

Series: Secret Tub Fun

by Murgurgle



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Twilight Sparkle

Twilight trotted into her bathroom and set a small bucket down on the lacquered wood counter. "Finally, a night alone to unwind and enjoy some me time," she said with a relieved sigh. "Spike's helping Apple Bloom and her crusaders study, and everyone else is occupied with Pinkie's party." She pulled a box of scented candles out of the bucket and placed them strategically around the small bathroom, then lit them one by one with her horn. "And no studying tonight, so it's just going to be me, Mr. Bing Cropsby, and a nice, looooong soak."

Her horn sparkled as she began running the bath and poured a generous helping of foaming bath salts Luxury had recommended her. As it ran, she began unpacking her tub. A record player first, with the old crooner's melodious tunes already loaded. Secondly, more candles, which she arranged into arcane designs on the sink. Next was Spike's poster of a dragon's glaring eye, which she tucked up into the bathroom's only window and taped down. Lastly, she unloaded several wads of fabric which she tucked into the seams of the door. "Hmm... this could get loud," she murmured, staring at the rest of the tub's contents. "I'd better take more precautions." She squinched her eyes closed and conjured a bubble of silence. A quick effort layered it into the walls and door, ensuring she couldn't be heard. "Wait, I need to make sure no one can interrupt. The last thing I need is someone walking in on me." Chewing her lip, she willed an invisible ring of alarm around each of the entrances to the library, including the loft window. They were designed to pop if anyone came near it, which would alert her to visitors and hopefully knock the intruder on their butt long enough for her to hide.

Finally, she could relax. She shut off the faucet and moved her bucket onto the toilet next to the tub. "At last~" she giggled, admiring the colored steam rising off of the mounds of bubbles. She shook out her mane, then climbed slowly into the bath, inching her way down below the surface to let herself get used to the heat. After several minutes wincing, hissing and wiggling, she finally settled onto the tub's smooth bottom, her head just barely above the level of the water. "MUCH better..." she sighed happily.

Bing Cropsby's silky voice crooned out 'Moonlight Becomes You', which caressed the young filly's ears with its soft tones and slow music. "This is perfect..." The song faded minutes later and another took its place. "Mmm..." The bath was amazing. The salts were still foaming slightly, sending little bubbles rippling along her coat like tiny fingers, and the heat kneaded her tired muscles into perfect relaxation. All of the worries of the day, about her friends, about the upcoming celebration for the Mayor, all of it faded as the sensuous warmth and pressure of the water closed in around her and wrapped her up in a blanket of pure bliss.

Her head sank down below the water until only her eyes and nose were above it. Below the water, a slow, wicked smile curled the edges of her lips. "Almost perfect, that is," she giggled to herself as she eyed the bucket sitting on the toilet. This was going to be /great/.

"Oh no! Look out! It's Moonicron, aaaaaaaa!" screamed Twilight as the huge chunk of transforming plastic hovered over the tub. "Don't worry, I'll save you," she said in a lower voice as she shook a plastic submarine in the air, miming speech by dipping the nose up and down. "Rooaaaah dive dive dive!" The submarine sank below the water and breached a bank of bubbles like a shark, then flew up at Moonicron trailing water. "Launch the laser torpedoes, pew pew!"

"Bwa ha ha, you'll never defeat me. I have force-fields which are immune to your laser torpedoes, Ms. Sparkle." Moonicron threw her spherical head back and laughed in Twilight's lowest evil laugh. "Ah ah aaaaah."

"But not to JUSTICE, Moonicron!" cried a yellow rubber duck. "Taste webbed feet, evildoer!" Cloptimus hopped up and down on Moonicron's head, making squeaky noises with each hit.

But justice was to be denied! Moonicron blasted him with her Death Moon Vision! "Bwa ha ha, foooooaalish Cloptimus. Did you really think your puny justice was a match for MY powers?" Moonicron tried to transform but got stuck halfway. Stupid overcomplicated toys. How did Spike manage it? "Nnngh, curse you Cloptimus. Your justice has made me get stuck. Help me out."

More laser torpedoes flew at Moonicron as the submarine. "Never, Moonicron! You're going to pay for eating Sweet Apple Acres!" A dinosaur flew up out of the tub, covered in pink foam. "Get 'er Pinkiesaurus! Use your anti-force-field teeth!"

Pinkiesaurus leapt up and chomped Moonicron's half-transformed arm. "Rar! You taste like old socks! And candy! Grrrrr!"

"No! Not pink dinosaurs! My only weakness! AAAAAAA! prrrghkrrr..." Moonicron flopped over into the tub, dead.

"Yaaaaaay! We have saved the day!" cheered Twilight while waving the plastic submarine and foam-covered dinosaur around. Cloptimus the duck bobbed cheerfully upside-down on the water.

Twilight giggled and put the rubber duck on her head and ladled a dollop of foam bubbles onto his bill to form a comely beard. "There. A suitable reward for our intrepid hero." After a moment, she plopped a bubble-beard on herself, too. "Now it's time for..." She flicked her horn at the record player, changing albums. Powerful, racing strings

blared as she lifted a toy shark and a battered old pony doll with no head out of the water. "Revenge of the Headless Shark-Pony!"

Rarity

Rarity watched her last customer gallop excitedly out of her front door with her new dress and a radiant smile. Her eyes followed her for a moment, a satisfied smile of her own on her lips. It was just a simple pullover sundress; a light and breezy little thing for a young filly's first school dance. But oh, it was such a joy to make for her! She'd wanted something to catch the eye of that little would-be Casanova who'd been trying to make the rounds of the schoolyard and breaking hearts with his handsome smile and charming laugh. The poor dear was so smitten that she nearly chewed her ear off with syrupy-sweet descriptions of his mane. Well, with that little number and the lovely hair ribbon she'd thrown in, the girl would not just turn his head; she'd have to start beating the little colts away with a stick.

She snickered wickedly to herself and locked the door. "Just like yourself at that age. So new to romance, all full of ideas and dreams." A sigh brushed her front window's lace curtains as she turned the sign to 'CLOSED'. "Of course, we know better now. A pony can only break so many hearts, after all, before one finds one's own heart being broken."

She hopped down from her small stepladder and headed to the till to count her profit for the day. Once it was safely counted, recounted, noted in her ledger, and balanced against projected future gains, she nudged the till closed and flicked off the lights. She paused in the doorway to her office to stare critically at the display ponniquins in her window. "Hmmm, I think I might move those display dresses to the rack tomorrow. I think I might have a new idea for a line of summer dresses. Spring is so over, after all." She nodded firmly, then shut and locked the door behind her.

Rarity nosed through her library, inhaling the delicious scent of old and well-loved books. The spines of some were beginning to crack despite her care, and they were plagued by hastily done dog-ears and a few coffee stains. One was nearly unreadable after it had accidentally joined her in the bathtub, but she kept it and cared for it just the same. All of them were her favorites. There wasn't a single one she hated. It turned out that her sense for fashion had lent her an impeccable eye when it came to choosing just the right book. Each book had to fulfill a certain standard, and she kept rigidly to it, and so far she hadn't been wrong. Every trip to the bookstore was like choosing a lover for the night, with the protagonists whirling her through the pages and ravishing her mind with their adventures, leaving her tired and satisfied as she closed the cover.

She giggled and plucked an older one from the shelf. Its cover was plaid, and had a picture of a powerfully built stallion wearing most of a shirt on the front. "Ah, here's one we haven't read in a while," she said, a slight skip in her step as she headed toward her bathroom and the warm bath waiting there for her. "Wait a moment." Rarity

looked up at her wall clock. "The others are normally beating down my door by this point. I wonder what might be keeping them." She thought for a moment, and then decided it didn't matter. "Oh well~" she chirped, her tail perking as she flounced toward her tub. "A quiet night alone with a book is something I've been wanting for a while."

She stopped briefly by her vanity and grabbed a black pot from the edge and unscrewed the top. She dipped her hoof in and dabbed lightly at her face, smearing the artfully applied makeup with a mixture she'd created just for this. It would quickly remove even the thickest, most caked-on makeup while leaving the skin and facial coat rejuvenated. Afterward was a quick rubdown with a towel, and then her mud mask, something which she enjoyed wearing just a little too much sometimes. She laughed quietly to herself. "You just like the idea of being clean while wearing mud all over your face. Don't you, Rarity?" She continued to chuckle at the thought as she tucked her hair up into a fluffy terrycloth towel.

"At last, my sweet," she said to the faded tartan cover of her book, "I am ready for my bath."

Rarity stepped away from the vanity and picked the book up gently with her mouth, then headed for the tub. It foamed and steamed and smelled softly of lavender, and was exactly the perfect temperature. Before she could begin, she had to test it. She daintily dipped a hoof into the water and shivered as the warmth spread up her leg in a rippling wave of pure pleasure. "Oh~h my," she breathed as she settled slowly into the water, inching her way below the surface, and came to rest with her shoulders just above the floating lavender seeds. "Bliss~!"

She turned to her book, then, and patted the cover to reassure it that she hadn't forgotten it was there. She then opened to a dog-eared section in the middle and began to read.

"Lord Tartan Claymore *powerfully* snatched Lady Redflower's slender, *beautiful* shoulders roughly and *threw* her *roughly* against the wall of his wooden and *pine* hunting lodge. The scent of pine wafted sloooowly up from the wall as her bruised shoulders as she stared up at him as he stared back at her, their *gorgeous* eyes *locked*. 'Lady Redflower,' he groaned in a husky groan. 'I need you. **NOW**.'"

Rarity put her hoof to her mouth and laughed as she scanned the page. "Lady Redflower's cheeks colored to think of what the savage brute could want from her, of the *obviousness* of how he was going to *ravish* her and claim her in the ancient ways of the Scottish lords of old."

Rarity threw her head back against the side of the tub and let out a long belly laugh. "Ohohoho! Oh! Oh my! My sides! This is too funny!" She flicked a tear from her eye and buried her nose back into the pages. "And then Lord Tartan Claymore

BELLOWED, 'I do not care, my lady! For you are mine and I shall have you! Because you are *mine*, just as the ancient Scottish ways demand!' Lord Tartan Claymore grasped Lady Redflower's gown in a powerful grasp and ripped it asunder revealing her *heaving chestflesh* to the cold Scottish winter's night. But Lady Redflower was not cold, no, she was hot with the heat of his *lust* burning in her heart. She wanted this, to be taken by the manly stud and pressed against his heaving, sweaty **chest**."

Rarity's horn sparked and a pair of her favorite combs, a blue porcelain comb and a rough-bristled coatbrush, flew into the air and came to a stop above the tub. "My Lady Redflower!" barked the coatbrush. "I have taken your land, your house, and your title! And now, I will take **YOUR VIRGINITY!**"

The blue comb fainted and turned its tines away from the brush. "But, milord! I am a virgin! Were you to take mine maidenhead I would surely be ruined for marriage! **FOREVER!**"

The comb yelped as she was thrown to the 'ground' and pinned under the brush's stiff bristles. "I care not to hear your foolish cries! *No pony can hear you here!*" The two combs clacked together with Rarity providing smooching and moaning noises while trying to laugh through pursed lips.

Sometime later, she placed the book back on the sink and sank into the bath with a contented sigh. "Oh darling Primrose," she murmured, fondly regarding the book. Her eyes were puffy and red from laughing, and little crinkles appeared at their edges. "Someday, I must find you and thank you for your terrible writing." With another happy sigh, she lay her head back against the tub and twisted the hot water knob with the tip of her hind hoof.

Fluttershy

Fluttershy took a deep breath as she looked up at the vine-covered entrance to the cave and tightened her grip on the fairy lantern in her mouth. You've been here a thousand times, Fluttershy, she thought to herself. You know it better than your own house. Her eyes fixed on the soft green leaves of the vines covering the opening. It was silly to think of those vines coming alive and wrapping around you and choking the life from you as you struggled uselessly against them and—

She shook her head fiercely, nearly dropping the lantern. No, she was not going to be afraid this time. She was not going to think of horrible things coming out of the dark to grab her and drain her blood with wickedly sharp probosci and feed her desiccated body to their chitinous spawn. She was not going to think of slipping on a rock and breaking all of her legs and getting trapped down there and being unable to move and dying slowly of infection and starvation, alone. She wasn't going to let the rustling leaves behind her make her think of some hungry animal licking its chops and wondering if she'd make a good meal. She was not going to let her imagination get the best of — Wait.

Fluttershy lifted her head and looked quickly around. Nothing was lurking in the bushes, or in the grass around them. There were only fish in the small stream leading into the cave, and those weren't scary at all. It was too late for bats, which were too cute to be scary. Just her imagination playing more tricks on her again.

She stamped her hoof, lowered her head, grit her teeth, and stomped into the cave's opening. This was getting ridiculous. She was going to enjoy a nice, quiet bath by herself in her favorite spot if she had to blindfold herself. She swatted aside the vines with a contemptuous sniff and shuffled past them, quietly proud of herself for asserting her dominance over the leafy menace.

Outside, a pair of scaly eyes broke the water of the sluggishly moving stream and watched the young pony's pink tail disappear into the gloom. The thing let out a quiet, reptilian hiss, then sank back below the water, its eyes gleaming.

Fluttershy's hooves splashed quietly in the burbling stream as she walked through the entrance to her secret cave. The chamber was immense, vaulting up high enough that the lantern's light couldn't reach the ceiling. Stalactites loomed like giant stone fingers reaching for their brothers on the ground. Fey light from the lantern bounced off of the delicate, fan-like sheets of flowstone that covered the walls and bounded down from the ceiling in silent waterfalls of stone. Below the entrance was a small pool filled with tiny cave fish. She gingerly stepped down, careful not to step on

any, and trotted up to the shore of a huge lake.

"Let there be..." she murmured, setting the fairy lantern down on a large, glowing mushroom. As the magic in the copper bottom connected with the spongy cap, a silent pulse went through the fungus and shot along a trail of mycelium leading into the heart of the chamber; a giant crystal column covered in more of the luminescent fungus. The fungus' light flared as the pulse from the fairy lantern hit it, causing the strands that shot through the column to intensify their glow. The crystals bent and refracted the light in all directions and colors, lighting up the whole chamber in cornucopia of gentle, phosphorescent light that made the cave's thin coating of mineral-saturated water glisten. "...light."

Fluttershy sighed dreamily at the spectacle. The water of the lake reflected everything almost perfectly, with only the smallest ripple marring its glass-like surface. She dipped a hoof into the water with a shiver. It was exactly the right temperature; delightfully cool but not cold. She smiled as a cave fish swam up to nibble experimentally at it and gently shooed it away with a gesture. Time for her to get ready.

She plucked a bottle from the crook of her wing and popped it open. Clear oil drizzled out over her feathers as she waved the little bottle around and then placed it next to her lantern. A few minutes of careful preening with her teeth and muzzle and her wings were completely waterproofed. Now, she was ready for her bath. She stood, took a deep breath, spread her wings wide, and slid gracefully forward into the water.

Even as a filly she'd always loved the water. She would spend hours in the tub, splashing happily and chasing bubbles and showing off how squishy and wet her mane was to mom before waving her head around and getting water all over the bathroom. She hated soap, so her mane would stick out in all directions unless mom was there to scrub her, which was always her least favorite part of bath time. That would all be made up for a minute afterward, though, as she was then left to play for however long she wanted. The bathroom floor was almost always soaked after her baths.

When she was older, she was allowed to play in the stream behind their house and graduated from chasing bubbles and surprising rubber ducks to chasing fish and turtles and surprising wading birds, who always took her playful bumps with good humor. She learned to hold her breath forever, and how to use her wings to help her swim.

Fluttershy opened her eyes and shook off the nostalgic haze. This wasn't the time. She opened her wings and held them loosely at her sides, shoulder muscles flexing as she pushed them against the water in slow, graceful undulations. Her legs trailed behind her and rippled in time with her shoulders, while her stomach clenched and relaxed, propelling her through the water like a dolphin. She turned a lazy arc around the base of the glowing crystal column, turned herself around so that her back

hooves were against one of its facets, and then pushed off into the yawning abyss of the lake.

She smiled as she corkscrewed slowly downward, enjoying the way the water slid through her fur. This was so much better than flying. There was no fear of the ground so far below rushing up to meet her, or sudden winds carrying her off. There was no knowing she was only being carried by her small wings or worrying about her clumsy hooves catching on a cloud and sending her tumbling to her doom. The water buoyed her up and held her with a gentle pressure, like a soft hug. There was an almost weightless feeling, being in the water. Her fears didn't hang on her heart like little lead weights. They hung serenely in the water, just like her. This must be how earth ponies felt all the time – never far from the ground, always safe.

She shook her head quickly. She was not going to think like that again. She snapped her wings closed and shot downward into the deeps of the lake, chasing down a beam of light. It flickered as something, probably a big fish, swam above her. She ignored it, concentrating on following the shaft down. It stopped inside of a crevice in the rock that sparkled with hundreds of tiny gems. If only the other pegasi could see how beautiful it was down here, instead of being stuck in the clouds all day. Of course they'd never follow her down here. A pegasus was meant for the clouds, the sky. For flying. Not... not grubbing like a badger and swimming under the earth like that huge fish that was following her.

She shook her head again, harder this time. Why did it always come back to this? Why couldn't she enjoy herself, even down here? She pressed her head against the hard edges of the crevice until it began to hurt. The thoughts just wouldn't go away. That little voice telling her that she had to fly, that it was what pegasi were supposed to do, was getting louder. Well, so what if she never flew more than a dozen feet up? What if she never flew *again*?! Then the others would leave her alone and that horrible little voice would finally shut up and let her swim in peace.

Suddenly, the pressure of the water closed in tighter around her, trying to crush her. The gentle hug became a cold fist and those little leaden fears sank to the bottom. She pushed away from the crevice and beat her wings frantically, hooves clawing at the water as she tried to swim to the surface.

Too many minutes later, she broke the surface and gasped a deep lungful of air. Her hair spread out in a fan of pink as she sank back down and stared miserably out at her secret place. "Th-this is a-all wrong..." she mewed, paddling slowly back to shore.

She collapsed in a shivering heap on the sand and buried her face in her hooves. Why couldn't she enjoy herself? Why couldn't she just be normal, like other pegasi? All they could think about was flying, and she was terrified of going above the treetops. She sat up and scrubbed angrily at her face. "It's these stupid *wings*. If I never had them then I'd never have to--" Snarling, she bit at the base of her wings only to jerk away when her teeth nicked the skin. "I, I can't do it," she sniffed, curling her wings in close to

her sides.

The light from the lantern flickered as something walked in front of it.

...what was nibbling on her leg? That fish couldn't climb out of the water, so how could there be— something had followed her into the cave.

She turned her head and found a pair of bright purple eyes staring up at her. The short, blunt snout below them opened and hissed at her, then bit her gently on the nose and hopped backward, playfully wiggling a scaly tail. Too stunned to pull away, she stared at the little green alligator that was stomping its tiny feet like it was ready to pounce.

"G-Gummy?"

The alligator squeaked at her and trotted up to nip at her nose.

"How did you get down here?"

Gummy answered by rolling over onto her pink tail and chewing on it. "You followed me? But how did you get out? I thought Pinkie Pie never let you out of the house." She reached down and scooped up the tiny gator in her forelegs, a tiny smile on her muzzle as he tried to chew on her hoof. "You're hungry, aren't you?" She patted his scaly tummy and then shuffled to her hooves. "Let's go find Pinkie and get you something to eat."

With a loud squeak, Gummy leapt out of Fluttershy's grip and snatched her lantern in his mouth. "Oh, Gummy! Please don't—" Gummy yanked the lantern away from the mushroom pedestal and scurried toward the wall. The light from the fungus flickered and faded, throwing the cave into deep shadow. "Oh dear, please come back with that!"

