



A Stitch in Time

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- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Twilight Sparkle
- Princess Luna
- Original Character
- Other
- Main 6
- Romance
- Comedy
- Slice of Life

Description

After the events of [Hard Reset](#) Twilight's life and mental well being are slowly returning to normal. Her recovery is cut short, though, when a letter arrives informing her that the time loop spell she cast is causing severe damage to space and time itself. In over her head, Twilight tries to summon anypony who will know how to fix it. The pony she gets is the last one she ever thought she would meet... and nothing like she expected him to be.

[Available in Spanish](#) thanks to [dgs1993](#)
[Series TV Tropes page](#)

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Time Heals All Wounds

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

The longest day of my life was the day, about three months ago now, when I ended up trapped in a time loop in the middle of a war zone. I don't know how long it lasted exactly, but on that day I got to experience being choked, stabbed, eaten, burned, mind controlled, eviscerated, decapitated, falling to my death, cut into pieces, run through, disintegrated, immolated, and having changeling eggs laid in my brain.

The second longest day was a few weeks later, when I finally opened up to my friends about it. They cornered me in my library and told me in no uncertain terms that they were sick of watching me being torn up from the inside by all the things I wasn't telling them. They were there to listen, not to interrogate me or judge me but they weren't leaving until I told them what had happened. I could take as long as I needed, and tell it any way I wanted, but there was one rule; I couldn't leave anything out.

That rule was amended slightly ten minutes later when I started listing all of the books I had gone through over my second and third trips through the time loop. I just couldn't leave out anything important.

It wasn't easy at first. For the first hour or so I had to monitor what I was saying and be aware of all the little details I was editing out just by force of habit. Once I got into the rhythm of speaking the full truth, it got quicker and quicker. Soon I was past the tipping point and I couldn't have stopped the story even if I'd wanted to. The trickle of words flowing from my mouth turned into a babbling torrent until the buildup of emotions would overcome me and I broke down. I'd cry until I could reassert control over myself, and the cycle would start all over again.

My friends didn't say very much as I spoke. That was exactly what I needed from them. The important thing was that they

were there, to listen and to hold me and to comfort me when the memories got to be too much. Even though it was mid morning when I started telling the story. I was still barely halfway through when Pinkie slipped off into the kitchen to start making dinner for us all.

The five of them had gone out of the room occasionally over the course of the day, just for a few minutes at a time to use the bathroom or grab a fresh box of tissues for me. They didn't want to bring me to a full stop while they took a break. Maybe they weren't sure whether or not I'd be able to start up again. I was never with less than three of them.

I talked straight through dinner. I think Rarity was more horrified by my table manners than what I was telling her about being pulled apart by a pair of changeling drones, but she had the good sense not to interrupt or tell me to chew with my mouth closed. It wasn't until late into the night, well after Spike has fallen asleep on the couch despite his best efforts and certainly sometime after midnight, that I finally finish my tale.

For the second time that day I felt like an empty and hollow shell of myself. This time though? That was a good thing. All the toxic fear and anxiety I'd been carrying around was... well I can't say it was gone, but a burden shared is a burden sixthed.

It was several minutes before anypony spoke. Finally, Fluttershy broke the ice.

"Wow."

That summed it up pretty well.

"Twilight, we all knew that you had been through a lot, but we had no idea it was... like that," said Rarity. "That first night after the invasion, we were all joking and laughing together about it. That must have been just awful for you."

"It's OK, girls. You couldn't have known. I was lying to you to make sure you didn't. I'm sorry I did that, but I wanted to protect you. I didn't think it would hit me this hard," I said.

Rainbow Dash gave me a curious look, like she wasn't quite sure what to make of me after all she'd heard. "Did you really let us all get killed or eaten or mind controlled or whatever on that one loop just so you could go back and bang Luna? While we were dying on that train? Not cool, Twilight."

I winced. It had just been a stupid impulse I'd gone ahead and indulged without thinking at the time. After all, consequences had been something other ponies dealt with and not anything I had to care about. I'd never expected that I'd one day actually be called out on it.

"Rainbow, ah don't think this is the time for that kinda thing. Can't you see she's plumb tuckered out?" asked Applejack.

"She's right though, Applejack. I treated all of you like you were disposable tools when I should have been treating you like friends. I even started to think of myself that way. Whenever I made some little mistake I'd cut my own throat open to jump to the next loop if I thought it would save me an hour. How could I do that to myself?"

"It sounds like the whole world got all crazy on you for a while, but it's all back to normal now. Just because you were crazy in the crazy world doesn't mean that you'll be crazy back here in the normal world. If you do act crazy we'll be here to talk to you, and then you can ask us how you'll know you're not crazy anymore, and we'll tell you that just because you were crazy in the crazy world doesn't mean that-"

"Pinkie, what have we said about being recursive?" I asked.

"I haven't even figured out how to talk in normal cursive, much less recursive."

"She's right though, Twilight," said Fluttershy teasing out the core of sanity from Pinkie's... Pinkieness. "You aren't in a place like that anymore. You're home."

"What if..." I wasn't sure how to phrase it because I wasn't even sure how I felt myself. "What if I feel like doing something self-destructive like that to myself again?"

"HEY!" Applejack grabbed me and yanked me over to her. I'd never seen her so upset before. "Don't you dare even think

about doing something like that, Twilight Sparkle. Ah swear to the Princesses, if you go and hurt yourself ah will come over to this library and beat you half to death with my own four hooves, understand?" Her glare softened just a little bit.

"Ah'm dead serious Twi, you ever think about doing something like that to yourself, you come over and talk to me, or any of us. Morning, afternoon, or dead of night, we're there for you."

"Yeah," said Rainbow Dash, "but if you do decide to come to my house when you're like that, which you're totally welcome to do anytime, just remember to cast the cloud walking spell on yourself first. Otherwise the situation would end up being all ironish, or whatever."

I chuckled. "You mean ironic?"

"Sure, that. I know you explained that to me but I'm still not exactly sure what it is," said Rainbow Dash. She muttered something about how if a pegasus let it rain on another's wedding day that pony would be out of a job before the ceremony was even over.

"This ain't somethin' we're joking about, Twi," said Applejack. "If you ever, EVER think you might hurt yourself, you promise me you'll talk to one of us first."

"AJ, I've never-"

"PROMISE ME!"

Her insistence blew me back a bit. My first thought was to tell her to go buck herself, to tell the truth. They were only thoughts. But on reflection I realized that I really had considered it. Idly, never in a serious way, but it had crossed my mind more than once. The realization that I might have been only a few weeks or even days away from violently ending myself shook me to the core.

"I won't. I promise I won't. Oh Celestia, Applejack, I thought about doing it. Please don't... please don't hate me for that. I just wanted all of this to stop. I'm..."

She just wrapped me tighter in her arms and my words devolved into sobs. I hated myself for even thinking that. I

realized that I'd hated myself for a long time.

"I'm sorry," was all I managed to choke out between sobs.

"Don't blame yourself. And don't think that any of us love you any less just because you might have felt that way, hmm?" said Rarity .

"I know," I said, without really believing it. How could they not hate me, after what I'd done? What I'd kept from them?

I didn't speak for a while. The five of them must have sensed how I felt, because they didn't leave to go home. They just laid down by my side, comfortably close, and wordlessly let me know that they were there.

We fell asleep like that. I was cramped, too warm, and twisted all wrong by the bodies pushed against me.

Best night of sleep I've ever gotten.

I didn't dream that night. I didn't relive anything or imagine what might have been or see myself suffering one of my many horrific deaths from some creative new angle and I thank the Princesses for that.

When I woke up, refreshed for the first time in weeks and surrounded by the ponies who loved me, that might have been the first time I truly realized how blessed I was. Not twenty four hours ago I would have honestly considered ending it all to find the sort of peace I'd just had. Yet waking up, with five slumbering bodies pressed against mine I knew that oblivion was a cowardly and feeble substitute for what I had every moment of my life, without ever properly appreciating it.

In that second when I woke up, I swore to myself never to take my friends for granted ever again.

I laid there for as long as I could pretending to be asleep. I'm pretty sure that Fluttershy and Applejack woke up not long after, but didn't know that I was already awake so they didn't move. I would have loved them forever just for that, as if I needed another reason.

It couldn't last forever though, and soon enough Pinkie stretched and rolled over. Rarity, who had been balancing her head comfortably but precariously on her shoulder woke up with a start as her face collided with the wooden floor. She, in turn, kicked out in alarm and caught Rainbow Dash in the ribs. Rainbow beat her wings trying to disentangle herself from the pile and the six of us were shoved every which way. There was no pretending to be asleep after that. We all went out to breakfast, my treat. It was the least I could do for them. Then with one more round of hugs and thank yous the other five went their separate ways. They had dropped everything the day before on zero notice to come help me, and probably had a lot of catching up to do.

I tried to turn that day into a friendship report for the Princess, but I just couldn't find the words to do it justice. Even to this day I haven't sent it. I've sent others, of course, and Celestia wrote back how happy she was that I was sending them again. But that one I won't send until it's absolutely perfect.

I expected life to go back to the way it had been before, and that since my friends had lifted me out of the worst of my slump they wouldn't need to do anything else. Life, it seems, had other plans. The next day there was a knock on my door and when I opened it there stood Rarity. Her saddlebags were full to bursting with color swatches, lengths of ribbon and lace, and other assorted samples and dressmaking supplies.

"Hello again, darling," said Rarity as she walked into the library without waiting for me to invite her in. That was what threw up the first warning flag in my head. It wasn't like her to ignore a point of etiquette so blatantly like that. Looking closer, I noticed that she was a bit on edge. "Twilight, I was hoping you would do me a small favor if you have a moment?" she asked. It wasn't like I could say no after everything that had just happened, even though I was suspicious.

"Of course, Rarity. What do you need?"

Rarity undid the strained clasp and dumped the contents of her bag onto the table in the middle of the library. "I was just brainstorming ideas for a new line of dresses, and I was

hoping to get a little bit of input,” she said as she lifted two color samples up from the pile. “Which of these colors do you like better?”

I froze. One of the things that I’d been having trouble with since getting out of the loop was making decisions. Even little ones seemed to be impossible for me, as if the fate of Equestria hung on which one of two books I should read first or something equally ridiculous.

“Come on, dear. There’s no wrong answer. Just pick the one you like better.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Rarity, but I don’t think that this is-”

“SURPRISE!” Pinkie popped out of the kitchen I would have sworn had been empty not five minutes before. The sudden noise sent me into a fresh panic attack, gasping for breath and shaking my head to clear out the way it was throbbing in time with my heartbeat. “Guess what Twilight? I’m in charge of making you get used to things surprising you again! So every day I’m gonna find a new way to surprise you until being surprised isn’t so surprising any more, and then when you’re back to normal I’ll throw a surprise party and you’ll be all like ‘yay I’m better’ instead of freaking out the way you are right now. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

“I think we need to coordinate this a little bit better Pinkie, I was right about to start with the decision making therapy,” said Rarity.

“Wait, you two planned this?”

