



You Can Fight Fate

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- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Twilight Sparkle
- Original Character
- Other
- Dark
- Sex
- Gore
- Adventure

Description

Having discovered the message left for her by Star Swirl the Bearded in the distant past, Twilight once again finds herself caught up in the middle of a struggle against forces far greater than herself. In order to even stand a chance she'll need to travel further and wider than she ever has, and forge some unlikely alliances with old enemies. All to bring down the powers that have manipulated and shaped her entire life, and retake control of her own future.

The conclusion of the Time Loop Trilogy, which began with

[Hard Reset](#)

[Available in Spanish](#) thanks to [dgs1993](#)

[Series TV Tropes page](#)

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Oh, Come On!

OH, COME ON!

The multiverse hates me. It's the only rational conclusion I can draw that fits all of the available data.

I cast one spell. One stupid little thought-it-was-just-a-specialized-divination spell, and a few months later I'm holding a blood spattered, sixteen-hundred year old letter. A letter written by the pony who used to be my hero until I found out he was kind of a jerk, and telling me that pretty much everything I've ever believed about the Elements of Harmony is completely wrong. Where exactly did I completely lose control of my life?

I turn the letter over to look at what's written on the back. Just as it promised there are a set of coordinates and instructions there, a location in time and space where Star Swirl is waiting for me, supposedly right on the verge of death. Worst of all the letter says not to share it with the Princesses or anypony else. Why would he possibly want that? I have dinner with Princess Celestia and my friends in half an hour to celebrate this whole time travel ordeal being over. How am I supposed to celebrate now? I just had to come straight up to my room to look at his research on the Elements of Harmony. What's in there that Celestia felt the need to suppress after Star Swirl disappeared? With a trembling hoof I reach into the cubby and pull out the stack of papers hidden within. Either Star Swirl had his own organization system or the notes aren't in any particular order. I give up trying to make sense of them for the moment, and just reread the letter for the fifth time. The promise of another message disguised as a prophecy will be worth following up on first, even if the last one was vague to the point of being nearly useless.

The prospect of other timelines though, that's as exciting as it is scary. If they're like the other one with that other me, they must have branched off from points where somepony used the Elements of Harmony. That's how Star Swirl described it. But

the other times the Elements have been used were times when Equestria was in desperate trouble. If they failed...

I'm roused from my thoughts by a pounding on the door. "Twilight?" asks Spike's voice from outside, "are you ready to go down to dinner? I'm hungry."

"Sure Spike, just a moment," I say and quickly pack the notes back in the cubby hole and reseal it. The illusion spell that concealed this little hidey hole from everypony for sixteen hundred years reasserts itself and the wall looks perfectly undisturbed again. I step out into the hallway where my assistant is waiting, tapping a foot against the stone floor. "Shall we?"

"Yeah! Oh boy, I can't wait for the celebration feast. The royal kitchens always have the best gems and Amuse Bouche knows just how to carve them," says Spike as we walk through the hall. He's going on about some gravel-based porridge dish while I'm thinking about what the right thing to do is. We arrive at the dining hall and even though we're a bit early, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Princess Celestia are already there. Pinkie is talking to the Princess. Maybe talking at the Princess would be a better descriptor, although she seems to be gamely following along with Pinkie's train of thought. I only catch the very tail end of whatever they were just discussing.

"Yes, I can certainly see why you'd think he was crazy for suggesting oatmeal, of all things, under those particular circumstances," says Princess Celestia.

"I know, right?" says Pinkie. "Hi Twilight! Did you send Star Swirl back yet? I bet he's happy to be home. Or was happy, a long time ago."

"I hope so," I reply. I make a conscious effort not to look directly at the Princess while simultaneously not looking like I'm not looking at her. I doubt I'm pulling it off.

If the Princess does notice something wrong she doesn't comment on it. "Luna sends her regrets. She won't be joining us for dinner, she feels she needs a little solitude after the last few days."

“Well, I should certainly think so!” says Rarity. “Reuniting with her beau after centuries apart, only to have to give him up again with the knowledge that their love still connects them across the vast ocean of time? That he’s even now back in her embrace in the distant past while she’s left with only old memories of it for comfort? Why a lady could take *days* to properly brood over something so wonderfully tragic!” she clutches at her chest as she’s swept up in the romance of it all for just a moment before she comes back to her senses. “I mean... heh heh... I do hope she feels better soon.”

Celestia is spared from having to respond to that by the arrival of my three other friends, chatting away about the day we just spent with Star Swirl and Luna out in Canterlot. Wow, was that earlier today? It feels like it was months ago now. They sit down at the table and a veritable swarm of waiters appear with appetizers. The other seven tuck in with varying levels of enthusiasm, but I mostly just push the food around on my plate while the others talk around me. Remembering how fresh the blood on the letter smelled robs me of my appetite.

“Um... Twilight? Is everything alright? Does your food not taste good?” asks Fluttershy. She’s seated next to me and, well, she’s Fluttershy so her voice doesn’t carry very far or interrupt the conversation the others are having.

“It’s fine, Fluttershy. I’m just not that hungry,” I say, hoping to move on before anypony else notices what she has. I’m too late. Now Rainbow Dash glances over too, and I doubt I have more than a few seconds until she says something that draws the attention of the rest of the table. I guess I could fake a stomach ache. I’ll be fine as long as the conversation doesn’t turn to-

“Hey, I’ll eat that if you don’t want it, Twilight. Whenever we use the Elements of Harmony I’m always starving for, like, three days afterwards,” says Rainbow Dash.

Naturally.

“You’re starvin’ most of the rest of the time too, Rainbow. Don’t think ah don’t notice the piles of apple cores that

mysteriously appear under trees you've been nappin' in," says Applejack.

"Maybe. You and Star Swirl studied them a little bit before he left, right?" asks Rainbow Dash.

"No!" I say, loud enough to disturb the other conversations going on around the table. "I mean, so what if we did study the Elements? It's not like I found out anything new. I certainly didn't come into possession of any kind of forbidden information about them!"

I don't think I'd be a very good spy.

"Twilight, whatever are you going on about?" asks Rarity with a small frown.

"Oh, it isn't anything important. Just a silly idea Star Swirl had. I'm sure that the Princess isn't suppressing or hiding anything from me," I continue as I dig myself even deeper.

"Actually, I am," says Celestia as she dabs her mouth with a napkin.

Now all eyes turn to her as I stare in shock, unable to believe what I'm hearing. "...what?" is all I can get out after a long silence.

"I am hiding Star Swirl's work on the Elements of Harmony," she goes on to say. "By the way, do you want the bisque for your soup course? That's what I usually prefer but it seems the kitchen has prepared an excellent gumbo as well, which I was considering having instead."

"But why?" I ask.

"Well, I thought that something a little spicier would pair nicely with-"

"You know what I mean!"

Celestia sighs and lowers the menu card she had been examining, her attempt at defusing the tension in the room thwarted. "Yes, I do. I'm sure that Star Swirl found a way to send you a message, and that by now you've either found or soon will find the work he did on the Elements of Harmony.

All I ask is that you listen to my side of the story before you choose what to do with it.”

I suppose I owe her at least that much. The others make no move to say anything, and I sense that they’re waiting for me to make the choice on their behalf. “I’m listening,” I say with doubt and caution dribbling from my voice.

“Thank you, Twilight. You already know that Star Swirl and I had something of a falling out later in his life, yes?” she asks. I nod. It was what she wouldn’t discuss with me while he was still here. She claimed it was to prevent disruptions to the timeline, but now I don’t know what to believe. “It was over his work with the Elements. The first few years after he returned from this time period he was a changed pony. He was friendlier, more pleasant, and he even began to reach out to the ponies around him which was something I’d been futilely begging him to try. Now I know I have you and your friends’ influence to thank for that.”

“I still don’t understand,” I say.

“Let me finish. Luna took the Element of Magic and carried it away some time later. If she’d told me what she planned to do with it I would have stopped her, but she didn’t. Months afterwards she returned with the necklaces you’re all familiar with.”

“Yes, the Elements of Harmony,” says Rarity.

Celestia smiles, and I see her shifting more and more into teacher mode as she speaks. “Well, yes and no. The Elements of Harmony have existed since long before that, perhaps since the world began or even longer. Luna and I have always been able to call upon them in times of need by working together, no crown or necklaces required. This regalia of harmony was something related, but distinct.”

“Now just hang on a tick. So you’re sayin’ that there’s the Elements of Harmony, and now there’s a whole ‘nother thing called the Regalia of Harmony, and we’ve been mixin’ ‘em up all this time?” asks Applejack, confused.

“Maybe we should call them something distinct to avoid confusion,” I suggest. I ponder the quandary for a moment. What about an acronym? Everything’s better with acronyms. “How about, just for the sake of argument, we call them the Roh?”

“Roh?” repeats Celestia, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Fight the pow-ah!” shouts Pinkie. We all turn to her, Celestia’s story momentarily forgotten. “What?” she asks.

“...on second thought, just ‘the regalia’ should be fine,” I mutter. Oh well, it was a stupid name anyway.

“As I was saying,” continues Celestia, determined to power through the momentary derailing, “the regalia are how mortal ponies such as you and your friends are able to tap into the same energies. They serve as a focus, if you like. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that if I’d had my way back then they would have been destroyed on the spot.”

“Destroyed?” gasps Fluttershy, “but why?”

“Oh! Oh! I know!” says Pinkie stretching a hoof as far into the air as it will go. “I bet it was because sometimes being Princess means you have to make hard choices like when you have three ponies who all want the last slice of carrot cake and you have to pick just one of them to get it and the other two get upset and they’re like PEW PEW RAINBOW FRIENDSHIP DEATH LASER KABLOOIE!”

“A surprisingly apt summary, thank you Pinkie,” says Celestia, a little brightness returning to her eyes for the first time since starting her explanation. “Yes, I did fear the consequences of putting such power in mortal hooves. Shortly thereafter Star Swirl began to regress. Locking himself away with the Elements for weeks at a time to experiment with them. Pushing away the friends he’d managed to make. He grew utterly enthralled, and when I questioned him he refused to give me a straight answer about why he felt so strongly about them.”

“He stopped having friends?” asks Pinkie, as if the very idea is the most foreign thing she’s ever heard. “Why that... that...”

that cur!” It’s the closest I’ve seen her get to swearing. I’m surprised she even knows what the word means. “He was kind of a cur when he got here, but we showed him how to be nice. Why would he re-cur over the Elements?”

“It was Luna,” I say as the words of Star Swirl’s first letter echo in my head. “He knew what you would eventually do with them.”

“I suspect you’re right,” says Celestia. “But that is with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, I feared that I was seeing my most dire predictions being confirmed before my eyes. After one particularly heated argument, I put my hoof down and forbade Star Swirl to study the regalia any more. That was... that was the last time he ever spoke to me.” Princess Celestia takes a moment to compose herself. “Please understand, he had become obsessed and paranoid in the years since he’d returned from our present. I thought that what I’d done was right at the time, but a few years later he just up and vanished. Luna and I were both heartbroken, but we carried on. It wasn’t the first time we’d lost loved ones.”

“You didn’t have to suppress his work, though,” I point out.

“Perhaps not,” she concedes, “but after I used them to seal away Nightmare Moon, and the regalia along with her, I felt it prudent. Then a few years ago when the seal collapsed and you used them to defeat her... I was scared.”

My mouth drops open, and it’s Fluttershy of all ponies who flaps over to Celestia and wraps a wing as far around her back as she can manage. “Why were you scared?”

“Twilight... there’s a reason I left you in Ponyville and took the regalia back to Canterlot with me. Partly it was that you’d requested it, but partly... I didn’t want to lose another student the way I lost Star Swirl. So I hid the truth from you, and I’m sorry,” says Celestia. She allows herself a sad little smile. “Perhaps I only delayed the inevitable.”

I’m confused and upset in equal measure. Nothing she’s said explains Star Swirl’s second letter, the one about the Elements being an intelligent, manipulative force. I freeze up. Maybe... she doesn’t know? That second letter looked like it was

written in a hurry, and if the two hadn't been on speaking terms for years...

When was the last time I knew something the Princess didn't? Has there *been* a last time?

"I understand, Princess." In fact, I understand more than she meant me to. I won't rest until-

I look down at my plate, and my vision takes a bit longer than it should to focus. My stomach is churning with all this new stress, not that the past is going anywhere. I think I will rest, actually. I've earned it. I'm not sure quite how, but I manage to make it through the rest of the meal without passing out despite how late it is. The mood is a lot less celebratory than my friends deserve. I hope I don't have to drag them into this, especially if it turns out to be dangerous. By any measure the rest of the meal is delicious, but I still find it unsatisfying and excuse myself before dessert.

The others let me go, and before I return to my room for the night I swing by the library. No pony's using it this late in the evening, which suits me fine. I hunt down the book of prophecies Star Swirl referenced, the one he used to pass on a message to himself when we were trying to figure out how to repair the damage I'd done to the timestream. I flip it open to... what page was it again? Right, two hundred and forty-seven. I read what's written there by the dim candlelight that casts long shadows around the room.

*The ephemeral made physical,
perfection confined, touched by an imperfect world.
Destruction born not out of wrath,
but rather disappointment.*

Have I ever mentioned how much I loathe prophecies? Just once, I'd like to crack open an ancient tome and read something like *Hey Twilight, big disaster next week. Take simple steps X, Y, and Z to prevent it. PS: Pick up a new carton of milk on the way home, the one in your fridge went bad two days ago.* Is that too much to ask? With a sigh I reread the passage and then close the book, turning the words over in my head and trying to make sense of them. Paired with the letter

from earlier they're clearly some sort of warning, but I can't deduce much beyond that. Maybe I'm just too run down to think straight right now. With a small sigh I head back to my room to turn in for the night, and fall asleep wondering just what I'm supposed to do next.

The next morning Celestia sees us off to the train station with another apology and a hug. She even presents me with a bound copy of Star Swirl's research into the Elements to go with the saddlebags full of notes. I'm still a little upset that she kept the truth about the Elements from me for so long, and I decide to heed the letter's warning and not tell her anything else. At least not until I can get a handle on Star Swirl's version. I almost convince myself that it's a perfectly defensible decision, and not even a little bit out of spite.

I do, however, share the letter with my friends over the course of the train ride home. I don't know if it's the wise thing to do or not, but I do it anyway. "...so that's what I found when I looked in the cubby, and now I don't know what to do about it." I finish my recap just as we're disembarking from the train onto the platform in Ponyville Station.

"Does sound like a bit of a tall tale, sugarcube," says Applejack. "Could be that ah'm a tad biased, but ah don't see how somethin' like honesty or kindness could have a plan, let alone one that'd be bad for us pony folk. They've pulled our flanks outta the fire more than once."

"Yeah," agrees Rainbow Dash. "'Didn't Princess Celestia say that Star Swirl got a little crazy at the end there? Maybe it was all in his head. I'm certainly not being manipulated by a necklace."

"But if we were how would we even know?" I ask. "It can't *just* be in his head. Luna said that they did something to her when she got back from the moon, but she wouldn't say what."

"Well I know because I'm way too awesome to be manipulated," says Rainbow Dash.

"Of course you are, dear," says Rarity. "Say, would you mind lending me a helping hoof with one of my bags?" She scoops

up the four suitcases and the trunk of ‘absolute essentials’ she had taken with her to Canterlot for our three day stay, visibly straining to cover it all with a field of her magic.

Rainbow Dash scoffs. “Maybe you should have packed less if you can’t carry it all.”

“I’m only asking you to take one bag,” Rarity says, a bit cross. She turns her head so Rainbow can’t see the sly grin that’s spreading over her face, or the subtle twinkle in her eyes. “It’s not like I’m asking you to carry the trunk. Your wings probably aren’t strong enough to get it all the way to my boutique, after all.”

“What? Oh, it is so on! I’ll show you who’s not strong enough,” says Rainbow Dash as she grabs the trunk by the handle on one side. Hoisting it into the air with a grunt, she begins flapping awkwardly down the road. Fluttershy can’t hold in a little giggle once she’s out of earshot.

“I really must agree with Applejack, Twilight,” says Rarity. “Even if it is the case that Star Swirl’s gotten himself into danger, that doesn’t make you responsible for saving him.”

“Rarity! How can you say that? He’s our friend,” I say. I can’t believe she’d be so callous.

“I think what Rarity means is, um, well sometimes you do put a lot of pressure on yourself to fix other ponies’ problems,” says Fluttershy. “Don’t misunderstand, that’s wonderful most of the time but maybe just this once you could not think you have to save the world? I mean, you only even met Star Swirl because of all that time stuff, and that wasn’t going to be an issue for hundreds of years.”

“That was different. It was my fault it was a problem in the first place,” I say, but I’m having trouble shaking the notion that her broader point might be right.

“Besides, you already know you’d fail if you went, so why bother?” asks Pinkie.

“Pinkie! Don’t worry Twi, ah’m sure you’d do fine if you did go,” says Applejack.

“No she wouldn’t, silly! Otherwise she already would have,” says Pinkie.

I figure out what she means a moment later, but Applejack doesn’t. “Ah don’t follow, Pinkie.”

“She means that if I went back and helped him, he wouldn’t have disappeared in the first place because I would have already changed it so it didn’t happen,” I explain. I’ve been so wrapped up in trying to decide if I should go back to help him I never stopped to consider that it might not even be possible. “He said he was going to a different time line, though. That must be where the coordinates he gave me will let me meet him.”

“You still don’t have to worry then,” says Pinkie, undeterred. “It can be other Twilight’s problem! Or maybe there’s a third timeline where you decide to go to that second timeline and help him so main timeline you can just relax!”

“Am ah the only one who’s completely lost here?” asks Applejack.

“No, you certainly are not,” says Rarity. “Should I get out some yarn? That helped last time.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Pinkie. It’s not like every time you flip a coin and it comes up heads, it creates a universe where it came up tails,” I say.

“What if your coin comes up tails? Does it work then?”

“No, Pinkie. It takes a lot more than that. Star Swirl was one of the first ponies to pioneer how they could be created, it’s part of how he was able to come up with that time loop spell at all,” I say.

“Oh, I get it! Because if there were infinity other timelines and it were possible for them to visit each other than infinity ponies would end up visiting ours all the time, and all of Equestria would collapse into a welcome party singularity,” says Pinkie.

“Well, actually that isn’t the case either. See there are these things called aleph numbers that-”

“I believe we might be losing sight of the original question,” interrupts Rarity before I can really get going on cardinality and set theory. “Now, I need to go open up the boutique for the afternoon if I’m going to have any hope of getting some work done today but I believe the consensus among the four of us is that you should disregard the letter, at least for the time being. Is that fair to say?” The other three mares nod. I sigh. They’re probably right.

“Thanks girls, I should get back to the library too. I’ll see you later,” I say, and we say our goodbyes before they head off in other directions. It’s just me and Spike on our way back to the library. “You know, I can’t help but notice you didn’t say very much about what you think I should do about Star Swirl, Spike.”

Spike gives a little shrug. “I didn’t think I needed to bother,” he says. “I think that going after Star Swirl would be a terrible idea, I think you *know* that it would be a terrible idea, and I think the minute you read that a friend of yours was in trouble you made up your mind to go anyway.”

I stop dead in my tracks as Spike walks on, the library just now coming into sight. “I’m not that predictable,” I say.

“Yes, you are,” he says without bothering to look back. The worst part is that I’m pretty sure he’s right. A few quickened steps later I catch up to him right before we reach the front door and I glance up as I unlock it.

“Spike, you forgot to close the upstairs window when we left. What if it had rained?” I say.

“Come on, Twilight, there isn’t any rain scheduled until that storm later tonight. I could have sworn I remembered, though,” he says. We push open the door and step inside. Other than a few sunbeams streaming in through the windows the room is dark.

“Let’s get some lights on in here,” I suggest and Spike walks into the kitchen looking for a lantern.

I don’t even notice the dark shape above until it drops down onto my back and wraps a pair of legs around me. The sudden

weight makes me cry out and stagger. I try to turn my head to see what it is, and as I do what feels like a hoof traces its way up to my cheek and gently guides my chin upward.

Luckily for me, the thing on my back pulls me into a deep kiss instead of ripping open my jugular vein.

“Welcome home, Twilight. I missed you,” says a mare’s voice when the kiss finally ends.

“Azalea!” My panic turns into elation. It would probably be bad for my burgeoning love life to tell my fillyfriend I was about three seconds away from disintegrating her, so I tactically neglect to mention it.

“I saw you getting off the train about ten minutes ago, and decided I wanted to surprise you,” she says as she moves in to give my cheek a nuzzle.

“Well you certainly did that. I had no idea you were so quiet,” I say.

“I can be sneaky when I want to be,” she replies with a playful little giggle. A moment later, though, it turns into a frown.

“You know, I’m realizing that I sort of just broke into your house. Sorry.”

“You didn’t rummage through my things or anything, right?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, I’ll let it slide this time. I guess this means you owe me one, though,” I say.

“Oh, I’m sure there’s *some* way I can make it up to you,” she says. The way her voice drops over the course of that sentence makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up with anticipation.

“Oh, gag me,” says Spike from the far side of the room.

Azalea laughs and with a flap of her wings lifts herself up off of my back before landing in the center of the room. “Good to see you again too, Spike.”

“Hi Azalea,” he says. “Do you two want anything special from the market? I was going to head into town and restock our

pantry.”

“Just what’s on the list. Thanks Spike, you’re the best,” I reply.

“Better than sitting around here watching you get all lovey-dovey,” grumbles Spike. Grabbing a few bags, he heads right back out the front door leaving Azalea and me alone.

Azalea trots over to a nearby couch and hops up onto it, patting the empty space beside her and looking at me expectantly. I move to join her, and it’s not very long before we’re wrapped up in one another’s legs. “So I take it that everything in Canterlot went well?”

I shudder a bit, which doesn’t go unnoticed. “...more or less,” I say after a long pause.

“Something wrong?” asks Azalea, the worry in her voice poorly concealed.

“We fixed everything, I sent Star Swirl back to his own time, and I got a ton of new information about the Elements of Harmony,” I say.

“That sounds great,” says Azalea. “I almost didn’t notice how you completely avoided answering my question.”

I snort a little despite myself. “I guess I did, didn’t I? It’s just something I don’t want to think about right now,” I say.

Azalea frowns but lets me bury my face into her chest without comment. I’m trying so, so hard not to imagine how scared Star Swirl was as he wrote that letter. How desperate he must have been if his last hope was some mare he only knew for a few weeks and who wouldn’t even be born for hundreds upon hundreds of years. How-

“Twilight, you’re crying,” whispers Azalea. I blink a few times, and sure enough wet trails are carving a path down my face. I don’t bother to say anything in reply for a little while, electing instead just to hold her while she strokes my mane.

“When is it going to stop?” I ask nopony in particular. “I’m tired, Azalea. I’m so, so tired of the way things keep happening to me. Star Swirl’s in trouble, and he asked me for help but...”

“But you’re tired,” says Azalea. I nod rather than risk letting my voice break as I answer her. I talked about this the entire ride home. I don’t want to talk about it any more and I certainly don’t want to dump all my troubles on her.

“I should be staying here, and planning something special the two of us could do together. Can you believe that technically we’ve only been on one date?” I ask her. “Think about it, Applejack set that one up. I’ve never actually asked you out.”

“You don’t have to, Twilight. You’re special to me, and I know that. You don’t have to call the time we spend together a date for it to count,” she says.

“But I still don’t know what I’m doing! What are the rules for this sort of thing? I mean, we’ve been seeing each other for weeks now. How long am I supposed to wait before I ask to, I don’t know, meet your parents?”

Azalea stiffens. I worry that I said something wrong but I’m not quite sure what. “The longer the better on that front,” she mutters, an uncharacteristic note of bitterness invading her voice. I wait for her to continue, but she doesn’t.

“Why?” I eventually prompt. “I’d like to meet them someday.”

Azalea is quiet for a long, long time, just holding me against her. I’ve given up hope on getting a response by the time she speaks up again. “I haven’t really spoken to my parents in a while. A long while,” she says.

“You haven’t? Did something happen?” I ask. I’ve never heard Azalea mention her parents with anything but affection. Could there be something between them I didn’t pick up on?

“You might say that,” she says. I could press her to tell me more, or I could let her off the hook by changing the subject. I do neither. If we both have things we don’t want to share, then so be it. My ear is right up against her chest, and I can hear the way her heartbeat has started to quicken. “You are impossibly wonderful, Twilight,” she says. “No matter what I just want to be sure you know that. Listen, the truth is that I haven’t always been-”

Whatever she was about to say is drowned out by a loud rapping on a nearby window. We both groan at the interruption and I roll off of the couch to investigate. Rainbow Dash waves at me from outside, and I walk over to let her in. “Can I help you?” I ask.

“Hey Twilight. I’m not interrupting something, am I?” she asks.

She is. “No, of course not. What’s on your mind?” As much as I’d love to tell her to get lost, I’m sure she wouldn’t have come to see me if it weren’t important. After all, we just rode the train back from Canterlot together so it isn’t like she’d just drop in to catch up.

“I swung by the weather office on the way to my house. One of the other ponies there reported seeing changelings at the edge of the forest,” she says.

I frown. Most of the changelings who attacked Canterlot were transformed when we used the Elements of Harmony, but the ones who weren’t are still dangerous. Packs of feral changelings have been spotted all over Equestria. Without a Queen to guide them they aren’t quite as threatening as they used to be, but to outlying towns like Ponyville they’re still a potential risk. If there’s a pack of them nearby, they need to be pushed back before they can try to infiltrate the community. “Do they need us to go deal with them? Can’t the guard handle it?”

“They’d feel better if we tagged along, you know, since you’ve got the reputation of being Equestria’s number-one changeling flank kicker these days. Me being a close second, of course.”

I sigh. “Fine, let’s get it over with. Azalea, I’m really sorry but I need to go deal with this.”

“It’s fine, Twilight. Be safe,” she says giving me a quick peck for good luck.

“Uh, Twilight, aren’t you forgetting something?” asks Rainbow Dash. She bobs her head in Azalea’s direction. “Ahem. Cough. Cough cough.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary, Dash,” I say. Bad enough she’s pulling me away from Azalea just when we run into each other again.

“Hey, you know the rules and protocols. You’re the one who wrote them. You can’t go giving out special treatment just because you like somepony,” says Rainbow Dash. This coming from the mare best known for the blatant favoritism she displays towards the ponies she manages on the weather team, but it isn’t worth making a royal case over.

“I don’t mind,” says Azalea, “actually it kind of tickles.”

I shrug and with a quick spark from my horn a current of magic arches from me to Azalea’s chest. Nothing happens when it hits her, but had she been a disguised changeling she would have been forced back into her natural form. “You too, Dash,” I say. Rainbow Dash doesn’t protest and I repeat the test again on her with another negative result. I’ve gotten pretty quick with that particular spell. I had a whole lot of time and opportunities to practice it. “Just give me one minute and I’ll meet you out front.”

Rainbow Dash flies back out the window, a habit I’ve given up hope of ever breaking her of. “Sorry about this. Before we were interrupted, were you trying to tell me something about your parents?” I ask.

“Oh, it isn’t important right now. I’ll see you sometime over the next couple of days and we can talk about it then.” We walk out the front door together to where Rainbow Dash is waiting and I wave goodbye to Azalea.

The changeling ‘infestation’ turns out to be completely underwhelming. Rainbow, three guards, and myself up against four malnourished drones. I probably could have taken care of it single hoofed, and before long we’ve scattered them and forced them to retreat into the depths of the Everfree. It’s the work of two hours, tops. Trotting back along the road towards Ponyville, I think I’ve earned the right to grumble a little bit about it.

“Hey, I know it turned out not to be a big deal but thanks for coming with me to take care of this, Twilight. I know it meant

a lot to the guards. Of course, I could have personally fought all of ‘em myself blindfolded with a hoof tied behind my back, but I guess I appreciate it too,” says Rainbow Dash. “A lot of the ponies around here still freak out whenever they hear the word ‘changeling.’”

“Why? The invasion was only in Canterlot.”

“Well yeah, but it still spooked us. I mean, it spooked them. Think about it, nopony had any idea what was going on, they probably got all kinds of conflicting reports, the Elements of Harmony go off and some of their neighbors turn into totally different ponies. I heard one changeling that got turned into another copy of Bon Bon was even run out of town that first afternoon.”

“Really? What about Kicky?” I ask.

“She’s only still around because Cloud Kicker stuck up for her, hid her inside their house until word arrived that the changelings were actually reformed, then ponies got over it pretty quickly. I asked Cloudy about it once. She said that Kicky had all her memories from West Hoof and stuff, and as far as she was concerned she was part of her clan. Cloud Kicker takes that kind of thing really seriously.”

I weigh the new information in my mind for a little while, the only sound around us the wind rustling through the tall grass of the field we’re walking beside. I remember how I first reacted to the idea of former changelings integrating into pony society. They aren’t memories I’m proud of, especially not the family dinner that almost ended in me taking poor Butterscotch’s head off. I’d actually fought off the invasion, too. It must have been doubly terrifying to all the ponies who had been helpless during it.

“Uh, actually, I kinda had an ultimate motive for bringing you along, too,” says Dash as she looks up at a nearby cloud to avoid my questioning gaze.

“You mean an ‘ulterior’ motive, right?”

“Yeah, one of those too. I thought that maybe it wouldn’t hurt to remind you that, y’know, you do a lot to help out around

here and maybe you don't need to go chasing after some big disaster just because you got a letter."

I smile. "Don't worry, Dash, I'm not going to just up and disappear on you guys. At the very least I need to go through decades of research by the greatest mind of the last two thousand years," I say, "so that'll probably take two or three days."

Indeed, once we get back to the library and I've said goodbye to Rainbow Dash for the time being the first thing I do is fish Star Swirl's notes and the copy of his work Celestia gave me out of my bulging saddlebag. I open the book up to a random section and hunt down the corresponding section of Star Swirl's notes. In this case, it's a few paragraphs speculating on the purpose of the filagree that that supports the Element of Magic's central jewel. Both copies match one another other than a few sentences here and there that have been reworded for clarity. I repeat the process three more times with other sections of the book, and get the same results. It seems safe to say that the copy of the book Celestia provided is legitimate. I hate that I even felt I needed to verify it, but the knowledge that she actively concealed this for so long and explicitly chose not to share it with me has left my faith in her a bit shaken.

I begin to read. The first few chapters go quickly since they don't tell me anything I don't already know. Mostly they just describe the physical characteristics, speculate about the cut of the gemstones. It seems in his day they were more geometric and uniform rather than stylized representations of my friends' cutie marks. I'm noticing that a lot of what he's written is speculative, actually. For a pony who spent twenty years working with the Elements, he doesn't seem to have drawn very many definitive conclusions.

One big exception is a chapter centered around some very clever experiments in probability alteration due to exposure to the Element of Magic. Even when the crown was only physically present, Star Swirl found that events or systems would trend towards more orderly and harmonious states,

sometimes to the point that implied they were entirely ignoring basic entropy.

The implications are mind boggling. The Elements might have passive effects, and change the environment around them even when they aren't in use? How could the Princess not allow such promising experiments to continue? I check Star Swirl's notes to see if there might be more information than what's in the final edition of his work.

Soon enough I find my answer. Celestia *did* want the research to go on. Several other researchers tried to reproduce Star Swirl's findings and every one of them failed. Nor could Star Swirl figure out how to replicate the effects with any of the other five, despite trying for years. His personal notations in the margins grow increasingly angry and rambling at what he sees as the other researchers' failings. The phrase 'morons who couldn't tell a test tube from their own plot' makes several appearances. More ominously, some of his notes suggest that he began to believe somepony or something was working against him, actively trying to undermine his credibility.

I find that hard to believe. No wonder Celestia felt he was growing unhinged and paranoid. Still, I can't help but ache in sympathy as I read of how his frustration grew and grew as his reputation suffered. Maybe suppressing this work was a blessing after all, ensuring that ponies would remember Star Swirl for his other great accomplishments rather than his failings. I wish that Celestia had let me take the Elements back here with me so I could try the experiment myself, but she denied my request when I asked her. Probably for exactly this reason.

Odd that it would only work for the Element of Magic. I try to think about the other Elements, and my mind can't help but jump to their bearers. Does being around the Element of Laughter make me feel freer, happier, cheerier? Well, yes, but usually when I'm near the Element it's because Pinkie's wearing it, and I always feel those things when I'm around Pinkie. The same goes for the other four too, and their respective Elements. I can't reasonably conclude that just

because being around the bearers of an Element makes me feel something like that it's due to the workings of the Element itself. Correlation is hardly causation, after all.

I read on, and it's not far into the chapter wherein Star Swirl tried to activate them when I discover why he was never successful. It's pretty much all summed up in one paragraph:

Search for bearers unsuccessful. No matter what I do, the candidates I've selected seem unwilling to join in my endeavor despite the power I can promise them. The ones who do approach me are failures, lacking in some way or another, and insufficient for my cause. Based on events unduplicatable in a laboratory setting, only the strongest ponies can bear the Elements. No pony believes me, I know, but the six mares I've observed using the Elements surpass them all. How? How did Twilight find such exemplary subjects? I wish I had asked her.

Damn it Star Swirl. You're an idiot. I mean sure, you're brilliant, but you're an idiot.

If you had bothered to ask, I would have told you that I *never* would have picked these five ponies to be bearers right when I met them. Friendship isn't supposed to be a means to an end. You don't pick your friends, my experience has been that they just... happen, once you've opened yourself up to the possibility. If I had shut out any one of them because I didn't think they were worth my while, and to be completely frank I probably would have had I not been so desperate at the time, I would have missed out on an entire world of experiences and perspectives. How many amazing ponies did you reject, because you couldn't see how wonderful they were?