Gummy's claws scrabbled on pebbles as he ran around a pillar, Fluttershy close on his heels. "I need that, Gummy! Please put it down!" He turned his head and squawked at her, then sprinted for the lake. Fluttershy lowered her head and spread her wings. "No you don't, you naughty little gator." A smile crept onto her face as she jumped over him with a snap of her wings. She came down a half-step in front of him and planted her hooves. "Gotcha!" Gummy scrambled to stop, but wound up wedged between her forelegs. Fluttershy quickly lifted him under his arms and mushed her nose against his. "You have been a very naughty reptile, Gummy. Now drop the lantern like a good boy." She couldn't help but smile as he opened his mouth and let the lantern fall to the floor. "Thank you."

Fluttershy hugged him close; her face in the scales of his head, his head snuggled into her dripping mane. Gummy wiggled into her chest with a happy little hiss and nipped her cheek. "Thank you..."

Pinkie Pie

Pinkie's lips were dry and cracked. Her mane was a tangled, matted mess slick with sweat and body soil, and sticky in places from where she'd run her hooves through it. One of her hooves was developing a split; a little painful, but not terribly so, yet. She'd have to get it looked at once this was over. She stared bleary-eyed at the edge of the tub where her work lay, finally finished, and licked a bit of blood from a cut on her foreleg.

"It's taken every bit you've been able to save for the last three months to do this, Pinkie Pie. Three months of extra shifts, double-time parties, and... a-a little book-cooking." She bit her lip and looked away from the tub. She felt horrible about that, even if it was only for an extra bit here and there to help out. It felt wrong. It was wrong, but she needed the money. She had to hope it was worth it.

She sat alone in the empty room she'd rented from Lotus, only the huge tub and its contents for company. She'd sent Gummy away earlier; he didn't need to see this. It... it was too much. Almost too much even for her strong stomach. The smell was overpowering, sickly-sweet, with a sticky quality to it. It stuck in the nose and mouth, making everything taste like it. Pinkie took a few steadying breaths and coughed to clear her throat. "Snap out of it, Pinkie. This is what you wanted, right?"

Pinkie stared down at Twilight's picture in the photo book sitting next to her and let out a relieved sigh. It was done. Over. This whole business needed only one thing before she could go home. She drew a big 'X' over Twilight's picture in red pen. Around it were more 'X's, each one over a picture of one of her friends, or someone she knew. "Just one last..." she said, rubbing her hoof over her own picture.

She smacked her lips, then grabbed a nearby pitcher of water and drained it. She then turned to the heater below the tub and double-checked the temperature. The dial had long ago been caked over, but she knew it was still where she'd left it. It was the perfect temperature for ponies. "Alright, Pinkie. You can do this." She took another, deeper breath and let it out in a shaky, giddy exhalation, then tucked her knives back into their case and rolled it closed. She wished she had someone to share it with, now, but no one was left to share it with. This wasn't the kind of thing you shared, anyway; this was her responsibility and hers alone.

"No more waiting, Pinkie Pie... It's time to face what you've done." Three days of non-stop work; biting, sawing, stripping, slicing, shredding. Lying, conniving, hiding. *Stealing*. All of it done for this one perfect moment.

She pulled from a bottle of cider. Deep breathing wasn't going to steady her nerves. All it did was get more of that cloying smell caught in her lungs. She shook as

the lukewarm alcohol burned dully in her stomach, using her anxiousness as fuel. "No more waiting." The words became a mantra. "Let's go." She shuffled unsteadily to her feet, exhaustion weighing on her muscles, and walked solemnly up the steps to the top of the tub. As she walked out onto the little diving board she'd set up, her heart began to hammer in her chest. Tears came to her eyes and fell onto the wood in a steady drip.

"My friends... thank you. For everything you've done for me," she sobbed, scrubbing at her face.

The ground was made of one part hot fudge, three parts caramel, and one part whipped cream. The roads were made of chocolate sprinkles carefully laid down to resemble cobblestone and dusted gently with cinnamon. Gingerbread buildings decorated with gumdrops and vanilla icing sprouted up between them, surrounded by green licorice grass. Blue gummi, heated to a liquid state, made up the lake and filled the marzipan fountain in the town square.

Rarity's boutique was a dazzling creation of licorice allsorts pulled apart and pasted together with thin layers of icing. Every single one of them had to be individually balanced to capture the fashionista's beautiful home, and she was certain that she'd done it just right. The whole thing was topped with a light dusting of powdered sugar, and a small, gummi Rarity sat inside the door with a smiling gummi Bon-Bon trying on her new marzipan dress, while mint imperial Lyra looked on with a bright smile on her face.

Up above, Rainbow Dash was napping in her cloudhouse made of cotton candy propped up on sugar glass, dreaming little gummi dreams about impressing the jujube Wonderbolts, who were just outside her door, debating who would get the honor of knocking on her door and inviting her to join them.

Twilight's gingerbread library sat toward the edge of the main plaza, with marshmallow leaves covering the upper branches. Princess Celestia, a miniature version anyway, was curled up with Twilight on the balcony and reading a book to a napping Spike made of pressed grape puree. Twilight's horn sparkled with dewdrop bits of sugar, and was nestled against Celestia's almond marzipan breast.

Sweet Apple Acres was a sprawling expanse of caramel and fudge, with chocolate trees scattered thickly across the lot. Winona, a wine gum, was barking at marshmallow chickens and cows. Applejack and Big Mac, a pair of candied apples carved into their likenesses, were struggling to pull a caramel Caramel out of a caramel mudhole he'd fallen into.

The Candy Cutie Mark Crusaders, along with raspberry Snips and blackberry Snails, were chasing each other through the middle of town. The boys were trying to catch the girls, who had stolen their homework and were carrying it in their mouths. Mayor Mare and Miss Cheerilee, both wine gums made with aged brandy and port

respectively, were tearing after them, trying to stop them from running into Old Sweepy's chocolate mousse fertilizer cart and knocking it over onto a bickering treacle tart Trixie and gummi Gilda.

Fluttershy was snuggled in among a mob of tiny marshmallow bunnies, all trying to get at the tiny bundle of candy-coated carrots in her mouth. She was trying to patiently hand them out, but they were being stolen one by one by the hungry horde. Her house, behind her, was a green-frosted mound of fudge and brownie with a cupcake center. A lone maraschino sat inside, presided over by marshmallow Angel.

Sugarcube Corner was made out of pure sugar, with each layer beautifully crafted to resemble her home in intimate detail. The windows were also made of sugar glass, and were framed by mint icing. The Cakes, made of angel food, were busily preparing more confections inside, with powdered sugar 'flour' everywhere. Above it all sat the Moon, carved out of a single white jawbreaker. Luna danced across its pockmarked surface, her licorice hooves tapping along a crater. Her hair billowed around her in ethereal waves of finely spun sugar as a pecan fudge Dr. Whoof twirled her in circles.

"It's... it's so beautiful!" cried Pinkie through a smile that brushed her ears. "I almost didn't think I could do it. But I did, and it's, it's beyond words." She plucked a small pink gummi pony out of her hair and placed it gently on top of Sugarcube Corner. "There. Now it's complete." She sat down and dabbed at her eyes with a rag.

Pinkie Pie could feel all the energy she'd spent over the last three days rushing back to her, banishing her exhaustion and bringing color back to her cheeks. Her smile crooked at the edges as she surveyed the candy model of Ponyville. All this work, for One. Perfect. Moment. Rearing up on her hindlegs, she beat her hooves against her chest and leapt off of the end of the diving board. She hung in mid-air for a half-second; long enough to give her one last look at her doomed creation before she landed, and let out a primal bellow she'd learned from watching some of Twilight's old monster movies.

"I AM PINKIEZILLA!"

Rainbow Dash

Soft snores sawed quietly against the inside of her math book.

"Ms. Rainbow Dash?" A hoof clacked loudly against wood.

"Mmmngh, go 'way... Sleepin'..."

The hoof rapped again, this time slamming down into the desk beside her head.
"MS. RAINBOW DASH."

"HUHWHUZZAH!? WHO!?" Rainbow Dash's head shot upright and nearly smacked an old, grizzled-maned pegasus in the jaw. Her heart raced and her wings flapped awkwardly as adrenaline rushed through her. The old pegasus glared down into the filly's wide magenta eyes and growled, "I would thank you not to fall asleep in my class, Ms. Dash." He turned on his hindhoof and walked slowly back to the front of the class, his icy stare silencing the titters of his students.

As he started to speak again, she rubbed furiously at her eyes. *Ugh... It's not my fault I'm sleeping in class. If I wasn't up all night studying everything else, then I wouldn't have to catch up in this boring class.* She looked up at the blackboard with a weary grunt. *Not that I'm learning much here anyway. It's all boring old review, and even MORE boring basic trig. I could do this stuff in my sleep.*

She looked slowly around at the class. She was the only second year-student out of a class of seniors, and hated every minute of it. None of her friends were here, every one of the other students hated her for being smarter than them, and the teacher's voice drove her nuts. Even more than that, she hated that she'd let her old teacher talk her into moving up to the advanced math courses. All of her old friends were starting to resent her for Mrs. Whitehoof's fawning attention every time she solved a problem in no time that they were still struggling with. Even Gilda had grown a little distant in the last week.

She sighed and looked down at her desk. It wasn't that she was smarter; she was just good at math. Just like she was good at flying, though that had taken a hit in the last year. Her other grades were average at best, and absolutely dismal at worst. It was just math and flying she was good at. Well, and meteorology courses, but only because she was so good at the two biggest parts of it.

"Ahem. Ms. Rainbow Dash. I assume from your extremely pensive expression you've already solved the problem?" Mr. Nimbus glared at her from the desk and crossed his hooves in front of him. "Well?" he asked, moustache twitching expectantly.

Rainbow Dash blinked, and then looked over at the blackboard. Jaw muscles clenched as she squinted at the squiggles and lines and tried not to reach into her desk. "Uh, give me a sec, teach."

Mr. Nimbus looked up at the clock. "You have ten. Seconds, that is." Rainbow's teeth ground together as she squinted hard at the board. If she leaned forward a bit more, she could just barely make it out. *Delta... graph...? Is that some kind of, wingy thing there, next to a Bernoulli function? Yeah, almost got it...*

"Time's up, Ms. Dash. Since you have failed to answer today's question, and such a simple one, I am going to have to ask you to remain after class is finished for remedial tutoring." He turned back to the blackboard and began dusting the chalk away with a wing. "How odd that you couldn't, since you came on such high recommendations from the other faculty. I will have t—" He trotted back half a step and stared wide-eyed when Rainbow stomped up to him and spat a piece of paper onto the floor. "W-What is this?"

"The answer, featherbrain, and a note saying exactly how you messed up the question," snarled the young pegasus. "Which you'd know if you'd bothered to remember basic. Flippin'. Algebra. You put brackets around the function solving for the n value when it didn't need them, and forgot to put a... y'know what? Just read the stinkin' paper. It's the kind of mistake I remember making in *grade school*." Snorting, she stormed out of the class and stuffed a pair of thick-rimmed glasses into her saddlebags. "Screw this, Nimwad, I'm outta here."

"So I heard you told off old Nimbreathe, Dash," Gilda snickered. "Wish I coulda been there to see it."

Rainbow Dash sighed and picked at the cloud lichen mush on her tray. "It wasn't that great... He just called me stupid 'cause I couldn't see the board since I'm all the way in the back row. I mean, it's hard to see even with my great big binocularglasses, he's got me back so far. I can't see anything up there without 'em."

Gilda shrugged and stuffed a wad of hotdog into her beak. "Mmph. Can't this school offer meat for a change? Tired of nasty old soy stuff." She swallowed, then threw an arm around her friend and pulled her close. "Don't let him get to ya, Dash. Ain't nothin' but a sour old fart, that's all."

Rainbow sniffed and leaned into her friend's shoulder. "Thanks, G." A hoof wiped at her nose. "I'm sorry for bein' such a flip-flop this past week. Ditchin' you, and everything. It's just, this class is getting to me, and I can't focus on flying. And I have to wear these gigantic... things even to do that." She pulled a pair of black, thick-framed

glasses with even thicker lenses out of her school uniform top and let them dangle from the end of her hoof. "All I want's to come back and do regular stuff with you guys again." She slumped in her friend's grip. "I'm not a genius. I'm just Rainbow Dash."

"You're not just Rainbow Dash, buddy," growled Gilda, snatching her up by the shoulders and staring down her beak. "You're *Rainbow Dash*; the fastest flier in the Junior Speedsters and the best athlete in the school. You're the coolest pony I know, and the best friend I've ever had. Now stop all that 'woe-is-me' crap and finish your... what are you eating, anyway? Looks like frog poop."

Rainbow stared up at her friend, eyes wide, then turned to her tray. "I-I dunno, G... It's, uh..."

"Well *hello* there, Rainbow Crash!"

Both Rainbow and Gilda rolled their eyes as three stocky-framed pegasi strolled up to their table. "What d'you want Gold Medal?" Gilda let Dash's shoulders go and glared down at the colts.

"Oh nothin'. Just wanted to see if we could borrow your glasses, Rainbow Crash," said the leader, Gold Medal.

"Hehe, yeah!" The second, a smaller pony with a set of weights on his flank, trotted over to the other side of the pair and nudged Dash with his shoulder. "The observatory just called and said their telescope is missing a couple lenses!"

Dash's jaw clenched again, her teeth grinding almost audibly as she stared straight ahead and tried to ignore the three. "Go away, Heavy Weight. No one wants you here."

"Hey! It's a free country, we can go where we like!" Gold Medal pushed his friend out of the way and plopped himself down next to Dash. "And, see, my dad also donates heavily to the school, so I can go anywhere I want, and do anything I want," he said with a leer, one foreleg snaking around Dash's waist. Heavy slapped down beside Gilda and grinned up at the tall griffon. The third, who'd never given his name to anyone, just sat across from them and tried to look invisible.

"Anything," smirked Gold Medal.

"Back off!" shouted Gilda, putting an elbow in Heavy's mouth and grabbing Gold by the mane. "How many times does she have to say no?"

Rainbow put a hoof on Gilda's arm and shook her head. "I've got this, G. Thanks." She pushed her friend's arm down and turned to Gold, a coy smile on her lips. "So, you want to go out with The Dash, huh? Is that it?" Her raspy voice lowered to a throaty coo as she leaned into the larger pegasi's side. She could feel the heat of

Gilda's glare behind her, but she ignored it, focusing on Gold Medal. She felt the same way; disgusted and angry and heartsick and a little nauseated from the storm of emotion churning in her gut, but she couldn't give into it now.

"That's right, chickadee," Gold sneered. "You and me could be king and queen of the Cloud Prom next summer, if you play your cards right."

Rainbow's smile crooked at the edges as she rubbed her slender shoulder against Gold's chest. "Why wait until summer to be king? I could make you feel like a king right now." She tilted her head slightly and winked back at Gilda, who just watched, confused and blushing bright red. Her lips pursed as she lifted her muzzle to Gold's. "Close your eyes and pucker up, big boy," she said in a breathy moan.

Gold smiled triumphantly at the big griffon, then bent to steal Dash's lips. A pale blue hoof greeted him instead, barreling into his mouth. White-hot pain exploded inside it as his lower jaw was shoved backward into his cheeks with a loud snap. Teeth and blood flew as he fell backward and landed on the floor.

"I GOT YOUR CROWN!" shrieked Rainbow as she leapt on his chest and pummeled his head. "CROWN O' LUMPS! GREAT BIG FAT ONES!" The cafeteria erupted in chaos as students and teachers rushed the pair.

"Fighting again, Rainbow Dash?" Principal Silver Lining said with a heavy sigh. "This is the third time this month. Are you sure you don't want to talk to me?"

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to speak, then caught her father's glare out of the corner of her eye. "...no, sir," she growled. Her father's head turned back toward the principal in her peripheral vision, leaving her open to charge ahead. "Except there's these three idiots who keep bugging me and Gilda in the lunchroom, and won't stop touching me! One of them even tried to kiss me!"

Silver Lining looked between the two. Rainbow Dash, bright young filly and brilliant flier she was, was a prime target for the less positive attentions of the student body. She was a good filly, but too prone to bottling things up and letting them fester until they exploded. She had been for years. She looked visibly upset, so whatever had happened to drive her to break another student's jaw must have been terrible.

Her father, on the other hoof, terrified him. His eyes were the same color as brushed steel and were twice as hard. His slate blue mane was kept neat, the opposite of his daughter's wild hair, and he had an air of barely controlled danger to him, like a storm cloud about to break. He was a bad sort, and getting worse. He'd have to watch

himself around Mr. Thunder Mane.

"If you hadn't wanted them to do that, you shouldn't have been flirting with them," Thunder Mane said flatly.

Silver's eyes went wide, as did Rainbow's. "Are you saying this is my fault?" she choked.

Thunder Mane fixed her with an icy stare. "Of course I am. You fail consistently in school, so you thought your only recourse was to find a colt to marry. Get in good with the son of this school's topmost donor." A sneer curled his lip. "Have to have some way of supporting yourself after school, don't you?"

"But she's a brilliant mathematician, and a wonderful flyer, too!" Silver Lining put a hoof to his mouth when Thunder turned his steely eyes on him. "S-sh-she could be a brilliant—"

"Weather Patroller? Mailmare" Thunder Mane made no attempt to keep the disgust out of his voice. "With her eyesight going, she'll never fly for the Air Force, or anyone else, will she? She'll be an air janitor. A bleeding *cloud jockey*."

"But mom was a Weather Patrolmare, and she was—"

"A liar, a cheat, and very nearly the ruin of this family. I'll not have you following in her wake." Thunder Mane's eyes trained on a point just behind Rainbow's mane.

"But dad!"

"Sir!"

"**Shut up!**" The old pegasus' eyes were red at the edges and shaking. "Not another word. If you only failed at half of the things you tried, then I might listen. If you were even a great student, I'd have some sympathy. If you didn't let your mother's words delude you into thinking you're something you're not, then perhaps I might even support you! But **NO!**"

What in Celestia's name was he hearing? "But Mr. Thunder Mane, she's a bright young filly! She could be any—"

"Did I ask your opinion, *Principal*? No? Then be quiet when I'm talking to my daughter." He turned his acidic stare on Rainbow. "You're good at math and flying? Where will that get you then? Mail delivery? Teaching job? You'll be lucky to get that far. Flipping tofu patties more likely. You're not being a cloud jockey."

"But, sir!" Silver Lining slid out from behind his desk and trotted toward Rainbow Dash, one hoof on her shoulder. "Weather Patrol's a fine job, an important job! It's

something all of Eque—"

"I SAID NOT ANOTHER WORD." Thunder Mane's wings flared, lightning dancing among the feathers, as he lunged at the Principal. "Not another word," he hissed, turning to Rainbow with foam flecking his lips. "I'm your father, and I know what's best. Get you things; I'm putting you in a different school. One that will better suit your future." He straightened in his chair and dabbed at his muzzle.

The air stank of ozone and tension as Silver Lining pulled the filly against his chest. "I-I'll walk you out, my dear. We can get your things together," he murmured to Rainbow. He goggled at the slate blue stallion until he closed the door behind him. He let out a shuddering sigh once those eyes were off of him and hugged Rainbow Dash tightly. "I'm sorry, Rainbow. I'm so sorry."

Rainbow sniffed and leaned into him, her forelegs dangling against her stomach and tears staining her cheeks. "I hate him. I hate him so much. I hate this place. I hate the teachers, and the students, a-and, and I hate these stupid glasses!" She buried her face in Silver Lining's coat, choking sobs shaking her shoulders.

Silver Lining just tightened his arms around her. "I know, sweetheart, I know..."

Water slopped against the floor and a little, tired groan filled the small room.

Rainbow's magenta eyes were bright red as she walked slowly toward her locker. Silver Lining walked next to her, his eyes on the students. He could hear them; they both could. Hateful, spiteful words from hateful, spiteful creatures, thought Silver Lining. He hated himself for thinking such things; he was an optimist by nature. But he couldn't look at them and not see a little of the horrible things he tried so hard to work against.

