are wrong? Can we afford the risk?" She stopped and looked down, as if what she was going to say hurt immensely. "I know you care about her, and it hurts me too, but we may have no other options."

Luna shot Celestia a dark gaze. "Sometimes I truly wonder how you can think the way you do, Sis. She may not be your sister, but she is the mare that I love, and she deserves all the same chances that I or anypony does. Would you not do the same for me? Or did you... did you give up on me so soon too?" Celestia took a step back, a hurt look on her face. Luna didn't look away. "Was banishment truly the last option, or did you just give up on me too like you're giving up on Trixie now, on the mare of my heart?"

"Luna, I..." Celestia whispered.

Luna lowered her eyes, unable to lower her head. "I'm sorry, Sis. I know you mean well, but sometimes... sometimes I worry that you judge too soon and too harshly. I know deep in my heart that Trixie would never hurt me. What she did was not of her own will, and I think we can both clearly see whose will it was. Nightmare Moon has given up on me, she has found a new promising host and I am now dead weight to her. The last thing she wants is having me around to spoil her chances with Trixie. So she tried to get rid of me. Do we want to give Nightmare Moon everything she could wish for by giving up on Trixie? Without even trying?"

Celestia merely shook her head. Luna smiled sadly and gestured for Celestia to come over. Celestia walked over and lowered her head, letting Luna wrap her hooves around her neck in a gentle hug.

"What would you have me do, Luna? It seems whatever I do, I risk everything I hold dear, and my duties as regent would never allow me to go with you."

"We all do what we must, Tia, and accept the price for our actions. I brought Nightmare Moon into this world, she and every pony she torments because of me are my responsibility. If my life is the price I have to pay in the end to ensure she never threatens another pony, then I pay it gladly. Let me go with Trixie to Hoofswell, and as far beyond that as we may need to find the answers. At least give me this chance to put everything right that I have done wrong."

Celestia closed her eyes. "I could send somepony else. Somepony from the school, perhaps Bastion Yorsets? You know him, he's a good pony, and knowledgeable in the studies of magic. And he knew Twilight too."

Luna gently wiped a tear from Celestia's eye. "You know this is something Trixie and I have to deal with, sister. But if it helps you feel better, then I will promise that we will not go alone. Twilight had good friends, perhaps they would also like to find out what really happened, maybe get a sense of closure."

Celestia opened her eyes, looking at something in the distance. After a moment she nodded a little. "Take Spike with you, at least. You remember Twilight's old assistant, the young dragon she raised? I want regular letters from you, twice a day at least, or I'll make sure all your flanks are properly roasted. Am I clear?"

Luna smiled and nuzzled her sister. "Of course, Sis. I promise."

Trixie moved a little, stretching her aching limbs. She had been sitting there for hours, just waiting. She glanced towards the bowl of cold soup and bread. Slowly, tiredly she reached out, lifted it up in her magic and watched it drift towards her. The soup looked simple but good, a basic vegetable soup. She stirred it a little with the spoon, then took a sip. The taste was refreshing and made her feel better, if only a little.

Trixie licked the spoon and was about to dip it back into the cold soup when she stopped mid-motion. Her eyes fixed upon the blank silver as she lifted the spoon up in front of her. A tiny lavender face peered out at her, eyes filled with sadness. "Don't leave me here... I don't want to be alone!"

Trixie's lips trembled. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Twilight!"

A knock on the door broke her out of her thoughts and as she blinked the vision in the spoon vanished. The door opened and a guard stepped in and bowed to her. "Princess Luna awaits you in the hospital, Your Highness. She wishes to see you."

Trixie spent the rest of the evening and night with Luna, who told her of the agreement with Celestia. She slept in the hospital where she felt a little safer knowing others were around. Despite tossing and turning, the day passed without nightmares, and the following evening the doctors reluctantly allowed Luna to leave, although insisting that she take it easy for a couple of days. Luna herself assured them that she was feeling fine.

Celestia came by as much as her duties would allow, but remained silent throughout. It seemed as if a heavy weight hung upon her shoulders, making her appear smaller and older than Trixie had ever seen the princess of the sun before. As they prepared to leave that evening, she came down to say farewell. It felt to Trixie as if they would never see her again, and she felt a tightness in her throat as the carriage set off towards Ponyville, the figure of Celestia growing smaller and smaller behind them.

Chapter 4

The flight to Ponyville was much shorter than the one to Dappleshore, but Trixie was happy to make the journey aboard the royal carriage regardless, and Luna even more so with her injuries. They didn't speak much during the ride. Instead, Trixie found her gaze drifting off, staring blankly at the fields passing by below her as her mind wandered.

She was so deep in thought that she barely noticed when they landed, and jumped a little when Luna gently nudged her. "I think it's best if we arrive on hoof. We get less attention that way," Luna said as they got out and thanked the two pegasi pulling the carriage.

Trixie watched them fly away, leaving the two alone on the small path winding towards Ponyville. Luna adjusted Trixie's cloak a little for her. They had decided it was best to wear a simple set of traveling cloaks, to draw less attention. The clothes didn't exactly hide their identity from any ponies who decided to look closely, but it would hopefully prevent too many from doing so.

"Luna, can I ask you something?" Trixie asked quietly as they began walking slowly down the path.

Luna nodded, turning her head to smile at Trixie. "Of course, dear. Anything."

Trixie paused, before speaking. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it, but... I have been wondering what it was like... all those years alone on the moon. A thousand years, that's... not something I can really imagine. It must have been horrible." For a while now the image of the purple filly, all alone and lost in the darkness, had been one of the primary thoughts occupying her mind.

Luna smiled sadly and glanced up at the sky. "It wasn't easy, but it wasn't as terrible as it may sound either. There's a reason the legends say that Celestia imprisoned me in the moon, not on the moon. I didn't sit there all alone for a thousand years among barren rocks and dust. It was more like,"

she paused to think, "like a long, mostly dreamless sleep. And when I woke up, at least to a mind unclouded by Nightmare Moon's influence, I was back here in Equestria and my sister was there. I don't even remember anything of what I did as Nightmare Moon after our return. The hardest part came after her hold on me was broken. There was a lot I had to get used to, a lot of loss and changes." Luna looked down a little sadly at the dusty road.

Trixie nodded a little to herself, eyes on her hooves. "So... you don't remember anything?"

"I remember when I became Nightmare Moon the first time, what lead me there, and what followed. I remember what I did before my banishment, and I remember some early dreams during the first decades of imprisonment. They were all filled with so much anger." She sighed deeply. "But after a while I suppose my mind just fell dormant and Nightmare Moon's hold on me strengthened until, even when we were released, I remained sleeping. Until the Elements broke the spell."

"You say Nightmare Moon was in control, and you said earlier that you suspect she may have been... passed to me with your blood. Who or what exactly is Nightmare Moon?" Trixie asked, finding herself wondering about so many things lately.

Luna's ears drooped, a look of shame. "I was always the more magically adept of me and Tia, and perhaps I could have defeated her back then. In a one on one match certainly. Maybe not now, since she's had a thousand years while I slumbered, but before that. Contrary to popular belief, I did not need Nightmare Moon in order to oppose my sister. But I had no desire to fight anypony, much less Tia. My only wish was to have a friend. I may have had the magic, but she always had the friends." Luna smiled a little sadly. "And as Twilight would have told me, magic isn't much without friends."

The sun still cast a lazy glow over the road in the early evening. Luna was silent a while before continuing. "So... I found a friend. Or she found me. Perhaps it was a little of both. There are... things out there, beyond the stars. Things even older than my sister and I."

Trixie looked up at her. "I thought you and your sister created the sun and

moon and all the stars."

Luna stopped and shook her head. "Heavens no! I don't even control the stars, they're just... backdrop. We are as much part of the world as you and everypony else. I don't know who, or what created it all, and it is not wise to dwell on such things. We are as old as the sun and moon respectively, we are their children in a way; as far as we know we have no other parents. But there are much older things that came before, and we have no special power over these things. Still, there are... ancient and forbidden magics born from the secret studies of these alien things."

"When I felt lonely and unappreciated as a young mare, I studied these things to fill the void. I do not claim to understand all of it, I don't know if anypony can lay claim to such knowledge, but I know it has a way of... taking over. It is dangerous to study because it is so easy to lose control, and then..." She sighed, "I don't know exactly what went wrong back then, but I lost control and what I thought would be a friend turned out to be a Nightmare who wanted a lot more than just a friend. I can not say what she truly is, other than the product of a lonely mind seeking a friend in all the wrong places."

Ponyville seemed somehow different from what Trixie recalled of her first visit, long ago. It was as if some part of its spirit had wilted away. Superficially it looked the same, with ponies trotting about, busy with their daily chores, but underneath lurked a sense of loss, of something that could never be replaced.

Luna came to a halt and Trixie looked up at the large, hollow tree housing the library and once home of Twilight. Celestia had said Twilight's old assistant still worked there, but it looked closed. Luna knocked a few times while Trixie took a peek through a window. "I don't think anypony's home. Did Celestia say where else he might be?"

Luna shook her head and knocked again, harder, but still no reply came.

There was a slight screech as of something dragging against the gravel before coming to a stop. "Hey! What's up?" They turned to the young orange pegasus who was standing on a scooter surrounded by a small

cloud of dust from her sudden stop. The filly tilted her head, then gave a smile of recognition. "Miss Luna, Miss Trixie! I thought it was you under those cloaks. What are you doing here?"

Luna smiled and walked over to the young pegasus. "Scootaloo? It's good to see you. We were just looking for Spike, but it seems he's not here."

"Well of course he's not here now, it's late! He's probably on the apple farm, with Applejack. I can show you the way if you think you can keep up?" The filly grinned.

"If it isn't too much trouble," Luna smiled.

"Pff! I was going there anyway. Rainbow Dash promised she'd teach me some new tricks tonight." She got back on her scooter and set off with the beating wings. "You better keep up!"

Trixie set off after her, followed by Luna. "So, how have you been?"

Scootaloo raced down the street, moving in and out between ponies who turned to watch the three, some shaking their hooves at the little speedster. "I'm cool. I mean..." She frowned but kept her focus on the road ahead, "I really miss Sweetie Belle and Twilight, but it's been crazy since they... you know. I sure don't want to end up like some of the others. But Rainbow Dash has been totally cool and helped me a lot."

"Some of the others?" Luna called, having to yell a little to make sure she was heard over the rushing wind.

The orange pegasus winced. "Yeah. Just saying, you should probably avoid Pinkie Pie if you ever drop by Sugarcube Corner. She gives me the chills. And Rarity's lost it too, after what happened to her sister. She's gone and locked herself up in her boutique. I saw her through a window once, she looked awful, just..." she shivered and had to narrowly evade a cart full of carrots parked on road. "I miss them too, but moping won't bring them back. That's what Rainbow Dash says! She and Applejack are the only two who keeps their cool."

"What about Fluttershy?" Trixie remembered the yellow pegasus she had met back in the royal gardens. "Do you know her?"

Scotaloo shrugged. "I barely ever see her. Always on her way somewhere now."

"Hey, Scoot! Up here!" A rainbow blur descended from the sky over the apple orchards. "Who... Oh, it's you!" Rainbow Dash came to a halt in front of them and gave Trixie a cold stare.

Scotaloo stopped and smiled, then glanced between the rainbow mare and Trixie. "Uh, yes, this is Princess Luna and..."

"I remember her!" Rainbow Dash muttered "The worthless showmare who humiliated us all and ran off with our best friend."

Trixie frowned. "Well, I certainly feel welcome now."

"Well, you're not!" Rainbow Dash flew in between Trixie and Scotaloo, puffing up her chest defiantly. "And if you think you can come here and use your devil charms on any more of my friends, then you better think again!"

Scotaloo tried to get around Rainbow Dash. "Hey, Rainbow Dash, calm down. She's cool, she saved me and Applebloom, remember?"

"Well I don't trust her! I can't believe Twilight would run off with somepony like her!"

Trixie felt the anger rise inside her, like a dark fire eating away at her, a sudden urge to shut the pegasus up... for good. She took a step forward, but paused. No, that wasn't like her. But she wasn't going to let her get away either. She smirked and gave the other mare a taunting look. "Oh, you think she should have run off with somepony else? Is that it?"

"Calm down, dear," Luna said quietly, placing a hoof on Trixie's shoulder. "We didn't come to fight. Just let it lie."

Trixie felt the fires dim a little, but she couldn't stop. She had to show this foal. "I bet you're jealous!"

Rainbow Dash stared daggers at Trixie. "Oh, that is it! You better take that back, you..."

Rainbow's words were cut short as a lasso wrapped around her body and pulled her out of the air. "What in tarnation are y'all yelling about out here!" They all turned to the orange earth pony who was coming towards them, carrying a small purple and green dragon on her back. "Well?"

Luna stepped up quickly before Rainbow Dash or Trixie could speak. "I'm really sorry, miss. It seems our arrival opened a few old wounds."

Applejack paused, then quickly bowed and gave Rainbow Dash a stare. Rainbow Dash just sat down and crossed her hooves over her chest in a defiant posture. "Well, if ah had known you was coming, Princess, ah would have chained up Rainbow here in the barn first. Ah am really sorry for that, but Twilight's death's been hard on us all."

Luna smiled and gave Trixie a little nudge. Trixie forced a small smile, while her eyes were engaging in a war of stares with Rainbow Dash. Luna sighed and rubbed her head with a hoof "They're like little fillies."

Applejack laughed. "You have no idea! But shoot, ah wish ah had been warned y'all were coming."

"Celestia didn't send a letter?" Luna asked.

"Only just now," Applejack gave a nod at the dragon on her back, who had been busy watching the raging battle of stares between Rainbow Dash and Trixie.

Spike looked up. "Oh... the letter." He fumbled a bit before holding up a scroll bearing the royal seal. "It only said she wanted me to go with you on some journey."

Applejack nodded. "It was a might sparse on details, if y'all don't mind me saying. What is this all about?"

"Trixie and I are going to visit Hoofswell, specifically its... asylum. There may be somepony there who can help us shed some much needed light on what happened with Twilight. We promised Celestia we would take others

with us, in particular Spike to keep her updated."

Rainbow Dash jumped up. "What?! I knew it, you're just here to take more of our friends away! Well, I'm not..."

Applejack grabbed her tail and pulled her back down. "Will you calm down, sugar cube!" She gave the rainbow mare a firm look, before turning back to Luna and Trixie. "You sure you want to go digging in that mess? Ah mean, there's no reason to dwell on the past and all. What's done is done."

Luna nodded. "We are certain. There are questions we need answered, and we would appreciate both the company and help if you would join us. I mean, you were Twilight's closest friends."

Rainbow Dash scowled. "Well I'm not going anywhere! I promised Scoot here I'd look after her, and I sure never let a friend down." She glanced at Trixie, leaving the obvious accusation unspoken. Trixie was about to reply but closed her mouth as both Luna and Applejack gave her a cold stare.

Applejack shook her head. "I'm mighty sorry to say ah can't go either. Ah have my sister Applebloom to look after, and this one," she gave Rainbow a poke, "ain't much better. But I'm sure Spike here would be happy to get away for a while, and ah could use one less head to keep count of."

Spike looked between Luna and Trixie. "Well... if Celestia wants me to go, then I will. And I'd do anything for Twilight, even though... even though she's gone." The dragon looked down sadly, but then looked back up as if remembering something. "Oh, but you've got to take Rarity too."

"Why shoot, I nearly forgot about her," Applejack exclaimed. "And Pinkie Pie. We've been trying for weeks to get those two out of their holes, but they're more stubborn than a pair of mules. If y'all could take them with you, that'd do them some good ah think."

"Yes, that's the spirit... let's just give up on all our friends and send them off to some far off place when they become a burden. That's what friends do," Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Get over yourself, Rainbow! You tried your best with Pinkie, but you know it ain't been working. Some fresh air and new

sights will do her good, I'm sure. Rarity too, she really needs to get out of there and stop being such a burden on poor Fluttershy."

Trixie followed behind as Luna, with Spike riding on her back, stepped into Ponyville's bakery. She didn't recall ever meeting Pinkie Pie, but her letters to Twilight had always been the most... colorful of the lot. Trixie wasn't sure what to expect, given what they had heard.

There was a clatter as a plump, rose-maned pony dropped a plate of cakes with a gasp. "Y... Your Majesties!" She stammered and bowed. "What can we get such esteemed guests?"

Luna smiled politely. "Good evening. I hear a miss Pinkie Pie lives here?"

Mrs. Cake's ears drooped. "Oh... oh my... I... I'll try to make her presentable, Your Highness. Just give me some time."

Luna shook her head. "Don't worry, my good pony. We simply wish to talk with her. We hope she will consider coming with us on a little trip."

The baker blinked, then looked as if some realization dawned on her. "Oh... oh!" She looked down sadly at the cakes on the floor. "Has it... has it really come to that? Dearest me, I promised to take care of her, but heavens know it hasn't been easy. And now... well, we almost had to close the shop when she began scaring all the customers. Maybe... maybe it'll be for her best."

Luna looked confused, but Trixie quickly stepped up. "We are terribly sorry, madam. We promise that miss Pie will get the help she needs, you have our word. The Hoofswell asylum has a long reputation for helping cases like these, and perhaps once she's feeling better she can return to you."

Luna nodded a little slowly. "Erh... yes. Perhaps you would tell us where we can find her, and we'll go talk to her."

Mrs. Cake sniffed and sighed. "If... if you're sure. She's in her room, just up those stairs," she pointed at a flight of stairs. "Please, she's... not herself."

"You know... I almost wish that thing about putting Pinkie in an asylum wasn't a big fat lie you just gave Mrs. Cake," Spike said as they ascended the stairs.

Trixie raised an eyebrow at the dragon. "Oh? Why is that?"

Spike shivered as he peeked out over Luna's head. He didn't get to respond as Luna stopped and knocked on the door in front of them. "Pinkie Pie?"

The door opened with a creak, and a single cyan eye peeked out through the slight crack. Her deep pink hair hung around the face like a wet blanket and her pink coat seemed dull and messy. But worst was the joyless face and that blank stare. Trixie felt a slight shiver. For a second she thought at least it couldn't get any more uncomfortable, but she was wrong. The eye glanced over them once, twice, then lit up. The joyless face seemed to twist and contort in front of their eyes as a grin formed on her lips, a grin so deranged it made both Trixie and Luna take several steps back down the stairs. Spike squeaked and buried himself in Luna's mane, quivering like a piece of jelly.

The door opened fully and the pink pony stepped out. "There you are! I'm so happy you could make it!" She dragged them both through the door and shut it behind them. Once inside the pink pony shoved them each a glass of punch and ushered them through the room to a table completely overflowing with sweets and colorful decorations.

Trixie and Luna could only stare in disbelief at the room. It was at once an utter mess, and done up with more decorations than would be fitting for the whole town. Balloons, streamers, confetti, silly hats, flowers, and an endless supply of sweets which all worked to create an overpowering scent. Around the table were placed chairs, most of which were occupied by everything from a bag of flour to a stack of rocks, all wearing party hats.

One chair and its occupant drew immediate attention, however. Placed at the end of the table, evidently the "guest of honor", was a large, ragged doll in the likeness of a lavender unicorn. Bits of hay stuck out of her here and there, and it looked like she had been crudely pieced together from old

bags by a highly unskilled hoof. The guest sitting on the chair opposite the doll was almost as odd: a small alligator staring back at them with indifference.

Pinkie Pie walked around the table, pulling out chairs for them on each side of the Twilight doll. Evidently she had expected guests. "Sit down! We'll have so much fun! Aren't you happy to see them too, Twilight?" The pink pony stuck a hoof out and made the doll nod enthusiastically. "Oh yes, I've missed you two so much!"

Luna sat down slowly and Trixie followed, the two sharing looks. "Uh... yes." Luna struggled a bit to find words. "So how have you been, Pinkie?" The princess remembered the pink pony only briefly from the party she had thrown when Luna had been freed from Nightmare Moon's grip, but this party pony seemed quite different.

Pinkie stopped and flinched. "I'm great! And Twilight is great! We're having a delightful party! Aren't we?" She shoved them a pair of cherry cupcakes and looked at them with her big, deranged eyes.

Luna winced and put the cupcake down. "Pinkie... maybe we could... go outside?"

"I'm not going anywhere!" The pink pony stared at them maniacally, but it quickly returned to the deranged grin from before. "We're having a wonderful party here, for our friend Twilight. It's her big, special party, isn't it Twilight?" Again the doll nodded in agreement.

"Pinkie...." Luna tried to keep eye contact with the other pony, but it was admittedly difficult to not look away from those crazed eyes. "Pinkie... Twilight, she's... Pinkie, she's dead! Twilight is dead."

The deranged smile vanished from Pinkie's face and she stared at Luna. "She most certainly is not! She's sitting right here," The doll nodded, "It's not very nice to joke about such things. Not fun at all!"

Luna opened her mouth again, but Trixie stopped her. She leaned in and whispered to Luna. "Let me handle this. I have an idea." Grabbing a silly hat, of which there were plenty, Trixie subtly covered her horn to conceal her magic as she reached out to control the doll next to her, like she had

done so many times before with her puppets in her later shows.

The stuffed Twilight moved a little and spoke. "Hey, Pinkie..." The pink pony turned and blinked, staring at the puppet. Trixie winked at Luna and pretended to take a drink while Twilight spoke. "I just had an idea! Let's go on an adventure, it'll be fun! Just like we used to do, Pinkie."

"But... Twilight, your party? I made it just for you..."

"And it's been a great party, Pinkie! You always throw the best parties, you know. But this'll be fun, and we can have lots of other parties. What do you say, friend?"

Pinkie shuffled her hooves a little. "Can Gummy come too?"

Trixie blinked, having no clue who Gummy was. Twilight nodded slowly. "Uh... sure, the more the merrier they say! Why don't you and... Gummy go ahead with the princesses, and I'll catch up with you later?"

The deranged grin returned, as Pinkie scooped up the pet alligator and headed for the stairs. "You heard the guest of honor, come on! We're going on an adventure!"

As Pinkie disappeared down the stairs, Spike looked out from Luna's mane where he had been cowering. "That was pretty cool! I can't believe she fell for it."

Trixie grinned and shot out her chest proudly, giving the dragon a haughty laugh. "Oh ye of little faith, like there could ever be any doubt. The Great and Powerful Trixie is not called Great and Powerful for nothing!"

Spike rolled his eyes, but Luna snickered, pulling the silly hat off Trixie's head and giving her a small dash on the nose with it. "You know, I kinda missed the Great and Powerful Trixie."

Pinkie walked along with Gummy the alligator lounging on her back. Everypony they passed stopped and stared at the deranged pony and her pet, most of them taking several steps away. Trixie gave Luna a skeptical

glance. If they had hoped to avoid attention, they just failed big time. "I'm having serious second thoughts about taking this pony with us."

Luna smiled. "I know, but we promised Celestia we'd take others with us, and she was Twilight's friend. Maybe we should just give her a chance."

Trixie nodded, not at all convinced. "So where to next?"

Spike pointed down the road. "We need to get Rarity, but she's locked herself up in her shop for weeks now and I don't think she ever gets out at all."

Luna looked over her shoulder at the dragon. "She doesn't come out at all?"

"Nope. She only lets Fluttershy in. That poor pegasus comes by every day with food and such. Works herself to the bone to support Rarity now that Rarity isn't selling any clothes."

Trixie paused. "Fluttershy? I met her in the royal gardens. If she can talk to Rarity, then why don't we go to her first? If nothing else I think she would be a more useful addition to our party than..." she glanced at Pinkie who was walking up ahead "... uh, you know what I mean."

Luna nodded. "Sounds like a good idea to me. Do you know where Fluttershy is, Spike?"

Spike scratched his chin thoughtfully. "She might be at her cottage, if she's not working."

"Alright, show the way then, Spike," Luna said and set off.