I suppose I won't ever know. I just wish I could go back and... well, I'd probably smack him. But it would be for his own good. If anypony ever needed a lecture on the nature of friendship, it's him. How could he misinterpret everything he saw while he was here so awfully?

Easy, Twilight, he didn't experience the same crises you did. Before I met my friends, I probably would have done the exact same thing. Still, when I see him again he's getting a talking to.

If. If I see him again. Because I still haven't decided whether I'm even going back to help him yet. Yep, that's totally up in the air. No final decision made yet. Could go either way.

I'm not fooling anypony, am I?

I skip ahead over quite a few other experiments, more interested now in what could have compelled him to write that second letter. Skimming over the later chapters, though, all I manage to find is more variations of the same experiment on probability and fate manipulation. What's more, his notes grow increasingly manic. Entire pages are filled with ranting about 'forces arrayed against him' and 'powers beyond his control.' This isn't... this isn't what continuous exposure to the Elements does to a bearer, is it?

Checking the same passages from his personal notes sheds a little more light on what he's talking about. Odd accidents, laboratory fires, texts he wanted to check out suddenly going missing from archives. Nothing conclusive, and never anything where there was evidence of wrongdoing, but certainly suspicious. He was paranoid, but that doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility that he was right.

There's no choice in my mind now. I have to know.

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to investigate Star Swirl's letter."

Seven faces look at me from across the table over the steaming hot cups of tea we're discussing this over. None of them are happy about what I'm saying. So, major accomplishments since the last time I saved all of time and space? One more pony is unhappy with me.

"Twi, ah thought we talked about this the other day," says Applejack, "just doesn't seem right to me that the Elements could be up to something."

"Maybe they aren't, and Star Swirl really did go a little nuts. Either way his letter said that he was off in another timeline, and neither of the Princesses knew any more than that. I owe it

to them to find out what really happened. At the very least, I can bring Princess Luna some closure.”

“That’s quite magnanimous of you Twilight, but do promise us that you won’t take any unnecessary risks. You have a way of getting swept up in things sometimes,” says Rarity.

“Is that why you had me pack your bags last night, Twilight?” asks Spike. “You took enough stuff to last for months.”

“Relax, Spike,” I say. I take a sip of my own tea. At least one of us should enjoy it. “Time travel, remember? Even if I’m gone for days or weeks, I’ll be back later tonight.”

“Sure you will,” he mutters into his drink. It’s like he almost doesn’t believe everything will go exactly as planned.

“We could go with you,” says Fluttershy. “I mean if you would go tomorrow so I could make arrangements for my animal friends.”

“I won’t hear of it. I’ve inconvenienced all of you too much already these last few months, with all the trips back and forth between here and Canterlot. I want to accomplish this on my own, but you’ll be with me in spirit.”

Azalea is still frowning at my decision. “As long as you promise to come back to us safe and sound.”

“I promise. Safe and sound and better than ever, you have my word,” I say, looking her right in the eye as I do. I hope it’s enough to reassure her that I have things completely under control.

“Well, I’m not going to try to stop you if you’ve made up your mind, just don’t do anything crazier than I would do,” says Rainbow Dash.

“As if that rules anything out,” says Applejack.

I finish the last of my tea. The others are lingering over theirs, shooting furtive glances between them as they silently debate the best way to talk me out of my decision, but my mind is made up. “I’ll be fine, girls. Really.” I rise from my seat and circle the table giving each one of them the most comforting hug I can manage. Lifting my bags up onto my back, I pay for

the tea and then head for an empty field behind the restaurant followed by the others. I've already prepped the spell that I read out of Star Swirl's notes, the one-way ticket to wherever and whenever he ended up. Getting back will be up to me, but I have a few options that should work.

I motion for the others to stand back and start gathering up power. It's going to take quite a bit to travel so far. Shapes and colors dance around me as I shape my magic, molding it into the form I need. The familiar tension of unrealized potential fills the air. I cast one last look back at the friends I'm leaving behind, just for a little while.

"Wish me luck."

With that I complete the spell and the air around me starts to ripple and tear. I focus as hard as I can on the time and location Star Swirl gave me in his letter, and his spell does the rest. A surge of power courses through me, pulling me into the void. My last conscious thought is wondering just what's waiting for me on the other side.

An Impossibly Old Friend

AN IMPOSSIBLY OLD FRIEND

I reappear in darkness.

Wherever I am, it's dank and smells earthy. Some sort of cave, I think. My hooves are resting on something that feels soft and alive. It's also hot, and between the heat and humidity I'm sweating before I even have a chance to get my bearings. There's a point of light off in the distance, and I make for it, not having anywhere else to go. Just as I'm about to step into the light coming in from the cave's exit, a voice interrupts.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," it says.

I recognize that voice. "Star Swirl?"

"Twilight?"

I rush over to where he's laid out on the cave floor and hug him. He shouts in alarm.

"Ow! Seriously?"

He pushes me away and I fall back. "You're hurt?" Indeed, I pull my hoof back to discover it's covered in his blood.

"What tipped you off? The shrieks of pain I just let out? Or the fact that I sent you a distress call saying exactly that? Moron."

My horn ignites, casting light over the familiar stallion. He's older than I remember him being, the wrinkles on his forehead set deeper than the last time I saw him. He looks a great deal like the portrait of him that hangs in the Canterlot library, except his robes are grimy and soiled. "The beard looks good," I say.

He strokes the bloody, matted hair hanging from his chin. "It's seen better days, as have I."

"Let me see your injuries," I say, getting down to business. I remove the robes and quickly fold them up before placing the bundle down by the cave wall. I size up the task before me.

Star Swirl is covered in cuts and gashes, and bleeding freely. Fortunately I knew to expect something like this, and prepared a good number of healing spells to cover every eventuality. My horn glows as I go to work and Star Swirl trembles as the injuries start to knit themselves closed. “How did this happen?”

Star Swirl is grateful for something to distract himself from the pain my spell is causing him, necessary though it may be. “I was walking by a window, and it exploded. Very sharp glass everywhere,” he says.

“It must have been. You’ve lost a lot of blood. Here, drink this.” I pull a juice box from my saddlebags and poke the straw into it. He takes it and starts to suck it down. It should help get him back on his hooves a bit quicker. “Any idea what made the window explode? Your letter said it was the Elements of Harmony.”

“Well, indirectly. I’m sure that if we investigate it’ll turn out that when the glass was made some two hundred years ago it had a microscopic flaw, and then as I was walking by it the perfect combination of heat and air pressure just happened to make it fail catastrophically at just the wrong moment. That tends to be the way they operate.”

“Sounds like just a weird coincidence,” I say.

“Once you’ve seen the kind of things I have, you’ll stop believing in those.” His most dangerous wounds are all patched up, so I take a moment to inspect him. He’s in pretty good shape for a stallion in his early fifties, although the gray in his mane and beard suggest that he’s been through a lot.

“What about you? I see you’ve been taking care of yourself. You don’t look a day older than you did when I left.”

“Well why would I? You left less than a week ago.”

He waits several seconds before he answers me. “Why would you come straight here that quickly?”

“Huh? You asked me to. Your letter said you were dying. Oh, and you’re welcome for the way I just saved your life, by the way.”

“I gave you a fixed point in time. You could have spent an entire decade studying, made archmage, gotten ready properly and still arrived exactly when you did. Instead you just rush in half-cocked?”

I throw up my hooves. “Gee, I’m so sorry that my heroically charging in to save you doesn’t live up to your expectations.” Unbelievable. He hasn’t mellowed a bit in the last twenty years, just gotten surlier.

He glares at me and collects himself. “You’re right. Thank you, Twilight. You didn’t have to come at all. I didn’t actually expect that you would. I figured I would just bleed to death here in this awful place. Twice.”

I tilt my head at the last part. “Can you do that? Can you bleed to death twice?”

“I can,” he replies. He shifts up onto his knees gradually, and holds up the amulet that’s dangling from his neck. It’s dominated by a large ruby placed into a rectangular setting of gold, and covered by carvings of tiny runes. “I made it myself,” he says with pride. “It’s the only reason I’ve lasted as long as I have. My own personal rewind, takes me back about five minutes whenever I die. So the Regalia can’t just collapse a building on me by surprise, I’ll get a second chance.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” I say. I hold my hoof out to touch it, glancing up at Star Swirl’s face for permission. When he nods, I pull the amulet a bit closer to get a better look. The gem is warm to the touch. “So, basically as long as you’re wearing this you can’t die?”

“It doesn’t go quite that far,” he explains. “Takes about an hour or so to recharge between uses, so I only get one do-over per attempt on my life. And with something like that blood loss you just helped me with it only means I’ll get to live through the last part of it twice. Still, it’s kept me one step ahead of the baddies for this long.”

“Will you make one for me?”

“Depends. Do you have any massive gems that you personally ripped from the crown of a necromancer who was leading a

skeletal army against Equestria just lying around?”

“Can’t say that I do.”

“Sorry, can’t help you then.”

It’s awfully annoying to hang around a pony who’s actually accomplished so much more than I ever have. This must be how others feel around me. “So why would the Regalia be trying to kill you anyway? I doubt even you could be *that* unpleasant.”

“Because I figured them out,” he says. “You saw my notes. The Regalia has been changing and manipulating everything, trying to counter basic entropy, and basic pony nature. We all have room for self-improvement after all, even me. But they’re fighting a losing battle, and when they fall too far behind and decide we aren’t worth the effort, they pick up their ball and go home. By which I mean they blow up the planet.”

“The Elements want to end the world? They hate us that much?” I ask. It’s the part of all this I’m having the most trouble believing.

“Oh it’s much, much worse than that. They do this because they *love* us too much. They want to make the best of all possible worlds for us to live in, and they’ll go through every possible permutation until they find the one they like. I don’t like our timeline’s odds of winning the grand prize,” says Star Swirl. “I don’t think the Elements are controlling the Regalia directly though. They’re more like free agents with the authority to use the Elements’ power.”

“That’s pretty out there, Star Swirl. I don’t see how I’m being manipulated, and I’ve been exposed to them more than most.”

“Oh, really?” asks Star Swirl, skeptical. “Never had anything weird happen around you? Never gotten little bursts of inspiration when you were near the Regalia that helped you figure out a solution to your problem?”

“Well, when you live in Ponyville weird is relative.”

“And you started living there right after you used the Elements on Nightmare Moon, didn’t you?”

“What are you implying?”

“Oh, I think you’re smart enough to know exactly what I’m implying.” He stands up and stretches, evaluating the effects of my healing magic, which are apparently satisfactory.

“They’re very good at manipulation. We’re talking about a set of artifacts that literally manipulated themselves into existence.”

“How did they do that?”

“Beats me, but I’m sure that they did. Think about it. The other five Elements are based off the Element of Magic. Where did Luna get it?”

“You brought it back with you from my time,” I reply.

“Correct. And where did I get it?”

I sigh. It seems that he’s really going to go through this step by step. “We brought it back with us from the other timeline. The really bad one. Come on Star Swirl, this all happened within the last month for me.”

“Almost there. Ever wonder why that timeline exists in the first place? My time loop spell, obviously, but why did I write it with such an obvious flaw? I knew before I even wrote it that it wouldn’t work right, but I wrote it that way anyway because that’s how I knew it had to happen. Had already happened, thanks to my coming to visit you and fix the problems it caused. What if there was a bigger point?”

My thoughts race through the implications of what he’s saying. “Wait... so everything that happened to me in the time loop...”

“Was to make you their delivery girl, and put the crown in the right place at the right time,” he finishes for me. “You played your part perfectly.”

No. The Elements of Harmony wouldn’t do that to me. They’re supposed to be good. Well, I guess from their perspective this is good. I remember something I thought right after they had finished off Chrysalis and turned the changelings into ponies, without any sort of consent involved.

There's a very good reason they aren't called the Elements of Niceness...

"So are we just going to sit around here and talk all day, or are we going to do something about it?" he asks me.

"Where is 'here,' anyway?" I ask, delaying the need to make my choice.

"Remember how I told you there were other timelines? Ones where somepony tried to use the Regalia, but it failed instead of succeeding? This is one of them, from the very first time the Regalia was employed in my lifetime. The seal on the great wolf Fenrir came undone, and it started to menace the countryside. Celestia went out to fight it. When she lost, it ate her."

"It *ate* her?"

"Yep. Swallowed her whole. Luna and Celestia don't need the Regalia to use the Elements when they work together, but they do if just one of them tries to use them alone. Luna and I took the Regalia and went to help her."

"She's never told me any of this," I say.

"I doubt she's a big fan of this particular story, for obvious reasons."

I think about what I know of the Princess. "You know, she always *has* liked cats more than dogs..."

"There you go, now you know why," says Star Swirl. "With the Regalia's help, we beat Fenrir. But what if we hadn't? Well, it turns out that if Luna had lost, the unicorn council wouldn't have been up to keeping the sun and moon going. They must be out of practice after so long. All of which is a long way of saying don't step into the sunlight."

"Huh?"

Instead of answering, Star Swirl pulls a chunk of moss from the wall of the cave with his magic. It hovers in front of my face for a moment and I get a good look at it before he tosses it into the sunlight streaming in through the mouth of the cave.

The moss bursts into flame. I can only watch as it burns away in an instant before I turn back to Star Swirl.

“It’s a bit warmer out there these days.”

I look out at Equestria, acutely aware now of how I’ve been sweating since I got here. The landscape is a dead and baking wasteland, rippling in the heat rising up from the ground. Star Swirl joins me in looking out over the devastation. “The cave is enchanted, so it’s safe for the time being,” he explains. “In a few days, though, the Regalia will do exactly what it always does. It will reject this world. I’ll either find somewhere else that’s safe for me, or I’ll die.” He falls silent for a long moment. “So now you know what I’m up against. I wouldn’t blame you if you went back to your own time and forgot all about this. You’ve already helped me a great deal, and if you do stay you aren’t going to like where I’m going next.”

“Where’s that?”

“To meet with the only pony who I’ve ever known to have any luck fighting the Regalia. I’m going to see you.”

“What? But I’m right here. I never fought against the Regalia unless you count-” my mind catches up. “Oh no. No way. Absolutely not. She was completely insane, and she’ll kill us for what we did to her last time we were there.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t like it.”

I sit down to think about my choices. Almost certain death at the hooves of an enraged changeling queen who used to be me, or a happy, comfortable life in Ponyville with a pony I love, the best friends I’ve ever known, and just the tiniest shred of suspicion that it might all be a lie.

“I’m in.”

Star Swirl looks surprised that I found it so easy to choose. “I’ll prepare an escape spell and keep it ready. First sign of trouble and we’ll warp right back here.”

I nod to him. His horn glimmers in the dim light of the cave, and a moment later we’ve gone and left the dead, burned-out shell of Equestria to its fate.

We re-enter the time loop at the same point we always have; the library of Canterlot palace. It's situated in one of the upper wings of the castle that hangs out over the city in what is, bar none, the most impressive architectural achievement in Equestria.

Or rather we enter the point in space where it used to be. There's no castle there, and no floor under our hooves. Just empty sky. The two of us instantly begin to plummet towards the ground far below. Gravity is *such* a bitch.

I look down. There's a lot of 'down' to look at. Below us, though not for long at this rate, is the smoldering wreckage of what used to be the castle spread out through the equally wrecked city of Canterlot. "Cast the escape spell!" I shout to Star Swirl, desperate to be heard over the rushing air. I can't even hear my own voice through it, hopefully he'll figure it out on his own. "Cast it cast it cast it cast-"

There's a blur at the corner of my vision, and I land on something soft and yielding. A moment later Star Swirl lands on top of me. Pinned down as I am, I can only make out bits and pieces of the scene around me. We're gliding rather than falling now, carried on the back of the big purple pegasus that just saved us. She lands on a nearby hillside and I fumble my way off her back. I've never been so happy to be back on solid ground. I turn to thank our savior.

My jaw drops.

That 'big purple pegasus'? She has a unicorn horn too. In fact, she's me.

"Hello, Twilight," says Princess Sparkle. "Long time no see."

I just kind of sit there in stunned silence for a little bit.

"If we could get the banal portion of this conversation over with as quickly as possible, I would appreciate it," she says.

It takes me a few more seconds before I can say anything at all. "You have wings!" I finally manage.

"Correct."

“You’re an alicorn,” says Star Swirl.

“Equally correct. Is it really any more surprising than a changeling queen?”

“Yes!” I say.

She smiles a little and I realize there’s a distinct lack of her trying to kill us. “I’m not going to hurt you, Twilight. Relax.”

“How did you know I was-”

“Not the first time I’ve had this conversation,” she replies.

“You two pop up right about now in every loop, or at least the ones that last long enough. Oddly enough you’ve never returned at the time you came in during, from your perspective, your last visit. Probably has something to do with the spell you two cast when you left.” She glares at us at her mention of the spell. “I believed you, you know. I wanted what you told me to be true so badly. After you left I wasted no time killing myself. I wasn’t afraid, in fact I welcomed it. Can you guess what happened after that?”

“Well that didn’t work,” I say. We both flinch as I say the phrase.

“Precisely. After that, I simply broke. I couldn’t believe you would do that to me. To yourself. I devoted myself entirely to hating you.”

I shudder. She’s not talking like somepony who doesn’t want to kill me.

“However,” she continues, “eventually, madness became as boring as everything else. I spent many a loop curled up in a trembling ball at the base of a ticking clock, counting downwards from 10,627 to zero. Then I simply chose to stop.”

“You just chose not to be crazy? Really?” asks Star Swirl.

“Twilight understands. When we set our mind to it, nothing is impossible,” she says lowering her face to my level. “Isn’t that right?”

As if I’m going to contradict her. I nod.

“Once my mind was clearer and I had some perspective on what I had done as the changeling queen, I realized just how pathetic I really became. I had no desire to go down that road again.”

“You did such horrible things, though,” says Star Swirl. “I understand how you were pushed that far, but it isn’t the kind of thing I can ever entirely forgive.”

“You cannot even conceive of how little your approval matters to me,” she counters. “I have not always been this forgiving, either. I have sat in this very spot many times and simply watched you plunge to your deaths, enjoying the sound your bodies made as they splattered in the ruins of Canterlot.”

“What happened to Canterlot?” I ask. It seems like a good time to change the subject.

“I came to realize what my biggest mistake had been for all those loops. I cared. I was so eager to sacrifice myself to save other ponies when it should have been the other way around. So I took the Elements and carried them off, leaving Canterlot to its fate.”

I stare at her. Even as a changeling queen, my double had felt *some* loyalty to the city, twisted and warped as it had been.

“You just abandoned everypony?”

“Temporarily. I needed more time with the Elements. Taking them away from the source of the destruction gave me more time to study and work with them. I could usually tease out a few weeks before they exploded, rather than just hours. I came to realize that once the other five bearers died, their Elements would be unaligned. I found a way to volunteer myself and as you can see, they accepted,” she says, fluffing her wings for emphasis. “You wouldn’t believe how many times I got myself killed figuring out how to use these things.”

“But our friends! They have to die for you to become immortal?”

“Not immortal. The oldest I’ve been able to reach is about one hundred and fifty, but they’re long and happy years. I’ve spent lifetimes adventuring, studying, making new friends, raising

families, anything I want to do. It really isn't that bad. And then when I die, whether it's by being crushed by some trap in an ancient temple or in a bed surrounded by my foals and grandfoals, I just start over again."

"You acted like you were pretty happy about your life the last time we met too," says Star Swirl. "We all remember how that turned out."

"I'm not claiming to be happy, only content. I'm certainly not doing anything like what I was doing to poor Luna in that loop," she says. She begins to walk away and waves with one of her wings for us to follow along. "After all, that really wasn't very interesting."

"It was also wrong," I point out as we trot beside her. She comes to a full stop underneath a rocky overhang, covering the three of us in shadow.

"Oh, please. Right and wrong? You sound like Celestia, and just like her you're too young to have figured out that there is no such thing. There are things that amuse me, and things that bore me. That's the only meaningful distinction. Keeping Luna locked up and her mind addled wasn't a stimulating use of her. Now, getting her to revert into Nightmare Moon? *That* was fun."

"Why would she ever--"

"I knew the right buttons to press, it was easy. Especially in loops where Celestia didn't survive. Once she falls again, though, *wow*," says Princess Sparkle. "Matching wits against her in a decades-long chess match set against the backdrop of a slowly dying world? Absolutely exquisite. We probably spent fifty-five percent of our time in bed together, and fifty-five percent trying to kill each other."

"That adds to a hundred and ten percent," says Star Swirl.

Princess Sparkle grins. "We're both excellent multitaskers."

"What about all the ponies who suffered because she wiped out the sun?"

"What about them? They're fine now. They don't even remember. Sure, the Elements weren't happy about it, but as

long as I'm bound up with them and alive they can't wipe everything out the way they want to. Which I suppose brings us to the point of your visit. Finding a way for you to defeat them." Something in a hidden cache below the overhang begins to glow with her magic, and she pulls out a scroll. She drops it into her hoof and offers it to us. "There you go. Took me three days to come up with the idea, and eleven centuries to dumb it down enough that one of you would be able to use it."

I unravel the scroll, ignoring her little insult, and try to read the spell that's printed there. I can wrap my head around the casting process easily enough, but everything after that is so far beyond my understanding of magic I doubt I'll ever comprehend it. I pass it over to Star Swirl, and from the way he stares down at it I can tell he's just as lost. "What does it do?"

"The Regalia are powerful," begins Princess Sparkle, "even having your five friends shatter theirs would only have been a temporary solution, though I didn't know that at the time. In fact, the only thing I'm confident would have the power to destroy them are the Elements of Harmony themselves."

"So you came up with a spell that's just the equivalent walking up to them and asking them to commit suicide. Great. That's sure to work," grumbles Star Swirl.

"The Regalia and the Elements are not the same thing," says Princess Sparkle, cross, and leans in over Star Swirl until he's forced to take a step back. "Perhaps if you'd let me finish?"

Star Swirl opens his mouth, but proves that he's learned something in the last twenty years by closing it again.

"Thank you," continues Princess Sparkle. "The Regalia are merely a vessel for the Elements, and vessels can be broken. When you cast this, it will redirect the energies they channel back at them as long as you are in their presence when they are used by another. Don't worry about understanding how to control it, everything will make sense once you cast the spell. Plus there will be copious amounts of energy left to turn against your allies."

“My allies? Why would I want to turn the Regalia against my friends?” I ask.

“Not your friends, your *allies*,” Princess Sparkle emphasizes. “If you simply reappear in your timeline again and go after the Elements directly, they will predict your actions and they will stop you. Fatally. No, you’ll need powerful beings from other timelines to assist you. Timelines that the Elements have abandoned, and thus cannot predict. Remember that each time the Regalia was used successfully in the past created a timeline where it failed, which the Elements would consequently destroy. I’m sure if you think, you can come up with at least two excellent candidates.”

I stare at her blankly.

She sighs. “Nightmare Moon and Discord. Uncorrupted by the Regalia’s influence. I cannot believe I have to spell it out for you.”

“But Discord is reformed back in my time,” I point out, “Why would I want the evil version?”

“You mean after he was marinated in the Regalia’s energies for a while, he came out differently. Just like Luna did. Of course they can’t help you. In fact they’ll both attempt to fight you off, and believe it to be their idea the entire time. Once you’ve dispatched the Regalia, the remaining energies provided by the Elements should be more than enough to banish them from your world once again.”

“Why would they help us if I’m just going to banish them afterwards?”

Princess Sparkle rubs the base of her horn with a hoof, the same thing I do when I’m getting a headache. “Lie to them. You’re good at that.”

I ponder that for a bit. Would the ends justify the means? These are some awful ponies we’re talking about, and it would be in service of a greater good. Still, service of a greater good is what’s making the Regalia a threat in the first place.

“At any rate, what you decide to do with this is up to you,” says Princess Sparkle, “I can only provide the option to you.”

“Why are you bothering to, anyway?” I ask. “Are you hoping we’ll help you out of the loop in return?”

“I will never escape this loop, Twilight. I’ve come to accept that. However, not all is lost. The disjunction that the time loop spell created, the one you stopped in your universe? It continues to consume this one. Though it may not be for billions of years, subjectively, eventually the damage will become bad enough that it reaches this era. And I will stop, forever. To be honest, I look forward to it. However, that also means that every loop I create is eventually condemned to destruction, by either flame or freezing. Yours, however, may yet be saved.” She smiles. “I have no future, not really, but perhaps you might. So I cast a light into the darkness, and send you back with slight variations of this spell every single loop in the hopes that I might somehow still make a difference.”

To think that I was terrified to come here. This is more than I could have ever expected from her. I can’t help it; I rush in and give her a hug.

“Can I ask a question? A personal one?”

“Of course you may.”

“Umm, well I’m dating this mare…”

“Azalea,” she confirms. I gape at her. “Again, not the first time I’ve had this conversation.”

“Oh, right. I was just wondering… does it work out for us?”

She looks down at me for some time. “I do not know. I haven’t ever met her.”

That’s confusing. All these loops and she’s never bother to go meet her? “Why not?”

“Because she’s dead.”

“How is that more than an inconvenience for you? Just spend a loop saving her.”

“You misunderstand. She died months before the invasion even began.”

I scoff. "Okay, we're obviously talking about different Azaleas."

"Flower vendor? Born and raised in Trottingham? Went to university and majored in floriculture with a minor in economics?" I can't think of any way to answer, so Princess Sparkle goes on. "There was a runaway cart in the Trottingham market. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm sorry."

"But I met her after the invasion was over! Months later!"

"Did you?" she asks. "Had you ever noticed her before you began to date her?"

"Well, no, but why would I?"

"Precisely," says Princess Sparkle as if that should explain everything. "Let me pose a question to you. What identity would be better for a spy than a deceased mare, one with a paper trail, from a foreign city? A mare who could hang around Ponyville watching from the background, never drawing attention to herself, and report back what she learned? Another question; how do you think Queen Chrysalis found out exactly which train our friends were on in the first place?"

I see what she's saying, but I refuse to believe it. "No. Azalea's a pony. Just like me."

"Well, she is now," concedes Princess Sparkle. "The Elements of Harmony did quite a number on the changelings in your timeline, didn't they? I'm sorry you have to find out this way."

I stumble backwards. "You're wrong," I say as my voice wavers. "You have to be wrong."

"I hunted down the changeling in question myself. I am not. Ask her yourself if you don't believe me."

I make up my mind to do exactly that. "Star Swirl," I say as I turn to my companion, "I need to go home to my time for a bit."

"That's a horrible idea. The second we pop up the Elements will begin arranging things to kill both of us," he says.

“I don’t care. I’m going. You can come with me, or stay here and rot.”

It’s his turn to sigh. “Fine.”

“Princess Sparkle, I... I...”

She holds up a hoof to cut me off. “No words are necessary, Twilight. Return to your time. Cast the spell. That’s all the satisfaction I need. Good luck.”

I find the determination to channel the magic I’ll need to return to my time more easily than I expected to. Rage is a pretty useful motivator that way. Right before Star Swirl and I vanish, I catch the last snippet of what Princess Sparkle says.

“Thank you.”

Star Swirl and I reappear back in our timeline, the same evening I left from originally. I’m almost immediately soaked by the pouring rain. I’d forgotten about the storm that was scheduled for tonight. “Remember that we can’t stay long,” says Star Swirl, raising his voice to be heard over the weather. “The Elements will figure out that I’m back, and that we’re working together. I don’t want to be around when they do.”

I nod to him, but my mind is elsewhere. There are hundreds of spells that could block out the rain, but I cast none of them. It feels right to let it pound against my back, seeping everywhere and leaving me shivering in the middle of the street. An appropriate penance for how stupid I’ve been this entire time.

I march through the streets until we reach Azalea’s front door, and start pummeling at it. It’s a good thing she’s home; in my present state of mind I could have ripped it out of its frame to get at what I want. Instead Azalea opens it, surprised to see me standing there like some grim parody of the night I invited her out for a stroll on the surface of a pond. Did everything I could think of to convince her she wasn’t just any average pony, when all that time she already knew she was anything but. Just not for the reasons I thought.

“Twilight? What are you doing out in the rain? You’ll catch a cold. Come inside,” she says and tries to wave me inside.

I stay right where I'm standing under the downpour. "You haven't always been what?"

Azalea freezes up, which is all the confirmation I need that everything Princess Sparkle told me is completely true.

"Please, Twilight, I was going to-"

"You haven't. Always. Been. What?" I ask again.

"...a pony."

My world collapses around me. I trusted her. I *loved* her. "So you've been lying to me this entire time. About everything," I say, my tone a deathly calm that belies how furious I actually am.

"No, I never lied to you," she tries to claim.

The appropriate thing to do would be to laugh in her face at such a ridiculous statement, but I find I just can't summon the mirth. "Oh, that's rich."

"Nothing I told you wasn't true," Azalea tries to rationalize to me. "I swear Twilight, I just... I left a few things out."

"A few things? *A few things*? Like the fact that you're a bucking changeling? Little things like that?" I shout at her.

"YES!" she screams back into my face. "I was going to tell you the other day before Rainbow Dash interrupted and said that you needed to go beat up a pack of them, but for *some reason* I didn't think that was the time to mention it!

Everything I feel for you... that's all real. Every bit of it. I'm Azalea, Twilight. Maybe I wasn't born as her but I remember everything she lived through. I didn't tell anypony what I was because I was horrified at what they might do to me if they found out."

"So your plan was what, exactly?"

"I don't *have* a plan," she says, her tears starting to mix with the raindrops. "I didn't *plan* to live in Ponyville after the invasion. I didn't *plan* to fall for you like I did, it just happened. I'm making my life up a day at a time just like everypony else."

I look at her, really look, and try to wrap my head around the deception she's perpetrated against me. Was it maybe justified? "What about your parents?"

"They don't know. They buried their daughter nearly a year ago now, and they hate changelings. They just... I wanted to let them move on."

"You don't miss them?"

She stares at me, incredulous, for a long moment. "I miss them every single day," she says quietly. "Twilight, you're right. I was a changeling. Queen Chrysalis sent me to Ponyville to monitor you and your friends. I watched you from the background, learned about you and what you liked. It wasn't personal, it was just the mission."

"So you were stalking me."

"More or less," Azalea confirms. "Then after the invasion the Elements changed me into, well, into me. I had this whole new perspective on all my memories of you, a new understanding of what you were like. That's how my crush on you started."

"That's really messed up, Azalea."

"You think I don't know that? It's why I never approached you myself," she says. "I thought if I stayed away from you, it would go away. Then Applejack asked me if I wanted to go on a blind date and you know the rest. I was just this dull, uninteresting little pegasus. Nothing special. That's why I picked this identity in the first place. I'd be so plain and boring no pony would ever look at me twice, especially not you. And then you did." Azalea falls to her knees in the doorway, and I come in from the rain.

I reach for her despite myself, but my hoof stops inches from her side. "Somepony told me once that every changeling had orders to kill me." Azalea curls up a little tighter and buries her face under her hooves. "Did you?"

"It never came up. I didn't ever get the opportunity to do that without blowing my cover."

"And if you had?"

She doesn't answer. That tells me all I need to know but I want to hear it from her. "Azalea..."

"Yes, okay? I would have killed you. Are you happy now?"

Not in the least. "What was all that at the hospital then? Why did you pretend to be so shocked by what I went through?"

"Pretend? I wasn't pretending at all. I know exactly what changeling queens are capable of, and the fact that you chose to become that..." she shudders. "The idea of it still creeps me out."

"You should have known what the changeling venom would do to me, though. You shouldn't have asked me what you did," I insist. I realize that this isn't exactly of the same magnitude as my original accusation, but I won't be satisfied if I can't pin at least something on her.

"I didn't know that you'd been injected with changeling venom."

"The nurses didn't tell you before they let you into my room?"

Azalea lets out a bitter chuckle. "No pony let me into your room. I snuck in. I told you I can be sneaky when I want to be. I've had a lifetime of practice, after all, and I decided that I wanted to see you despite the hospital's decision to keep you quarantined," she says. "My mistake."

"Hardly the only one." I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. A hoof touches my back, and I see Star Swirl standing there looking at me with expectant pity. He doesn't say anything, though. I lie down next to Azalea and stroke her back and wings. She uncovers her face to look over at me.

"You... You aren't mad?" she asks.

"Oh, don't misunderstand, I'm livid. You did lie to me, Azalea, even if it was just through omission. But I'm willing to talk it out with you before I decide whether I'm going to forgive you," I say.

"Why?" she asks, genuinely confused. "You can't tell me that you ever would have started going out with me if I'd been upfront about this from the start."

“No, probably not,” I agree. “And that would have been the biggest mistake I ever made. Wait, has Kicky known about this changeling thing the entire time?”

“Of course. I was dating Cloud Kicker, so it made sense for her to take a form that could be seen with me without raising suspicion. She respected my decision not to tell other ponies what I used to be, though. I wish I had a pony like Cloudy to stick up for me like she does.”

“Maybe you still can. Listen to me, Azalea. if we stay together, and that’s very much an *if* at this point, no more lies. You have to come clean to the town and my friends.”

“But what if they hate me for what I was?”

“Then they’ll answer to me. The longer you wait the harder it’s going to be, and-”

I’m interrupted when Star Swirl’s amulet flashes. He looks down at it, then back up again, and sighs. “I’m going to be hit by lightning and killed in five minutes. We need to leave.”

“What, inside? The odds of that are-”

“Infinitesimal, yes,” he says, cutting Azalea off. “Dealing with an enemy that manipulates fate and probability is annoying that way.”

“I’m sorry. It sounds like that must have hurt,” I say.

“Well, the alternative was continuing to stand here and listen to you two talking about your relationship. So comparatively it wasn’t so bad,” he says.

I roll my eyes and turn to Azalea. “I have to go, but I swear to you that I will come back and we will finish this. Would you do me a favor? Ask the girls to meet me in Canterlot this weekend at the palace. Something big is going to happen and I need their help.”