“Not very well, apparently. Yes, the five of us spoke again after we left you yesterday. I apologize on all our behalfs if that seems a little bit underhoofed to you, but we simply will not stand idly by during your time of need. Perhaps you would recover fully on your own with time, but we intend to speed the process along whatever way we can. I am going to help you get used to making decisions again, starting with little ones and working our way up. Pinkie-”

“SURPRISES!”

“Indeed. Fluttershy is preparing a guest room at her cottage and making a spare key for you so if things here ever get to be too much or overwhelming you have a safe place. She isn’t going to let you abuse it, though, so don’t think you’ll be able to hide yourself away like you were doing before. Rainbow Dash is coming up with a physical fitness regimen for you, and she’s going to make sure you follow it. Not only will a little exertion do wonders for your mood, but if I’m being completely frank all this sitting around and moping is making you pudgy,” said Rarity. She poked me in the belly with her horn ignoring my yelp of protest. I did seem to be a little bit jigglier around the middle than I used to be. “Besides you’ll want to be fit and trim again for Applejack’s effort. She’ll be-”

Pinkie cut her off. “Nope, hold it right there. As Ponyville’s chief surprisologist I’m afraid I have to insist that we not tell her about that yet. You can’t just administer a prescription strength surprise like that. We have to build up to it.”

“I don’t suppose it matters that I don’t want you to do any of this?” I asked.

“Sorry, Twilight. This is tough love, baby!”

“Come now, we’re not doing this to make you miserable. We’ll do it in whatever way is most comfortable for you, but Pinkie is correct. This is happening,” said Rarity. “Forget the colors and ribbons for now, why don’t we just go out to lunch? I know this is probably a lot to take in.”

“That would be nice. Maybe you’ll see that I’m just fine and the rest of you are overreacting. Where are we eating?” I asked.

“Well that’s the catch, isn’t it?” asked Rarity with a hint of a smile. “You have to pick.”

The weeks wore on and my friends were as good as their word. The very next morning, and every other morning thereafter I was awakened at the crack of dawn by Rainbow Dash pounding on my window. She practically dragged me out of bed and told me that we were going for a one mile trot. As

our warm up. I had never known until that morning what it was like to be on the receiving end of one of Rainbow Dash's 'pep talks.' She's a little bit terrifying when she thinks you're standing between her and something she wants.

Pinkie's "surprise" that day was that she was waiting for me inside my shower when I got home. As soon as she realized I was back she jumped out and given me a big hug, undeterred by the fact that I was sweaty and half dead with exhaustion.

The next day, her surprise was hiding between the library bookshelves.

The day after that, hiding inside one of the books.

How did she even get into that pot of stew? It was boiling hot!

I guess that ponies really can get used to anything. After a week, I was resigned to it happening every day. After three weeks, there came a day when Pinkie's surprise was that there was no surprise, and I found that I actually missed it.

The workouts pushed me to my limit, and then some, but I can't deny that they were effective. I dropped the extra weight I'd put on pretty quickly. Spike helped with the meal planning, and the ratio of broccoli and cauliflower to heavy pastas and hayfries in my diet became depressingly one sided for a while.

I expected to use the hideaway Fluttershy had set up for me a lot more than I ended up needing to. Sure, there were days when I felt like I was overwhelmed or that I couldn't stand to go on but I never wanted to sequester myself from everything the way I had before. I actually felt a little bad that she'd gone through all that effort on my behalf and I wasn't using it. The solution turned out to be the occasional sleepover at Fluttershy's cottage. First it was just the two of us, but later on the whole gang would join in. I'm pretty sure her little rabbit friend didn't appreciate the intrusion, though.

I got better a whole lot more quickly than I'd ever expected to, and I'm sure I never could have made half this much progress on my own.

So that's why I'm sitting here today, three months after I escaped from the time loop facing Pinkie's latest surprise.

Apparently I'm practice-dating Applejack now.

We're sitting across from one another at the little coffee shop in the center of town, having just ordered drinks. "Alright, Twi. We're all really impressed with how far you've come in the last couple of months. So now ah wanna help you too. We're gonna get you a date, but first we're gonna practice a little bit so you'll be ready when it does happen."

I nod. I was a little hesitant when the girls told me they were going to help me find a fillyfriend, but now the prospect actually sounds like a lot of fun.

"Before we start, can ah ask you a question?"

"You just did."

Applejack gives me her best 'Really?' face but continues with her question anyway. "This may be kinda personal, but are you attracted to me? In that way ah mean."

I think about the question for a moment. "Would it make you uncomfortable if I was?" I ask.

"Well, yeah, it kinda would if ah'm bein' completely honest. Ah mean sure it'd be flattering and ah'm not saying that there'd be anything wrong with it, but at the same time ah don't want our friendship to change or for you to want something from me that ah can't give you. If you thought you had those kind of feelings for me then this fake practice dating idea is just gonna end with one or both of us gettin' hurt. That's why ah'm askin'," says Applejack.

I look her up and down, trying to study her with fresh eyes. When I don't say anything for a minute or so she starts to shift uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, based on your facial structure, general level of fitness, and social standing within the community I would put you between the eightieth and eighty-fifth percentile of overall attractiveness, assuming it can be modeled as a single variable function with a roughly normal distribution," I eventually conclude.

Now it's Applejack's turn to stare. "If that's the way you're gonna talk this is gonna' take longer than ah thought," she says.

“It was a compliment! You’re cute, but no I’m not nursing a secret crush or anything like that. My turn for an embarrassing question though. Have you ever been attracted to another mare? What makes you qualified to help me date one?”

Applejack shakes her head. “Ah’ve only had eyes for colts and stallions, but maybe if the right mare came along ah could fall for her. Ah’d keep an open mind, at least.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ve always kind of wondered if you and Rainbow Dash had a bit of a thing,” I say.

Applejack laughs. “Funny you’d say that. When you told us all about you likin’ mares the first thing ah wondered was if maybe all those times Dash’d gone over to the library to read with you hadn’t been cover for somethin’ else. Guess there’s just something about that filly that gives off that kinda’ vibe.”

“I don’t think she’s interested in anypony not wearing a Wonderbolts uniform,” I point out.

“If you’re interested in her that might not be a dealbreaker. You might be surprised what you can find over at Lingerie & Refrigerators off Main street. As for what ah’m gonna be teachin’ you, the stuff ah was thinking of is pretty universal. If you want a teacher who’s got experience with mares though, we can always go see if Cloud Kicker’s offer still stands.”

I shudder at the mention of that name. I’ve managed to avoid her for the last week and a half, ever since she cornered me at the market to thank me for inspiring a new pickup line for her rotation. Even more disturbing, ‘I’m trapped in a time loop and the only way for me to get out of it is for us to bang’ has a non-zero success rate.

“That’s what ah thought. Now ah wanna see what ah’m working with here. Didja notice how our waitress was lookin’ you over when she showed us to our table? Ah think she likes you,” says Applejack. “When she comes back with our drinks ah wanna see you flirt with her a little bit.”

“What makes you so sure she wasn’t just being friendly?” I ask.

“Maybe she was, only one way to know for sure. You gotta start sometime. Just say something clever to break the ice, relax, and act natural.”

“I haven’t thought of anything clever to say yet! I need more prep time,” I say.

“Here’s your first lesson then. You gotta be able to do this on the spur of the moment even if you’re nervous. Only way to get better at that is to practice. Worst that’ll happen is she’ll say no. Ah’m not givin’ you the chance to overthink this, Twi. Better get ready ‘cause she’s on her way over right now,” said Applejack with a wicked grin. She’s enjoying this more than she should be.

Sure enough our waitress, a lime green pegasus mare with a mug of coffee as her cutie mark, steps over and places two piping hot cups in front of us. Something clever. I just have to say something clever. My mind goes completely blank. I look over at Applejack who jerks her head in the direction of the mare and then my gaze drifts down to the table. Cups of coffee. I grab onto the idea like a drowning pony to a life raft. What can I say about coffee?

“Can I get you ladies anything else to go with that?” our waitress asks.

“You,” I say. “Because you’re hot. Like this coffee. Only with sexiness instead of boiling water and dissolved particles of ground up beans. Not that I’m objectifying you. I mean I’m sure you have lots of other nice qualities that also somehow relate to coffee, I just didn’t want to imply that I thought you were literally the same temperature as the coffee even though I guess that’s what I said. If you had a body temperature as high as hot coffee you’d die in agony as you were cooked alive from the inside out oh Celestia why am I still talking?” I clamp my mouth closed before I can do any more damage. The two mares staring at me in silence is somehow even worse. Maybe I can salvage this?

“Wait, no, caffeine! You’re like the coffee because we’ll be up all night, the implication being that we’ll be banging! But then as our relationship goes on I’ll develop a terrible case of

insomnia, and I'll cheat on you with tea to try to wean myself away until eventually a doctor tells me I have to quit you cold turkey because I'm developing heart palpitations and odd muscle tremors."

"Are you trying to hit on me?" asks the waitress, genuinely confused.

I plant my face down on the table and moan. "Sorry."

She giggles. "Don't worry about it dear. You're new at this aren't you? At least my fillyfriend won't feel like she needs to be jealous or protective."

"Of course you already have a fillyfriend. You're cute and you're nice and ponies probably hit on you all the time," I say without bothering to look up.

"Aww, thanks for saying so! That's what you should have said in the first place. You don't have to think of some crazy line to flirt with somepony. All a mare as pretty as you are really needs to do is be friendly and maybe a little playful and you'll have fillies falling all over one another to get to know you," she says. Wait... is she flirting with me now? "I met my fillyfriend in this very coffee shop, you know. She was one of our regulars, and one day some rambunctious little colt bumped into me and I spilled coffee all over her."

"Oh no, she wasn't hurt was she?"

"No, she didn't get burned or anything but of course it ruined her dress. I apologized over and over and finally told her that if she came back at the end of my shift I'd buy her dinner. She did and we got to chatting over her meal. I found out what a sweetheart she was and before I knew it, poof, I had a fillyfriend. Nothing to it."

"What, just like that?" I ask. It's a nice story, it just doesn't seem... dramatic enough. Like it shouldn't count unless somepony saves another's life from a burning building or a monster attack. Then there's a heartfelt confession of love at first sight and a passionate kiss in front of a sunset as the scene slowly fades to black. Maybe I've been hanging around Rarity too much.

“Just like that. Don’t go making it more complicated than it has to be,” she says. “Now can I get either of you anything else?”

“Thank ya kindly, we’re set,” says Applejack.

“Thank you for the advice, too,” I say.

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you need anything,” our waitress says before she trots off to attend to the other customers.

“That actually went better than ah thought it would. There might be hope for you yet Twi,” says Applejack.

“That was better? The only way I could have made it worse would have been if I somehow lit this place on fire while I was talking.”

“Twi, ah’m gonna level with you here. Ah love you, but you’re a weird pony. You aren’t gonna find a special somepony by hidin’ that though. Heck, bein’ weird is half your charm. Although if you want to leave out the boiling alive from the inside thing the next time that’d be a good idea,” says Applejack. She takes a sip of her coffee. “Now, puttin’ aside how to flirt for a moment what sort of mare are you lookin’ to date? Do you have a particular type?”