"Finally leavin' us, Rainbow Crash?" said one, a cheerleader for the Skyball team, as she passed. "About time."

"Only a matter of time before she went off. Glad it wasn't me," said another.

"I heard she's getting expelled!"

"Good riddance!"

"That overmuscled jackmare Gilda's probably next. Celestia, I hope she drops this semester."

"I heard they were fooling around in the locker room after school."

"We don't need ponies like them around here."

The color drained from Rainbow's face as she numbly dropped her belongings into her saddlebags. Silver's ears pinned back as he watched her shrink further and further into herself.

"I think the PTA are gonna try and expel them both."

Silver's eyes narrowed. Steel uncoiled in his gut. "Not if I have anything to say about it." He grabbed Rainbow by the shoulder and turned her toward him. "Rainbow Dash, listen to me, and listen close." He pressed a small card into her hoof and pushed it against her chest. "Hold onto that. It's got the name of a good friend of mine in town called Ponyville. She's with the Weather Patrol there. Tell her I sent you, and she can get you a job. It's not the best, but it's the most I can do for you now."

Rainbow stared up at him. "B-But, I... what about my dad? What about school?"

"This place, this life, is no good for you, Rainbow. I've been watching you since you were a foal in my 2nd grade class. Ever since your mother left. I've tried to ignore your father, but he's just been getting worse, and worse." He cupped her chin in his hoof. "You're better than him. Better than this. Get out of here. Go to Ponyville, talk to Firefly. I'll make up some story so you can live free of him and have a happier life than this." He pulled her close and laid his head against hers. "You're a beautiful young mare, and one of the most talented students I've had the privilege of serving. You could be Equestria's finest Weather Patrolmare, or mathematician, or anything. You could even fly with the Wonderbolts someday. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise." He smirked and stroked her mane. "You're The Dash; quick as the lightning on your flank and just as bright."

Rainbow sniffed and buried her face in his shoulder, ignoring the whispers of the other students. "Thank you Mr. Silver..."

He gave her a fierce squeeze and let her go. "I'll tell your friend Gilda where you went. And, here." He pulled his wallet out and tucked it into her saddlebags. "It's not much, but it should help you get started. Now get going." He lowered his head and pushed her for the front door, into the light streaming in through the glass. "And Rainbow? Good luck."

Rainbow flew for the door and didn't look back.

Rainbow jerked herself awake and gasped. Something fell into the tub with a plop and sprayed soapy water everywhere. "Oh no!" She stuck her hoof in and scooped up her glasses. "...Aw shoot. They're all wet. Stupid glasses," she muttered as she wiped them on a towel.

She shoved the dried glasses back on and sank into the water. "I hate that dream. Ever since that stupid Gilda came and yelled at everyone, I keep having it. Why? She's the bully here, not me." She snatched up the heavy book beside her and planted it on her chest with a grunt. "Stupid book. Stupid dream. Stupid grif—"

A small strip of paper fluttered down from the pages onto her face. Slowly, she sat up and scanned it. It was that old newspaper clipping, the one about her principal that she used as a bookmark. He looked so much older in the picture, even though it'd only been a couple months since she'd left. He was smiling, though, even though the article told every reason why he shouldn't be. Tears fell onto the thin pages of the textbook from the edge of her glasses.

Gilda had been one of the only good things in her school days, besides Mrs. Whitehoof and Mr. Silver. And while she'd gotten a second chance in Ponyville, Gilda had been left without any other friends for the three years? Four? Four years since she'd left that place. She took a deep breath and tucked the yellowed paper back into her book, then set it down on the stand next to her bathtub. "No wonder she was such a crab. I left her without saying anything." She sniffed and rubbed her face.

"I got my second chance. It's time I gave Gilda hers."

Spike

Dames. If I live to be a million, I'll never figure them out. I've got nothin' but dames in my life, and everyone of them is trouble.

I set my jaw against the early cold and tugged my collar higher on my neck. The first few hints of fall were nipping at the breeze as I trudged toward Pinkie's. I loved fall. Apple pie, marshmallows, everything. Nights were longer, meaning more time indoors, meaning less time away from troublesome broads. Well, all but one really troubling broad.

Twilight. Twilight, Twilight, Twilight. Now there was a heck of a mare. Smart, pretty, and one of the most irritating people I know. She always had this sense of being a know-it-all, like you could almost hear her correcting you out loud as you talked. But she rarely did. She just gave you that same eager smile and asked you to continue. At least when she was talking to anyone but me, that is. And then she'd leave a note for you somewhere about 'suggestions' that were worded a bit too imperiously to take seriously and too good not to. I pushed her out of my mind. I was nearly there.

Three steps down from the street brought me to Pinkie's door. Pinkie's was a great place. Best place to go after dark if you were thirsty and underage. Or if you needed a safe place to stay for a night or two. Pinkie operated out of the back of Sugarcube Corner and ran a tight ship: anyone who messed with anyone inside, besides simple stuff or pranks, was kicked out. Anyone who had trouble behind them was welcome. Anyone who brought it in was kicked back out to deal with it. Adults, kids, princesses, didn't matter. Nobody messed with Pinkie's house.

Music greeted me as I walked in, carried to my ears on the voice of an angel. Sweetie was singin'. She was crooning out a song I didn't recognize. Might have been Louis Armstud. It wasn't a piece I'd heard before. Somethin' she'd written herself? Sounded new.

Eyes greeted me, too. A couple of thick-necked hoofballers and their cheerleader dates with their fake, peroxide smiles. Hated that bunch; always too loud and too obnoxious. They quieted a bit as I walked past, none of them eager to repeat what happened the last time they messed with me. I may be half their size, but I'm tougher than I look. Doesn't hurt that I breathe fire, either.

There were a couple apprentices there, too, surprisingly. Even a go-fer and an errand-filly I knew from Canterlot. My people. Tonight must be special if they got a

chance to come out. I gave them a nod as I headed for the bar.

"Been a while, Spike. What's your poison?" Dinky Hooves was behind the bar tonight. Weird. Pinkie never took a night off.

"Applejack's. And leave the bottle. It's been a long day."

"You gonna be wantin' your usual, too?"

Usual. Now there was a loaded word. It made me think of... wait, Twilight? What are you doing in my head? Go away. It's supposed to make me think of Rarity.

"...yeah."

Dinky paused and put a dainty hoof on my claw. I let her. Dinky was good folk. "You alright, Spike? You look kinda peaked." She put the mug down in front of me with a bottle of Sweet Apple Acre's finest apple juice, brought in by none other than Ponyville's finest bootlegger: Apple Bloom.

I put the bottle to my head and closed my eyes. The cold glass felt good. "Yeah. Just a lot on my mind, recently. Where's Pinkie at? Not like her to take a day off."

"No one's seen her. Not for a while now. Last anyone saw of her was three days ago, at the Spa. But no one seems to be worried yet, so there's been nothing official done."

"Then it's probably nothing. I'll look into it in the morning."

Dinky frowned and pulled her hoof back. "...I'll go get your bath ready, then." She sounded disappointed. Let her be, I'd had a long day.

I didn't watch her go. It was probably a failing of mine, not keeping closer eye on the mares in my life. But there were too darned many of them! Besides my client and her boss, (who was the boss of all bosses) there were five more broads, and then three miniature ones, and then a whole host of others I had to rub elbows with. And of course there was Dinky. Another guy might count himself lucky to know so many mares, and cute ones, too. Not me. Dames were nothing but trouble.

Speaking of trouble, here it came now, in the form of that sweet-faced little filly Apple Bloom. She was hard to figure, sometimes, so unlike her friends. She was rough, tough, could out-wrestle most of the colts in her class, and loved pink. She loved frilly dresses and princess fairy tales and sparkly ribbons and mud. She had eyes you could lose yourself in and a devious mind lurking behind them. It was no wonder she was the area's number one candy smuggler. She could have any colt she wanted if she put her mind to it, but she kept latching on to me, who knew better than to get tangled with a broad who wore trouble like a badge.

"Enjoyin' the juice, Spike?"

She tugged a lollipop out of her pocket and tucked in her mouth. "I haven't even opened it, Bloom." I twisted off the top and poured myself a glass before she could offer to, and pushed away the lollipop case she held out. I knew her game: butter me up by acting all neighborly and then try and wheedle a favor out of me. Not tonight. I couldn't afford it. Snips had doubled his rates, putting me two weeks behind on my cootie insurance. Something about a shortage of shots.

Before I could take a sip, the mug was snatched away from me by Sweetie Belle. She hadn't even finished her song. I glared at her as she took a sip and handed it back. "Keep it," I said as I pushed it away. All she did was bat her eyes and smile at me. She was trying to be sly tonight, something she normally wasn't. Sweetie was many things. Sweet? Definitely. It was even in her name. Pretty? That, too. She echoed her sister that way. Sly? I would hesitate to even call her 'average'. She wasn't dumb, really. Just slow on the uptake. Something was up, then, if she was playing at being sly.

"Why thank you, Spike! Such a gentlemanly thing to do," she said coquettishly. THAT put my scales on edge. Sweetie Belle flirting was a definite sign that something was up.

"What do you want, you two?"

"Oh, nothin', Spike. Just wondered if you'd be interested in doin' a little favor fer us." Apple Bloom leaned back against the bar and smiled around the lollipop in her mouth. Her smile was too tight for that pretty face. Like she wasn't happy about something. Wonder what.

"We'd be ever so grateful if you would." I felt a shiver crawl down my spine when Sweetie batted her big, doll-like lashes at me and grinned. "Please, Spike? For me?"

I could hear Bloom's lollipop crack. So she didn't like Sweetie's flirting, either? Weird. I figured they'd be trying to tag-team me; hit me from both sides with their girly wiles. But if Apple Bloom didn't like what Sweetie was doing, then it meant they weren't playing on the same team. I could use that.

"Weeeeell, I could be persuaded."

Time to take a risk, Spike. Time to put your manliness on the line and break out of this. I leaned in closer to Sweetie and waggled my eyebrows, kept my voice low.

"For a *kiss*."

Bloom's lollipop shattered. Bullseye.

"Ah don't think a kiss would be appropriate." Heh. She was mad now. I could almost feel the daggers she shot Sweetie. **"Let's just stick t'business fer now."**

Sweetie stared for a moment. I could hear her think, those rusty gears grinding away in her head. Should she go for it, or stick to the original plan, whatever that was? "But Apple Bloom, surely a kiss," She shot her partner a quick smirk. She was going for her new plan. Spike, you sly old devil. "Is a small price for the favor we're asking?"

Crunch crunch crunch, went the shards of Bloom's lollipop. I didn't need to look at her to know she was grinding her teeth pretty hard. "But Spike hasn't even agreed to th'favor yet, so keep yer lips to yerself." There was heat in her voice. A lot of it.

Time for another gamble. I turned back to Apple Bloom and cranked the charm up full blast. "Soundin' a little jealous, Ms. Bloom. Maybe you'd like to give me the kiss instead?" Eyebrow waggle, check. Confident smirk, check. Flustered Apple Bloom? Check and double check.

"Ah, er... well..." She turned away to try and keep me from seeing her blush, but it was too late. I'd already seen everything. Putty in my claws. Only problem was that I was digging myself deeper. Exactly the opposite of what I wanted.

I saw Dinky coming back out of the corner of my eye. Good. I could pull myself out before I got any more stuck. I grabbed the bottle of Applejack's and tipped my hat. "But I'm afraid it's gonna have to wait. I've got an appointment with a bathtub to keep."

And with that, I left the three fillies at the bar without a further thought. I could feel Apple Bloom fuming at my back, but didn't pay it any mind. Wrong move.

I settled into the bath with a sigh. The mud was nice and hot, just the way I liked it. Smelled a bit, too. Miss Dinky always did know how to spoil me. She even used the good mud from behind Mrs. Hook's Bait and Tackle, the one with all the worms wiggling in it. Who needed fancy imported mud when you could get the good stuff right here in Ponyville?

I took a moment to savor it. It was rare that I got to treat myself like this. Twilight hated it when I filled the bathtub with mud, saying it was 'gross' and 'dirty'. Which was true, but was half the reason I liked it. The other half was because the grit kept my scales nice and shiny. Speaking of which, I couldn't see my scale-brush around anywhere. Oh well. Steel wool worked just fine.

As I scrubbed, my mind wandered back to the ladies in my life.

Twilight. Why did my mind always wander back to her? She was so annoying, always barging into my thoughts and taking over. I wanted to think about the sweet curl

of Rarity's deep violet mane, not Twilight's impossibly straight hair, or that goofy grin she got when she thought she was being subtle. She was such a terrible liar; it was no wonder I always beat her at cards. Not like Rarity's practiced pout.

Darnit, Twilight. Can't I have some alone time even in my own head?

Apparently, she figured it was fine to let me be after that, because Rarity trotted into my head the next minute. I sighed in relief.

Rarity... Sometimes I think I thought about her too much. Weird, I know. Thinking about your crush too much was par for the course, wasn't it? I couldn't help myself, anyway. She was just so beautiful and could be the sweetest thing on the planet when she wan—oh hey a bug! Cool, it's still wiggling! It's *huge*! I'm gonna eat it. Yes I am. I'm gonna eat you, little bug. *cronch* homfgromnf nom homf oh Celestia that's good.

...wait, where was I? Oh right, Rarity.

Rarity was everything I said she was and more. There were depths to her that I hadn't plumbed yet, beyond the image of the fashion-obsessed pony everyone saw. Even at a glance, though, she was smart and beautiful and had charm for days. Knowing her as well I did (at least I think I do), I knew her beauty went to the bone. She'd given up a lot for others just to make them a little happier and their lives more beautiful. Even mine! And I was just a kid with a crush, I think. I leaned back against the edge of the tub. Who wouldn't be at least a little in love with her? No one, right?

So why did I say "kid with a crush" instead of "love-struck he-dragon"?

I knew who I wanted, and it was... no, no not Applejack! Oh sweet merciful gemstones what the heck was AJ doing in my head? Ugh. I ground the heel of my hand against my head. It was just an almost kiss, AJ! I like you, but as a friend. Yeah, you're pretty, almost as pretty as Twi— Rarity. But I've got a crush on Rarity, not you! I bit my tongue mentally to stop my brain from babbling. Yes. I did like AJ. She was dependable and loyal and... not Rarity. She was pretty, like Rarity but in a rougher way. It was just an almost-kiss. I hadn't betrayed Rarity by almost-doing something on accident. She didn't seem to think anything of it at the time, either. She was a friend, and that was that. There.

I sighed as Applejack smirked at me and galloped away from my thoughts. Stupid brain. Get back on track.

You know the worst thing about liking older dames? They never treat you like an equal. As deeply as I felt about Rarity, I had to be honest. She still thought of me as a baby. The best that could be said was I was a particularly affectionate pet to her. But that was fine, I could change that. I just needed to show her I was the mature, responsible older dragon she surely wanted deep down. Applejack probably thought I was some weird little brother or cousin or something. Or a neighbor-kid from down the

road. None of them saw me as anything more than a kid, though.

Come to think of it, so did Fluttershy. Weird how I didn't seem to mind when she did it. She treated me like... well, a baby dragon, with a heavy emphasis on 'baby'. It was sweet on her, though. She gave me all the mooshy gooshy snuggly wuggly attention I could handle and then some, but I never minded it in the least. As much as it hurt my manly pride to admit, I *did* like the attention, even when she'd come over just to tuck me in at night. Reminded me of when I was little and... Darnit, there she was again.

Quick. Think of someone else. Pinkie Pie, or Rainbow Dash. Yeah, them two.

I licked bug goop off of my fingers and frowned. If all the others made me feel like a kid, then Rainbow and Pinkie made me feel *old*. Both of them were just too bubbly and boisterous, and always messed up all the work I put into the library. Especially Rainbow Dash. Pinkie Pie was silly, and made of nonsense and bubblegum, but she could restrain herself unless she got her hooves on raw sugar. When (and it was always "when", never "if") she got into the stuff she'd go berserk and turn into a pink tornado that left disaster in her wake. And you couldn't get mad at her, oh no. When she'd crash she'd be the most adorable thing ever and Twilight would just throw a blanket over her and keep going, saying something flippant. And when she woke up, she wouldn't remember a thing.

But Rainbow didn't even have that much going for her. She'd barge in, make a mess, never apologize, then rush out to do something else. Sounded an awful lot like another mare I wasn't going to think about. Both her and Pinkie acted like they were my age, while I was stuck lecturing them about responsibility and proper use of library resources, which did not include "kindling". And Rainbow would try to play cool, act like she didn't hear me, but we both knew I was right, and just who the cooler one was. Me, of course. Yeah, it was harsh, but the truth hurts, baby. She was still pretty cool, though. Not many broads can pull off a rainbow hairdo and make it look good. She had a ways to go before it was as cool as my spines, though.

I smirked and scrubbed a rough patch under my armpit. *That* felt good. First good feeling all night. Between dizzy dames looking down their muzzles at me and screwy fillies trying to get their girl germs on me, on top of my job, and my side-job, I was pretty pooped.

I patted the pocket of my coat to reassure myself my spitball gun was still there and looked around. Looked as good a time as any to take a quick nap. I shuffled down until my head rested against the back of the tub, and was asleep before I could close my eyes.

I was being chased. That horrible space-bear Twilight had chased off was back, and was hungry this time. I didn't know how or who put it up to this, but it was coming for me, intent on turning me into its first appetizer. My spitball gun was useless against its starry hide, and my stubby legs were too short to outrun it. I had seconds before I was eaten.

A muzzle jabbed me in the ribs. I was scared, couldn't make out who it belonged to, and slapped at it. It did it again and called my name. No longer caring, I wrapped both arms around it and let it pull me away. Anything was better than getting eaten by an Ursa. Its jaws closed on air, then evaporated, along with the rest of it.

I opened my eyes to find a pair of deep violet ones looking back at me. They were huge and worried and a little red around the edges. I looked down. My arms were wrapped around Twilight's muzzle. My heart was racing, and all I wanted to do was curl up and hide. The dream had felt so real.

"Spike, are you alright? You sounded like you were having a nightmare." She didn't pull her head away. She did the opposite, and nuzzled my stomach. She sounded as worried as she looked.

I swallowed and closed my eyes again. That terrifying space-bear was waiting on the other side of my eyelids. I was afraid. You would have been, too, if you were chased by a three-story star-monster. I looked her in the eye and shook my head. "Come here, then," she said quietly, pulling me close.

Don't get me wrong, I liked Twilight just fine, but when she picked me up and held me, it was different from any other time. I felt like everything was going to be okay. No Ursa Minor could touch me, so long as I held onto her. She lifted me onto her bed and wrapped her mane around me, and I curled up next to her with my face in her shoulder. I was warm and safe, and I'm not too proud to say it was the best, most confusing thing ever.

I yawned and closed my eyes. The Ursa wasn't waiting for me this time, just sleep.

I woke up again. How did I manage to do that *twice*? I was back in the tub, and my arms were wrapped around something. I looked down. Dinky's muzzle was squashed against my chest. Her cheeks were mashed together and bright red. I coughed and let her go with a pat on the head. "Uh, hey again." Oh man. Awkward.

She backpedaled a bit and fidgeted. "I uh, I-I came to see if you needed anything." She looked nervous.

"Well, thanks, Miss Dinky. I'm okay, though." Something wasn't right. I checked the pocket of my coat again. When I looked up, Dinky was pointing a perfume bottle at me. There were tears at the edges of her eyes. "Dinky? You wanna put down the piece? We can talk this out. Whatever I did, we can work through it."

"Oh Spike... I'm so sorry." Her grip on the bottle wavered for a moment. "I-I can't. I just can't." She shook her head. I moved slowly for my gun, but a voice from the door stopped me.

"Hands awff da spitshoota, flatfoot."