Fluttershy's cottage lay nestled among the fields and woods outside Ponyville. The idyllic little home seemed warm and welcoming as the group trotted up the path towards it, the sun just beginning to set, casting a red glow over the landscape. Here and there a chicken clucked, birds chirped and bunnies frolicked in the tall grass. A few windows in the cottage were open, and a thin line of smoke rose from the chimney. "Seems we're in

luck," Trixie said as she glanced around.

Luna nodded and stopped at the front door. She raised a hoof and was about to knock when a voice called out behind them.

"Hello there, can I help you?" A pink unicorn with purple mane smiled at them from inside the chicken pen where she had been working. As they turned she gasped and quickly bowed. "Oh dear, I'm sorry Your Majesties... I had no idea it was you."

Luna smiled. "There is no need to apologize. We were hoping to find Fluttershy, is she home?"

"Yes, Your Highness. She just returned not long ago. Poor thing works so hard." The unicorn dusted herself off and stepped out of the chicken pen. "Follow me." She opened the door and stepped inside. "Fluttershy, dearest?"

Luna and Trixie followed her inside and looked around, while Pinkie sat down outside. The cottage looked neat and tidy, and a small pot was bubbling merrily on the stove. In front of it stood a yellow pegasus with pink mane, holding a wooden spoon in her mouth and swaying slightly, her head drooped near the floor. She snored a little as the unicorn spoke, then blinked and dropped the spoon. "Oh... uh... oh my... Sparkler? Is that you...?"

Sparkler, the unicorn, gasped and ran up to the sleepy pegasus. "Oh dear, Fluttershy, come here..." she led Fluttershy over to the couch and made her sit down. "Now don't you worry about dinner, I'll take care of that. You just relax and talk to our esteemed guests." She turned to Luna and Trixie, smiling nervously. "Please forgive Fluttershy. She works so hard now that our poor friend Rarity can't support herself."

Luna smiled. "Actually that is partly why we came." She turned to Fluttershy who was now sitting on the couch, nodding to herself. "Uh... Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy jerked her head and blinked at them. "Uh...?" She rubbed her eyes and looked at them, then gasped and bowed, causing her to tumble down the couch. "Oh my... princess I'm so sorry!" After a few seconds of scrambling about, and some help from Sparkler, she pulled herself up off

the floor. Trixie gave the pegasus a worried look.

Luna looked concerned as well. "I think we'll cut to the chase. We need your help to get Rarity out of her house, so she can come with us on a small journey. We hope it would help her, and us."

Trixie nodded and added with a smile, "And we'd love to have you come with us as well, if you like. You could really use the vacation, I'd say." Their meeting earlier had been brief, but Trixie already felt that she liked the shy but hard working pegasus.

Sparkler clapped her hooves enthusiastically. "A great idea! And don't you worry about your cottage and all your animal friends, Fluttershy. If it means you and poor Rarity get some rest, then I'll gladly take care of them while you're away. That's what friends are for, after all!"

"Anything... for my friend Rarity. Where... where are we going? Can Angel come too?" Fluttershy yawned, swaying on the couch as she tried to stay awake.

Trixie gnawed her lip. After Pinkie Pie and her crazy alligator, she could only imagine who or what Angel was. She nodded a bit. "Sure. We're traveling to Hoofswell, we hope there's somepony there who can help us find out what happened with Twilight. Pinkie Pie and her friend Gummy are also coming."

Fluttershy's head drooped again. "Oh... that sounds good."

Trixie looked at Luna and Sparkler. "Maybe we should let her sleep first, she can hardly sit up, much less walk."

Fluttershy swayed dangerously, then jerked up and shook her head. "No, no, I.... I'm fine..." she mumbled and stood up shakily. "A little fresh air and... and I'll be fresh as a... uh... daisy."

They all watched with concern as the pegasus staggered out of the door, calling for Angel in between long yawns. Luna sighed. "I suppose she can sleep later. Thanks for your help, miss Sparkler."

Sparkler bowed. "Of course, your highness. I really hope this will do her

and Rarity some good, it pains me to see old friends like that."

Fluttershy knocked on the door to Rarity's boutique. "Rarity? It's me..." she yawned, a long, quiet yawn, "Fluttershy." She knocked again. A curtain on the second floor was pulled apart just enough for a single azure eye to peek out for a second, scanning the area. Fluttershy looked up and waved.

Trixie watched Fluttershy from where they were hiding, out of sight of the windows, waiting for the signal. They had decided that the best thing to do was to not let Rarity see them, lest she decide not to let any of them in. There was a faint click from the door and Fluttershy winked as she opened the door. Trixie and Luna, with Spike on her back and Pinkie trotting along behind, hurried off and slipped in behind Fluttershy.

Trixie looked around at the closed fashion shop. She remembered the local fashion designer well, both from her first visit to Ponyville and her letters to Twilight during the time in Dappleshore. Everything bore the touch of a mind obsessed with cleanliness, despite the room looking abandoned.

Fluttershy pointed a hoof at the stairs, and they ascended in silence. The yellow pegasus paused at the top and bit her lip nervously "I... I don't know if I can convince her. I've tried before, but she... she won't listen to me."

Luna smiled at her. "Just try your best, Fluttershy. We're here to help."

Fluttershy nodded and reached out for the door. She paused. "Uhm... watch where you step and don't uh... don't mind the cats." Trixie quirked an eyebrow and looked at Luna, who looked back with concern. Trixie walked in behind Fluttershy as the yellow pony opened the door and stepped in. "Rarity? Are you in here?"

Several eyes turned to stare at them in the gloom. Trixie stopped and looked at the wall of unblinking eyes. "Cats... no kidding," she uttered under her breath as she scanned the horde of felines dotting every inch of the room. Luna and Spike blinked nervously, while Pinkie put on her most deranged smile... or rather left it on as she took in the room.

Rarity sat in front of a large mirror, dressed in a black dress and holding in

her lap a white cat with a purple bow in its hair. She stroked the cat gently while staring blankly into the mirror. Her dress and grooming was as Trixie remembered it – perfect – but nothing could hide the ragged, crazed look of somepony who had obviously not slept in far too long, much less been outside in the fresh air and sun.

As they entered, she looked up. When she saw them all her eyes widened and she jumped up, pointing an accusing hoof at Fluttershy. "Traitor! You have led the hounds into our midst! How could you?"

Luna and Trixie shared looks again. This day was by far one of the more interesting they had ever experienced.

Fluttershy shook her head vigorously. "No, no, please... I... I'm your friend. You remember Luna, and Spike, and... and Pinkie. We just want to help..."

"No! You will not have us! Stay back, curs! Back!" Trixie almost expected foam to form around the cat lady's muzzle.

"Please... please stop yelling..." Fluttershy cried.

Trixie frowned and stepped up next to Fluttershy. "Will you calm down and stop scaring your friend! We just..." Her voice broke and her eyes snapped to something behind Rarity, in the large mirror. A little violet unicorn was staring out at her, large tears sparkling in her eyes. But there was something else there. Trixie couldn't see it, but she knew something was there, a lurking shadow in the corner.

Rarity stared at Trixie with wild eyes, pointing a hoof shakily. "You... You! We will drive you off, you dirty, dirty mongrels, yes we will! Back with you! Back I say!"

Trixie opened her mouth, but that was about all she got to do as all the eyes in the room turned to her. In a cacophony of cries and hisses all the cats launched themselves at her with tiny claws bared. Trixie stumbled and fell with a cry as the mass of fur and claws descended upon her, scratching mercilessly.

Trixie screamed and flailed wildly but the cats were far too many. "Help! Somepony get these things off of me!" Luna and Spike fought to get

through the mass of fur and claws, but little did it help.

"YOU. STOP. RIGHT NOW! ALL OF YOU!" Trixie blinked and batted away a few cats from her face. Total silence fell over the room as all cats and ponies alike stopped dead in their tracks and stared at the yellow pegasus whose eyes suddenly seemed to draw in all attention, as if the world had decided to revolve around those two orbs of unflinching cyan.

Fluttershy lifted herself off the floor and flew straight at Rarity, who visibly shrank under the yellow mare's gaze. "How DARE you! Of all the ponies! I don't care how sad you are," Rarity opened her mouth, but Fluttershy wasn't done, "No, not one word! You do NOT hurt your own friends! Do you hear me?! Now you go apologize to Trixie, and then you march right out of here. We're going on a trip, and you're coming with us! You GOT that?"

Rarity gulped. "Wh... what about my cats?"

Fluttershy didn't remove her eyes from Rarity. "I'm sure Sparkler will find good homes for them all."

"Can I... at least take Opalescence with me?" Rarity looked beyond miserable as she sat there, small and cowering before Fluttershy.

"Yes, you can take Opal with you, but only her. Now, apologize to miss Trixie."

Trixie scowled as she stood up. She had scratches everywhere from all the tiny, sharp claws.

Rarity walked over to Trixie with lowered head, Opalescence on her back looking just as sad. "I'm terribly, terribly sorry!"

Trixie closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath. "Apology accepted. Don't let it happen again," she half whispered, "and keep your little monster away from me!"

Rarity trotted out of the room. Pinkie followed her out with a mad grin, while Luna hurried over to Trixie. "Are you alright, dear? How hurt are you?"

Trixie looked down at her bloodied coat and winced. "I'll need a bath before

we go anywhere, but I'll survive. If I get any scars, I swear I will turn that cat green, however!" She gave the mirror a nervous glance, but it was empty now. She stood for a second, then turned around.

Trixie stepped back out of the boutique, glad to feel the fresh air, and even more glad to be away from all the mirrors in there. The sun had set by now, and while Trixie was washing her wounds Luna had brought out the moon to begin the night. Fluttershy, meanwhile, had taken all of Rarity's cats to her cottage, where hopefully Sparkler would find a home for them. Trixie thought of poor Sparkler and decided that she wouldn't blame the unicorn if she simply dumped all the cats off in the Everfree Forest. Or in a lake.

She sighed to herself and looked over the group as it gathered outside the shop. Her and Luna, Spike the dragon, the deranged party pony with her toothless alligator, the insane cat lady and her cat – thankfully just one cat – and finally Fluttershy with her scowling bunny. No doubt it too didn't much like cats, or alligators, however toothless. At least she had come to like Fluttershy, especially after that display in the boutique.

Trixie shook her head and leaned in close to Luna, whispering in her ear. "We're a traveling circus, I dare say a freak show! Fitting that we should be traveling to an insane asylum. Are you sure you're not secretly intending to dump us all off there? I wouldn't blame you."

Luna chuckled and winked at her.

"This is going to be a long trip..." Trixie sighed.

Chapter 5

Canterlot drifted by far below as the balloon rose steadily upwards, towards the snowy peaks in the distance. It was in the middle of the night before they had managed to take off from Ponyville in Twilight's old balloon. Fluttershy had been first in the balloon, rolling up in the bottom of the basket along with Angel and promptly falling asleep. Rarity and Opal had quietly followed, along with Spike, while Luna ensured that they had a basic supply of food.

Everything was going well, until Pinkie began to complain that they couldn't leave without Twilight. The pink pony had stubbornly refused to get in the balloon without the purple unicorn. It had taken a long time, and a lot of talking on Trixie's part to make her come along. In the end, Trixie had managed to convince Pinkie that Twilight was lost and they had to save her. It didn't feel like a complete lie to Trixie as she thought of the filly in the mirror, feeling her heart sink in her chest.

But then to top it off, it had turned out the balloon was too small for them all to sit comfortably in it. With Fluttershy snoozing away, it had fallen on Luna and Trixie to take turns flying next to it. Luna had taken the first turn, suggesting Trixie write the first letter to Celestia, to let her know that they were – finally – on their way to Hoofswell.

Trixie sighed as she looked up from the letter. Both Fluttershy and Spike were soundly asleep, while Rarity and Pinkie were leaning over the edge of the basket to view the landscape below. Angel meanwhile hid behind Fluttershy to avoid the hungry looking cat, and Gummy was happily nibbling at Spike's tail. Trixie shook her head and looked back down as she wrote. The letter was getting a little long, but Trixie needed something to take her mind off things and she wasn't in a rush to wake the sleeping dragon so he could send it anyway.

Luna could only fly for brief stretches at a time before her wounds forced her to rest, so Trixie spent most of the night on the wing. It was a long and cold flight, as the balloon rose above the clouds and mountains, but Trixie pushed on. As the first rays of dawn burst forth, they had left the

mountains. Vast forests stretched out as far as the eyes could see below them.

Trixie felt herself starting to wear out and struggled not to sag behind the balloon. "Is Fluttershy awake yet? I could use a rest," she called to Luna.

Luna poked her head up from the basket. "No, should I wake her?"

"Yes, please, I don't think I could fly much longer."

Luna nodded and disappeared back into the basket. Trixie flew closer to the balloon, looking forward to a few hours of rest. A moment later a yellow and pink head peeked out over the edge of the basket. Trixie smiled, "Good morning, Fluttershy." The pegasus' eyes widened and with a squeak she vanished back into the balloon. Trixie blinked, "What's wrong? Is something wrong?" she called.

Luna looked back out. "It would appear our pegasus friend is afraid of heights."

"You're kidding me?" Trixie flew closer and held on to the outside of the balloon, looking over the edge. Fluttershy was huddled together in the bottom, shivering at the hooves of the others. Trixie sighed. "It's alright, Fluttershy. Surely you've flown before?"

"But it's so... high!" The quivering pegasus whispered. Angel stomped his paw at Fluttershy, but she just rolled up even tighter. "I... I can't. I just can't!" The bunny slapped his paw against his face with a hopeless expression.

Trixie was tempted to do the same, but resisted. She took a look around. "What then? I can't fly much longer, nor can you," she said directed at Luna, "sooner or later we'll both have to sleep."

Luna leaned over the edge, looking down at the forests below. "Only one solution. We need to find a place to land for the day."

The balloon touched down heavily in a small glade and everyone got out.

Fluttershy and Rarity seemed happy to have firm ground beneath their hooves, while Pinkie was already off exploring the area.

Trixie landed with a sigh. "Do you think it's safe for both of us to rest and leave the others on their own? They don't seem entirely... stable," she asked quietly.

Luna looked around before shaking her head. "No, I suppose not. I don't think this forest is safe either, it's probably good that we're only here during the day."

"This isn't the Everfree Forest, is it?" Trixie glanced nervously at the trees around them. She had never truly been to the Everfree Forest, but the stories about that place were plenty enough.

Luna shook her head again. "No, but we're no longer within the borders of Equestria. This area is sparsely populated and not well explored. In any case," Luna said as she pulled out some of the food they had brought along, "I can stay awake a few more hours while you get some rest, then we can switch."

Trixie hesitated. "Are you sure? How is your neck?"

Luna smiled. "Don't worry about me, dear. I haven't been flying much so far, I'll be fine. It's you who have been flying almost non-stop all night."

Trixie nodded and crawled into the basket where she curled up under some blankets they had brought with them. It didn't take long for her to fall asleep.

Trixie woke at a gentle nudging. She groaned and turned to look up at Luna, blinking and holding up a hoof to shield against the sharp light of the sun behind the princess. "How long have I slept?"

Luna rubbed her eyes tiredly. "About six hours. I think the others are getting a little restless, and I could really use some sleep myself." She glanced at the others nearby.

Trixie sighed and got up slowly, stretching herself as she stood up and looked around the glade. Pinkie and Rarity seemed to be having an improvised tea party with Gummy, Opal and a very displeased Angel, as well as a few "guests" made of twigs and stones. Fluttershy was sitting nearby, watching the butterflies dance in the sunlight. "Where's Spike?"

Luna looked around. "He's taking a walk. I told him to stay within sight of the camp, I saw him not long ago."

Trixie nodded, a little concerned still. "You know, it occurs to me that this whole plan was rather poorly thought out. They're awake while we sleep, but they can't be left on their own."

Luna sighed and lowered her head. "It isn't exactly the greatest arrangement, but to be fair I hadn't planned on making any stops in the middle of the forest. I thought the balloon was big enough, and who would have guessed that the pegasus was afraid of heights?"

"We're off to a great start," Trixie smiled and nuzzled Luna gently. "Don't worry, love. Get some rest, you need it. I'll keep an eye on everyone."

Luna smiled and kissed her before crawling into the basket. "Good day, then, dear."

Trixie stifled a yawn as she got out of the balloon. She narrowed her eyes as she scanned the tree line around them. After a moment she spotted a small bit of green and purple moving around among the trees. "Don't go too far, Spike," she called.

The dragon gave a wave at her before turning back to his wanderings.

Fluttershy had been quietly sitting in the sun all day, watching the butterflies and listening to the birds and animals of this new forest. She looked up as Trixie sat down next to her. "Oh... I'm so, so sorry."

Trixie looked at her. "Why?"

"Because I'm such a burden on you all."

Trixie sighed. She couldn't deny that Fluttershy refusing to fly had made the whole thing rather more difficult. "Well, I would be lying if I said it wasn't mildly inconvenient. But I'm glad you came along, Fluttershy. Still, it would be a great help if you would try flying." She ruffled her wings a little. "I wasn't born with these, you know. It was quite strange, and frightening, when I had to fly the first time. But there's really nothing to be afraid of, Fluttershy."

"But... what if I fall? It's so, so high." Fluttershy stammered and gazed up at the sky.

"You just need to get up there and face your fear. Stare it right in the eye, like you did with Rarity and the cats. That was great! You do that with your fear, and you can do anything, Fluttershy!" Trixie smiled brightly and stood up. "When I was younger I always got really nervous when I had to go up on stage and perform. But I knew that I could do it, I knew I would be Great, so I faced the crowd and my fears with raised head. And I didn't fall." She pulled Fluttershy up. "And neither will you. You have got to believe in yourself!"

"I don't know if I can do that..." Fluttershy muttered with bowed head.

"Nonsense!" Trixie stepped back and looked Fluttershy over with a hoof under her chin thoughtfully. "The Great and Courageous Fluttershy! Yes, fabulous!" A grin appeared on her face. "That's you, you are the Great and Courageous Fluttershy! Say it with me!"

Fluttershy whimpered. "I... I'm the gr... great and c...courageous Fluttershy!"

Trixie shook her head, "No no no no! Follow me..." She jumped up on her hind legs with her front hooves in the air dramatically, gesturing at some unseen audience. "Watch in awe as I, Fluttershy, spread my wings wide and fly into the heavens! Watch as I bring the world beneath me and soar to ever new heights! My wings shall NEVER falter and NOTHING will EVER keep me down, for I AM the GREAT and COURAGEOUS FLUTTERSHY!"

"Bu... but I'm not c... courageous at all!" Fluttershy huddled together on the

ground, quivering as she looked up at Trixie.

"YES. you. ARE!" Trixie pulled her back up and stared into her eyes. "You listen to me now. I believe in you, and by Celestia so will you! I want you to stare yourself in the mirror whenever you have the chance, and proudly proclaim to the world that you ARE the Great and Courageous Fluttershy! Let no pony tell you otherwise, least of all yourself. Do you hear me?"

"B... but I don't have a m... mirror."

"Then pretend! Just stand up and pretend you're staring yourself right in the eyes, and say it!"

Fluttershy sank and nodded.

"Good! Now let me hear it!" She grabbed Fluttershy who gave a squeak as Trixie spread her wings and set off. "I'm not hearing you!" Trixie beat her wings, taking them both into the air above the canopy of the forest. Fluttershy squirmed and closed her eyes tight. "Come on, Fluttershy! There is nothing to fear, spread your wings and say it!"

Fluttershy's wings unfolded, every feather shivering with fear. "I... I... I am... the g... the... great... I... I want to go down! Put me down!"

"No. I am here, Fluttershy. You are safe. Open your eyes and your mouth and say it with conviction! You ARE the Great and Courageous Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy held on tightly and buried her face in Trixie's chest. "I... I can't... I just can't!"

"Yes you can, and don't ever tell me you can't! Who ARE you?!"

"I... I am... I am... the... gr... great a... and c... c... cour.... courageous... F... Fluttershy...." Fluttershy cried.

Trixie smiled. "Yes you are! That wasn't hard! Say it again!"

"I am... I... the... great a... and c... courageous... Fluttershy!"

"You're doing great! One more time!"

Fluttershy opened her eyes. "I am the... the great and c... courageous Fluttershy!"

Trixie woke with a start as someone poked her. Had she fallen asleep? Fluttershy had made some progress, but still refused to fly on her own. Trixie was still exhausted from the night's flight and too little sleep, and had decided to take a break and sit down for a moment. She opened her eyes and looked around, spotting a small green and purple dragon standing above her. "Spike? What's wrong?"

Spike pointed towards the trees. "The others are gone. I saw them walking in the forest a while ago."

Trixie sat up and looked around. The small clearing around her was silent. The balloon was standing where it had been before, but aside from her and Spike she couldn't see any of the others. She stood up and looked at the sky. The sun had begun its descent but was still shining. "Evening, alright, was Luna with them?"

Spike shook his head. "Not that I saw."

Trixie nodded and walked up to the balloon to peek in. Luna was still sleeping in the darkness under the blankets. Trixie nudged her gently. "Luna, wake up. We have a problem."

Luna stirred and peeked out from under her cover. "What? Oh my, how long did I sleep?"

"I don't know. A while. I fell asleep too."

Luna got out of the balloon and looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"I don't know," Trixie admitted. "I just woke up. Spike said he saw them in the forest a while ago."

Luna gnawed her lip nervously and scanned the area. "Great. We need to find them quickly. I'd like to be gone from here before nightfall. Spike, can

you point the way?"

The dragon nodded and pointed. "I saw them go this way." He turned quickly and started running in that direction.

"Good, let's hurry." Luna said as she and Trixie followed behind the dragon.

Pinkie trudged through the undergrowth of the forest. It had been way too boring so far, but that would all change once she found Twilight. Everything would be fine again once she found Twilight. "She's here somewhere, girls. Come on." She smiled widely as she pushed her way through the bushes. Yes, everything would be fine again.

"I'm getting scratches and dirt all over! Why would Trixie have us go through this dreadful forest?" Rarity complained from somewhere behind Pinkie.

"Because it's an adventure, silly! And because Twilight needs us!" Pinkie stopped and looked around as if deciding on a path, then turned left and continued. "You heard Trixie, she's out here somewhere waiting for us to save her."

Rarity sulked. "Twilight is not here, darling, you know that. If you ask me, something is up with that Trixie. Do you think she's plotting something?"

"I, um, I don't think this is a good idea. We should go back." Fluttershy whimpered nervously even further behind, but the other two ponies didn't hear her. She let out a frustrated sound and tried to keep up.

"Of course Twilight is here. And we're not gonna let her down!" There was a slight twitch in one of Pinkie's eyes as she continued on. "Hey, there's something over here!" She exclaimed and pushed aside a few branches as she stepped into a small circle of trees. "Somepony left their lunch here! Isn't that silly?"

Rarity stepped in behind Pinkie. "It's probably dirty and rotten. And where is a bath when you need one? I'm fi... WUAAH!"

"Aww, no cupc... HAY!"

Fluttershy jumped and shrieked at the sudden noise. Up ahead the forest floor seemed to rise up and swallow Pinkie and Rarity in a swirl of fallen leaves, pulling both ponies high into the air among the trees. The yellow pegasus squealed in panic as green-cloaked shadows leaped out of the canopy, diving down on large wings towards them. Two winged creatures turned in the air and raced for her. Fluttershy squealed and felt her legs take over as she turned and ran.

Fluttershy could hear the beating of wings behind her as she ploughed through the forest with Angel hanging on to her mane. Her pursuers were closing in on her fast. In a mad rush she dashed in and out between trees, hoping to shake them off. As she ran her mind cleared and a purpose emerged above the initial panic. She had to find Luna and Trixie. With lungs screaming for air she leaped over a small bush as grasping claws from behind narrowly missed her.

Her hooves touched back down on the soft ground, and with a terrible snap a pair of strong steel claws closed around her leg just below the knee, the sharp metal teeth sinking deep into the bone. Fluttershy screamed in agony and fell, tumbling across the ground as two large shadows descended upon her.