“Of course, Twilight. We’ll be there.”

“No, *they* will be there. I don’t want to drag you into this any more than I already have,” I say. She frowns at that, but doesn’t object. Before I go, I pull her face up to mine and kiss

her. I break it when I hear Star Swirl tapping his hoof impatiently behind me. “Alright, alright, back to base.”

Star Swirl doesn’t waste a second. His horn glows and in an instant we’ve disappeared from where we were standing inside the threshold of Azalea’s home.

Rather than back in the cave in Fenrir’s timeline, we reappear in a beautiful corridor. I recognize it as Canterlot Castle, but it isn’t decorated the way I remember it. “Where are we?” I ask.

“Canterlot Castle,” says Star Swirl, confirming my suspicions. “A better question would be *when* are we. Welcome to the past.”

A Great Big Screwed Up Family

A GREAT BIG SCREWED UP FAMILY

“The past?”

“Yes, my time,” confirms Star Swirl as he begins to walk down the hallway.

“Wait, but then we’re in our main timeline again, aren’t we? Won’t the Elements come for us here?”

“We aren’t in our timeline, this is another parallel one. They aren’t *only* created by the Regalia failing to stop world-ending disasters. Nothing we do here should affect the future, which is one of the many useful properties of alternate timelines. Being outside our own should buy us at least a couple of hours.”

“What’s this one from, then?” I ask.

“I made it. I got the idea when an alternate-universe counterpart of me popped in to take my version of a sweater he had lost. So I did the same. While it isn’t technically ours, it’s practically identical.”

“You made an entire universe to replace a single sweater?”

“Well, it was that or tell Luna I’d lost a gift she gave me for Hearth’s Warming. Easy choice, from where I’m sitting.”

“So why are we here?”

“Because I need a few things. Like most importantly a nap.”

“The fundamental forces underpinning the universe are hunting us down, and you want to take a nap? How old did you get while I was away?” Star Swirl doesn’t get a chance to dignify that with an answer before he stumbles over a lump in the carpet and falls. I only just manage to catch him in my magic and put him back up on his hooves. His legs continue to tremble well past when they should have stopped. When I

realize that, I quickly regret what I just said. “Hey, I’m sorry. You lost a lot of blood, and then transported us across alternate timelines twice. I guess I should cut you some slack.”

“I’m glad you at least know how clueless and insensitive you are,” he says. His knees are still wavering, so wordlessly I lean in to support him. I feel the shaking muscles along his barrel begin to relax as I do.

“Wow, you kept the halls cold back in the day. Mind if I use you for some warmth?”

He turns his head to me, the look in his eyes all the thanks I need. “Yeah, that would be fine.”

We continue on like that, until we come to ornately carved double doors in a spot I don’t remember there being any in my time. “My study and office. No pony else besides me can even open these doors,” says Star Swirl. His horn glows and the doors creak open. Inside the study is what I recognize as an eternally-burning fireplace lighting up a fantastic office. Bookshelves line every wall all the way up to the ceiling, with just a few strips of green wallpaper so dark it might easily be mistaken for black between them. In one corner is a desk covered by haphazardly-scattered papers that cover every bit of its surface.

None of that can distract me from the young, dark blue unicorn mare standing frozen in the middle of the room, staring guiltily towards us with a hip flask in her mouth. For a long moment none of us say anything while the light of the fire dances in the mare’s mane; pitch black, but riddled with speckles of grey throughout.

“Father?” she finally asks.

“Father?” I echo more skeptically.

“Shooting Star,” says Star Swirl. “Tell me that isn’t the flask I keep in my bottom drawer.”

She hesitates. “This... isn’t the flask you keep in your bottom drawer.”

“So why does it have the initials ‘SS’ inscribed on the the side?” he asks.

She smirks. “Those are my initials, too.”

“You’re fifteen! You aren’t old enough to be drinking. And stealing out of my desk? What were you thinking?”

“But *faaaaath***ER!**”

I cover my ears reflexively. The Royal Canterlot Whine: It’s a thing, and it’s horrible.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re too young to-”

“It’s not fair! You were doing all sorts of crazy things when you were my age! Auntie Tia’s told me all about them! I want to go on an adventure, too! When does it get to be my turn?”

“When you’re ready, Starry. I promise that someday I’ll-”

“But I’m ready now! I know all kinds of spells! I can help you! So why won’t you let me come with you?” She notices that I’m there for the first time and glares at me. “And who is she?”

“Somepony who knows how to handle herself under pressure,” Star Swirl shoots back to my surprise. That might be the nicest thing he’s ever said about me.

Shooting Star narrows her eyes even further. “Well, I hate her.”

So clearly this relationship is off to a phenomenal start.

“**MOTHER!**” Shooting Star yells, breaking out that voice again. “**FATHER’S BACK FROM THE FUTURE, AND HE BROUGHT BACK ANOTHER ONE OF HIS FLOOZIES!**”

“Hey!” I protest, but it’s no good. Shooting Star begins to storm out of the room.

“Drop the flask,” says Star Swirl. Shooting Star turns to glare at us, and spits the hip flask down at his hooves before marching out of the room. “I’m sorry about that, Twilight. My daughter can be completely insufferable at times. She probably gets that from her mother.”

I hold my tongue, with great effort.

“Anyway,” he continues, “just let me do the talking. Luna can be difficult too.”

“I know that,” I say. “I’ve dealt with Luna before.”

“You’ve dealt with *your* Luna before.” Before I can ask him to clarify what he means by that a door on the other side of the room is slammed open, and in walks a huge, black alicorn I don’t immediately recognize.

Maybe if Nightmare Moon ditched her armor she would look like this. Rather than being a head shorter than Celestia, this pony is just as tall and well-proportioned. I have to shake my head to stop gazing into the mane that shimmers with a perfect display of the cosmos. I’m not even sure it isn’t actually a real-time display of them. “Luna?” I ask before I can think better of it.

“That’s *Princess* Luna to you, peon,” she replies. Who says you never get a second chance to botch a first impression? She turns to Star Swirl, but then does a double take back at me.

“Why do we recognize you? We cannot recall meeting you.”

I frown. There’s no reason she *should* know me at this point.

“I’m... not important. Don’t worry, I’m not here to steal Star Swirl from you, in any way.”

“As if you could compete with the divine,” says Luna. “You are correct, you are indeed unimportant.” She turns her attention back to Star Swirl. “Another adventuring companion of yours? I suppose she’s not the least attractive one you’ve ever brought back.”

“Hey, nothing like that is-” I try to protest.

“We are well aware that he is uninterested in you in that fashion. Now hush until you are spoken to,” says Luna, cutting me off. She resumes her conversation with Star Swirl. “More impudent than most of them, though. You certainly have a type.”

“Listen, Lunatic-”

“Sweet talk will not help you. Are you aware of what time you’ve returned to?”

“Not exactly,” admits Star Swirl. “The return spell I used is only accurate to within a few days.”

“Is that the reason you’re offering for **SKIPPING OUR ANNIVERSARY?**” she bellows. I changed my mind. I’m perfectly happy to be ignored for the duration of this conversation.

“Oh. Oh Lu, I’m so sorry. It was an accident. I’ll just use another spell to go back again and-”

“That is not the point! It is not just that you were absent, but rather that you forgot in the first place. Not everything can be mended with time travel.” Luna huffs. “I hope you at least plan to make it up to me on this night.”

“Err... actually, I can’t stay long. I just came here to grab a nap and a few supplies and then I’ll be off again. I wish I could explain, but...”

“Knowledge of the future. I grow weary of that being your excuse whenever you do not wish to tell me anything about where you keep disappearing to, or why you’re so curious about my Regalia.” says Luna. Her anger tempers away as I watch. “I just miss you, Star Swirl. We see each other too rarely these nights. Shooting Star misses you as well. She’s growing up so fast, and I have so few decades to spend with both of you. I wish to make the most of them while I can.”

I bite my lip. For all I know, neither of them are ever going to see each other again after this. When, exactly, did Star Swirl vanish anyway? I wish I’d thought to ask. “I promise I’ll make it up to you, Lunatic. Just not right now.”

“See that you do,” says Luna as she turns to go. She looks over at me again. “Forgive me for not asking your name. It does not seem worth my time to bother remembering it.” What am I supposed to say to that?

After she’s left, Star Swirl’s horn glows and a trunk emerges from a closet that was hidden away behind one of the bookshelves. From around the room assorted odds and ends glow and slide inside. Tents, sleeping bags, boxes whose labels identify their contents as food, and everything else one

would need for long trip. As the trunk slams shut a nearby couch pulls out into a cot. “Do me a favor, Twilight, and wake me up in about an hour? We’ll want to get moving.”

“Sure.” I settle into a nearby chair and he pulls the covers over himself, and before long he’s out cold. There’s nothing for me to do but watch the fire dancing hypnotically in the fireplace, until my eyelids start to get heavy too.

“Twilight, wake up.”

My eyes jump open. “Wha?”

“You were supposed to wake me up after an hour. It’s been two. We need to hurry before the Elements track us down, let’s go,” says Star Swirl.

I rub my cheek to rid it of the impression left by the hoof I’d been resting it on, and wipe the little traces of drool from the corner of my lips. Shaking my head to push out the last of the cobwebs, I rise to my hooves and wrap the trunk Star Swirl packed up earlier in my magic. It’s heavier than I expected, but I hoist it up and follow after him.

Luna is out in the hallway waiting for us. She’s knocking on a nearby door. “Shooting Star, come out and say goodbye to your father before he goes.” The door doesn’t open. “Young filly, I will not tolerate you sealing yourself up in your room away from other ponies just because you are upset about him leaving. Such conduct is unbecoming and pitiful.” Still nothing.

“It’s fine, Luna,” says Star Swirl stepping over to nuzzle her cheek. “I wish I could stay until she comes around, but I have to go. I’ll bring something back for her.”

“Very well. Take care, Star Swirl. And be safe. I plan to hold you to your promise to make things up to us the next time we see you,” says Luna returning the nuzzle. “Goodbye to you as well, other pony. It is unlikely we’ll meet again, but do try to keep my husband from doing anything exceptionally foalish.”

“Goodbye, Luna,” I say.

“Again, it is *Princess* Luna. I will overlook the slight on this occasion, but do not address me improperly again. You would not enjoy the experience of falling out of my favor.” I just nod. I can’t say she’s wrong about that.

With our goodbyes finished, Star Swirl’s horn glows and we disappear from yet another world.

This time, we arrive in a new castle with the trunk in tow. It takes me a moment to place why it’s so familiar. I’ve been here before. “What is this place?”

“Luna and Celestia’s summer palace, I think,” says Star Swirl. “I didn’t have a lot of choices. We’ve got a pretty tight window to work with between when Celestia’s attempt to banish Nightmare Moon with the Elements fails, and they destroy the timeline. We should hurry.”

Despite the urgency, I hesitate. Now I remember. This is the ruined castle where my friends and I confronted Nightmare Moon, only now it’s a thousand years earlier. The memory brings along with it all the associated baggage of that night, and just how many times we came close to dying. And now I have to do it all again, just without the Elements’ support.

“Star Swirl, hold on. I don’t... I don’t know if I can really do this,” I say. Now that I’ve actually said so the doubt boils over in my mind.

“You waited until *now* to decide that?” asks Star Swirl. “Get over it, we’re in a hurry.”

“But maybe there’s another way to settle things with the Elements. Maybe we could just talk to them? Come to some kind of a settlement or compromise? Even if they’re bad news, we should at least try.”

“Are you just scared? Or did the Elements finally get to your mind too?” asks Star Swirl.

“Come on, Star Swirl, that’s ridiculous. I’m just saying that we should consider other possibilities. Maybe there’s a way that’s less dangerous.”

“Everything we’re doing is dangerous. Going back to see Queen Sparkle was dangerous, but we got through that. I have my amulet, I’m sure I’ll be fine and I’ll help keep you safe too.”

“No you won’t be fine!” All that guilt I felt watching Star Swirl and Luna talk about their future while I stayed silent is rushing in at once. “This isn’t like when we went into the other timeline and you knew you would get back to the past because it already happened that way,” I shout at him. I really shouldn’t say what I’m about to. “This time I already know that *you never came back!*”

Star Swirl’s jaw drops. “What?” he says.

“***WHAT?!?***” shouts the trunk.

Star Swirl and I pause, our disagreement from a moment ago replaced by mutual confusion. “...Star Swirl, is this some kind of magical talking trunk?” I ask.

“No. No it isn’t.” His horn glows and he frowns as the lid of the trunk lifts up.

“Umm... hello again, father,” says Shooting Star. Most of the supplies we brought along are still there, but there’s a hollow pocket in the middle of them where she’s curled herself up and smuggled herself in with us.

“Shooting Star,” says Star Swirl, barely keeping his anger out of his voice. “Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

“I’m coming with you this time. I’m older than you were when you time traveled, and I want to come.”

“You are going to march yourself right back to your original time and wait there for me. This is not up for discussion.”

“But she just said you don’t come back!”

“I’ll... I’ll...” he can’t think up a good response for that.

“I’m not going back without you, and there’s nothing you can do about it,” she says. She crawls out of the trunk and plants four defiant hooves on the stone floor.

“She’s wrong, isn’t she? I mean, we can take her back to where she should be and then pop right back over here, right?” I suggest.

Star Swirl groans as he weighs his available options. “I don’t think so. The period of time I was aiming for was already a pretty small target. If I try to get back here without us crossing our own path I might miss it entirely.”

“Ha! Then you *have* to let me stay!” says Shooting Star with a triumphant laugh. Her smug grin disappears when she sees the look Star Swirl is glaring at her with. “Maybe I could just hide in a broom closet or something though.”

“And risk leaving you stranded here when the Elements explode? I don’t think so. You are not to step hoof out of my sight, do I make myself clear?”

“Oh father, thank you thank you thank you! You’re the best!” shouts Shooting Star as she rushes over to hug him.

He sighs. “This is a side of your mother I was hoping you would never have to see.”

“Mother came too? But I heard you saying goodbye to her before we left.”

“Uh...” I interject. “Should we really be telling her this?”

“Might as well at this point. If she insists on being treated like an adult, I see no reason to protect her from it anymore,” replies Star Swirl. He hugs Shooting Star back, and after a long squeeze lowers her to the ground and sets a hoof on her shoulder as his face grows somber. “Shooting Star... a long time after we were both gone, Luna became a very unhappy pony. She did something really terrible, something that once you return home you can never, ever tell her about. Are you absolutely certain you want to know about it?”

“Yeah, I wanna know,” says Shooting Star. She tries to steel herself and say it forcefully, but the tiny waver in her voice makes how scared she is perfectly clear.

“Very well. She tried to kill Aunt Tia, and make the nighttime eternal. We’re in the timeline where Celestia couldn’t stop her.”

Shooting Star takes a shaken step back and sinks down to her knees at the revelation, shock painted all across her face.

“No... You’re lying to me so I’ll agree to go back with you. Mommy wouldn’t ever...” her voice trails off when she sees the absolutely serious way Star Swirl is watching her.

From down at the end of the hall, there’s a loud crash behind the throne room doors. The hallway trembles, and a vase on a nearby pedestal topples over and smashes itself to pieces against the ground. Star Swirl nods towards the door. “Come see for yourself.” He begins to walk away, but Shooting Star stays frozen to the spot.

“I don’t... I think I want you to take me home now,” says Shooting Star. She’s trembling.

“Tough. You should have thought of that before you snuck along. Maybe seeing this will make you realize that actions have consequences,” says Star Swirl without turning back.

“Star Swirl, she’s terrified,” I say.

“She should be. If I could get her back home and come back here reliably I would have done it no matter what she wanted. You wanted to go on an adventure so badly? Well this is what they’re like sometimes.”

“Can’t you... I don’t know, go back to a couple years ago and help her not be evil?” asks Shooting Star.

“No. I told you, actions have consequences even with time travel. Now come on, we’ve wasted enough time already because of you.” He stands still with his back to both of us, waiting. I lay a comforting hoof on her shoulder and nod to her with an encouraging little smile. With a gulp, she takes a hesitant little step, then another and soon she’s following along behind him and Star Swirl starts to trot down the hallway again, still not looking back at his daughter. I scowl and canter a few steps to pass him with the intent of quietly reading him the riot act, but when I actually get there my plans change in a heartbeat.

The look on Star Swirl’s face is one of unbridled pain and fear. He’s staring desperately forward and taking slow, measured

breaths through his open mouth. I know the early stages of a panic attack when I see one. When I pass by him, he casts a pleading look at me. Of my two companions, Shooting Star is the less terrified of what might happen on this trip. I set my face as neutrally as I can and give him a small nod. *If something happens, I'll bring her back*, I mouth to him. For a moment I'm not sure he caught my meaning, but when he smiles at me I know he got the message.

We come to a stop in front of the doors. I hear Princess Celestia's voice cry out in pain. Star Swirl takes a deep breath and composes himself before turning to the two of us.

"Alright, let me lay down some ground rules. I don't know to just what extent she's going to remember Shooting Star or I, or if she does remember much whether she'll even care. Twilight, if I tell you to run you take Shooting Star and book it back down the way we just came. If you get to where we came in the trail from our entry into this timeline should be fresh enough for you to trace it back to that alternate past we just left."

I nod, but Shooting Star has to ask the question I already know the implicit answer to. "What about you Father?"

"I'll stay and hold off Nightmare Moon as long as I can."

"What? You can't expect me to-"

"I can and I do expect you to." He pulls his daughter into a hug and squeezes her tight. "Besides, If I came back without you your mother would kill me anyway. But I don't think it's going to come to that." He can't possibly know that. The three of us stare at the door until we can't put off opening any longer. Here comes the moment of truth.

We open the door to find a half-destroyed throne room, a pitch black alicorn as dark as the night itself towering over the battered body of another one. Off to one side, a badly wounded pegasus guard is fighting to stay conscious in a pool of his own blood through the trauma of the terrible cuts and wounds that cover his side, his white coat and feathers stained red. "You arrogant little foal," sneers Nightmare Moon. "Did you truly believe that the Regalia would work on me? They

are my own creation!” Sure enough, the five necklaces are scattered over the floor around her, flashing and sparking angrily. I’m not sure if that’s because they just failed or because they’re about to blow. This is an awfully disharmonious situation.

“Sister, I beg of you, consider-”

“I have considered. For years I have been patient, hoping that each next generation would be the one to understand. To appreciate. But you’ve had them under your sway the entire time. No longer!” She stomps a hoof inches from Celestia’s face. Celestia tries to rear up and away, but she cries out in pain when she puts weight on a broken leg and falls back to her knees. As she does so the guard tries to pull his broken body across the floor towards her, as if he’ll be able to rescue her through sheer determination. When Celestia sees the signs of life in him, her eyes fill with fear and pain.

“Okay Luna, you win. You can keep your night going, maybe we can discuss this later. Just let me and Glowie go.”

Glowie? The story Celestia told me once about her son being killed in Nightmare Moon’s uprising comes rushing back to me. It looks like we might be too late to save either one of them. “Give you a chance to recuperate so you can try to murder me again? I don’t think so. Don’t worry, though, if Morning Glow survives I’ll take very, *very*, good care of him. By the time I’m done with him, he’ll spit on your name and acknowledge me as the one true Queen of Equestria. But I’ll spare you from having to see it.” A jagged, obsidian spear floats in her magic, and Celestia’s eyes go wide. “Now it’s time for your sun to set for the final time.”

“Mother! No!” screams Shooting Star. The three ponies all turn to look at us at the same time.

“Well, this is interesting,” says Nightmare Moon. She pauses a moment longer, then thrusts the spear deep into Celestia’s chest and leaves it there, blood welling up around the mortal wound as she turns back to us. “Come back to rejoin me in my new and improved Equestria? You even brought Shooting Star, I remember when she was that age. And who is this?”

“I’m Twilight Sparkle,” I say. Nightmare Moon frowns and ponders that.

“Odd, you seem familiar somehow. Are you a disciple of mine in some fashion?”

“I’m Princess Celestia’s student, not yours.”

“Are you certain of that?” asks Nightmare Moon. She gestures down at the gasping Princess who’s trying to slowly pull herself over to Morning Glow, idly watching her struggle. “I think you’ll find that class has been dismissed permanently. And you Star Swirl, don’t tell me you’ve come to try to stop me too. I’ve been your widow before, and I will not hesitate to become so again.”

“No, I don’t intend to fight you. In fact we need your help. Your Regalia is endangering all of Equestria across all sorts of timelines, including ours. In fact, this timeline only exists because Celestia banished you to the moon successfully a moment ago in ours.”

“Is that what you intended for me, sister? Eliminate the competition without compromising your own self-righteousness? Perhaps we are less different than I believed.” Nightmare Moon lashes out with a kick that catches Celestia in her side, knocking the breath from her. She hacks and coughs, bloody sputum landing on the floor in front of her. But she ignores Nightmare Moon and continues to push herself ahead bit by bit as Shooting Star looks on frozen in horror. “Well, I see no reason to care about your timeline. I suppose I should thank my Regalia for giving me this one to rule over instead.”

“You might want to hold off on that. Look at what they’re doing now.”

All eyes in the room turn to the Regalia laid out on the floor, which has started to grow worse. The stone floor is beginning to warp and crack as power leeches into it. Nightmare Moon frowns and reaches out to touch them, only to pull her hoof back when a bolt of angry magic stings her. “What is happening? Stop this display at once,” she commands to no avail.

“We can’t stop it, not here. You can either die the ruler of a doomed Equestria or come with us to help save an alternate one,” says Star Swirl.

Nightmare looks back and forth between the Regalia and her mortally wounded sister before she lets out a scream of rage at having her conquest snatched away from her at the last moment. A blast of dark magic from her horn destroys the throne she’d been hoping to claim as her own. After a moment’s venting she stands down again, and her voice changes in an instant to an icy calm tone. “Then I suppose I have little choice. Very well, I take at least some satisfaction in knowing that if I cannot have it, Equestria will be wreathed in flame and darkness.” She looks over to me again, and all of a sudden recognition flashes over her face. “Wait, you said Twilight Sparkle?”

This is driving me nuts. How do Luna and Nightmare Moon seem to know me hundreds upon hundreds of years before I was even born? “Yes, why?”

She turns to Star Swirl. “The Twilight Sparkle you had nightmares about?”

I turn to him too, confused. Why would he have nightmares about me after he got back from my present? The only thing I could see him having them from would be the other timeline where that other me was... holding Luna... so she could...

Oh, buck my life.

“I think there may be a, uh, a slight misunderstanding. That wasn’t me, exactly. I mean it kind of was, but I’ve never done that to you in any time. All the times we had sex were totally consensual, I swear.”

“You *slept* with *my mother*!?” cries Shooting Star.

“No! Well, yes, but it’s okay. You and your father were both dead.”

“How is that *at all* better?”

“Come now, Shooting Star, don’t be so squeamish about such things,” says Nightmare Moon, “obviously this is a mare with potential for great darkness and power. Why would I not take

such a lover? What a shame you became Celestia's student rather than mine. I could have made you something great." I grimace. I think I would have preferred her to hate me.

"Glowie?" Celestia's voice pulls our focus back to more important things. She's reached Morning Glow and is cradling him against herself, a long bloody trail marking the path she took across the room.

Morning Glow's eyes flutter open. "Mom? I'm sorry. I wasn't strong enough to protect you from *her*."

"Don't speak of her that way, Morning Glow. She is still my sister, and I still love her just as much as I love you," says Celestia. Nightmare Moon sneers.

"I guess it's not going to matter in a few minutes," says Morning Glow, bitterly aware of the severity of his injuries.

"It will matter a great deal," insists Celestia. "You're going with them."

"What?" asks Morning Glow, Nightmare Moon, and Star Swirl all at the same time.

"Please sister, you just said you would look after him. This isn't a plan, or a trick. I just want him to be okay. He's your nephew."

"He is dead. His body simply has not realized it yet," says Nightmare Moon.

Celestia smiles, radiant even as she's fading away. "I've survived eight of my children. A trend I'm happy to bring to an end. Goodbye sister. I forgive you. Morning Glow, I love you so very, very much and I always will. I have one last thing to give to you." Celestia's horn sparkles and a light begins to glow in her chest. The light builds until it swallows up the ugly blackness of the spear, and bright little pinpricks appear all over Morning Glow. They dance between his wounds, sealing them back up.

"Mom, what are you doing? Stop it," says Morning Glow with strength returning to his voice.

If Celestia hears him, she gives no sign of it. Her smile hasn't faded in the least even as the life leaves her eyes. "I love you," is the last thing she whispers before the light grows to be too much to see through and I have to shield my eyes. When it fades again, Morning Glow is standing and looking down at the corpse of his mother, still covered in blood and wearing ruined armor but his body made whole once more.

He looks up at Nightmare Moon and lets out a scream of rage every bit a match for one of her own. Yanking the spear out of Celestia's chest, he charges at Nightmare Moon. She moves to meet him, but I'm quicker at wrapping him up in my magic and holding him in place. "Stop it, Morning Glow! We need her!" I command.

"She killed her! She killed Celestia! She killed my mother! I'm going to kill her, I swear on my mother's memory that I am going to kill you, Aunt Luna."

She leans down so she's right in his face. "You're welcome to try, if you value my sister's gift so little you would throw it away in such a hopeless attempt."

"Both of you, stop it! Look at the Regalia!" Indeed, the display they're putting on is growing worse. Power crackles in the air, and one rogue arc strikes a curtain which bursts into purple flames.

"We need to leave," says Star Swirl. "Hurry!"

The five of us all make a run for it. Well, four of us run and Morning Glow is dragged along in my magic kicking and screaming. I can see the sharp shadows cast in front of us by an intense brightness behind, but I don't look back. Finally we get close enough to where we came in that Star Swirl's horn starts to glow and we're whisked away just as another Wall of Horrible Shiny Death consumes the castle behind us.

We reappear, panting, back in the cavern I found Star Swirl in originally. "Don't let the sunlight touch you," he reminds me and our three new companions.

“Bah. What sunlight?” asks Nightmare Moon. Her horn glows and with a little strain the light outside the cave fades into night, though the heat from the sun beating down on the scorched ground all day means it’s still uncomfortable. “What timeline is this, anyway?”

“Remember when we used the Regalia against Fenrir? This is a timeline where they didn’t work.”

“Ah, yes, I do remember that. That was an enjoyable weekend, particularly the look on my sister’s face when we carved her out of the wolf’s stomach.” She smiles, a genuinely happy, nostalgic smile instead of the predatory one I’m used to.

Then without turning around she snaps a foreleg around her, backhoofing the pony trying to sneak up on her with a knife into the cave wall. Morning Glow shakes off the impact as Nightmare Moon walks over to him. “And what shall be done about you? Your attempts to murder me are amusing, but could prove distracting at an inopportune moment. I think I should probably just kill you.”

“Mother, you can’t,” says Shooting Star as she steps in between them. “I won’t let you.”

“Why do you care? You don’t even know him.”

“...I think that maybe having a cousin for once would be kinda cool,” she says.

“Hmph, very well. I need to speak with your father anyway. You live for now, Morning Glow, but do not test the limits of my mercy.”

Morning Glow grumbles as Nightmare Moon walks away, but I hang back to do a little eavesdropping. “Thanks, I guess. Shooting Star, right?” Morning Glow starts to take off his armor, and as he removes his helmet I get my first look at his mane, which is the same hue as the green band of Princess Celestia’s.

Instead of answering, Shooting Star slaps him across the face. “That’s for trying to kill my mother, jerk,” she says.

“Your mother? What about mine?” asks Morning Glow. He peels off the rest of the useless, twisted royal guard armor to

reveal a cutie mark of a rising sun. "I joined the guard back when I was your age, that means I was supposed to protect her. But I failed her, and now she's..." he starts to tear up. "I was always so busy with training, and guard stuff, and she always had all of her responsibilities. I don't think I talked to her for the entire last week. Now I'll never get to again."

Shooting Star settles herself beside him and pats him on the back. "Tell me about it. I go weeks without talking to either of my parents sometimes, and then when I do see them it's because they want me to show up with them to some big event so they can talk to everypony but me while I'm bored out of my mind."

Morning Glow chortles through his tears. "I remember the first time Mom dragged me to the Gala. I *hated* it!"

"You too? I just started going last year. I can't believe it's still awful by your time. Everypony tells me how lucky I am to get to go to all those parties, but I'm like, everypony's at least twice my age..."

"...the food's horrible..."

"...they all just want to talk about politics or gossip about ponies I don't know..."

"...and the clothes are always uncomfortable!" they both finish at the same time before laughing together. "Finally, another pony that gets it," says Shooting Star. They both look over at where Nightmare Moon and Star Swirl are discussing the time loops. "So I'm sure you haven't thought about this yet, but what are you going to do once this is over? Your world just kind of blew up."

"Yeah," he answers, then falls quiet for a long time. "I guess find another one to live in. Get out of Canterlot, that's for sure. Maybe strike out my own. I don't care what Luna says, I'm not sticking around with her, after what she did."

"You could come back to my time," suggests Shooting Star. "You'd even be able to see Auntie Tia again."

"That isn't a very good idea," I say, jumping into the conversation. "First of all, you'd be sending back a ton of

information about your future along with you, so you risk changing a lot. Bad enough when Star Swirl went back with a couple weeks worth of knowledge about my time, and he knew exactly how to avoid letting it influence things. Plus, even though you would remember Celestia as your mom, she wouldn't know you."

"No pony cares what you think, Twilight Buzzkill," says Shooting Star. They're both glaring at me, obviously Morning Glow isn't quite ready to forgive my grabbing him in my magic a few minutes ago. I don't seem to be making many friends on this trip. The awkward moment that descends over us is broken by the last thing I expected to ever hear coming from Nightmare Moon. Namely, high-pitched giggling.

"Eeeeeee! Stop that Star Swirl, I forbid you to hee hee hee hee!"

"Hmm... so you're definitely still ticklish in the same spots despite the transformation," he says. We look over to them. Star Swirl's horn glows and he's grinning as a cloud of magic darts around Nightmare Moon's underbelly. As we watch she leans too far back and falls over onto her back, rolling and squirming helplessly against the assault.

Shooting Star buries her face in her hooves and shakes her head. "Ugh! My parents are both *such dorks*."

Nightmare Moon doubles over clutching her sides. "You stop that right this second! Ha! This isn't funny! Ha ha ha!"

"Really? Then why are you laughing?"

"I'm- EEP! I'm serious Star Swirl!"

"What'cha gonna do about it?" Star Swirl's amulet flashes, and the amusement on his face changes into shock as his magic disappears. "Okay. I'll stop."

While we wait for the amulet to recharge, we break out some of the rations Star Swirl packed and discuss strategy. Although she won the battle, Nightmare Moon is still a little worse for the wear from fighting Celestia. She'll need some time to recover, so we all agree she should sit out the encounter with Discord and save her strength for Canterlot.

“Besides, that way Mother can stay back here with me and Morning Glow while you two go to this other time.”

“Oh no. You are going home, Starry.”

“What, and leave Mother and Morning Glow alone with one another? You really think that’s a good idea? I’m not going back so you can just vanish forever. We’ll wait here where it’s safe, and if you don’t come back by a certain time Nightmare Moon can send me back home,” says Shooting Star.

“That is within my capabilities,” agrees Nightmare Moon.

“I guess it isn’t the worst compromise,” I point out.

Morning Glow looks around at the three mares arrayed against Star Swirl, takes a big bite of an energy bar, and shrugs.

With a sigh, Star Swirl relents. “Fine, twenty-four hours and not one minute more. And don’t try to stick around the timeline after you drop her off, we already have a Luna.”

“An obnoxious jerk of a Luna,” I mutter under my breath.

Nightmare Moon’s smokey black mane reaches over and strokes the underside of Star Swirl’s chin. “Oh? And is there *nothing* you can think to do with two of me?”

Shooting Star blushes and chokes on her food. “Ew! You guys! I’m eating, stop being gross!” Her parents share a laugh at her discomfort.

Soon, Star Swirl pronounces his amulet fully recharged and we pack up our things. “So, I assume you’re going to do the talking this next time. I’ve never met Discord,” says Star Swirl.

I don’t have a plan, beyond an appeal to his self-interest. It feels weird to say that, but plans have a way of disintegrating around the physical embodiment of chaos. “Just be ready for anything,” I say.

I’m not. Not even close. But my horn glows and we’re off again in a flash.

Chaos and Canterlot

We arrive to pandemonium in Ponyville.

It's just like I remember it, the sun and moon swapping places every few minutes like somepony had accelerated the music to their eternal dance across the sky by a millionfold. Freakish hybrid animals stampeding through the streets, which are themselves slick with a layer of soapy, viscous fluid. It's a lot to take in even if I've seen it before. Star Swirl doesn't have that advantage.

"Yikes," he says, and it's all that needs saying. In the distance, a spire assembled from rubble, junk, and colorful bric-a-brac sits in the center of town. A throne of chaos for its avatar. If I did the spell Star Swirl showed me correctly we've passed the divergence point when the six of us would have otherwise successfully re-sealed Discord with the Regalia, and done who knows what else to him in the process? He was awfully different when Princess Celestia asked us to unseal him again to attempt a reformation. Maybe she knew something we didn't, or had it whispered into her ear by something that we'd succeed.

"Yeah, this is pretty much the way I remember it," I tell him. Remembering how quickly everything went bad in the other timeline is enough to spur me on. At least this time we don't seem to have anything that could hold another stowaway, but who can say for sure? The multiverse seems to make a game out of proving me wrong about that sort of thing. "We should go, just stay alert."

He nods to me and we walk towards the center of town. We're about to round the corner when I hear the laughter that haunted my nightmares for months. I shudder but turn the corner, only to see... me. Me, wearing the Element of Magic which is letting out weak purple sparks rather than the rainbow of power that sealed Discord away again in my timeline, and the other me is talking to all five of my friends, wearing their own pieces of the set.