“A type? I guess I never really thought about it,” I say. It’s true. Being so nervous about liking mares meant that I always used to avoid that kind of subject even in my own head.

“Well, start thinkin’ about it. Look at our little group. We’ve already gone over me and Dash, but if you had to pick one of the others.”

“I don’t know Applejack, that would be kind of weird. I don’t even know if any of them like mares.”

“Say they did, though. It doesn’t have to be one of them, ah’m just trying to get a sense of what you’re interested in. Maybe somepony on the livelier side, who’d balance out all that quiet readin’ in the library? Say Pinkie grabbed you and kissed you ‘cause we were playin’ truth or dare, or spin the bottle or somesuch. Would you like that?”

“Ooh! I love kissing! It’s like a party in your mouth and somepony else’s tongue is invited,” says Pinkie popping out from underneath our table. It’s a testament to the effectiveness of her somewhat unorthodox therapy techniques that I’m only mildly surprised.

“Pinkie? Where did you come from?” I ask. You would think I’d know better by now.

“Twilight, I really think that’s a conversation you should have with your parents or the Princess, not me. My parents gave me the talk about the stalactites and the geodes years ago,” says Pinkie.

“That isn’t what I-”

“Really, if you don’t know about that then I don’t think you’re ready to be in a relationship. I’m sorry Twilight, but I’m breaking up with you. It’s really important to me that we can still be friends though, so let’s just pretend that we were never dating at all.”

“But we never did date,” I say.

“That’s the spirit! Good luck finding a new fillyfriend!”

With that Pinkie hops off towards Sugarcube Corner. “Maybe some pony a bit less lively than Pinkie,” I say turning back to Applejack.

“Ah see what’cha mean. But that still leaves Rarity or Fluttershy.”

“Look, Applejack, I appreciate the amount of effort you’ve put into this, and I promise I really will think about what I want but could you please stop trying to hook me up with our friends?”

“But you and Fluttershy are just so adorable together!”

“I think we’re done here,” I say and finish the rest of my coffee.

“Fine, fine, just hold on. Ah’ll stop even though you two would be just about the cutest thing in the world together. Here’s the deal though; two weeks from this Saturday you’re going on a blind date. Ah’ve already got a couple ponies in

mind, and we're gonna work on makin' sure you're ready by then," says Applejack. I open my mouth to object but Applejack won't listen. "Don't bother arguin' cause it isn't going to change my mind. Two weeks."

I resign myself to being thrown into the deep end of the dating pool to see whether or not I'll sink or swim. Even though I was ready to leave a moment ago Applejack spends the next ten minutes peppering me with questions, still trying to get a sense of what sort of pony she'll be setting me up with. I could only give her vague answers and I think we were both pretty frustrated by the time we finished and I left to head back to the library. Applejack promises slash threatens that she's going to have a date ready for me in a fortnight, whether I like the idea or not.

I head back to the library. There's plenty of books I can check to get a feel for proper dating behavior and etiquette. I don't have to let this catch me unprepared. I can't say I really feel like it, though. Maybe I'll kill the afternoon with my new Statistics textbook instead, just for fun. At least if I hole up in my library the day can't get any worse.

I walk into the library to find Spike waiting for me. "A letter came for you while you were gone. It looks important," he says gesturing to a letter sitting on the table. Unusually, the letter is sealed with both Celestia's and Luna's insignias. I think Spike was right about the letter being important. I break the seals and pull the letter open, giving it a quick once over.

"Spike, go get the rest of the girls and bring them back here," I say.

"Why? What's going on?" he asks.

"The world is ending. And it's all my fault."

One More Time Loop

ONE MORE TIME LOOP

It takes Spike about forty five minutes to round up the other five and bring them to the library. I try to put the time to good use, pulling every reference book I can think of that might be the least bit helpful. The texts in Canterlot will be more useful, but I could use a quick refresher on six-dimensional calculus before I try to crack this. Spike and the girls arrive as I'm skimming it as quickly as I dare.

"Thanks for coming, girls. We've got a big problem. I just got a letter from Celestia and Luna with some awful news. That time loop spell seems to have had some kind of weird side effect. Try not to panic when I tell you this, but it looks like the aether is decoupling itself from the underlying quantum framework of the universe," I say. I look into six blank faces. "That's bad."

"Dumb it down for us, Twi. How bad are we talking?" asks Rainbow Dash.

"If the decoupling... if the thingie happens all the way, time will literally stop. The universe will freeze and all of us will just be suspended in it forever. We'll basically cease to exist."

"Are you kidding me? Has it already started? Are there going to be, like, weird fast time places and slow time places everywhere?" she asks.

"The superstrings are completely entangled," I say.

Fluttershy gasps. "They are? Oh no... I think?"

"Actually that's good. It means that until the moment the thingie happens we won't even notice it in our day-to-day lives."

Rarity looks like she's on the edge of tears. She takes a deep breath and tries to put forth a stiff upper lip. "It's... it's been an honor to know you all, girls. Twilight, don't pull any

punches. I want to know; how long do we have left? Will I... Will I have time to see my family again? To say goodbye?"

"It's hard to say exactly how long. The rate of decay seems to be increasing. The Princesses ran some projections and worst case scenario, Equestria may only have three or four centuries left," I say.

The room falls silent.

"Did you just say centuries, Twi? As in a hundred years each?" asked Applejack.

"That's only the worst case. It could be longer," I say.

"Geez Twilight, you really had us worried there for a second. When Spike woke me up from my nap I thought it was for something important," says Rainbow Dash.

"How is this not important? It's the *end of the world*." I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"Yeah but not for a really really long time," says Rainbow Dash.

"It does lack a certain degree of urgency, you must admit," says Rarity. "Oh, as long as I'm here tell me how it went with Applejack. Did you pick out who you want to be your special somepony?"

"Nah, we talked about it and ah got a couple of ideas but ah wanna see how she does on a blind date. What do you think of her with Lily?" asks Applejack

"Hmm..." Rarity turns to look at me and I feel like I might be losing control of this conversation. "Lily's fun, but she's not much of a reader. I don't know how much they would really have to talk about. What about Lyra? She's a little eccentric, but she's sharp."

"Ah heard she and Bon Bon got back together a few days ago," says Applejack.

"What? Oh, Carrot Top will be just devastated. She really thought this might be her chance with Bon Bon. Tell me more, I need details!"

“Girls! Can we maybe spend a little less time discussing my love life and a little more discussing how we’re going to avert the coming apocalypse?” Honestly, some ponies need to seriously reexamine their priorities.

“Don’t you think the Princesses will just find a way to make it all better? What do you want us to do until then? Are we gonna get to use the Elements and be all ‘pull yourself together, time!’ and then make the Elements go *pew pew, pew pew* and somehow that magically makes everything normal again? Cause that’s what we usually do,” says Pinkie.

“I’m not sure yet,” I admit. “Since I’m the one who cast the spell in the first place I’ll probably be involved, maybe even as the focus. I don’t know if we’ll need the Elements at all. I’m going to go to Canterlot to help them figure this out, but I guess it would be alright for you to stay here in Ponyville and we can just call you if we need to use the Elements.”

“Um... do you think you’ll be alright with using time magic again? After what happened last time I mean,” says Fluttershy. I stop. I didn’t even think about that. Despite my best efforts the prospect sends a little shiver through my body.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. You don’t have to worry about me,” I say, my voice a little bit higher than it usually is.

My friends look at one another as I turn back to packing books into my saddlebags for the trip.

Rarity clears her throat, “You know, I’m running low on a few different fabrics that take forever to order. I could use a trip to Canterlot to restock.”

“We gotta shipment of apples to deliver there, wouldn’t hurt to make sure they get there just fine. Plus ah could try to find some new restaurants to sell to, meant to do that last time we were there but didn’t get the chance what with all the craziness that ended up happenin’,” says Applejack.

“There’s a mouse living in your parents’ wall. I negotiated a settlement between your family and him last time but it would be a good idea to make sure everypony is still getting along OK. I’ll come too,” says Fluttershy.

“Maybe I can get some last minute Wonderbolt tickets. I hear they’re performing in Canterlot this month,” says Rainbow Dash.

Pinkie looks at the four of them, confused. “Wow, that’s a crazy coincidence that you all have reasons you already wanted to go to Canterlot anyway! I’m only going because Twilight is super obviously scared about using time magic again but too proud to admit that she wants us to come with her for moral support.”

“Pinkie, remind me when we get back to explain the concept of ‘subtext’ to you,” says Rarity through a forced grin.

“What’s a subtext? Is it text that’s written in recursive?”

“Thank you girls. You’re right, I guess I am a little scared, and I would like it if you’d come to Canterlot with me,” I say. “I just feel like since this is my fault I need to fix it. Even if it isn’t going to happen for a long while, I can’t live with the idea that I might have broken the entire universe,” I say.

I guess that’s settled then. All six of us catch a train for Canterlot, and our ride there is pleasantly forgettable. I cherish every moment of casual chatter but I know that once we get to the Canterlot archives I’ll probably fixate on something that, while it takes me a few hours of studying, will turn out to be the solution to this problem.

Holy horseapples, I have absolutely no idea what the solution to this problem is.

I’m terrified. I’m studying an unfamiliar problem, which isn’t so bad or unfamiliar in and of itself, but what’s terrifying is that it isn’t working. I’ve read numerous books about this sort of thing and yet I still don’t know how to actually fix the mystery they should pertain to. It’s almost as if... Ok, this will sound ridiculous, but *I might have found a problem that can’t be solved with studying or friendship!*

Yes, I hate to admit it but it’s true. I’ve been picking at the edges of this problem for nearly a week now, but I’m not making any progress. Every time I feel like I might be on the

verge of a breakthrough, like I'm about to discover brand new time magic, I enter a state of altered consciousness.

That's really just a nice way of saying that I freak the buck out. This is so not fair. This is what I should be good at. By Tartarus this is practically all I'm good at! If I can't help the girls research new magic in response to a world ending threat what's even the point of keeping me around?

The girls are patient with me, and they haven't said anything, but I can tell they're getting restless. After a few days in Canterlot their already transparent excuses grew even thinner. Applejack and Fluttershy were the first two to leave, claiming their duties to the farm and the animals respectively. Pinkie left next, something about needling her vacation days for parties. I can't really blame them. Providing moral support is an important part of being a friend, but the dirty secret is that it can also be really boring.

I make an important decision; I can't solve this problem on my own. Maybe I have sort of a block about time magic. I can't imagine why. I mean, the last time I used it... well, I died several hundred times. But the time before that I... oh, right. Spent a week freaking out before learning that time magic couldn't actually change the past. In most cases magic could only create stable loops. Otherwise you got, well, exactly what I was dealing with right now. The not-really-all-that-imminent end of the world. At least the Princesses took it seriously. I guess being tens of thousands of years old meant that you don't procrastinate over armageddon just because it was a century or two off.

Who can I ask for help, though? The Princesses are both busy, not to mention they've made it clear they're counting on me to fix this and I don't want to let them down. There are probably only a few unicorns in the entire world who know enough about math and magic to even understand the nature of the problem.