Trixie skidded to a halt as a cry of pain cut through the forest from far away. "Fluttershy!" She called back, her heart sinking at the cry.

Luna flew past Trixie and made a quick turn, racing in the direction of the sound. "This way, quick!"

Trixie set off again, following swiftly while Spike clung to her back trying not to fall off. Ducking branches and evading trees and shrubs, Trixie made her way through the forest behind Luna. Why had she fallen asleep? She cursed herself and set off from the ground, beating her wings as she rose upwards through the canopy. "I'm taking a look from above!"

She burst through the leafy cover of the forest and into the last light of the day. She blinked at the light and scanned the forest below. Something in

the distance caught her eye and she looked up to see several figures flying towards the north, carrying a large net beneath them. Trixie narrowed her eyes. "Griffons! They have our friends!" she called and set off after them at top speed. But the griffons were already far ahead. Untrained and tired as she was Trixie knew she could not catch up with them. She came to a halt and cursed as Luna came out of the forest behind her.

Luna placed a hoof on her shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll get them back. I'll go back and get the balloon, you follow them. Don't lose them of sight." She picked up Spike and turned around, flying back towards the balloon on swift wings.

Trixie nodded grimly and set off again. "I won't lose you... not again."

"Put us down, you ruffians! This is no way to treat a lady!" Rarity yelled, tangled up in the net as the griffons carried them away. "This net is chafing me! I'm going to get marks!"

"Are all griffons such big meanies?" Pinkie frowned from the bottom of the pile she was in with Rarity, Fluttershy and their three pets, all together in the net.

Fluttershy cried. Her leg was bloodied and pained, but the fear was even greater than the pain now. "I am the Great and Courageous Fluttershy" she kept whispering to herself over and over as the forests passed by beneath them. "I am the Great and Courageous Fluttershy...."

Silence fell over the group as the sun's last rays disappeared below the horizon. Only the sound of the wind and the slow beating of wings was heard. Fluttershy shivered as the night grew colder. With a sad snuffle she curled up tight. Angel's small body tucked against her shoulder did little to keep her warm.

"Here you go, darling." Fluttershy felt Rarity's long scarf settle over her and opened her eyes to see the unicorn smiling at her. "Is that better?"

Fluttershy wrapped herself and Angel in the scarf and nodded a little. The scarf provided only little protection against the cold air around her, but

Fluttershy was thankful for her friend's gift nonetheless. She closed her eyes and fell into an uneasy rest.

As dawn broke, the landscape below had changed to a white, snow covered plain and tall, jagged mountains rose up ahead like a threatening wall. Fluttershy opened her eyes and stared at the scenery. "Wh... where are we?"

"I don't know, dear." Rarity groaned a little. "But we've been flying all night."

Pinkie Pie moved beneath them. "Ouch! I think we're landing."

"Oh good, I can't wait to get back down on the ground," Rarity said.

"Me too, sister! I can't feel my legs." The pink party pony moaned.

The griffons began a slow descent towards a large collection of tents and buildings below. Large crowds of griffons were already beginning to gather as they landed. The three ponies landed on their backs on the cold, hard ground and were quickly pulled up by unrelenting claws.

"Tie them, and lets get things going!" One of the griffons commanded. More griffons were drawn to the scene, some standing around, others pushing to get a closer look, while the three ponies were tied up.

"10 bits for the pink one!" Someone shouted among the crowd.

"Are you nuts? A pony is worth twice, at least," one of the griffons tying up Pinkie said.

The first one pinched Pinkie's leg. "Yeah, but this one's not a proper work pony. She's a little too plump, ten is my offer."

Pinkie frowned and struggled against the ropes. "I am not plump! And this is not funny! Let us go!"

None of the griffons paid them any attention. "Fifteen for the pink pony!" Another griffon called somewhere.

Fluttershy cried as claws poked and pulled at her, feeling and probing.

"Look at that leg," someone muttered and others chimed in, "she's hardly even fit for food, look how lanky she is. Hardly any meat."

"How dare you! Uncultured brutes!" Rarity yelled as she struggled against the griffons holding her. "Let us go this instant!"

"75 bits for her horn!" Someone shouted, somewhere another griffon bid a hundred.

"That's a fine specimen. I'll pay thirty for her skin."

"What?! You can't..." Rarity choked on the words.

"Fifty for the unicorn's skin!"

"Any higher? Sold!"

"Fluttershy! Pinkie! Help!" Rarity cried, but the other two had already been dragged off, sold for much less. A large, one-eyed griffon grabbed her and held up a long knife, the edge blinking dangerously in the light. Rarity closed her eyes, awaiting the cut of the blade and the final moment.

It was a moment that never came. A resounding crack of thunder shook the village and caused everyone to stop in their tracks. Rarity fell to the ground as the griffon holding her let go and dropped his knife which landed inches from Rarity's face. Rocks and dust flew everywhere from where the lightning had struck the ground.

"The next one won't be a warning! Let them all go this instant. The rabbit, cat and alligator too!"

All eyes turned to the dark mare hanging above the gathering. Lightning danced dangerously in her teal eyes as she looked down at them. A nervous silence fell over the crowd. Finally, after a long moment of tense uncertainty, a griffon took a step forward. "You have no claim here, pony princess! We're not in Equestria, we don't follow your rules here. We caught these ponies fair and square in the wilds far from the border, so back off!"

Luna turned her gaze slowly to the speaker. "And I say you better let them go, if you value your own hides."

The griffon hesitated, glancing to the sides nervously. Even alone in the wilds, the princess of the moon commanded a certain respect. "Y... Yeah? What's one pony gonna do about it?"

"Who said I was alone?" Luna lifted a hoof and all eyes followed. With a mighty beating of wings a vast line of pegasi rose against the distant sky, the rays of the early morning sun flaring in their golden armors, and at their head drifted a golden vessel, rising majestically with the sun. Luna smirked. "So? What will it be then?"

The griffons stared open-beaked. The one who had spoken turned positively white as he stuttered. "O... Of course, Your Highness." He gave a nearby griffon an elbow in the side, and soon the three ponies and their pets had been brought before Luna.

Luna frowned and pointed a hoof at Fluttershy's leg. "If I were you I'd turn tail and fly before the princess gets here and sees what you did to her favorite pony."

The griffons shared frightened glances. In a wild flutter of feathers they were off, disappearing swiftly against the horizon. Luna landed next to the three ponies and quickly untied them and their pets. "Don't worry, we're here."

"That was awesome, Trixie!" Spike jumped excitedly as the balloon drifted down towards the ground where Luna and the others were waiting.

Trixie gave the dragon an exhausted grin. "You continue to underestimate the Great and Powerful Trixie!" Even she had to admit to herself that she had outdone herself with that display. "Although she did get a teensy bit of help from the sun this day" she quietly admitted.

Spike shook his head and crawled out of the basket as they landed, running over to embrace the three ponies.

Trixie jumped out and trotted over to Luna, who was washing Fluttershy's wounded leg. "Oh Fluttershy, I'm so sorry...."

Fluttershy smiled weakly at Trixie. "I'm just glad you came. I was so afraid."

Trixie smiled and sat down next to her, turning to look at Luna. "Will it heal?"

Luna looked up with a grim expression. "She won't be able to walk on it for a while at least. All we can hope is that it does not get infected."

Trixie nodded and looked back at Fluttershy, smiling warmly. "Don't worry. Tell me who you are."

"I... I'm the Great and Courageous Fluttershy," the pegasus whispered and gritted her teeth as Luna began wrapping the wounded leg.

"Damn straight, and don't you forget it! You'll be fine." She gave the pegasus a friendly nudge before turning to Luna again, glancing around. "So what now?"

"We need to move on soon, I don't know if it's wise to stay in case the griffons figure out what we did and come back." She took a look up at the sky. "We aren't much off course. If my navigation hasn't failed me entirely, we are near the mountains south of Hoofswell. If we leave soon we should be able to get there tomorrow morning."

Trixie nodded at the balloon. "We need to rest along the way, the balloon is still too small for all of us."

Luna bit her lip and nodded. "Then it will be a little longer."

"I believe I can help!" They all turned and looked at Rarity, who already looked much better after having found a house with water. She trotted over to the large net. Her horn glowed as the net lifted off the ground and floated towards the balloon. "We hang this beneath the basket, line it with some blankets..." Rarity explained as she worked her magic, "and voilà, not... pretty, but comfortable enough for one pony I am sure." Opalescence gave an approving meow.

They all looked at each other, then at Rarity and the balloon. Luna smiled. "That is excellent, thank you, Rarity. This will make the journey much easier."

Rarity beamed. "You're quite welcome, darling."

Chapter 6

The heavy iron gates creaked upon their hinges, sending chills down Trixie's spine as she pushed them open. Before her lay the asylum, nestled among the windswept mountains outside Hoofswell, isolated and blissfully forgotten by the world around it. A deathly silence hung over the place, so oppressive and complete that Trixie swore she could hear the heartbeats of her friends behind her. She took a step through the gates and looked around with a hint of trepidation.

"Where is everypony?"

Luna followed not far behind. "I have no idea." The princess paused for a second in the gate before continuing down the gravel path towards the looming asylum. Trixie and the others trotted reluctantly after her. The sun had set not long ago and while Trixie had written her latest letter to Celestia, Luna had brought out her moon to begin its path across the darkened sky. The nightly orb now cast its pale white light upon everything, clothing the asylum grounds in an eerie glow.

"M... maybe they're s...sleeping," Fluttershy whispered in the back, flying along close to the ground, her eyes darting back and forth in fear. Her wounded leg had been treated and bound up so that she had to fly most of the time, only briefly resting on three legs.

Rarity backed up a little to walk next to the shivering pegasus, offering her friend a warm smile. "All of them, darling? I am certain somepony must be around to keep an eye on things, even at night."

Luna shook her head. "Celestia sent them a message to let them know in advance that we were coming. They could not have missed it, I am sure."

There was a gasp from Pinkie, causing everyone to jump and turn around. At the sudden attention the pink pony quickly slapped a hoof over her mouth, staring back at them with wide, crazy eyes as if she had just stopped herself from blurting out some immense secret.

"What?!" Spike, sitting on Luna's back, groaned irritably. The long hours of the past few days and the scare of the griffon incident had been rough on the young dragon, and his mood had dwindled quickly.

Pinkie removed her hoof from her mouth and trotted along past them with a big smile. "Nothing."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Let's just move on. The sooner we find somepony else, preferably sane, the better."

The large main building loomed ahead, an ancient colossus draped in black. Trixie looked up at the darkened windows and the heavy oaken doors at the top of the stairs. Everything was silent except for their hoof steps against the stones. A shiver ran through her body as she took the first steps up the stairs and raised a hoof to knock. The hollow knocking echoed across the asylum grounds. Trixie waited, but the ancient building remained shrouded in silent, unresponsive darkness.

"I don't like this," she whispered and pushed at the door, but it remained stuck. Trixie turned around and looked at Luna. "Something is wrong with this place. Can you open this door? I think it's locked."

Luna nodded and stepped up next to Trixie. "I should be able to do that," she said and focused her attention on the lock. Her horn glowed briefly in the darkness, but after a few moments she looked back around at Trixie. "It's not locked. I think it's barred."

"Barred?" Trixie sighed and rubbed her eyes. Something was definitely wrong with this picture, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was. "Can you force it open?"

Luna considered the door in front of her, shaking her head a little. "Not without breaking it down. Maybe we should look for another way in first, I would hate to break down doors if everypony is just... elsewhere or something."

Trixie nodded faintly and turned slowly, looking around at the surroundings. She paused and narrowed her eyes, holding up a hoof as she pointed

towards a patch of trees where something had caught her attention. "Do you see a light too, or is it just me?" Everyone turned to look where she was pointing. A small light appeared to dance and flicker among the shadows of the the trees.

"I see it too," Rarity nodded, with Fluttershy cowering behind her. Pinkie was already off towards the light, striding cheerfully along. Luna looked at Trixie before following the pink pony, Spike holding on to her mane with a bleary look.

Trixie looked at Fluttershy and smiled. "Come, my brave pony. There is strength and courage to be found in numbers." The yellow pegasus let out a short squeak before hesitantly following Trixie. Rarity walked behind her with Opalescence hungrily watching Angel.

A soft, orange light flowed out from a small, overgrown greenhouse tucked in among a grove of trees in the garden surrounding the main building. Trixie caught up with Luna and Pinkie as they trotted across the garden in silence. The door to the greenhouse was open, light flickering through the opening into the night along with a sweet, strangely soothing scent. Trixie found herself slowing down as they neared the door, breathing nervously. Only Pinkie Pie seemed unmoved by the gloomy atmosphere and deathly silence. The pink pony appeared in fact practically giddy.

Trixie took a quick look around her and over her shoulder, instinctively checking that they hadn't all disappeared on her. Luna offered a reassuring smile, although it was clear that she too felt nervous about the situation. Trixie straightened up, holding her head high. "I am the Great and Powerful Trixie," her voice proclaimed with conviction in her mind before she stepped through the door, pushing aside the green curtain of plants and flowers.

Among flowering vines of a vast variety a lonely pony was sitting within a circle of lit candles, from which the flickering light originated, her back to Trixie and head bowed as in meditation. Her coat was a light indigo and her short-cut mane and tail a dull blue with two stripes of different shades. A star-shaped black flower graced her flank. Trixie stopped, feeling struck by a sudden sense of familiarity. "You... You can't be..."

The pony's ear flicked a bit at Trixie's hushed voice. Her head lifted a little and turned towards Trixie and the others entering behind her. A pair of bright cerulean eyes, pupils focused like pinpoints, stared intensely into Trixie's. Trixie only now noticed the broken stump of a horn between those fierce eyes. "You must have me confused," she spoke. Her voice was calm, eerily contrasted by her seething eyes betraying a deep, burning anger, like a lightning storm barely contained within two orbs of glass.

She looked young, and yet so very old, with a striking familiarity... The likeness with Twilight undeniable, if not nearly as obvious as Midnight's had been. Trixie felt suddenly on guard, a sense of anger and fear. She felt like she was viewing the other unicorn as through a growing haze. "Who are you?" she demanded, lifting a shaking hoof as if to take a step, but setting it back down quickly, too tired to carry through with the intended move.

"A kindred spirit," she heard the unicorn speak, showing no reaction otherwise.

Trixie backed up and glanced over her shoulder, feeling a rush of panic. As she stepped back she bumped into Luna who was swaying slightly, eyes half closed. "Luna! We need to... get out," she said, her voice feeble. Trixie felt her own eyelids drop against her will and her legs buckle under her. She turned, trying to glare at the unicorn. "Stop it! Stop... whatever you're... doing," she demanded, her horn flaring in the flickering light of the candles. She felt the magic surge through her, and fade. She closed her eyes and felt the ground rise up to meet her.

Behind her Trixie could hear Pinkie protest weakly. "Where's the... surprise party? Where's... Twilight?" The voice grew distant, fading into the night.

"Twilight?"

"Yes, dear?" Twilight looked up from her book, the light of a candle dancing across her face. Owliscious was sitting on his perch near the window, head tucked under a wing, safe and warm within the old mansion while the rain and wind howled through Dappleshore's streets. A hint of concern crossed Twilight's expression. "Are you alright?"

Trixie leaned against the door frame, reaching a hoof to her head and closing her eyes. "I think I had a nightmare... it's all so... hazy. I can't quite remember..."

Twilight got up and trotted over to Trixie. "Maybe you have a fever, you should stay in bed." The lavender unicorn lifted a hoof to feel Trixie's forehead, her worried look quickly confirming the suspicion. "I'll make you some tea. You better get back to bed."

Trixie's legs wobbled a little under her. "I don't want to be alone. Please don't leave me."

Twilight smiled. "I'll just be in the kitchen, dear."

"I thought I had lost you. I don't want to lose you..."

Twilight leaned in and kissed Trixie. "You know I would never leave you, Trixie. I will always be with you, no matter what." She touched her hoof against Trixie's heart, smiling, a glint in her purple eyes. "Now rest, my dear. There is nothing to fear, I'm right here with you. Always."

"Good, you're awake."

Trixie groaned and blinked at the dim light around her. Memories started to flood back as she struggled to clear her mind and locate the source of the voice. Everything seemed hazy, where were she? What was going on? Memory of their arrival at the asylum and their meeting with the unicorn in the greenhouse slowly returned to her. Trixie tried to pull herself up, but strong leather straps held her down firmly against the bed she was lying upon.

A face began to form through the haze in front of her and she felt something touch her horn, taking it in a firm grip. "Don't struggle or try any funny business. I would hate to have to break your horn, but I will do it if you don't remain still."

Trixie hesitated, a brief moment of fear at the threat. Yet even through her clouded senses her mind picked up something in the voice and eyes of the

other unicorn. Trixie smiled, or tried to, she wasn't exactly sure her facial muscles were under complete control at this point. "You're a... terrible liar, you... know that? I say... you're bluffing!" Trixie knew how to deceive, it was part of every stage magician's act, and she knew how to spot it in others quite well too.

There was a moment of silence, a slight tic of one of those bright cerulean eyes. "Oh? Are you prepared to test that hypothesis?" The hoof on her horn tightened its grip slightly.

Trixie could barely contain her amusement. Even in her drug addled state she could clearly see through this pony's pathetic bluffs. "Quite," she managed to utter in a smug tone.

Another moment of silence passed. The unicorn glared at her, then gave a mildly annoyed sound and removed her hoof from Trixie's horn.

"Congratulations, so I'm not much of a liar and yes, your horn is quite safe. But don't think for a moment that it matters. You couldn't manage any kind of resistance in your current state anyway, so you may as well lie still and listen for now."

Trixie tried to stare down the unicorn standing above her, but it was proving quite difficult to focus. "Where are my friends? Where is Luna?! Tell me!"

"Your friends will have to wait," The unicorn stepped out of Trixie's view, "but let me assure you that they are quite safe. Safer than they are around you, in any case."

Trixie listened, trying to follow the echoing hoof steps of her captor as they moved around somewhere behind her. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The hoof steps came to a halt not far behind Trixie's head. "You may call me Manna. Manna Sparkle, the name my mother gave me. And what I want, Trixie, is revenge! For generations have I waited, patiently, for this moment. And now I have you to thank for it."

Trixie's throat felt dry. She recalled Twilight's early family research, the family tree in that little journal Twilight had found at the fair in what seemed like ages ago now. "You're saying you're... Twilight's great, great... something grandmother? Midnight Sparkle?"

"Do not call me by that name! I spit on the name Midnight!" Manna hissed behind her. There was a long silence, except for a slow, deep breathing. Finally she spoke again, more calmly. "My name is Manna. My mother was wise when she changed our family name to Sparkle, and I was but a foolish girl when I changed the name she had blessed me with. A foolish obsession it was, with something long dead. It should have stayed dead!"

"How... how is that possible?" Trixie could hardly believe what she was hearing. Was her mind playing tricks on her? "You must be... how old?"

Manna chuckled darkly, her face appearing over Trixie once again. "I don't look that old? Why thank you, but you should know it is not polite to ask a lady about her age." The laughter quickly faded a little and she looked up sadly. "Besides, I stopped counting the years long ago. I know what you're going through, Trixie. And my poor descendant Twilight before you. It is a curse that runs in the family, a curse I have known all too well."

She sighed. "When my grandmother died, her spirit lived on through her family. Quite literally, through ancient and forbidden magic. Every few generations the curse falls on a new host and inevitably drives the unsuspecting victim to research their ancestor's dark work and eventually bring her back, at which point her undead spirit takes over their mind and body. That's what she did to Twilight, and almost did to me," she lifted a hoof and tapped her broken horn, "but I broke her hold over me."

Trixie blinked through the hazy cloud of half-sleep threatening to overcome her, trying hard to follow the other unicorn's words. "You... broke your own horn?"

Manna nodded solemnly. "It was painful, but necessary. With my magic broken, I was useless to her. I denied her a body, but she never stopped haunting me." She paused, looking down at Trixie, her eyes revealing the ages that had gone by. "I haven't aged, or slept in all the years since. For generations has she tormented me, one long nightmare, and in all those years I could do nothing but wait and scheme. Nothing, until... until Twilight took my place and freed me from eternal torment."

She paced slightly as she talked. "I had hoped I could save Twilight, but I was too late. When she died, I was sure I would once again be tormented

by the undead spirit of my ancestor, as before, but... things changed. Twilight changed the rules." She stopped her pacing and looked deep into Trixie's eyes. "I see much of Twilight in you, but I also seem something else. When Twilight died she passed on the family curse to you, and with it, my grandmother's undead spirit."

Trixie stared at her, unable to find a single word.

The unicorn continued without waiting for a response. "You have been haunted lately, I am certain, and did you ever stop to wonder what in Equestria brought you to this forsaken place?" Manna nodded knowingly, before Trixie could say a word. "You came here for 'answers', or should I say certain forbidden knowledge by a certain long dead pony? You are a puppet, Trixie, and guess who's pulling the strings. In time she'll drive you mad and before you know it you'll be digging up graves and performing unspeakable magic to bring back the dead. And I dare not think of what will happen should she gain possession of the body and raw power of an alicorn such as yourself, and I don't plan on hanging around long enough to find out either."

Trixie's mouth felt like a desert. She tried to lick her lips but it didn't help much.. "So... what do you intend to do you with me?" Manna disappeared briefly out of sight and returned carrying a cup of water, holding it against Trixie's lips. Trixie drank the cool liquid greedily, not stopping to worry if it was more than just water.

"You are valuable to me, Trixie. As long as you live, I am free of my grandmother's spirit, so I am going to keep you alive and safe. But as valuable as you are," she paused, looking serious, "I could never trust you. I know what she is capable of. The moment I turn my back you'd slit my throat and dance in the rain of my blood. I'm going after her, and I'm going alone. I will not be kept from my just revenge! Midnight is mine, and I will see to it that she suffers eternally for what she did to me, to Twilight and what she is doing to you!"

Trixie jerked, the sudden movement causing the cup to fall and shatter against the floor. "You're mad! And how would you even do that?"

"Am I? Perhaps, but I'm going to do what I should have done ages ago. I'm going to kill Midnight, and make her stay dead, forever! I have studied, and

I have uncovered her weakness, the only way in which I can touch her. It is called the Mirror of Souls, an ancient artifact of the alicorns from time immemorial, long lost but I know how to find it. With it, I can enter the realm of the soul and confront Midnight's immortal spirit. All I need in order to do so, is the blood of an alicorn, and how fortunate that you brought one with you."

"You won't touch Luna!" Trixie pulled against the straps holding her down, but despite the anger burning inside her at the treat of hurting Luna, she felt too weak to do much but hiss helplessly.

"Calm yourself. I won't need much, and she won't feel a thing. You have my word."

"Then take mine, but keep your hooves of Luna!"

"Sorry, Trixie. I can not be sure that your mixed blood is sufficient, nor safe given Midnight's influence over you. You must understand that I can risk no mistakes in this endeavor. No, all I need from you is sleep." She turned and gestured at the room. "In this room, and the rooms where I have left your friends, are tubs containing a mix of herbs. These particular herbs are usually burned as incense in small amounts to cause relaxation and sleep for those who find it hard to achieve this on their own. In larger doses they are very effective at subduing ponies, as you are witnessing. It is something I envy you, Trixie, as sleep has ever eluded me. The lovely scent you may have noticed is the product of a slow fermentation going on in the tubs behind you. A somewhat crude, but much more reliable long-term administration than burning incense. Flames can go out if not tended, after all. For the next weeks or months you will sleep, waking up only for brief moments like now." She gestured again but this time closer to Trixie. "There is water and hay within reach, enough for months I should think."

"You're insane! Let me go, we could... help each other against... against Midnight!" Trixie felt tired and weak. She could barely feel her body now, and her eyelids were getting heavy as she struggled to stay awake. "We don't have to be... enemies!"

"Midnight is mine, Trixie! And I won't risk having you close enough to betray me when she inevitably takes control of you." She leaned in close, staring

into Trixie's eyes. "Sweet dreams, Trixie. And Midnight? I'm coming for you!"