“Girls, what happened?” she asks.

“Ah dunno, Twilight,” says Applejack. “Ah feel like my old self, not all dishonest or nothin’. Thought for sure right up until the end there we’d pull it off.”

“Yeah! How could it not have worked? I’m actually here this time!” says Rainbow Dash.

From up on his throne Discord just looks down on the six of them, grinning like the madpony he is. “Come now my little ponies,” he says. They look up just in time to catch a highly localized hailstorm of gumdrops to their faces. Well, except for Pinkie, who instead looks to be trying to catch as many of them in her mouth as possible. As the others try to cover their heads or brush the candy out of their manes, she chews away happily.

“Mmm! Theth ‘umdrops ‘re thorta funny tathting, but they thure are gummy!” she says through a mouthful of candy.

“Why my dear, what a refined palate you possess. You’re exactly right, they *are* made from alligator,” says Discord with a smirk.

Pinkie’s smile persists for a few seconds longer, then her eyes go wide and her ears perk straight up before slowly beginning to droop. She suddenly stops chewing as her smile falls away. Hesitantly, she sticks her tongue out.

The sugary mush is entirely green. It twitches.

Pinkie starts hacking and choking as she tries to spit the candy out, while Discord doubles over with whoops of laughter, slapping one of his knees. He wipes a tear from his eye with his paw and stands up from the throne, striding down towards the mare gathered up in front of him taking steps in thin air along an angle that bears no resemblance to the slope beneath him. “Oh, Twilight Sparkle. Trying the same thing over and over expecting different results each time? Don’t you know the definition of insanity?” He lands on the ground and leans over until they’re face to face. To her, uh, our credit, the other Twilight doesn’t flinch away. “Turns out it’s me.”

“I know you had something to do with this, Discord,” she says, although I can tell it’s false bravado, and so can he. “What did you do to the real Elements of Harmony?”

Discord draws back and places his talons over his chest, and presses his paw to his forehead as he gasps. “What? Little ol’ me? Why I’m offended! You’ve only used the Elements of Harmony once before, isn’t that right? Well what makes you so sure that they do the same thing every time?”

Twilight looks entirely confounded by that. “What? Do they not? What do you mean? What are you saying they did?”

“Well, this is just random speculation but let’s say, oh I don’t know...” He taps his chin. “Maybe they failed and created an alternate timeline where the point of divergence is the success or failure of their use in banishing me, and in the other timeline you were successful and continued your life until you miscast a spell and got stuck in a lime loop during an invasion of shapeshifting bug monsters until you used the Elements *again* to create *another* divergence and escape only to realize that you would need the assistance of an archmage from the distant past to repair the damage the spell did to the universe and so you summoned him and accidentally ended up creating the Elements of Harmony, well, the Regalia that channels them anyway, out of nothing but an ontological paradox only to then discover that they were planning to wipe out the entire world which, really, you can hardly blame them for when you’re all so *boring* so now you’re jumping through various timelines and after getting advice from the other you from the second divergence who never left the loop you’re picking up the greatest villains who were ever taken out by the Regalia, and even though I’m offended that you went for Nightmare Moon first when I’m clearly the superior bad guy the you from that divergence is here to ask me for help and screw the rest of you over completely.” Discord shrugs “Or, you know, something else.”

My friends stare up at him for a little while trying to parse that, until finally Rarity speaks. “Really, Discord, there’s random and then there’s just completely idiotic.”

“Oh? Certain of that, are you? Why don’t you ask those two what they think?” he says. And then he turns and looks straight at Star Swirl and me for the first time. “Well, Twilight? Aren’t you going to explain it to them?”

Other Twilight comes running over to me, pushing her face in obnoxiously close, eyes darting around examining every inch of me. “Who are you? I mean, you’re me but I’m me too! How can there be two mes? It’s not scientifically possible. You’re not-”

She’s stopped when I shove a hoof into her mouth. I’ve been through this twice already, I know the general thrust this conversation takes. “Twilight, I am not having a good day. Yes, I’m from the future. My universe’s version of these,” and I tap a hoof against the crown atop her head, still giving off a flurry of magical sparks, for emphasis, “are trying to kill us, followed at some future date by all life in Equestria. Also? That over there is Star Swirl. Yes, Star Swirl the Bearded.” My double’s eyes grow wide and start to shimmer with the first glimmers of hero worship, which I am *not* going to tolerate right at the moment. “Focus, Twilight. Fawning goes at the bottom of the checklist. Or down around item eighteen, at best. Do you understand?” She nods, and I pull my hoof away.

“Okay, right, okay, wow, okay,” she says, pacing back and forth. Discord is watching from back on the throne, with a bag of popcorn he pulled from wherever. When he reaches into the bag for a clawful, it quacks. Suddenly Twilight spins to the other five. “Alright girls! With the help of my future self and Star Swirl the Bearded, we’re going to fix the Elements and then we’re going to stop Discord and save Equestria! With the eight of us working together, we can’t possibly fail!”

“Yeah!”

“Woohoo...”

“Spectacular!”

Star Swirl and I share a look. That... wasn’t exactly part of the plan.

“Yes, Twilight, please tell your friends how you’re going to save their families, and friends, and town, and kingdom, and world from the Regalia by using all your magic and knowledge of the future,” says Discord. I glare at him.

“Assuming you are, in fact, going to save them.”

“Of course she is!” shouts my duplicate. “I’d never give up on Equestria, and neither would my future self!”

“Twilight? I can’t help you,” I say, so softly it’s barely more than a whisper.

It’s enough. She spins around with a strange look in her eye and gives a nervous laugh. “Speak up, Twilight, for a second there I thought you said that you *can’t* help us. But you beat Discord when you fought him, so obviously you can if you want to. And why wouldn’t you want to?”

“We need him around to save my timeline. Yours was doomed the second the Elements didn’t work when you tried to use them again. I’m sorry.”

“But... but... I did everything right! Celestia sent me the friendship reports, and I restored all my friends by reminding them of our bond with one another! What did you do differently?”

I wince. I know how I’d react to someone telling me I failed something this important. “I didn’t do anything differently. It’s just a coin flip you lost and I won. The power of friendship just... it isn’t going to work this time.”

Slowly but surely, the lavender tone of her coat begins to fade to a darker shade. “But... but that’s not fair. The Princess trusted me to save everypony from Discord, and now you’re saying that because I used the Elements, I made everything even worse?”

I open my mouth to deny that, but then close it again without saying anything. There’s nothing that will make this right for her. If it were me, which I guess it more or less is, I’d want the truth. “Yeah. In this timeline, I guess we did.”

“But... But our parents! Shiney! The Princesses! Our friends! You can’t tell me that we’re all going to... going to...” Other

Twilight's head droops, and the color is leached out of her until she's faded to grey. "I guess... I guess I'll tell the girls and... say goodbye."

Watching her go, I don't feel so colorful myself. It's worse for her of course, but she's right. Everypony I love is going to die, just like they did in each of the loops. They all die eventually. What's the point? I look around at the chaotic Ponyville around us. It's a duller, blander shade than it used to be. Is it changing, or is that just my perspective on it? Is it really worth saving? Shouldn't I just lie down and give up? It would be so much easier. Just close my eyes and... and...

Going up against Discord, I thought I had prepared myself for everything. I wasn't prepared for what happens next, though. I wasn't prepared for Star Swirl to pull me into a hug and give me a gentle kiss on the forehead. "Don't tell me you're quitting on me now, Twilight," he chides. "I know it's hard, but there's a whole universe out there that needs you."

I shrug, weakly. "I just make everything worse. All the time. It's never enough. It'll never be enough. They don't need me."

"I need you," he says. "There, I said it. I need you. And if you can't see that the rest of us need you too along with all the ways you make Equestria an incalculably better place then you're the dumbest super-genius I know."

I sniffle. "It probably wouldn't actually be incalculable."

"Oh, just shut up and feel better."

I can't help but do exactly that. The color is slipping back into me, and hope rising up again. How did I almost give up on my entire world? With the aura of despair cleared away, I become aware of all the weird sights and sounds around me that had been dulled as they get sharp and crisp again. Particularly, I become aware of the booing coming from the throne.

"Boooooo! Boo, old guy! I was about to sweep the board!" says Discord. He glances over to where the other me is struggling to explain what's happening to our friends, and the color begins to drain from them too. "Ugh. I abhor reruns,"

says Discord. He snaps his fingers and in an instant my friends vanish, replaced instead by... pieces of fruit?

“What did you do to them?” I cry out, as I rush over. The Regalia is still there, and only getting angrier as I lift Generosity from the watermelon it’s now draped over. “Wait, could you have just done that any time?”

“But of course!” says Discord, “Where would the fun be in that, though? I don’t need them any more, you two seem much more interesting.” An upside-down drinking glass appears in mid-air, and the orange that used to be Applejack is yanked off the ground by some invisible force. It comes to rest below the the glass, and Discord reaches over and wrings it like a damp washcloth, pouring a stream of thick red fluid upwards into the glass. “Huh, guess I made her a blood orange.”

Discord pulls the glass full of I-don’t-want-to-know out of the air and sticks the bottom of it between his lips. He drags a claw over his own chest and with a scraping sound a small flame ignites on the end of it, which he then holds up to the glass’ other end. The fluid starts to glow a ruby red, and Discord takes a long pull of the... cigar... glass... thing. He holds it for a moment then exhales, blowing out a stream of bubbles. He gives a very satisfied sigh, and turns to us. “So are we at the part where you beg me to help you yet?”

“Fix them! Put my friends back like they were!” I demand.

Discord taps his paw against his chin. “Hmm... How about... no. I did them a favor. Or did you want them at ground zero when the Regalia blows up? Besides...” he pulls out a carving knife and the rest of the fruit floats up to him, “...I’m still feeling a bit peckish.” He swings the knife back and forth through the air, too fast to see anything except quick flashes of steel as it moves.

As the blade slices into it, the fruit starts to scream. Something fleshy and pulpy spatters onto my face, slipping into my mouth before I can stop it. It tastes sweet, with just a hint of something else I can’t identify. The chunks of fruit fall into a bowl that wasn’t there a second ago, and Discord pops a piece into his mouth as he watches us. “Oh, where are my manners.

Did you want a piece? The Rainbow Kiwi is delicious.” I slowly shake my head. “Your loss. So, are we having fun or what?”

“Stop this, we’re wasting time. You clearly know what’s going on, so will you help us or not?” asks Star Swirl. I’m still staring at the fruitbowl, trying to wrap my head around what I just saw.

“Booooooooooring,” says Discord. “All work and no play makes Star Swirl a dull pony. You need to lighten up. How about a joke? So this pony walks into a bar-”

Before he can get any farther Star Swirl’s amulet flashes. His eyes bulge and he clutches at it, falling to his knees and trembling. He’s so shaken it takes him a minute to collect himself, then look up at Discord in horror. “That... wasn’t funny.”

“Dang, now you already know the punchline,” says Discord. “Something else then.” He gets up and slides down from the throne, past us onto the slick streets. “How about a classic?” Reaching down, he somehow slips a claw underneath the cobblestone streets, and with a dramatic flourish yanks the top level of the street like a throw rug to reveal glowing orange magma underneath a long section of it, before it abruptly becomes the normal ground again down the road. “Let’s play ‘The Floor Is Made Of Lava.’”

“What?” I ask.

“You’ve never played that before? Did you even *have* a childhood, or did you just emerge fully grown from a card catalogue somewhere? Get all the way to the other end of the street and I’ll help you. Oh, and no teleporting. If you try to cheat I’ll turn the convection back on, and you do *not* want to be standing here when I do.”

Star Swirl and I glance at one another. We shrug. We’re operating under a pretty tight deadline here, with an emphasis on dead, and I don’t see any other choice. In my experience, Discord’s usually kept his word, in his own twisted way. “Fine, so if teleporting is out I guess we make a bridge?”

Discord claps, and does a little backflip in the air. “Oh, you have played this before! Wonderful! Doesn’t raising the stakes like this make it so much more interesting?”

Rather than responding, Star Swirl levitates a nearby mailbox off the ground and tosses it out into the pool. The instant it comes into contact with the lava it glows white hot and the metal bursts into flames, reduced to nothing in less than the blink of an eye.

Discord makes a disappointed ‘tsk’ and shakes his head. “Do I have to do everything for you? I thought you said you’ve played this game before.” He walks over to us and turns both of our heads in the direction he wants us looking. We’re facing a store, jutting out from the ground at an odd angle with a sign in the window that advertises a sale on checkerboard-patterned paint. Discord holds the thumb of his paw up and squints, an artist studying his canvas. He reaches out and rubs the air in a circular motion. There’s the squeaking sound of cloth on glass, and when he stops a round portion of Ponyville has been restored to normal; good old Sofas and Quills. Discord lets loose a sharp whistle, and three sofas bark as they crash out through the front window before running over to where we’re standing. The cushions flap as they bounce and yap at us, and a particularly affectionate one sidles up to me and nuzzles me with an armrest.

Quick as lightning, Discord’s claw darts out and rips the cushions off of them. They give out high pitched cries of pain and scamper away into the distance. “I thought the lava-resistant properties of couch cushions were common knowledge,” he explains, gesturing at the pile of cushions at the edge of the lava. He kicks one and it lands in the lava with a splash, bobbing there completely unharmed. He picks up several more, and tosses one much closer to our edge of the lava pool. “The Regalia doesn’t look too happy, better start jumping.”

I gulp, but step out onto the wobbly cushion. It feels like it’s floating in water, which is so not fair given that magma has a way higher specific density. The platforms should at least be stable. Star Swirl steps out onto the cushion with me and we

cling to one another as close to the center as we can get. A throw pillow comes flying out and smacks Star Swirl in the side of his head, nearly sending him teetering off the side of the pillow before I hook my own foreleg around one of his and pull him back. “Oops,” says Discord with a grin.

The next cushion goes soaring over our heads and plops into the pool. I pull my hoof away just in time to avoid a few droplets that are splashed up onto the cushion we’re on now. Star Swirl and I nod to one another and leap at the same time. The cushion we were standing on dunks itself beneath the surface, never to emerge again. We both land on the next cushion and I let out a relieved breath. Halfway there.

Another cushion flies past and lands farther away than the last one was. “I don’t know if I can jump that far,” says Star Swirl.

“I’ll try first, maybe I can maneuver it closer once I’m on top of it.” I crouch, take a deep breath, and push off as hard as I can.

I don’t make it.

“Twilight!” Star Swirl calls out when it becomes clear that my trajectory isn’t the one I want. Disregarding whether or not it’s against the rules, his horn glows and magic wraps around my tail, but just an instant too late. My head and face are dunked into the lava.

I burned to death a few times in the time loop, and it wasn’t a fun experience. I briefly wonder before I hit the surface if it will be hot enough to burn me up before I have time to feel it. If I had to guess, I’d have given an eighty percent chance it would be at least that hot.

I would have given a zero percent chance that lava would be tangy and delicious. And I would have been wrong.

Star Swirl lifts me out of the ‘lava,’ the thick, syrupy liquid clinging to my face. “Discord,” I say with a bizarre sense of calm that can only be attained by totally abandoning the idea that I could make sense of any of this, “is this orange juice?”

“More of an orange smoothie. Isn’t it good?” I’ll give him that, at least. Star Swirl’s magic deposits me on the far side of

the lake and a series of cushions rises out of the liquid for him to follow.

“So what was the point of any of that?” asks Star Swirl as he joins me and Discord on the shore.

Discord shakes his head. “I forgot you’re new at this. If you’re looking for the point, you’ve already missed it. But I’ll help you anyway. After all, getting rid of the Elements of Harmony permanently is too good an offer to pass up. Once they’re out of the way, I’ll show you ponies some *real* fun.” I shudder at the idea. “Let’s go pawn some jewelry.”

“Pawn some jewelry? That’s what you’re going with?” asks Star Swirl.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to make picking a fight with some necklaces and a tiara sound cool? I’m working with what I’ve got here. Now let’s go, unless you want to stall until they explode, then leap away at the last possible second.”

“That sounds fairly dangerous and impractical,” I say. “Let’s just go.” Star Swirl looks a little disappointed, but he eventually agrees to leave before they explode on us. With the last member of our little adventuring band in tow, we return to the cave.

“-and of course you’ll want a servant with a mop and a stepladder for the cleanup, but even so that’s definitely the best way of interrogating an uncooperative member of a rebellion and... Oh, you’re back,” says Nightmare Moon as we reappear in the cave. Shooting Star and Morning Glow are seated across a fire pit from her, looking nauseous.

“How long were we gone?” I ask.

“From *urp* our perspective it was about half a day. Not that that means anything to Queen Forever Nighttime over here,” says Morning Glow as he fights to keep his last meal from coming back up.

“Hmph. You are lucky my daughter favors you, or I would rend you apart for such disrespectful words,” says Nightmare Moon.

“Luna! Great to see you again!” says Discord. “Something’s different about you, though. New manecut? No, wait, it’s the evil. It’s really working for you.”

Nightmare Moon scoffs. “Ugh. I’d forgotten what a pest you were. Hold no illusions, this is an alliance of convenience alone. Once we’ve destroyed the Regalia I fully intend to destroy you as well.”

Discord’s mouth changes into an exaggerated frown, “Aww, don’t be like that. We can get along, especially if you’ve loosened up a bit since I last saw you and that stodgy older sister of yours. I’ll give you your own little fiefdom in my masterpiece of chaos that you can keep as dark as you want. Maybe the inside of a broom closet, or a basement somewhere if you’re a good little pony.”

She snarls at him, and lowers herself like she’s about to charge. “Uh, everypony? How about we save it for the Regalia?” I suggest. Bad idea, it just means they both turn their attention to me.

“Sure thing, hero mare,” says Discord. “Just settle this for us first. Once we take out the Elements, do you prefer eternal darkness, or eternal chaos?”

Neither. I’m currently planning to stab both of you in the back with Princess Sparkle’s spell before you can turn on each other, but for some reason I don’t think telling you that is the smart answer. “Maybe, er, we’ll work it out once we get there? No sense putting the cart before the pony, right?”

I try to hold my smile as best I can as Discord gives me a funny look. “Oh dear, you think you have a plan, don’t you?” he asks.

“A plan? Me? What? No, of course not,” I lie.

He shrugs. “It’s so cute when you good guys think you’re pulling one over on us. I’m going to go along with this just to see how spectacularly it all blows up in your face.”

Nightmare Moon glares between Discord and me, before she finally huffs and walks to the back of the cave. I breath a sigh

of relief as Discord's mercurial attention span shifts to somepony else. Sorry, Morning Glow, better you than me.

Star Swirl pulls me aside. "As soon as my amulet's ready, we head for Canterlot. I don't want to keep these two powderkegs near one another for a second longer than we absolutely have to."

My head is spinning. Everything is happening too fast. I can't focus or think about what's going on. I feel like I'm just being pulled forward. Along for the ride instead of steering it. "Do we have to? It's only been, what, eight hours since I found you here? I need to stop and think. There's still too much about this situation that doesn't make any sense."

"Do you not get what we're up against here, Twilight? This is how I've been living for nearly six months. There aren't timeouts, or days off, or anything except moving from reality to reality, barely a half a step ahead of the Regalia. Even so, I'd be dead a couple dozen times over if not for this amulet."

"See, that's another thing I don't get," I say. "If the Regalia knows as much as you say it does, how has it not realized you have that thing and found a way to work around it? I mean, since you told me about it I've come up with at *least* eight different ways to kill you for good. No offense."

"None taken."

"So why are you still alive?"

Star Swirl takes a moment to think about this. "Well, they almost did get around it one time. I would have bled to death if I hadn't been able to send you that message through my note, so it seems to me that they're trying."

That explanation feels thoroughly unsatisfying, but I'm too tired right now to figure out why. "Maybe if we sleep on it, take a couple of days? Doesn't that sound like the smarter play? You're the one who told me I was an idiot for running in half-prepared. We should at least practice casting Princess Sparkle's spell before we have to use it for real."

Star Swirl just shakes his head. "Twilight, this reality has two, maybe three more days tops. I'm running out of safe places to

hide us from the Regalia. Maybe you're right that this isn't the smart way to go about this, but it's all I've got. Besides, what do you think starts to happen when Discord can't entertain himself any more?"

The two of us look over to where Discord and Shooting Star are engaged in an animated discussion. Shooting Star looks the only way that could be worse than completely horrified: engaged. "Do you know what's especially fun?" asks Discord. "Acid."

"The chemical substance, or the hallucinogenic?" she asks.

Discord considers this. "Yes. Provided you don't mix them up. Actually, especially when you mix them up."

Star Swirl sighs. "I have to go deal with that. Just be ready to leave in about twenty minutes or so."

I settle down to collect my thoughts, and grab a snack out of the trunk. If I'm going to my death at least I won't go hungry. I also skim Princess Sparkle's spell a few more times trying to familiarize myself with it. I cast it once just to practice, and I can feel it surrounding me. Like she said, without the presence of the Elements it's just opaque and inactive. A few minutes later, I feel it dissipate away. I'll have to either use it during or right before the showdown with the Regalia. I hope my friends got my message to come and meet me in Canterlot. And that they're still on my side.

I'm roused from my thoughts by Star Swirl digging through the trunk next to me and pulling out a scroll.

"What's that for?"

"To get Shooting Star back home after we leave. She'll be able to trace a route home with this after we leave."

"You aren't taking her back yourself?"

"And risk Discord or Nightmare Moon tagging along? No thanks."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," says Shooting Star. I guess it isn't that big of a cave. "I want to come with you."

“Absolutely not. You’ve put yourself in too much danger as it is. Take the scroll and use it to get home, then take Morning Glow to wherever he wants to go.”

“But Father... Twilight said you don’t come back. Is this... is this going to be the last time I ever see you? How can you just abandon Mother and me like this?” asks Shooting Star. Her voice begins to waver and tears well up in her eyes.

Star Swirl stops, and kneels down with his daughter. He levitates his bell-adorned cloak from the trunk and drapes it over her, a jangly blanket. “It isn’t because I want to, sweetie, but I have to do this. Even if I don’t come back, if Twilight and I pull this off our universe will be safe for your foals, and their foals, and their foals, and all the ponies that come after them. If that means that I don’t get to watch my little filly grow up into the amazing mare I know she’s going to be it’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

“It’s not just you paying it! Maybe I don’t care about any of those other ponies. I’m never even going to meet any of them beyond maybe my own grandfoals. Why would they be worth losing you?” she asks.

“You already have met one of them,” I say, with a small, hidden smile.

“Yeah, whatever, Twilight.”

“I’m serious,” I say as I settle down on the other side of her. She flinches as I run a hoof through her mane, but I’m willing to endure her contempt. “Me.”

Both Stars turn to gape at me, and I just grin back. “What, I didn’t mention that before? In our timeline, a version of you was one of my fifty-something times great grandmothers. And probably for millions upon millions of other ponies too.” I lean over and kiss her cheek. “So thanks, grandma.”

“Don’t... don’t call me that. It just sounds weird. Technically she’s a different pony than I am, right? Just similar,” she says, but most of the venom behind the barb is missing.

“What are the three of you babbling about over here?” asks Nightmare Moon as she strides over, still suspicious after

Discord's entirely-accurate accusation.

Shooting Star gives me a long, evaluating look. "Nothing, Mother. These two want me to go back home to my original timeline."

"That would be a waste. Once I've removed the threat the Regalia poses and taken Equestria again you could have a very powerful place at my right hoof. Consider it carefully."

"Don't consider it at all, Starry," says Star Swirl, glaring up at Nightmare Moon. "Hon, get ready. We're going to be leaving any minute."

"Very well, the sooner we've left this hovel the better."

I look over to where Morning Glow is sitting all alone by the fire, just staring into it. I decide to keep him company for a few minutes, since I'll probably never see him again after this. I leave Star Swirl and Shooting Star alone to make their final goodbyes, and trot over to him. "Hi there," I say. Morning Glow looks over in acknowledgement of my presence, then grows quiet again. "You know, I'm Princess Celestia's student back in my time. I grew up learning from her. She's like a mother to me, too. So I get-

"No you don't. But thanks anyway," he interjects.

For a minute there's nothing but the crackling fire to watch. "Well, I think she'd be proud of you for trying to get over what happened and coexist with Nightmare Moon."

"I forgot to tell her I loved her."

"Huh?"

"At the end. I was so busy telling her to stop trying to save me, I forgot to ever say goodbye properly," he says without ever looking away from the fire. One of his hooves is limply hanging from his side, so I reach out and take it with mine. It's the least I can do. "She's going to try to stop you, you know. When you show up with those two and try to tell her what the Regalia can do, you'll have to fight her. Then either you'll all die for nothing or you'll kill her. Again. And I won't get to say goodbye to her either."

I bite my lip. I can't give away the plan we're formulating. "We'll... figure something out." I conclude rather lamely.

"Yeah, right." He finally turns to me, still holding my hoof. "If you do have to fight her, and things look like they're getting bad? Do me a favor and tell her that I love her for me. Even if she isn't exactly the same pony, tell her that... that..."

Morning Glow starts to gasp for breath and throws himself into my forelegs, hugging me tightly as he sobs quietly on my shoulder. After the shock wears off in the first moment, I return the hug until he's calmed down enough to loosen his grip.

"Twilight, it's time to go," says Star Swirl.

I walk over to where Nightmare Moon, Star Swirl, and Discord are waiting for me. Shooting Star is hesitant, but after giving her father one last hug, she backs away and joins Morning Glow by the fire, pain filling her eyes. Star Swirl prepares the dimensional shift spell, the one he's cast so many times already, and uses it for one final jaunt. With that, we're off to the final battle.

We pop into Canterlot in the palace courtyard. It's an almost offensively quiet and normal day, although it won't stay that way for long.

Surrounding the courtyard, pointing spears upwards from the ground and crossbows down from atop the walls around us, are hundreds of the royal guard. They were ready and waiting for us, somehow knowing exactly where we'd arrive.

"Enemies of Equestria!" shouts a Captain from atop the wall, thankfully not Shining Armor which would have broken my heart right there, "throw down any weapons you may be carrying and surrender, and you will be unharmed!"

I can't process what's happening quickly enough to voice a response, and I'm not sure what I would say if I could. Our odds just got a whole lot worse. Discord, however, is unfazed by the development. "Now why would we do a silly thing like that?"

“This is your final warning! Surrender or be fired upon!”

“Ugh, guard types. Always following orders like the mindless sheep you are. So why not give you a shape that better reflects that, hmm?” Discord holds up a claw and snaps it, and with burst after burst of chaos magic the guards transform into wooly, mindless animals. One manages to get a crossbow bolt off, but an instant before it would strike Star Swirl in the head it’s transformed into a banana cream pie that splatters harmlessly in his face. Discord sighs. “Is that the best Celestia’s got? How very disappointing.”

“Not exactly,” says an identical voice from up on the palace ramparts. A second Discord, the one native to this timeline, leaps off the wall and plummets towards the ground. Right before he lands he thrusts his heels downward and comes to a stop with a loud screeching sound, gently depositing himself on the lawn. “Not bad. I would have made a ‘call upon the sheponies’ quip myself, but that’s some good chaos.”

“Thank you. It’s so nice to be appreciated at last,” replies the first. “How about I ditch these losers and we go tag-team the order out of this entire continent?”

“Tempting offer, but I’m afraid I can’t. Celestia asked me to help stop you four, you see.” He looks down at me. “You are getting the detention of your life when this is all over. Not that I don’t appreciate the craziness of me turning friendly right before you go evil. We never can seem to find ourselves on the same side, can we?”

Our Discord bursts out laughing. “Oh that is rich. You work for Celestia now? That would be even funnier if it weren’t *so pathetic*,” he snarls. “This goody four shoes? Evil? Please. The Regalia must have scrambled you up but good. Here, I’ll prove it.” He points upwards and a cloud overhead poofs as it turns into an anvil, hovering right over the sheepified guards. I try to grab it in my magic, but it slides right through as it plunges downwards towards the oblivious creatures.

The other Discord sighs and snaps his paw, turning the sheep in harms way to a trampoline angled towards us. The anvil lands on the trampoline, stretches and distorts it, before

snapping back and flinging the anvil directly into our Discord's face. The force of the impact causes his head to stretch back until a moment later it's followed by the rest of his body, slamming into and through a nearby wall leaving a perfectly Discord-shaped hole behind.

"Now then, where were-" but he can't finish the sentence before a spot next to the hole tears open like paper and Discord charges back out onto the field, dressed in full-contact hoofball gear. The air is suddenly filled with the cheers of an adoring crowd, even if there's no crowd anywhere to be seen.

"Looks like I need to teach myself some manners," says Discord. "You three go after the Regalia, I'll catch up." He claps twice and we suddenly disappear from the courtyard, and reappear in the throne room. That's certainly the direct approach. Sitting on their thrones are Luna and Celestia, and next to them are my five friends, already wearing their necklaces. It's hard to say whether the three of us or the seven of them are more surprised. The room's empty of guards, and the windows around the hall are open, allowing the gentle singing of birds to waft in. At least until they're interrupted by what sounds like a fugelhorn being played with a bowling ball coming from the direction where the two Discords are fighting.

Celestia breaks the silence. "When the Elements told me that two of my students were going to lead an assault against the palace, and do so with a pair of the greatest threats Equestria has ever faced, I didn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it unless I saw it with my own eyes. Twilight, *what have you done?*"

"What have I done? I'm not the one doing this! It's the Regalia! They're manipulating you so that... something... but we have to stop them!" I shout.

"The Regalia are our greatest protection against the darkness and chaos you brought back," she says. "If you had concerns, why didn't you voice them to me? Why did you take such drastic measures? And why are the three of you dressed like a mariachi band?"

I become aware of the wide brimmed hat sitting on my head, and turn to see that Star Swirl and Nightmare Moon are similarly adorned. Nightmare Moon even has a trumpet stuck between her lips, and looks very confused. Damn it, Discord. “That... that isn’t important!” I shout as I rip the costume away. “And I didn’t tell you because Star Swirl’s letter said I shouldn’t, you might be compromised.”

“No it didn’t.”

Star Swirl’s voice cuts through my tirade like a knife. Now it’s my turn to look confused. “Yeah, it did. Twice.”

“That’s not what I wrote. Why wouldn’t you tell the Princesses? I mean, I couldn’t in the past because it might interfere with keeping the time loop stable, but they’re the only ones who can tap into the Elements without the Regalia. You didn’t think it was worth mentioning that you hadn’t told them?”

There hasn’t exactly been time for us to compare notes. Uh, literally, I guess. I’m just about to suggest a tactical withdrawal when Nightmare Moon steps forward, blotting out the sunlight that had been shining down on us from one of the windows above.

“Hello, sister,” she says. Celestia’s eyes narrow. “Who’s that pathetic little wretch seated besides you?”

Luna stands. She’s not as large as Nightmare Moon, or her past self. “Demon. Parasite. Leave this world, it is spoken for.”

“I’ve always known it was Celestia’s desire to rule as the greater sister, and shunt us aside. What better proof could I ask for? You’re just a husk compared to your former glory.” She flicks her smokey tail across Star Swirl’s face. “Is it any wonder that your husband would trade you in for the younger, sleeker version?”

Luna charges. This is all spiraling out of control, and I realize that I don’t have Princess Sparkle’s spell up yet. I’d meant to prepare it outside the throne room before Discord sent us straight inside. The notes, where are the notes?

While I'm looking, Star Swirl leaps between Nightmare Moon and Luna, holding out his forelegs to separate them from each other. "Stop it, you two. Just turn over the Regalia and nopony has to get hurt. Twilight and her friends can destroy it."

"And then what? Equestria falls to Nightmare Moon? I think not. I will end her threat right here and now, and nopony will stop me from doing so. Not even you, love."

"Luna, it doesn't have to end this-"

Star Swirl's amulet flashes. He slumps down to a seated position and stares at Luna, betrayal written all over his face. She's shaking her head like she can't accept what his face is telling her, but she knows what the amulet does.

I just got put on a very tight clock.

I turn to my friends. "Girls! I need you to use the Elements of Harmony. Celestia can use Magic if you won't trust me with it."

"Uh, I dunno that we've got a clear shot on Nightmare Moon, Twilight," says Rainbow Dash. I glance over at the melee that's about to start. For all I know, that's what kills Star Swirl in... four and a half minutes. Sure enough, Luna rushes Nightmare Moon, and a bolt of magic lances from Star Swirl's horn to stop her. He might last a bit longer than five minutes if he knows what's coming, but not a lot longer and I don't want to count on it. I close my eyes. "Use them on me."

"Absolutely not, Twilight, it's despicable of you to even ask that of us," says Rarity. I finally find Princess Sparkle's notes in the folds of the mariachi costume. How did it go again? I should have practiced this, but I don't have time to get it straight before I start provoking the Bearers.

"Princess, use the Elements on me. It'll help Equestria, I swear, I just can't explain how right now." Celestia studies the crown before her with a grim expression on her face. Off to one side, Nightmare Moon gets a lucky hit in on Luna and sends her flying, darting up into the air before crashing down on her where she lands. The impact throws chunks of marble

up from the floor, striking the thrones. “Do it, or Luna dies the same way Morning Glow did.”

Celestia’s head snaps up and she looks at me wide eyed. I knew that would get her attention. I fumble with the notes, trying to remember how I cast the spell earlier. It was a lot easier in a nice quiet cave. She brings the crown to her head. “You’re putting me in an impossible situation, Twilight,” she says. My friends look back and forth between us, unsure of who to side with. The necklaces around their throats have lost their glow without the support of their convictions. Celestia looks at the five of them, understanding yet disappointed, and pulls the regalia away from them with her magic. “There is no need to burden you with what must be done. I will bear the guilt myself.” The five necklaces begin to glimmer and spark, and the crown glows. No, no, no, too soon I haven’t gotten the spell right yet, I need more time, I need-

That’s exactly when Azalea darts out from where she’s been hiding behind a nearby pillar. With a scream, she brings the baseball bat she’s holding in her forelegs down with all her strength, clobbering the back of Celestia’s head. The Element of Magic is knocked askew and the light from the other five sputters out.