Bloom's hired muscle stood in the doorway. Two feet of trouble in a purple and orange wrapper, with a cute face and a name you'd never associate with thuggery: Scootaloo. I'd tussled with her before, and came out on top only half of the time. Maybe a bit more. I did not want to throw down with her. Not with Dinky in the room.

She popped her hooves and strutted up to me, motioning for Dinky to keep the bottle on me. "You's been breakin' a lotta hawrts lately, big boy. My bawss, Miss Belle, even powr Dinky heeyahr. Th'bawss thinks it's time you's learned a lesson in mannahs." She took a step closer and nudged me across the cheek. "An' there ain't nuttin' yew c'n do about it, tough guy. So keep ya yap shut an' we'll go easy on ya's."

Oh dear Celestia in Canterlot her accent was *terrible*. She shot for downtown Broncs, missed, and wound up somewhere inside of a bad Fillywood production. It would have been funny if she hadn't been grinning like a fiend. Or if Dinky hadn't been pointing the perfume bottle at my face.

I glanced at Dinky, who wouldn't meet my eyes. "So you're workin' for the Cutie Mark Crew, now? I thought I taught you better than to get mixed up with them. I thought you liked me."

Dinky tightened her grip on the bottle. "I didn't want to do this Spike. I do like you. Like, like you-like you." She opened her eyes and locked them with mine. There was steel there, and tears. "But they've got my mom." That was two surprises in two seconds. I must be off my game if I missed that.

Apple Bloom's hoof came down on her shoulder. "Don't you worry none. You just keep 'im covered with that piece. Me an' my girls will take care of th'rest. And Scootaloo? Stop it with the accent. It's so bad even I can't understand ya."

"Awww... I liked the accent."

"I'm really sorry about this, Spike." Sweetie Belle stepped out from behind Scoots lugging a huge makeup kit. "But Apple Bloom is kinda right. If you hold still this'll be over with quick." She opened it and pulled out a set of makeup jars. My heart began to beat

faster.

I leaned backward, my hands in the air. I'd seen that kit before, and what had been done with it. Poor Snails got it last month, when he refused to pay his cootie protection. "What are you gonna do with that?" I kept my voice low, even. If I kept it cool, I could maybe bluff my way out of this.

Bloom's face, though, put paid to my delusions of getting out of this unscathed. That evil grin let me know they weren't going to listen to me. I clenched my fists and snorted back a loogie, ready to make a fight of it. Let 'em take me. I was gonna go down spittin'.

She pulled out a long, pink frilly dress with a silver tiara and waved it at me, causing me to lean away from the germs infesting it. Scootaloo tugged a pair of ribbon spools around her hooves and clapped them together. "You know exactly what I'm gonna do, Spike." Her voice was low, her eyes dangerous. "We're gonna teach you why it's a bad idea to toy with a girl's heart. We're gonna show you why it's a bad idea to mess with the Cutie Mark Crew."

Both Scoots and Sweetie punched the air. "Yeah!"

Dinky let out a scream and fired. Time slowed down. Drops of perfume hung in the air as I began to move. The Crew leapt on me, ribbons flying and lipstick bared.

Darkness fell.

I stumbled into the library some time later. I was battered, bruised, and covered in makeup. Half a dozen ribbons hung from my spines, partly-tied. A frilly dress hung off of one shoulder. I'd made it out alive, but only barely. I was covered in cooties and frou-frou junk. I could feel the girly germs working their way through my system, even with the mud on my scales. I smelled like a mixture of shame and girl. My pride felt like it was on fire.

I needed to get this off of me. I rushed into the bathroom, pushing the door open and stumbling to the sink.

Or at least that's what I was going to do.

I had to stop in the doorway. Twilight was there in the tub, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. The quiet noise of a tripped alarm spell jangled in my ear, mixing with the Cob Calloway on the record player. My Moonicron toy was floating in the air above her head, and my plastic submarine was doing donuts in a bank of soap-suds.

So that's where my toys kept disappearing to.

She broke the silence first. "Spike."

"Twilight."

Long, awkward seconds ticked by. She looked at me, I looked at my toys. Neither of us felt like laughing.

"I won't tell if you won't."

I nodded and shuffled my feet uncomfortably. "Right."

"Neither of us has to breathe a word about being caught in an embarrassing situation."

"Of course not."

"We can keep this between ourselves, keep each other's secrets. Like friends do."

"Most definitely."

More long, silent seconds.

I scratched my neck.

She fiddled with a rubber duck.

You could cut the awkwardness with a knife.

She cleared her throat. "...do you want to play with the submarine? The Twilight October could use a new captain." She offered me a sheepish grin.

I could feel a smile cracking my face as I nodded and climbed in with her. "Yeah. Thanks, Twilight."

Her smile widened as she passed me the toy. At that moment, I didn't care if I couldn't stop thinking about her when I shouldn't, or if she confused me with being nice and motherly or sisterly or whatever she was when all I wanted was for her to stop being weird. It didn't matter if our work relationship wasn't entirely appropriate. And so what if every time I thought of Rarity, Twilight was there with her? I realized that she was my friend first, and always would be no matter what. I grinned and shook my head.

Dames. If I live to be a million, I still won't have them figured out. But I wouldn't live a minute without 'em.

Celestia: Prologue

In the beginning, the world was not as we know it today. There were no monsters, and the spirits did not slumber as they do now. The elements roamed freely, and our ancestors lived short lives in their shadow, clinging to the edge of existence. Two ancient ponies, the oldest ones in the world and among the first ponies to be born, would change this, and bring the natural harmony that we enjoy.

A mountain sang out a mournful call to the heavens. His friend, a beautiful river, had been dammed by a rockslide from his neighbor. How was he to feed her meltwater from his great beard of snow now? Surely, she would die without it, and he would be left friendless. Alone.

Grandmother Moon turned her face toward the mountain. "Why do you cry, sad mountain?" she asked. "Is the night too dark? Are the stars too bright?"

"No, Grandmother Moon," said the mountain. "My neighbor has dammed my friend the river, and now I cannot feed her meltwater from my beard of snow."

Grandmother Moon looked at the other mountain, and then she looked at the river. Sure enough, the young silver ribbon was dying away. "Mountain, I cannot help you," she said with great pity in her heart. "I am Grandmother Moon, who gives light and rest to all things. I cannot save your friend. I will ask the stars. Perhaps they can help you."

And so Grandmother Moon flew out to the seven brightest stars in the sky and called their names. "O Stars, clever and mysterious, I have a young mountain in need. His friend is dying, and in desperate danger."

The seven stars winked and twinkled in their secret language. "What would you have us do, O Grandmother? We cannot help the mountain, for we are too far above. He cannot benefit from our wisdom in this. We are sorry. Ask the Four Winds. Perhaps they might help you where we cannot."

And so Grandmother Moon flew to the four corners of the world and gathered the Four Winds at the mountain's peak. "O Winds, can you help the mountain? His friend,

the river, is dying, and in desperate need of your aid."

The Four Winds looked to each other. First among them was the East Wind. "I can blow a breeze to soothe her spirits and ease her pain, Grandmother, but I cannot help her. I am sorry."

Second was the South Wind. "I would be a danger to her. My heat would dry her waters even more quickly, and she would die sooner. I am sorry, Grandmother."

Third was West Wind. "I could blow a storm to fill her banks again, and keep her alive for a time, but I could do nothing against the rock slide. I am sorry, Grandmother."

Lastly, North Wind whispered to the gathered Winds and Moon. "I could freeze her, and she would not die. But she would no longer be a river, and would not be the mountain's friend. I am sorry, Grandmother."

Grandmother Moon frowned in thought. The Winds could not help her, and the Stars had no answers. As she thought, Mighty Earthquake rumbled in the distance. "O Beautiful Grandmother, I offer my assistance. I can shake loose the rocks and free the river. You have only to give the word."

Grandmother Moon was delighted to hear this, but just then, the Stars flew down to stop her. "No, Grandmother! You mustn't! Earthquake would topple the mountains and swallow the river, and none would be happy!"

Grandmother Moon frowned at Earthquake. "You would try to deceive me, O Earthquake?"

Earthquake shook furiously at the implications. "No, Grandmother! I would never try to deceive. I apologize for not having thought ahead and realized the consequences of my actions. I will not try to shake the rocks loose. But who will be able to help?"

Grandmother Moon thought long and hard. There was only one being left powerful and wise enough to aid them. She bid the Winds and Stars to be silent, and Earthquake to be still. She waited the long hours for her husband to crest the horizon, then bid the others to bow. "O Husband of mine, Great Grandfather Sun, there is a young mountain who needs you. His friend the river has been dammed, and cannot survive long without his meltwater. I have asked the Winds and the Stars, and Earthquake has even offered his aid, but none can help. Please, O Husband, tell us what we must do."

Grandfather Sun was wise and powerful, and saw all that happened in his light. He had seen the young mountain's troubles and had thought long and hard. "O Wife of mine, beautiful and compassionate, I am afraid the mountain is beyond our help. But all is not lost, for I have seen that the answer lies within the mountain himself."

Grandfather Sun gestured to the mountain, where two ponies, one white and one dark blue, dwelt on his sides. "Though we are powerful, we are each limited. My light shines across the world, revealing truth, bringing life and warmth, destroying evil. But I cannot move a rock. Stars, you are cunning and mysterious. None know your hidden movements, but you cannot touch a rock. Earthquake, you cannot move the rocks without destroying that which you seek to save. We are limited by our natures. It is our curse as spirits." He gestured lower, and bid Grandmother Moon look upon the two ponies. "But these two creatures are not. Their nature is to be free, to choose what they will do."

The two looked up from their shelter and saw the Great Spirits gathered around them. They held their tongues, in awe of the creators of the world.

Grandfather Sun bowed his head to them, and they returned in kind. "'See how they have taken the trees and stones and made shelter? Not content with what was offered; they have taken their surroundings and bettered them. They have elevated themselves above the common beasts."

Grandmother Moon nodded. "I think I see, O Husband. But how will they move the rocks? They are small and weak, and the rocks are so much bigger than they. They would surely be crushed in the attempt."

"We will each grant them gifts to take," said Grandfather Sun. "They will use these gifts to help the mountain and the river, and, should they prove worthy of it, they will be allowed to keep them." Grandfather Sun turned to the small white pony, who looked on him in awe, but unafraid, and bowed his head. "O white beast, I grant you the power and majesty of the Sun that you might better the world with my light. I give you the foresight and wisdom to bring harmony, and the clarity of mind to use it well." The white pony bowed low, and then was bathed in the Sun's light. She stood and named herself Celestia.

The Four Winds, ever impatient, leapt forward to be the next to give their gifts. "We, also, give you both sovereignty over the winds and the mastery of flight. The weather will answer your call, and the seasons will bend to your will." The Winds bowed one at a time to the pair, who then bowed in turn. Soft wings grew from their backs as the Winds' gift entered them.

The Stars descended, their glittering light shining bright as Moon's. "We grant you both the knowledge of the Heavens and the mastery of Magic that is the secret key to every answer you would wish to seek. Take this knowledge so that you might work wonders." They each bowed, and the pair bowed in turn. Tall, fluted horns grew from their foreheads and gleamed with magic.

Earthquake was hesitant. He had no gift he felt worthy of giving, for he was a force of destruction who had only recently realized his own nature. "O gentle beasts, I have little to offer you save the wisdom of restraint, for I have learned when to hold my

might back, and when to let it loose. I offer this, and the secret wisdoms of the soil, so that your children might be fruitful and prosperous." They smiled, and said it was a generous gift, and Mighty Earthquake was pleased. As they bowed, he gave them a small measure of his limitless strength. Their bodies grew tall and powerful, their eyes sharp and keen.

Then it came for Grandmother Moon's turn to offer a gift. She had waited patiently for the others to give theirs and smiled approvingly as they gave their gifts. She descended to the peak and stood over the blue creature, who bowed her head fearfully. "Do not be afraid, lovely beast. To you, I give a heart full of love. I give you the compassion to do what must be done, and the love of your fellow being. I give you the knowledge of the hearts of others." She bowed to the blue creature, who bowed low in return. When she raised her head, she smiled at Grandmother Moon and named herself Luna.

Grandfather Sun smiled at his wife, for he knew her heart and knew the reason for her gift.

And so Celestia and Luna set to work on their first great task. They carefully placed the stones at the base of both mountains one by one, mindful of their weight and potential uses. They worked tirelessly for a night and a day as the Spirits watched. Finally, the morning of the second day, they removed the last stone. Bright River flowed free of her imprisonment, rejuvenated and happy.

"O wonderful ponies!" she cried. "Lovely Luna! Beautiful Celestia!" She sprang up out of her banks, fresh and cold with new water, and bowed low to them. "I am forever in your debt. Name one boon you would ask of me, and it is yours!"

The two ponies looked to each other. "I can think of nothing we need now. But we may have need of you soon," said Celestia. "We will call on you then."

The river smiled and bowed again, and then flowed down the mountain.

The neighboring mountain, an angry and sulking peak, rumbled at the indignance. The two sisters looked across at the mountain. "O Mountain, why do you rumble so?" asked Luna.

The neighboring mountain was sullen and dour as he spoke. "You have destroyed my work! I was going to rid myself of the bothersome fleas that live within me by choking their river and shaking them loose from my skin! They tunnel and scratch and make endless noise so that I cannot sleep!" Cracks appeared in his skin as he shook. "Without the river, they would have left me or died of thirst, but now they will return and they will resume their scratching and merrymaking!" Anger was replaced by grim satisfaction. "See how I have killed many of the ponies? Dam the river again, or I will kill them as they return, just as I have killed so many before them!"

Luna gasped in horror. How could a mountain hold such petty hatred in its heart? Celestia flew to her sister's aid. "O Sullen Peak, you are a spiteful and cruel thing, and you must learn the price for such jealousies. For every creature you have killed, I will make ten, and they will hollow you out and live inside you and around you, as will their children, and their children's children!" Her horn glowed and her forelegs waved, and many hundreds of ponies sprouted from the fallen remains of the dead. "And for every pony you have chased away, I will bring back a hundred! And they will live on the plains below, fed by the waters of the Bright River!" Her horn shone brightly, sending out a call to the ponies that had fled.

And thus the land that would later become known as Equestria was created.

Luna looked out at the teeming plain. "That is not enough, Sister. The Mountain will simply resent us and attempt to destroy the works of these beautiful beings." She waved down at the herds on the plain below. "I could not bear to see them die again. And so I will give them our gifts, so that they might have the tools to prevent this from happening."

Celestia nodded. "That is wise, Sister. But I urge you do not give them all of our strength. It would burn them from the inside out and leave them hollowed shells. We are ancient, and can shoulder the burden of this power. They are not gifted as we."

Luna nodded, and spread her forelegs wide. Her horn shimmered with silver light, and thus the three races of ponies were born. The Pegasi were given flight, and the mastery of weather given them by the Four Winds. The Unicorns were given cunning and the knowledge of magic, granted them by the Seven Brightest Stars. The Earth Ponies were given a measure of the strength and wisdom of Earthquake.

The two sisters looked out at what they had created, and saw that it was good. "But what of the ponies who stayed when Sullen Peak tried to shake? The ones who did not die?" Luna looked to her sister for an answer.

Celestia thought. "We will ask them out and ask why they stayed. If their answers are satisfactory, we will ask Bright River to reward them with eternal life.

And so the Immortal Rulers were born.

The first to come out of the mountain was a tall, muscular pony. He bowed to the sisters and puffed out his chest. "I am Crom, strongest of the ponies. I stayed to find the heart of the mountain so that I might crush it beneath my hooves and save my people. I did not wish to kill, but I did not want my people to die. Alas, I could not protect my people."

The sisters returned the bow. "We will give you strength eternal, that you will be able to crush any foe under your hooves, and the wisdom to know when to use it. There is much to do, Crom. We grant this boon asking that you help us in bringing harmony to

the world."

"Then you will have my help." And so they made Crom immortal and granted him governance of the earth and growing things, and the secrets of the world below.

Next came four ponies, lean of leg and keen of eye. They bent low in a bow. "I and my siblings are called Boreas, Notos, Eurus, and Zephyr," said one. "We stayed because we are the swiftest ponies, and guided the others out when the mountain began to shake. Those that were trapped we brought to safety. We did not want any pony to die, but we could not save everyone."

The sisters returned the bow. "If you will join us, then we will give you the swiftness to overcome any obstacle and sight unending."

The four siblings agreed, and were made immortal. To them were given the governance of each of the four winds and the cardinal directions.

Lastly came seven ponies, lean and mysterious with stars on their brows. They did not speak their names, but took the names of the seven brightest stars in the sky. "We are the cleverest ponies. We saw that the mountain would not tolerate us and began to evacuate our people. We also guided Crom to the heart of the mountain. Alas, our foresight came too late, and many of our people were lost."

The sisters bowed. "Then, if you will join us, we will give you the knowledge of prophecy, and the foresight to avert any doom."

They nodded, and were made immortal. One of the seven, however, raised a hoof in caution. "Beware, O fair sisters. There is danger far ahead. It is hazy, indistinct, but present. A doom is upon us if we do not hold fast to each other. Our friendship must sustain us."

The sisters looked to one another, then to their world. "Then we will stay true to this friendship, and keep our bonds strong," said Celestia. Satisfied, they turned lastly to the first mountain and bowed low. "O Bearded Mountain, we ask to be able to stack the stones of our labors atop your slopes. We will make our shelter greater, and give our subjects a place to live in safety," said Luna.

The mountain thought, then agreed. "You may. I will give you my word of safety forever. No pony will ever come to harm while they live on my slopes or beneath my skin."

And so the First City and the Court of Immortals were founded.

When the last stone was set into place, Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon descended from the sky and looked at their two children. "You have done well," said Grandmother Moon. "You have created something greater than yourselves." She bowed

low. "We give you governance of Sun and Moon in trust, that you may better serve the needs of the world. We will now slumber, and give you and your people peace."

And that is the story of how Equestria was made.

Celestia: Celestia

"The Court of Immortals acknowledges Princess Celestia, Three-Fold Equine, Princess of Equestria, Queen of the Sun, Empress of the Waking, Toppler of Mountains, Sword of Equinity," barked a voice, low and stentorian. "Welcome, Princess Celestia! Hail Princess Celestia!"

Hooves shod in orichalcum rang against the ancient marble of the Court as the Sun-Queen stepped through the pillars framing the entrance to the Court. She held her head proudly, neck arched just so, as she stepped through the vaulting entryway into the open-air court. Her hoofsteps rang out with musical notes as she passed the great table and its empty seats, listing off the positions from memory.

There would be Crom, her oldest and dearest friend besides her sister. She suppressed a smile at the prospect of seeing him again; this was supposed to be a solemn event, after all. Even still, she couldn't keep it off of her face entirely, and had to look away from the Court Herald as she passed him to hide her faltering façade. There would be the Wind Kings just beyond him, sitting in seats decorated with symbols of their directions. Their entourage of Guardians would flank them in smaller chairs of their own. Still further, toward the end of the table furthest from Celestia, would sit the Seven Siblings, or they would when they arrived, of course. And finally, at the opposite end of the table, would be her notably absent sister.

As First among Immortals, she was the first to be given entrance to the Court, with only the Court Herald allowed in front of her. It was part of the procession; a ritualistic parade of each of the Immortals in turn, starting with the Sun. The Exalted Guardians were behind them, trailing their patrons. Lastly, Luna would bring up the rear and close the circle, ending the day.

Of course, Luna hadn't been able to make it for some time, and still wasn't. Celestia bit the inside of her cheek to keep from sighing as she settled herself in the cool marble of her throne at the head of the table. Luna was still fragile from her ordeal. Restoring her power to its untwisted state had taken a toll on the younger Immortal. She was recovering, just slowly. Celestia held a secret hope that her sister would have wanted to attend Court, to begin her return to full health again, but the younger Princess had said she still didn't feel up to making it.