Chapter 7

Trixie's horn shone in the chill darkness of the night as she picked up the bouquet of flowers from where they had been dropped on top of the stairs. A small card attached to the gift bore the stylized insignia of a crescent moon, matching the moon in the sky that night. Trixie glanced down the path and around the garden outside the mansion, but everything was quiet with no sign of the princess. She turned slowly and closed the door behind her, the bouquet drifting in front of her. Twilight's owl on its perch watched her as she placed the flowers on the desk and turned to stare into the dark window.

Her wistful self gazed back at her from the blackened glass, reflected by the night beyond. The mare smiled sadly, a hint of understanding. "I'll give you a hint, they are not for you. Not for the Great and Powerful Trixie."

The azure unicorn brushed a strand of light cyan hair from her face and sighed, pinching off one of the bright flowers and holding it up before her. "I know," she said quietly to herself, watching the flower.

The mare in the mirror took the flower gently and pulled a petal off, letting it drop on the table. "You know who she loves. It was never the Great and Powerful Trixie. It never will be."

"It was Twilight," Trixie whispered, half as a question, though she knew the answer well.

The mare nodded sympathetically. "You never loved her either, did you? You know deep in your heart who you truly love, don't you?"

Trixie gave a little nod of her own. "Twilight Sparkle." It was not a question.

"It was always Twilight."

"Always will be."

"I know. And Luna would take her from you. She tried to kill you. You, the

Great and Powerful Trixie. And she'll try again if you let her."

Trixie clenched her teeth and glared at the flowers.

"But you wouldn't let her, would you? You know what you must do."

Trixie nodded and picked up the flowers before turning around, throwing the bouquet into the fireplace with a flick of her head. The flames licked over the gift, turning the once lush and colorful flowers to ashes as she watched. "Twilight is mine!" She picked up a coat by the door and threw it over her shoulders as she stepped out into the night.

Behind her a purple unicorn watched her in the window with a dark smile. "And you are mine, my dearest Trixie. All mine."

Luna felt a slight caress of her cheek. With a faint groan she opened her eyes and blinked at the hazy darkness around her. Her head felt heavy, like it was hoping to sink through whatever surface she was lying upon. "Wh... where am I? What is going on?" she whispered, struggling with her memory.

A pale light lit up above her, casting long shadows over a familiar face. Luna felt a great relief as Trixie smiled back at her. "Trixie... I'm so glad you're here! What... happened? How... did you escape?"

Trixie remained where she was, still smiling. "Don't worry about that. What is important is what is going to happen."

Something about Trixie made Luna pause. "Wh... what do you mean, Trixie?" She felt suddenly uneasy around the otherwise so familiar mare.

Trixie leaned in closer. "Tell me, Luna, who do you love?"

Luna tried to focus on Trixie, tried to remain calm and clear her foggy mind. She didn't like feeling helpless, tied up and unable to move as she was. "You know I love you, Trixie. Please, I don't like this. Please, help me free of these bonds."

Trixie's smile vanished. A darkness filled her eyes as she straightened back up, looking down at Luna. "I don't like being lied to. You never loved me, we both know that, so let's drop the game."

Tears welled up in Luna's eyes as she felt a growing panic. "That's not true! Please..." she choked on her words. "...please, Trixie. I do love you. This isn't you, please... I don't like this."

"Oh! You don't like me now? Well..." Trixie leaned back down, staring into Luna's frightened eyes. "I never liked you either. I never loved you, Luna." She smiled at Luna's widening eyes. "Don't look so shocked. You knew this was coming, but you had planned to be standing where I'm standing now, hadn't you? Ever so sorry to disappoint, but I couldn't let that happen could I?"

Luna struggled against the bonds holding her. She wanted to get free, needed to be free. The pony standing above her was not the Trixie she knew, she couldn't believe that. Her mind fought against the haze as her horn began to glow. If she could only get free of her bonds. Her magic fizzled uselessly as a hoof struck against her jaw hard. The copper tang of blood filled her mouth as she looked up at Trixie through the tears.

"Bad move, Luna." Trixie's own horn glowed and something floated up beside her, hanging in the air above Luna's eyes. A long row of metal teeth glinted in the magical light.

Luna's eyes fixed upon the saw dangling in front of her. "You... you can't do that!" She gasped as Trixie lowered the tool, placing it against the base of her horn. "Trixie!"

Trixie reached out a hoof, placing it against Luna's head and pushing down against the bed. "Better lie still, or my hoof might slip and you'll get ugly scars and jagged edges, dear."

Rarity turned slightly, burying her face in the soft covering. Something soft and warm poked her ear and rubbed against her face insistently. "It's too early, Opal..." she moaned and pushed the cat away with a weary hoof, "just one more hour." She turned her head and sighed. Just a little longer...

that would be nice.

A sudden pain shattered her slumber as the cat took an angry swipe at her cheek, leaving behind five thin red lines. Rarity's eyes flashed open with a gasp. "Opal! Wh..." her protest at the rude awakening was cut short as she tried to grasp her surroundings "...ere am I?" The looming trees and dark gardens didn't look anything like her home back in Ponyville.

Slowly memories began to flood back to her. The trip to the asylum, the greenhouse... the scent! "That incense!" she half cried as she recalled the events of that night. She had stepped into the greenhouse behind Fluttershy and recognized the sweet scent. It was the same incense she used when Sweetie Belle couldn't fall asleep, just stronger. She had felt the slumber come over her and backed out... she remembered stumbling out of the greenhouse towards the trees, calling for Fluttershy and the others.

"Fluttershy!" Rarity jumped up and looked about her frantically. Everything was quiet, and not far away she could see the greenhouse. It was now dark. Nowhere could she see any sign of Fluttershy or any of the others. "Oh, Opal, of all the worst possible things..." she moaned, having cleanly forgotten the claw marks on her cheek as she lifted the cat off the ground and set it down on her back. "I have to find my friends!"

Rarity snuck up along the greenhouse and peeked through the door. The place was dark and the sweet scent had left, blown away by the breeze. Carefully she stepped inside and poked her head as quietly as she could through the green cover of plants hanging everywhere. "No pony here," she whispered and backed out through the door, "somepony must have ponynapped my friends! They would never just leave me... would they?"

Rarity looked around at the gardens and the dark, looming asylum. She sank a big lump in her throat and tried to keep her legs steady. "Oh Opal, this is simply dreadful! How will I ever find them?" A slight shiver crept along her spine and down through her legs. "Well! If I stand around here any longer I'll become positively frozen! Now where did I put..." Rarity paused, her eyes widening at a sudden thought and her horn lit up as of its own volition. "My diamond encrusted scarf! Oh I hope Fluttershy still has it... come along, Opal!"

Rarity's horn glowed, pulsing softly as she nudged the door open. She took a glance back at the garden, nervously scouting for anything lurking in the darkness, before stepping inside. The door on the side of the building lead to a large kitchen. Pots and pans were scattered over the tables as if somepony had been busy cooking before suddenly abandoning all work. Now the kitchen was silent. Opalescence hissed and stood up on Rarity's back, puffing herself up as if at some unseen threat.

Rarity yelped as the cat's sharp claws dug into her back. "Ouch! Opal, darling! What is wrong with you?" She pulled the hissing cat off and sat it down on the floor, where the animal proceeded to hide between her hooves. Rarity trotted cautiously through the kitchen, whispering at the cat following along, "be quiet darling, we don't want anypony to hear us now, do we?"

The light from her horn provided only little illumination in the darkness, and Rarity had to walk slowly to not stumble into tables and walls. As she turned the corner of a table a glint of something in the darkness ahead made her pause. After a moment she took a few slow steps towards the source of the reflection. A single eye looked up at her, reflecting the soft light of her magic. "H... hello?" Rarity's horn glowed stronger, shining ahead of her and falling on a stallion collapsed on the floor behind another table.

"Oh my, good sir, are you alright? What is the matter?" Rarity exclaimed and stepped closer. She stopped almost instantly and felt her insides churn as her light fell behind the table. The pony was lying on his back behind the table, in a pool of dried blood and a plate of scattered muffins that he must have been carrying before collapsing. A deep cut across his throat nearly separated his head from the body.

Rarity stumbled back with a choked cry, stepping on Opal in the process. The cat wailed loudly and Rarity's hoof slipped, causing her to lose balance and fall back, violently crashing through a door into another room. In the fall her horn flared brightly, briefly lighting up the room to reveal a nightmarish scene before her.

Rarity screamed as the light died around her, yet the blood still stood out in burning red letters before her eyes, forever seared into her mind.

"A gift for Twilight, something fitting! You always gave her gifts, did you not?" Trixie threw the saw away and held up Luna's horn before her, looking at it with deep satisfaction in the dim light. "She will love this one, don't you think?" Luna looked away, crying quietly.

Trixie stood in silent contemplation of her trophy for a few minutes. She wasn't sure what she felt. "Look at her," Trixie instinctively turned her head in response to the thought, her cold eyes lingering on Luna's face. Tears streamed down the princess' cheeks from her closed eyes, but her expression was one of defiance not the despair of a broken pony. "So helpless now. We're not done with her yet, are we?" Trixie closed her eyes, shaking her head.

Luna's horn clattered against the floor as Trixie dropped the grim trophy and fell on her knees, a new look of horror on her face. "I... Luna! Wh... what have I done?" Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at the horn on the floor before her. "I... I'm so sorry... I never..." Luna remained silent. "I'm a monster," Trixie cried in despair, "I can not fight this!"

"Trixie..." Luna's voice was weak from the slumbering effect of the drug. She stirred a little, pulling against her restraints. "We need to get out of here, while... while we can."

Trixie stood up and looked at Luna with a pained expression. "I'm sorry... for everything..."

Luna broke her off. "Trixie! I would give anything to... save you from this curse. But you need to forget everything for a moment and just get me free of these bonds before I lose you again." Trixie looked down. Her horn flared briefly as she untied Luna's hooves. Luna quickly threw off the leather straps and rolled off the bed, standing on shaking legs.

"Luna... how can I ever..." Trixie looked away, unable to face the princess.

"I followed you out of love, Trixie. I swore I would do anything to help you, that I would give anything if I could end this nightmare somehow. None of that has changed." She reached out and placed a hoof on Trixie's cheek,

turning her head so that she could look into her eyes. They stood for what seemed like a long time, eyes locked. "Nothing has changed..." Luna whispered and closed her eyes as she leaned forwards.

Trixie sighed as their lips met. A faint gleam crossed her eyes, a brief satisfied smile. "Born for the stage, my dear Trixie. A fine performance..." Pride filled Trixie's heart. She was doing well, but the play was far from over. She relaxed and lost herself in the kiss.

A sharp pain and the unpleasant taste of her own blood broke Trixie out of the moment. Her eyes widened and she let out a muffled cry as Luna's teeth sank deep into her tongue. Trixie stumbled and fell back, feeling the air forced from her lungs as Luna pushed her hard and spat out a mouthful of blood on the floor.

"Nothing has changed... except you!" Luna hissed as she snatched her severed horn from the floor and charged at Trixie, death gleaming in her eyes. "You can't fool me, not for a second, monster!"

For but a second the flash from Rarity's horn lit up the grand dining hall and revealed a scene she would forever wish she could wipe from her memories. It looked like most if not all of the asylum's residents had been gathered here, and then savagely slaughtered. Some seemingly while eating dinner. Everywhere ponies were sitting or lying, thrown randomly on the floor or dragged onto a table, with throats cut, heads severed, and guts disemboweled in a seemingly senseless massacre born of some unfathomable rage.

And above and around the sea of blood which drenched the floor and tables, words had been smeared crudely in red upon the walls and ceiling. Large and messy letters scribbled by a furious hoof, their crimson message burning in the dark with some demonic light, the strangely lucid ramblings of a mad pony.

"NO MORE LEASH TO KEEP ME
AWAY FROM YOU, NO MORE
SLEEPLESS NIGHTS ENTWINED
IN A DREAM, A NIGHTMARE,

YET SO FAR APART,
ALWAYS OUT OF REACH!

STARING THROUGH A MIRROR,
CAN SEE YOU, CAN TOUCH YOU,
PART OF ME, APART
FROM ME, NEVER AGAIN
SCREAMING THROUGH MY BARS,
DON'T TOUCH ME! NO MORE!

MY REVENGE SWORN IN BLOOD,
UNLEASHED, HAS SHED YOU
FROM ME, SET TO CLAIM
BACK WHAT YOU TOOK FROM ME,
I NOW SWEAR, I COME
FOR YOU! JUST FOR YOU!"

Rarity scrambled to her hooves and backed out through the door to the kitchen, away from the monstrous scene. She shut the door and leaned against it, ignoring the dead cook nearby. She stood there in the darkness and silence for a long time, her breathing a low hissing.

Slowly, after a while, she began to stir again. She looked around for Opal, but there was no sign of the cat anywhere. Maybe it had run off, that was the last of her concerns. She needed to find Fluttershy and the others, if it wasn't already too late. If they hadn't already joined the poor lot in the other room. A determination took over from the terror in her mind and her horn once again lit up, pulsing faintly as she turned to open the door. Somewhere out there her friends were waiting, depending on her. She would not fail them.

Weaving through the massacre, Rarity made it to the door at the other end of the dining hall when she heard echoing hoof steps on the other side. Swiftly she stepped to the side and pressed herself against the wall next to the door. Darkness fell upon the room as she dismissed her spell and held her breath. The hoof steps reached the door and paused. Rarity felt her heart beat faster as the door opened, and she pressed herself closer up against the wall and into the shadows.

An indigo unicorn with a broken horn walked in and continued across the room, holding a lit candle in her mouth and carrying a pair of old saddlebags over her shoulders. Her head was low as she wound her way amidst the corpses, and in the dim light Rarity seemed to catch a look of shame on her face. Rarity considered jumping her while she had the advantage, but quickly decided against it. She couldn't risk getting caught. Finding her friends was more important, and if this pony was on her way out maybe that was a good thing.

The other pony reached the door to the kitchen and suddenly paused. Rarity's heart skipped a beat as she pondered if the other pony might have noticed something out of the ordinary. Had she dropped something in her fall? Rarity mentally checked everything but couldn't think of anything she might be missing. If the other pony turned around she would surely spot Rarity immediately. Rarity watched the other pony closely, preparing herself for action should she turn.

The other pony shook her head back and forth a little, then finally continued on through the door. Rarity released her breath in a sigh of relief as the door to the kitchen closed behind the pony. Quickly she hurried out of the dining hall and into the dark corridor beyond.

The gloomy corridors seemed to have no end as Rarity's horn lead her deeper and deeper into the asylum, down long passages and winding stairs into what she thought could only be the depths of the very abyss. Her hoof steps echoed against the hard stone floors, frequently making her spin around when she thought she heard somepony behind her, only to stare down yet another empty hall. The atmosphere and constant feeling of being watched or followed was starting to wear on her nerves, and on several occasions had she almost set off in a panicked gallop at some perceived sound or creeping shadow in the corner of her eyes. And every time it had been nothing, or so she assured herself.

She wasn't sure how long it had been. Her horn glowed more brightly now, but still she had no idea where her friends were, or even if the spell was leading her to the right place. Perhaps their captors had taken the scarf from Fluttershy, or she could have lost it somewhere in the endless halls

and rooms. Rarity gnawed her lower lip in anxiety and listened at yet another door before poking her head inside. Laundry room. Nothing.

She had to be close to the scarf, she could feel it. But where was it? Rarity turned and looked down a corridor lined with doors. So many doors. She had to concentrate, had to focus. Maybe she could get a clearer image of where exactly the spell was pointing. "I miss Twilight..." she whispered. The sound of her voice made her feel a little better, a little less alone and lost. It was a small thing, but it helped. "She would have known a spell, or... something."

Rarity closed her eyes, fighting the fear and desire to keep them open. Her horn lit up a little brighter as she tried to get a better image of where to go. It was difficult with the constant feeling of somepony watching behind her. And she was growing tired, the effort of keeping the spell up for so long wearing on her. But she couldn't give up. Never.

Slowly she began to walk once more, down the new corridor. All the doors seemed to lead to cells, cells that had not been used in a long time from the looks of it. Rarity stopped at the end and listened at the last door. It was silent like the others. "Can't be anywhere else," she whispered, "it must be here." She pushed the old door open and peered down a crumbling flight of stairs. Rarity wrinkled her nose at the dust and cobwebs, but something else took her attention. Somepony had obviously been this way recently, because the dust on the steps had been disturbed.

Encouraged by this, Rarity began her descent further into the earth. "What is this place?" She thought as she stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked around at the ancient stone walls and crumbling floor. It didn't look like the rest of the asylum and had obviously not been used for anything in ages.

Rarity took another step down, but felt her hoof slip on a broken step. With a cry she fell the last few steps into the room, landing hard on her face. Her cry echoed through the room for a bit as she sat up and rubbed her bruises. "Oh Rarity, darling, you look just terrible," she sighed at her ragged looks. Why had she come along on this horrible trip? Why had all this happened, why did it all have to happen? First her little sister, and her friend Twilight. They were gone, she would never see them again. And now this, her friends lost, maybe worse. Rarity sat in the cold, dank room and

cried as the memories and the miserable situation she was in overwhelmed her. She had failed them all, like she failed her sister and Twilight.

A tiny voice broke her out of her misery. Rarity looked up with wide eyes. Had she really heard it? Was it another trick of the mind, a cruel joke played by her senses?

"...anypony? pl... please..."

"Fluttershy!" Rarity cried and jumped up, looking around. "Where are you?!" There was a long silence before the voice returned, barely audible.

"Ra... Rarity? I... I don't know..."

Rarity listened with bated breath, following the sound down a narrow passage. Her horn burned brightly as she stopped in front of an old door. "Fluttershy?" she called, listening at the door. There was a faint and familiar scent from behind the door, sweet and soothing, but no reply. Rarity frowned. She knew she would have to work quickly now.

With a deep breath of air, Rarity threw open the door and stepped into the damp room. Fluttershy was lying, tied up on a bed on one side of the room with Angel nearby. On the other side, Pinkie, Gummy and Spike were tied up likewise, all soundly sleeping. Rarity could find no sign of either Trixie or Luna, but didn't waste time speculating about their absence. In a flash of her horn she had them all untied – that was thankfully one thing she could do easily, practically in her sleep as it were. Dragging the drugged and sleepy ponies and assorted animals out of the room while holding her breath was another task entirely. "I miss Twilight..." she thought to herself once again, reminded of the purple unicorn's great show of magic when she lifted that Ursa so long ago.

Trixie fell on her back with Luna swiftly upon her, the sharp horn in Luna's mouth aimed at her heart. She rolled to the side to evade the attack and tried to push the princess off, but Luna proved stronger and forced her back down with great force. The back of her head hit the floor and she felt her vision blur as she tried to hold the princess back. "Please... I... I'm sorry, for everything! I... I love you, Luna, please..." she begged.

Luna hissed and stabbed again, a grim determination shining through the tears in her eyes. "Beg all you want, you're not fooling me, I know your little mind games. You are not the Trixie I knew, you are nothing but a monster. It is too late for second chances now. I should have let Celestia have you executed after all, at least it would have been merciful."

Luna's words hit her harder than she had expected. Something deep within her stirred, a burning rage. A dark ember glowed in her eyes and magic flowed within and through her, erupting in a burst which threw Luna back against the wall. Trixie stood up as Luna collapsed on the floor. "If that is how you would like it," she hissed as she picked Luna up in her magic, "then you shall have your monster!"

Trixie advanced on Luna, who struggled helplessly in the magical grip. Something floated up between them, a puppet in the likeness of a dark mare, long threads flowing along attached to its limbs. "Remember this?" Trixie held up the doll in front of Luna. "You tried to strangle me with it once, long ago. It was our first meeting, even if I didn't know it at the time. Can you guess where this is going?" The strings stirred and wrapped around Luna's neck as Trixie leaned in close to her. "A fitting conclusion to this, our last meeting."

Trixie watched as the strings tightened. Luna gasped for air, struggling in growing despair against the magic. The princess' eyes grew wider, almost pleading. Trixie smiled, unable to look away even for a second. Luna continued to struggle for a while as the strings wrapped even tighter, but soon her body grew still. Trixie stared into the now empty eyes of the mare she had once called her love. It was over. Without moving she let the magic fade away, watching the body fall limply upon the floor. A tear ran down her cheek. It was beautiful. So beautiful.

"The show is over, my love."

Chapter 8

Celestia raised her sleep-deprived eyes towards the morning sky. It was a few hours since she had raised the sun and set it on its course for the day, and still the pale white crescent of Luna's moon sat there against the deep blue horizon, looking like a ghostly sickle in the light of the dawn. Celestia closed her eyes, letting the tears flow freely as she reached out at last with her magic, gently cradling the moon in her mind as she brought it down beyond the horizon. A faint sob escaped her lips as it faded from her view.

"Your Majesty..." A voice spoke behind her. Celestia hadn't heard her servant enter, too absorbed in her own thoughts or simply too tired. She remained still, head lowered and eyes closed. "Your Majesty? Is something the matter?"

Celestia opened her eyes weakly, blinking away a few tears without turning around to look at the servant. She took a long breath before speaking, forcing herself to speak in a regal tone. "Cancel all appointments and send home all servants and guards, on paid leave until further notice. We desire the castle for ourselves, and we will not be disturbed. That is all. You are dismissed."

She could hear the servant shuffle her hooves uncomfortably behind her. "Y...your Majesty, I mean no disrespect, but are you sure..."

Celestia stood up, raising herself to her full height as she turned around, pointing a hoof at the servant who instantly fell down before her blazing eyes, cowering as the Sun Regent's normally calm and lighthearted voice now rumbled like thunder across the sky, shaking the castle in its foundations. "That was an ORDER!" The last word reverberated over the mountain, echoing back in thunderous waves. It was a voice she had not used in centuries, one in which she had never taken pleasure, and now it reminded her most of all of her sister. Perhaps somewhere, she too would hear.

She lowered her hoof slowly and watched in silence as the terrified servant stormed off without looking back. There would be consequences, much to

catch up on and sort out later, but for now everything else could – and would have to – wait. Celestia turned one last time to look at the sky, then walked back inside, head now low. She wished to be alone, away from the light of day.

Awareness returned slowly. All was dark and silent, no sound nor sight. Luna lay perfectly still, huddled up like a foal still in her mother's womb. As her senses expanded out, searching the void, she slowly became aware of another, something there in the dark with her. It felt familiar to her, yet it made her uneasy and she wanted it gone. It circled around her, mocking her weakness, offering the power to escape, the key to her prison. But Luna knew it would not be granted even if she succumbed and begged for it. Not this time. This time she was truly alone.

She had no idea how much time passed. A day, a year, a thousand? A mere dribble in the eternity that lay ahead, alone in the dark. Time passed silently around her as she lay, asleep and yet aware.

Somewhere there came a scratching of hooves against stone. Was she dreaming? Luna stirred and turned her head towards the sound. She listened for a time, then reached out a hoof to feel in front of her. Slowly, ever so slowly, she began to move towards the sound, dragging herself through the darkness. Stone formed around her, a narrow, jagged tunnel. A dull, gray light shone down from above and a small hoof reached down to meet hers. Luna hesitated at the offering of help. Slowly, fearfully she reached out and grabbed the hoof, feeling it pull her up into the shadowy bleakness above.

Luna gasped and scrambled through the opening onto a barren plain of rocks and dust, her legs feeling like those of a newborn foal as she tried to get up. The other hoof let go of her, and Luna looked up into a pair of violet eyes, belonging to a lavender unicorn filly. Luna stared back, her mind flooded with memories of a love long lost and a great evil lurking in the shadows with dark promises.

"Don't be afraid..." the filly said, looking at her sadly. There was something in those eyes which made Luna feel uncertain. She wanted to trust in those eyes, wanted to reach out for help...