Celestia blinks several times, more surprised than hurt, and looks down at her. “Do I know you?”

Azalea, clearly expecting that her blow would do more, loses her earlier confidence. “Oh, um, my name is Azalea. I’m Twilight’s... well we were dating, but we just had this big fight so now I don’t know if I can really call us-”

“She’s my fillyfriend,” I interrupt with absolute certainty. Azalea looks back at me, a smile beaming on her face before she turns to Celestia again.

“It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Princess. I’m so honored. When this is all over I’d love to introduce myself under more normal circumstances. You’re so important to Twilight. She goes on about you all the time. If you would give me your blessing to be with her it would absolutely mean the world to me. Right now though,” she shifts Home Run back up over a

shoulder, “if you try to harm a single hair in her mane, I will fight you as long as there is breath in my body.”

Celestia smiles sadly and glances over at me. “You certainly do surround yourself with the most spirited of companions, Twilight.” Back to Azalea now. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my little pony. However, now isn’t really the best time.” Celestia’s horn glows and Azalea is lifted up in her magic. She just has time to cry out before Celestia throws her out of an open window.

“Azalea!” I cry.

“She will be fine, Twilight, provided she remembers that she has wings.” The Regalia rises up again.

“Hold it!” The voice behind me startles both of us, and I turn to see Rainbow Dash and my other friends have moved to take their place behind me during Azalea’s distraction. “I have no idea what’s going on, or why Twilight would bring Discord and Nightmare Moon back and then ask you to use the Regalia on her. But if you’re going to zap her, you’ll have to zap all of us.”

“Please do not make this harder for me than it already is,” says Celestia. Her face is full of regret, and her usually billowing mane is limp and flat under the weight of the crown.

“Um, I’m very sorry Princess, but we all feel that way,” says Fluttershy. “We would really prefer it if you didn’t use the Elements on us, though.”

She looks like she won’t, which would ruin everything. I send a bolt of magic at her, aiming it so it bursts on the floor right in front of her hooves. I could never bring myself to actually strike her. “Come on! What are you waiting for?” I ask.

I finally manage to cast Princess Sparkle’s spell over the six of us, feeling it settle into the air. Now that we’re prepared I face down Princess Celestia, ready for what she’s about to do. She adjusts the crown on her head, and the five necklaces of the regalia float around her, ready to be used. “Twilight, please don’t make me do this. Surrender yourself and help me contain

Nightmare Moon and Discord once again, then we can talk this over.”

“I’m sorry, Princess, this is the way it has to be.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to convince them to be gentle to you,” she says. Still she hesitates. Luna cries out from across the room under a blow from Nightmare Moon, and the noise spurs her back into action.

My friends look from one to another. Despite their declarations of faith in my decision, this must feel wrong to them. I only hope that once I’ve redirected the Element’s power back from them and at Nightmare Moon they’ll hear me out as I explain myself. “Either hoof over the regalia, or use it to stop me,” I say.

“Then you leave me no choice,” says Celestia. “I love you, Twilight. I’m so sorry I failed you like this.” She lowers her head and tears stream from her eyes as she closes them for a moment. When she reopens them they glow with the might of the Elements. The necklaces ring out in response, and I hold my ground as light starts to pour out of them. I’ve never seen this from the outside before. There’s a moment of stillness before a rainbow wave bursts from them, arcs upward, and then pours down over us. There’s nothing in my world but that light, in all its horrible intensity.

Time stops.

I blink and try to move. While I can look around, my body won’t respond to my commands. My friends are locked in place as well, staring blankly out at the light that’s all around us. Is this what Princess Sparkle’s spell does? She said it would make sense when I cast it, but I can’t feel any way to control or redirect the Elements’ attack. My efforts to find one are interrupted by the sound of shod hooves on stone, approaching slowly from in front of me. I squint against the overwhelming brightness and I can just make out a blurry silhouette somewhere in there. “Hello?” I call out. “Is somepony there?” The shape gets closer, but the light is too intense to make out any details.

“Well, well, well,” says an all-too-familiar voice, “that didn’t work.”

Oh no.

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one before,” says Princess Sparkle, “Twilight Sparkle tells another version of herself about a wonderful spell. It’s exactly what she wants to hear. She says there’s a spell which, when it’s cast, will resolve all the worries and troubles she’s been struggling against. But it doesn’t work quite as advertised.” She walks right up to me and puts a hoof under my chin, forcing me to crane my neck back to look up at her. “Does that sound at all familiar to you?”

“Twilight, please...” I beg.

“You promised me, Twilight,” says Princess Sparkle. “And we all know that losing a friend’s trust is the fastest way to lose a friend.” We both look over at Pinkie Pie, who’s still frozen there.

“Huh. I kind of thought she was going to-”

“Yes, so did I,” says Princess Sparkle. “But my point is that forever is a very, very long time. I am millions upon millions of years old, and have far longer to go before I finally get to rest. I remember thousands of lifetimes. Thousands of wives, even the occasional husband for variety’s sake. Scores upon scores of foals. All nothing more than memories, undone as if I dreamed all of them up out of whole cloth. Of the many, many ponies I’ve loved, almost none of them have ever existed. I don’t have a future, Twilight, and soon neither will you. You brought what’s coming onto yourself and onto Star Swirl as well. You always have been your own worst enemy.”

“What are the Elements going to do to us?” I ask. If my knees could move, they’d be shaking.

“Oh, I have no idea,” she admits. “They just promised me it would be thorough. I wish they had told me more when they gave me the idea for this spell, or that I could stick around to see. Once it ends and time starts up for you again I’ll be gone. Still, I’ll always have the look that’s on your face right now.”

“We can talk about this. I understand what you went through better than anypony else.”

“Yes. So you understand exactly why the false hope you gave me was so despicable. I’m doing to you exactly what you did to me. It’s why I took the pony you love away from you first, just like you did with Luna.”

Wait, what? “You didn’t take Azalea away from me, what are you talking about?”

Up until now, Princess Sparkle has been making a show of how in control of the situation she is, but my question stops her in my tracks. “Well, I couldn’t murder her like you did to Luna, but I could at least drive you two apart. That’s why I told you she was a changeling.”

“But we didn’t break up over that. We talked it over and I forgave her for lying to me,” I say.

“You *forgave* her?” asks Princess Sparkle. “Why would you? She’s a changeling.” She frowns at me, like she’s somehow disappointed that we’re the same pony. “Well, I’ll just have to settle for wiping you out of existence. I knew I’d only get one shot at this. Even if my information wasn’t perfect, the Elements told me more than enough to pretend I’d seen you in hundreds of other loops. I told you that you were a good liar.” Princess Sparkle begins to fade away and the light somehow grows even more intense. With the protection of the time stop spell waning, the sheer amount of magic flying around is making the hairs of my coat stand on end. “Goodbye, Twilight Sparkle.”

She vanishes. I don’t even have time to blink before the full power of the Elements of Harmony comes crashing down on our heads.

Broken and Reunited

BROKEN AND REUNITED

I wake up screaming, and sit bolt upright in my bed.

Something next to me startles, and the covers are cast aside as it struggles to get itself free. My eyes turn to it, and the shape of a pony emerges out of the dark and grabs me. "Twilight? Twilight, what's wrong? Come back to me, Twilight," she says.

Reality comes rushing back in and I remember where I am. "Star Gazer?" I ask like a scared little filly. My wife leans over and gives me a big hug. I'm so lucky she's there for me, but then she always has been. "I dreamed... I dreamed that... I don't remember, but it was something so awful," I say.

"Shhh... it's okay. You're safe now." Her whispered words begin to calm me down almost instantly. She's right, I am safe now. "Think of something happy. Do you remember our first kiss?"

I giggle. "Of course I do, how could I not?" I ask. I seek her mouth out with mine and recreate it, lingering over every single familiar but incredible sensation associated with it. I take in as much of her as I can in the low light. Her unkempt dark red mane is hanging down over her eyes just like it did on that night. Back when we should have been studying for finals. When I doubted everything, especially myself, but she showed me the way. The best possible thing that could ever have emerged, and yet...

"I wonder, sometimes. What would have happened if, you know, you hadn't been..."

"Gay?" she asks, her words gentle and accusing at the same time. "Well, I suppose I wouldn't have been so eager to kiss you back that I fell off my chair and sprained my ankle."

I laugh quietly. The conversation's practically a tradition between us by this point. "I could apologize again, for the

thousandth time, but I still won't be sorry."

"Neither will I," says Star Gazer. I glance at the clock just beyond her on the nightstand. We have to get up in about twenty minutes anyway, and I don't feel like going back to sleep. Instead I snuggle up under our covers against the most important pony in my world and kiss her, hard.

She kisses me right back, employing all the little tricks she's learned over the last decade to make it even more thrilling than that first time. "Do you think we have some time before Leafy wakes up?" she asks.

"Who?"

She frowns and gently bonks my horn with an orange hoof. "Our son, dummy. Honestly, has Celestia had you researching memory spells over at the Academy again? I don't care if you're the 'youngest professor ever,' the last time one of those backfired you couldn't even remember my name for two weeks."

"You were so mad. Celestia still talks about the way you broke into one of the meetings she was having with her cabinet and forbade her from letting me experiment with them ever again. It's a good thing she was so impressed."

"We've come to accept that we have to share you with one another. But right now?" She rolls on top of me. "You are all mine. And I intend to pay you back for that thing with the weather vane last week."

The door to our bedroom creaks as it opens, and we both suppress a little groan at the interruption. "Mommy Sparkle? Mommy Star? Are you okay? I heard yelling."

"It's fine, Leafy," I say. "Mommy had a bad dream, but I'm feeling much better now." I hear the pitter-patter of tiny hooves on my bedroom floor and a *whumph* as the colt leaps into our bed. He clings to my chest, squeezing desperately.

"Then I'll help you make the bad dreams go away, just like you do for me."

I look over to Star Gazer, an apology implicit in my eyes. She just smiles, shrugs, and repositions herself behind my back with a hoof draped over me so she can stroke Leafy's mane. I don't fall back asleep, but I spend the next quarter hour sandwiched between the two ponies I cherish more than anything in the world, savoring every second.

The alarm goes off too soon. I rouse the little green unicorn clutching my chest from his slumber with a peck on the forehead, and all three of us get out of bed to face the new day. Despite what I said, I still can't quite shake the sense that my dream was important. I take a quick shower and blow-dry my mane, preparing myself for another day of research over at the academy. With a kiss each for my wife and son I head for the door. Star Gazer will take Leafy to school just like she does every morning. She does teach there, after all. Right before I leave I remember to grab a little shard of topaz out of the pantry. It always pays to stay on the good side of Celestia's pet dragon, Spike. The little guy has a good heart; it's obvious why Celestia made him her assistant.

I walk through the streets of Canterlot, wishing I could throw off the last lingering traces of whatever it was I dreamed last night. Whenever I try to remember it's so tantalizingly close, but perpetually out of reach. A statue I've passed by a thousand times before catches my eye, and for some reason it's interesting enough to me that I have to stop and look. It's a monument, a carving so lifelike that if the six ponies it depicts came to life and stepped down from their pedestal I wouldn't think twice about it. The statue commemorates Trixie Lulamoon and her five friends, the ponies who wielded the Elements of Harmony and redeemed Princess Luna after she returned as Nightmare Moon.

What a shame that their heroism cost all six of them their lives.

I study Trixie's confident gaze that looks out across the city she helped save. Of course, she's been a household name ever since, her story the talk of Canterlot ever since that artificially lengthened night. The tale is well on its way to being immortalized as legend. Supposedly, the six had met that very

day. I wish I could make friends like that. Sure, I have colleagues at the Academy, and of course Star Gazer and her friends, but it just isn't the same.

Something twinges in the back of my mind, something related to the dream I had last night. Was it about Trixie and her friends? It all seems unusually familiar.

I continue walking, getting closer to the Academy, but I stop a block away. I look over at the train station I'm passing, and an irresistible impulse wells up inside of me. Before I know it, my hooves have carried me over to the ticket window. What am I doing? It's not at all like me to just skip out on work.

"Hello, sir," I say. "One, please. On the midday train, going anywhere."

"Cheapest fare's to Ponyville," he replies.

For some reason, that sounds like it's exactly where I want to go. "Perfect!" I throw down a few bits to cover my ticket and walk to the platform the train will be leaving from in ten minutes. Behind me, the stallion mutters something I don't quite catch about how he had *just* gotten that song out of his head.

As the train pulls away from the station, I wonder again what I'm doing. This feels important, important enough to risk Celestia's displeasure at my playing hooky. I can always catch up over the weekend, and in my present state of mind I wouldn't get anything done anyway.

As the train rolls along, the sense of familiarity only grows, as does my confusion at it. I've never even been to Ponyville before, so why do I recognize all the scenery that's passing by my window? The sensation of *déjà vu* only continues to mount over the next several hours until by the time I arrive at the Ponyville train station my mind is screaming for me to remember this, but frustrates me when I try. I step off the train and wander into the street. At least on the train I was moving, which gave me the illusion of progress, but now that I'm actually here I've got no idea what to do next.

"Oh, hello there. Is this your first time in Ponyville?"

I turn to the source of the voice, a white unicorn mare with an elegant and distinguished purple mane. “It is, I think,” I say. “Is it that obvious?”

The other pony laughs graciously. “Not to most, I would suspect, but I’m something of an informal welcoming committee around here. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Rarity. A pleasure to meet you.”

I extend my hooves and bump hers. “Twilight Sparkle, and the pleasure is all mine.” I study her for a second. “Have you ever been to Canterlot? I can’t shake the feeling I know you from somewhere.”

“Hmm... This is embarrassing. I have the same sensation. I certainly have heard of you by reputation, some my clients will simply *die* when I introduce them to one of the foremost minds in Canterlot, but I can’t place where I know you from either.”

I take a step back. “You’ve heard of me all the way out here? What line of work are you in?”

“Well, technically I’m an event planner...” she turns to one side so I can see her cutie mark, a trio of yellow and blue balloons, “...but my passion is in networking. Bringing ponies with common interests together, or matching up ponies with needs to those with the ability to fulfill them to their mutual benefit.” She allows herself a small chuckle. “I suppose I like to think of myself as the pony everypony should know.”

“That does sound useful,” I admit.

“Why, thank you for saying so! If you’re going to be here later this evening, you simply must attend a small soirée I’ve been working on. There are so many ponies I need to introduce you to.”

“Oh... Gosh,” I say as I wrack my mind for an excuse. I hadn’t planned on staying that late. Well, strictly speaking I haven’t planned any of this. I don’t even know why I’m here. “...I don’t have anything to wear.”

Rarity’s eyes light up. “Then I know just the pony you should see! Our local seamstress will have exactly what you need, and

she's such a kind and gentle soul. I'm sure she would even lend you a dress if you only needed it for one night. Let me take you there now."

Seeing no escape from the mare's relentless generosity, I don't have much of a choice but to follow after her. We walk past a number of other ponies along the way who I could swear I've met before. I have to stop myself from waving several times. We stop in front of a boutique, stylized to look like a giant carousel. All manner of animals are depicted on its walls. We step inside, and Rarity looks around for the proprietor. "Fluttershy? Are you in?"

"Hello Rarity," says a voice from much closer than I anticipate. I spin towards it and see the pony I missed before, hidden amongst mannequins, a yellow pegasus with a pink mane.

"There you are, darling. Honestly, you're so quiet sometimes I just don't realize you're there."

"I'm sorry," says Fluttershy. She tilts her head as she looks at me. "Oh my, have I forgotten an order? I know I've seen you before, but I'm afraid I can't remember your name."

"That seems to be going around today," I say, "I'm new in Ponyville, though, so I can't say where we'd have met."

"Twilight Sparkle, this is Fluttershy. Fluttershy, Twilight Sparkle," says Rarity. "I know this is a bit last minute, but I wanted to make my dinner tonight into a welcome party for Twilight, and I hoped you would help her look her best."

"Oh, I could do a quick fitting," says Fluttershy as she sizes me up with a discerning stare. She turns her attention to some of the dresses on the racks. From what I can see, they're all modest but quite refined numbers. Flattering on the appropriate body type, but nothing that would make you stand out of a crowd. "It would be good advertising, I suppose. I have just a few things to finish up first."

"You are too kind, dear," says Rarity. "If you're interested in advertising, I know a number of ponies who work in

marketing. I'm sure they would be happy to give you some pointers."

"I couldn't. I don't like the idea of telling ponies what they should think or wear, I just like helping them look their best." Fluttershy gestures to the three diamonds on her flank. "It is my special talent after all."

"Well, how fortunate it is that your work is so beautiful that it speaks for itself," says Rarity. "Now please, don't let us keep you from it. We'll wait."

Fluttershy returns to the dress she's working on. Holding a spool of thread between her wings, her hooves move with a surprising dexterity, and stitch after stitch appears before my eyes. "Wow, Fluttershy, I've never seen a pegasus who's so good at sewing."

"Oh, thank you Twilight," says Fluttershy as she continues her work. "I'm glad you think so. Back in Cloudsdale, a lot of ponies thought it was a little freaky." She grimaces at the memory.

"They simply did not appreciate how special you really are," declares Rarity. "Their loss is Ponyville's gain."

I let my gaze travel over the rest of her boutique, and something on one of the racks catches my eye. Hanging there are some intricately decorated outfits, but far too small to fit even a foal. "What are those for?" I ask.

"Hmm?" says Fluttershy, looking up and following my gaze. "Oh, those are for a special commission from-"

The door to the boutique slams open, and a pink blur rushes inside. "Hiya, Fluttershy! It's us!"

"-Pinkie Pie," says Fluttershy, answering my question and greeting the new pony with the same words.

"Yep-a-rooney! Were you girls talking about me? My ears were burning!" She turns to me. "Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie, and this is Angel," she says. For the first time I notice that there's a little white bunny riding on her back.

“Aww, he’s so cute! I’m Twilight Sparkle,” I say. Pinkie smiles. Angel glares.

“He’ll be even cuter when we dress him up for our show tonight. Hey, you should come see it!” says Pinkie.

“It’s very kind of you to extend the invitation, Pinkie,” says Rarity. “However I’ve already asked her to attend my event.”

“Ooh! Then we should do the show for you right now! Let’s go, Angel.” Before I can protest that I don’t need to see her show, the bunny hops off her back and over to a nearby corner. Pinkie reaches into her mane and pulls out a hoop that just happens to be on fire.

“That was in your mane this whole time?” I ask, unable to believe my eyes. I have all kinds of questions, but before I can voice them something tells me that I should just go with it.

“Yep!” says Pinkie. She holds up a hoof to the underside of her chin. “Hmm... now that I think about it, I bet that’s why my ears were burning.”

“Oh, I hate this part. It always looks so dangerous,” says Fluttershy as she covers her eyes.

“Don’t worry, Angel’s a pro! Watch!” With that she tosses the burning ring into the air. Angel takes off running, building speed as he goes. He leaps up onto Pinkie’s back again and carries the momentum as he jumps high into the air. He does a little flip as he soars through the descending hoop, his puffy little tail passing just inches from the flames. Then he lands and at the very same instant Pinkie catches the hoop again, holding it above her triumphantly as she falls onto her rear knees. “Tah dah!”

The three of us can’t help but applaud at the display, though Fluttershy looks a lot more relieved than impressed. I’ve been having trouble making out what Pinkie’s cutie mark is, but it clicks in my head. Three pink butterflies, although the pink-on-pink color scheme was making it hard to tell. “That was amazing!” I say. “So you’re a rabbit tamer, I take it?”

“Not just rabbits, all kinds of animals,” she replies. “In fact I’m friends with just about every animal in Ponyville!”

“Pinkie has performed at a number of my events,” says Rarity, “it’s always quite amazing what her little friends can do.”

“What can I say? I love to make ponies smile,” says Pinkie

“And I just love to make little outfits for all of them,” says Fluttershy.

“The three of us do make quite the team, I must say,” says Rarity. Looking between the three of them, I can’t disagree. Their talents really do complement one another nicely. I’m just about to say so when everything explodes.

I cry out as the boutique shakes, grabbing a folding screen for support. It isn’t enough, and I fall to the ground. I look out the window and I see a ring of colors, every single part of the rainbow, spreading outwards.

The other three are entirely unimpressed. “Oh,” says Rarity, “I had forgotten that it was Tuesday.”

“What was... how did... where did that come from?” I ask.

“Ha! Your first rainboom! You’re a real Ponyvillian now,” says Pinkie, slapping a hoof on my back.

“They are a little scary if you aren’t used to them,” says Fluttershy.

“To answer your question, just follow it back to the center of the ring,” says Rarity. “You’ll likely find the origin over Zap Apple Acres.”

“Zap Apple Acres?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had Zap Apple jam before,” says Pinkie.

“Of course I have. Who hasn’t? I didn’t know this is where it came from, though.”

“Indeed, it’s Ponyville’s biggest export,” says Rarity. “It’s made the farm’s owners quite well off over the last few years, after they found a way to produce it regularly.”

“I’ll still be awhile before I can start on your dress, why don’t you go over and see? I’m sure they would love to meet you,” says Fluttershy. I consider it. I might do just that. Now that I

think about it, I could swear that something about that explosion felt familiar. Haven't I seen it before from all the way in Canterlot? Like so many other things today I can't place it. I bid farewell to the three friends and leave the boutique, following the trail of the still-expanding ring.

About ten minutes down the road, I start to find evidence that I'm in the right place. Trees adorned with multicolored apples are planted in neat, even rows in the nearby fields, their rainbow crop dominating the view of the countryside. A few minutes later I pass under a wrought iron gate and survey the center of the farm. There's a three-story mansion at the end of the path, dwarfing the barn I can see just behind it. All the equipment scattered around the yard looks top-of-the-line and well maintained.

"Yee ha!"

The cheer makes my ears perk up and draws my attention over to an orange mare who's waving a beat-up old hat at me. We trot towards one another and meet halfway. "Well, howdy there partner. Name's Applejack, pleased to meet'cha. What brings you all the way out here to the Acres?" She grabs my hoof and shakes vigorously.

"I'm Twilight Sparkle. It's my first day here in Ponyville, and I when I saw that rainboom I wanted to come over and investigate. The walk over was nice, too. Your land is really beautiful."

She breaks into a grin. "Well shoot, ah can already tell that ah'm going to like you." Somehow I'd known she would appreciate that particular compliment before I even said it. "Ah'm not quite the right one to tell you about the rainbooms, though. Might wanna cover your ears or back up a nudge."

Confused, I do as she suggests. She inhales a huge lungful of air and holds it in for a moment. **"HEY RAINBOW DASH! SOME PONY'S HERE WHO WANTS TO ASK YOU ABOUT THE RAINBOOMS!"** she bellows up into the sky. Even with my hooves covering my ears, my head keeps ringing for a few seconds after the sound stops.

For a moment nothing happens, but then a projectile with a rainbow contrail zips across the sky before turning down and coming to rest a few feet above us. The cyan pegasus pulls off the goggles she's wearing and shakes out her rainbow mane. She wipes her forehead and flicks the moisture off to the side, making a small dent in the sheen of sweat that runs down her chest, sides, and even her cutie mark of three ruby-red apples. "Sure, I could use a break. I've been out in the fields since sunrise," she says. "I guess you heard, but the name's Rainbow Dash. Nice to meet you." She has just the hint of an accent herself, but not nearly to the degree Applejack does. She sets herself down next to Applejack.

"Twilight Sparkle. That was amazing back there. What did you call it? A rainboom?"

"Sonic rainboom. And yes, I am pretty awesome," says Rainbow Dash. Applejack rolls her eyes, which doesn't go unnoticed by Dash. She flicks her tail, and wetly slaps it right against the other mare's lightning bolt shaped, tricolor cutie mark. Applejack gives a little yelp at the impact. "Oh, don't pretend you don't love it."

I look from one to the other, unsure if I should acknowledge the flirty behavior. "Well, I was really impressed. With moves like that, you should try out for the Wonderbolts."

Rainbow Dash shrugs. "I thought about it, but ended up deciding not to. I have everything I need here, and these guys would be totally hopeless without me around."

"My family worked this farm for generations perfectly fine before you showed up, Rainbow," says Applejack.

"Hey, I've got nothing against your family, AJ. After all..." She suddenly lunges at Applejack, catching her by surprise with a deep kiss that just goes on and on. "...I married into it," she finishes when she comes up for air at last. She turns her head and gives me a wink. "Turns out I really like the taste of apples."

Applejack coughs and sputters. "Dashie! Come on!"

"So... uh... you two are... wow," I say.

“Yeah, wow is a good word for it,” says Rainbow Dash. “Fell for this one more or less the day I met her. She took a few years to come around to the idea though.”

“Ah always preferred stallions, growin’ up,” explains AJ. “Sorry, ah dunno why ah’m telling you all this when we just met. Just... feels like ah’ve known you for a long time, somehow.”

Rainbow Dash makes a loud *pffft* sound and waves a hoof. “Mares, stallions, everypony’s a little bit Rainbowsexual. Too bad most of ‘em won’t ever find out what they missed.”

“So how did you two meet?” I ask.

Applejack looks over to Rainbow and smiles, giving her cheek a nuzzle despite the sweat. “C’mon inside and we’ll tell you over some tea,” she says. We step into the front hall of the mansion, tastefully but ornately decorated, and Applejack leads us to the kitchen. She pulls three glasses from the pantry and a pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator. I take a sip. It’s as delicious as it is refreshing. Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, chugs an entire glass in one go and motions for more.

“So before I decided I didn’t want to join the Wonderbolts, uh, I did want to join the Wonderbolts,” begins Rainbow Dash.

“Practiced all around town, trying to learn the tricks I’d need to impress them. Finally I came up with something that’d knock ‘em out of their flight suits when they saw it. The Sonic Rainboom. So I practiced and practiced and practiced until I was ready to do it for real.” She takes another gulp from her refilled glass. “Anyway, free tip about Sonic Rainbooms. Don’t do your first one heading down towards the ground. Although I guess that won’t help either one of you unless you magically grow a pair of wings somehow. I’ve had bad crashes before, but that one was worse than most. I totally pulled it off though.”

“Anyway,” Applejack cuts in. “Ah was just on my way to the big Appleoosa rodeo competition. Ah spend a couple months a year out on the tournament circuit. Guess ah’m a pretty competitive pony, as this one knows.” She pats Rainbow Dash on the back. “Ah was leavin’ for my train when bam! Sonic

Rainboom right over my head. Well, ah probably ran faster than ah ever had before trying to follow the trail of where she landed. Meanwhile, around me the apples are turnin' all kinds of colors. Found the crater in the southern field, and her right in the middle of it."

"Right, so first thing I see when I come to is this gorgeous mare leaning over me. Glowing blonde mane, adorable freckles, the whole nine yards," says Rainbow, jumping into the story with a practiced ease that makes me think the two of them have done this many, many times before. "Naturally, I played it suave and cool."

"As ah recall, you'd broken a wing and were cryin' for your mommy."

"But, like, in a totally suave and cool way," insists Rainbow Dash.

"We took her in and patched her up. It was only neighborly. Wasn't until hours later we noticed we'd both gotten our cutie marks during the whole ordeal. Once my Granny figured out that the rainboom had turned our crop into Zap Apples, we hired her on the spot."

"After I worked out the kinks and got the Rainboom down cold, we started making Zap Apple jam full time. I thought I'd been working hard before, but these ponies really cracked the whip at me, even though sometimes I asked for it."

Applejack goes all red again. "Rainbow Dash! That's *private!*" she hisses.

Rainbow Dash nearly spits up her tea giggling. "I only meant that I was one lazy little fieldhoof back then, Jackie," she says. Then she turns to me with a grin. "That other stuff came later." Applejack swats her, but the smile on Rainbow's face lets me know she thinks it was worth it. "So it worked out for both of us. AJ and the rest of her family got the money to fix this place up, I got a steady job and, oh yeah, we both ended up with the mare of our dreams." She leans over to me conspiratorially, and stage whispers into my ear. "Just between us, AJ got the better deal." Another swat, another laugh, another kiss, and the two of them end up leaning against one another, Applejack's

left foreleg intertwined with Rainbow Dash's right. They both look utterly content.

I glance at the clock. "Oh, wow, I didn't realize how late it was getting. I need to head back into town," I say.

"Feel like some company?" asks Applejack.

"I'll come too," says Rainbow Dash. "There's something there I need to do."

"There is? What's that?" asks Applejack.

Rainbow Dash blinks several times at the question. "I... I don't know. I just know there's something important I need to do." She shrugs. "I'll probably remember when I get there."

The three of us set out from the farm back towards the boutique. We're almost there when we run into Pinkie, Rarity, and Fluttershy coming the other way. The six of us look from one to another, unsure of what to say until Rarity breaks the ice. "Do you all feel this as well? Like we're... we're..."

"Connected? I'm glad it's not just me," says Rainbow Dash.

"Well, ah know I've seen y'all around town, but yeah. Like it's something more important."

"More important than you can possibly imagine," says a voice from above. We look up and gasp as Princess Celestia descends from the sky, carrying a sealed chest on her back.

"Wowzers! It's the Princess! The Princess, you guys!"

"Um... yes Pinkie, I think we all noticed her. I mean, I did," says Fluttershy.

"Twilight Sparkle, I'm surprised at you. Skipping out on your work to come here, of all places." I wilt a bit under her criticism. "I'm sure you must all be very confused, and I'm here to help you resolve that confusion with these." She opens the chest and reveals a crown accompanied by five necklaces.

"Are those..."

"The Elements of Harmony, yes," answers Celestia. "I would like each of you to take the one which feels most natural to

you, and put it on. When you do so, the Elements will fix your memories.”

“So we’ll be able to remember how we know each other?” I ask. I’m eager to solve that particular mystery.

“No, Twilight. They will fix your memories so you forget one another for good.”

The hoof I was reaching for the box with freezes in mid air.
“...What?”

“The six of you shared a connection in a... different time. It was a wonderful friendship and you accomplished many things together, but it proved dangerous to harmony in Equestria. So your minds and your fates were altered. Incompletely, it seems. The time has come to correct that.”

“Twilight,” says a new voice from behind a tree. Out steps Star Gazer. Celestia appearing from nowhere was odd enough, though not completely out of character for her. How did Star Gazer even get here? “Put on the crown. Then everything can go back to being the way it was before. Weren’t things wonderful? I love you so much, I couldn’t bear to go back to a time when we weren’t together.”

“But... but my friends-” at the words ‘my friends’ my head snaps back and I cry out in pain as the dam blocking up my mind breaks. Memories of another life pour in and mingle with what I thought I knew about my past. “Star Gazer... You didn’t sprain your ankle that night, did you? I did, because you shoved me.”

“Please don’t remember that, Twilight. Put the crown on so you won’t have to. I can’t bear to see you remember the way I treated you then. It doesn’t have to be real if you don’t let it,” says Star Gazer.

“You’re a lie,” I say. She begins to cry.

“No, I’m not. I’m a better truth. Please, Twilight, do it for Leafy.”

“Mommy Sparkle?” I spin around, and there’s my son right in the middle of the ring my five friends are standing in.

“You,” I say, “are supposed to be in school.” The Elements fight dirty.

“Don’t you want me to be real, mommy? I thought you loved me. Why do you want me to go away?”

I rush over to him and wrap him up in my arms. I’m his mother. I’m not his mother. I’m... I’m... “Of course I don’t want you to go away,” I whisper into his ear. “I don’t want my friends to go away either, though.”

“You have to choose, Twilight,” he says. My ears twitch. That doesn’t sound like something he would say. I lean back and look more carefully. I am Leafy’s mother. And a mother knows her own child.

“You aren’t Leafy.”

He frowns at me. “No, we aren’t,” says a new voice from his mouth, about three octaves lower than his real one. “We simply find that a corporeal form helps us to communicate better. Put on the crown, Twilight.”

“Why are you doing this to us?” asks Fluttershy.

“We don’t want to hurt you, any of you. The six of you made phenomenal champions, and we did so much good with your aid. We didn’t anticipate how effectively you’d marshall the forces of chaos and darkness from other timelines, though, they’ve always been something of a blind spot for us. With the exception of that other Twilight from the time loop, naturally, who was a known quantity. That will all be corrected in the future.”

“What do you mean, by ‘corrected?’”

“You fulfilled your destiny, and gave us a great boon by doing so. Under our guidance, your actions vastly expanded our influence through enabling the existence of the Regalia. Yet the process left you profoundly dissatisfied, which would have led to you and your friends investigating the Regalia as Star Swirl did and possibly undoing us once again. We discovered a mutually beneficial solution, and arranged things through Star Swirl and Princess Sparkle to bring you into a situation where we’d be able to bestow an entirely new life upon you,

one where you would find no need to look into our nature. You weren't supposed to remember the other timeline at all, but your connection to one another is... stubborn. This isn't a punishment, Twilight, it's a reward if you'll only just accept it."

"So, what, happily ever after for Equestria?" I ask.

"No. Equestria is a failure. We were close, much closer than with the worlds that came before, but we haven't succeeded in creating a perfect harmony yet," not-Leafy explains. "You all did well. We'd say you get an A-minus as a species. So live a happy, uneventful existence, and a few centuries down the line we'll wipe the final remnants of this world away and start from a clean slate." The colt puts a hoof to his chin and considers this. "Perhaps a race of sentient ostriches next time."

"I won't let that happen. Somehow, I'll stop you. We deserve to live. Ponies aren't just pawns in some stupid game, or variables in an experiment."