Oh well... Maybe next time, I suppose?

She looked up as the Court Herald read off the next name.

"The Court of Immortals acknowledges Crom, Great in His Mountain, The Hundred-Fold Lord, Keeper of Secrets, Sovereign of the Soil. Welcome, Crom! Hail Crom!"

Celestia's face lit up as she watched the entrance to the Court, her eyes shining with excitement at seeing her old friend again. She couldn't hide a slight, unregal wiggle of her shoulders, and had to stop herself from preening. Crom was handsome, after all, and dashing. And brave. And handsome. Even after all these thousands of years, he could still put a spring in her step just by smiling at her. She'd definitely have to make time for him... After official business was concluded, of course! A giggle broke the sober silence of the court, which Celestia quickly stifled behind a hoof. Her small, decidedly non-royal smile grew wider as she watched.

"In absentia."

Oh.

...Right.

He wasn't coming this time, either. Celestia frowned and thought back to his reasoning. *I remember, yes. He went missing several hundred years ago. I remember... him retreating under the earth, looking haggard and horrible.* Her frown deepened and her shoulders sunk. *That's right. He'd gone feral. Too much time underground chasing secrets, the Siblings had said. It had... changed him.* She couldn't suppress a sigh this time. The Court Herald looked up from his paper at his Princess with an apologetic stare.

Celestia's giggle fluttered among the columns like a mocking echo.

"Ah, The Court of Immortals acknowledges King Boreas Septentrio, Lord of the North Wind, Sovereign of Winter, and Father of the Ursa Major. Welcome, King Boreas! Hail King Boreas!"

Celestia's face lightened slightly. Boreas was a dour stick in the mud, but had a surprisingly sharp sense of humor when he allowed himself to indulge in it. She remembered him deep in his cups one starry evening before... Nightmare Moon, when he had had his children dance for him. It was quite a sight, seeing a dozen hundred-foot tall star-bears waltz.

"In absentia."

No one walked up the marble steps and took their place at the table.

Boreas, too? But I remember seeing him only just last decade! Celestia shook her head. Wait. No, she hadn't. She frowned deeper, her alabaster brow knitting. *Oh... He was the first to disappear into his own realm. That's right.* She sighed and smoothed her brow as she watched the Court Herald tried to regain his voice under the gaze of his Princess.

"The Court of Immortals acknowledges King Eurus Volturnus, Lord of the East Wind, Sovereign of Spring, and Father of the Imp. Welcome, King Eurus! Hail King Eurus!"

Celestia braced herself. Eurus, she knew, had gone shortly after his brother. He retreated into the East and shut himself inside his bower and didn't come out. Celestia hadn't the heart to go after him, and neither had anyone else. She let him pine in solitude.

"In absentia."

"The Court of Immortals acknowledges King Notos Auster, Lord of the Southern Wind, Sovereign of Summer, and Father of the Cockatrice. Welcome, King Notos! Hail King Notos! In absentia."

Fat lot of good that did anyone... Poor, gentle Zephyrus let apathy take him away not long afterward. I remember now. Another sigh echoed through the still-empty court. Notos was last, of course. He stayed nearly as long as Crom had. And then... he just leapt onto his sirocco and sped off to the south. I don't think anyone's heard anything of him in hundreds of years. Gods, has it really been so long?

Celestia's ears pinned back and her head lowered slightly.

"The Court of Immortals acknowledges King Zephyrus Favonius, Lord of the West Wind, Sovereign of Autumn, and King of the Hydra. Welcome, King Zephyrus! Hail King Zephyrus!"

Was there anyone still left?

"In absentia."

At least the Siblings hadn't gone. Cold and distant they may be; they're at least still peers of mine. I can talk to them, kind of, without having to worry about making some faux pas and setting them off, or mentioning anything even remotely connected with the moon, and sending the poor dear into fits. It'll be good to finally talk to someone without them bowing or scraping or having to walk on eggshells around them. Celestia set her gaze hopefully on the entranceway to the Court as the Herald cleared his throat and continued to read.

"The Court Acknowledges the Seven Siblings of the Stars! Sirius the Constant! Canopus Most-Bright! Arcturus of the Many Eyes! Vega Woe-Seer! Rigel Furthest-Seeing! Procyon Fortune-Bringer! Betelgeuse the Eldest! Keepers of the Tapestry of Fates, and Most-Wise of the Immortals! Welcome, Seven Siblings! Hail the Seven Siblings!"

Celestia's ears flicked back and forth as hope and fear warred within her. She never saw much of them, but they had never failed the Court when they were needed most. *And I can talk to them!*

"In absentia."

Celestia heaved a gusty sigh. "Of course they are."

The Court Herald, an elderly stallion who, despite his advanced age, was still bright-eyed and well-muscled, swallowed hard and looked up from his scroll. "I apologize, your Majesty. I merely report the same thing my father's father told me. The Siblings are gone, too." He shifted uneasily. "If you like, your Majesty, I can stop."

"No, no, continue. You might as well."

"...Very well, your Majesty."

Celestia bit her tongue. She remembered now; they were all gone. Those that hadn't left by the time her sister had let her power twist and warp in on itself, turning her into the hateful moon-demon Nightmare Moon, did so shortly afterward. They all did the same thing. Too much time spent among the winds, or out in the stars, or under the earth, and not enough time with each other. Less and less time each year was spent with their peers. Months became years. Years became decades. Decades became scores.

Even Crom, whom she loved dearly, left her to follow the veins of secrets under the earth, turning into a half-mad, hateful thing that spat and fought her at every turn and endangered their people with earthquakes and sinkholes. She remembered crying as she closed the crypt imprisoning him underground. She hadn't wanted to. She hated herself for doing it. But to save their people, she had to.

Celestia wished she couldn't remember, and that her friends were with her now. That she didn't have to remember. *But of course I must... There's no one else left to do it.*

"The Court acknowledges First Rose, Exalted Guardian of the Eastern Bower! In absentia."

Celestia closed her eyes and tuned him out.

Why do you keep doing this to yourself, Celestia? Why do you come here every year, hoping against hope to see your friends again? You know that they've been gone for centuries now. Even the Exalted Guardians have gone. So why do you do it? Celestia chewed her lip. Is it masochism? Or are you just an old fool who's finally gone senile?

you want someone to love you back

Celestia blinked and looked around. Who had said that? Was there someone else there? Finally?

"The Court acknowledges Silver Sky, Exalted Guardian of the Archback Jet-Stream! In absentia."

Of course not... she thought bitterly.

"The Court acknowledges Steven Magnet, Exalted Guardian of the Everfree River! Welcome, Steven Magnet!"

Celestia's ears perked as she heard the sound of scales slithering across marble. She opened her eyes and saw a towering, vividly purple serpent slither into the Court and settle himself around a seat near the far end of the table. He gave the Princess a short bow and then wiggled his fingers at her in a limp-wristed hello.

She smiled hesitantly back at him and inclined her head.

"The Court acknowledges Autumn Gold, Exalted Guardian of the Appleloosan Plain! Welcome, Autumn Gold!" A dusty grey earth pony, a mare taller and more muscular than most stallions, walked slowly into the Court. She tipped her hat to the Sun Queen in a terse greeting, and then took her place at the very last seat.

Celestia frowned briefly. "But, no. No that can't be right."

The Herald and both Guardians looked down the long table at Celestia. "Your Highness?" called Steven in his thready, too-high voice. "Is there something wrong, darling?"

Celestia stared firmly at Autumn, eyes crinkling with the faintest hint of a glower. "You're not the Guardian of the Appleloosan Plain, Painted Scale is."

The Herald swallowed hard, then looked at the two Guardians, who shrank back slightly and looked at each other. Finally, some long moments later, Autumn Gold squared her jaw and cleared her throat. "Ah, yer majesty? Painted Scale died eleven years ago."

Celestia stared blankly. "Then how did you become Guardian?" Her pupils narrowed slightly.

Autumn grit her teeth and tugged her hat down over her face to hide the bitter grimace. "...yew Exalted me, yer Highness."

Celestia went pale under her white fur as memories washed over her. She remembered attending Painted Scale's funeral with her successor, a young farmsteader, one of the first to settle the area. No, a visitor, come home for the winter. Autumn Gold, she called herself. *One of the Apple Clan, that's right. There was... there was something very important I had to do for her, but what? All I remember is a message somewhere. I can't have lost it.*

it doesn't matter she is your subject she must love you regardless

Celestia tossed her head, as if shooing away a fly. "You're right. I'm sorry." She turned to the Herald. "Continue, please."

He nodded slowly and cleared his throat. "...The Court acknowledges Princess Luna, Three-Fold Equine, Princess of Equestria, Queen of the Moon, Empress of Dreams, Architect of Compassion, Shield of Ponydom. Welcome, Princess Luna! Hail Princess Luna! In absentia." The Herald rolled up his scroll and tucked it into a pouch at his side, then lifted a well-worn spear and slammed its butt into the floor, sending three loud knocks echoing through the Court. "The Court of Immortals is now in session!"

he's a liar it hasn't been in session in over six hundred years

Celestia's jaw flexed as her teeth ground against each other, clearly audible in the nearly silent Court. She turned her head slowly and took in the view of her Hall. Whoever had said that...

There, at the end, was Luna's empty throne. Dust had stubbornly collected on the seat, despite the best efforts of the caretaker. Small plants grew in the cracks and had snaked their tiny roots into the marble. Beside it were Steven and Autumn's seats, well-worn and well-used. Autumn had carved something into the table. She couldn't read it from here, but it looked several years old. The rest of the seats after that were in steadily worsening states of disrepair, until they reached the worst at her end of the table. Crom's had been split in half, and had a half-dozen hoofprints gouged into the stone. Boreas had made his of ice, which had long since melted away, while the others had scoured theirs smooth, and were steadily turning to rubble piles.

The floor was in a similar state. More of those odious weeds had grown up between the tiles, bitten off here and there in an obviously futile attempt to control them, while dirt had accumulated in the corners, refusing to be dislodged. The whole *Courtechoed*. It had never echoed before.

Whoever had said it, they were right. I've been a fool, trying to keep something alive that's been gone for centuries. And if Luna's repeated absence is any indication... Celestia bit her lip and looked at the table. "Herald."

"Yes, Majesty?"

"Dismiss the Court." She stood up from her throne and strode toward the entrance.

"Your Highness? What do you mean, 'dismiss the court', sweetheart?" Steven called, his brow knitted with worry. "We haven't even*started!*"

Autumn Gold stood up, hackles bristling. "So that's it? Yer just gonna waste our time? Again?" Steven laid a hesitant claw on Autumn's shoulder, which she shook off with an angry growl. "Yew Exalted me, an' left me out in that forsaken little spit o'desert away from all mah family, an' now yer just gonna cut me loose?" She hawked and spat, then stormed toward the entrance, calling over her shoulder at the Princess. "Well fine, then. Yew've disappointed me so far, cain't see why this time'd be any different."

"Oh my. Your Majesty, I must apologize for her outburst. She has been having a trying time, as she related to me before we entered, and—"

Celestia lifted a hoof to silence him and smiled sadly. "Thank you, Steven. I understand." She gave one last look around the Court. "Steven, I want you to go home." Her eyes fogged slightly, going distant, as she thought. "Go home. Make what life you can in the forest. Don't come back here." She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. "The Court is dead. There's no sense wasting your time here."

Steven's lower lip quivered as he slithered away from her, hands fidgeting nervously. "But, I, you... O-Of course, your Majesty." He bowed deeply and slithered out of the Court.

****he only pretends you can make him like you he can be your friend you just have to order him****

Celestia shook her head. "Be quiet. You don't know what you're talking about," she said with a low snarl. A haze rippled in front of her, and she swiped at it with her horn, dissipating it.

"...Your Highness? Who are you talking to?"

Celestia blinked. "No one, Herald. It's not important."

Herald walked around in front of her, cradling his ceremonial spear against his shoulder. "Alright, your Majesty. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

She shook her head. "No, Herald. You should leave, too. There's nothing left for you to do."

He looked slowly around the Court as his sovereign stepped around him. He took a deep breath and puffed his chest. "No, Majesty. I think I'll stay right here. I've so much left to clean." He turned around to face her back. "And besides, this place is the only home I know. My father raised me here, and his father, and his father. And so on for generations." He smiled proudly and thumped the butt of his spear against the floor. "You say the Court is gone, but I don't believe you. Not for a moment." He bowed deeply, mane brushing the floor. "I have faith in you, your Highness. So long as you're with us, The Court of Immortals lives." He quickly stood and turned back to the Court.

Celestia stiffened at his words, eyes flicking back and forth among the columns.

ehehehehe

Celestia landed on her balcony just moment after lowering the sun and was immediately greeted by an ever-present and always faithful quartet of guards. She nodded at them in acknowledgement, and then brushed quickly past them, her eyes unfocused and distant.

What is going wrong with you, Celestia? You can't be... be turning. You have your sister with you. You've kept yourself together with your students' help. You're fine. She trotted quickly down the hall to her chambers, ignoring the queries of the guard captain. Silver Hoof, or Sun Flare, or something. She couldn't remember, and frankly, didn't care at the moment.

that's right everything is fine don't worry

I just need to relax. A short break by myself to get my head together. You're not turning. You're just stressed. She nosed open the door to the hallway leading her chamber and let it swing closed, nearly trapping one of the guards in it.

Speaking of my students, maybe it would do me good to visit Twilight? She waved away her majordomo, a dark blue pegasus or unicorn who'd come fluttering up beside her with something irritating and trivial and no doubt urgent to the little mare. *No, she doesn't need me looking after her anymore. She's a grown mare with her own life.* She shook her head, fighting the surge of jealousy that flared in her. *I don't need to bother her with little things like a bad day, even if she would make time for me. No. I'll just relax for a few minutes. Maybe a bath. Yes, that sounds good.*

your students would help you

Of course they would. That is why I picked them in the first place. Why I took students at all. Their naiveté and innocence meant I could groom them to be companions, of a sort, someone I could talk to. Someone I could be friends with. In return, they prospered. Flourished, even. I spared nothing when it came to them. Especially Twilight, my most precious student. But I don't need companions now, because the Rainbow Gambit worked. "I have Luna."

do you?

She growled and shook her head. This isn't what she needed. She needed to think about relaxing, not outdated measures to keep Equestria safe from herself. Just a short rest, an hour, at most, to sort myself out. Then, I can return to my people, refreshed. That's all. Just a short break.

why not longer? they do owe you everything. take two hours. three hours.

No. Selfishness did not get me this far without the others. I just... I just need a moment, that's all.

Her horn sparked as she shut the door to her bath chamber and locked it. A sigh of relief rolled out of her as she settled into the quiet chamber. This was her place, where no one else could go without invitation. It reflected the Princess' desire for privacy in the choice of decorations. It was free of the overdone, vaulting architecture that plagued the rest of the castle, preferring the more intimate nature of an enclosed space lined with soft carpet and simple tapestries. Fluffy cushions were strewn about haphazardly, piled up or scattered about according to the Princess' whims and needs. Tonight, they sat stacked in a lazy pile in an alcove next to a lacquered cabinet that was kept locked at all times.

She smiled at her little sanctum and walked toward the tub, the one concession to the overwrought designs of the castle beyond. Black granite, polished smooth, surrounded the tub, which was set into the floor so that the lip was flush with the tile. Gold filigree, in the design of a sunburst, ringed the edge. The tub was always filled with water, and was easily large enough to accommodate several ponies of her size. It had, at one point, held every one of the Immortals with room to spare.

Celestia bent her head down and touched her horn to the water, sending a pulse of warmth into it. Instantly, tendrils of steam began snaking away from the surface, filling the room with a bloom of wet heat. She quickly shrugged out of her golden regalia and dropped it in a loose jumble on a nearby cushion. Now naked, she settled into the bath with a satisfied coo of delight.

"This is exactly what I needed..."

She lay back against the edge of the tub with her eyes closed, her mane spreading out across the water like a living oil-slick, and sank below the water until only

her head was above it. Steam curled around her muzzle in a tender caress, while the heat worked into her muscles and smoothed away tension and regret and fatigue. She stayed like that for many long minutes before a memory flitted through her head. She cracked an eye and looked across the tub.

Twilight used to play in here when she was little. She'd bring a big bucket of toys and plop it down on the edge of the tub, then very carefully arrange them by size and color. And then the little scamp would gleefully toss them all in and chase them around and make a great big mess of everything.

Celestia smiled at the memory. *And then Spike would waddle in, and Twilight would scold him and very gently lower him into the water. She was always so careful with him. She always made sure he had on this ridiculous foam bath-hat to keep the soap out of his eyes, which she wore too, of course.* Her eye wandered up to the wood cabinet in the corner. *Come to think of it, I still have that silly hat of hers. She'd be absolutely mortified to hear I'd kept it,* she thought with a wicked little grin. Her grin softened, taking a melancholy tint as her eye wandered to the cabinet by the wall.

Her horn gleamed as she levitated the small cabinet over to her and undid the magical locks, and then turned to face the edge of the tub to nose around inside of it. More memories flashed as she looked over the contents. *There's little Gloaming Mist's favorite tea set. I can't count the number of tea parties she forced the Guard into with it and her great big blue eyes. Twilight's toy battleship. She kept trying to sink me with it, and Spike kept trying to eat it. I don't remember how many times I replaced that silly toy. And Star Streaker's toy sword, too! I thought she'd taken that with her when she left in... when I buried her with it nearly a hundred years ago.*

Bittersweet feelings rose up in her breast as she took them out of the cabinet and laid them reverently on the floor. *Minty Gales' kazoo, with which he terrorized all of his other tutors, and me, at all hours of the night, she thought with a dry smile. And Redhoof's favorite painting palette, which he gave to me when he... when he died.*

your students can still help you.

She looked deep into the cabinet, at the very back of the highest shelf. There, tucked in a corner, was an ancient stone box. Celestia floated it down to the ground and opened it carefully. Inside were two clay dolls. One was painted white and pink, the other shades of blue. They were crude, but the emotions she felt when she saw the ancient dolls were as vivid as when she first received them, so many thousands of years ago. If anything, they were sharper.

Luna gave these to me, before we became Immortals. She worked so hard on them, even as difficult as it was back then. She wanted to give me something so we'd never forget each other. As if I could ever forget her. Tears welled in her cheeks as she cradled the ancient toys against her chest. How long had it been since she'd seen

these? Decades? Centuries? She hadn't even thought of them until now.

play with them. remember their love for you. they haven't gone.

That's right. As long as I have these treasures of theirs, they'll never leave me. She gently placed the two dolls next to the tea set and arranged the other toys around it. A tight smile tugged at Celestia's lips as she carefully poured imaginary tea for each of the participants. *This is so... silly. If anyone should see me, I... Well, I suppose they wouldn't do anything. They'd all be too afraid that their Princess was losing it. Even Luna would probably just turn her nose up at playing with dolls now.*

but not your students. never your students. they loved you, and always will.

She nodded slowly as she lifted the teacup to her lips and took a noisy play sip. *My students would never think ill of me. They love me, and always have.*

And we always will, Princess Celestia, spoke Redhoof's palette.

Celestia bowed to it. "Thank you, Redhoof. I'm so glad to hear you say that."

Princess? Could I have another cup? I'm ever so thirsty, called Gloaming's teacup.

The Sun-Princess nodded and poured her another cup, smiling at the pleased sounds the little cup was making. "There you are my dear student. Let me know if you need anything else."

Thank you so much, Princess!

"Please, call me Celestia. You've all earned that right, after all." She smiled as Twilight's battleship waved a cannon. "Yes, Twilight. Even you," she cooed, tenderly running a hoof across the battleship's prow.

No, Prin—Celestia! I was gonna ask if I could ride on your shoulders again after the party! You did promise yesterday I could, and you told me a pony always keeps her promises, she said primly.