Luna took a step back as a distant sound made her look up into the starless void. Was it a call? It seemed so far away to her. Luna looked back down and saw the darkness swallow up everything around her. She cried out and tried to reach for the quickly fading filly. "No! Don't leave me here! Please don't leave..." Their hooves touched for a second, before darkness took her away.

A long crack ran through the glass of the small hoof-held mirror, dividing it neatly in two halves. Celestia ran her hoof along the thin crack as she held up the mirror in front of her. She could barely recognize the tired pony staring back at her, bloodshot eyes looking at her blankly from the other side. Her horn glowed dimly and the crack in the mirror faded as the glass mended itself. With a sigh she put the mirror back down on Luna's desk, among all the other things; everything her sister had left there as well as other things she herself had dug out or brought with her when she had practically turned Luna's room into her own. Every surface of Luna's already overcrowded room was now covered in books and scrolls.

Celestia stared hopelessly at a blank spot in front of her. It seemed to take infinite resolve to break herself free. Finally she blinked and looked up. Her eyes fell on a scroll, one of the many she had brought with her from her own shelves. She picked it up and felt a little pain as she recognized it as one of her student's old friendship reports. Shaking a little she unrolled the scroll and began to read aloud to herself, her voice faltering in several places.

Dear Princess Celestia

Today I learned something amazing. Every pony, everywhere, has a special magical connection with her friends, maybe even before she's met them. If you're feeling lonely, and you're still searching for your true friends, just look up in the sky. Who knows, maybe you and your future best friends are all looking at the same rainbow.

Your faithful student

Twilight Sparkle

Celestia lay the letter down on the desk and held up her hooves to her face as she cried. She was still crying when a small flash and puff of smoke broke her out of the moment. She looked up through tears as a scroll appeared and landed in front of her.

Trixie looked upon Luna's still form. She watched the blank stare now in her eyes, the strings around her neck. She wanted to reach out and wrap her hooves around her, to shake her and cry, to scream out all her despair. She wanted to do something, anything, but all she could do was look as if through a window into another world, detached from everything except the vision in front of her. Watch as she sat down next to the dead princess, watch as she stroked the once flowing, now fading mane with a cold mockery of affection. And she couldn't look away.

She had enjoyed it... she had felt a great desire well up inside her as she looked into Luna's dying eyes, a sensual pleasure, feelings she had associated with something different. Her mind fought in horror against the realization, she didn't want to admit it, it couldn't be true! These thoughts were alien, revolting, and yet she had surely felt this way as she did the deed. She wanted to cry now.

A warm breath caressed her ear as a whisper reached her. "You can't deny it, Trixie... you loved it, didn't you?" She could feel Twilight's presence behind her, the familiar violet eyes examining her. Trixie felt violated, exposed and powerless in the presence of these eyes. She was a slave, a puppet to be controlled and abused. "Embrace it, Trixie. There is power in death, power in the flow of blood... and you know what we want, don't you?" Trixie watched as her hoof caressed Luna's neck before settling over the princess' heart. A knife floated up from behind her and settled in her lap. "For us, Trixie... for our love. Present us with her heart."

Trixie watched. She could feel the knife with her magic, could feel it as it pressed against the soft skin, could feel it cut, deep red blood flowing from the fresh wound. Trixie felt herself drawn to it, felt a burning desire for it. She wanted to cry, but all she could think of as she followed the knife with her eyes was the memory of Luna's warm blood upon her lips that night back in Canterlot, and the desire to taste it once more, one final time.

A distant noise made her ear twitch slightly. The knife came to a halt, her hoof shaking. Somewhere, voices called out for her. They seemed far away, hazy... as if from another world.

"Trixie? Luna?" There was terror in Rarity's voice. "Are... are you in here?"

Trixie's eyes stared in horror from the knife to Luna's bloody chest. Twilight's whisper echoed in her mind, "Give us... the heart!" Trixie gasped and felt herself collapse, the knife clattering against the floor as her consciousness and body reunited in a rushing sensation. Her body trembled violently, tears streaming from her eyes as she screamed in despair...

Rarity dropped Pinkie Pie on the floor and collapsed against the wall, her breath frantic and her vision blurred from the exertion. She closed her eyes, she wasn't sure how long, and tried to calm her breathing. She had dragged them all out and away from the sleep inducing fumes, but she couldn't allow herself to relax now. She couldn't afford to fall asleep in this place, and there was still Luna and Trixie to find. Rarity tried to force herself to stand, but collapsed again with a sigh.

She wasn't sure how long she had been out when she woke to a claw shaking her shoulder firmly. "Rarity! Rarity, wake up!" The unicorn blinked her eyes open and stared into Spike's green eyes. The dragon seemed greatly relieved to see her awake.

"Spike? How long... did I sleep? Are the others awake?" She held up a hoof to her eyes, closing them briefly as she tried to steady herself and regain her bearing.

"Pinkie is up, but... she just sits there." Rarity opened her eyes and followed Spike's claw where he pointed. Pinkie was sitting on the floor nearby, staring at her hooves, shoulders sagging and mane utterly lifeless. Gummy was asleep on the floor next to her. Rarity had never seen the pink pony so entirely joyless, it was a deeply surreal sight. Spike shuffled his foot nervously. "I have no idea about the time. I just woke myself."

Rarity nodded and stood up, looking for Fluttershy. The pegasus was still asleep close by, a sad looking Angel pawing at her nose to wake her up. Something about the scene made Rarity feel a tightness in her chest and tears threaten to well up in her eyes. She trotted over and knelt down beside her friend, gently nuzzling her.

"Dearest Fluttershy! You're burning up!" Rarity gasped as she felt how hot the other pony was. She moved over to have a look at the wounded hoof, carefully unwrapping the bandage. It looked like a new bandage and some care had obviously been given to it, but the humidity in there had left the cloth wet and the wound in a bad state. The hoof looked swollen and the wound clearly infected.

Spike looked on with wide eyes, a claw to his mouth in worry. "Will she be alright?"

Rarity shook her head sadly. "I can not do anything for her here. But she needs rest, the poor thing. Help me get her up on my back..." Rarity said as she lay down next to Fluttershy. "We need to find Luna and Trixie and get out of this... this dreadful place." With Spike's help, Rarity had Fluttershy slung over her back and stood up slowly. It was a good fortune that pegasi were built light to allow flight, Rarity thought as she turned to Pinkie.

The pink pony looked up at the attention. Without a word she picked up Gummy and stood up to follow. Rarity shook her head and took a long breath before looking around, feeling low on hope as she stood there without a clue where to go or what to do. Finally she took a door at random, the others following close by as they ventured on.

Spike glanced up and down the rows of empty bookcases, ancient wood hidden beneath ages of dust and cobwebs. He stopped as the others passed by. A library without books, long forgotten and left to time. It reminded him of Twilight, of the library back in Ponyville where he used to fetch her books from the crowded shelves. Since her death the library had been so quiet, only a few ponies still came by to get a book now and then. The dragon sniffed and wiped his eyes before catching up with the others.

Rarity called out again. "Trixie? Luna?" Her voice echoed among the

bookcases and crumbling stone walls of the library. "Are... are you in here?" They had decided to throw caution to the wind in order to better find their two missing friends. If anypony were still down here with them, they had given no sign of themselves so far.

"Libraries are supposed to be quiet," came a sad whisper from Pinkie in the back. Spike backed up a bit to pat the depressed party pony on the back. He felt a little less alone knowing he was not the only one to have thought of Twilight.

Rarity was about to call again when a long shriek cut through the silence, causing them all to jump and look around in fear. Loud crashes followed amidst continued cries of despair between choked sobs. Rarity looked around with wide eyes, then set off in the direction of the noise as fast as she could run with Fluttershy on her back.

They turned a corner and burst through a door into what must once have been a study, in ages long since past. The room looked like it had been razed by fire in a great struggle, things thrown everywhere. Not far from the door a bed had been toppled over, leather restraints torn. Trixie lay on her knees next to this bed, sobbing uncontrollably, blood dripping from her mouth.

Rarity rushed over. Trixie offered no resistance as Rarity began to pull at her, but made no effort to help either. With Fluttershy on her back, Rarity struggled. "Pinkie! Spike!" she called and was glad when Pinkie appeared and quickly grabbed Trixie. Together they got the sobbing alicorn out and collapsed next to her just inside the library.

"Ah hurh una... Ah hurh her..." Trixie kept repeating in sobs, her voice a strange, almost incomprehensible slur as if her tongue was rebelling against her.

"Rarity, Pinkie!" Spike's voice called from the other room. "I found Luna! Come quick!"

Rarity let Fluttershy roll off her back next to Trixie and got up. "Stay with them, Pinkie," she said, not waiting for the pink pony to reply as she hurried back in. Spike was struggling with something in the back of the room, trying to keep the sleep from overcoming him. Rarity rushed over and quickly took

stock of the situation.

Luna lay on a toppled bed, still tied down. The princess peered up at them with a blank, distant gaze, her lips moving slightly, "Don't leave me here..."

With a flick of her horn, Rarity loosened the bonds and with Spike's help began dragging out the dazed princess. Safely back in the library, she collapsed, exhausted.

"How are they doing?" Rarity looked up at Spike as she slowly came back to her senses.

"Luna is awake and better. Trixie... doesn't respond." The dragon looked over at where Luna was trying to get through to Trixie, but she simply lay there, staring straight ahead, tears rolling down her cheeks and lips occasionally trembling. "She seems to have bitten her tongue quite bad, but I don't think it's because she can't speak. She's in her own little world right now."

Rarity stood up on shaky legs and walked over, sitting down next to Luna. The princess looked down, exhausted and concerned. "She doesn't seem to register anything. She appears to think she hurt me. I wish I knew what she's going through, I wish I could help her."

Rarity put a comforting hoof around Luna's shoulders. "She'll recover. She's a tough one." Luna didn't say anything as she stroked Trixie's cheek. "We need to get out of here. Can you carry her?" Luna nodded slowly and stood up, gently lifting Trixie up with her magic and laying her on her back before helping Rarity with Fluttershy.

They walked in silence through the dark, empty corridors. Rarity was glad for the company, but still felt uneasy in the eerie darkness of the asylum. The image of the slaughtered ponies kept coming back to her, and the thought of returning to the scene made her struggle with her breath.

Luna glanced over her shoulder at Rarity, seeming to notice the unicorn's struggles. "Are you alright?"

Rarity shook her head, "No. No, I can not..." she breathed deeply, "We simply can not go back the way I came. We need to find another way out. Please."

Luna nodded, a look of understanding on her face. "Where did you come in, then?"

"Through the kitchen, there was a back door."

Luna considered for a moment, then gave Rarity a small smile. "Then we take the front entrance. It was blocked from this side, so it should open for us here."

Rarity nodded, feeling a little calmer at the prospect of not having to go through the dining hall. She just hoped they could find the main entrance and get out that way. She didn't want to spend one second longer in this place than she had to.

Thankfully it proved a simple matter to find the entrance hall. The grand doors had been blocked by furniture in a haphazard but effective manner, preventing entrance from the outside. Pinkie and Spike helped Rarity and Luna pull the furniture out of the way, and soon the group found themselves breathing in the fresh air and warming themselves in the rays of the midday sun.

Rarity, greatly relieved, trotted down the stairs and carefully lay a fevered Fluttershy down in the soft grass. Luna followed, letting Trixie off her back. The azure pony still lay there, staring ahead of her. Luna lay down next to her and nuzzled her sadly. Rarity looked between Trixie and Fluttershy before turning to the others. "I'm... going to go get some things from the balloon so we can do something about Fluttershy's leg."

Spike raised his claw, "I'll come with you."

Rarity smiled at the dragon, thankful for the offer. She honestly didn't want to be alone, even if it wasn't very far to walk. "Thank you, Spike. You are a darling."

Luna nodded, "Can you get some paper and quill while you're at it? We need to write a letter to my sister as soon as possible, she must be terribly

worried by now. She needs to know that we are... relatively well."

Rarity nodded and set off down the path towards where they had left the balloon, Spike following close behind. Luna sighed and wrapped a wing around Trixie, while Pinkie sat down on the grass and stared ahead of her in silence.

"Twilight is... is never coming back, is she?"

Luna looked at Pinkie Pie, surprised at the sudden question. The pink pony had been uncharacteristically quiet, and with Trixie still in shock, Luna had for a moment almost forgotten Pinkie was there. As she spoke, Luna smiled sadly and shook her head. "No, Pinkie. Twilight is dead, but she lives on in our memory."

Pinkie looked down, seeming to understand, something having clicked in her mind to finally break the weeks of denial. "Last I saw her was at the... the fair. I was a terrible friend to her."

Luna stood up and walked over to give Pinkie a friendly nudge. "I'm sure that's not true, Pinkie. I'm sure Twilight couldn't have asked for a better friend."

Pinkie shook her head vigorously, the first real energy displayed in a while. "But I wasn't any good. I never visited her in Dappleshore. I should have come by sometimes, I should have... I should have thrown her a big, humongous, superrific party to make her feel at home there. But I never did. Maybe that's why she became so sad and did the things she did, because she never got a big party to cheer her up!"

Luna sat down beside Pinkie and wrapped a wing around her. She wasn't sure what to say, all she could think of was, "It's not your fault, Pinkie."

Pinkie sniffed sadly and leaned against Luna. "I miss her. Do you think they have parties where she is now? Do you think she's happy?"

"I... I'm sure they do, Pinkie. And I'm sure she's happy too, wherever she is." Luna looked up at the sky with a sigh. Deep down she found herself

less certain about her words than she wanted to be.

She was torn out of her thoughts as Rarity came running with a huffing Spike struggling to keep up behind her. "Luna! The balloon... it's gone!" The white unicorn called as she slowed her run and came to a halt.

Luna looked in the direction of the balloon and bit her lip. "Gone?" She frowned and stood up again. "The pony who captured us must have taken it. No doubt she's far away by now, not even any point in trying to go after her then."

Rarity stomped in annoyance. "What do we do then?"

"You and Pinkie stay here with Trixie and Fluttershy. I'll go find bandages and paper. There must be some here somewhere. I won't be long."

Rarity nodded nervously as Luna wandered off, but the princess was true to her word and Rarity didn't have to wait long. Luna returned not long after with bandages, paper and a few other supplies she had managed to salvage from the nearby buildings. She lay it all in the grass and Rarity immediately set about treating Fluttershy's leg while Luna sat down to write a very late letter for Celestia.

Spike watched for a while before voicing a thought that had plagued him. "What are we going to do now? I mean, where are we going and how?"

Luna looked up from her writing and let the quill rest on the paper as she pondered quietly. "I am not certain, Spike. For now I suggest we go into Hoofswell and rent a room or two, until Fluttershy and Trixie are better. Until then I don't think there's much we can do."

Spike nodded and returned to watch in silence as Luna finished the letter.

They rented a small suite at the nearest hotel in town, but none of them slept much that night.

Luna was resting on a couch in one of the rooms, watching over Trixie on a nearby bed while reading the response from Celestia. She felt sorry for

putting her sister through such pain and constant worry. Luna had no doubt that Celestia would know if something did happen to her, but the stress of waiting in uncertainty, unable to do anything to help or hinder the inevitable, seemed to affect her deeply. Luna sighed and rested her head on her hooves, her thoughts drifting. What would happen if she failed? What would happen to Trixie, to her sister, and to Equestria? She knew she had to continue on and find a way any way she could. "I only wish I knew how," she whispered to herself as she glanced up at the sky through a nearby window.

The sun was starting to rise again when Trixie stirred, drawing a long, pained breath. Luna looked up and quickly got on her hooves, rushing over next to Trixie on the bed. Trixie stared past Luna, into the ceiling, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Ah'm sowy, Twi'ight. Ah'm so sowy!" she cried as Luna pulled her into a tight hug, wrapping her wings around her.

Luna nuzzled her cheek. "It's alright. I'm here, we're all here for you. We'll find a way, I swear."

Trixie buried herself in Luna's embrace. "Ah know wha' she seeks. Ah know wha' she intends to do." Her voice remained slurred, though a little better than earlier.

There was a moment of silence before Luna responded. "Who are you talking about?"

"Manna Shpachle. Midnight'sh granddaughter. She wash in the ashylum, it wash her in the greenhoush. She wanted revenge on Midnight, an' she shpoke of a... a miwor of shoulsh, Ah think." Luna listened in silence as Trixie explained what Manna had told her. After a while of silence Trixie pulled herself free of the embrace and looked up at her. "Wha' ish it?"

Luna seemed to have drifted off in a thoughtful gaze. "Then I know where she's going," she finally spoke.

Chapter 9

Luna watched the rising sun through the window of the hotel room. Perhaps her sister was watching it with her even now, somewhere back in Canterlot. Yet Luna knew she couldn't return there. Somewhere out there lay her own path, a path that would take her back... but not to Canterlot. Luna wondered what she would find at the end... if she would ever return to see her sister.

"Princess?"

Rarity's voice broke her out of her gloomy thoughts and she turned to the others who had gathered in the room, waiting for her to explain. They all seemed eager to know what their next step was going to be, everyone except Luna. Luna tried not to show her hesitation and sat down on a nearby pillow. "From what Trixie has told me, the pony in the asylum was Twilight's great, great... great or so grandmother, Manna Sparkle. You all know the story of... of Twilight, and how she..." Luna took a moment to gather herself, "died. It seems Manna was the victim of the same malevolent spirit as Twilight, and now Trixie. It appears to be a family curse that Trixie has now inherited. Yet Manna escaped by breaking her own horn, though we know nothing of what else happened back then. It seems that once her tormentor passed on to Twilight, and now Trixie, Manna broke free and now pursues her vengeance against the spirit of her and Twilight's ancestor."

"So she's after the same as we are?" Spike, sitting with Rarity, asked?

Luna nodded. "It would certainly seem so, but I wouldn't trust that mare, and it appears that she doesn't trust us one bit either. But we know what she seeks, and I know where to find it. Whether she actually knows where it is too..." Luna shook her head, "it doesn't matter." The others looked at her expectantly. "Manna, it seems, seeks the Mirror of Souls, an ancient artifact that would allow her her cross into the world beyond and confront the spirit of her ancestor. That is her plan, but it won't work."

The others waited patiently for her to continue. Luna's mind drifted back

through the ages, to a time before the nightmare. "The mirror is a powerful piece of alicorn magic, from the time of Discord. It was through it that my sister and I discovered the Elements of Harmony and how to use them to defeat Discord. Only an alicorn can use its magic. Manna took some of my blood, but even if the mirror is still intact and functioning after all this time, it won't work for her."

Trixie looked up from where she was lying next to Fluttershy, resting and tending her wounded tongue. "Are you sure? Ah mean... your blood did thish?" She ruffled her wings a little.

Luna hesitated. "We still don't know exactly how that happened. I am fairly certain that my blood alone could not have done it. I suspect Twilight's sacrifice had as much to do with it as my blood did, though surely neither would have been enough on its own and perhaps other factors played a part as well. Even so, it is not clear whether you could use the mirror either. Manna seems to have suspected that you might not have that power at least, from what you told."

"But you could!" Spike interrupted eagerly.

Luna nodded slowly. "If the mirror is still there and intact, yes... yes, I could. The mirror was lost long ago, however, during the last days of Discord's rule when much of the land and seas were changed. Equestria once encompassed much of what is now sea, and the mirror was in a grand city in what is today the southern sea. One of many such sunken cities, the most famous of which is of course Marelantis. If it still exists, it has long since been claimed by the deep."

There was a long silence as everyone mulled over the information to themselves. Finally Pinkie broke the silence, "How do we get there? We have to get there!"

Everyone looked to Luna, who knew they had all reached the same conclusion. This was the path they needed to take from here, she knew that too. "I suggest we all get some rest. We will travel south by hoof, if we follow the roads and stay within Equestria's borders we should be able to make good time and not run into anymore... trouble. Once we reach the sea we will need to take ship, but let's save that worry until then. For the moment we need to rest, then resupply in the evening."

Everyone seemed to agree with that plan for now and got ready to get some rest. Luna turned back to look out through the window, gazing into the distance.

Trixie stepped into the small shop and looked around at the shelves full of various and sundry items and supplies. It was not the finest of places, a little rustic and simple, but like every other place in town it seemed to have been shined up in a great hurry. Apparently the presence of her and Luna was difficult to keep from the local ponies and like everywhere else they went out of their way to greet the royal pair. Trixie was merely happy to not be trampled by a mob of festive ponies upon entry. An old mare peeked out from over the counter at her, watching nervously as Trixie walked along the shelves. Once she would have been happy for the attention, to have ponies bowing and scraping at her hooves, but the attention of strangers no longer made her feel joy or any thrill. Yet neither did she seek solitude... something was missing from her life, and something dark now lurked in the void instead.

She picked a few items off the shelves. Dried and canned food, good for long travels. They had lost everything with the balloon and needed to restock for the next step of their journey. While the others took care of other matters, Trixie had volunteered to do the necessary shopping of basic necessities. She mentally checked her list and looked around the shop. She needed fresh bandages and healing herbs for Fluttershy. The pegasus' leg was still in a bad state, and they had only been able to give it a very crude treatment. Her own tongue was already doing much better, the swelling nearly gone though it still hurt.

She approached the mare behind the counter. "Do you have any medicinal herbs?" She asked as she loaded everything else onto the counter and began counting the payment. "I need plenty of bandages and basic remedies for wounds and infections."

The elderly mare bowed deeply, "Of course, Your Majesty!" and hurried out back for the requested items. Trixie could hear her scramble about and mutter to herself.

While waiting, Trixie turned to one of the shelves. She briefly glanced over her shoulder at the door – half expecting to see Luna enter behind her – before looking back at a small hoofheld mirror on display. Quite ordinary, unremarkable, a simple piece of glass in a wooden frame. Trixie checked the door again before picking up the mirror, holding it up before her. Nothing but the empty shop stared back and Trixie lowered the mirror again in sadness.

She picked up a few more things, quietly paid the shopkeeper and left, slipping the small mirror into one of her saddlebags, tucking it in safely beneath the other things where it would stay hidden.

"Opal, dear?"

Rarity called as she trotted down the path through the small local park, her horn shimmering in the early evening. She hadn't seen her darling cat since it fled from the asylum kitchen. Her gem-finding spell had turned up no trace of Opal's jeweled necklace back there and Rarity had been worried sick for the poor thing, lost and alone somewhere out there in these unfamiliar lands. While the others prepared for the trip, she had gone out to search the city. Her spell had picked up a trace which had lead her to the park, where she hoped she would find the lost critter.

Peeking under a bench, she called out again. "Opalescence, darling? Momma is sorry, you can come home now! Oh, of all the worst possible things...." she broke herself off and sat down heavily on the bench, sniffling a little sadly. Twilight, Sweetie Belle and Zecora's deaths, all those poor innocent ponies in the asylum slaughtered, Fluttershy and Trixie suffering even now, Celestia worrying for her dear sister who only just returned after a thousand years of banishment and nearly died less than a week ago. Who was she to put her cat above all of that. "Of all the worst possible things, this is... at the very bottom," she muttered, lips trembling.

The gleeful voices of a pair of nearby foals broke her out of the gloom, and her horn flared slightly as she glanced up. A pair of young fillies, twins judging by their nearly identical looks, ran up to what Rarity assumed to be their mother. They looked poor and in need of a solid meal, and a bath, in stark contrast to the fine object one of them was holding in her mouth.

Rarity recognized Opal's jeweled necklace immediately, her eyes widening at the sight.

The filly with the necklace held it up to her mother, dangling the trinket eagerly, "Look Mommy! Look what we found!"

The other filly giggled joyously, "It's so shiny! I bet it's worth a fortune!"

The mother picked up the fine piece, "Oh my... where did you find this?"

"In the bushes over there," the two fillies chimed, "it was stuck on a branch. Can we keep it?"

"I.. I'm sorry, dears." The mother looked deeply conflicted. It was obvious that the small family could do well with the money such a find would bring. "It... It must belong to somepony who is probably missing it. We... we should bring it to the guards so they can find the owner."