"We understand that the news is upsetting. That's why once we're finished here and you accept the inevitable, we'll remove your memories of all that you've learned. You'll live a wonderful life, and you'll never have cause to think about Ponyville or one another again. We feel we are being more than reasonable about this."

"Ah'm not interested in living a lie," says Applejack.

"We'd expect nothing less from Honesty's champion. Are you comfortable telling your wife that what you feel for her is a lie? Because if you go back to the truth, or more accurately the most recent truth before this one, all of that will be gone."

Rainbow Dash looks over to Applejack, the pain on her face as clear as day to anypony that looks. Applejack hangs her head without answering.

A heavy silence descends over the six of us. Leafy doesn't press us to reach a decision quickly. "I've made up my mind. Give me the crown," I eventually say. Probably-not-actual Celestia lifts it in her magic and passes it to me. I take it in my hooves and examine it.

“Twilight-” begins Pinkie, but I hold up a hoof to cut off her protests.

“I’m sorry girls, but I know what I want.” I stare into the star-shaped jewel, the one modelled after my own cutie mark. Each facet and cut surface reflects an image of my face looking back at me, each one just a little bit different from all the others. The blissfully happy, unaware me from this world and the stressed out, sometimes miserable one from my original world side by side. I take a deep breath and brace myself for what’s coming.

Then I drop the crown to the ground and stomp my hoof down on the gemstone, breaking it into a thousand pieces.

The world shatters with it.

The light is back. Colors streaming by, inches in front of my face. I look around and there I am along with all of my friends, right back in the throne room of Canterlot Castle. Right in the eye of the storm of rainbows circling counter-clockwise before me. I smile, and dip a hoof into the stream. It isn’t going to hurt me. I understand it now. A chime rings out through the room.

“You know,” I say, gathering my thoughts as I begin, “this all reminds me of music, actually.” I don’t raise my voice, but it cuts right through the noise of the fighting and the tempest just the same. I’m as sure as I’ve ever been of anything that everypony can hear me just fine.

“Star Swirl told me about how the Princesses created music, a long time ago. How Celestia favored the resolved chords, and Luna favored the flawed and minor ones. Only when they put all those imperfect pieces together could they find something worth celebrating. You were right about one thing; ponies aren’t perfect. But guess what I just realized? You can see everything that has been. Everything that is. Everything that will be or could be. Yet you’re still missing the big picture.” The rainbows around us start to slow. Then they stop for the space of a heartbeat. Then they start revolving in the opposite direction.

“Music isn’t just about what’s printed on a sheet of paper. It’s about the rises and falls, and the emotions we fill them with. Ponies’ lives are the same way. Maybe you can read notes from a page, but you can’t carry a tune. You need us to do that for you, otherwise you would have just changed our memories without needing us to accept you. And I very much *do not* accept you. Without us? You’re just a bunch of gaudy costume jewelry.” A new light catches my eye from behind me. I glance back and see that it’s swelling from the chests of the five most important ponies I’ve ever known, from just where a necklace would rest if they were wearing any. The Regalia might be great amplifiers for the Elements, but they aren’t their source.

“I’m Twilight Sparkle. You were scared of me before, and you have no idea how right you were. I’ve seen what you planned for Equestria. I’ve been on the other side of your wall, and I came back. It’s dull and empty, just an eternal white void. Monotonous. That literally means ‘one tone.’” The power pouring out of my friends is matching that of the regalia blow for blow. I can feel the crackling rage and frustration billowing off of them. They aren’t used to being defied like this. Tough.

“Somewhere along the way you should have learned. A monotone...” A fresh burst of light pours out of us, overwhelming anything I’ve ever seen the Elements do before. It’s too bright to see through, but I don’t need to see anything any more. I’m one with anything that light touches.

“...*cannot form*...” I take a step forward, and I feel the surface of the regalia start to warp and blister. Ugly welts bubble up from them before they pop, spattering precious metals all over the floor.

“...A HARMONY!”

With a final pathetic whimper, the Regalia melts away forever.

I fall to the floor, completely drained and just as completely satisfied. Across the room, Celestia’s jaw hangs open and her eyes are wide. Melted gold from the piece of slag on her head that used to be the Element of Magic runs down the side of her face, but I don’t think she’s noticed yet. The remains of the

crown slip off her head and land with a wet slap in a semiliquid puddle. Celestia's mane and coat are singed around the edges, but other than that she's no worse for wear. Luna and Star Swirl are looking over at us too. For a long time nopony says anything.

"That... was... AWESOME!" says Rainbow Dash finally. With the silence broken all five of my friends begin to talk at once, confirming to one another that yes, that did really just happen.

My only warning of what's about to happen next is the clatter of a wooden baseball bat falling to the floor, and before I can turn around the body pouncing on me undoes any progress I've made at rising up again. "You're okay! You're okay! When I saw the Princess try to blast you, I thought... I thought..." says Azalea, then she gives up on words and just starts peppering me with little kisses. At some point we're going to have to have a conversation about the appropriate times and places for surprise tackle-hugs, but moments like this one are certainly going in the 'approved' category.

"I'm fine, Azalea. Never better," I lie. This almost feels like cheating on the wife I've never had, but remember spending a lifetime with. I remember everything. I try to push away the nagging little guilty thoughts, and at least for the moment I succeed.

Azalea stops mid-kiss. Her lips press against my cheek and the tip of her tongue gives my skin a few experimental pokes before she pulls away, confused. "Why do you taste like oranges?"

I chuckle. "Kind of a long story, I'll tell you later."

"Hey, where's Black Snooty?" asks Pinkie Pie. We all looks around. In the spot where Nightmare Moon had been pinning Luna in a choke hold, now there's just a pile of smoldering broken armor, the way there had been after the very first time we used the Elements.

"Well would you look at that," says Applejack staring up out through a nearby window. The moon is sitting in the sky, and

once again it's adorned with the markings it used to have before Luna broke out. The mare in the moon is back.

Luna looks up as well, and her jaw drops. "Is that what my moon looked like for a thousand years, while I was banished to it?"

Star Swirl, switching from enemy to loving husband in an instant, gives her a hug. "It must be hard for you to see that. Don't worry, we'll get through this together."

"I'm not some traumatized little foal, you doofus," she says to Star Swirl, although she does return the hug. She turns to the still-stunned Celestia. "Honestly, Tia, slapping a picture of me up on the moon? That's just tacky." Her ear twitches and she looks back at Star Swirl. "Wait, when you said we'd get through this together..."

"I'm not going anywhere, Lunatic. This is about the age I was when I disappeared from the past, isn't it?" asks Star Swirl. Luna looks him over for several seconds, then nods. "Well then I can't go back or it would mess everything up, wouldn't it? No reason I can't stick around here, though, and get to know this new you. Technically, aren't we still married?"

She smiles. "I suppose that we can say so. Although I regret to inform you that I have been committing infidelity against you for several hundred years."

"Oh yeah? Any of them any good?"

"Well, the was this one lavender unicorn mare..."

"She's taken," I call over to them. Azalea snorts and resumes her kisses.

"There will be time for all of that later," says Luna, blushing. "We should dispose of Nightmare Moon's remains. They are physical manifestations of her power, and in the wrong hooves may be dangerous." She picks up one of the shards, but when she tries to put it back down again oily tendrils of it peel off and stick to her coat. She tries to detach it by shaking her hoof, but it keeps its grip. The rest of the broken armor begins to vibrate and shake, before more tendrils dart out and stick all over her body. The armor melts into a thick liquid while Star

Swirl looks on in horror. As it flows and envelops her, Luna screams.

The scream is what finally snaps Celestia out of her daze. “Luna!” she cries out and dashes towards her, but she’s been entirely swallowed up by the black fluid. From the outside, she just looks like a three-dimensional silhouette of herself, and then even that begins to warp and change. She staggers around as her body stretches and shifts, and then a tiny crack appears in the surface. Bright light pours out from it, and the cracks spread as the light grows overwhelming. With a final explosion the oily darkness vanishes, and when I can see again it isn’t exactly Luna standing there.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that it’s more exactly Luna than it ever was before. Just like back in the past, she stands as tall and regal as her older sister. Her wings flare and she twists her head, as she works out the kinks and soreness from the transformation. Whatever the Regalia of Harmony ripped away when it sealed her away, I get the feeling she just took it back.

She laughs. “Oh, my! What a rush. I feel... I feel fantastic!” she trots over to Celestia and giggles. “It seems I no longer need to stare upwards to look you in the eye, sister. As it should be.”

Pinkie gasps. “Oh no! But if you took some of Nightmare Moon’s power does that mean you’re gonna go all crazy and evil and do the eternal night thing again?” she asks.

Luna shakes her head, perhaps a bit more emphatically than she needs to as she lets her newly rich and starry mane flow through the air. “I am pleased to report that my desire to plunge the world into perpetual darkness has increased only slightly from its usual level.”

“Yay!” shouts Pinkie.

Luna giggles at the way Celestia is eyeing her warily. “I meant that in jest, you and I are meant to rule as equals. I have no desire to repeat the mistakes of the past. Besides...” she stalks over to Star Swirl and kisses him on the nose. “...I have more important things to do than scheme against you.”

“Oh, geeze, not again. Why do you two always have to be so gross in front of everypony?”

We all look towards the sound of the new voice at the entrance to the throne room. Star Swirl looks like he’s about to have a minor aneurysm. “Shooting Star? What are you doing here? You were supposed to use the scroll I gave you to get home. I explicitly told you not to follow me!”

“Yeah, like that’s ever worked before,” she scoffs. She trots up to both of her parents and hugs them. “I don’t wanna go back if you don’t. I’m staying right here.”

Star Swirl seems moved, but his anger hasn’t dissipated entirely. “What if we hadn’t won? What if the Elements had killed us all, or Nightmare Moon had taken over after we won?”

“I don’t know, that whole ‘daughter of the evil empress’ thing sounded like a cool fallback plan.”

While the three of them cuddle together and chat away like they’re somehow the most normal family in the world, Celestia returns to me, Azalea, and our friends to give them some space. “I apologize for not trusting you, Twilight. Attempting to use the Elements of Harmony on you... I’d understand if you didn’t forgive me. Azalea, I also apologize for defenestrating you.”

I smile up at her. “It’s fine. It’s what I wanted you to do anyway, although I couldn’t explain it with Nightmare Moon right there. I’m sorry for all the things I said to provoke you. It’s not like things went according to my original plan.”

Azalea nods. “I’m just glad that you picked an open window. Sorry about hitting you with a baseball bat.”

Celestia grins. “In your position, I might have done much the same thing. Twilight is very dear to me. If you’d like, I think we should have some tea together and discuss your relationship with her. Alone.”

“A...Alone?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I shall invite her parents to join the two of us as well. I’m sure they would have quite a few questions

for you as well.”

Azalea starts to tremble and look down at the floor. I frown at Celestia. “Princess, be nice.”

She narrows her eyes ever so slightly for a moment, but then throws her head back and laughs. “I have a large and moderately painful welt beginning to form on the back of my head. I think I’m entitled to a tiny bit of payback.” She spreads a wing over Azalea, and pulls her against her side. “If Twilight loves you, and you her, of course you have my blessing.”

“Thank... thank you, Princess.”

Celestia looks over at Luna, her power and her family restored to her in the space of a few minutes, and gets a wistful look in her eyes. “It’s the best feeling in the world, to see those you love together with their friends and families. I couldn’t possibly be happier.” I’m not really sure if she’s telling that to us, or to herself.

“Mom?”

Celestia goes rigid. Frozen there on the floor, it’s several seconds before she can respond. “That... That can’t be...”

I grin up at her. “Are you *sure* that you couldn’t possibly be happier?”

Celestia stands up slowly and turns to where Morning Glow is standing in the doorway. I thought Shooting Star might have brought him along. He’s still a bloody mess, with dirt and mud caked onto his matted coat. It’s not like that cave was equipped with a shower. They stare at each other for almost a minute, neither of them able to believe their eyes. “... Glowie?”

At the sound of his name Morning Glow charges into the room. Celestia rushes towards him as well. Halfway into the room he leaps to her and they collide in midair, forearms and wings wrapped around one another by the time they hit the ground. “Mom! Oh, Mom, I saw... I watched you die. Most of this is your blood. I thought I’d never get to tell you that I love you again.”

“I love you too. Oh, Glowie, I love you so much. So, so much. My baby.”

“Wait, who are these ponies? I remember Star Swirl, and his letter mentioned Shooting Star, but who’s the new guy?” asks Rainbow Dash.

“That’s Morning Glow, Celestia’s son,” I explain.

“Princess Celestia has a *son*? Since when?”

I look over at the two of them, clinging to each other like they’re never going to let go again with tears streaming down both of their faces. Celestia is gently rocking back and forth as she whispers something just for the two of them into Morning Glow’s ear. “Since right now.”

Rarity gasps. “Do you realize what this means? With all these ponies from the past coming to live in our time?”

My mind races. Could there be some sort of temporal feedback loop? A paradox that wipes out existence? Gigantic changes in history rippling outwards from this moment? What am I missing? “What does it mean, Rarity?”

“It means that retro is going to be *huge* next season!” She grabs my cheeks and as she pulls me to face her, I see a manic glint in her eyes. “Twilight, I need every book you have on fashions from those time periods, a sewing machine, and three hundred pounds of purple silk, stat!” She drops me to the floor and brings a hoof up to her forehead. “And Princess Luna! She’s bigger now! She’s going to need an entire new wardrobe from the ground up! I need new measurements! Oh, where is my tape?”

“Uh, Rares, don’tcha think you might be forgettin’ somethin’ important?” asks Applejack.

“Well, well, well. Look at all the lovey-dovey wittle ponies with their happy endings,” says Discord’s voice from above. “I haven’t seen this much sap since I turned Manehattan into a forest of maple trees.”

We all gasp and look up the monster standing on the ceiling looking down on us. Oh no, what are we going to do? I don’t

know if I have the energy to draw directly on the Elements again like that. “Discord!” I shout.

“The one and only,” he replies. “No, really, the one and only. Had a big fight with that other one, real knock down, drag out stuff. Probably blew the special effects budget for months. But in the end, that other me just wasn’t up to snuff. So he got snuffed.”

“Wait, um, I don’t know if I understand,” says Fluttershy. “Are you the nice, reformed Discord or the mean, unreformed one?”

“Hmm...” he strokes his chin, then he looks down at Fluttershy and winks. “Wouldn’t *you* like to know?” With that and one final, lingering laugh he vanishes into thin air.

“Ugh. Never can get a straight answer out of that one. What a pain,” says Applejack.

“Yeah, maybe we should’ve locked him back up in the statue, just in case,” agrees Rainbow Dash. The two of them look at one another, then suddenly blush and turn away again. It doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Um... Rarity...” says Fluttershy, changing the subject, “if you’re making a whole new line of retro-inspired period works, do you want any help? I mean, I still remember a lot about how to design and sew from that... other place.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly impose on you like that, Fluttershy. I’m sure some of my connections can help me acquire the labor that I need. Assuming, ah, that they do still exist. Besides, if you were in my boutique who would look after your animals?”

“Ooh! Ooh! I will! Pick me, pick me!” Pinkie bounces into the air, waving her hoof to draw their attention. “Do you think I could teach a ferret to do a backflip?”

“Wait, do you all remember everything the Elements did to us?” I ask. I had assumed for some reason it would only be me.

“What did they do, anyway?” asks Azalea. “How did you know you needed to attack Canterlot with Discord and Nightmare Moon?”

“It’s been kind of a weird day,” I reply. “Not actually the weirdest one I’ve ever had, which says a lot about my life, but I’ll fill you in on the train ride home.”

“Heh, I betcha aren’t going to want to leave the library for a straight month after all this,” says Applejack.

That does sound good, but first there’s one more trip to make.

A week later, I push open the door of a small flower shop in Trottingham, the jingling of the bell announcing my presence. I hear movement and a stallion emerges from behind a display, a green earth pony with a flower for a cutie mark. “Hello, sir,” I begin. “You wouldn’t happen to be a Mister Xylem, would you?”

“Sure am. Can I help you?”

“Not me, but there’s a pony here I think you should meet.” I take a step to one side and gesture behind me.

“Uh... there’s nopony there. This some kinda prank?”

My confident smile falls away as I turn my head and look. Sure enough, the two of us are alone in the shop. “Heh heh,” I chuckle, “I’ll be right back.”

He shrugs. “Best be quick about it, we close for the day in about ten minutes.”

The jingling of the bell is a lot more frantic as I run through the door a second time. I stop on the empty street and look every way I can for my target. I find her closer than I expected to. Sitting against the wall just to the side of the door and silently crying is Azalea. I sit down next to her and pull her into a hug. “I can’t do this. I’m scared, Twilight, I’m so scared. What are they going to say when they meet me?”

“I don’t know, sweetie, but there’s only one way to find out. You need to walk through that door. No more sneaking and hiding, that’s not who you are anymore, is it?” Azalea shakes her head.

“Please don’t make me,” she begs.

“I won’t. I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to. If you’d rather come back another day we can, but you’re going to have to do this eventually.”

She sniffles. “Yeah, I know. But what am I supposed to tell them? Hey, sorry your daughter died last year. Don’t worry though, I’m here to replace her?”

“You are her. You are Azalea,” I say. She doesn’t seem convinced, but at least she stops crying and lays her head down on my shoulder. I let her rest there for a minute, acutely aware of the time limit I’m under. “Hey, remember that night on the lake?” I ask. I feel her nod, but she doesn’t say anything. “It’s a leap of faith. You didn’t think you could do it that night either, you just thought you were going to end up soaking wet and disappointed. But you leapt, and something amazing happened. Us happened. And just like that night I’m going to be right here helping you walk on water. If something goes wrong and we take a plunge, we’ll just crawl back out and help each other dry off and warm up. Does that sound good?” Azalea wordlessly reaches out, and I take her hoof in between mine.

She takes a long, deep breath. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“You go in first this time, I’ll be right behind you.” I give her a quick kiss and help her stand back up again. She steps over to the door and after one last glance back to assure herself I’m there, pushes the door open. The bell jingles for a third and final time. The same stallion as before steps out again, from another direction this time. “Did you find the pony... the pony that...” He stares at Azalea, unable to form coherent words.

Azalea’s knees have stopped shaking, and her tears dried up. She smiles up at the stallion, and though it takes her a few tries she does manage to get the words past her lips.

“Hi Dad.”

An Uncertain Future

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

I can't believe it's been three months.

A whole season of spectacularly unspectacular routine. Wonderfully boring days that blur together with barely anything to distinguish them from one another. Days where the biggest thing I worry about is 'do I feel like white or rye toast with my eggs' instead of 'which ancient evil is going to try to kill me next?'

At the thought of food, my eyes snap open and I sit up in bed. It's an hour before sunrise, and despite only going to bed three hours ago I feel completely alert, not to mention ravenously hungry. I don't seem to be getting much sleep these days, but Azalea's told me that when I am out I sleep like the dead. I lean down and place a gentle little kiss on her head. She won't be up for a while, but I'm going to get an early start.

Creeping downstairs towards the library's kitchen in total darkness, I find I have no trouble at all navigating the cupboards and pantries to pull out exactly what I want. A couple pieces of fruit, half a loaf of bread and the jam to go with it, a bowl of cereal, a danish. Yeah, that'll get me started. It's actually a bit of a shock when I open the refrigerator door and the tiny little light bulb is the first light to strike my face since I woke up. Pulling out some juice, I briefly consider whether to make a cup of coffee just for old time's sake. I don't think I've had a sip of it in nearly six weeks. Not through any conscious effort to quit, I just haven't felt like I needed it. I'm glad that I'm up before Azalea is, because frankly my table manners are atrocious. I cannot get the food down fast enough and I'm just too hungry to care. Twelve minutes later, the very first rays of the pre-dawn sun come shining in, landing on four empty plates, a dirty glass, and one stuffed little unicorn.

I groan as the meal settles, with guilty satisfaction. This must be why my clothes don't fit right anymore. Now that there's a little bit of light entering the library, I head to the dim bathroom and examine myself in the mirror. Heh, and to think Princess Celestia used to tell me that reading by candlelight would wreck my eyes. My low-light vision's better than ever.

I take a good hard look at myself. Despite the meal I just finished, which was far from atypical for me these days, I'm svelter than I was a few months ago. More muscle, but leaner and stronger than I used to be. Must be my new exercise program.

After five minutes of brushing my teeth and washing my face, my stomach is settled enough to head out for a run. I started distance running about a month and a half ago on a whim, and I never realized what I'd been missing. Now if I go more than a day or two without putting in at least a couple miles at a hard gallop, my hooves start to itch and tingle to feel the ground pounding underneath them. Slipping on some running shoes, I sneak past Spike's room and out the front door, slowly closing it with the quietest little click of the latch.

Few ponies are even up at this hour, much less out and about. That's just fine with me. Even just trotting down an empty street is a pleasure. A baby bird chirps a couple of blocks to the south, and even from here I catch a whiff of freshly baking bread from Sugarcube Corner across town. I once tried to go for a run before breakfast, and a quarter hour later ended up gorging myself on their pastries. Wiped out a week's food budget on a single feeding frenzy. The sights, sounds, smells, everything about the world around me just feels more real than it used to, like I'm feeling them with entirely new senses my brain hasn't quite figured out how to interpret just yet. I canter down the street to warm up my legs, grinning to myself as I approach the edge of town. Three more buildings... two more... I lower my head and my muscles quiver with anticipation.

I cross the arbitrary, invisible line at the edge of town and cut loose into a full gallop. I'm absolutely flying across the fields and roads towards the path in the Whitetail Woods I usually

run along, a longer version of the Running of the Leaves course. There are a couple of times where I feel like my hooves aren't even touching the ground at all. It's a shame I'm going by too fast to really appreciate the scenery, but I have to get my heart rate up or this run will barely count. A few miles into the run, just when I'm finally starting to work up a light sweat, I hear a voice calling for me to slow down.

Mildly annoyed, I slow to a walk and despair as the pounding in my chest vanishes almost immediately. I'm having to push myself harder and harder every day just to recapture that sensation. Rainbow Dash glides over me and turns around, flapping to keep up. "Wow, Twilight, I know you told us you'd been running, but you didn't tell us you were getting that fast! Color me impressed."

"Thanks, Rainbow Dash. I have been reading a lot of books about building physical endurance. I think they're working." A year ago, Rainbow Dash rarely surfaced before noon. But the habits ingrained in her through the memory of a decade's worth of farm labor did something I would have thought impossible even for the Elements of Harmony: Turned her into a morning pony. "What are you doing out in the woods? Training?"

"Nah, I thought I'd get my weather work out of the way first thing, then head over to Zap... to Sweet Apple Acres."

"How are you and Applejack doing these days?" I ask, feigning casual disinterest. It's a subject the other girls and I have been tiptoeing around for weeks now. For the first month after we got back, the two couldn't even be in the same room as one another for five minutes before one of them would make some flimsy excuse to escape, but at some point they must have broached the initial awkwardness, because now they spend more time than ever together. Neither of them have been forthcoming about the exact nature of their relationship, if they even know themselves, and none of us wants to push them into talking about it before they're ready.

"We're cool, I guess," says Rainbow Dash, a phrase that could mean anything and therefore means nothing. "I just wanted to

pick up some moisture from the pond out here in case the humidity in town was getting too low.”

“Well, when I was there a half an hour ago it felt like around twenty-eight percent,” I say.

Rainbow Dash stops in midair. “You stopped and took humidity measurements while you were going out running? That’s pretty nerdy even for you, Twi.”

“I didn’t stop, I mean, I was there and it felt like...” I trail off. I’m sure that I’m right, even precisely right. I didn’t even think anything of it at the time. I was only looking around. The roof of this house is blue, this street is dusty, the humidity is twenty-eight percent, I just knew.

“Well, thanks for trying to help but you should probably leave stuff like that to us pegasi. Weather is kinda our thing,” said Rainbow Dash, her attention already drifting away from me.

“Well, I’ll catch you around later. Keep up that awesome speed!” She flies off. I try to recapture that same escapist sensation of movement I had a moment ago, but now I’m distracted by how self-conscious I’ve gotten about the atmosphere around me. I can taste something tingling on the edge of my tongue, something... hailstormy? Just an odd feeling in the air. The nagging sense that I’m missing something spoils the rest of my run.

As I canter back into town a bit later, I almost manage to walk past Sugarcube Corner without stopping in for a treat. Almost. But the newfound appreciation for life that’s enhancing all my other senses makes sweets positively irresistible. For some reason, the effect seems most pronounced on cake.

When I open the door to the bakery, I briefly wondered if I haven’t stepped into a menagerie by accident. Animals race around the room, and surround a table where three patrons are seated. One of them is trembling as he lifts a cookie with shaky hooves, eyes never leaving the giant black bear that’s looming just a small ways away. Another takes a sip from a water glass, half draining it, and there’s a sharp cry as a huge condor swoops down from above and hovers over the table. It refills the glass with a pitcher of water hanging from a talon

and flies back up again, the sloshing ice water splashing another patron on the way up.

“Uh, Pinkie?” I call out as I step inside. I slowly make my way over to the counter, careful not to step on any of the small critters running around underhoof. I ring the service bell at the counter and immediately regret it. I have to clasp my hooves over my ears to block out the cacophony of squawks and hoots that break out.

Drawn out by the noise, Pinkie Pie sticks her head out from the kitchen in back. “Oh, hey Twilight. Did you want to place an order? Just ask the goat.”

I look over at the goat standing next to me, and he stares back, nonplussed. We hold eye contact for a second, then he leans over the counter and pulls a napkin from the dispenser, slowly chewing on it. “...Maybe later. What’s going on in here?”

Pinkie’s grin grows wider. “Oh, the Cakes are out of town for the next few days and a whole bakery is lots to manage for just me, so I thought since I was so good at training animals to do tricks in my other life, and I’m so good at baking in this one, why not combine the two?” There’s a loud crash from the kitchen. “I may not have quite worked out all the kinks. One second.” She turns back to something I can’t quite see. “No no no, no amphibians or reptiles in the walk-in freezer, or you’ll *really* be cold blooded! If you need something in there, ask the penguins.”

“Okay, so they’re, uh, helping you in the kitchen too?” I look around the room. Maybe Pinkie’s on to a half a good idea here. I can’t even guess how she got the jaguar into that tuxedo to serve as maitre’d. “What’s the bear doing?”

“The customer specially requested to eat with him!” Pinkie cheerfully declares. “Well, technically he only asked for one of the bear’s claws, but here at Sugarcube Corner we believe that going the extra mile is key to good customer service!”

“Maybe I’ll just grab something from your bread box and be on my way. Just put it on my tab,” I suggest.

“Okie dokie lokie! If you need help finding anything just ask the king cobra who’s napping in there for help.”

I freeze. She has to be joking. Not even she would... “Pinkie, is there really a king cobra in your bread box?”

“No, not really,” she says. I let out a sigh of relief. “I asked him where he was king of, and he didn’t really answer me, so I think he might be a government-in-exile cobra instead. I’ve never heard of those being venomous!”

I begin to slowly back towards the door. “Well, I just stopped in to say hi. Hi! There, I said it so now I’ll just-”

“Actually, as long as you’re here, could you help explain something from a letter a pony in a suit left for me?”

“Sure.”

“What’s a health code violation?”

I return to the library an hour later, exhausted for all the wrong reasons. I didn’t even get a decent workout and it’s already mid-morning. Still, I did just run seven miles, even if it wasn’t especially taxing. I go through a few quick stretching exercises as soon as I’m through the door, and yelp as one especially troublesome muscle group cramps up. I grumble. Why does this one patch on my back keep hurting me? I’ve read everything I can about chiropractic treatments and proper posture, but nothing seems to work right. At least Azalea’s getting good at back rubs. “Anypony home?” I call out. Usually I get back in time to catch Azalea before she heads over to the market to start selling flowers, but the detour to Sugarcube Corner was an unexpected delay.

A minute later, Spike emerges, yawning, from his room.

“Morning, Twilight. You want breakfast?”

“Spike, I ate hours ago. I think there’s still a couple of tourmaline-crust ed waffles in the fridge from yesterday if you just want something quick. I’m going to hop in the shower.”

A hot shower goes a long way towards relieving the pain in my back, and I step out clean and refreshed, ready to face the

rest of the day. When I return to the main room with a towel wrapped around my head, the first thing I notice is an annoyed-looking Spike waiting for me. “Twilight, I went shopping two days ago. How is the pantry nearly empty again?”

“Uh... I was hungry?”

“I bought enough food for a week! Are we...” his lips tremble a bit. “Can we afford how much you’ve been eating lately? I could go look for gems to sell, if you need me to.”

I’m shocked to hear that coming from him. I’ve taught the Spike the basics of personal finance, how to manage an allowance, and the equivalent of several semesters of university-level economics the one time he asked me how money works and I got slightly carried away. Not entirely sure how much of that actually took. Still, I never wanted him to feel like it was something he needed to concern himself with. “You don’t have to worry about that, Spike. Last month, Luna sent me a big extra bag of bits in addition to my usual stipend.”

“She did? She just gave you all that money? Why?” he asks.

A good question. “Well, when I asked her about it she said it was an ‘advance against an upcoming readjustment in salary to bring it into line with the actual scope of my achievements and future duties.’” Spike looks at me blankly. “No, I don’t really know what she meant by that either and she wouldn’t explain when I asked, beyond that she didn’t want me worrying about financial pressures. Still, we have plenty of bits. In fact...” I open a drawer and lift a half-dozen or so coins from inside it, “...once your room and the kitchen are straightened up, why don’t you skip the rest of your chores for today and take the afternoon off? Just be back in time to help me with dinner before Shining Armor and Cadence get here, let’s say four o’clock.”

Spike’s jaw drops at the twin gifts of a surprise advance on his allowance and an unexpected day off. “You mean it?”

“I sure do! You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, Twilight,” he jumps up and gives me a hug around my neck. “By the way, a letter from Princess Celestia arrived while you were in the shower. I was chewing at the time, so sorry if it’s a little sticky.”

I turn my attention to the letter sitting on the table nearby. I open it and as I scan it I break into a wide grin. I run up into my room and gather up a pile of clothing that I meant to take to Rarity for alterations some time tomorrow, but my plans just changed. I dash down the stairs with my clothes in tow.

“Spike! Lock up the the library if you leave, I have to run over to Carousel Boutique right this second.”

“All of a sudden? Why the rush?”

“Because,” I say, grinning even wider than before, “the 10:07 train from Canterlot got in two minutes ago.”

All this running I’ve been doing has at least one major advantage: I can get where I’m going a lot faster than before when I hurry. I stop in front of Rarity’s shop and take a deep breath so I seem calm when I head inside. I think I got here first.

“Hello?” I call out as I step inside. The now-familiar sound of two sewing machines working together rings out through the display space. “Rarity? Fluttershy?”

Fluttershy’s head pops up from her work when she hears her name. “Hello, Twilight. Were you looking for me? Rarity has a big order coming up, and I could use a few extra bits, so I’m helping her out.”

“I guessed when I saw that Pinkie was watching all your animals. You know that she’s having them help her run Sugarcube Corner?”

Fluttershy shudders. “Oh, my, I hope they’re doing a good job. Is everything alright over there?”

“Kind of. Besides the king cobra in her bread box.” I sigh. It’s Pinkie. It’ll work out somehow, or so I keep telling myself.

“She put Mr. King Cobra *where?*” she shouts, suddenly intense. I take a small step back.

“In her bread box. She said he was napping there.”

“Mr. King Cobra is gluten intolerant!” she shouts. “Rarity, I have to-”

“Go ahead, dear,” Rarity calls out from the next room.

“I’m sorry, if you don’t want to pay me for this hour-”

Rarity steps into the showroom, measuring tape and fabric draped over her and her work glasses ever so slightly askew on her face. “Absolutely not, Fluttershy. Of course I’ll pay you. Honestly, you’d be a bargain at twice the price. If you won’t accept more than what we’ve agreed on, you simply must let me give you a few outfits. Now go on,” she looks askance at me as Fluttershy rushes past me and out the door. “Really, Twilight? More alterations?”

“There’s no rush, just whenever you get around to it. Usual rate?”

She sighs. “Yes, I suppose. I might as well do it soon. You’ll probably be some entirely different shape next week, if the last two months are anything to judge by. What’s the problem now?”

“The collars are too snug.”

Rarity wraps her measuring tape around my neck, and squeezes it just the tiniest bit tighter than I think she really needs to. She examines her readings. “Honestly Twilight, I’ve never seen a growth spurt like this in a mare your age.”

“Well, I have been working out. I must be building extra muscles or something,” I suggest. Despite my nonchalance, it has been bugging me. I’d be more worried, except all these changes have felt so good, and so natural. Like my skin was a size too small and I never noticed until it wasn’t. Besides, the clothes aren’t the real reason I came over here. Any second now...

The door opens and Morning Glow steps inside. “Lady Rarity!” he says, a bit flustered. “You’re looking lovely as

usual, how are you today?”

Rarity’s earlier annoyance disappears in an instant. “Oh, Prince Morning Glow! Quite well, and yourself?”

“Rarity, I’ve told you a hundred times, just because Princess Celestia is my mother doesn’t mean I’m an actual prince.”

Rarity smiles and steps maybe just a bit closer to Morning Glow than she has to. That mare doesn’t do anything by half measures. “*Prince* Morning Glow, there are things that matter a great deal more than titles. I will stop calling you a prince the minute you stop living up to the ideal of one.” Now he’s definitely flustered. “But you didn’t need to come all the way from Canterlot just to pick up the suit you ordered. That’s what shipping is for.”

Morning Glow runs a nervous hoof through his mane. “I guess not, but I just came to pick it up myself in case you wanted me.” He blinks a few times. “For measurements and a final fitting, I mean. Have to make sure everything’s comfortable, right?”

“Mmm, well of course,” says Rarity. “It’s not enough for fashion to look good. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you feel good, as well.” This from a mare who I know for a fact owns a variety of corsets. I roll my eyes, quite certain neither of them are looking.