I don't know who those unicorns are. But you know what? I know seven... wait... thirteen... no... let's just say I know lots of ways to find out who they are and bring them here. A summoning spell. It'll be perfect. Not only will the spell be

able to evaluate ponies on the criteria that I feed it but if the pony I get objects or won't help me I can just send him right back again. Still it can't hurt to take a few extra precautions.

"Spike, take a note for the Princess please. Spike?"

I look for him and find that he's drifted off for a nap in the corner, with a pile of books for a blanket. I hate to wake him, but I'd like to get this spell up and running as soon as I can. I write the letter out myself, asking Celestia to meet me right after she's lowered the sun for the day. That should give me enough time to get everything set up. I shake Spike until he wakes up a bit.

"Sorry, Spike. Could you send this to the Princess really quick? I asked her not to reply unless she has any objections so you can go right back to sleep after that, I promise."

He wordlessly grabs the letter and with a concentrated burst of dragonfire sends it off on its way before turning over and pulling an open volume of an encyclopedia onto himself and drifting off again. That's fine, I have plenty to do. I start double checking references and drawing out the magic circle I'll be using to cast it. I'll need a unicorn with powerful magic. One who knows all about time spells and the effects of unfinished magic spells. There may be some all nighters, so preferably somepony on the younger side too...

I spend the next couple hours covering as many different criteria as I can think of. The sun sets and the Princess walks in as I'm wrapping up the finishing touches, her pet phoenix Philomena perched on her back. "Perfect timing, Princess. Thank you for coming, I just wanted to make sure that you were here so that nothing could possibly go wrong."

Celestia smiles. "It's the least I could do, Twilight. You've attacked this problem with your usual diligence, and I'm proud that you've learned when to ask for help when you need it," she says. It's a fresh reminder that I never sent her the friendship report about the night the others held my little intervention, though of course she knows the details of the night itself. "What exactly are you planning to do here?"

I guess my letter had been light on details. “Well Princess, like you said I need somepony who can help me here but I don’t know what pony that should be. So I mixed a *Silver Slate’s Searching* with a *Crystal Chalice’s Calling* to find the kind of pony I’m looking for and bring them here straight away. Assuming he or she agrees to help, would it be alright for them to stay here at the palace in one of the guest rooms?”

“That would be just fine. This is an ingenious bit of spellcraft, Twilight. Well done,” says Celestia. My heart swells with pride (and maybe my head too, a little bit) as I bask in the praise.

“Thank you, Princess. Mind if I begin now?” I ask. Celestia nods and steps back from the magic circle. I move to just outside the perimeter and begin to push my magic into it, letting my will flow around all the different parts I’m about to put into motion. Once I’m confident I have a solid grip on it the real work begins and I throw the spell into gear. The world around me falls away and there’s nothing but me and the circle that I’m hoping will shortly contain the solution to my problem. The searching spell goes to work. Every pony in Equestria is connected to others, it’s just the nature of how the world works. The spell follows those connections and checks each pony I’m connected to for what I’ve told it I’m looking for, then every pony they’re connected to and then every pony *they’re* connected to and so on.

The first hit I get, almost immediately, can only be Celestia with Luna following shortly after. I don’t perceive them as ponies but rather as lists of information regarding how well they fit the description I gave the spell to work with. Of course they’re both excellent candidates to help me, but I reject them. I’m specifically looking for somepony besides them after all. A minute passes. Then five. Then ten. I have no idea how long has gone by out there in the real world. Casting magic tends to muck with my perception of time. The spell throws dozens of candidates that fit some but not all of the criteria I gave it, listing the pros and cons of each one. I probably should have thought to ask for names, but it’s not important enough that I’m going to risk modifying the spell on the fly.

I'm starting to grow frustrated. Surely there has to be some pony out there who's the answer to my problem. Just when I'm ready to give up hope and declare the spell a failure, a match comes up. In almost every category this pony is ideal, far and away better than anypony I've seen up to this point. I feel hope start to rise in my chest.

Time for the second part of the spell, the easier part. I just need to reach along the connection and sort of pull this pony to myself. I focus my mind and give a mental yank.

Nothing happens.

That's weird. Really weird, actually. I give another experimental yank but with the same result. Still nothing. I go to examine the connection that led the spell to this pony. I'm surprised to discover that he's connected to the ponies that I thought were the Princesses, and strongly. There's a connection to me too, and not through the link to the Princesses. Something independent. The spell should have reached this pony sooner than it did. There does seem to be something a little off about the connections though. Like it's too long, I guess? It's hard to put the sensation into words.

Celestia just praised me for coming up with this idea. I'm not going to fail, not when she's standing right there watching over me as I cast it. I'll just have to pull harder. I pour everything that I've got into the calling spell. It's surprisingly difficult, but I feel the stubborn pony at the other end of the spell slowly start to give. Then there's a snap and the spell takes. My concentration shatters as I fall back and hit the floor of the library at the sudden release.

When I get back up to my hooves there's a unicorn stallion lying in the circle, which is still glowing with a fading light. He's purple, though a darker shade than I am. If I had to guess I'd say he's about my age. His cutie mark is a circle of three stars with trails that interlock, like the image was captured as the three of them were chasing one another through the sky.

There's a sharp screech and I look over to where Celestia is standing. Something's driving Philomena positively nuts.

Before I can even get back up she darts over to the pony in the circle and start to peck at his head. He groans in response.

“Not right now, Philomena. I’ll feed you in a minute,” he says. He rises and looks over to Celestia, who’s staring at him.

“Princess, what happened? Last thing I remember we were going over some conjuration formulas, and then there was this pulling...”

Celestia seems to recover a bit of her composure. “I always wondered when this day would come,” she says more to herself than anypony in the room. “Why don’t you tell me what you think happened?”

The new pony seems to take this as a challenge. He looks down at the runes around the circle and focuses on a couple of them. “Well this looks like part of a summoning spell, so that explains the pulling. Not sure what this over here is, though.”

“It’s a searching spell,” I say. The pony looks up at me for the first time.

“You’re the one who summoned me, I take it?” he asked.

“Um, yes. I was looking for somepony to help me with some time magic.”

“Well you came to the right pony. Time spells are my specialty,” he says and looks down again. “Now I see it. You didn’t limit the search spell to only search through the present time, did you?” he asked. I guess I didn’t.

“I just didn’t think-” I begin.

“Yeah, that’s pretty clear,” he says cutting me off. “I’m in the future, right?”

“You seem awfully calm about that,” I say.

The pony shrugs. “I always sort of figured it would happen eventually, I just thought I’d be the one to do it to myself. Still, you’re dealing with time magic and didn’t specify time as a parameter in your search spell? Not the brightest candle on the chandelier, are you?”

“Excuse me?”

“My faithful student, that is quite enough,” says Celestia.

“Sorry Princess,” both the new pony and I say in unison. We turn to one another.

“She was talking to-”

“I’m the one she was-”

“Enough! Both of you!” says Celestia. We both cower a little, but we stop talking. “I see that introductions are in order. Twilight Sparkle, this is Star Swirl. He’s a former student of mine.”

“A former student of... Wait, Star Swirl? As in Starswirl the Bearded?”

“I’m famous in the future? Oh this is too cool,” says Star Swirl.

“Not another word, Twilight!” commands Celestia. “You have no idea how precarious this situation could be! I remember the day Star Swirl disappeared from one of our lessons. You will send him back, and he will tell me that he helped you solve a serious problem, as well as a few details of how it happened, which I am not at liberty to share with either of you. Star Swirl, it is critical that you never, ever tell anypony, including me, what you learn of here. This must remain a stable time loop. The spell itself will do most of the work, but if you intentionally deviate from what you would have done the strain to the timeline will become greater. It is already in a fragile enough state, any further changes could be catastrophic. If you learn that you did something in the past, you must make sure that it happens the same way when you return home.”

“But he doesn’t even *have* a beard!” I say.

“Relax Princess, I know the deal,” he says. He holds out a hoof and gives Philomena a friendly rub on the head and she nuzzles him with affection.

“You two seem close,” I say.

“Why wouldn’t I be close with the Best Assistant Ever?” asks Star Swirl. He holds his muzzle out to her and the phoenix

boops it with the tip of her beak.

“Phoenix fire can be enchanted to send letters, much like dragon fire can,” says Celestia. Her eyes get a little wider. I’ve known her long enough to recognize when she has mischief on her mind. “Actually, I think a demonstration would be edifying. Philomena, I believe that there’s somepony else we need to tell of this, isn’t there?”

Philomena seems puzzled for a moment, but then something passes between them and she perks up. She gives an excited coo. Celestia writes a quick note on a piece of nearby parchment and rolls it up in her magic before placing it on the ground. Philomena raises a wing and grips one of her loose feathers in her beak before gently pulling it out. She hops over to the letter and touches the feather to the parchment’s edge. The feather turns to ash and the parchment catches flame, sending up bright red sparks of magic. The sparks fly out the library’s open door and off towards whoever the recipient of the letter is.

“How far in the future are we exactly, anyway?” asks Star Swirl.

“Sixteen centuries,” says Celestia.

Now it’s Star Swirl’s turn to be surprised. “Sixteen centuries?” he asks. He turns towards me. “Wow, you’ve got some real power, don’t you? Pulling me across 1600 years can’t have been easy. What sort of time magic are you having trouble with, anyway?”

“We’re basically looking at a complete decoupling of the aether from the quantum framework of the universe,” I say.

Star Swirl’s jaw drops. “What? What could possibly have caused that?” he asks.

“Well, I kind of cast a spell that-”

“It was you? Wow, I was right before. You are an idiot. I don’t know how you got this kind of power but you obviously don’t know what you’re doing with it,” he says with a sneer.

“It was your spell!” I spit back before I can think better of it.

“Twilight! What did I *just* say?” says Celestia.

“What?” asks Star Swirl. “My spell?”

Celestia sighs. “I suppose you’ll have to find out the details in the course of investigating this. Twilight found some of your old notes and cast a spell that created a fixed point in time which she would return to after she died.”

I watch Star Swirl’s face, and I know inspiration when I see it. “You couldn’t... You really could do that, couldn’t you? I mean you’d have to balance the, no, wait, the instability itself would be essential to the spell’s functioning. Oh. Oh my goodness now that’s an idea. Like organized chaos.”

I’m literally watching the birth of the spell that will one day put me through the worst thing I’ve ever experienced.

“Star Swirl, you will work with Twilight to fix this. Perhaps you’ll learn something from her in the process. After all...” she leans her face uncomfortably close to his “...she’s the best student I’ve ever had.”

Whatever Star Swirl is about to say in reply is interrupted as a voice comes from out in the hallway outside the library.

“Honestly sister, I was about to begin the Night Court. What is so important that you’d ask me to drop everything... and...”

Luna enters the room and trails off. Her face is looking a little pale, like she’s just seen a ghost. I guess she sort of has.

“Star Swirl?”

Star Swirl grins. “Hey there, Lunatic.”

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen Luna move fast before. I’m pretty sure she clocked well over a hundred and eighty miles an hour when she was going to rescue my friends from a train that was about to be attacked by a swarm of changelings.