"Aww!" the twins chimed in sad agreement, hanging their heads low.

"Now now, you know it's... it's the right thing to do. You wouldn't want somepony to take your toys if you lost them either, would you?" The fillies shook their little heads and muttered something Rarity couldn't hear. The mother smiled, "There you see. Now come along."

Rarity watched as they began to walk down the path. She wiped a few tears from her eyes and stood up, approaching the family. "Excuse me... I'm sorry to disturb, but my cat, Opal, she ran away and I couldn't help but notice that you found her necklace. I was wondering if perhaps you had seen her? She's a white, fluffy cat and very dear to me, you see."

The family looked at her with a mix of fear and awe. The mother glanced down at the two fillies who shook their heads, jaws hanging a little. "Uh... Uhm... we only found the... the necklace, ma'am," one of them finally managed.

Rarity's ears dropped and she hang her head slightly. She had dared to hope, even though deep down she had expected that to be the answer. "Oh... alright, then. Thank you."

"We... We're really sorry, ma'am. We didn't mean to take it... here," the mother held up the necklace, but Rarity stopped her.

"No, no! Please..." Rarity smiled through her tears. It was time to let go and move on. "Please keep it. It... would just remind me of poor Opal, and I dare say you need it more than I ever did. Take it with my blessing, and may it bring you good fortune." The mother hesitated, but Rarity looked insistent.

The fillies brightened as they watched, and the mother smiled thankfully, "Really? Oh... Oh thank you, good ma'am. You're very kind."

"Think... nothing of it!" Rarity felt her voice faltering slightly. "I... If I could just ask one thing. I promise I won't ask much, but... if you find my cat, would you... would you make sure she gets a good home? She can be a little difficult, but I'm sure somepony around here could take good care of her."

The family looked at each other. The twins both looked hopefully at their mother, who finally nodded with a smile. "O... Of course, ma'am."

Rarity smiled sadly. "Then I... Then I can't ask for more. Thank you, and may fortune smile upon you and your family." She turned around, head hanging low.

She was stopped by a gentle tug on her tail. "Ma'am..." She turned around and looked at the young twins staring up at her admiringly. "Wh... what is your name, ma'am?"

Rarity knelt down and smiled at the two young fillies, "Please call me Rarity, dears."

Pinkie put the bowl of warm water and soap down on the floor next to the bed and sat next to Fluttershy. She looked at the pegasus who smiled back at her warmly, yet Pinkie felt no joy herself, no bubbly feeling deep in her chest wanting to burst out in a fit of giggling or outright laughing. All she wanted was to laugh and smile with her friends again, to see them all happy and full of joy again, but how could she smile or laugh with all the

death and suffering around her?

"Are you feeling better?" She asked while unwrapping Fluttershy's wounded hoof. The wound still looked infected, and the others had seemed worried about it. Pinkie had volunteered to stay behind and take care of Fluttershy while the others went out to get supplies and prepare for the trip. She wanted to feel helpful, wanted to do something to be of use, but what use was a party pony who couldn't party?

Fluttershy just smiled, gently as always. "A little," she said, in her eternally quiet voice.

Pinkie wanted to cry at that voice. She dipped the rag in the warm water and began washing the infected leg, cleaning away pus and dried blood. It made the leg look a little better, but the deep wounds left behind by the bear trap now gaped openly at her. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. I don't know if..."

Fluttershy placed a hoof on hers and rubbed it gently, her gentle eyes telling her to stop speaking. "It doesn't matter, Pinkie."

Pinkie looked down. "Is there anything I can do for you? I just want something I can do."

Fluttershy sat up as best she could in the bed and nuzzled Pinkie. "There is one thing you could do..." Pinkie looked up at her hopefully. "There is only one thing I really want, Pinkie."

Pinkie looked at Fluttershy expectantly. "Yes?"

Fluttershy smiled, "I want to see you smile again, Pinkie. I want to hear you laugh again, just like you did before all of this. Back when we were all together."

Pinkie looked down and closed her eyes. "I don't know what there is to laugh or smile for anymore..."

Fluttershy nuzzled her again. "Smile for me, Pinkie."

Pinkie looked up and smiled sadly. It wasn't much of a smile, but it seemed to make Fluttershy happy. Pinkie felt a little warmer inside as she saw her

friend brighten up like that, it made her feel a little better, even if it wasn't much.

"See? I knew you could still smile, Pinkie!" Fluttershy wrapped her hooves around Pinkie as best she could with her wounded leg. "I don't know what's going to happen, Pinkie, but I know I don't want to face it without you, or your smile to lighten up the dark. I don't want you to ever stop smiling." She gave the pink pony a light tickle, which caused her to giggle slightly. Fluttershy smiled.

Pinkie sniffled and giggled all at once, "Thank you, Fluttershy. You're the bestest friend a pony could ever have!"

Spike let out a long burp of green flames, from which a small pouch formed in mid-air.

The pouch clinked a little as Luna picked it up with her magic and opened it to inspect the golden bits inside. "It's a most curious choice of communication you and my sister have established. And a little bit gross, actually."

"But useful!" Spike said as he coughed a bit and patted his chest. A letter was one thing, but bags of gold and other big deliveries always left his throat a little sore.

Luna nodded, "Quite. It would make things a little more difficult if we had to buy everything on our good names alone."

"Glad to be of assistance!" Spike said cheerfully. It felt good to be doing something useful once again, instead of lounging about the empty library all day. "And it's a dragon thing. The breath, you know," the young dragon began as they turned down a small path outside town. "All dragons have a special breath. A little like cutie marks and special talents. And messenger dragons were very import in the ancient dragon societies, you know," he explained proudly, puffing himself up to look important.

Luna smiled, "Yes, I'm quite familiar with the history and cultures of the dragons, though I don't recall other messenger dragons being quite as..."

she searched for the right word, "uh, noisy when delivering messages."

"Just part of my unique charm," Spike answered, brushing his scales back with a claw.

Luna chuckled a bit. Or perhaps it was his youth, she thought to herself. Either way, the dragon had managed to cheer her up a bit, at least for a short while. She pushed open an old gate and stepped through to a small lot of land with several wagons and carriages lined up in rows. Luna walked casually down the rows, inspecting each of the carriages.

"What are we looking for?" Spike asked as he rode along on her back.

Luna stopped and considered. "Something large enough for us all preferably, but if not that then at the very least it must be covered. We need to make sure Fluttershy stays warm, dry and off her legs." She turned and looked at a small, covered carriage. "Like this one, though perhaps bigger if we can get it."

Spike nodded quietly and looked around. "Do you think she will be alright? Fluttershy, I mean."

"I don't know," Luna said sadly, looking down. The worry of earlier, briefly banished by the previous conversation, began to return as she continued down another row. "Hopefully Trixie will find something which will help. But whatever happens, we will do all that we can to help her."

They continued in silence for a while before Spike spoke again, having watched Luna as they walked. "You seem very worried lately."

Luna bit her lip a little and smiled, "I'm sure we all are. Aren't you worried, Spike?"

Spike scratched his chin, "Yeah, but you seem very tense and... jittery." He gave Luna a poke between the wings, causing her to jump a little and twitch a wing reflexively. He grinned as she turned to stare at him, "And you look like you're somewhere else half the time."

Luna frowned slightly. "Please refrain from poking me like that. It is not very... polite to poke a lady, much less your princess like that! And I'm

just..." she sighed. She probably wasn't fooling anypony, "I suppose worried is right. I fear for Trixie, I fear I'll lose her, and you all. I don't know what we will find, if it will even help us or if it's just a wild-goose chase. Or something worse."

Spike gave her another friendly poke, "oh come on, don't worry like that. You do your best, and we all trust you. I'm sure we'd all be totally lost without you."

Luna looked over her shoulder at the dragon riding on her back. She sighed and tried to give a smile, "I suppose you're right. We all do our best, don't we?" Quietly she wondered to herself if they were trusting her blindly, trusting her too much? What if she was the one who was lost?

Trixie pushed the door open and walked into the hotel lobby. She stopped when she spotted Rarity sitting on a couch under a small palm tree, reading a magazine. "Hello Rarity, what are you doing down here?" she asked as she walked over to the other unicorn.

Rarity looked up and smiled a little, though it was clear she had been crying. "I got back and... I, you know, thought that Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie might want a little... time to themselves."

Trixie glanced towards the stairs, "Is Fluttershy alright? I got her some herbs and fresh bandages that should help with her wound."

"I think she's doing better," Rarity covered a slight blush behind the magazine she was reading. The giggling she had heard through the door left her with the impression that barging in would have been most inappropriate. "So I take it your shopping went well? You got everything you were looking for?" she asked to steer the topic in a new direction.

Trixie merely nodded and sat down next to Rarity. She glanced at the magazine for a while before looking at Rarity. "And how about you?" Trixie wasn't sure how to approach such a situation. She had never been known for her skills at listening or making ponies feel better, but Rarity and the others were the only friends she had, the only ponies who made her feel less lonely and lost now.

Rarity lowered the magazine, shoulders slumped, "I lost Opal. I couldn't find her, just her necklace which I gave to a poor family... I don't think she's ever coming back."

Trixie nodded slowly and looked down. "I'm sorry." She wasn't sure what else to say in such a situation. It wasn't something she was used to saying, even after everything. "I know you loved that cat. Maybe she'll find you, though... pets have a strange way of finding their way back, don't they?" Trixie had never owned a pet herself, but that seemed like the kind of thing she always heard about pets.

Rarity shook her head. "I don't think... I mean, maybe it's for the best. Maybe I needed to let go, and focus on what is important here. Namely you, and everypony else. My friends." She looked up again, "I just hope she finds a good home."

Trixie looked down quietly. "Thank you, Rarity. For coming along, and for being there for me and for us all. I just hope one day I can make up for everything. I don't know if I can trust myself anymore, or if you all can trust me. I just don't want to hurt any of you."

"Friends are always there for each other," Rarity said and smiled at her, "even when the going gets tough. You know I certainly didn't have high thoughts of you when we first met, but I can see now something of what Twilight saw in you. And I know she would have stood by you 'till the end as well."

They both looked up at the sound of a carriage stopping outside. Rarity put down the magazine and stood up, "That must be Luna and Spike. We better go see if Pinkie and Fluttershy are ready to go, then."

The carriage rolled steadily along the rocky, uneven road, pulled by a simple come-to-life spell cast by Luna and enthusiastically steered by Spike. The rest of the group were tucked inside, a little tightly so as to make room for Fluttershy to lie down comfortably. Trixie looked back at Hoofswell as the small town disappeared in the darkness behind them. It was going to be a long and arduous trip to the sea and beyond, but

hopefully it would be an uneventful one.

As she settled in under a blanket and looked up at the stars, Trixie thought of the small mirror secretly hidden away in her saddlebag, and of the little purple filly she had talked to back in Canterlot. If only she could pull out the mirror and look into it, to find her... but she knew Luna wouldn't approve. She sighed sadly, feeling the strange loneliness deep inside, despite the others around her.

Chapter 10

Luna's eye twitched, her face set in an expression of barely held back anger. She had to find a way, if only she could... and again that accursed sound tore at her train of thought and caused it to crash down the mental hillside in a wreck! She clenched her teeth in frustration, but she didn't want to give in. No, she would ignore it! She would not pay it any attention. She would pretend it didn't exist at all until maybe that became the truth! Instinctively she picked up her pace and turned a corner.

If only she could find a way in this darkness. She wasn't sure to what end, or what she sought. But she didn't want to admit that she was lost or worse, clueless. She marched stubbornly on, neither looking nor stopping to consider her course. There was no course to take, it didn't make any blasted difference! She would carry on, and one way or another she would stumble upon the way. Sooner or later.

And there it was again! That sound, always right behind her. Luna's face scrunched up even more, teeth bared in a low snarl. It had been driving her slowly insane ever since... since... Luna didn't know how long she had endured this, this torture, but she would never let it get to her. She would pretend it didn't exist. For all eternity if she had to!

She tried to divert her thoughts. Maybe if she could remember why she was here, or where she had been before. She strained to remember something. She focused all her attention, it was right there, just beyond her reach, if she could only remember something... just a tiny piece... so close...

Clip-clop, clip-clop. Little hooves against stones.

Luna scowled as she tried to keep her focus. It was an exercise in futility.

Clip-clop, clip-clop they continued incessantly.

Luna's eye twitched. She couldn't take it anymore. She spun around and stared at the frightened filly behind her. "What do you want from me?!" Luna demanded, her expression of restraint collapsing, tears of frustration

streaming down her face. "Why do you hound me still?!"

Twilight looked up at the princess with deep, sad eyes, quivering all over as if freezing. She looked lost and confused. "I don't want to be alone," she whimpered, "I don't want to be lost here all alone."

Luna hesitated. Looking at the young Twilight made her want to cry again. She backed away a few steps and tried to resist, tried to ignore her heart. She knew she couldn't allow herself to listen to her heart. "No! I will not believe your lies! You..." She trembled.

The little purple unicorn backed away a little from the dark princess. "I... I'm sorry," she sniffled, "I thought... you could help me find Trixie. I think I lost her and now I can't find her again. Do you know where she is?"

Luna's face contorted into a snarl as Trixie's name stirred up certain memories. "Trixie?" She rose up, towering over the filly like a black cloud of thunder. "I remember now!"

Twilight backed away in fear, eyes full of tears. "I... I thought you could be my friend... I just want a friend..." she stumbled and fell.

Luna's eyes flashed with lightning as she approached the terrified filly, "I am not your friend, monster! I will never be your friend! No pony is your friend! And I won't let you hurt me, or Trixie, or any pony ever again!" She raised her hoof, lightning flaring from the tip of her horn.

"I... I never..." Twilight cried in terror, eyes begging, "I never hurt you!"

The storm raged around Luna as she looked into Twilight's eyes. For a second she hesitated. The lightning in her eyes died and she turned away, spreading her wings. "Leave me alone. I don't want to ever see you again!" She tried not to look back as she set off into the endless darkness, heart broken. Somewhere behind her the young Twilight cried, alone and abandoned.

Luna opened her eyes. Outside the sun was setting as the carriage bumbled along the road of its own power. It wouldn't be long before she

had to bring out the moon. She sighed and sat up, stretching herself as she looked around at the huddled up ponies around her. She was feeling terrible, but didn't want to show it. "How is she doing? Any improvement yet?"

Pinkie looked up as Luna spoke. "She's still fevered." Fluttershy's condition had gotten worse despite their best efforts to treat the infection. The pegasus slept most of the time, the rest she spent in a fevered dream and it had been difficult to get her to eat and drink enough. Pinkie had stayed with her ever since they left Hoofswell, helping as best she could, but now that Fluttershy was unable to guide them herself there was little left they could do armed only with Luna's limited knowledge. "She'll make it, won't she?" Pinkie asked. She had asked that many times, and every time it was a little harder for Luna to reassure the pink pony.

"I'm sorry, Pinkie, we can only hope. If we're lucky we'll reach Derbyshire within a day." With Fluttershy's condition getting worse rather than better, they had decided to stop by the hospital in Derbyshire, the largest city within reach. Luna had always suspected this would be a necessary stop, but had dared to hope otherwise. It was now the best hope they had of helping the pegasus.

Pinkie stroked Fluttershy's cheek gently and lay down, huddled up next to the pegasus.

Luna watched them sadly for a while. "Where is Rarity?" The others were still sleeping, except Pinkie and Rarity who had been keeping an eye on Fluttershy and Trixie the past few hours. It had been decided that two of them should always stay awake at any time, with Fluttershy sick and Trixie afraid of what she might do in her sleep they needed to be on their guard.

"She's outside," Pinkie said as she looked up again briefly.

Rarity poked her head inside the wagon, trotting along behind it. "I am right here. I simply had to stretch my poor legs for a while. Sitting in a wagon all day, packed in like stuffing, is not my idea of a fun time. And I still can't get used to staying up all night and sleeping the day away." Rarity sighed. She was still prone to complaining, an old habit of hers. "It's not exactly doing wonders for my looks," she said and rubbed her eyes, "oh dear."

"I know, Rarity. Once we get to Derbyshire we can all get a proper rest and a bath." Luna got up and moved over to examine Fluttershy's leg. Pinkie followed along as Luna unwrapped the injured hoof and studied the infected wound and the blackened skin surrounding it. The look of worry on her face said more than she really wished, but there wasn't much point in giving false hope. "I'm sorry, Pinkie."

Trixie watched the ponies walk up and down the street through the window of the small hospital in Derbyshire. Or so it might have appeared. In truth her eyes paid the passing ponies no heed, instead lingering passively on the faint reflection in the newly polished pane of glass. She could vaguely make out Rarity and Spike behind her, along with Gummy and Angel. Luna and Pinkie had been allowed into the clinic as Fluttershy was brought in, while the rest of them waited for the news on her condition. Trixie's own reflection was still absent, as was the image of young Twilight. And yet she hoped as she stood by the window thinking of Fluttershy, that the filly would show herself. Just a glimpse, a brief reassurance that she was still there, somewhere.

A door behind Trixie opened and all of them looked over as Luna came back out. The princess shook her head as she closed the door behind her. "They have to remove the leg to prevent the infection from spreading even further. There's nothing else to be done for her." Everyone looked down in silence. "We did all that we could," Luna tried to reassure them all, "the good news is that without the infected leg she should recover well enough."

"The poor dear..." Rarity dabbed her eyes with a hoofkerchief.

Trixie turned around. "When will the operation take place? Can we... see her?" She felt she needed to see the pegasus before the operation. To say she was sorry.

"They're preparing to perform the operation later tonight. She's asleep right now and the nurse thought it best if she was disturbed as little as possible. Pinkie is with her, though, and we'll get to see her just before the operation."

Trixie nodded and looked down silently.

Luna walked over to her and nuzzled her lovingly. "She'll be alright, Trixie. She's a strong pony. Stronger than most would think. I'm going out to find a place for us to stay while she recovers, will you accompany me, dear?" Trixie nodded quietly once more and Luna turned to Rarity and Spike, "You two should stay here in case Pinkie or the nurses need anything. We will be back before the operation."

Spike gave a small salute, "You can count on us, princess."

Rarity agreed, "We'll wait here for you. Take care."

Luna smiled. "Good, see you later then," she said and headed out the door with Trixie close behind her.

Trixie followed behind Luna as they trotted in silence down the streets. She didn't pay much attention to anything but her own thoughts, trusting Luna to know what they were looking for. She followed quietly as Luna found a hotel and rented a small suite, and she continued to follow along as they went upstairs to inspect their new temporary residence. Trixie walked mindlessly around the room and stopped, without thinking much of it, in front of a window, gazing distantly out at the early night outside.

"Trixie."

Trixie turned and blinked, pulled out of her thoughts, or lack thereof. Luna was lying on a couch nearby, watching her, a serious and concerned look on her face. For how long? The realization hit Trixie immediately, but she instinctively tried to conceal it as she turned and took a few casual steps away from the window. "Um... yes?"

Luna folded one hoof over the other and gave Trixie a look. "Trixie, please don't pretend I didn't just watch you mutter to yourself in front of a mirror."

Trixie looked at Luna, surprise likely evident on her face. Had she been muttering to herself? She didn't remember. What had she been muttering? Her mind struggled to remember.

"You didn't realize? No, I figured as much from the look of you," Luna answered in response to her thoughts. "I saw you in the hospital too, in front of the window, it wasn't very difficult to put two and two together. I'm worried for you, Trixie. I wanted a chance to talk to you, and I wanted to be sure that it is Trixie, the real Trixie, with whom I talk. That's why I wanted you to come with me now, without the others. Just you and me, despite the risk."

Trixie looked around. It hadn't truly registered in her mind before that they were alone, she had simply followed. She looked at Luna and it occurred to her how exposed the princess was here, alone with her. Trixie felt a stab of worry and stepped away, when it dawned on her that this had been Luna's intention from the start. She stopped and looked at Luna, "You didn't trust me. You wanted to see if I would attack you here, when you were alone."

Luna seemed to watch her reaction carefully, and sadly. "I do trust you, Trixie. I would entrust my life and everything I hold dear to you, you must know that. But you have been very silent of late and we haven't had a chance to talk much, it's not been easy to tell what goes through your mind. I wanted to be sure I was talking to you, the real you, the Trixie I love and trust and not a certain somepony else. I take it as a good sign that you haven't attacked me, though I'm still worried."

Trixie sighed and nodded. She knew that. "I'm sorry."

Luna tried to draw her eyes to hers, "I'm sorry too, you know." Trixie walked over and tucked herself against Luna. Luna nuzzled her gently and wrapped a wing around her. "I don't want it to be this way, Trixie, but more than anything I don't want to lose you. I just hope I can be there for you, to look out for you and protect you if you can't do it yourself. And what I don't trust right now is what you see when you look in the mirror, and you know you shouldn't trust her either."

"Luna..." Trixie rubbed her head gently against Luna's soft coat and breathed deeply, taking in the mildly perfumed scent still detectable despite a few days spent on the road. They could both use a proper bath once Fluttershy was better, but right now Luna's scent still made her feel comfortable and safe. "I don't think she's bad. I think... Luna, my heart tells me she's really Twilight."

Luna was clearly worried and sad. Trixie didn't need to look at her to tell just how concerned she looked. "Trixie..." she tried to look at Trixie, but Trixie instead buried herself in Luna's soft mane. "Trixie, she is not Twilight. I know you wish her to be, but she's not."

Trixie didn't reply. She lay there, tightly pressed against Luna, face buried in her mane. She knew Luna was just trying to protect her, but she couldn't ignore what her heart was telling her.

Luna was silent for a long time, waiting for Trixie to say something. Finally she continued. "I know it's hard to accept, but you have to face the truth. It's hard for me too. I've... been dreaming of her. She comes to me in my dreams now."

Trixie pulled herself out of Luna's mane and looked at her with wide eyes, "You've talked with her? Is she... is she alright?"

"Trixie..." Luna gave her a little shake, "she's only trying to trick you and bend you to her will, and it looks like she's succeeding. Please listen to me... she is not Twilight. She can't be, it's not possible!"

Trixie frowned, "How do you know that? How can you be certain?"

"Because this one was in MY dream, Trixie. Remember, Twilight chose you back in Dappleshore. She gave her soul to you, never to me. I don't share your connection to Twilight. What we do share is my blood and my curse, which is Nightmare Moon. This filly who appears to us both, can't be Twilight."

Trixie looked at Luna, who looked back deep into her eyes. Trixie's mind struggled. Luna's words made sense, she knew they did, but at the same time she wanted desperately to find some rationale, some reason to disbelieve it. "Maybe..."

Luna shook her again before she could begin her argument, "No! Trixie, I won't lose you to her. She is a monster and a liar, pure and simple. Please promise me that you won't listen to her. If she's stopped appearing to you maybe that's a good thing, but don't think it's safe. It's just another one of her tricks, I fear."

Trixie looked away. She wanted to cry, but she didn't know why.

"Trust in me, Trixie. That's all I ask."

She looked at Luna, found it hard to breathe as she gazed into the eyes of her love. "I promise. I won't listen to her." Her voice was flat. It was a lie, and they both knew. Trixie looked away and closed her eyes. She could tell that Luna was crying.

Pinkie brushed the hair away from Fluttershy's face and watched her sleep. It wasn't a peaceful sleep. The pegasus looked pale and pearls of cold sweat soaked her yellow coat. She breathed heavily and frequently turned restlessly in her sleep. It broke Pinkie's heart to see her friend like this, and all she could do was wait. It wouldn't be long, the nurses had promised.

The thought of them sawing off Fluttershy's leg frightened Pinkie, made her feel sick and terrified at the same time. She knew it was necessary, that the pegasus would lose her leg anyway and might even die if it wasn't removed now. That thought scared the pink pony even more. But there was more to it than just the fear of losing a friend. Fluttershy had always been a close friend, but more and more Pinkie felt there was something she wanted to tell the pegasus. Something she couldn't deny and needed to get out. She watched the fevered pony for whom she felt so deeply. But did Fluttershy feel the same?