Morning Glow does a double take, noticing my presence in the room for the first time as Rarity walks into the back to collect the outfit. “Twilight! Uh, hello, sorry, didn’t see you there.” I bet he didn’t, seeing as how thoroughly concealed I am standing in the middle of an open room five lengths away from him. But I guess he was focused on something else. “My mother sends her regards, as always. Wow, we always do seem to run into one another when I come to see Rarity, huh? I mean when I come to the boutique for an outfit.”

“Yep, what a crazy coincidence,” I say. Surely the fact that a particular Princess has a very personal interest in his romantic life but doesn’t want to be seen as overbearing, and the fact that I’m her student are just crazy coincidences too. I was

wrong before; I actually do make a half-decent spy. “What’s the occasion for this outfit?”

“It’s for next weekend,” he says. “Aunt Luna is holding an all-night festival of street music. Mom can’t make it, so she asked me to go in her stead. It’ll be fun.”

“Oh?” I ask, feigning surprise. Shooting Star wrote to me about the festival a week ago. She’s a great deal more tolerable as a pen pal than pony to pony. “That sounds like a long night. Are you going alone?”

“I... I...” Morning Glow stammers as Rarity returns with his suit.

“Rarity, what do you think of street music festivals?” I ask her. Yes, I’m shameless. No, I don’t care.

“It sounds like a delightful evening! I only wish I could attend, but I’m sure I’ll have a fine night here as well. Alone. Not doing anything. Wishing somepony would ask me attend some sort of event with them,” she says.

Morning Glow clears his throat. Thank the Princesses, I was starting to worry we’d have to clobber him over the head before he caught on. “Lady Rarity, I would be honored if... I mean if you’d like to accompany me...”

I slip out of the boutique while they’re both distracted. From the way Rarity’s eyes glitter, I already know I’ll be writing back to the Princess with good news. My stomach rumbles yet again. Good thing I’m meeting Azalea for an early lunch. I wander towards the market and find her in the usual place next to Applejack. When she sees me, she looks moderately put out. “Well, well, the prodigal pony returns. I waited up for you last night until almost midnight, do you even sleep any more?” She kisses me anyway. She’s seemed a little worried about me for a couple weeks now.

“Sorry, got caught up in a book and didn’t come up until about two. How are you doing today, Applejack? I saw Dash earlier, she said you guys were going to meet up later?”

“She said that? Well, that makes one of us she’s told. Honestly, that mare has got to learn how to communicate,” says

Applejack. “Still, she’s been awful helpful around the farm, what with the harvest coming up.”

I resist the urge to grab her and shake her while demanding she tell me if the two of them are an item. Inquiring minds want to know! “Did you two ever try to see if the Sonic Rainboom could change your apples?”

“Nah, when ah asked Granny ‘bout it, she said that even if it did the old ways of doin’ it were still better. Ah think she’s right too, our jam tastes a whole heck of a lot better than ah remember the other stuff tastin’, even if we can’t make as much of it. Then when the Mayor caught wind of the fact that there’d be Sonic Rainbooms goin’ off every week over the farm and she put her hoof down. Hasn’t kept her from comin’ over, though.”

“Applejack, would you watch my cart while Twilight and I go to lunch?” asks Azalea. “Help yourself to a couple of flowers if you feel like it.”

“Sure thing, sugar. Y’all have a good time.”

Azalea flips a sign from ‘Open’ to ‘Closed’ and waves to Applejack. By unspoken mutual agreement we head for Reuben’s, a couple sandwiches and maybe some soup to go with it sound perfect to me right about now. On the way, though, we run into Ditzzy Doo. Well, more accurately she runs into me at a not-inconsiderable velocity. “Oops, sorry Twilight!” she says as I pick myself up and dust myself off. “Letter for you.”

I take the letter from her in my magic, and after a quick thanks Ditzzy takes off again along her mail route. I examine the letter as we take our seat at a table outside the deli and place our orders with the waiter. We’ve been here often enough that menus are superfluous. The envelope carries a Stalliongrad return address, which gives away the sender before I even open it.

“Who’s the letter from?” asks Azalea, helping herself to a petal from the vase in the middle of the table.

“It’s from Star Gazer. She’s coming back from the Stalliongrad Observatory and said she’d like to stop in Ponyville and see me again.”

Azalea’s smile falls away. “Oh, right. The homophobe who you used to be married to. That’ll go well.”

I shoot her a look. I was open about everything from the other timeline with her, and even though she’s said she’s okay with what happened it’s still a point of friction between us. “Azalea, that was a long time ago. She’s told me she’s sorry about what she did, and I want to give her a chance to reconnect with me. I’m sure that she and *her husband* aren’t going to try to steal me away from you.”

She sighs. “I know that, Twilight, I really do. I’m just worried that seeing her again is going to dredge up a lot of bad stuff for you. It sounds like what she did really hurt you for a long time. Although if I do think she’s making eyes at you I reserve the right to make out with you in front of her.”

I almost choke on the water I’m drinking, but manage to get by with just a couple of coughs. “Just as long as you don’t do that when you meet Cadence and my brother tonight.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Especially not after you were so great about getting dragged along to my family reunion the other weekend. Don’t change the subject, though. Are you sure you want to meet Star Gazer? What if she doesn’t react well when you tell her what happened?”

I do pause and think about that. It’s something I’ve been thinking a lot about over the last couple weeks, to be honest, and I don’t think I’ll really know if I’m ready until it actually happens. “I think... it’s something I need to do. I have to let that go. I don’t... I don’t want to carry something that toxic anymore. I’ve seen what kind of pony I’d be if I did, and it isn’t who I want to become.”

Our meals arrive, two of them mine and one Azalea’s, and as the waiter places them on the tabletop Azalea reaches over and brushes a strand of my mane away from my face. “Twilight, you are such an impossibly wonderful pony it’s actually

annoying sometimes. If it does get to be too much, I'll be there for you, okay?"

"I know." I say gently and stare back at her, my hunger forgotten for just a second. Nothing could possibly ruin this moment.

Why do I even think that kind of thing?

A gust of air suddenly rushes at us, and a deep penetrating sound makes the table start to shake. Azalea and I both turn to look at it's source as the air crackles with white hot energy at a point in the middle of the street. My jaw drops as space twists and warps, distorting my view of the buildings beyond. With a blinding rush of power, we're forced to look away for a moment, when we turn back, there's a pony standing there.

It's me. A few more wrinkles around her eyes and a few years older, but unmistakably me. "But... what..."

"Twilight! Azalea!" shouts the other pony as she runs over to our table. She stops and catches her breath. "Thank the Princesses I found you! You have to come with me!"

"Huh? But, what, why..." I can't form any coherent thoughts. Not again. Please not again. "Why do you need both of us? Does something happen to us in the future?"

"No, no, you two turn out fine. It's our foals, girls! Something's got to be done about our foals!"

What? Foals? No, that's impossible. This cannot be happening. I look over to Azalea to see how she's taking this...

...Only to see her rolling on the ground clutching her sides with laughter.

"Hee hee hee, oh, I needed that," she says as she calms down. "Hello again, Discord."

"Discord?" I ask and turn back. He's dropped the disguise, and returned to his normal shape.

"Ooh, I thought for sure I had you two," he says. "What was wrong with my Twilight? Was I not high strung enough? Should I have worn glasses? I knew I should have worn glasses."

I relax a bit, and I actually do laugh a little. “Alright, you got me. Totally had me going there.”

“Well, at least you’ve learned how to take a joke. You though,” he points a talon at Azalea, “I’m going to have to get you double later on for wrecking my little prank before it could even get started.”

Azalea giggles. “I’ll look forward to it.”

With a snap, Discord vanishes again, leaving the restaurant exactly as he found it. I’m pretty sure I’ve figured out which Discord won that fight they had. I turn back to Azalea. “How could you tell that wasn’t really me from the future? I couldn’t even tell.”

She gets surprisingly nervous all of the sudden, and fidgets around refusing to look at me before she answers. “There’s something I didn’t tell you about the day you took out the Regalia. When I was coming back in through the window, and you were channeling the Elements, I think I saw something. Something that hasn’t happened yet, involving you. For just an instant, you looked different. The reason I could tell that Discord wasn’t really you from the future... well, he missed a pretty big detail. Two details, technically.”

“You saw my destiny?” I ask, gobsmacked. “Why would you keep that from me?”

“Because I wasn’t even sure it really meant anything, or even if I saw what I thought I did. Besides, I didn’t want you to get all worried over it only for it to turn out to be nothing.”

I gulp. “Is it... something I *should* be worried over?”

“No. Even if it comes true, it absolutely isn’t. Look, Twilight...” she bites her lip and thinks for a moment. I don’t interrupt. “Let me put it like this. Change is scary, especially a big change. Sometimes it feels even bigger than it actually is, and you can’t see how things can ever go back to being like the way they were. I know how that felt when it happened to me. But the thing you helped me realize is that I could still decide for myself how things would turn out. Some things were different, some weren’t, and a lot of things actually got

better. I thought I was just getting swept along, and I forgot that I had a say in what was happening. Part of the reason I didn't want to tell you is because you'd jump to a lot of conclusions based on questionable assumptions. If something does happen, just know that it doesn't have to change the pony who you are on the inside, and that I'll be there to help you any way I can."

I sit back, my sandwiches forgotten. If I have some grand destiny ahead of me, I want to know. "Would you tell me?"

Azalea considers this, then she grins. "Such knowledge carries a terrible price, Twilight. To learn such secrets you must make a sacrifice, to appease the powers that be. Ooooooooooh," she waves her hooves in circles. I sigh, lift my pickle from my plate, and pass it to her. She grabs it from midair and chomps down with a happy crunch, smiling as she chews and swallows it. "Your sacrifice is accepted. Very well. Your destiny is..."

She drags the pause out as long as she can, and I can't help but lean in a little.

"...to take me to get ice cream after we're done with lunch."

"Azalea! I'm serious!" I say.

"So am I, and I don't mean about the ice cream. Well, about the ice cream too, but mostly about not telling you what I saw." She bites into her sandwich, and I follow suit as we sit eating in silence. I've polished off the first sandwich I ordered, and I'm sure Azalea can tell I'm annoyed at her. She gulps down a mouthful. "Do you want to know why I'm not telling you what I think your destiny is?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice," I snap.

"Because I don't believe in destiny."

That stops me in my tracks. "You don't believe in it?"

"Nope. I think obsessing about some greater plan or purpose means you miss out on what actually matters in life. I'm making my life up a day at a time, and you know what? I like it that way. All the best things that have ever happened to me have been things I never planned or expected. Becoming a pony? Falling in love with you? Never supposed to happen. I

think that just makes the fact that it did anyway that much more special. I'm not going to tell you what your destiny is, because it's for you to decide for yourself. Except for the ice cream. That's definitely happening."

Azalea munches away while I think about that. "But... but the Elements, and the Regalia. Destiny has to be a real thing. It's why we fought against them in the first place."

"Know what I think is more important than the fact that you fought them?" she asks.

"What?"

"The fact that you won."

I put down the last half of my sandwich, and push the hay fries away. I've lost my appetite. "For me to decide, huh?" Azalea nods at me and finishes her meal. We watch each other for a few minutes, then I feel an irresistible grin slowly spread over my face. "I think I could get used to that."

I'm on the cusp of something big. Something life changing, and I know it. There's going to be good days and bad days, and I'm going to make mistakes, and things beyond my control are going to completely upend plans I was counting on following, and I might not get a happily ever after.

Life's a lot more complicated than happily ever after. So forget that.

I leave some money on the table and we leave to get some ice cream. After that? No pony knows.

But no matter what, we're all going to live eventfully ever after.

Author's Notes:

Well, it's been a long and twisty road, but we've finally reached the end of the Time Loop Trilogy! I'd like to thank-

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

...Pinkie?

Uh, yeah! Who else? What do you mean it's over? I didn't get to do my chapter yet!

You still get to, it's just not really exactly canon. Well, other than Twilight becoming an alicorn princess.

Eakin! Spoilers!

I'm pretty sure everyone and their dog figured out we were going in that direction about a chapter and a half ago, Pinks.

They *might* not have! Your story is super confusing and time twisty! Maybe they thought she got warped back in time to become her own grandmother or something instead.

Look, I left notes on all the confusing stuff in the author's notes chapter, the one after yours. Plus a bunch of ideas I didn't get to use and thoughts about all the characters and stuff.

Well you shouldn't have had to! You should of made it clear within the story itself! Posting that was pretentious! It's postentious!

It's not like it's required reading, just for people who want to know more about my process in writing this.

Do you even hear yourself? Ooh, look at me, I'm Eakin. Can I tell you about my process? I'm so great with all my words. Look at all my themes and my subtext! What's that, Mr. Reader? You liked that Princess Sparkle found peace and was happy now? WELL BUCK YOU, HA HA HA!

This is so unprofessional, Pinkie. Besides, that's why I wrote that epilogue for her at the very end. Still, the double cross was pretty well foreshadowed.

Oh well the double cross was pretty well foreshadowed.

Just repeating what I say in a mocking tone isn't witty, it's just juvenile.

It isn't witty, it's just juvenile.

Just... just... go narrate your chapter, okay? Twilight's already started her lines, so you don't have time to stand here and make fun of me. Get to work!

Fine! But don't think this is over!

Ugh, is... is she gone? She's gone? I swear, every single time I talk to her I end up with a migraine. Anyway, where was I? Right. I want to thank... to thank... Ah, screw it, I'll stick it in chapter eight. Right now I need a freaking drink.

Afterparty (Featuring Special Guest Narrator Pinkie Pie)

AFTERPARTY (Featuring Special Guest Narrator Pinkie Pie)

Holy crap I grew wings.

It's been maybe four months now since we stopped the Regalia, and I knew that *something* was up. I was having the oddest aches and cravings. I mentioned it to my mother who responded by buying Azalea and me a crib. Real subtle, Mom. But then last night I had the weirdest, most vivid of dreams. I saw the Elements, the *real* Elements, and they told me... something. Something about what was going to happen even if I can't remember all the details now. Then they asked me if I would be a part of it and I said yes and I woke up and...

Holy crap I grew wings!

There was a big ceremony that just went by in a huge blur and boom, I'm Princess of Equestria. One of the diarchs. Triarchs? Does Cadance count? Should it be quadrarchs? I only wish proper terminology were my biggest problem. I reach for the Royal Brown Paper Bag I've been keeping next to me the whole afternoon and breath in and out through it, fighting down my panic attack.

Twilight?

"Pinkie? Is that you?" I ask the empty study I'm hiding out in. I could have sworn I just heard her say something.

It sure is!

"Where are you? I can't see you." Great. Now I'm hallucinating.

Of course you can't, silly! I'm narrating, not talking to you.

“What do you mean, you’re narrating?” I ask. Not that this is even the most confusing thing to happen to me today.

I just figured that since you were going through all this Princess stuff right now, I would narrate the rest of the story for you.

“What story?” I ask the empty air around me.

The Time Loop Trilogy story, of course.

“It’s not a story, Pinkie, it’s a bunch of stuff that happened to me.”

Right! In a story!

“Wait. Wouldn’t that imply that all those awful things that happened were for somepony’s amusement? What sort of sick, twisted mind would-”

Ooooookay, so while Twilight’s doing her existential crisis thing let’s go somewhere else. Specifically the great hall that Princess Celestia told me I can use for the rest of the evening. I’ve been super busy decorating it, preparing for my greatest triumph. My resistance-y piece. The only appropriate way to celebrate my best friend turning into an alicorn and a Princess on the same day.

The greatest party *of all time*.

I take a quick five minute breather from blowing up balloons and look out the window down to the streets below. The parade that’s been going on all afternoon is still in full swing. Parades are super fun, they’re like parties that move. Not quite as much like a party that moves as my Partymobile is (some new bestest friends of mine who said they were from a place called “Hasbro” gave me the plans for free as long as I promised to drive it around Ponyville once in awhile! Wasn’t that nice of them?) but still pretty nifty. Vendors on the street corners are selling commemorative plush baseball bats, and a swarm of laughing foals run around learning how much fun it is to hit things with them. A lesson that surely could never backfire in any conceivable way.

I gave them the idea, since Chief Royal Advisor Home Run will be around the palace all the time now. Twilight didn’t

want to appoint him at first until I told her for the fifty-seventh time that she totally had to because, uh, *of course* she totally had to. She finally gave in and promoted him on the spot, with the promise that if he ever told her to do something she would do it. Or start seeing a therapist.

There's a knock on the door and my super-big smile gets a little less super-big 'cause I'm confused. The party doesn't start for another hour so why would guests be here already? I open the door and there's a pegasus in some overalls with a wrench cutie mark. "Hey there," he says. "I got a call that you needed somepony to service a ceiling fan?"

I think for a moment, but then shake my head. "Nope. This party's already going to have tons of fan service! But come back later for some cake!" With that I close the door and get back to work. This is gonna be epic.

"...and so then Azalea said, 'I think we both knew it would come down to this,' and she grabbed her katana as she wiped the wet hairs from her mane out of her face. And Luna picked up her broadsword and she said, 'yes, it's really the only way it ever could have ended.' They glared at one another and at some unspoken signal they started charging over the top of the zeppelin through the blowing wind and rain, but just as they were about to clash suddenly-"

"Um, miss?" interrupts the pony I'm telling the greatest story ever to. "What does any of this have to do with my question?"

I tilt my head. "What question?"

"I asked you where the bathroom was. Ten minutes ago."

"Oh, it's over that way. So anyway, they were right about to start the sword fight to win Twilight's love when..." but the pony I was talking to has already run off in the direction I pointed.

I sigh. The party is hopping, especially the special section for bunny rabbits, but we're almost an hour in and there's still no sign of the guest of honor. I walk over to Rarity where she's

been hanging out in front of the coat check for a while now.

“Hi Rarity.”

“Hello, Pinkie. Wonderful party, you’ve outdone yourself again.”

“Thanks! Hey, have you seen Twilight? It is her party, after all, but I haven’t seen her.”

“Oh, uh, yes actually,” she says. She lowers her voice and leans in. “She’s with Azalea. The poor thing was nervous, and Azalea said she would show her something she could do with her new wings to blow off steam.”

“But Rainbow Dash already said she would give her flying lessons later.”

Rarity blushes, and there’s a loud thump and an immodest moan from the door down the hallway behind her. “I believe she had something different in mind. That’s them in the closet. I’m, ah, standing guard as it were.”

“They’re in the closet? But they’ve been dating publically for months now! Who do they think they’re going to fool?”

“...the *literal* closet, Pinkie.”

“Ooooooooooooh! You mean they’re having sex!”

“*Would you keep your voice down please?*” hisses Rarity.

“Speaking of Twilight and sex...” I say. Rarity looks like she wants to fall over and die as I do. “...has she ever told you about the thing she does with weather vanes? I mean it sounds crazy! Like even-crazy-for-me crazy! And that’s pretty crazy.”

“Perhaps we could discuss this when we have a bit more privacy?”

“Huh?” I look back over to Rarity from the especially shiny piece of confetti that distracted me from whatever she just said. “Anyway, so I guess the first pony sort of leans back near the ‘S’ and twists a hind leg up over their chest, while the other one grabs the ‘W’ and-”

“MORE CHANGELING VENOM!” shouts the Royal Canterlot Voice from across the room. A host’s work is never

done.

“I’ll have to tell you later. It’s easier to describe with a flow chart anyway,” I say. Rarity breathes a sigh of relief as I walk away, swinging past the bar to grab a fresh tray of shots before continuing on to the source of the voice.

Princess Celestia and Morning Glow are sitting at a table nearby. Morning Glow has half a bottle of soda pop and an embarrassed grimace. Celestia is focused on constructing a small pyramid out of empty shot glasses. She’s up to her fourth layer of them when she sees me approaching. “Aha! Additional building materials! Leave the tray.”

“Mom, stop. You’re drunk,” says Morning Glow.

Celestia wrinkles her nose and eyes him from her seat. “I am merely enjoying myself on this momentous occasion. I used to drink your father under the table, you know. You should lighten up.” She bursts into a melodious titter. “Lighten up! Because the sun! Oh, I should write that down.” She looks over to me and instantly grows serious, draping a foreleg over my shoulder. “Pinkie Pie. These shots are amazing. Their creation is the greatest service that you, and possibly any pony in history, have ever performed for Equestria.”

“Well, my friends and I have also saved the world like five times now. Was it five? I lose track sometimes,” I remind her.

She waves a dismissive hoof. “These are better. I wish to reward you.”

“Wow! My very own stained glass window?”

She scoffs. “Oh please. Those are for chumps. I just get a discount for ordering them in bulk.” She wobbles a little in her seat.

“Um, is everything over here going okay?” says Fluttershy, slipping up behind me.

“My mom is drunk,” says Morning Glow, burying his face in his hooves.

“As I was saying. Pinkie Pie, please choose a boon that I can grant you. The entirety of my kingdom’s resources and my

magic are at your disposal. Simply name it, and it will be done.

“Oh no,” whimpers Fluttershy.

“Hmm...” I say. This is a big decision, so I think about it for a long time. Like nearly a minute. Then I lean over and whisper my choice into her ear.

Celestia’s eyes go wide. “Really? Are you absolutely certain?” she asks. I nod my head a whole bunch. Celestia stands bolt upright with her forehooves on the table, knocking her chair to the floor as she does. **“Hear me, Canterlot!”** she begins. She tries to raise a hoof for attention but quickly lowers it when she starts to topple over without the support. Magic from all throughout Equestria rushes in and begins to gather at the tip of her horn. This spell is going to be a doozy. **“By the power granted to me by my Princess...Princessy...**

Princessiness... I have a decree to make! From henceforth and also retroactively, across all timelines, worlds, and universes, the word ‘recursive’ shall mean ‘of, relating to, or constituting a procedure that can repeat itself indefinitely!’” Her magic bursts outwards in an ever-expanding ring, and reality is rewritten in its wake. Then Princess Celestia falls forward and faceplants onto the table. She doesn’t rise, and a moment later a gentle snore emanates from under the mane that’s covering her face and most of the table’s surface.

“Pinkie? I don’t know quite how to tell you this, but that’s what ‘recursive’ already meant,” says Fluttershy.

“Silly Fluttershy!” I pat her gently on the head, to her annoyance. “Of course that’s what it already meant *now!*”

Fluttershy stares off into space puzzling that over, but she’s brought back to reality when something smacks into the side of her face. It’s a multi-colored ball that sticks there, the colors seeping into her coat. She blinks several times and reaches up to touch it, which only makes it adhere to her hoof and smears it around further.

“Watch it, Star Swirl! You hit Fluttershy!”

I face the direction the projectile came from, and sure enough Rainbow Dash and Star Swirl are standing a ways away looking guilty. “Sorry, Fluttershy, we were aiming for Celestia,” says Star Swirl.

“Wow! You totally rainbowed all over her face! What’s it feel like, Fluttershy?” I ask.

“It’s sticky. And the parts that got into my mouth taste a little weird,” says Fluttershy.

Star Swirl and Rainbow Dash grin at one another, and she does a quick little loop-the-loop that leaves a streak of rainbow behind her. Star Swirl’s horn glows as he pulls the contrail out of the sky and mashes it into another ball. With a nudge the ball goes flying and splats all over me.

I look down at it, and my eyes go wide. “Omigosh! Now Rainbow Shy *and* Rainbow Pie are Pinkie Pie Party Canonical! How are you gonna choose, Dashie?”

“Why would I choose?” asks Rainbow Dash. “Me and Star Swirl are gonna rainbow every pony at this party before we’re through! They’re gonna need a team of pegasi with mops to get it off the walls and ceiling!”

“Oh, gracious. Do you two have the stamina for that?” asks Fluttershy

“I do. We’ll see if the old codger here can keep up with me,” says Rainbow Dash.

“I may not be as spry as I used to be, but I make up for it with experience,” says Star Swirl. “We should make sure to rainbow Twilight first. It’s her big day, and I want to rainbow her good and hard. Maybe a couple times.”

“I don’t know if Azalea would be happy about that, even if Twilight’s open to the idea,” I say.

“Eh. If she complains we’ll just rainbow her too,” says Rainbow Dash.

“If we rainbow the wrong pony, though, there’s a chance we might catch something. You know, like a kick to the face,” points out Star Swirl.

“Do you think we need to use protection against that kind of thing?” Rainbow wonders aloud.

“In my experience, as long as you stick to ponies who you trust and respect, that isn’t an issue,” says Fluttershy. “Just don’t get pregnant.” Her face goes red and she slaps a hoof over her mouth when she realizes what she just said, and tries to shrink away. “Um... I don’t know if we’re still talking about the same thing we were when this started.” She runs off before any of us can reply. Rainbow Dash and Star Swirl shrug to one another and head off to find a new target.

I go ahead and bounce away to the next guests. Before I can reach them, an odd noise fills my ears. Kind of an EEEEEEE-OOOOO-EEEEEEE-OOOOO sort of noise. I stop to listen to it and as I do a blue box begins to fade into existence in front of me, the words ‘POLICE BOX’ visible above the doors. The door opens and a brown earth pony sticks his head out.

“Well, certainly took long enough, didn’t it?” he asks. He looks over to me. “Hello, I’m the Doctor.”

“I’m the Pinkie Pie! Well, except for the thing with the mirror pond when I was one of the Pinkie Pies, but we got rid of them in a completely not at all morally questionable way and now I’m the only one again.”

“Ah! One of the bearers. I’m in the right place then. Listen, I don’t want to alarm you...” he glances around and motions for me to lean in closer, which I do. “...but the city is about to be invaded by changelings, and your friend Twilight just cast a spell that locks her into a time loop.”

I gasp. “Oh no! Not again!”

The Doctor is puzzled by my reaction, although most ponies usually are. “What do you mean ‘again’?”

“She fixed that already. It was like a year ago. Don’t you read the paper?”

“Ruins the surprises, I find, but you say she already fixed it? By herself?”

“Yep! Well, we got to help. It was great!”

“I see. I shouldn’t have set the oscillator to ‘puree’ after all. Hmm...” He pulls out a small notebook and begins to flip through it. His eyes light up as he reads a particular page. “Ah, here we are. So the time loop is over but the residual effects will cause the aether to decouple itself from the quantum framework of the universe. I have a setting for that though so I’ll just-”

“She fixed that too.”

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me!” shouts the Doctor as he stomps a hoof in frustration. He flips through several more pages in the notebook and looks up at me hopefully. “Okay, so there’s this evil set of jewelry that’s manipulating fate and destiny...” I try to put on the most reassuring smile I can, but he sees right through it. “...she solved that as well, didn’t she.”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“So... absolutely nothing wrong? No crisis threatening all of space and time? No major disaster about to destroy the world?”

“Sorry.”

“No, no, don’t apologize. That’s... good. What kind of pony would hope that something like that was happening so they could rush in at the last second and save everypony?” He asks. Then he gives a sad little sigh.

“Aww... It’s okay, I’m sure you would have done a really good job fixing it too,” I say and pat him on the back. “Why don’t you stay for the party? We have muffins.”

There’s the sound of movement from deep inside the box and a second, soaking wet gray head pops out. A few strands of blonde mane poke out from under her shower cap. “I heard muffins,” she says.

“Well, I suppose the three of us could stay for a while,” says the Doctor.

“The three of you?”

“If that’s alright. We picked up a third in another timeline, and we were on our way to return her home when we swung by.” He lowers his voice so only I can hear. “Actually, a distraction for her would be perfect. She’s been making eyes at Ditzzy here in a way I’m not entirely comfortable with.”

“Sure!” I say. “The more the merrier!”

“I’ll be ready in a jiffy!” says Ditzzy as she disappears back into the box. A new pony steps out of it. A fuschia-coated pegasus.

“Hey, I know you! You’re Cloud Kicker,” I say.

“Oh, hi Pinkie. I guess you like parties in this timeline too, huh?”

From across the room, Cloudy and Kicky stare at us. “Please tell me you’re thinking what I am,” says Kicky.

“I saw a bowl of whipped cream over on the dessert table. I’ll meet you upstairs with it in ten minutes,” says Cloudy.

Kicky walks over, and doesn’t even break her stride as she wraps a wing over Cloud Kicker and pulls her along towards some nearby stairs. “Hello, Cloud Kicker. Welcome to the greatest day of your life.”

That’s nice. I bet they’ll have fun together. I’m about to head on to see somepony else, but then in an instant all the light in the room is extinguished. Ponies gasp and mutter in confusion. A single spotlight comes on, pointed down at the stage in front of the band which is cloaked in dark smoke. It writhes and coalesces into the shape of a pony, a dark pony with wings and a horn, although no larger than most.

“You thought to banish me? You thought I would never return? Well I have, and now the night... *shall last-*”

“Oh hey! It’s Nightmare Moon again! Hiya, Mooney!” I shout. A good host should always greet their guests, that’s just Parties 101.

“Silence!” she commands. “Your precious Elements couldn’t contain me for long, even if they did strip away some of my power. Now I am renewed, and no matter what clever

machinations Celestia has put in place to stop me, I refuse to be denied!”

Silence falls over the room. From the direction of Celestia’s table comes another snore.

“No words? Then I won’t delay any longer. Prepare yourself, my little ponies, for from now on the night... *shall last-*”

“Mother!” shouts a voice from the floor. “You’re embarrassing me! Be cool!”

“Shooting Star?” asks Nightmare Moon, confused. Some of the lights come back up to reveal Shooting Star in the middle of the dance floor, dressed in a racy evening gown for the occasion. “I shall be cool! In fact I shall redefine the word ‘cool’ as I plunge Equestria into the icy grasp of-”

“You’re being so lame in front of all my friends! Stop it!”

“Watch your tone, young mare. I am your mother and you will address me respectfully.” She squints down at her. “What are you wearing? And in public no less?”

“It’s the future, mother! This is what all of my friends wear. Get with the times.”

“If all your friends leapt off a balcony, would you?” Nightmare Moon demands. “Besides, your friends are not the daughter of a Princess. You must hold yourself to a higher standard.”

“That’s so unfair! You never let me do anything I want to. I wish you weren’t my evil mother!”

Nightmare Moon gasps. “Starry, how can you say that? You are... wait, are you wearing *makeup* as well?”

“So what if I am?”

“You look like a common whore!”

“*Mother!*”

Nightmare Moon addresses the crowd. “Eternal night is momentarily postponed while I talk some sense into my daughter and she puts on something decent.” She steps down

from the stage and the crowd parts around her as she walks towards Shooting Star.

“You are literally ruining my life right now.”

Nightmare Moon grabs an ear between her teeth and Shooting Star shrieks as she’s led over to the corner where the two continue to bicker back and forth. On the opposite side of the room, as far from the display as it’s possible to be while still being at the party itself, Star Swirl and Luna watch. I trot over to them. “Do you think one of us should talk to them?” asks Star Swirl.

“Do you want to?”

Star Swirl looks over to his wife. “Honestly, I think they deserve each other.” Luna gives a little snort of laughter.

“Wow, it’s so great that you three can all be together again here in the present,” I say. Luna nuzzles the top of Star Swirl’s head and he gives a content smile. “You know, even though you’re totally dooming us all.”

The both stare at me. “Pray tell, how have we done so?” asks Luna.

“Well, You’re both from this timeline, but Shooting Star’s from a different one she snuck out of when Star Swirl and Twilight came to visit it, right?”

“I am uncertain as to why that matters. She lived a full life back in the past, but she had long since passed on when Shooting Star returned to us.”

“But see, she didn’t return,” I remind them. “So there’s a timeline she’s supposed to be in, but isn’t.”

“Well, I suppose that may alter their history in several ways, but it is an acceptable loss. Twilight’s efforts saved our timeline, others are of no consequence.”

“But Star Swirl can move between them, right?” I can’t believe they’re missing this, I thought it was so obvious. “I guess my point is, what would *you* do if someone ponynapped her away from you?”

“Anything it took to get her back,” says Star Swirl instantly. He and Luna look at one another and then back to Shooting Star. Then they turn and race out of the room.

On second thought they don’t actually have to worry. After all, if that sort of thing happened then this wouldn’t be a trilogy any more.

I look out over the party I put together. Morning Glow and several guards are trying to carry the unconscious Celestia out of the room and to bed, while a team of magi and linguists argue over what exactly her spell did. Others are cowering before Star Swirl and Luna, who are shouting orders to anypony who will listen to start making preparations for what they’re convinced will be an invasion by an enraged archmage and an alicorn. Meanwhile, Nightmare Moon and Shooting Star’s argument is still going strong and has attracted a crowd of gawkers. Another crowd is gathered around Ditzzy and the Doctor getting down on the dance floor. A globule of leftover rainbow that missed its target earlier peels off the ceiling and plops right into the punch bowl.

Twilight Sparkle, newest Princess of Equestria, chooses that moment to make her entrance from the door Rarity was watching. In all the craziness, nopony even notices her.

Greatest party ever? Greatest party ever.

Five Years Later: An Unnecessary Epilogue

FIVE YEARS LATER: AN UNNECESSARY EPILOGUE

Buck bureaucracy, I think to myself as I stare at the stack of paperwork on my desk. Despite hammering away at it for nearly two hours now, it seems no smaller than it was when I started. Hard to believe I once enjoyed doing this kind of thing in my spare time. Spare time, I remember having that a long time ago. *Seriously, buck it right in its stupid hypothetical face.*

Could this day get any more aggravating? There's a loud crash from the other room, and I beat my face against the surface of the desk just hard enough to feel. Yes. Yes it can.

I slide off of my chair slowly, debating whether or not to take advantage of my wings to get where I'm going more quickly. They're really useful things, now that I'm acclimated to them. Ultimately I decided to just hoof it, though. I run my foreleg over the heavy bulge in my abdomen that's been slowing me down these days, and can't help but smile. Azalea warned me what a pain it was, and she'd know since she did it last time, but I insisted that it was my turn. Haven't regretted it for a minute since.