I’ve never seen her move as fast as she does between that doorway and Star Swirl as she tackles him. At first I think she’s attacking him but... well actually ‘attacking’ isn’t the worst word to describe it, just not quite the way I thought at first.

Luna comes up for air from their kiss first. “How?” she asks.

“Don’t really know, I just got here. Apparently something Twilight did.”

“For how long?”

“Until we fix whatever brought me here in the first place. Some kind of time loop?”

Luna smiles, predatory. “Oh, I know exactly what you’re referring to. It isn’t urgent. You can start first thing tomorrow morning. Sister? Please let my majordomo know that Night Court is cancelled tonight. I have other things to attend to.”

Celestia rolls her eyes, but doesn’t stop them from getting up and leaving together.

“So, sixteen hundred years? What have you been up to?” asks Star Swirl.

“Well, I turned evil and spent a lot of it banished on the moon. Kind of a funny story actually...”

“Don’t tell him that!” Celestia calls after them. She winces and sits back, massaging her temples. “Mother and Father preserve me.”

So. That all just happened.

“Princess? Can you explain any of that?”

Celestia sighs. “I’m sorry about that Twilight. Star Swirl is a very powerful magic user, who did great things. The magnitude of his intellect was matched only by that of his ego, especially in his younger years. He could always be a bit... acerbic.”

“That really is him? I can’t say I ever pictured him that way. Did he and Luna really-”

“Yes on both counts. Don’t repeat this to Star Swirl, but he and Luna were together on and off throughout his entire life. They could bring out the best in one another, as well as the worst. It was a turbulent relationship. And of course they both came to me with their complaints about the other,” says Celestia with a sigh. She’s doing that a lot tonight.

“They seemed pretty happy just now. How bad could it get?”

“Let me put it this way; did you hear his pet name for her?”

“Lunatic? Seems a little mean for a pet name,” I say.

“Sixteen centuries ago you wouldn’t have thought so. It didn’t enter widespread use as a word meaning ‘a crazy pony’ until *after* they started dating.”

I let that sink in for a moment. Oh. Oh dear. “So they can be difficult?”

“More like dysfunctional. By the way, Twilight? I meant what I said about you being the best student I’ve ever had, but you will need Star Swirl’s aid,” she walks over to me and spreads a wing over my shoulder. I barely feel it. Me! Best student! YESYESYESYESYESYES.

I don’t think that there’s anything that can sink my spirits after that. Then Celestia’s next sentence proves me wrong.

“From now until he returns to his own time, your assignment is to be Star Swirl’s friend.”

In Good Times and Bad

IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

I spend the rest of the evening doing background research on Star Swirl's life, sticking to the earlier years that he's already lived through. The information is pretty sparse beyond that he was taken as the Princesses' protege when he was young, although not as young as I had been at the time I was accepted. If they had a major falling out at some point nopony wrote about it, or the records didn't survive. What I saw back there was not the kind of student-mentor relationship that I'd always enjoyed with Celestia.

I give up on making progress into this tonight. I have breakfast with Rarity tomorrow morning before she heads back to Ponyville. Rainbow Dash left yesterday, so now it'll just be me in the library. Or I wish it would just be me, since I've been assigned a new study buddy. I probably won't see him until at least noon, he's sure to be tired after he and Luna are up all night...

...let's go with 'water skiing' as the euphemism of the day.

I call it a night and try not to think about weather vanes as I fall asleep.

I'm woken by a knock on my door around sunrise, a half an hour before my alarm is scheduled to wake me. I stumble over to the door bleary eyed and open it.

Can you guess who's standing there? I bet you can.

"Hello Star Swirl. What do you want? Why are you up so early, anyway?"

Not only is he not asleep, he looks completely rested. I hate him just a little bit more than I did when I went to bed.

"Technically, I'm up late. Polyphasic sleep. It's very useful when you have commitments to keep at midnight as often as at

noon. I just thought you might have wanted to get started on some research before breakfast. I took the liberty of sifting through your notes and I'm actually a little impressed. There were a few things in there that were almost half right," he says.

"Forgive me if I don't leap up clapping my hooves after such a wonderful compliment. I have breakfast plans already with a friend of mine," I say.

"Rarity, wasn't it? Luna suggested that I meet her as well," he says.

Oh, fewmets. So much for my last meal in pleasant company. "Well, if... the Princess... thinks so..." I say.

"Do you hear something grinding?" asks Star Swirl.

I do. It's my teeth. "No, you must just be going insane," is what I say instead. We make plans to meet up in an hour and walk down into Canterlot together to where Rarity and I arranged to meet for hay cakes and omelets. By ourselves. Not that my plans have such a great track record these days. I abandon all hope of getting back to sleep and instead hop into the shower to start getting ready for what will undoubtedly be a very long day. Still, I have an assignment from the Princess, not just to work with him but to... ugh... be his friend. Then it hits me. Celestia said there were things she knew about this loop we were in that she couldn't tell us right now. Maybe something I do or say has to be carried back into the past to make sure the time loop stays stable? She must just be trying to make sure whatever happens is organic and unforced.

So ditching him isn't an option. While it's true you never get a second chance to make a first impression maybe I can establish a few ground rules to mitigate his rampant jerkiness. If I lay down the law maybe we can at least build up a foundation of professional courtesy. It's better than nothing.

I throw on a simple sundress for the walk into town. I know for sure that Rarity will be showing off something of her own creation and I don't want to feel underdressed by virtue of, well, not being dressed. Star Swirl and I meet in the lobby of the castle. Oh Princesses he's actually wearing the robe

covered in stars and moons. No bells, though, I guess those came later.

“Hey Twilight, ready to go?” he asks.

“Nice robe,” I say trying so very hard to keep the amusement out of my voice.

“Thanks, Luna had it laying around, I guess she thought I’d look good in it,” he says. My brain tries as hard as it can not to connect the fact that Luna ‘just happened’ to have a period-accurate Starswirl the Bearded robe in her closet to what I’ve learned about their relationship over the last day. It fails.

“Come on, let’s go get this over with,” I say and head out the palace’s front door. It’s about a fifteen minute walk down to the restaurant, and I don’t want to be late. We walk through the streets for a few minutes without speaking.

“So this is future Canterlot, huh?” says Star Swirl breaking the ice.

“Sure is. Why, what was past Canterlot like?” I ask. I’m actually curious about that. I’m not supposed to tell him about the future, but that’s no reason I can’t learn more about the past from somepony who was actually there. I may never have an opportunity like this again.

“It was... livelier. More vibrant, not quite this buttoned down. This used to be a place ponies came to wander the streets, see art and listen to music,” he says.

“It still is. Canterlot is still the major cultural hub of Equestria,” I say.

“Let me guess, in galleries and performance halls at neatly scheduled times?” he asks.

I’m a bit puzzled at why he sounds so accusing when he says that. “Well, sure. Where else would you have it?”

“Everywhere! In my time there were acts or musicians on every street corner. You could spend an entire day just walking and every time you turned down a new street there would be something novel and exciting. I’m not saying there’s a right or

a wrong way, just that it's different. It's very... Celestia," he says.

I feel myself getting defensive. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"It's just all very rigid and predictable and orderly, and that's Celestia to a T. She was a good, no, a great teacher but I can't say she was ever my favorite Princess. She and Luna are opposites in more ways than just being the day and the night," he says before he trails off. "The way Celestia looked at me last night... what happened to us? No, don't tell me even if you know. It's better if I find out for myself. Look, Twilight, speaking of last night I probably came across as a little critical. You actually seem like a really smart mare, almost as smart as I am," he says.

Wow, that was very nearly something resembling an apology. Maybe I can meet him halfway here. "Well, I'm glad that you'll at least admit that. I really am looking forward to working with you on this. I think that as long as we can both agree to treat the other with the dignified respect our knowledge and abilities deserve--"

"Oh, shut up for one second. Hey! Hey you!" says Star Swirl, shouting at some brown earth pony stallion with a rugged manecut and an hourglass for a cutie mark. So much for that idea.

Star Swirl marches over to the other pony. "Thought I'd forgotten, didn't you? You still owe me fifty bits from the thing with the volcano and the eggplants," he says. The brown stallion grumbles something I can't make out, but reaches into his saddlebags and pulls out a small bag of bits, which he hoofs over to Star Swirl. "Now we're even then. See you earlier."

"What was that about?" I ask as Star Swirl trots back over to me.

"Don't worry about it. That one's a hard pony to track down. Anyway, were you saying something?"

I'm tempted to just let it go, but that was just too strange.
"How could you know him? Is he from the past too? Can he help us with what's going on?" I ask.

"He's from... around," says Star Swirl, annoyingly vague. "If he decides to get involved I'm sure we'll stumble across him again, but don't worry. We've got me."

"Gee, I feel so much better now," I say.

"As well you should," he says. His supposedly boundless talents obviously don't include sarcasm detection. Thank harmony we're within sight of the restaurant. Rarity's beaten us there and gotten a table already. The fact that she's sitting in one of the *two* chairs at the table is just another reminder of the worthless load shackled to me here.

"Hi Rarity, hope you weren't waiting long. Would you mind if my new..." a wicked thought crosses my mind, "...*assistant* here joins us for breakfast? He'll be helping me with this time problem I've been working on. Star Swirl, meet Rarity. She's one of my closest friends from Ponyville." I step back and wait, the trap laid. I give Star Swirl three, maybe five words before he manages to say something so monumentally arrogant that he earns himself a slap across the face or, in my wildest dreams, an immensely satisfying verbal beatdown from my friend.

Star Swirl bows down and takes Rarity's front hoof, lightly kissing the back of it. "The pleasure and honor are all mine, milady Rarity. The Princess told me how beautiful you were but her words barely did your stunning visage proper justice. And that dress! One of your own designs, I presume? It complements your mane just perfectly."

Oh, *come on!*

Rarity blushes at the compliments. "Oh my, that's very kind of you to say, sir. The Princess you say? Yes, you absolutely must join Twilight and myself for breakfast," she says. Her magic pulls up a chair for him from a vacant table, noticeably closer to hers than it is to mine. He sits in the chair next to Rarity and I take my place across from them.

“Please send my best to the others when you get home, would you Rarity? I’m not sure when I’ll get back there again,” I say. I wave over the waiter and we place our order.

“Why, of course, Twilight. But you’ll be back there before your date on Saturday, I would imagine. ” says Rarity trying to hide her smile behind the cup of tea she’s sipping from.

“I don’t know if-”

“Oh, you aren’t wriggling out of this just because the world is ending. If we wait for a period of quiet to launch you kicking and screaming out onto the dating scene, we’d be waiting a very long time indeed. You have hundreds of years to figure this out, but you’re going to enjoy your youth whether you want to or not. Unless...” Rarity raises an eyebrow and leans in. “You and Star Swirl here haven’t struck up a little something on the side have you?” asks Rarity.

“NO! NonononononononoNONONONONO!” I say. Rarity smiles. I’m sure that was exactly the reaction she was trying to provoke. You don’t stay friends with Rarity without learning to let her have a little fun at your expense every once in awhile. The horseshoes been on the other hoof more than a few times.