Celestia nodded. "Very good, Twilight. You've been learning well. Now, I did promise, but you have to remember that—"

Tia? You're not going to go back on a promise now, are you? Luna's clay doll teased her, its eyes twinkling with mischief. ***Just think how it would break the poor filly's heart not to have a ponyback ride from her dearest friend.***

Celestia rolled her eyes, but her smile widened as she picked up the little battleship. "Oh, very well. Come here you little goofball." She gently placed the toy in

her mane, where it snuggled into the strands with a whoop of glee. Celestia leaned her head back to nuzzle its bridge and tuck it securely against her neck.

What about me, Celestia? I wanna ride, too! Minty's kazoo jumped up and down eagerly. ***Can I have a ride, too?***

You may as well let him, 'Tia. They're not going to sit still unless you give them a ride. Luna lifted her teacup to her muzzle and sipped daintily at the imaginary brew. ***Mmm... I have to hand it to you, Streaker. You make an excellent pot of tea.***

Streaker's sword blushed and hid its pommel against the side of Mist's teacup. ***Th-thank you, your Majesty... ***

Celestia smiled brightly at her students and her sister as she placed the aging kazoo on top of her head. A laugh bubbled out of her as it strutted around between her ears.

I'm King of the world! Nothing can stop me now! cried Minty.

Nuh-uh! Princess Celestia is Queen of the World! You're just a student, Minty! Twilight angrily waved her little cannons at the kazoo.

You're just jealous that I get to sit up here, while you're all the way down there.

"Now students, don't fight. Both positions have something to offer, remember," Celestia said in a soothing voice. "Up there, Mist, you can see forever, and always know what's coming. You have the advantage of foresight." She turned toward the battleship. "But down here, you get the intimacy of being close to a friend you love dearly. Down here, you'll always be close to those you love." She smiled as she placed a kiss on the battleship's prow.

Mist hopped down into Celestia's mane and snuggled in on the opposite side. ***I wanna be close, too!***

Luna smiled an enigmatic smile as she poured herself another cup of tea.

Princess? Celestia?

"Yes? What is it, Redhoof?"

If it's alright, I'd like to ride in Princess Luna's mane. The palette shuffled awkwardly, its edges turning red with embarrassment.

Alright, sweetheart. I'll let you ride on my mane if you want.

Celestia smiled as the palette eagerly leapt onto Luna's back.

A tinkling broke the mood.

Celestia looked down. On top of Luna's doll was a wooden palette, heavy with old paint. The doll was cracked and broken, with the head and ears scattered, and all four legs snapped in several places. How had it—she looked down at her hooves, where dust from the palette rested. Horror sank its claws deep into her heart as she pressed herself against the floor beside the broken doll.

"Oh. Oh no... no no no no no no."

She gingerly slid the palette off of the doll and scooped the pieces into her hooves. Powder dusted the soles as the edges of the ancient doll rubbed against each other and began to crumble. With a startled cry, she lifted them with her magic and set them back on the floor. "What... what is going on?"

Celestia's eyes darted around, pupils shrunk to pinpricks. She felt something nudge against her cheek, and she brushed a hoof against it. "What... why am I wearing toys in my mane? Why— what am I doing?" Tears ran freely as she looked around the room. "Who was I talking to? There isn't anyone else here. There can't be! Then—"

Realization hit her.

Celestia curled up against the side of the tub and laid her cheek against the cold gold inlay. Her trembling hooves covered her face as her mind raced.

She was going. She was turning. She could feel it. She remembered everything now. How could she have forgotten it all? Was this a symptom, too? Would she remember anything of herself when she changed? She could see it all. Everything. Autumn Gold's message to her children. The hundreds of times her staff had covered for her when the madness crept over her, causing her to forget in the middle of running the country. All the faces she'd forgotten, the names that had blurred together.

Everything she'd worked for would be undone. Her sister wouldn't be strong enough to oppose her. She'd never get to see Crom again. All of her ponies, all of her people, would... she didn't know what would happen. She couldn't think of what she would do. The Elements of Harmony would have to be used against her, but would they work? Could they do their magic a second time? Would they even get a chance to use them? No. Not if Twilight was forced to see her like this. A madmare.

That was nearly the cruelest stroke of all. The one pony in the world she could talk to like a friend, or whom she hoped could, who had given her back her sister, who had given her everything and more, kept Celestia sane, and thereby kept Equestria safe would... *She'd have to pull the trigger. There's no way I could force her to do that.*

There's no way she would be able to.

A piece of paper rustled against the stone chest as the contents shifted. Celestia glanced up at it and turned pale under her fur. She reached out and brushed it with a hoof, her gorge rising in her throat as she read the words on the yellowed page.

If only she were stronger... If she were stronger, wiser, better, none of this would have happened. She would never have had to do the things she had done.

***But it did. And you did. And it's all your fault. Now you get to terrorize everyone. Everyone who's ever looked up to you, worshipped you, adored you. ***

"N-No..."

***Loved you. ***

***All the sacrifices you made, and that they made for you, you get to spit on them. You finally get to take your proper due. All because you weren't strong enough. Now, you get to be more. *** And then the voice was gone, leaving Celestia alone with the mocking echo of her laughter in the Court ringing triumphantly in her ears.

Tears flowed freely down Celestia's face as she cowered against the side of the tub, beating her hooves against her ears to drown out the exultant laugh only she could hear. The only sound in the chamber was Celestia sobbing into her wings.

Celestia: Diary

Excerpt from the diary of Princess Celestia, dated 1 January, 1001 CR.

Twilight Sparkle, if you are reading this, it is because the worst has happened. I will have turned into a monster worse than any other. I am going to have to ask something terrible of you. Something terrible, but ultimately necessary if Equestria is to survive me. Before I do that, please know that I love you. More than any other of my students, you have touched me, kept me together in these trying years.

And now I must explain what will have happened.

I am not a god, and never have been, nor claimed to be. I am an Immortal; a mortal being elevated in the Dawn Times by the primeval Gods to bring harmony and balance to the elemental chaos. Together with my fellow Immortals and my sister, I have carved out and tamed a paradise for my people, the ponies of the world. We have also brought balance to the rest of the world, taming its wild spirits and appointing guardians over them. But we are not infallible.

An Immortal is very powerful, but has a critical vulnerability. We need each other. We need social contact and amiable relations and affection. In short, we thrive on friendship. Without it... well you need only remember Nightmare Moon to know what happens. But I will explain further.

An Immortal's power is extremely seductive. There is always the niggling temptation; however faint, to delve into our power, to join with its heart, and never come back. But in doing so we cut ourselves off from outside contact, and with nothing to distract ourselves from our power, the temptation begins to build and grow into an obsession. We feel the need to always be in contact with it, to study it, never part from it. Just like you and your books in the Royal Library, before you went to Ponyville.

When the obsession takes control, then the Immortal's power distorts them. At first, the change is emotional, becoming distant and paranoid, but soon the changes are mental and physical as well. It's a never-ending spiral that has only led to ruin.

Luna was not the first Immortal I've had to imprison for the good of the world. Nor was she the last.

Why have you not heard of the others, you ask? Partly because I purged any record of them to keep ponies from looking for them and unwittingly releasing them. They are powerful, and utterly mad. The other part is because they are distant from ponykind. Their roles either do not require them to be near ponies, or require them to distance themselves. When they went, they went quietly

But I and my sister are closer to ponykind. Luna's turn was fueled by despair and jealousy and rage. She felt she was being pushed away from the ponies she loved so dearly, and for whom she had given so much. Did you know that there are several bloodlines of hers in Equestria and beyond? She loved her ponies so much that she even gave herself to them in order to strengthen them against the world when it was still in its infancy. She then gave her children, all of them powerful, all of them lovely, to the world, never telling them of their true parentage to allow them at least a chance at a normal life. Many of the finest heroes are descended from her. Others of the Immortals gave their children to the ponies, too, but none like Luna. And so, when she thought herself being forgotten, being denigrated by them, she couldn't help but feel betrayed. Like a fool, I tried to reason with her, but emotion too often clouds reason when left unchecked. And so, she sought solace in the Moon and the wild places, where she was still remembered. And she became twisted and spiteful, and turned into Nightmare Moon.

When I go, and I can feel it more and more with each passing day, even with Luna here... When I go, it will be for much the same reason, if not in the same way. Events are blurring together. Names and faces run into one, and I can't tell who is who anymore. Just the other day I called everyone in the palace by the wrong name. Names that hadn't been heard in decades. Some in centuries. Only you, Twilight, have stayed fresh in my mind. You've been my anchor, my lifeline. But if, when, I go, then I may not remember you in the same way.

I have attached a plan below, detailing what I have done to you, for you, and with you. How I have done things to ensure that the worst does not come to pass. You have succeeded at the Rainbow Gambit without even trying, and so I have every confidence that you will be able to do what's necessary when the time comes.

You will almost certainly feel betrayed, reading the next page, but remember that I did this for Equestria, and for you, my beloved, most cherished student. I pray to the slumbering Gods that you can forgive me.

Excerpt from the diary of Princess Celestia, date 21 June, 990 CR.

I call it the 'Rainbow Gambit'. It's too nice a name for the disgusting manipulation I must perform, for the lives I must use for Equestria to have a future.

I'm turning. Slowly but surely, I'm falling prey to the same madness that took my sister, my lover, and all of my friends from me. I can't let myself fall, too, or else... I've seen her. She's a black and gold mare, unutterably lovely, but with no spark of love in her eyes. Only greed for the love and worship of others. She is everything I hate about myself magnified and given life. She is a dark sun that would be just as detrimental to the world as any of the other turned Immortals. If anything, it would be worse, as there would be no one left to oppose her. So I must steel my heart for this and pray to the slumbering Gods for their favor in this.

I hate it. I hate being forced into this. I don't want to use my subjects like this. Equestria was a project of love. If I meddled, it was only to better things, or to remind ponies how silly they were being and perhaps allow them to laugh at themselves. I've always tried to keep my interference light to allow ponies to grow as they should. But this is almost blasphemy. No, it is. Not even the Siblings, as cold and cruel as they could be, ever attempted to twist a pony's destiny. If anypony finds this, please remember that I do this with the heaviest heart and the best of intentions. The utmost care will be taken, and the ponies involved will want for nothing when the project is finished.

And that brings me back to the matter at hand. The Rainbow Gambit will take ten years to complete, and require me to use magicks that would be taboo if any law governed them.

Forgive me. I can feel her rising even as I write. I must get this down while I have some lucidity left to me.

The first part begins tonight, the longest day of the year, when I am at the height of my power. I will commune with the Three Shrouded Stars and bind the destiny of six ponies together with ancient Rainbow magic and the threads of an ancient weapon dubbed 'The Elements of Harmony': a weapon of unknown origins which shows traces of primal magic similar to the Gods'. I will bind their fates into one and bring them together ten years from now.

The fillies, all female, all without cutie marks, show remarkable aptitude and potential, even for those touched by Immortal blood. Twilight especially, hides an untapped reservoir of power I've not seen since the early days of the world. All of them have shown resonance with one or more of the Elements, marking them as suitable candidates for bearing them.

Twilight's aptitude for magic rivals an Exalted Guardian's own might. With the right impetus and guidance, she could easily surpass them in time. After the second phase of the Gambit, I will be taking her under my wing for personal attention. She will need every advantage she can get to lead the others against my sister.

Applejack's fortitude and bravery are in their infancy, but even now shows glimmers of greatness. At such a young age, she made the trek from Ponyville to

Manehattan, a good two days walk for anypony, in under a day. But her place is at Sweet Apple Acres, where she will be guided after the second phase. I pray that she forgives me this, but I need her connection to her home. She will be the bedrock on which the others will rest.

Rainbow Dash is the key to the Second Phase. Her meeting with the future bearer of Kindness will be the spark that catalyzes the others and truly binds their destinies. To this end, I will place a spell on her, allowing her to achieve a speed no other pegasus has been able to attain without assistance. It is laced with destiny, and will dissipate as soon as she achieves it. I foresee that it will drive the rest of her life, but everything after the initial Sonic Boom will be her own work, not mine. I doubt that she'd want it any other way. Her duty will be to support her friends, to stand at their side should they need her.

Fluttershy, Bearer of Kindness, is such a timid creature. She hides a deep love inside a cage of fear and shame that needs only to be shown the way out into the light. She will be the most difficult to work with, as she will most likely be frightened by the spark of destiny, but I have faith in her. I will be waiting for her when she falls to guide her to the key to unlocking her kindness, which will ground the others, reminding them of what they fight for. Maybe then she will be able to grow and prosper.

Pinkamena is another tricky one. Her very body resists the tug of destiny and stubbornly refuses to be led. Her fate is like trying to hold a greased eel: possible, but only with extreme delicacy and never for very long. Even so, the laughter and love of life that I see lurking behind her beautiful blue eyes is critical to keeping the others hopeful. I will have to guide her carefully, so that her fate does not rebel against the Gambit, ruining the whole working.

Finally, Rarity, generous of spirit and large of heart, will be guided to see her own worth. She has long held an interest in fashion, which I will foster and nurture during the time between now and my sister's release. It will be a trial, matching her beautiful heart against the viciousness of the fashion industry which even I cannot tame, but her steadiness in the face of it will temper her. When she succeeds, she will be their generous heart, providing for her friends whatever they might need. She won't be alone, of course. None of them, save Twilight, will be separated from each other for long. Twilight will remain in my care so that I can prepare her.

Twilight will have the hardest time. Much will be expected of her, and more will be expected of her should she succeed. But I will arm her with everything I can, and be there for her as much as I am able with my advancing madness. If the worst should happen, I have left instructions with the guards to find her and take her to my bath chambers, where I will seal a copy of this page and instructions on how to perform the phases. Should I fail...? Twilight will use the Elements on me. The only question is how they will work. If they will purify me like they will my sister, or banish me. The former is unlikely, as Luna will be weakened on her return, and I will have measures in place to bind her power until the Elements can purify her. The latter is more likely, as I will be

unfettered and at the zenith of my power.

I fear for my little ponies if Twilight were to fail.

The Second Phase will begin, and end, with Rainbow Dash. In one year, her enchanted speed will trigger a bloom of destiny and magic that will catalyze the destinies of the others. This is crucial. Without it, then their destinies will lay dormant and likely snarl and twist. There is a contingency in place, however, should this happen.

The Third Phase will consist of nurturing the young ponies in their destinies and allowing their friendships to grow and bloom. Twilight will be brought to me by her parents, who work for me, to join my school for Gifted Unicorns, and I will take her under my wing. I will do what I can to provide for Sweet Apple Acres in Autumn Gold's absence, and see that it does not fall to ruin before her children are able to take up stewardship of it. Rainbow Dash will be guided to Ponyville at the earliest opportunity, as will Fluttershy. I will see that they find places suited to their temperaments and talents, and watch over them the best I can. Rarity lives there, and must stay there. A fine line must be walked with her, as I must keep her in Ponyville while still allowing her aspirations to larger success to blossom. Pinkamena... I will do what I can for Pinkamena Pie, but I believe she will be able to care for herself just fine without my interference. The only thing I need do, I hope, is to make sure she arrives in Ponyville. Twilight will be last to arrive, after I have armed her.

During this time, I will seed in Twilight's mind the thought of Nightmare Moon. She will be driven to search out mention of her, which I will place in the Ponyville library, where it will wait for her to find once she is ready. But she must find it on her own. I cannot give her the answers without spoiling the working. If I could do this on my own, if I could purge my sister of her mad power, then this wouldn't be necessary. But I can't, and it is.

The final phase will be the confrontation. In ten years, almost to the day, the Star Siblings will free my sister from the Moon and unleash her on the world. I have set wards in place to sap Nightmare Moon's power and bind her from working any harmful magic. She is powerful, so I will need to supplement them personally. I will likely be captured, but if all goes according to plan, this is an acceptable risk. With the Elements and their Bearers working together in harmony, my sister will be freed, and we will both be able to heal.

We may even be able to return the other Immortals to lucidity, but my hopes for that are slim at the moment. I must concentrate on one thing at a time.

My student, with this paper you will find instructions on how to perform any of the phases I may have missed, along with notes and diagrams and a special incantation to allow you to work briefly with the stuff of Fate. I hope you never have to use it. As well, I

have included steps to contain me should you succeed, but I fall prey to madness anyway.

Remember. Do what you must.

I love you, my little pony.

Trixie

Rarity hummed tunelessly to herself as she hung her damp towel on the rack to dry and rearranged her toiletries on the bathroom's counter. "That was just what you needed, darling. Dear Lotus and Aloe, lovely as their hooves are, can't stand up to a bath with 'The Scoltish Laird'. A night with Primrose is what you need to truly unwind." She grinned and fondly patted the lovingly worn book she'd set on the edge of the tub. "I've not laughed like that since I found poor Scootaloo's little 'shrine'." A pang of guilt tugged at her, which she waved off dismissively. "I know it was horrid of me to laugh at her," she said to the book and the little pang. "She just reminded me of another silly pegasus who does the same thing." A wicked grin curved her lips. "I wonder if I'll ever tell her."

The book was silent.

"You're right. That would be rude of me. Considering the targets of their worship, it may be best to let them pine for now. They'll grow out of it soon enough."

A loud knock punctuated her sentence.

Rarity blinked and looked at the clock on the wall, which showed the time to be several hours after dusk. "Now who could that be at this time of night?"

The knocking grew more insistent.

"Coming!" she called. "Please be patient!" She cantered gingerly down the stairs to the front of her boutique, only to screech to a halt at the sight of a hulking, misshapen silhouette in the door. It was obviously a pony, but it looked like none she'd ever seen. She swallowed as she levitated an umbrella from the rack by the stairs and quietly stepped toward the door.

The knocking kept up, growing more urgent.

A robber? No, they wouldn't have knocked. A thug, come to take advantage of her? They would have broken the glass by n—

The darkened boutique was filled with the crash of shattering glass as the silhouette put a hoof through the door. There was a frustrated grunt, and Rarity caught sight of a pair of bloodshot eyes glaring through the door before she launched the umbrella at them with a cry. "**YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE!**"

The pair of eyes widened in surprise and then disappeared under the

simultaneous assault of the rest of the door's glass shattering outward and a spinning umbrella which smacked right between them. Rarity wasted no time in jumping to the door with another umbrella floating over her head ready to strike at the would-be rapscallion! "Stand still and I'll make this easy on—"

"Wait! Sis!" Sweetie Belle's head popped up through the break in the glass, her hooves covering her head. "It's just us!"

Rarity blinked and lowered the umbrella. "Us?" Her eyes flitted past her sister to the figure sprawled on the ground behind her. A bright blue unicorn mare was splayed out in a painful-looking heap, half-in and half-out of a muddy puddle. Her mane was caked in mud and glitter and ribbons, and what looked like the remains of a paper hat. Her clothes, the severely cut and powder-pink uniform of a waitress, were torn and stained and had several rhinestones haphazardly glued to it, as well as one or two on her face. She made no move to get up as Rarity trotted over to her; content to lie in the mud and glare at the sky.

"Trixie? What on earth are you doing out here?" Rarity gently lifted the other mare into a sitting position.

Trixie's first response was a glower that could curdle milk. Her second was a tired snort. "You locked us out," she muttered.

"What happened to your key, then?" Rarity frowned in confusion and turned to Sweetie. "And I thought you were staying at Applejack's tonight for that sleepover."

Sweetie fidgeted uncomfortably as she waited for Trixie to reply. When she didn't, Sweetie swallowed and shuffled her hooves. "We uh... kinda got caught up in a game. We ran into Miss Trixie and I sorta... 'attacked' her with a Bedazzler. And lost Miss Trixie's key."

"She was aiming for some disgusting little dragon who put **spitballs** in my **hair**." Trixie's eyes narrowed to slits.

Rarity put a hoof to her breast and gasped. "Spike did that? But he's such a gentleman! He would never do something so horrid to a lady!"