I take a deep, calming breath then head for the source of the noise in the other room. *Remember Twilight, you love your child. You love your child. You love your child. That doesn't mean you have to like him all the time*, I tell myself, repeating the mantra that's saved my son from countless moon-banishments over the last two years. Pushing open the door to the library's second bedroom, I take in the disaster in front of me. A bookcase, the most durable one we could find for exactly this reason, is laying on the floor where it's toppled over with the arm of an unfortunate teddy bear sticking out from under it. A field of green magic belonging to the culprit in the crib on the other side of the room tugs futilely at it.

“Leafy,” I say to the little green colt, swapping the Princess Crown for the Mommy Hat in my mind, “what have I told you about being careful with your magic?”

“Bear!” he replies as he reaches out through the bars of the crib, straining towards the beloved stuffed animal. I suppose nap time is over.

Despite the cleanup I’m looking at in my immediate future, I smile at him. I lift him from the crib and perch him in the familiar spot on my back, flaring my wings to keep him steady. “Yes, yes, Bear,” I say and add my magic to his own to lift the shelving off the floor and free the pinned doll underneath. He screws up his face and jerks the bear bit by bit across the floor until he can reach down and snatch it in his hooves, squeezing it against his chest. “You did it, Leafy! Great job,” I say to him doing nothing to hide my pride as I nuzzle his cheek. I’m rewarded with a hug of my own, even harder than the one he gave to Bear, and it nearly brings tears of joy to my eyes. Although the way he’s gripping my face in his forelegs is more than a little awkward.

Now that Leafy is fully and properly awake, the window of opportunity to handle all my Princess paperwork has been closed. I’m more than okay with that. Most of it is just annoying busywork, with a single big exception: the letters. I hadn’t ever realized how much fan mail a Princess gets, other than the letters I sent as Celestia’s student of course, but I make the time to read every single one even if I can’t always reply. They remind me that what I do has the power to really change ponies’ lives, which is easy to forget when you’re just staring at columns of figures all day. Call me selfish, but the little life perched on my back and the one growing inside of me will always get preferential treatment.

It doesn’t take as long as I feared to clean up the mess Leafy made, the only real damage is a broken picture frame containing a shot of me, Azalea, and Spike laughing at a picnic together. Even though Spike moved out when Leafy was born this still feels like his room to me. Sure, we needed the space, although I would never have made him leave if he hadn’t suggested it himself, but even with him living just eight blocks

away it changed the dynamic of our relationship a lot. It's good for both of us, I think, and I know he appreciates having his own 'lair,' even if it's really just a studio apartment. Needs new curtains, though, no matter how he bristles whenever I tell him so. My horn glows and the shards of glass lift from the ground and fuse back together into a single pane within the frame. Leafy watches from my back, entranced by the workings of my magic. "Again!" he shouts when I'm finished.

"Sorry, hon, maybe later," I tell him. The last thing I need is for him to get the idea that he can break things just to watch me fix them, so I trot out of the room humming a familiar song to him. If two-year-olds weren't so easily distracted I doubt any parent would stay sane long enough to see their third birthday, and the song does exactly what I expect it to. My ear twitches. I still have the whole super-unicorn-senses thing going although I can filter it out most of the time. Right now, my improved hearing recognizes the rhythm of the hooves that just turned the corner a block or so away. "Leafy! Mommy Azalea's coming home."

"Yay! Mommy 'Zalea, mommy 'Zalea!" he shouts, rolling off of my back with a splat as he hits the floor and bouncing around with unbridled joy. It's about five minutes later when Az pushes open our front door and walks into the library.

Leafy rushes over to her first, as per usual. He's rewarded with a long hug from my exhausted wife. Her mane and tail are both frazzled from an entire day working in her flower shop. She probably hasn't realized that she has a smudge of dirt on her cheek either.

She is, and always will be, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Blame all the extra hormones affecting my brain if you want to, but if Leafy weren't right there watching us I might snatch her up and ravage her here and now. "Welcome home," is what I say to her instead.

I'm thoroughly rewarded with a deep, lingering kiss and I savor every second of it. I miss her when she's out running her flower shop, although I suppose technically it's my fault she even has it to run. Still, we had the money, it was nearly her

birthday, and *Crossbows and Bowling Balls* had just gone out of business downtown. Was I supposed to *not* lease it for her?

Didn't get the reaction I expected from that. She was, frankly, really ticked off that I'd spent that much of our money without discussing it with her first. I get that, I really do, but it was her dream to own her own store, and she's done such a great job managing it. I have never even for an instant regretted marrying her.

It was about a year after my coronation that I popped the question. Planned the whole thing out over the course of a month. I thought all my new responsibilities would've scared her away, but nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, she's the bastion of sanity who never fails to bring me back down to the ground, literally and/or figuratively, whenever I start to get overwhelmed. I'm just about the luckiest pony in the world, I think. Even if I was shaking so badly that I botched the proposal by dropping the ring over the side of the boat I proposed on. And dove in, unthinking, after it. Never did find it.

Not that it mattered in the end. Once I swam to shore Azalea let me know that her answer was yes anyway, and she had all kind of ways to warm me up again. When even Cloudy and Kicky settled into long-term relationships I knew it was time for me to do the same. Nice of them to be two of Azalea's bridesmaids, too, even if they did spend most of the reception hitting on my brother. Much to his discomfort and Cadence's amusement. That's one of the few details about the wedding I actually remember. Most of it's just a nervous blur in my head.

I, of course, didn't have to think for even a second before I chose the five ponies I wanted by my side for the ceremony. Although there was a bit of a spat when we realized that my wedding would originally fall on the same weekend as Applejack and Rainbow Dash's before I rescheduled it. Celestia officiated, and it was everything I always dreamed it would be.

"Thanks, Twilight," says Azalea as she breaks the kiss and leans against me for the support I'll never stop giving her. "I needed that. Long day."

“Bear!” shouts Leafy again, and shoves the stuffed animal towards her.

“How could I forget?” She wraps Bear up in one of her wings and kisses him too with a subtle roll of her eyes. I only smirk. That’s pretty much my entire life in a nutshell these days, no reason she should get to be exempt from the embarrassing Mom duties.

“I’m making pasta and wheat balls for dinner, I’ve been craving them all day,” I tell her.

“I remember what that’s like,” she replies from where she’s draped a wing over Leafy. “For me it was usually pickles.”

“You always crave pickles,” I remind her. Before she can answer that I wince and kneel down. The baby just kicked. We decided to let the race and sex be a surprise this time, but secretly I’m thinking that Azalea’s earth pony heritage won out if that kick was anything to go by. She joins me on the floor and rubs my belly reverently. “Hee hee! Stop it, that tickles!”

“Sorry, can’t help myself,” she says as she spreads out her wing so the very tips of her primaries overlap with mine. The same quiet way she’s said ‘I love you’ since I grew them. “Oh, I picked up the train tickets for next week on my way home. We’ll have an extra day in Canterlot before we head on to Saddle Arabia.”

I grin. I’ve been looking forward to this vacation for three months, even if it’s technically a diplomatic visit. “That’s fine. We’ll drop Leafy off at my parents’ and then swing by the palace. It would be nice to see Rarity again.” My time with her has been a lot more scarce since she and Morning Glow got engaged. The decision to move her boutique to the big city surprised nopony, and even though she played off her choice to live in the palace as an act of selfishness on her part having an extra pair of hooves there makes a lot of sense as Star Swirl gets older. He’s slowing down just enough to be noticeable, although he’s too stubborn to die for at least a few more decades.

That sort of responsibility would have fallen to Shooting Star, except about a year and a half after she got here a *very* annoyed Luna from her original timeline showed up to take her back. She still visits, and she's grown into quite the magic user herself. Not surprising, given who her parents are. I hadn't realized that her timeline moves faster than ours, or at least she pops back and forth between them at something other than a one-to-one interval. Last time I saw her she was older than me.

I finish making dinner for the three of us and we sit down to eat. It's looking like a late night of wrapping up the forms I didn't finish earlier, but the family dinner is inviolable. Or almost inviolable, as the tail end of it is interrupted by somepony knocking at the door. I glance out the window. It's already after nightfall, and the library is closed. Who would that be at this hour? Azalea begins clearing the dirty dishes as I head for the door to investigate.

When I open the door, the pony standing there is too excited to wait for an invitation and immediately walks in past me, a familiar ancient text carried in her magic.

"Princess Luna?" I ask. We've been swapping letters about the odd book she found in one of her bedroom drawers, where it had apparently been forgotten since before her banishment.

"Twilight!" she cries out in excitement, "we have been fools this entire time! 'Argent Map' is an anagram for the word 'pentagram!'"

I smack my forehead with a hoof. Of course! It's so obvious!

"Wouldn't that mean-"

"Precisely!"

"And so the translation would be-"

"Exactly!"

"Really, though? With an enchanted spatula?"

"It is the only rational explanation," concludes Luna.

"Azalea, I have to-"

"*No adventures!*" she calls back from the kitchen before I can even get the words out. "No quests, no journeys, no epic undertakings. You promised me after the thing with the pearl inside of the giant fish."

"But *Azaleaaaaa!*" I try deploying the Royal Canterlot Whine, but alas she long ago built up an immunity. I hope and pray every single day that Leafy never inherits that particular ability. "But... but... enchanted spatula! We have to do something or the cultists will cross-pollinate with the mutant porcupines."

She appears in the doorway to the kitchen, a scowl across her face. "Twilight, I don't know if you've noticed at any point in the last seven months, but you are quite pregnant. You aren't going into any ancient ruins, you're going on a vacation."

"It's inside a volcano, actually," says Luna. She at least has the good graces to look sheepish.

"No volcanoes! What's more important to you, recovering an ancient artifact or spending time with me?"

I open my mouth to reply that it's clearly the artifact, but at the last second I catch on to the fact that this is one of *those* questions. "Sorry, Luna," I mutter. "I can't go."

She looks back and forth between the two of us. For a second I think she's going to try playing the Princess card, which I know from experience never works. Instead she just nods. "Fear not, Tia and I will handle it ourselves. You enjoy your time off."

"Yeah, I guess," I say, dejected as Luna leaves as quickly as she arrived. I mope around the library for a bit longer before it's time to put Leafy in bed for the night. Despite the nap earlier, he falls asleep quickly after a bedtime story and a lullabye leaving Azalea and me the only ponies awake. While I'm intent on stewing for the rest of the evening with a book, Azalea has other ideas and sits down next to me so she can rub my back.

"Hey, are you mad at me?"

"No," I say, which is a blatant lie. "Maybe a little."

“I know you’re a little disappointed you couldn’t go after the, uh, magic whisk?”

“Spatula,” I correct her.

“Right, the spatula, but it’s not just you and me these days. You can’t just run off on the spur of the moment without thinking about what’s at stake,” she says. I don’t reply right away, but I do shift on the couch so I’m laying on my side. Azalea rests her head with an ear against my bulge and closes her eyes. I’m not mad at her anymore.

“It’s fine. We’re gonna have a great time in Saddle Arabia,” I say and I smile at her, closing my eyes too. “You’re the best adventure I could ever wish for.”

Author’s Notes:

The [Legend of the Enchanted Spatula](#), for those who are curious.

Don’t get your hopes up.

Bonus Content and Author's Notes

“I Have No Idea What’s Going On *And I Love It!*”

A Quick Guide to the Plot/Characters/Themes/Deleted Scenes of the Time Loop Trilogy

First of all, thank you all for your favorites, upvotes, comments, and even just your views. It’s been a hell of a ride, and I wouldn’t have made it all the way through without your support and criticism.

So now that we’ve wrapped this all up I think it would be a good idea to take a step back and spell out what, exactly, happened over the course of this trilogy of stories. Of course, you’re welcome to your own headcanons. I’m probably gonna kick myself later when someone suggests something in the comments that’s better than what I actually did, and I won’t be able to claim it as my own. But this is the ‘official’ deal.

So. Harmony; how does it work? There are a lot of closely-related terms that are used by our characters, sometimes incorrectly or interchangeably before they know better. We’ll break it down into two things: the Elements and the Regalia.

First the Elements. These are the bigger and simpler of the two, the six virtues we’re all familiar with. Created the world of Equestria, and several others before it in the search for perfect Harmony. All living things possess it and generate it to a greater or lesser extent. But it turns out harmony is a lot like pornography; you know it when you see it but it’s tough to pin down in words. Plus that whole ‘free will’ thing keeps messing it up, but now I’m getting ahead of myself. Harmony doesn’t interfere *ex nihilo* in pony lives, but you can call on it for an assist, which brings us to....

The Regalia. Not actually all that powerful. I know that seems odd considering what they accomplish over the course of the show and the story, but they aren’t. They’re intelligent but not

alive, and therefore lack that spark of harmony that living things have. They can't create on their own, though they can push and prod at inanimate things and maybe slip a few gentle suggestions into your head. It's not really story relevant, but in my mind their inability to create stems from the fact that they themselves were never created. They exist as an ontological paradox. Their job actually kind of sucks, when you think about it. They get dropped into a world full of imperfect and damaged parts and told to make it into a perfect harmony. They haven't ever pulled it off on any other world, and by the end of chapter five it's clear this one wouldn't be any different. They're sort of like temporal surgeons, excising bad outcomes and calling in their bosses to nuke them from orbit, hoping that whatever's left afterwards will survive. They also don't really 'get' living things. They see darkness and chaos and think 'that's bad and we should purge it' rather than 'yeah, that's life.' Hence their reforming Discord and weakening Luna. Being a physical embodiment of an abstract concept will do that to you.

So if they aren't that powerful how do they make such huge changes to the world? Well, by drawing Harmony from their bearers. Blowing up a window or making lightning strike a particular point they can do on their own, but to rewrite something like Nightmare Moon, Discord, a changeling swarm, or Twilight they need a pony/ponies to activate them. They're quite good at making little changes to bring about exactly that exactly when they want it.

So enter everypony's favorite adorkable librarian and multi-time savior of all of existence. I absolutely love writing Twi (though I have a funny way of showing it, considering what I put her through over the trilogy). I envisioned her living thoroughly under the Regalia's influence. Destiny and Fate are pretty important concepts in the show itself, and I didn't want to depart too much from that (although obviously I did put in a counterpoint at the end of the last chapter). She was indirectly responsible for the existence of the Regalia via the time loop spell and her efforts to fix the subsequent damage. Like Star Swirl, I think she would have figured out the nature of the Elements on her own if she'd had as long to study them.

Remember they're limited in their influence most of the time and could only stymie him through increasingly suspicious accidents, and he eventually caught on. So the Regalia didn't want to keep her around, and they didn't want to kill her, so they figured that now that her work with the time loops and the Regalia was complete they would retire her. Everything that happens up through chapter four of *Fate* is completely in line with the Regalia's plan, the culmination of which is getting her to sit still and provoke Celestia into blasting her and her friends so the Regalia can do a more thorough rewrite of their futures.

One more time: There's a reason they aren't called the Elements of Niceness

So what happens in chapter five? Well, for whatever reason the Regalia couldn't finish what they started. Even though they put her in what would have been a very nice lifetime and rejigger her memories (I rewatched *Magical Mystery Cure* about five times over the course of writing this, although I've never liked that being knocked out of alignment with their destinies made the rest of the Mane Six so miserable, so I did some rejiggering of my own) the power of her friendships ultimately prevail. Having achieved a transcendent understanding of the nature of the Elements she politely invites the Regalia to go buck itself. The music metaphor is one that I'm really happy with, and yes, I was kicking this around in my head all the way back when I wrote about Luna and Celestia in *Stitch*. I sprinkled so much continuity porn through this series, and I hope if anyone does go back and rereads the series from the start they find that they can spot things that they missed the first time through, or hidden double meanings in some of the dialogue. After all, what kind of time loop story would it be if you didn't benefit from starting from the beginning again?

Okay, that's story. Let's talk characters.

Twilight: I outlined how much I love her above, but I have to say it again. Smart, snarky, adorable, she's the whole package and a blast to write. An author can't ask for much more than a

protagonist who feels equally natural when she's delivering an epic rant to the local Powers That Be as she does collapsing in a neurotic little breakdown. She's like a pony Harry Dresden who leans a bit more heavily towards book smarts. Of course the FiM writers deserve the real credit for giving her to us in the first place. Here's hoping for more of the same in Season Four, princesshood notwithstanding.

Azalea: Alright, let me be upfront here. Writing romance is hard, and OC romance doubly so because you don't have that collection of character moments that really come to life in the show. I like Azalea. Right from the start my intention was for her to be the normal girl, the mare next door, and a fresh perspective that I could use to point out how insane Twilight's life really is. That said, I went too far with making her not special, and ended up with 'bland,' at least at first. She's been the catalyst for some great moments, and I enjoy breaking Twi's heart with those fights and confrontations. Plus I got to turn 'weather vanes' into a running gag. I'm happy with the scene on the pond too. Between *Stitch* and *Fate* I took a hard look at her. She was over the self-esteem thing, more or less, and I needed somewhere to go with her arc even if she wouldn't be a huge part of *Fate*, I didn't want to admit defeat and just disappear her. So I decided to turn lemons into lemonade. I had this whole 'transformed changeling' thing from Hard Reset that didn't really have any payoff or development during *Stitch*, so I decided if she was going to be a bland and uninteresting pony who fell in love with Twilight much too quickly, I was going to give her a good reason to be. And oh, look at that, Twilight's grown close to a mare who can understand and empathize with what it feels like to go through a life-altering physical transformation because of firsthoof experience. Bonus. Could have been better, but I learned a lot through her.

Star Swirl: So much fun. Such a jackass, but not irredeemably so. The pony best suited to giving Twi a run for her money when she goes full-on Twilight Snarkle. Honestly, had I not made Twilight a lesbian those two would have hooked up and Twilight would have ended up her own great^50th grandmother. Somehow. Still, I like him with Luna. Both are

legends, and strong, abrasive personalities that lends their relationships a certain bipolar quality. I can't hate the guy too much though, Shooting Star is the ultimate karmic punishment. If I had to point out a major flaw in how I wrote him, it's that he's TOO similar to Twilight.

Queen/Princess Sparkle: Oh man, where to start? If I had to pick one single stand out original character from the entire trilogy... well I'd probably pick Home Run, but Queen Sparkle is a close second. She was originally going to be just a one-shot little 'what if' in an alternate ending. I just want to hug her, but if I did she would probably tear my head off and lay eggs in my brain. She's the most powerful and also the most pathetic character in the story, a haunting reminder of what most of us would end up as if we were stuck in the same situation Twilight was and had our hope extinguished. Driven by the desire to survive, and then after Twilight Prime's first visit an uncompromising desire for revenge over the one element of her situation she couldn't repeat and control. She even got her own spinoff fic so I could plumb that particular darkness. She was lying about so much in the loop when we looked in on her as Princess Sparkle, from how many times our Twilight had been there to what her spell would do. Ironically, telling Twilight that she was a good liar was probably the most honest thing she said. Gosh, I wonder how she turned out, all the way in the end. You know... I always have enjoyed it when movies have one more extra scene for the people who waited through the credits...

Pinkie: Like writer cocaine. Both of her chapters were written in a blurry rush over just a few hours each. I maintain the secret to writing good Pinkie is to make sure that even at her wildest she's grounded enough to stay relatable. She can't say just anything. That wouldn't be funny, just random. What she can do is say something so off the wall that while you would never say it in response to something in real life, you'd *wish* you had. It's a tricky balance, but very rewarding when you thread the needle successfully.

Morning Glow/Shooting Star: Ultimately I wish these two had more to do, and a more active role in the story's resolution. They feel, to me, a bit too much like flat props to let the

grown-ups be parents rather than fully realized characters of their own. Still, it was a blast to write ‘bitchy teenager,’ Shooting Star is easily my favorite of the pair. And once I realized that Equestria had a new Prince (in character and standing, if not in title) then teasing RariGlow became the obvious next step.

Themes! For those few of you still with me by this point.

If I had to pick one theme to sum up all three of these stories, it would be “Second Chances’ with a corollary of “Forgiveness.’ It manifested in a lot of ways. The Regalia used Star Swirl’s ‘Amulet of Second Chances’ to manipulate his behavior and create a false sense of urgency by letting him die and come back, within limitations. Obviously, in a time loop you have an unlimited supply of second chances, but on the other hand as Azalea pointed out at the lake eventually you have to accept an outcome and move on or you’re, well, Queen Sparkle. Both she and the Regalia were characterized as having *no* capacity for forgiveness at all. The Regalia have an impossible set of standards for ponies to live up to and wipe out entire worlds that don’t meet them and Queen Sparkle can’t even conceive of why Twilight wouldn’t put Azalea through a horrible death for being a changeling. Meanwhile, Twi picks up a greater and greater capacity for it, even trying to reconcile with Star Gazer back in her own timeline in the end.

Also, one that sort of caught me by surprise was how much parent-child stuff cropped up in *Fate*. I think almost every major character is a parent to or child of one of the others, although in Twi’s case it’s a temporary development. I don’t think there was anything specific I was trying to say about it, but I definitely noticed it popping up a lot. It’s just an inherently rich dynamic to be tapped (or a cheap source of feels if you’re feeling less charitable. Although I tried to keep it a little more organic than that). Feel free to try to armchair-psychologist your way into my psyche in the comments.

Hmm.... what else is there to say... You go through a lot of ideas in the planning stages of a story like this. One rejected one would have been a one-liner suggesting that Discord was Home Run's father (left ambiguous because 'he's probably joking'). Originally Princess Sparkle was going to join the bad-guy adventuring party, and have some kind of crazy crack ship going with Nightmare Moon. That got reduced to just being that one little anecdote Princess Sparkle has about how she spent a couple of loops of flirtatious back and forth while simultaneously trying to outmaneuver one another on a grand scale. And I did consider hooking up Shooting Star with Morning Glow and having Twilight be descended from them, but ultimately the incest angle turned me off. Sleeping with your eternally young great great great etcetera grandmother is funny, first cousins is a lot more squicky. Plus, Shooting Star is like fifteen and Morning Glow is Mane-6 aged.

Also, there a brief period before I decided that Princess Sparkle was lying where her spell would have brought together an army of identical Twilights from all the slightly-different timelines that now existed from main Twilight passing through the loop a bit differently each time. Then the thousand-plus identical copies of her would have combined forces to completely beat the Regalia down. Felt it was too cheesy, overly timey-wimey for an already intricate time travel plot, and I liked the Magical Mystery Cure redux ascension a lot better. Less epic, but more interesting.

Speaking of rejected timey-wimey bits, I also had an idea for a gag where Twilight's feeling hopeless and wondering what they should do next when future Twilight appears. Reflecting on the lesson she learned in *It's About Time*, she shuts up and asks future-her how she solved the central conflict. Only for Future Twilight to bitterly inform her that, while she knows the solution, all she was told when she was in Present Twilight's position was that Twilight's milk went bad two days ago and to get more on the way home. They then snarkily commiserate with each other about how much time travel sucks. And of course a few chapters later Twilight sees it from the other side when she travels back to close the loop.

Then in the final chapter, she remembers to buy milk on her way home from the post-adventure celebration, only to discover the milk she had already wasn't actually going to go bad for four more days. The 'warning' never meant anything. Cue facehoof. Tossed the gag for being unnecessarily complex and distracting, but salvaged the "warning from another time that your milk went bad," for Twilight's rant about hating prophecies.

So in the end, special thanks to all my prereaders. [Luminary](#) and his army of proxies through which he haunts me (so far just one guy on the internet), [Midnight 'Cyanobacteria' Herald](#), and [Dawn 'My Little Ostrich Needs To Be A Thing' Scroll](#) and anyone else who read and commented my drafts.

And I guess that's everything! Thanks again guys! We're all done.

...Oh what the hell. One more chapter.

Breaking Out

BREAKING OUT

There's a bird. A particular starling born in a tree planted eighty-seven years ago by my own hooves. Hatched three years ago to parents that had been forced to begin migration just a few weeks sooner than usual by the unseasonable cold snap I arranged. Saved from an untimely demise when, subtle manipulation across decades be damned, I caught a hungry cat mid-pounce with my magic and tossed it into the nearby pond. Above me, that bird chirps as it soars through the sunny afternoon sky. The afternoon's not too hot, or too cold, just right. Everything is just right.

Well, the sun may be a bit on the warm side, I'm sensitive to that sort of thing these days. That's why I'm wearing this thin white cloak over my graying purple mane. Okay, gray mane with just the tiniest hints there was ever any purple there to begin with. For a mare pushing a hundred and seventy I look pretty dang good, though. That's old even for a retired alicorn Princess of Equestria. There have been times when I managed to survive longer, through a cocktail of drugs or dark magics, but they always take a toll. About an hour from now, when I die, I want my mind to be clear of their influence. It's been annoying to have to stay clean for so long, and every billion or so subjective years I had to fight off the urge to give myself just a little boost, a few more years, and hit the slowly onrushing wall ahead of me. But I fought it off every time, and I'm about to reap the reward. Before I do though, this former Princess is going to grant one last audience.

"Granny Sparkle, guess where I am!" says a voice. A simple ventriloquism charm I taught the voice's owner makes the demand come at me from several directions at once.

I look over at the edge of the clearing. The filly I'm waiting on might be smart, but right now she doesn't realize that a little, glowing lavender horn sticking out of a bush is something of a giveaway.

“I know that you’re in that bush, Twilight. Come here.”

Her head pops out of the bush, shock written in her young, purple eyes. “No way, I thought I did the charm perfectly!” She hops out of the bush into the tall grass that’s chest high on her, and trots over to me.

I nuzzle her as she takes her familiar place against my side. “You did it very well. But I have my ways.” She stares up at me in wonder, gently pressing herself into me. “Now, did you say the thing I told you to say to your daddy this morning?”

She nods, proud of herself for remembering. Not that I had ever expected my favorite great-great-granddaughter to forget my request. “Uh huh! I told him that if you counted in base four, tomorrow is my twenty-first birthday.” She frowns. “I don’t understand why that made him choke on his porridge, though.”

I chuckle. “It’s because you made him feel old, sweetie. Don’t worry, he’ll be okay.”

“Oh,” says Twilight, not really understanding. “Do grownups always feel old?”

“Some of us more than others,” I reply. I look down on her and while she’s smiling, I can still tell there’s something troubling her. “What’s wrong, Twilight?”

She turns her head up to me, amazed again at my simple deduction. I just love watching her be thrilled and surprised by every new thing, experiencing the world for the first time.

“Well...” she begins before she turns her head down and away. “There’s a colt at school. He said mean things about you and I don’t like him.”

“Really? What did he say?” I ask as I stroke her mane.

“He said that his daddy says that you’re crazy and you talk about things that never happened. That I shouldn’t listen to anything you tell me. So I... uh... I sort of punched him in the face,” she admits, preemptively shrinking away from my disapproval.

“Twilight, that was not the the right thing to do,” I say, frowning at her.

“But he was-”

“No buts. If you see him again, you tell him that you’re sorry for what you did and you forgive him for what he said.”

“What he said was wrong, though! Why should I forgive him?”

“It’s very important to be able to forgive ponies for hurting you, Twilight. Everypony makes mistakes, and everypony does things for a reason. Acting out like that when you don’t understand both sides of the story can make you do things that you can’t always take back. Besides...” and at this I smile and wink at her, lowering my voice and leaning in like I’m taking her into my confidence, as if what I’m about to say should never go farther than the two of us, “...you don’t get as old as I am without being at least a little bit loopy.”

Twilight breaks into happy giggles. She might not get the joke, not really, but she loves feeling like she’s just been let in on some gigantic secret about how the world works. She’s so like me when I was her age. I should know; I spent quite a bit of effort making sure of it.

Oh, I’m not saying I grew her in a laboratory or anything like that. And if I’d left everything to chance, the odds of my daughter’s son’s daughter’s daughter expressing so many of the same phenotypes and personality quirks I did at her age is something on the order of one in a quintillion. But with a century and a half worth of variables to play with and all the time I could possibly need to do so, a quintillion isn’t that big. Push a ship off course here so a certain frustrated noblepony’s son will end up getting ambushed by a fiery mare and her pirate fleet. Discard a banana peel in just the right place so that the sprinting tomboy staring upwards to catch a hoofball goes careening into the bookworm who didn’t see her in time to move out of the way. Just so that the two of them share a hospital recovery room for the rest of the summer and a bed for the rest of their lives. And when all else fails, sabotage a condom.

If Celestia suspected anything when we showed up on opposite sides of the aisle at the marriage between her

grandson and my great-granddaughter, she never let on. In fact, I'm pretty sure she still thinks the whole thing was her idea in the first place. Their union finally produced exactly what I had been waiting for this whole time. A filly born nine years ago tomorrow, and first conceived of a hundred trillion years before that. Give or take.

"Do you regret anything?"

The question rouses me from my thoughts. I almost drifted off too early there. That wouldn't do, not when I'm this close to my goal already. "What do you mean, Twilight?"

"Stuff that you did when you couldn't forgive somepony, stuff that you can't take back."

I remember almost everything. For example, I remember exactly the moment I have to back up and jostle an ambassador from the Griffin Empire so he spills a goblet of wine over the Diamond Dog emissary at a cocktail reception to derail an alliance that, fifteen years down the line, would lead to an overconfident attempt to menace Equestria away from a particular shale quarry. The ensuing skirmish would leave Twilight's grandfather bleeding to death on the battlefield, so every loop I remember to back up right on cue. But I somehow forgot just how insightful young Twilight can be.

"Yes. There is something. Something I did when I was too young to know better that I now wish I hadn't." I just want to shake my head at what an arrogant little brat I'd been back when I'd only been in this time loop for a few million years. So sure I could do whatever I wanted, that consequences were things for other ponies and I was too special to need to care. When I thought that the only thing that could get me through each loop was narrow-minded unfair rage. Back when I was too young to understand. I never found out what happened to the pony I took that out on, to my eternal shame. She never did return in any of my loops. "I'm so sorry, Twilight," I mutter.

"Huh? For what, Granny?"

"...For waiting this long to give you your birthday present, of course! I don't think you should wait until tomorrow to open

it,” I say. Twilight’s confusion is instantly obliterated by excitement as I hover the wrapped gift over, and she tears into it with her hooves as I watch.

“A baseball bat?”

“I call him Home Run,” I say. I cast my eyes over the shiny, varnished wood. Enchanted to resist the wears of time, of course.

“Hi, Home Run! I’m Twilight. We’re going to be best friends!” says Twilight.

I ruffle her mane. “It’s just a bat, Twilight. He was my bat when I was about your age, and I think he should be yours now.” Maybe a dozen-plus years older isn’t ‘about your age’ by most definitions, but I tend to take a longer view.

“Wow! Thank you, Granny Sparkle!” says Twilight. She grunts and strains to lift it and begins swinging it around wildly. Twilight slips in the middle of one of her swings and the bat drops lower, suddenly on the perfect course to clobber me in the head. I drop under it at the last second, joints and muscles screaming as I push them harder than I have in decades. *I’m sorry, old friend. No more loops*, I think to myself.

“Granny! Are you... Did I...”

“I’m just fine, Twilight. Now come, I’ll show you how to hit a baseball.”

We spend the next forty-five minutes or so playing together in the clearing, as I show Twilight the proper way to hold a bat in her magic, and slowly levitate a few balls towards her for her to hit. I think I could stretch that window of time out for centuries and never grow tired of it, but in the middle of one ‘pitch’ my magic falters under the strain and I collapse. My body is failing me, organ by organ. I’ve been hiding it for the last three days but I can’t put it off too much longer. Then again I don’t need to. Just five minutes more will do.

“-Sparkle? Granny Sparkle?” asks Twilight’s voice as I come to. Tiny hooves are shaking me as I force myself to smile up at her.

“It’s fine Twilight. Everything is finally going to be fine. I’m just so tired all of a sudden. Let’s rest under that tree, just for a few minutes. Then I’ll show you how to catch a fly ball.” She helps me over to a spot in the shade where I collapse as gracefully as possible.

My horn buzzes. It’s coming now. Well, it’s been coming since the moment I cast the time loop spell, and the moment that the other timeline’s Twilight and Star Swirl quarantined my knotted, disjointed timeline away from theirs. The universe has finally noticed what I’ve been doing. With every loop, the damage got that much worse. The quantum... something has been decoupling from the... well I can’t remember right now, as my memories start to grow fuzzy. But the thingie that’s going to make time stop has been growing asymptotically closer to the moment I cast the spell in each subsequent loop. Both Princesses know it’s about to happen, along with maybe a half a dozen of the foremost minds on the planet. All were sworn to secrecy to prevent mass panic when we couldn’t figure out a solution. Or more accurately, when they couldn’t figure out a solution and I chose not to help. It’s taken so, so long for me achieve an overlap between my lifespan and the big stop. Once I’m stopped I can’t die. If I can’t die I can’t go back. I just have to hold on long enough to reach it.

“I love you, Twilight.” I’ve told her that ten thousand times, but not enough. I reach for her as my vision starts to fail at the edges and I begin to slip away, but I grope around in vain. No. Where is she? I want her with me at the end. I need her to forgive me, to promise me that she lived a long and happy life doing things I can’t even imagine in her timeline. To whisper me the story of what she created from the wealth of other possibilities open to her.

Just when I’m about to give up hope of finding her, of ever getting the closure I want, something unexpected happens. Two tiny lips press down on the tip of my muzzle. With just seconds left I hear Twilight speak to me for the last time.

“I love you too.”

I’ve done a lot of bad things, some of them unforgivably terrible. But if the last two sensations I’ll ever feel are surprise

and that I'm loved, I must have done a whole lot more right.
The shroud of death lowers over me, and time stops.
Well. That worked.

Author's Notes:

[Link to the sequel/spin off/reboot from Cloud Kicker's
POV](#)