Star Swirl chuckles. “I’m in a committed relationship with Princess Luna, milady. Not that Twilight is unattractive but I’m afraid my heart is spoken for,” he says.

Rarity coughs on her tea. “You and Luna? When... How...” She also shoots me a meaningful look at the mention of Luna’s name.

Star Swirl laughs aloud. “It’s a rather long story, I think. I’m from another time in her life. Ms. Sparkle’s magic pulled me here from the past to help her out of the predicament the timeline finds itself in.”

That gives Rarity pause. “Is that why you’re wearing what looks like Twilight’s old Nightmare Night costume? You’re *that* Star Swirl?”

It’s my turn to cough into my tea, nearly sending some of it up my nose in the process. I’d completely forgotten that, I’ll

never hear the end of it Star Swirl if knows I dressed up as him.

“What’s Nightmare Night?” asks Star Swirl.

“NOTHING IMPORTANT SO LET’S ALL TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE INSTEAD!” I say. Maybe slightly more emphatically than I meant to.

The conversation, along with the conversations at several nearby tables, screeches to a halt. I sink down in my chair.

“Hey, who wants to hear about the math behind this time problem?” I say. Half the restaurant groans and turns away. At least they’re predictable. I’ll never get that reaction though. Math is *awesome*!

“Twilight, honestly, you’ve tried to explain this to us seven or eight times now and I’m no closer to understanding it than I was before. Don’t bother with round nine,” says Rarity.

“If I may? Perhaps I could try to elaborate on the nature of the problem?” suggests Star Swirl. You know what? Fine. Let him try to stumble through the graph theory and the fuzzy borderline between Coltonian physics and quantum mechanics.

“I suppose I can listen to it one more time,” says Rarity.

“You’re a designer and a seamstress Ms. Rarity, could I trouble you for a small length of yarn?” asks Star Swirl. What? Where is he going with this?

“Yarn? Well, I have some I could part with in my saddlebags.”

“Just a few inches will do, I only need it for demonstrative purposes,” says Star Swirl.

Rarity brings up a foot or so of cheap-looking yarn from her side, and Star Swirl takes it from her.

“Imagine that this yarn represents time,” he says. “See how it’s made up of many strands twisted together?”

“I suppose...” says Rarity, furrowing her brow.

“Imagine that time is the same way. It’s not one unbroken line like you might think but rather many different possible paths

twisted together, all bubbling up through each other and rolling around. Have you ever lost something and later found it somewhere you could have sworn you never put it?" asks Star Swirl.

"Who hasn't?" asks Rarity. I have to admit that I'm getting engaged in his little demonstration too. This is something he's passionate about, and his excitement is infectious.

"Nopony. It's universal. Time is shifting around us all the time. Misremembered moments, *deja vu*, it's all time making little changes and tweaks to account for discrepancies. Most ponies never even realize it's happening," he says. He pulls both ends of the yarn with his magic. "See? Usually this sort of pressure just pulls the different threads tighter together. With me so far?" he asks.

"I think so," says Rarity.

"Now, Twilight's time loop spell..."

"Which was actually *your* time loop spell, I'd remind you," I say.

"Either way, the spell messed up the way things usually work by sending new timelines flying off in every direction which if it's allowed to go unchecked..." he grips the different strands individually and pulls them in different directions. The yarn frays and splits apart. If you can get past the part where everything he just said is, technically speaking, utterly incorrect in every meaningful way it's a pretty good explanation.

"So you two are trying to... twist it back together again?" asks Rarity.

"Can't be done, I'm afraid," he says. He pauses for a moment to let that sink in while our food arrives. He takes a bite of hay cakes while I tuck into my blueberry waffle. "We have to cut off the other timelines from this one. Any one you died in should be fine, but if there are other possible futures where you survived that are significantly different from this outcome we'll have to go through and snip them off before they pull us apart."

“Won’t we still be on the one fiber of yarn though? Either way?” asks Rarity.

“If we do it correctly the, uh, fiber will... grow more yarn... and I think it’s time to put the yarn metaphor to bed at this point,” says Star Swirl. “Twilight, tell me everything about how you got out of the loop. I saw in your notes that Celestia used the Elements, or something similar?”

“Celestia didn’t use them, my friends and I did.” I say.

“Ha! Mortals using the Elements, ridiculous. Really though, what happened?” he asks.

Rarity and I look at one another, not sure what to say. “It’s just as Twilight said. I should know, I’m the Bearer of Generosity myself,” says Rarity.

He stares at us blankly for a few moments while that registers with him. I try not to smile. He didn’t even know it was possible. He’ll have to be impressed now.

“*Are you two insane?*” he hisses. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? What the long term consequences could be? How did you even figure out you could use those?”

“It wasn’t the first time. My friends and I used them at least twice before this against Nightmare Moon and Discord. You don’t have to tell me they can be dangerous. I watched them blow up Canterlot about a hundred times over,” I say.

“Does Celestia know all this?” he asks.

“Of course. If it hadn’t been for her the six of us never would have found one another in time to use them,” says Rarity.

“Yeah, that does sound like her. Pieces on her chessboard,” says Star Swirl bitterly. “I’m sure she had a plan for you all along, and probably still does.”

“Hey! The Princess loves me, she wouldn’t ever just use me like that. Sure, sometimes she has me help her with things but she always makes sure I have what I need and I usually get something out of it too, like all my friends in Ponyville,” I say.

“I’m not saying she’s evil, Twilight, or that she doesn’t love you, but that’s just what she is. She could no more stop

planning and organizing than you or I could stop breathing. If she put you in danger I'm sure it was only because she had to. Used the Elements... Stars and stones Twilight I hope you know what you're doing. The destinies of your little gang are going to be tied together for the rest of your lives, for better or worse. That's how they work, you know. They can't create or destroy anything. Only rewrite the fate of their hosts and targets to bring them into line with the underlying harmony of Equestria, at least that's the best I've been able to figure." he says and shakes his head. Half of his hay cakes sit uneaten. Seems he's lost his appetite.

"Well I for one don't care if it's part of a scheme or plan of some sort. I've never been happier than I have been these last few years. If it wasn't originally my destiny to meet Twilight and my other friends, then phooey to destiny!" says Rarity as she drops more than enough bits to cover her share of the bill on the table and dabs the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "On that note, I really must be going if I'm going to catch my train. Twilight? Best of luck with saving the universe but you'd better not miss our appointment with the mane dresser Friday afternoon, understood?"

"Friday afternoon, then. Give my love to the others, would you?"

"Of course, dear," she says and after gathering up the three suitcases and trunk she has for luggage she hails a carriage and leaves. I turn back to Star Swirl, who's poking at his hay cakes, listless.

"What is it with you and Princess Celestia, exactly? Did Luna try to turn you against her back then or something?" I ask.

"Of course not, Luna would never do that. I learned from both of them, equally. Your problem is that you only ever got half an education. Without Luna, I'd probably have turned out as some hyper-anal bookworm obsessed with planning and scheduling every minute of my life, totally unable to see the bigger picture and terrified of ever deviating from whatever grand plan Celestia had set out for me," he says.

“Humor me, then, what exactly was so important that she taught you that I haven’t learned?” I ask.

Star Swirl leans back in his chair and grins at the memories. “Spontaneity. The value in taking chances, and letting things you’re unsure of play out and the chips fall where they may. Creative destruction. Even just living passionately and embracing the highest of the highs with the lowest of the lows. Celestia taught me that moderation was key in all things, but Luna taught me that that was especially true in the case of moderation itself.”

I blink a few times. “That... doesn’t really sound like the Luna I know. I mean she has her quirks but she’s been supportive of Celestia’s philosophy since she got back from the moon,” I say.

Star Swirl shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “She’s... not like I remember her, this modern her I mean,” he says and we descend into quiet contemplation. My waffle’s gotten cold and I poke at it just a few more times before I abandon it for good. “Did you know that she invented music?” asks Star Swirl.

“She did?” I drop enough bits on our table to cover our check plus a generous tip and we begin to walk back to the palace.

“A very, very long time ago. Celestia tried first to arrange chords into music by choosing only the most pleasing combinations of sounds. Only chords that displayed consonance, a perfect resolution in and of themselves, were even considered. Celestia believed that there would be one ideal song, a perfect arrangement of resolved chords, but after years of searching she never found it. Meanwhile, Luna was the one to take the abandoned and rejected dissonant chords Celestia felt unworthy of her attention. She took the imperfect parts she had at her disposal and arranged them in assorted combinations, but could never find the right notes to end her work, it was always open and incomplete. Finally the sisters thought to compare notes, if you’ll pardon the pun. When they brought their respective strengths to bear on the question, the solution became obvious. Both consonant and dissonant chords were combined, and the very first song was brought

before ponies, with thousands of voices rising up to sing it,” says Star Swirl.

“That doesn’t sound like Luna invented music. It sounds like the two of them were equally important in its creation for different reasons,” I say. I bring a hoof up to my face as what I’ve just said hits me. “That was exactly your point all along, wasn’t it?”

Star Swirl just grins. “Two Princesses. Two very different personalities and types of magic. Two halves of a whole. That’s been missing from this kingdom for a long time. Maybe Celestia tried to encourage some of the same things that Luna did while she was ruling alone, but it’s not her strength.”

“Celestia ruled for a millenium by herself, and I’d say we’re doing just fine,” I say.

“Yeah I bet you would. How was your last Full Moon Feast?”

“Our what now?”

“Exactly. How about your last Supernova Supreme Celebration?”

I just stare blankly. I’ve never even heard of one of those.

“That’s what I thought. Luna never came back from the moon, not all the way,” he says. He turns and starts trotting back towards the palace without me.

“Hey! At least explain what’s going on!” I trot after him and catch up. “How did you two even end up involved, anyway?” I ask.

“She was explaining the effects of the moon on the tides,” says Star Swirl with a grin. “I decided I was sick of waiting for her to notice me, so I tackled her in the middle of one of our private lessons and kissed her.”

“That’s it?”

“Didn’t I say a few minutes ago that she taught me spontaneity? Most effective lesson I ever had,” he says. “What can I say? You only live once.”

That phrase makes me want to smack him for a number of reasons but I refrain. I just want to get this research over with. The longer we go without speaking, the more agitated he seems to be getting. Finally we reach the palace gates and I can't take it any more.

"Star Swirl, hold on," I say. "Before we go in there can we talk about what's bothering you, please?"

"You wouldn't understand, Twilight. Just leave me alone and let me work this out on my own. You need my help but I'm not interested in yours," he says and walks into the palace ahead of me.

The tension doesn't really ebb as we reach the library but I'm pretty sure that we're both eager to throw ourselves into the work to avoid the other things we could be talking about. Spike is there and to my surprise so is Philomena, eager to play the role of assistant again. We ask our respective helpers to fetch us some books and they both go for the same one first. Inwardly I groan as I watch them start to squabble over who gets to bring it back to us. I'm sure before the end of the day I'll be glad they're both fireproof.

As we get to work I'm able to forget how unpleasant he is and we slip into swapping thoughts and ideas about time spells. I'm not used to being the pony in the discussion who has to work to keep up with a peer intellectually, but I'm holding my own and even manage to correct Star Swirl once or twice. After half an hour it's almost pleasant.