Sweetie shrank back and tucked her head down between her shoulders. "He was kinda sorta aiming for Apple Bloom. 'Cause she sprayed him with perfume and put makeup on him and tried to get him in a dress... and kissed him on the mouth. Four times. Dinky did, too. But Spike was unconscious."

Rarity's hoof moved to her muzzle as she tried to stifle laughter. "Oh dear. You were playing that silly 'Mob' game again, weren't you? I hope you didn't harm his pride too severely, darling." Her eyes wandered back to Trixie, who had slouched back down into the mud. "Come inside, you two. Let's get you cleaned up. And it's 'unconscious',

darling."

"No."

Rarity blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"If you don't mind, I'm going to sit here and wallow for a while." Trixie splayed her legs out in all directions and let herself sink back into the puddle. "But don't let my little pity-party ruin your evening, Rarity. By all means, go inside while I think of what more humiliation the universe can heap upon me, and how I'm going to pay you back for the door I broke. And the key I'll have to replace. And how I'm going to pay for yet another uniform."

Rarity sighed and reached out with her magic, folding the mare up in a shimmering glow. "Wallowing will get you nowhere, darling. I should know." She stepped over the broken glass and walked through her boutique toward the back of the shop, carrying the limp form of Trixie in front of her, Sweetie Belle in tow. "And don't worry about the door, dear." She bumped the showmare-turned-waitress with her nose to soften her already conciliatory words. "It's not your fault. It was an accident."

Rarity suddenly found herself staring into the blazing eyes of an angry unicorn as Trixie, with a flex of her magic, burst out of her telekinetic grip and rounded on the other mare. "**No**. It **was** my fault, and I said I would pay you back. I am a mare of my word! I am going to earn the money *myself*, and you are going to accept it!"

Rarity took a step back and glanced at the door. "Trixie, when I took you in, I told you I didn't expect payment. I still don't. You're a guest here. A friend!" Her horn sparked, lifting the glass from the floor and carefully setting it back in the frame. A second flash of magic set the pieces and made them whole again.

Trixie blinked back frustrated tears. "No, I'm a boarder." She slumped as the fire in her eyes started to fade. "I pay rent, I buy my own food, I fix what I break," Her head dipped, nose nearly brushing the floor. "And I pay what I owe. This town has taken nearly everything from me, but Trixie still has some pride. Trixie may not be 'Great' or 'Powerful' anymore, but I still have that much." Her head rose slightly, unfocused eyes staring at nothing. "If it wants that, it'll have to pry it from Trixie's cold, dead hooves."

Rarity bit her lip and fidgeted. "Darling, you could always work for me. I could use a talented mare like you around the shop."

Trixie shook her head. "No. I've already told you that. It would just be one more thing I would owe you. "Bussing tables isn't exactly my dream job, but it pays. Not well, but it *pays*." She lifted her head and stared her hostess in the eye. There was steel in the look, but it was fragile and weary. Brittle. "It's *Trixie's* money that she can use to pay what *Trixie* owes *you*." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. "Now if you'll excuse Trixie, she's going to borrow a bottle of wine which she intends to

pay for and drown herself in the upstairs bathroom."

As she schlepped up the stairs, Rarity looked down at her sister, concern written in broad strokes over her face. "I worry for her, Sweetie. She's going to do herself permanent injury if she keeps on like she has." A rolling sigh escaped her. "I'll go put the kettle on. Perhaps some of Twilight's special blend will calm her nerves. After which, we're going to have to have a talk."

She trotted away, leaving Sweetie Belle alone in the store's lobby. Little gears turned in her head, struggling against the fluff and nonsense that filled it. Slowly, a thought began to form in her head, which quickly became a plan. Her hooves moved on their own as the pieces came together.

"Trixie, you are an idiot. Did you know that?" She stared up at the ceiling, resolving inwardly to clean the moisture off of it before it molded over. "You had to go and get yourself tangled up with one of the worst ponies you could have ever managed to meet." She took a long pull from the wine bottle in her hooves, draining nearly a quarter of it, and closed her eyes. "You had to meet the one pony in Equestria who was genuinely nice to you... A charlatan or huckster, or even a scoundrel, we could have laughed off with no problem. There's been no shortage of them in my life."

She took another pull. "But no! She had to go and actually give you a chance and you, like a fool, took it. You went from fuming under a bridge to wallowing in the tub of someone who should be an enemy. But..."

Trixie sank below the edge of the water, the half-empty bottle of wine in her hooves, and idly contemplated making good on her threat and actually drown herself. *Oh that's a very good way to repay the mare that fed you, took you in, and gave you a second chance after you humiliated her publically. Leave your water-logged corpse floating in her tub. She'll be soooo grateful.*

She sat slowly upright and blew out the breath she'd been holding. "I hate this town. I can't even look at the houses without feeling guilty for what that bear and those idiot colts did, even if it wasn't my fault. And of course you don't have a clue as to *why* you feel this way." She rubbed her eyes. "That reminds me. I still have to pay that stupid mailmare so she can fix her roof. Stupid *bear*. Stupid children! If it's the last thing I do, I'm never having them! Disgusting little brutes always getting underhoof and mucking up everything! Always crying and whining and leaving foul excretions everywhere!"

She glared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. "What are you looking at? Come to laugh at the fall of the Great and Powerful Trixie, too? Want to watch the

crazypony talk to herself? Then go ahead! Ha ha ha!"

Her reflection stared up at her from the bathwater. "If it weren't for you, or us, whatever, mucking about under that bridge, we'd be in Manehattan by now! We'd have the whole city eating out of our hooves. But no, we had to go and dither around under a bridge until—"She shut her mouth with a snap and closed her eyes. "Until Rarity found us." Her voice softened as the white unicorn's named rolled off of her lips.

"Why did she have to help us? We would have been perfectly happy to have been left miserable under there. At least we would still have control of our life, rather than having it stuck in her hooves." She lifted her hoof and punched the water, ignoring the glower the reflection gave her. "But no! We had to let her take us in, and now we're up to our ears in debt! First funds to pay for room and board, and then for the window we broke. And then again for the roof the bear tore up. We've had to pay the city to have our cart cleared."

Her reflection in the mirror arched a brow. Trixie arched the opposite one. "It's no good telling me they didn't want my money. They took it quick enough, with only the most minor of insistence on my part. If I weren't truly in debt, they wouldn't take the money."

Trixie's eyes narrowed to wary slits. "I'd almost think there was a conspiracy to keep me in Ponyville. Every time I think I've got my head above water, of finally being free of my debt to this horrid little burg, something else breaks, or goes wrong, or falls on my head, and I sink back down into the depths of destitution!"

Her reflections, both of them, stared sympathetically at her. She was getting loud; louder than this time of the night allowed one to be. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to calm, and for her voice to even out. "Yelling won't help you, Trixie old girl. You're just talking to yourself." An unsteady sigh gusted out of her. "A sure sign you're going mad under the strain. Maybe we should talk to... No. No, Rarity would want to help, and we would owe her even more for psychiatric aid." She shut her eyes, blanking out the stares of the other two Trixies. "This is something we have to bear ourselves."

"Although..."

Trixie sank backward, laying the back of her head against the lip of the tub. "Twilight once referred to her as the 'Element of Generosity'. And she is, surely, the most generous pony we've ever met. She even gave me, who turned her hair green and assaulted her friends, however deserving they were, a second chance. I think. But she must be getting something out of this arrangement, or else she wouldn't be so generous. If only I could figure out what. Some sick sense of schadenfreude? A bet?"

Her eyes opened slowly and her throat suddenly became a size too tight. "Or... is it, could it? No." She shook her head fiercely. "No, she couldn't feel the same. She's

rhapsodized about her 'perfect stallion' too many times to ever have feelings for you, Trixie girl."

Her sigh this time was less unsteady and more bitter. "Not that we'd blame her. What have we to offer? We're a perpetually broke showmare with no home, a lousy job, and zero prospects for the future." Her head sank lower under the water. "It doesn't help that she's *smoking hot*, and we're... Well, we're also gorgeous, of course. But we're far too muscular from pulling that pest-ridden old rattletrap of a cart to ever get a dainty goddess like Rarity to look twice at us." She looked over at the fogged mirror with a wistful smile. "You know what I mean, yes? Those gorgeous, slender legs of hers, so sleek and graceful, with such delicate ankles. Oh, how I want to kiss them, to run my lips across them in worship of her incredible beauty!" She closed her eyes and clasped the bottle to her breast. "Her coat is so smooth, and shines like the diamonds on her flank, and *such* flanks! The kind you can sink your teeth into: firm and fulsome and ripe, with the skin taut across them, leading to the perfect bottom, with just a hint of jiggle as she walks to draw the eye to it." A dreamy sigh puffed the steam that curled around her. "And then... what's between—"

She heard a scuffling at the edge of the bath and tried to ignore it. The mood was broken, however, the thoughts of Rarity's rear end fleeing from her mind. "Maybe if we cut our meal funds, we'd lose some of the muscle weight and earn a little more toward paying off the debts." She nodded. "Yes, one meal a day will do just fine. And we should apply for another—" The scuffling grew louder. "What is over there?"

The scuffling grew louder as a little white horn poked up over the lip of the tub, followed by pastel pink-and-purple hair. Sweetie Belle put her hooves onto the tall end of the tub and heaved herself upward, pulling herself as high as her skinny legs would let her go. She stared intently at the water, clearly trying to decide the best way to enter, when gravity took over and pitched her headfirst into it. She spluttered and flailed until she managed to turn over on her back and begin floating, her eyes now fixed intently on the ceiling.

Throughout this, Trixie watched silently, taking the occasional pull from the bottle. "Are you having fun over there?"

"Uh huh. I'm real good at floating. Scootaloo says it's 'cause my head's made of wood." She floated calmly with her limbs splayed out.

"I see. If you're going to join me, then hold this." She placed the bottle's bottom on Sweetie's belly and let go. Immediately, Sweetie grabbed it in her forehooves and continued to float, an indignant look on her squinched up face.

"Hey!" Sweetie whined. "I'm not a coaster, Miss Trixie! That's what mean ponies do! And Miss Pinkie Pie. But she gives me cupcakes, so it's okay."

Trixie rolled her eyes and tugged the bottle out of Sweetie's hooves. "You must

not have been listening when the other ponies told you I was no good, then." She took another pull. "Or you'd have known not to bother me."

"But Rarity told me not to listen to them, so I don't." She folded her arms and slumped on the surface. "She says you're a good pony, and I believe her."

Trixie responded by muttering something around the mouth of the bottle.

Sweetie paddled forward, still on her back, and thumped her head against Trixie's stomach. "Listen to me! My sister is the smartest pony ever, besides Miss Twilight. She wouldn't like you so much if she didn't believe that. So if she says you're a nice pony, then you're a nice pony!" She punctuated the last few words by lightly banging her forehead against the older unicorn.

She rolled onto her stomach and stood up. "A bad pony wouldn't do what you do, Miss Trixie. A bad pony wouldn't try to pay people back, or apologize for turning somepony's hair green. A bad pony wouldn't be my friend and make sure I got home safe." Trixie flinched when Sweetie put her hoof on her arm and looked away. "A bad pony would have left Ponyville by now, instead of trying to make up for things."

Trixie rounded on Sweetie and swept her hoof off. "And I should leave! I should never have stayed! Ever since I entered this horrid little hick town I've been humiliated at every turn! I've been the subject of pitying derision for weeks now; Rarity's little 'charity case'! I've been trampled, set upon by reptiles and dragons and you disgusting little children!" she snarled, surging out of the water. She swiftly stomped out of the tub, clutching the wine bottle in the crook of her ankle. "I met a pony the other day, did you know that? He was a customer of mine. Do you want to know what he called me?"

"Um... was it a bad word?"

A humorless grin split Trixie's muzzle. "Oh yes, it was a very bad word. He called me a 'has-been'." The bottle smashed to the ground a second later, spraying wine and glass everywhere. "**A HAS-BEEN!** I, Trixie, who has wowed the crowds of Fillydelphia and won the hearts of even Manehattan's famously jaded ponies. I, Trixie! The Great and Powerful! **AHAS-BEEN!**"

Her eyes blazed as she turned and glared at the little filly. "It's all this damned town's fault, too! This was supposed to be just a warm-up show for Canterlot. I was going to charm all the little ponies, and then work my way up to performing for Princess Celestia herself! I would have been *legendary*."

"But Ponyville happened," she hissed through her teeth and turned to the mirror. "The little warm-up show, a charity event for you bumpkins, became the worst disaster of my entire career. And it wasn't content to merely destroy my career, oh no. This town took my dignity, my grace, and is now after my pride, too. Trixie should leave; she has every right to. But I'll be damned if I'm going to let this town win. I'll earn enough to pay

my debts, and then leave this little hellhole behind! DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Sweetie shook her head and took her hooves down from her ears. "Uh uh. I had to cover my ears when you started saying bad words. I'm sorry."

Something snapped in Trixie's head with an audible twang. Her eyes bulged out as she bit her lip and ground her hooves into the floor. "Fffffff—"

"Um, are you gonna say another bad word?" Sweetie's hooves inched toward her ears.

The door to the bathroom burst open and Rarity hurried in, carrying a teapot in a glowing cloud of magic. "What is going on in here? Trixie? Is everything alright? I heard yelling."

Trixie's glared snapped onto Rarity. In instants the blue unicorn was on her, nose an inch from the other mare's. "You! You're a part of it, aren't you! I know you are, so don't bother denying anything!"

Rarity stared into the other mare's eyes, her nose pricking at the sour smell of cheap wine on her friend's breath. She held firm as Trixie's off-kilter glower bored into her. "Sweetie, darling? I need you to get dried and go to bed. Use the towels in the linen cupboard." Her horn shimmered as she cleared a path through the glass on the floor.

"Okay, sis!" Sweetie chirped. She wiggled up onto the edge of the tub and tumbled to the floor with a wet splat. A quick shake to get the soapsuds and water off of her, and she scampered out of the bathroom, hooves squishing loudly.

"Now Trixie, what is going on? You've been an absolute bear for the past two weeks."

Trixie snarled and waved dramatically. "Oh I haven't the foggiest idea! Why, being trampled by young snots and having stallions ogle my hind-end all day is exactly my idea of a good time! That was sarcasm, by the way, in case you didn't catch the hint."

"I gathered that. But I'd like to think I know you better than that. You're too prideful to let little things like those get under your skin. Would you please tell me what's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" Her eye twitched. "What is *the matter*? My career, my glorious career which was once described as 'meteoric' and even compared to the great Hairy Hoofdini, if only once, has been crushed and trampled into the dust by this place. I have no idea if I'll ever be able to reclaim my former glory, or even be able to perform ever again!"

Rarity nodded and sat back on her haunches. Tea served itself in two porcelain cups, one of which floated out to Trixie, who ignored it. "Yes, I know darling. You've

been saying so for two months now. But if this truly bothered you, you would have left by now." She took a sip of tea and closed her eyes. "I wouldn't hold it against you."

Trixie opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out except for a strangled squeak. She cleared her throat and closed her eyes. "Your sister said much the same thing, and I'll tell you what I told her: I should leave. My debt won't let me."

"I think something else is keeping you, Trixie." Rarity smiled around the rim of her cup. "You are prideful, yes. One of the most honor-bound ponies I've ever met, however misplaced your honor is." She took a long sip and looked over her cup through half-lidded eyes. Her smile faltered as she saw the effect they had on Trixie. "But even honor couldn't keep you here." She reached out and laid a hoof on her friend's.

"Please. Whatever it is, you can tell me. I am here for you. I have always been here for you."

A knot choked off Trixie's next words as she stared into Rarity's sky-blue eyes. "I-I know... That has been the hardest part. Knowing you're here, and yet, so very, very far away." Trixie closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. Damn this mare. Damn her to the moon! "Knowing that you're everything I could ever want, and yet you can't return my feelings. It tears me up inside! Thinking about you, day after day, trying to live up to the example you set and trying to be a better mare. I want to be someone worthy of you. I know I can be worthy of you! I just need more time. Time to pay off what I owe."

Trixie leapt forward and caught up Rarity's hooves in her own. "I want to give you everything, because you deserve it! You've given me no less! I don't care if this is some sick, perverted attempt on your part to get a rise out of me, Rarity! I don't! I never have!" Tears streaked Trixie's cheeks as she pressed her nose against the other unicorn's. "And I know you feel it, too! As many stallions as there are in this town and the next, and you haven't found one? I know you're holding out for someone better and I CAN BE THAT SOMEONE! I know you feel it, Rarity! Don't deny it, tell me! Please don't say it's not true, because I know I can be, and already am, the one you want, deep down! Tell me I'm right!"

She searched Rarity's eyes for a reply when she didn't immediately react. "TELL ME!"

Rarity swallowed past the lump in her throat and stared into her friend's eyes. "Trixie, I... I had no idea you felt this way." She looked down at the floor and thought back on the smell of alcohol on Trixie's breath. "I truly did not. Had I known, then things might have..."

"Then you *do* feel the same?" Hope fluttered in Trixie's chest and made her voice catch.

Rarity was pained by the fragile hope gleaming behind the mare's eyes, but forced herself to look. All of the little looks and attitudes, even Trixie's continued presence in her house finally made sense.

"No."

The word pierced the little ray of hope and pinned it to the floor. The color drained from her face as she slumped to the floor and curled around herself. "I-I see..."

Rarity shook her head. "It isn't like that, Trixie." She placed her hoof gently on Trixie's shoulder and nudged her tenderly with her nose. "You know it isn't." Her voice was soft as she nuzzled the other unicorn's cheek. "I am your friend, Trixie. I do care for you. I love you, even! Just, as your friend."

Trixie closed her eyes and lowered her head. "But..."

"Listen to me." Rarity gripped Trixie's shoulders and held them tight, snapping the unicorn's head to attention, and stared hard at her friend. "You are a beautiful young mare. You are smart, talented, and funny in a bitingly dry sort of way. Any pony who would be with you, as friend or lover, should count themselves lucky. You have goals, drive, ambition. You know what you want, and how to get it, and you persist even in the face of great adversity! There is a deep core of confidence in you. And you are lovely! Don't get me wrong. With your looks and talent, you could have anyone you wanted if you put your mind to it."

Trixie shook her head. "But I already--"

"No, Trixie." Rarity sighed. "I know it sounds harsh, but it is for the best right now. You don't need a lover, not now. Right now you need a friend." She nuzzled Trixie's cheek. "And I am your friend, however much you pretend otherwise." She stood slowly and cleared the glass around her. "Whatever happens, good or bad, I am your friend."

Trixie's eyes were fixed on Rarity's tail as she slowly walked out. "'My friend', she says." She closed her eyes and lowered her head until it touched the cold, wet floor. "Perhaps she's right. Maybe we just need a friend. Hmph. 'Friend'." The word felt heavy, like lead. It weighed on her even as it rang hollow in her ears. "I can't say I've ever had anyone I could call that. 'Lackey' yes. 'Servant', 'minion', 'loader', even 'hey you!'. But... until Rarity, I don't think I have called any of them 'friends'."

A bitter sigh gusted across the wet glass. "Maybe that's all we can ever--" Her ear pricked at something. Her eye opened and stared at the face of the blue mare reflected in a shard of glass. "But she said we were beautiful." She stood up slowly, eyes locked on the shard. "She thinks we're beautiful." She touched her face with a hoof and looked up into the bathroom mirror, brushing off glitter and glass. She brushed her hair out of her face and turned to face it more fully.

What stared back was not some broken has-been, chasing the approval of a town that didn't want her, that pitied her. It was Trixie; brash, bold, and lovely Trixie. Trixie the magician. Trixie the *star*.

Realization washed over her moments later. "But then she must mean... of course." She smiled at herself in the mirror. "She said we could have any pony we wanted. And we want her." Her smile widened slightly. "Oh how we want her." She took a deep breath.