Pinkie looked down at her hooves. There was something else she would have to tell the pegasus, of course. About the leg. Pinkie wanted to be the one to tell her, even though it hurt so much to think of it. Fluttershy would appreciate a friend telling her, Pinkie thought to herself.

As she sat there, poking idly at the floor with a hoof and trying to think of what to say, Fluttershy stirred and opened her heavy eyes. It took a little while for her to speak. "P... Pinkie? Is it you there?"

Pinkie looked up and nodded, reaching out to rub Fluttershy's hoof gently. "Yes, I'm here, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy smiled and closed her eyes. "That is... good."

"Fluttershy..." Pinkie began, feeling her chest tighten. "There's something I need to tell you." Fluttershy tried to look at her. Pinkie moved a little closer, leaning over the bed so the pegasus could better see her. "About your leg..."

"Is it... bad?" Fluttershy's lip quivered a little.

Pinkie nodded. She was crying, but Fluttershy had to know. "They need to remove your leg. They can't do anything to save it. I'm so sorry, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy looked sad, but nodded a little as if it didn't really come as a surprise to her. "I... I knew. Sometimes... sometimes it's better... that way. Will you..." Fluttershy's voice broke, "will you stay with me?"

Pinkie nodded quickly, "I won't leave you. I'll be right here by your side."

Fluttershy smiled sadly and closed her eyes again, "I am... glad," then fell silent.

Pinkie's lips moved, but the words were slow to follow. "Flutter... Fluttershy," she finally half whispered. She needed to get it off her chest. She needed to say it. "Fluttershy, I... I love you!" It was a relief to say it as she watched Fluttershy anxiously. Pinkie cried a little, "I love you, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy breathed slowly, her eyes closed. The pegasus had fallen asleep again.

The door to the operating room opened as a nurse rolled the bed on which Fluttershy lay through. Pinkie walked in beside the bed, holding Fluttershy's hoof in hers. The pegasus looked calm now, sedated by the drugs for the operation. Pinkie squeezed Fluttershy's hoof gently. She knew her friend couldn't hear or feel anything right now, and yet she felt certain it meant a lot to Fluttershy that she was there with her. "Don't worry... it'll be alright, I'm here."

Chapter 11

The rock turned over and came to a stop, as inert as ever before. Pinkie sighed and gave the piece of black stone another nudge with her nose, making it roll a few feet through the darkness before once more coming to a stop. The little pink filly looked around at the endless black plains and sighed again, even deeper this time. She trotted with heavy hooves over next to the lonely rock and shoved it again, but all it ever did was roll then stop.

Pinkie plopped down on her haunches with a deep, soulful sigh and stared into the darkness. Her brow furrowed and her eyes bulged out as she scrunched up her face and stuck out her tongue in a grotesque expression of childish concentration. Slowly her little hoof came into her view as she lifted her front leg up in front of her face. Carefully and with great precision she reached out and poked the darkness.

A tiny chuckle escaped the young filly's lips and again she poked, poked the darkness. The black stuff around her gave way for her hoof, like the soft mass of fluffy, sugary candy floss. Pinkie giggled softly and poked once more. A little red sparkle flickered in the darkness as she pulled her hoof back. Pinkie's eyes widened and with bated breath she reached out. Her hoof poked through the black curtain of soft stickiness, and a tiny little light appeared above the groove of her hoof, dancing and blinking like a firefly in the night. Pinkie stared in wide-eyed awe at the vision, a smile spreading on her face.

With a quick upwards throw, the little blinking light left her hoof and soared towards the sky. Pinkie's eyes followed its trajectory as it rose higher and higher into the sky, then she turned her eyes to the rock next to her. That black, inert, silly little rock... Pinkie looked at it long and hard, stroking her chin like an imaginary beard as ideas began to form. Slowly she reached out her hoof, just barely touching the stone. There her hoof lingered for a bit, then she gave it a little, quick poke.

A spark flew from the contact between her hoof and the stone, a little flickering white light that landed on her nose like a flake of snow. Pinkie

tilted her head and crossed her eyes to look at the light sitting on her nose. Tears welled up in her eyes from the straining to look, but the smile remained all the same. She closed her eyes and sat perfectly still. As she sat there she could see the stone in her mind, and she picked it up. It floated in front of her as if held up by unseen hooves, the hooves of ponies she knew. Ponies she loved.

The stone turned in her mind as she gigglingly began counting. "One... Two... three..." Pinkie reached out both her hooves, the stone turning between them... "four... five... six!" On six she brought her hooves together, and with a gleeful chortle she tickled the stone. The stone sang in her hooves and sent sparks in every directions. Pinkie continued cheerfully as the stone grew smaller and smaller, until finally with a little poof, it vanished in a spray of prismatic stars.

Pinkie opened her eyes and looked up, mouth agape and eyes wide with glee at the wall of light shimmering around her, a glittering, dancing rainbow veil of tiny fireflies. Not a speck of black, not a single drab color. Pinkie cried and laughed at the same time as she turned and turned, hooves stretched out, passing through the veil of light, sending ripples through it as through water.

Her smile vanished swifter than it had appeared. Her hooves fell down, dangling by her side, and the veil of light fell quiet all around her. Pinkie stared ahead of her and listened intently. Somewhere else, somepony was crying, sobbing in the darkness outside. Pinkie gasped and pushed herself through the veil, into the dark. Somepony needed a hug and maybe a big cheering up party!

Pinkie scouted the darkness, eyes narrowed. Her gaze locked on a tiny figure in the distance, a lonely unicorn filly trudging through the dark and dreary night with head hanging low, almost dragging along the ground. Pinkie gasped and called out to her, waving her hooves wildly, "Twilight!"

Pinkie opened her eyes and fluttered at the pair of cyan eyes looking back at her. Fluttershy was smiling brightly at her, a little yellow sun with the most beautiful blue eyes. "You're just so... so cute when you giggle in your sleep. Did you know that?"

Pinkie opened her mouth, though she wasn't sure what to say. She didn't get to figure it out, as Fluttershy leaned over and kissed her passionately. A full grown dragon could have stormed through the building that moment and the whole place could have crumbled to ruins around her, yet Pinkie wouldn't have noticed. She just stared as Fluttershy's lips met hers, and was still staring as Fluttershy opened her eyes again and blushed at her. "I love you too, Pinkie."

She was crying, yet she had never been happier in all of her life. She reached out a hoof and touched Fluttershy's cheek before leaning back in for a second kiss. Pinkie wrapped her hooves around Fluttershy's neck and let the tears flow freely down her cheeks. Life and joy bubbled up inside her, flooding her and washing away what felt like ages of sadness. She laughed as she hugged Fluttershy.

Fluttershy seemed overwhelmed. She cried a little and blushed timidly. "I... I'm so happy to hear you laugh again, Pinkie. Nothing m...means more to me."

Pinkie smiled and nuzzled Fluttershy before wiping the tears from her eyes. She stood there for a while, hugging Fluttershy in silence, before her eyes settled on the bandaged leg. Some of the sadness returned as she looked at the now missing hoof. Only the thigh remained as a strange, useless stump, everything from the knee and down had been removed. Pinkie remembered little of the operation. She had been squeezing Fluttershy's hoof while trying to block out everything but the thought of the pegasus' smiling face and all the happy memories she had of her from back in Ponyville.

Fluttershy nuzzled her and turned her head away from the leg. "It's... it's OK, Pinkie. Don't be sad." Pinkie nodded a bit and buried herself in Fluttershy embrace. They sat like that for a while, before Fluttershy broke the silence. "You shouldn't have to sleep here. The doctors say I'm doing well and if the leg heals without complications I can get out of the hospital... soon."

"I don't want to leave you," Pinkie murmured.

"I know, Pinkie. But I don't want to keep you here now that I'm doing better."

You need proper sleep too, and you can always visit me any time."

Pinkie hugged Fluttershy a little tighter. "Just... Just a little longer?"

Fluttershy smiled and nodded. "OK, just... a while."

"What did they say?"

Luna closed the door behind her and looked up at the others who had gathered around the main room of the suite. "She is doing well. I talked a little with her, and Angel was very happy to see her too. She should be well enough for you to visit her. And if all goes well she can leave the hospital within a few days, but it will be a while before she is well enough to travel anywhere."

Everyone looked relieved and the mood of the room seemed to rise significantly. Luna appeared to be the exception, looking uncomfortable as she stepped over to the others where they were sitting. "It brings up a question that I am not eager to consider, but there is no way around it. With Trixie in the condition that she is, with what is at stake, I... am not sure we can wait for Fluttershy."

Both Pinkie and Trixie jumped up. Pinkie looked horrified, "We can't leave her here. I won't leave her! I promised I wouldn't leave her."

Trixie frowned, "I won't leave her either. She is our friend, how can you suggest we just leave her here because she's... inconvenient? After all she's been through and paid for in blood, you just want to abandon her?"

Luna looked hurt. "I'm not abandoning her, and I don't want to leave her behind any more than you do, but please be reasonable... We may not have much time, and the longer we wait the worse it will only get. I don't want to lose you for anything, Trixie, and Fluttershy would be safe and well taken care of here. I am certain my sister would be happy to arrange a royal escort for her back to Ponyville and her old friends. It's not like I want to just dump her here in the middle of nowhere."

Trixie huffed. "So all this has been for nothing. She came with us, and lost

a leg, for nothing? Just to be sent back home? That is not fair, I won't accept that."

"Trixie," Luna began, but was cut off by Pinkie.

"Trixie is right, it's not fair! What kind of grand tale of adventure would that be? Even I couldn't make that worth telling. Fluttershy can still help, just you wait and see!"

Luna sighed. "I know none of us want it, but we don't want things to take a turn for the worse with Trixie either. We need to think of more than ourselves here. Manna must be far ahead of us by now, she could have reached the sea already. What if she grows desperate when she finds that she can't use the mirror? She has my blood... what will she do with it? What will it do to her, somepony as unstable as her? I dread to learn the answers to such questions."

Everyone remained silent. Pinkie looked down at her hooves sadly while Trixie turned and stared at the wall. The briefly happy atmosphere turned cold and unhappy instead. Luna looked down sadly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come off as if... I'm sorry. I just try to do what is best." She turned around and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Luna turned on the bed and opened her eyes, sadly stroking the empty spot beside her. It was cold, untouched by the warmth of Trixie. Was she wrong? She only wanted to do what was right, to protect those she held dear. Had she been too hard on Trixie? Or not hard enough? Maybe she just needed to put her hoof down and take charge here. For Trixie's own sake, and for the sake of everypony. It hurt to think that way, but did she not have a responsibility to the others as well? To all of Equestria, if things took a turn for the worse? But how would Trixie react? Would she turn against Luna and... no, that could only make things worse.

Luna turned again, staring up into the ceiling. She wanted to hold Trixie tight, wanted to feel her and comfort her. She wanted to feel happy again and know that everything would be alright. Somehow. Something was missing or broken between them. Luna felt it deep within her heart... it was not the same since their argument earlier. The way Trixie looked at her, not

as a lover... or a friend, but... something else. Luna felt her chest tighten and closed her eyes to staunch the tears. Where had she gone wrong? How could she make it all right again?

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. She had to make it right again somehow. She needed to talk to Trixie, needed to make amends. Slowly, feeling heavy, she rolled over and got out of the bed. She trotted across the room and opened the door. Spike and Rarity were playing cards in the main room, passing the time as they kept watch while the rest of them slept. Luna gave them a weak smile as she walked over to the next door and gently pushed it up, peeking inside. "Trixie? Won't you come stay with me?"

Trixie was sitting on the bed with her back to Luna, looking down at her front hooves. "I would like to be alone, please. I don't want to talk."

Luna stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "I'm sorry if I've somehow hurt you. I'm honestly trying my best and you know that I love and care about you."

"I know." Trixie sighed and looked up a little, but didn't turn to face Luna. "I just wish to be alone right now, if you don't mind."

Luna looked down sadly. "I..." She walked over to sit by Trixie. "If I have done something... If there's anything I can do to..." She stopped as she was about to sit down and her eyes caught what Trixie had been looking at. A small hoof-held mirror. "What are you... where did you get that mirror?"

Trixie frowned, "I bought it, before we left Hoofswell, if you must know."

"And you didn't tell me?" Luna asked, looking hurt.

Trixie looked away. "I knew what you would think. You would try to convince me not to bring it. But... you're wrong." She looked back down at the mirror, eyes searching. "I need to find her. I need to see her again. It's all I can think about. It feels so important, as if... it's more important than anything."

Luna looked helplessly at Trixie. "Trixie, you're obsessed, it's not right. Please listen to me. I know how you feel, but you must shake off this... fixation with Twilight."

"You know how I feel, do you?" Trixie sounded angry, but composed herself again. "I'm sorry, Luna, but I know I am right. You don't understand."

"I try..." Luna said quietly and moved a little closer to Trixie. "I really try, Trixie. Because... because I love you." Trixie remained silent, looking down at the mirror in her hooves. Luna watched her, a great sinking feeling swallowing her up. She wanted to break down crying. "I love you, Trixie," she repeated weakly, though it seemed as if she might as well have been speaking to herself.

Luna couldn't make out Trixie's face or determine her emotions, but it was as if she was changed. "I am sorry, Luna. I can not abandon Twilight."

"Not even for me?" Luna tried desperately and reached out for Trixie. "Trixie?"

Trixie pulled herself away and turned around. She looked angry. Different. Luna recognized the look in her eyes, it was the same look she had seen long ago, back in Dappleshore when Trixie was just a poor, lonely performer down on her luck. Trixie stood up, facing Luna. "For you? You want her for yourself, don't you? Trixie sees it. You're jealous! Jealous, because Twilight chose the Great and Powerful Trixie, and not you. You never truly loved Trixie!"

"I..." Luna was in shock and crying. "I do. I truly do!" Her eyes fell on the mirror. She frowned and her horn glowed, determination in her eyes. "Trixie, I love you, I really, truly love you. I do this only because I love you."

Trixie's eyes widened as she saw what Luna was after. Before Luna could grab the mirror, however, Trixie launched herself at her. The air crackled with energy as Trixie threw herself and Luna violently against the wall. Luna cried in pain as she crashed into the wall.

"You won't have her! Leave Trixie alone!" Trixie cried and stormed out the door, past a shocked Rarity and Spike who only just managed to jump out of the way. Luna tried to stand and pursue, but collapsed with a cry as her wing gave a crack.

"Look after Luna, I'll talk to Trixie!" Rarity said to Spike before bolting out the room in pursuit of Trixie.

Spike looked lost as Rarity disappeared. "Be careful!" he called after her, unsure if she even heard it, before turning to Luna who lay by the wall, crying.

Trixie burst out on the street outside the hotel and stopped briefly. Everywhere ponies turned to look at her, some stopping to stare or even bow. Trixie quickly put on an untroubled, aloof face and hurried down the street, as if she was simply busy to get somewhere. But on the inside, her mind was anything but untroubled. She needed time to think and to calm down, to gather herself. She slowed down a little as she put some distance between herself and the hotel.

She glanced down at the mirror, still floating along beside her, and caught a glimpse of Rarity behind her. Trixie frowned as the unicorn trotted up beside her. "Do not try to take Trixie's mirror!" She warned, moving the mirror out of the way of the approaching unicorn.

"I won't, and I doubt I could even if I wanted to," Rarity said as she caught up with Trixie, "I simply wish to talk with you, if that's not too much trouble."

"Trixie does not wish to talk," Trixie said, trying to sound firm.

"I think you really hurt Luna." Rarity continued, undeterred. "And not just physically."

"I..." Trixie's voice faltered slightly, but she quickly caught herself, "Trixie is sorry for that, but she tried to take the mirror from Trixie. Tell her that Trixie is sorry."

Rarity watched Trixie as they walked. "I really think Trixie should be the one to tell her that herself." Trixie didn't respond, but kept walking while keeping an eye on the mirror as if expecting Rarity might try to grab it. "What happened? What is it about that mirror?"

Trixie didn't say anything. For a while they simply walked in silence along

the streets of the city. Trixie sighed as she thought of Twilight, the young filly she had spoken with in the mirror, and how much she missed her. Why did she miss her so? Why couldn't Luna understand? She felt so confused and... she finally slowed down and looked at Rarity. "Trixie... I mean... I just feel so..." She sighed, "so alone."

"You have us, your friends. We all care about you, Trixie," Rarity said as they stopped. "And we'll always be here for you, dear. You don't have to feel lonely."

Trixie looked down. "I know. It's just like something is missing. Somepony. I feel empty, lost... like I did before I met Twilight and fell in love. Before, when I was... nothing."

"But you have Luna. I know she loves you more than anything," Rarity said with a smile, trying to bring one to Trixie's own face. It didn't seem to work.

Trixie began walking with heavy steps again. "I... I don't know..."

"She does love you, Trixie. She's mad about you, it's hard to miss," Rarity insisted.

"That's... not what I meant. I'm not sure..." Trixie hesitated to voice the thought that had been growing in her mind lately.

"Are you saying..." Rarity looked a little shocked, "that you no longer love Luna?"

Trixie nodded slowly and looked down. "When I look at her... it's not the same anymore. Something that was there before is... gone."

"Oh, Trixie..." Rarity stopped her and tried again to give her a friendly smile, "if this is about your arguments lately, that's all normal. All couples fight sometimes, and you're both going through a very trying time. Don't throw away something wonderful just because you have a few fights."

"Have you ever loved somepony?" Trixie asked curiously, and mildly hopeful that it might divert the topic a little off of herself and Luna.

Rarity chuckled a little, "Well, since you ask, Trixie... let's just say I have yet

to find the perfect stallion. I'm a lady, and just call me old fashioned, but I expect to be swept off my hooves."

Trixie nodded. "I would really like to be alone, just for a while," she repeated her wish from earlier.

"Are you sure? If you're feeling lonely, is being alone really what you need?"

"I... need to gather my thoughts. Maybe I'll go see Fluttershy at the hospital."

Rarity watched her a little before nodding. "OK, Trixie. Just know that we're all here for you, any time you need it."

"Thank you, Rarity. And please tell Luna that I am sorry for hurting her."

"I will, but I think she would prefer to hear it from you sooner than later," Rarity said and gave Trixie a smile before turning around and walking back towards the hotel. Trixie watched her for a while, then turned and walked in the opposite direction.

Spike helped Luna back up, careful to keep her wing in place so it didn't move suddenly. "Are you alright? How bad is it?"

Luna grit her teeth as she tried to move the wing slightly, the pain bringing tears to her eyes. "Ow! I think... I just hit it badly. It's nothing. Where is Trixie?"

"Rarity went after her. Come, you should lie down or something. It didn't sound like nothing," The dragon sad as he lead her over to the bed.

Luna protested, "We need to find her! What if she hurts Rarity?"

"I'm sure Rarity knows what she's doing, and Trixie's not going to do anything in the middle of the street, is she?"

Luna reluctantly lay down and wiped her eyes in the sheet while Spike sat

down next to her. She looked up at the dragon, "Am I wrong, Spike?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I just don't know anymore. Trixie seems obsessed with Twilight and that mirror... I worry for her. I fear that Nightmare Moon is taking over, that I'm losing the mare that I love to the same monster I once fell to myself. But..." Luna shook her head. "What if I'm wrong? And maybe I was unfair about Fluttershy too." She looked at Spike, desperate for answers. "Was I unfair? Was I wrong?"

Spike sighed. "I think you're asking the wrong dragon," he said and got up. Luna watched him as he disappeared into the other room, returning moments later with a piece of paper, ink and a quill. He looked up at her as he placed the quill against the paper, waiting.

Luna smiled a little sadly and nodded. "You are a genius, Spike. Thank you."

"Dear Princess Celestia, Spike is a genius!" the dragon repeated proudly as he wrote down the words. Luna shook her head and looked up as she let her thoughts flow freely, letting Spike write down all her concerns and questions.

Trixie knocked gently on the door to Fluttershy's room at the hospital before opening it and peeking inside. "Fluttershy?" She asked quietly. A tiny snore was her only response from within. Trixie walked inside quietly and closed the door behind her. She stood for a while by the door, watching the sleeping pegasus, before walking over by the side of the bed. Fluttershy looked peaceful for the first time in a long time, comfortably asleep under a warm blanket which covered the now missing leg.

"May I sit here with you a while?" Trixie asked in a whisper. She didn't want to wake up the pegasus, but somehow talking to her made Trixie feel a little better, a little less alone. "Thank you..." she whispered as she sat down beside the bed. She sat for a while, watching Fluttershy's chest move slowly up and down with each long breath. "I'm sorry. Sorry for what you had to go through because of me. I'm a terrible friend, I take and don't know what to give back. Maybe... maybe one day I can repay your kindness and sacrifice. If I... if we survive this, I will! I promise."

"I know you are my friends... all of you. My best friends." Trixie looked down, crying. "So why do I feel so alone?" She fumbled a little with the mirror that she had brought with her. She looked into its blank surface and saw nothing but the wall behind her. "What have I done? Why can't I find you?" She closed her eyes tightly to keep the tears away. "Where are you, Twilight?"

Fluttershy's slow, soothing breath calmed her. She sighed and leaned against the bed, resting her head on the soft mattress next to Fluttershy.

Trixie stared into the mirrors all around her, reflections of reflections, infinite repetitions, yet no Trixie looked back at her and no Twilight met her searching gaze. All alone she looked around her, feeling empty inside. Sadly she reached out a hoof, touching it against the polished surface of the mirror in front of her. She wanted to pass through, to step through the cold, hard mirror, to find her there, wherever she was now.

A voice tickled her ear, brought to her upon a cold breeze. Trixie turned. Was it her name? Was somepony calling to her? "Twilight?" She called back, a tiny spark of hope igniting within her, but the mirrors remained blank, reflecting nothing but their own empty faces. "Twilight, I'm here!"

She had to find a way, had to find Twilight... she needed a way to get to her, to find her again. The voice called once more. Trixie listened with bated breath. Luna... Luna knew the way. Luna could open the way. That was the plan. She needed Luna... she needed her friends... to find Twilight. Trixie turned around... she had to find her friends first!

The green flame faded as a small scroll materialized in a puff of smoke. Luna looked up from where she lay and picked up the scroll, unfolding it. Spike looked over her shoulder as she read Celestia's reply.

My dearest sister,

Caution can turn to distrust, and distrust can tear apart even the best of

friends. Stay by and trust in those closest to you. If you leave friends behind you may be sorry later, and if you look for snakes everywhere that's all you're eventually going to find.

Celestia

P.S. Yes, Spike is a wise dragon and a good friend.

Chapter 12

"Before our friends and those so special to us here, on this wonderful day of happiness and good fortune, I Fluttershy take you Pinkie Pie as my wife, in friendship and in love, in strength and weakness, to share the good times and the bad times, in achievement and in failure, to celebrate life with you forevermore."

"FORRRREEEEVER!" Pinkie giggled as a crying Rarity lowered the garland braid over their heads to rest around their necks and bind them together in wedlock. The thin braid had been woven from strands of their own manes, two shades of pink intertwined in perfect harmony. Rarity bowed and stepped away, dabbing her eyes with her hoofkerchief and sobbing quietly.

"By the power that is vested in me, and the witnesses around us," Luna began, smiling at the two as she spoke, "I now pronounce you lawfully wedded wives. You may kiss each other."

Pinkie and Fluttershy looked at each other. Pinkie grinned, and set off like a pouncing tiger, tackling Fluttershy whose yelp was cut short as their lips met. Streamers and fireworks erupted in a wild display of lights and sounds – a collaboration between Pinkie and Trixie and truly something to behold. Pinkie had surely outdone herself for this party, and everyone had been eager to help out in preparation for the ceremony. It was something to take their minds off the journey and the desperation of their quest, and for that they were all thankful. Even if it was going to be only a short reprieve.