Then Luna walks in and I know immediately it's all about to go straight to Tartarus.

"Just wanted to pop in and say hello to my two favorite geniuses," she says. A rather transparent lie but it's not like I'm going to call her on it. She walks in and sidles up to Star Swirl, lowering her head until they're ear to ear. "What are you reading?"

Oh, get a bedchamber you two.

Star Swirl smiles and leans against her cheek in response. She blushes. "You know, you should really cross reference this

passage here on probability decay with Wild Card's work on thaumaturgical cross-interference. The book I'm thinking of is way back in the deeper parts of the stacks. I can't remember the title off hoof but I know just where it is. Would you like to come back there with me to fetch it?" Luna asks.

This is not happening. I am not watching this happen right in front of me. Maybe if I keep telling myself that I'll eventually will myself to believe it.

"Actually, can we just talk for a bit Looney?" he asks. I sigh in relief a bit too loudly and they both look over at me. I bury myself even further into the book I'm pretending to read and don't glance up until they've turned back to one another.

"What did you want to talk about?" Luna asks.

"Why you aren't acting like the mare I fell in love with," says Star Swirl. Can I retract my sigh of relief? Is that a thing you can do?

Luna seems taken aback. "What are you talking about? I'm acting like I always do, aren't I? Perhaps I've been over eager to see you, but it was just such a surprise when you appeared-"

"No, Princess, that's just about the only way you've been yourself. I went into Canterlot today for breakfast with Twilight, and there's no *you* there anymore. What happened to all the street music? You loved that, we both did," he says.

Luna shifts uncomfortably under the question. "It died out while I was... away. The best of it still lives on, I've heard a few symphonies that bear a trace of that influence even after so long. Star Swirl, understand that this is a different time now. It's a safe time, prosperous, not as wild as it used to be," she says.

"It was wild because you made it that way! You were always there to encourage the crazy, the irrational, the out-of-left-field but now you're holding all that back. Do you think Celestia would ever have had the idea to build a city sticking out of a mountain on her own? Or she could ever come up with something like Project Everfree?" he asks.

“Project Everfree didn’t exactly turn out the way we expected,” says Luna.

“Exactly! You were the patron saint of ideas that didn’t turn out in predictable ways! You were the happy medium between stagnation and total chaos. You told me once you went on a six month bender where you threw yourself into art to the extent that it kicked off the entire Bitalian Reneighssance. Why would you want to deny that part of you?” he asks.

“Because it isn’t all good. Don’t idealize me this way. Last time I let myself go like that was a thousand years ago, and I told you how that turned out. A lot of ponies got hurt because of me, even...” Luna trails off and shakes her head as if that will clear away the memories. “It’s better this way. Stability is more important right now.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this from you of all ponies. Celestia didn’t stop you, she *tamed* you. She turned you into what she thinks you should be instead of who you are,” says Star Swirl.

Meanwhile on the other end of the table, I’m torn between competing desires. Half of me doesn’t want to tear myself away from watching this, and the other half is screaming at me to flee the blast radius right now.

“How *dare* you speak to me that way? You know nothing, and you presume to reappear sixteen hundred years after your time and dictate to me how I should behave?” Luna asks. Angry tears are beginning to stream down her cheeks, but Star Swirl seems unmoved.

“I know enough about you to know when you need to be reminded of how wonderful you are. Or were, at least,” he says.

For a moment I’m sure that Luna is going to strike him physically, but instead she just stands up and backs away. “Finish your work and go back to your own time, Star Swirl. I don’t ever want to see you again,” she says and turns away. She makes for the door at a quick walk, determined to maintain what’s left of her dignity. I’m not sure where Spike and Philomena are but I’m left alone with Star Swirl, who’s

positively seething with anger but not speaking. It's the mother of all awkward silences.

"Um... Do you want to take a break? Or talk about what just happened?" I ask.

Star Swirl slams a hoof down on the table. "Buck this. We're getting nowhere on this time spell. I'm cheating," he says and stands up.

"Cheating? How?" I ask.

"Did I ever write a book of prophecies?" he asks.

I bite my lip and wonder how much to say. It's true that he did, or will from his perspective, write a book like that. It was a bit of an outlier compared to his other works, actually. Most of them never came true at all, and a bunch of the others were debatable at best. Still, I don't want to give him too much information about his own future. "Yes, there's a book like that," I say.

"Go bring me a copy," he says.

"No way. I'm not letting you read a book of prophecies you haven't made yet," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not going to read it. Now go get me a copy or I'll go poking around all the other books I haven't written yet and find it myself. Think Celestia would want that?"

"Fine," I say. I can't help but notice that I've apparently been demoted to 'assistant' in his mind.

It only takes me a minute to retrieve the book in question.

"Not so fast," I say as he moves to take it. "How are you planning to use this if you aren't reading it?"

Star Swirl glares at me and I match his gaze for a moment before he gives in. "I can't tell anypony in the past what I do here or what happens, but if I keep it vague I can send myself a message without anypony figuring out what I'm talking about. I'll make sure I write one into that book during my future," he says.

“If it’s so vague no pony knows what it is, how are we supposed to figure out which one of these it is without reading them?” I ask.

“Like this,” he says and grabs the book with his magic and flings it hard against a nearby wall. It falls to the ground, open to a random page.

“Careful! That’s a first edition!” I shout at him. He ignores me and walks over to the open book.

“Remember page three-zero-eight for me,” he says. He reads the words on the page and his face goes pale. He looks up at me and closes the book.

“What did it say?” I ask. I’m not liking that reaction.

“I don’t think I should tell you. Besides, it’s vague. It could mean a lot of different things other than the obvious so you really shouldn’t worry about it at all,” he says.

I’m way beyond asking his permission to read that kind of information at this point. The benefit of the doubt only gets you so far. I yank the book away from him with my magic and, over his protests, open it to the right page. There’s only a few lines written there and it takes just a second to read them.

*When the mare of many lives
Seeks to close the final loop and restore harmony
She will travel to a place outside of our time
And give herself over to madness and death*

I've Had The Time of My Life

I'VE HAD THE TIME OF MY LIFE

“Don’t panic, Twilight. You’re no good to either one of us if you start to panic,” says Star Swirl. Easy for him to say. He didn’t just read that he was going to go crazy and die. I thought I was done with this. I was moving on, getting better. Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? “Twilight? Talk to me. Look, this might not be as bad as it seems. It’s vague, and it probably doesn’t mean what you think it does. Heck, it might not even come true. I have to write this to preserve the loop, maybe it just inspires us to find the right answer some other way,” he adds.

“Do you really believe that?” I ask him, because I don’t. He hangs his head and it’s clear that he doesn’t either. I look up at nothing in particular. The midday sun is shining through the windows high above us, creating hard-edged shafts of light in the otherwise gloomy library. A particular speck of dust drifting through the light catches my eye and I watch it dancing on tiny currents of air until it sinks out of sight and disappears back into the darkness. I try to focus on another one, but my vision’s a little blurry. Stupid tears.

Star Swirl looks like he desperately wants to say the right thing, whatever that is in a situation like this. I get the feeling that being supportive isn’t something that comes naturally to him. “Forget the madness and death part for now. Travel to a place outside of time probably refers to alternate futures or timelines. Your destiny must have been something different before you changed it with the Elements. We’ll have to find the timeline with that destiny and cut it off at the source. I think I can get us there, with a little research. Hey, even if you do die maybe it isn’t for a really long time.”

“Celestia said that you’d solved this before you went back to the past, and I think if you went back several decades older

than when you left somepony would have written it down,” I say. I don’t want to die any more. I just figured out how much I have to live for.

“Hey, nopony’s had more practice dying and coming back to life than you, right?” he asks.

I slap him, hard, before I even know what I’m doing. There’s a time and a place for trying to lighten the mood with humor, and he hasn’t earned the right to be cavalier about this. He’s been nothing but terrible to me since he got here and I’m not going to take it any more. He’s stunned for a moment before he turns back wordlessly to look at me and wipes his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue or something because there’s a bit of blood on his hoof.

“This isn’t funny,” I say. “You might know that this little adventure has a happy ending for you, but it might not for me. You’ve been a jerk to me since the moment you got here and I’m sick of it.”

“Twilight, I-”

“No. Shut up. Anything you’re going to say is too little, too late. I’ve met ponies who are jerks before, and even gotten along with them sometimes. You’re worse than they are. No wonder Luna wants you to just go away, and you don’t have any friends back in the past. You’re awful. You think that just because you’re smart the world should rearrange itself around you and give you whatever you want,” I say. Star Swirl opens his mouth to reply, but I’m on a roll. “You know how to be nice! I saw how you treated Rarity. That’s even worse than if you just didn’t understand how to behave. You’re a bastard by choice. I can’t even comprehend the messed-up thought process that would lead to you deciding to be this way. Well, guess what? It worked. Honestly, I’d rather f... fa... not pass an assignment from Princess Celestia than be your friend.” I get up from the table and start to walk away.

“Hey! Where are you going? We still have work to do. How am I supposed to solve this by myself?” he asks.

“You think you’re so smart, I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” I say without turning around. I push the doors of the

library open and walk out into the hall, stopping to listen to them slam shut behind me. I just want to sink into a very dark hole and never crawl out of it. Before I do, I should probably tell the Princess what happened. I can't believe I didn't even last a full day with Star Swirl. That pony has a gift, albeit a sick and twisted one, for getting under my skin.

It's almost lunch time. I'm not hungry, but I'm sure that the Day Court will be taking a break soon. The Princess likes to have a little time to herself in the middle of the day to gather her thoughts and take care of any personal business, and that's always included me before. Sure enough, nobles and bureaucrats are streaming out of the throne room as I approach it, and I have to fight against the tide just to keep from being swept along. When I do push through the crowd I find myself in a mostly empty great hall as the last stragglers make their way out of the room. Celestia is seated on her throne reading something from a piece of parchment, but she looks up after a moment.

"Oh, hello Twilight. How are you and Star Swirl getting along?" she asks.

I wince under the question. "Not so well, Princess. I'm sorry. I think I messed everything up. He and Luna had a big fight and she broke up with him, and there's a prophecy, and then I had a fight with him, and... Well, like I said, it's not going very well. I know you wanted me to be his friend, but I'm not sure that I can," I say.

Celestia frowns. "I see. I know that Star Swirl can be hard to get along with and I understand how you must feel about him. The two of you are really quite similar in some ways and yet so very different in others. Don't worry about his relationship with Luna, the two of them seemed to find some reason to break up every few months or so but they always find one another again eventually," she says.

"He said she's different now than she used to be. Is that true?" I ask.

Celestia rolls up the parchment and places it at the side of the throne before answering. "It is. She's been a bit more hesitant

since she returned from the moon. She's getting better, gradually, but I'm sure that Star Swirl picked up on the differences. I'm also sure that whatever he said was a blunt and tactless way of expressing his concerns, but maybe Luna needs that. It's not my place to try and control my sister's personal life even if I do worry about her sometimes."