"You will be worthy of her, Trixie. You just need time. It won't be soon, but you can show her someday." She traced a heart on the mirror. "But how to go about it? This town... of course! This town is so hung up on friendship that they practically ooze it! I will be the best friend she has ever had. And I will show her why we should be together."

She rounded on the tub, a manic grin on her face. "I will reclaim my glory, too! But how? Another show? Hmm, perhaps. Yes. Yes it is what I was born to do. Let Rarity design the costumes, perhaps even perform with me! I will earn her love, even if it takes me years. Why do this?" She stared at the door and squared her shoulders. "Because Rarity is worth all of it. Every single hardship is worth seeing Rarity waiting for us at the end." She stood on her hindlegs and shook a hoof at the roof. "You hear that world? Trixie is back! Ahahahaha!"

"Wahahahaha!"

"..."

"..."

"...what?" Trixie blinked.

"I like laughing, too!" Sweetie Belle trotted up to Trixie and buried her muzzle in the older mare's shoulder with a soft yawn. "I don't know what it was about though," she murmured sleepily. "Looked like fun."

Trixie sighed and scooped Sweetie up in a foreleg. "What are you still doing up, you little snot? Rarity sent you to bed already."

Sweetie snuggled into Trixie with a contented burble, nose burrowing into her chest. "Rarity tol' me to tell you that Miss Fluttershy needs her help getting Pinkie Pie out of a big tub filled with candy, so she left to go to the spa to help out, and asked if you could watch Gummy for her."

Trixie blinked and looked down at Sweetie's tail. There, dangling from the end, was a small green alligator latched on with what looked like a cheerful grin. As cheerful as an alligator could be, at least. She carefully tugged it off of her tail and tossed it into the tub with a plop.

"...Right. We'll deal with that thing in the morning. Now you need to go to bed." Trixie trotted slowly down the hall toward Sweetie's bedroom.

"Promise me big sis will make it home safe?" Sweetie's eyes peered up at Trixie from a curled up ball of filly.

"...I, I will. Someone has to be responsible, after all." Trixie swallowed and laid Sweetie Belle down on the bed.

Sweetie yawned and curled closer to Trixie, hooves reaching out to wrap around her neck almost as soon as she touched the sheets. "Told you you were a good pony, Trixie," she murmured as sleep took her.

Trixie laid her head against the filly's chest and let her hold her for a moment longer.

"Thank you, Sweetie Belle. I'll try to be."

Applejack

~~Dear Journal,~~

"That don't sound right..."

~~Dear Diary,~~

"No, that's even worse."

Hey Book.

I'm a bit dusty and dirty right now, so you'll have to forgive me if I drop you in the tub water. Shouldn't be a problem, since I've got you on a desk I use to balance my sums, but I apologize in advance either way.

This is your first sight of the world I reckon, so I'm gonna tell you where you came from. Pinkie Pie gave you to me as a birthday present a few days back, told me it was 'something I needed', just like that. She even showed me hers so I could get a feel for what goes into a book like you, but there is no way on this world I'm gonna spout off like she did. Throwing out your love-life like that is just unseemly and not a little bit obnoxious. (And mine ain't none of your business, so don't ask.) And conciseness is a virtue, Pinkie! I know you like to talk, but come on! Near a hundred pages full of nothing but how hard you're crushing on Twilight! How many of those poor books are you gonna fill with rhapsodizing before you pony up and ask the girl out, for Pete's sake? Sheesh! Still, it's your book, so I can't rightly tell you what to do with it.

Didn't you like stallions, anyway?

Ah well. I've got a tiny crush of my own, so I've got no place to judge you, girl. I just wish you luck with her. She can be a handful (and so can you), but she's worth it. Twilight's the best thing that happened to us, even if she does act peculiar.

Huh. Just like you, Pinkie. Thinking on it, you two would be perfect for each other. You two'd be the talk of town, and do amazing things together. Why, you could even change the world if you put your mind to it!

Wait. What am I thinking? You two'd strangle each other to death by the second date.

Anyhow... She was right. I've got quite a bit on my mind, starting with today. Cousin Braeburn came up from Appleloosa since we never did get to spend anything like a

proper time together, what with the buffalo war and all. But thankfully, nothing too exciting (at least by Ponyville standards) happened, so we got to enjoy each other's company without distraction. We even had a light day of work, thanks to Big Mac being such an awesome big brother. I haven't seen him since then, though. I remember him saying he had some big engagement coming up, but wouldn't tell me what.

First thing we did was introduce him to all my friends, or those who weren't busy, like Pinkie Pie'd been. I worry for that girl, Book. I know for a fact that something ain't right with her, but I can't rightly place what. I love her to death, though, and she's rarely wrong about things. She just puts my tail on edge sometimes.

Wait, where was I? Oh right, Braeburn. The first person I introduced him to was my good friend Rainbow. She seemed to be feeling down about something, though, so our visit was kind of short, which is a shame. I'll have to remember to see what's bothering her tomorrow morning. We didn't talk much, of course, but I couldn't help but notice my cousin checking out her hindquarters. Kind of odd, since he hardly noticed her while we were in Appleloosa, and Rainbow's not the kind of pony you miss. Oh well. I wonder if there might be something to hooking them up. A beau might be just the thing to pull Rainbow out of that funk.

After her were my neighbors, Carrot and Caramel Top. They're a sweet couple, and we often spend dinner at each others' houses. Sometimes they invite that strange mailmare Derpy and her daughter along. You know, I kind of feel sorry for them. Derpy and Dinky, not the Tops. Derpy's younger than I am but already a mother working hard to provide for her family. She doesn't always manage, since I think the poor thing's a bit slow, and her accent doesn't do her any favors either, so me and the girls have been putting together a small savings fund for her to help her in tough months. She's such a sweetheart, too. First time we offered to help she couldn't stop kissing my face or hugging me or talking in that weird foreign language of hers. Real pretty, whatever it is. Sounds like it's from South Equestria, near the border.

Getting off track again. The dinner's turned into kind of a tradition, now. They eat at our place on Saturdays, and we eat at theirs on Sundays, even Derpy. They insisted on that day, what with them being religious and all. Whitefriars, I think. You know who I'm talking about, Book. Those weird ponies who believe Celestia is the sun and act the fool in public. Like those three Flower girls. They mean well, I guess, but I just can't make the connection in my head. I mean, she ain't the sun, she just *raises* the sun, right? Anyhow.

Carrot says she picked that day because good deeds performed on Celestia's day brings them closer to her ideal. Sounds like a load to me, but they're good folk, and they don't do anyone no harm.

Shoot, if it weren't for some of the other local Whitefriars making right fools of themselves, well... It's good that Carrot and Caramel ain't pushy about it, and it makes them happy. Might could see what they're on about sometime.

Rarity's the same, come to think of it. Heck, you wouldn't know she was religious unless you saw the sunburst icon she keeps in her bedroom, or watched her do nightly prayers like at Twilight's last sleepover. Maybe I should ask her about it?

Speaking of Rarity. After lunch with Carrot and Caramel we went to meet her. Now, I expected my cousin to fall for her, since Rarity is a beauty, but the poor guy went and made a fool of himself. Nobody in my family is the kind to do things by halves, and Braeburn is no exception. Practically drooled all over her and put his hindhoof in his mouth at least twice before I managed to get him under control. Rarity loved it, of course. She strung the idiot along worse than she does Spike and took full advantage of having a willing stallion around. Spent a good hour using him as a clothes-horse. Sheesh.

Darnit, Book. I know I said I wasn't gonna talk about my love life, but there's times when I'm plum jealous of Rarity. She doesn't even have to lift a hoof and she's got colts falling for her like leaves in an autumn breeze. At any one time, she could have half the male population of Ponyville wrapped around her hoof, ready to do anything she wanted. I've seen her in action, and I'm grateful she doesn't use her powers for evil. She says that only mares of loose morals go around flaunting their charms at any colt what crosses their path.

Hmph. I know what she means by it, but I can't help but feel a little patronized. As if she were saying that I couldn't get any stallion I wanted to, or that I'd be some kind of floozy for trying. I'm not bad looking at all, Book! In fact I'm right pretty when I feel like putting the time in. I could show Rarity a thing or two about a country girl's charms, if I were of a mind to!

I could put on that nice sundress Fluttershy talked me into wearing once, maybe powder my nose a bit. Nothing too fancy or frou-frou-y, of course; just a nice little something to turn some heads in this town and show them that I can be a little girly every now and then, too. Or maybe that little black dress from the catalog I've been hiding in the back closet, with the cut up one side. That'd show everyone this cowpony knows how to party. Yeah.

Goldarnit, lost my place again. Something about writing things down makes my head go all over the place.

After prying my cousin off of Rarity's perfectly trimmed fetlocks, we headed over to the library to meet Twilight and Spike for an early dinner, where my cousin proceeded to make a fool out of himself yet again by falling for Twilight. I felt bad for him this time, since Twilight could barely notice him falling all over himself trying to ask her out. I

swear the girl's thick as two planks when it comes to some things. Show her a bug, and she can tell you ten things about it before you can blink. Show her an interested colt or a handsome stallion and she stares at you blankly.

Oh Twilight... I don't know if I'd have you any other way. You're just too adorable sometimes.

Dinner was at a nice little corner-stop Spike found. Good food, if a bit greasy, but you get what you pay for. There was lots of it, and it was tasty, but I wouldn't look too deeply into the food preparation procedures. We went as a kind of double-date. I say 'kind of', because Twilight was too busy not noticing poor Braeburn's obvious advances and Spike is a bit young for me. Yeah, he's hard-working, smart, funny, sensible and chivalrous (He even offered me his elbow when we left the library and escorted me out, just like a real gentlecolt.), but he's still a baby dragon.

Oh hush up, Book. I know it's silly, the thought of me and Spike together. You don't need to make fun of me; I think it's silly, too, even if he is a true gentlecolt. Now stop patronizing me or you can forget about me telling you what Spike did after dinner.

So you've decided to hear what I have to say then, huh? Good. I like a Book who knows when to keep its mouth shut.

After dinner, Spike pulls out this heavy trench coat and an old fedora and pops them both on. He then starts talking in a perfect impression of Bumpy Haycart and putting the charm on Twilight.

I think I figured out just the man for our poor, oblivious librarian. He'd come straight out of one of Granny's old black-and-whites, and be a detective and talk rough and coarse but have that undertone of sophistication and honor that belies his hardscrabble ways.

I think it's an old joke between them, the way those two went on. They bantered back and forth like an old married couple, making Braeburn's cheeks red with jealousy, then fell about laughing! It was so sweet, how comfortable they was with each other.

And then the little devil went and turned them on me! I am not too ashamed to admit that he made this mare's heart go all a-flutter with his Bumpy Haycart. And the way he says "Here's lookin' at you, kid," had me turning as red as the apples on my butt and talking fancy and...

...

Breathe a word of that to anypony and I'll use you as kindling. Got it?

Besides, Spike's too young for that, and reminds me too much of my daddy. Even if that cute little face is growing up into a handsome young stud. Did you know he got his first whisker the other day? He paraded it around so proudly! Unfortunately, Twilight made

him shave it, but he looked so darling with it. I wonder how he'll look when the rest grow in? Heh. I bet in a few years he'd have fillies throwing themselves at him. Poor guy'd have to chase them off with a stick. Maybe some of the older girls, too.

But enough about that. Braeburn made his displeasure known, and we had to leave when he stole a tablecloth from a restaurant across the street to get Twilight's attention. I think he was gonna make a cape out of it, but I ain't sure. Made a mess of the table setting, though. Twilight thought it was funny, and Spike laughed, but I don't think that was what Braeburn was going for.

I decided against taking him to see Fluttershy, as she would've just hemmed and hawed while my cousin 'oohed' and 'aahed' and spent the rest of the evening spent mumbling or babbling. That or he'd try doing poetry again.

If my cousin ever offers to read you poetry, decline as quickly and firmly as possible. It's absolutely dreadful.

The rest of the evening went alright. We walked, and I showed him around my town. He likes it, but says he prefers Appleloosa's quiet. While Ponyville ain't exactly the most cosmopolitan of towns, it can get rather exciting here, what with the Everfree Forest practically on our doorstep and Canterlot not a day's run. Or that all six of the Elements of Harmony bearers reside here.

The Elements... There's a subject that needs some light shed on it.

I asked Twilight about them, way back when. She told me about a couple theories she has, and some stories of old, but hasn't been able to find the definitive tale about what they actually are and where they come from. There was one interesting tale about a place called 'Cromnia', which is supposed to actually exist according to Twilight. She thinks they come from Celestia, but I ain't sure about that. I don't know why I think that. Just a gut feeling, is all. I figure there's more to them than just the Princess. Or either princess, for that matter.

I'll have to see if Twilight can get a better answer from the Princess. There's no real pressure, of course. I'm just curious as to whether or not the one I've got will affect my ability to run this farm...

That's another thing that's been eating at me, Book. I love this farm, but me and my brother both can't run this whole thing ourselves much longer. I don't know how we managed this long, to be honest. I asked Granny about it, but she's unusually tight-lipped whenever I bring up the farm. Has been since we saved Princess Luna. The only thing I managed to wrangle from her was it had something to do with mama, about an agreement that—

That I don't know. Just, an agreement. Something between Granny Smith and the Princess that happened sometime after my mother disappeared.

Which makes me even more worried, now that I think on it. If Celestia knows something about my mother, then why hasn't she said anything to me? Why won't Granny say anything? Goldarnit, Book! There's so many things people won't tell me, and it's driving me nuts!

Sorry. I gotta calm down and explain myself so you understand what's going on.

About twelve years ago, my daddy, Apple Cider, died. It was a bad year for snowstorms, and one blew up out of the Everfree Forest that blanketed the whole town. Before the storm, he tried to get all the sheep inside the barn where it was safe, but one of them wandered off for who knows what reason. Daddy went to find it, but the damn fool thing got itself lost and he had to chase after. Unfortunately, the storm got worse, and he was caught out in it. Mama wanted to go after him when he didn't come back like he said he would, but the storm was still going and Granny said no, that it was better to wait. She had faith he'd come back like he said, and that he was a tough young fellow.

Unfortunately, he wasn't tough enough to beat hypothermia... We found him the next day when the storm had settled down a bit, frozen to death on the edge of Everfree wrapped around the sheep, which was only barely alive. The damn thing caught a fever and died two days later. I ended up inheriting daddy's hat at the funeral.

Things got tense around the farm after that. Mama blamed Granny for not letting her go look for him, but Granny said that she'd just have died, too. I can't say she's right or wrong, and I do understand... a little. Things got worse when we found out I was gonna have a little sister, and Mama started... She got distant, restless. She fought with Granny a lot. I remember a lot of things were said, hurtful things. Mama said that the house without her husband just wasn't home for her. But she couldn't uproot us, or leave Granny alone, and no one was ready to give up Daddy's farm. So Granny said that once Apple Bloom was born, she should go visit her parents for a week to get her head right. 'Put yourself in a state fit to be around my children', she'd said. Only reason I don't blame her for wanting to leave is because everyone was full up with grief, and nopony thought straight.

She was originally from the Appleloosa area, back when it was just a couple prospecting shacks, a trading post or two, and a couple sod houses and nothing like the boomtown it is now. Her family had a small farmstead out there, where she went and... never came back. Granny visited the place when Mama didn't return, but the whole thing had been leveled. Not a single building was standing, according to her.

Things on the farm got worse that year. There wasn't enough money to hire the workers in spring, and they weren't in the business of charity, no matter how much Granny harangued them. She and Macintosh had to work the orchards, and I did everything else I could. It was just enough to keep us from starving. That winter was even worse, and then...

Things got better. I don't know why, but that next spring our fortunes started to turn around. It was enough to keep the farm, and even make a little money. Granny told us it was probably some of the workers who'd come in the night because they felt bad but I couldn't believe her. I remember seeing weird tracks around the barn sometimes, too big for ponies. I even think I saw shapes in the orchards at night, and woke up to find chores had been done, and fields had been planted. I almost thought it was fairies.

I never saw them again after that, once the Apple Clan had pitched in to help, but those were weird and magical times, but also full of sorrow. I'm almost glad Apple Bloom was spared the grief, but she should have known... She should have met Mama. She should have seen Daddy working the fields, so strong and sure and wise. She should have met Grampa Russet and Gramma Vidalia. Oh Mama... why'd you have to leave? Why couldn't you stay? What happened to you out there?

sniff "Damnit, Braeburn. Why'd you have to visit now? I'd almost got it out of mah head..."

Sorry, Book. Give me a second.

Okay. I'm alright now.

It was back when me and my friends brought Bloomberg to Appleloosa Town as a thank you gift. After the battle with the Buffalo, me and Rainbow chased off after Little Strongheart in a quick race. It was fun, but I stopped to let them chase on and looked around. I was near my Grampa's old homestead, or where it had been. It was far away from town, so there should have been no one else there, but I saw somepony... She looked so familiar, and I swear I could hear my Mama's voice. Then Rainbow called me and I looked away for a second. Just a second, I swear. I looked back and they were gone. I don't know if she saw me or not, or even if it was a real pony and not some mirage, or my brains playing tricks on me. All those old feelings came back, and I spent the whole night scouring the place to find some sign that somepony had been there. I found nothing. I tried to forget about it for two weeks, but the thought just won't go away. I'm gonna go back, Book. I have to know for sure if what I saw was real or illusion.

I'll get Twilight to come along. Maybe Rainbow, too. Twilight would know what to look for, and is the smartest most powerful unicorn I know. Rainbow knows where we were, and can fly faster than anything. But before that I'm gonna make sure the farm is safe, and I'm going to wring every answer out of Granny I can. Celestia, too, while I'm at it.

I need to know, Book. I can't hardly rest without knowi

"...Is somepony knockin'?"

I'm sorry, Book. I have to go see who it is.

Applejack stuck her pencil in between the pages of Book and shut the cover, then pulled herself out of the tub with a loud splash. "Who in th'world could be knockin' at this time of night?"

She quickly wrapped a towel around her middle to dry herself and trotted toward the stairs, where a sleepy-eyed Apple Bloom was waiting.

"Sis? What's goin' on? Who's at the door?" she asked muzzily.

"Dunno, Apple Bloom, but stay up here for now while I see who it is and send 'em away."

"Alright, sis," she said with a yawn.

The knocking at the door grew louder, more insistent as Applejack crested the bottom of the stairs. "Probably just Big Mac comin' home from his 'big engagement'. Likely lost his key an' wants in." She snorted and shook her head, then unlatched the deadbolt. "Poor lug always hated th'cold."

The knocking grew louder, and faster. To Applejack, it felt like someone was trying to batter the door down with their hooves.

"Now just hold on an apple-buckin' second! Ah'm workin' the door as fast as Ah can!"

Silence, except for the gentle rattle of the chain being drawn back.

"See? Now that's better. Give me a second more, alri—"

"Now Ah know Ah taught ya better language than that, young missy."

Applejack's face went white and the chain fell from her lips.

"You gonna open yer door, now? Or am I gonna hafta kick it down just so's Ah can git a good look at ya?"

Tears welled in Applejack's eyes as she nosed the door open and looked up at the voice beyond it.

Standing in the darkness was a tall mare, powerfully built and nearly as tall as her brother. Her shoulders were broad and well-muscled, and every leg bristled with sinew. Moonlight lovingly caressed the muscles of the older mare, showing off the still noticeable curves that softened her outline and highlighted the figure's obvious

femininity. A hat looked over the top of a practical bun of golden-green hair, twinning the one on Applejack's head. "Ah'm sorry..." said the figure, bending her head to press her nose against Applejack's cheek. "Ah'm so sorry, darlin'. Ah wish... Ah wish there were summat Ah could say to make things right."

Applejack stared numbly out into the darkness. "Muh... m-mama?"

Autumn Gold smiled and nuzzled her little girl's cheek. "Ah'm here mah baby girl. Mah beautiful baby girl..."