Luna tried to share in the joy, but inside she felt only a growing despair as the days and weeks went by. While friendship and love blossomed between the others, she and Trixie had only grown further apart and now barely talked. Luna's wing had not been seriously wounded, but she could not say the same about her heart. Trixie's apology had seemed sincere, she seemed to be as sad and hurt as Luna, and yet the love was no longer there.

They had stayed in Derbyshire for a few weeks while Fluttershy recovered

from the operation. Pinkie and Fluttershy had announced their engagement only days after the operation. Luna suspected some of the hurry was out of a fear that they may never get the chance later, a very real possibility she tried not to dwell upon. Preparations for a wedding party began immediately after. It had kept the gloomy atmosphere at bay, giving everyone something else to worry about than the many concerns they faced.

Fluttershy's recovery had been quick and without complications, and the journey to the sea soon after was spent finishing the last bits of preparation. It was a wild and strange wedding preparation, nothing at all like the very formal and stuffy things Luna was used to back in Canterlot. At any other time, Luna would no doubt have been feeling all giddy about it all.

In the port of Canterbury it had taken Luna no small amount of searching and convincing before she finally found and secured a ship to take them out on the wide open ocean. The captain, one Woody Hooves, seemed friendly if not entirely reliable. Unable to find another ship, Luna had to settle for what she could get, however. Meanwhile the others had been asking around; nopony had seen anypony matching Manna's description, but a few did mention the sighting of an air balloon heading out to sea a few weeks back.

Luna gazed out over the open ocean as the currents took them into the vast unknown, in search of long lost lands now buried beneath the seas. While the others celebrated the wedding aboard the ship, Luna wondered what they would find once they got there, and if they would be too late.

The weather seemed to match Luna's mood as she stood at the bow of the ship, looking up at the densely clouded sky through the cold rain. They had long since left behind the safe, controlled environment of the Equestrian soil and entered the open sea where, not unlike the Everfree forest, the world had a life of its own, a life only rarely disturbed by the pegasi. Her mane flowed behind her in the wind and her coat was drenched, she felt cold and alone.

"Ahoy Princess, ya see anything?"

Luna glanced over her shoulder at the crazy captain at the wheel, before silently turning back to the cloudy sky. Her horn glowed and her eyes filled with a bright white light, reflected as a tiny rainbow in the rain falling around her. Stars peeked through the clouds as they parted before her eyes, a growing hole forming in the clouds above the ship. Luna studied the tiny lights in the sky above the clouds, noting the patterns and formations she knew so well. For a moment she felt a little less alone, as if she was among friends again. The stars and the moon, for a long time they had been her only friends. As her magic faded again, clouds drifted back in front of her vision, snuffing out the lights once more. She sighed and hung her head, then she turned around.

"So?" The wall-eyed, peg-hoofed captain looked expectantly at her. He was a strange one, not entirely reliable Luna thought, but Fluttershy in particular seemed to have taken a shine to the old, weathered pegasus and his talkative parrot, naturally named Polly. The captain had even carved her a wooden leg like his own.

"We are not far from our destination, of that I am certain, but I don't know what we can expect to find. There may be nothing but water for us there." It seemed like all they had seen for days was water, in the sea or falling from the sky. Luna had always enjoyed the open sea, so much like the open sky above, but the weather and feeling of loneliness made it seem so bleak and empty to her now. "Are you sure you don't want me to keep the sky clear?"

"A frisky wind is a ship's best mate, Princess. Let only the old gale blow and fill her sails up good. Makes her purr like a kitten, it does." The captain had a way of making everything sound dirty, a trait Luna might have enjoyed once, before all of this. Celestia had always accused her of having a bit of the same talent from time to time, but lighthearted humor didn't come as easily to her in these times.

Luna nodded and trotted down the few steps below deck to where the others were holed up, sheltered from the weather outside. The others, with the exception of Trixie, were passing the time with a game of cards, a pastime they had all become very familiar with over the weeks of travel in between wedding preparations. The captain's multicolored bird had teamed up with Pinkie and somehow hoarded nearly all the bits for the pink pony, Rarity scraping in the meager remains. Both Rarity and Trixie had shown themselves to be sharks at these kinds of games, and when both were

playing it often ended up a skirmish between the two, yet faced with the uncanny combined talent of Pinkie and Polly they both had to admit defeat, something Rarity dealt with a lot better than Trixie.

"We're not far from our destination. Is everything ready and packed?" Luna asked as she came down the stairs. "Where is Trixie?"

"She refuses to play when Polly is at the table," Spike explained and pointed a claw at the back cabin. "I can't blame her, that bird is no fun playing with. She's hiding in there, brooding."

Luna was sure she knew the real reason Trixie spent so much time alone, huddled up in the small cabin on her own. She knew Trixie well enough to know that she would never give up a challenge or admit defeat to anypony, much less a mere bird, if it wasn't for her obsession with that mirror. Trixie didn't want to speak of it, and Luna had long since given up trying to force the issue. The whole thing tore them further and further apart, and Luna couldn't bear to make it worse. A persistent doubt also kept gnawing deep in her heart, a feeling that perhaps she had been wrong about Twilight.

Pinkie had begun speaking of seeing the young Twilight in her dreams too. It left Luna even more bewildered and doubting of what she thought she knew. It made no sense. Rarity had tried to comfort her by explaining that Pinkie often made no sense, that it was probably just another one of her antics, but Luna was not so certain. As the weeks went by she felt more and more lost.

"I do have to admit, that bird is quite remarkable," Rarity said, apparently in reply to some comment by Fluttershy who sat next to Pinkie and Polly. Luna had drifted off for a moment and looked up as Rarity turned to look at her. "Are you alright?"

Luna nodded, "I'm well enough. We better get ready," she said before she was interrupted by a call from the captain above.

"Oy, ya need to see this!"

Luna turned and hurried back up the stairs, followed shortly by the others. "What is it?" She asked and turned to follow as the captain pointed a hoof towards the starboard. A roaring mass of lightning and storm clouds whirled

through the rain and darkness. Luna could have sworn she had seen no signs of such a storm moments before. At first Luna thought it was coming towards them, but soon realized that it was the ship moving instead, slowly but surely sailing sideways towards the storm. "Where did that come from? Why are we not sailing away from it?!"

"I'm trying, Princess," the captain called back over the growing noise of the storm. "It's pulling us in. Unless ye can tame that storm, Princess, I suggest ya all get the sails down fast and brace yarself for a mighty rocking."

"Trixie!" Luna called as they all got to work on the sails. The rain was hailing down around them, and the masts were already groaning under the strain of the wind as the ship pulled ever closer to the raging heart of the storm. Trixie came up the stairs and stumbled, sliding several feet across the deck as the ship rolled to the side.

"Everypony hold on tight!" captain Hooves yelled as a great wave roared above the ship and crashed down upon them. Trixie got back on her hooves and helped a trembling and terrified Fluttershy with the last sail, while Luna turned in the direction they were drifting, towards the center of the storm.

Luna stared up at the raging black clouds and thundering winds. "This is not a natural storm! Something is out of control here, I can't..." A purple flash of lightning broke her off, as it struck the main mast of the ship, splintering the wood in a shower of flames and a resounding clap of thunder.

Fluttershy screamed as they all fell down, holding on to anything they could grab onto. She felt Trixie's protective wing above her and an azure light enveloped them as fire rained down around them. "Pinkie!" Fluttershy cried as she struggled to see anything through the storm. The wind roared and the ship seemed to lift itself from the waves. "Pinkie!" Fluttershy cried again and tried to stand back up but felt herself get pulled down by Trixie.

"Shh... Don't let go!" Trixie whispered in her ear. A sudden violent crash rocked the entire ship and an earsplitting sound of splintered wood drowned out everything. Fluttershy felt her hoof slip and the deck of the ship disappearing beneath her.

"Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy felt herself torn from Trixie's side, her hoof slipping as she was tossed violently into the air by the whirling winds. Black rocks towered above her like giant teeth rising out of the white, raging sea. Fluttershy fought against the wind and the rain, her wings beating feebly as she tried to reach the rocky outcrops for something to grab on to. Anything at all. Through tears and rain she saw the rock disappear from her view.

Fluttershy cried and flapped her wings harder, as hard as she could against the storm, when she saw a pale blue light beneath her.

"Fluttershy!" Trixie's voice called. Fluttershy struggled blindly through the rain towards the light, her hoof searching desperately in front of her. Her hoof touched something and she felt another hoof grab her and Trixie's voice calling again. "Hold on!" Fluttershy held on for her life as Trixie's wings carried them towards the cliff in the distance.

Trixie hit a large rock and landed hard on a small outcrop far above the sea. "Hold on to something, and don't move!" she called as she stumbled back on her hooves and spread her wings again.

Fluttershy grabbed the nearest rock in terror. "Don't I...leave me!" she cried, but Trixie had already taken flight once more. Somewhere behind her, Fluttershy could hear Trixie yelling back at her.

"Who are you?"

Fluttershy sank the lump in her throat, her mouth feeling dry as sand, and hugged the rock tighter as the wind howled around her. "I... I'm the g...great and... and courageous F.... Fluttershy! I... I'm not afraid... I'm not afraid!" she cried to herself, sure that none but the wind could hear her. And yet a voice reached her back, a tiny cry deep below her. Fluttershy hugged the rock as she peeked over the edge of the cliff into the stormy abyss, shivering all over from fear. "S... so deep..." she whimpered.

Somewhere far below her she could see the shattered remains of the ship almost swallowed up by the sea. Amidst the white foam, dark blue waves

and brown wood of the sinking vessel, a tiny pink dot seized her attention. "P... PINKIE!" Fluttershy struggled to breathe as she stared down the side of the cliff, down at where Pinkie was struggling in the cold waves. "I... I'm not a... afraid! I am NOT afraid!" She let go of the rock she had been hugging and stood up. Her eyes set into a fierce stare as she gazed straight ahead into the darkness, into an imaginary mirror... "Now you listen to me here, Missy! I AM the GREAT and COURAGEOUS FLUTTERSHY!" The sound of her voice clashed against the rocks as she jumped, wings held tight along her body as she dove straight down, screaming at the top of her lungs against the choking wind.

At the last moment she spread her wings and swooped down over the sinking wreckage of the ship. Pinkie was hugging one of the broken masts, staring up as she tried to keep her face above the waves. Fluttershy landed behind the mast and reached out to grab Pinkie, but the pink pony kept her grip on the mast, coughing up water as the waves rolled over her face. "Flutter... shy I'm... tied!" she sputtered desperately and fought to keep herself above water a little longer.

Fluttershy looked around in a panic. Seeing nopony else around to help, she took a deep breath before diving into the cold water just as Pinkie's face disappeared under the waves again. Holding on to the mast, she felt herself along until she found Pinkie. A rope, from one of the sails, had tied itself around the pink pony's waist and hind legs and the heavy sail now pulled her down along with the rest of the ship.

The currents pulled at Fluttershy relentlessly and the cold water numbed her hooves as she struggled and tore at the ropes to get them free. Her lungs were screaming for air as the darkness of the deep grew closer around them, but she wouldn't leave Pinkie. She would never leave her.

Trixie landed on the small rocky outcrop with Spike clinging to her back, shivering from the cold. "Fluttershy!" she called, but there was no sign of the pegasus where she had left her. "Fluttershy!" Trixie looked around, was it the same place? She was almost sure of it, and yet there was no Fluttershy.

"Trixie! Up here!" Trixie looked up, shielding her eyes with a hoof against

the rain. Luna waved down at her from higher up. Trixie spread her wings again and set off, beating hard to fight the wind. Luna reached out and pulled them both into the narrow opening of a small cave in the side of the cliff. "I'm so relieved to see you both!" she gasped. "Have you seen the others?"

Trixie looked around, but all she could see was Luna, and Rarity huddled up further inside the cave, shivering. "I left Fluttershy on the rocks below, but she disappeared while I was out helping Spike. I haven't seen Pinkie or the captain at all."

They both gazed out of the small cave into the raging storm and sea outside, but there was no sign of either pony. Trixie walked back and forth along the edge in worry. "I told her to not move. They could be anywhere. We have to find them!"

"Wait, look!" Luna pointed down at the water. There, near the base of the cliffs, a small pink and yellow dot was struggling against the waves.

"It's them!" Trixie cried and set off, followed by Luna.

Pinkie coughed and wheezed as she dragged Fluttershy up on a flat rock jutting out of the sea and collapsed next to her. She barely noticed as she was lifted up by Luna and carried away.

"I have good news, and bad news," Luna said as she landed inside the small cave. It had been nearly an hour. "The storm is clearing, but there is still no sign of the captain, or the pets," she continued and looked down. "I'm afraid we've lost them to the sea."

There was a long silence. Fluttershy buried herself in Pinkie's hooves. "A... Angel..." she cried softly. Pinkie was silent, a once rare but now increasingly common occurrence, as were the others as they mourned the losses. Trixie glanced out at the blue ocean outside the cave. Somewhere down there, deep below the sea, now lay her little hoofheld mirror. Somehow it felt almost like losing a pony.

Finally Luna looked back up. "The good news is... I think we're in the right

place, and we're not as stuck as I first feared. I found the balloon, it's tied up on the other side of the island."

"The balloon? What of Manna then?" Trixie asked.

"I am not certain, I only saw it from afar, but if the balloon is there then I'm certain she must be somewhere near as well. Certainly she can't have gone far without it. Which means we're close, and should be careful. I suggest we set out as soon as possible to find her, and the mirror."

"I think we could all use a rest," Trixie said, despite her own eagerness to find the mirror. "We're wet and tired and still grieving."

"Which is exactly why we should not sit here and grow even colder. We'll all get sick that way. We've lost everything with the ship, we have no food, nothing to drink and nothing to keep us warm. If we're lucky there are still supplies in the balloon," Luna said.

They all looked around at the barren cave. Trixie looked at Fluttershy. "Can you fly on your own?"

The yellow pegasus sniffed a bit and nodded. "I'm not afraid," she whispered.

Trixie smiled at her. "That's wonderful, Fluttershy. If you can have Spike with you, then Luna and I can carry Pinkie and Rarity."

Luna nodded, "Sounds like a plan."

The balloon lay tucked in between two rocks, deflated and tied down. While the others searched it for supplies, Luna and Trixie searched the area. The island was small and barren, a spire of rocks rising out of the sea. Trixie had half hoped there would be tracks left behind they could follow, but even if it hadn't all been solid rock the storm would surely have blown and washed away any tracks.

Luna was silent as she walked among the rocks, shifting between looking up at the sky and down at the ground. Trixie followed quietly, straying a bit

in her search to cover more of the area. She wasn't sure what they were looking for, but Luna seemed to have something in mind and Trixie didn't feel like asking for details. No doubt she would know it when she saw it.

Or maybe she would literally stumble upon it.

Trixie nearly fell on her face as something got in the way of her hooves, but she managed to keep her balance and backed away with a small grunt of surprise. "I found something over here!" she called as she looked down at the rope stretched taut before her, one end tied to a nearby rock. "Look where you step," she added as Luna came up behind her.

"Well done, dear," Luna said with a smile, trying to cheer up the tension between them. Trixie didn't reply, but continued her previous silence as she walked along the rope. Luna sighed and followed. They didn't have to walk far before the rope disappeared down a wide crack in the rocks, into an inky blackness below. "Looks like we found the place," Luna said as she peeked down the hole. "If we're lucky, this leads to one of the towers of the city. It was built into a mountain much like Canterlot."

"Let's get the others then," Trixie said and turned around. Luna watched her sadly for a time, then followed slowly. Maybe it would soon all be over and they could return to how it used to be.

Trixie let go of the rope and flew the last few feet down. Rarity and Pinkie followed shortly behind her. Luna was standing a bit away, looking around in the light from her horn at the ancient stonework of the room. Trixie looked around as well as she landed. It did indeed look like the room of an ancient castle or tower, but not much had been left intact by the ravages of time.

"I think I know this place..." Luna said quietly and began trotting around the room, lighting up the walls and floor to inspect the old carvings that had nearly disappeared. She stopped at a crumbling hole which Trixie imagined might have once been a flight of stairs.

"Then you know how to find the mirror from here?" Trixie asked, feeling excited. The loss of the small hoofheld mirror, now resting at the bottom of

the sea, had felt like a greater loss than she had expected. The pull she now felt towards this Mirror of Souls was stronger than ever.

"Give me a little time," Luna said as she looked down the remains of the stairs and around the room as if trying to stir ancient memories. Trixie wandered back and forth while waiting. Would she finally find the answers she had come all this way for? And what of Twilight? For some reason that now seemed as important, maybe even more important, than anything else they had come here for.

It seemed like forever to Trixie, but finally Luna nodded as if to herself. "Yes, I think I know where we are. This is indeed one of the ancient towers of the castle where the mirror was kept. I don't know if it is still intact, but I know the way to it, at least." She took a few careful steps down the stairs. "Hopefully we can still get there. And we better be careful."

They all followed Luna, stepping carefully as they descended the stairs. The halls and rooms of the castle were empty and ruined. In several places the walls and ceilings had collapsed, and many low-lying passages were flooded, but Luna lead them on with growing confidence. Trixie noticed several places where it looked like stones and rubble had been pushed out of the way by somepony before them. If nothing else, it seemed they were on the right track to find Manna.

They had walked for what seemed like hours to Trixie, changing course many times when the path ahead was blocked or when Luna's memory lead them astray for a time. Finally Luna paused. "We're close..." she whispered and listened before continuing more carefully. They wouldn't be the ones taken by surprise this time, Trixie thought as she followed behind the others.

Manna sank down on the cold, wet floor, her eyes staring blankly in the dim light she had brought with her. So tired, and yet no end in sight, no rest, no peace, only the eternal mockery and pain of her failure. She had long since run dry of tears, long since lost everything but the desire for an end, and now here she was... stuck with a cursed mirror between her and the end.

She could hear the mocking laughter, see the smirking face in the reflective

surfaces around her. It looked a bit like her, but it wasn't her. She wanted to throw something at it... to shatter the glass and be rid of it, but she knew it would do her no good. There was only one way...

She looked down at the small vial of blood between her hooves. It didn't work. Why? Manna closed her eyes and turned the vial between her hooves, trying again and again to answer that question. It should work. She had been certain it would work, she had worked for so long, only to be defeated here. She could find only one answer; the blood was cold, dead... it had no life, no magic. It was useless. Manna grit her teeth and clenched her hooves, shattering the glass and staining her hooves a deep red with the cold blood of the princess. She took a deep breath, restraining herself from screaming again. She was losing control, going mad. She couldn't afford to lose herself again, she needed to be in control of her emotions. Always in control.

"Breathe!" she hissed between clenched teeth at herself.

The cold floor against her cheek calmed her a little as she lay there, defeated. She needed Luna to open the way forward. She had been sure she could do it on her own, but now she realized that she had been mistaken. But what could she do now, this far away? She couldn't return to Hoofswell in time, and surely Luna would never help her willingly. And she couldn't possibly force the princess. She had burned her bridges, it was over.

"Manna Sparkle!"

Manna jumped at the voice and scuttled backwards as she turned towards the sound. Her eyes widened as she stared up into Luna's stern gaze. Laying a trap and facing the princess when she was subdued and dazed by drugs had been one thing, but to face her now... Manna shrank before the regent of the moon. "How..."

Luna cut her off. "What have you done with the blood you took from me?" she demanded.

Manna pointed a bloodied hoof at the shattered glass and small stain of blood on the stone. Luna watched her but didn't say anything, as if waiting for her to speak instead. Manna's lips trembled as she sought for words. "I

only did what I thought I had to do. I was wrong."

"You admit your guilt then?" Luna's eyes remained cold, her face unreadable. "You admit to have murdered the ponies of Hoofswell Asylum in cold blood? You admit to having captured me and my friends, possibly putting our lives and the lives of many ponies, indeed all of Equestria at great risk?"

"No," Manna shook her head but quickly looked down again. She tried to maintain her breath, tried to keep focus. "I did kill them. I had to, they would have stopped me, locked me up. I didn't want to, but I had to. I had to get here, I had to find Midnight to end it all. And I had to make sure she would not be able to stop me either. I had to do what I did, to make everything right."

"Did you?" Luna asked, unmoving. "Did your plan work then?"

"I..." Manna kept her eyes down, staring at the floor. "No. I was wrong."

"So you did put others at risk," Luna continued.

"I thought..."

Luna raised her hoof, cutting her off again. "Manna Sparkle, what you have done is unforgivable. Even if your goal was noble, your actions haven't been."

Manna looked up, "Please, Your Highness... allow me to speak?" Luna gave a single nod. Manna took a moment before speaking. "I'm sorry. I am an honest pony, I know I have done wrong. I have..." she looked down. "I have done so much wrong. All I ask is that I be allowed a chance to make one thing right. All I ask is a chance to end my mother's evil. I need you to do that. I was wrong, I can't do it alone. I need your help, and maybe... maybe you'll accept mine before you decide my final fate?"

Luna looked at her for a long time, then spoke. "It is not for me, or anyone here, to mete out judgment for your crimes. We are all your victims and our judgment is colored by that." She paused. "You will come with us, and if you survive to return to Canterlot, your final fate will be determined there by the royal court, as is custom under Equestrian law. You will stay by my side

at all times, any attempt to flee and I may not be so lenient."

Manna looked down. "Thank you."

Trixie gazed into the vast mirrors around her. She had been here before, in her dream. In this very room, looking into these very mirrors. Her eyes drifted from one to the rest. She could see reflections in the ancient glass, reflections of her friends, repeated over and over, but none of her. And none of Manna. She looked around the room and her eyes fell on the purple mare, whose icy blue eyes seemed fixed right back at her. Trixie didn't trust that mare, and no doubt the feeling was returned, and yet... as she looked back into the mirror and saw nothing, she couldn't help but wonder at their shared fate...

Trixie shook the thought away as Luna approached one of the mirrors, horn glowing brilliantly. The princess raised her head. "It is time for us to find answers, and time to confront this evil that stalks us. I am going to open the way. Be on your guard and stay close, never lose sight of each other." They all gathered around Luna as she touched her horn against the cold surface of the mirror. The reflection shimmered and darkened as if a portal into a world of eternal night had swallowed the glass. "I will go first," Luna said, "Manna will go with me and stay by my side. The rest of you follow close behind."

Luna looked around at them briefly to make sure they were in on her plan, then took a step through the blackened mirror, soon fading until she was only a distant ghost against the blackness. Manna looked at the mirror and the fading princess, then followed in silence.

Trixie watched them step through one by one, before following herself. A cold, clammy darkness settled around her as she stepped through the mirror. She could see the shadowy outlines of her friends ahead, waiting for her. Luna said something to them all, but the sound barely reached Trixie. Something else did, another voice, like a gentle caress. "My Trixie... we are brought together at last!" She took a step forward and turned, staring into her own eyes looking back at her with a gleam of purple.

Luna's voice sounded somewhere in the dark. "Trixie? Are you with us?"

What's wrong?" But Trixie no longer heard or saw anything.

Luna turned around and looked at Trixie, whose wide eyes stared past her into the darkness, mouth agape in dead expression. "Trixie? Are you with us? What's wrong? Trixie!"

A gleam crossed Trixie's eyes, then she broke into a long, deep laughter. Luna's eyes widened, "No!"

Trixie just laughed and took a step backwards. "Thank you, Luna! You have been my greatest friend and ally all along, even if you never knew it. I couldn't have asked for better."

"Leave Trixie alone! Come out and face us, demon!" Luna thundered and charged through the darkness at Trixie. A deathly light lit up the black sky and sent Luna flying back with a cry.

"Don't flatter yourself, foal. You have been useful, but you were always too weak, unworthy of the power I now hold. You should have listened to your sister and killed Trixie when you had the chance. But you couldn't make yourself do what was necessary, could you? So you lead her straight to me instead, and so it ends." She stepped back, through the mirror, fading with the shadows around her. "I'll be sure to say hi from you."

"NO!" Luna scrambled to her legs and threw herself into the darkness. A great shattering of glass accompanied her fall, then everything went silent.