I think about that for a second, and something Celestia said earlier comes to my mind. "You say we're similar. You told me something like that before, too," I say. The wheels in my head are turning and I see Celestia giving me the smile she always does when I'm about to figure out something important. It's always been her style to give me just enough information and let me put the pieces together for myself.

"The locator spell said that I was connected to him independent of my connection to you, or to Luna."

"That's right. You are."

"You said that Luna and Star Swirl were together for his entire life, right? Did they ever..." I trail off. What I'm about to suggest will have to be phrased very delicately. It feels wrong to even think about. Lucky for me the Princess finishes the thought so I don't have to.

"They did. A daughter, in fact. Shooting Star was her name, if I'm remembering correctly," says Celestia.

"And was she... I mean, am I... am I related to her?" I ask.

"You are indeed. Very cleverly deduced, Twilight," says Celestia like it's nothing especially important. Meanwhile my thoughts are running in a million directions at once. I'm descended from Star Swirl? And one of the Princesses? But that would mean that when Luna and I...

Oh dear.

Celestia notices my distress and chuckles. "Relax Twilight, it was sixteen hundred years ago. You're, what, forty or fifty generations removed from both of them? You're probably more closely related to a random unicorn wandering the streets of Canterlot, genetically speaking."

“But... I’m the Element of Magic. Am I only special because I’m descended from an alicorn and a powerful archmage?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

“Absolutely not Twilight. You certainly are special, but it’s not because of the blood that flows in your veins. Your accomplishments are entirely your own. You’re hardly the only pony related to Luna, or myself for that matter. Think about it. Assume that Shooting Star started a family of her own, which she did, and had two children. Then assume that each of those children had two children and so on for forty generations. How many descendants total would they have?”

“Sigma two to the N power for N ranging from one to forty. Which is... uh... a lot,” I say. It would be well over a trillion, easily. Certainly more ponies than are alive in Equestria today.

“Shooting Star wasn’t Luna’s first child, either, and probably won’t be her last. She’s had eleven through the ages, by eleven different fathers. I’m not immune to the pleasures of the flesh either, Twilight. Mortal stallions have caught my eye in the past as well. I’ve been a mother nine times over myself, and eight of them went on to have families of their own. My children are inevitably mortals, and I’ve never given them any special title or any great wealth. We have enough noble houses as it is without me creating more. I would much rather my foals make a name for themselves with their own achievements. All I’ve ever needed to give them is my love, support, and every once in awhile a swift kick in the flank to motivate them,” she says. She’s not looking at me any more, instead she’s lost in her reminiscence.

“What happened to the ninth?” I ask. Celestia is jolted out of her memories. I don’t think she was expecting a follow up question.

“I’m sorry?”

“You said that eight of your foals started families of their own. What about the ninth one?”

Celestia gives me a sad little smile, and is silent for a few moments before she answers. “Morning Glow. My youngest. I had him a little over a thousand years ago. His father was a

great general, a pegasus. Glowie wanted to follow in his hoofsteps and joined the royal guard. I'm sure he would have been a great leader himself, given time. But then came the morning that Nightmare Moon refused to allow me to raise the sun. Technically, Morning Glow abandoned his post... to protect his mother. He was badly injured in the fight, and a few days later..." Celestia shakes her head. "I'm sorry, I'd really rather not talk about this. Lots of ponies died that day, and I've mourned them all. They're all like my children."

"Luna killed her own nephew?" I ask, not fully able to believe it. My own problems are forgotten for the time being. The details of that day have mostly slipped away into the mists of history, one of Celestia's conscious decisions to make Luna's return a little bit easier on everypony. Everypony except herself.

"Nightmare Moon killed my son. There's an important difference," she says. I don't know if that's true or just a rationalization on Celestia's part. Luna doesn't talk much about the exact nature of the relationship between herself and Nightmare Moon.

"Have you talked about this with her?" I ask.

"Of course not. If she doesn't know already there's no reason for me to add that to her burden. She has enough she feels like she needs to repent for already," says Celestia.

"Princess, respectfully, I think you're wrong. I think she knows on some level and you two need to talk about it. What if in a few decades she starts looking into the time period and finds out from somepony else? She needs to find out from you. If she really is different than she used to be, maybe this is part of why," I say.

"I'll consider it," says Celestia in a tone that implies finality. I don't think I've changed her mind, though.

I turn to leave before an idea hits me. "Princess, there's a friendship report I haven't sent you, it's from a little while ago but if you don't mind I'd like to just present it verbally rather than writing it down. Would that be alright?" I ask.

Celestia looks at me, suspicious, but eventually nods. “Go ahead.”

“Dear Princess Celestia,” I begin, “today I learned that sharing a burden that’s weighing you down is the best way to get past it. Even if something is dark, or scary, or hard to talk about you shouldn’t hide it from the ponies that love you. You aren’t making them happier, or keeping them safe, or even being kind to them. You’re just making it harder for them to understand why you’re hurting. Even though it isn’t easy, the best thing you can do is just open up to them about what’s bothering you. They might not like it, and they might even be angry at you for what you did or felt, but the only way for everypony to move past it is to talk about it. In the end, they’ll usually understand. That’s a mark of a true friend... or a family member. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.”

It’s not my best report. Some of the wording is a bit awkward, and if I were writing it down I’d probably do a couple more drafts to get it right, especially a report as important as this one. In the end, though, it’s more important that Celestia hears it from me right now than that the words are perfect.

“That’s... a good lesson. A-plus, as usual. I’ll keep it in mind,” she says. I have no idea what she’s decided to do, but I’ve done all that I can do here.

“I’m going to go back to Ponyville for a while, Princess. I think I’ll make more progress if Star Swirl and I work independently. I’ll send you a letter if I find anything,” I say. I turn to leave again, for real this time. There’s a lot to do before I head back to Ponyville, so first things first I track down Spike and give him a list of books I want him to check out of the royal library. I’d go do it myself if I wasn’t avoiding Star Swirl. Then it’s off to my room to pack up my things. I should have listened to my friends in the first place. This isn’t an urgent problem at all. I have a date coming up. How about I focus on that for the next few days rather than always be worried about saving the world? Somepony else can take care of it. Heck, maybe the point of that prophecy was to drive me away so that Star Swirl can fix the problem on his own. More power to him if that’s the case. The sooner he figures it out the

sooner we can put sixteen centuries between us again. I can't believe I used to look up to him!

"Twilight? You're muttering to yourself again," says Spike. At some point he returned to my room with the books I'd asked for and I didn't even notice. I look down at what I'm doing as I realize that I just packed one of my suitcases inside of another, larger suitcase. All the things I brought with me from Ponyville are strewn haphazardly around the room without any apparent rhyme or reason.

"I got kind of distracted there for a second, sorry," I say. I grab the books in my magic and begin to pack them up into my bags. Spike doesn't ask for an explanation as to why we're heading back to Ponyville so soon and I don't volunteer one. It's a lot of work to pack everything up, but with all the back and forth I've been doing between Ponyville and Canterlot these days I've gotten pretty good at packing efficiently. We're ready quickly enough that I'm able to make a mid-afternoon train. I'll be back home in my library in time for a late dinner.

These last few days just flew by.

I haven't heard anything from Canterlot, and I assume that no news is bad news. I'm trying as hard as I can not to care but I just can't. That's why I'm sitting up in my bedroom dressed in an evening gown and my favorite pair of amethyst earrings reviewing a copy of *Time Travel and its Interaction With Quantum Mechanics for Foals* as I try as hard as I can not to mess up my mane-do. It took nearly three hours at the spa to get just right, although I suspect that two of those hours could have been avoided had Rarity not insisted on coming along with me and giving her rather extensive input. I won't deny that the end result looks pretty darn good, though.

Nervous? Who's nervous? Why should I be nervous? It's just a date. A blind date with a pegasus who I've never met. All Applejack told me was that she met her at the market selling flowers and that her name is Azalea. We're just having dinner. So why won't somepony tell my heart rate that the way it's

been racing for the entire afternoon is completely unnecessary?

I've actually made quite a bit of progress in studying the time problem over the last couple of days. I'm pretty sure that I can keep my mind on this problem and also knock it out of the park where this date is concerned. Yes, I just used a baseball phrase. I really have been studying it since the girls gave me Home Run back at the party. If somepony had just told me it was ninety percent statistics I would have started following it sooner. Every time I hit a block on the time thing I just think back to Star Swirl and his smug little grin and I find the strength to push right through it, if only to prove him wrong. Give myself over to madness and death? I think not, thank you very much. It wasn't even a real prophecy. He was cheating. I wonder how many of his other so-called accomplishments were fake?

There's a knock on the door from downstairs. "Twilight! I think she's here!" Spike calls up.

"I'll be right down, Spike! Let her in!" I call back. I just need two minutes to finish this chapter. And maybe I'm just a little bit nervous. I've been having trouble putting all the thoughts of death and madness out of my head for the last several days, and I'd welcome a distraction from it. I force myself to put the book down. I've read it three times already and there's nothing in there I don't already know. Time to head downstairs.

I walk down to meet my date and find a light green pegasus with a flower for a cutie mark. An azalea presumably, although it's partially covered by the red dress she's wearing and I'm trying not to stare so I can't say for sure. Her mane is tied into two long braids with orange ribbons at the end of each. She's really cute. I'll have to remember to thank Applejack tomorrow. She looks up from her chat with Spike as I come down.

"Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Azalea, you look really nice in that dress," she says.

"Thank you, nice to meet you too," I say and bring my hoof up to bump hers in greeting. "I see you've met Spike."

“Hey, Twilight? Sweetie Belle is having a sleepover at Rarity’s boutique and asked if I wanted to come. Can I?”

Probably Rarity’s idea. That mare is quite the optimist. “Sure Spike, have a great time.”

“Thanks Twilight! You’re the best,” he says and runs off to gather up a few of his things to bring with him.

Mercifully, Azalea doesn’t comment on that. Instead she looks over at me. “Shall we? I still can’t believe I’m going on a date with *the* Twilight Sparkle,” she says.

“I’m not that big of a deal, am I?” I ask. I’m more than a little nervous about being described as *the* anything. I’m looking for a friend, not a fanfilly.

“You’re a little bit of a big deal, yeah. Was that the wrong thing to say? I thought we’d have at least ordered appetizers before I said something I shouldn’t,” she says.

“I’m not the mare to ask. Saying the right thing has never really been my strong suit,” I say. I meant it as a joke but neither one of us laughs. Wow, this got awkward fast. Thankfully the stagnant moment is broken by Spike returning with a little overnight bag full of his things. The three of us walk out the door together into the night. The sun went down a little over a half hour ago and the last of its light is only just now fading away. Spike and the two of us part ways right outside the door as he heads for Rarity’s while Azalea and I have reservations at a nice Bitalian place Fluttershy suggested called *The Wheat and Chaff*.

We walk towards the restaurant in silence for a few minutes before Azalea breaks the ice. “The stars are nice tonight. Weather’s supposed to be clear for the next couple of days,” she says.

“Yeah, they are. Actually I’ve been working on an idea for how I might be able to solve a problem with a magic spell I cast a few months ago by moving them around to alter the flow of ley lines into what might form a resonance cascade, if I’m lucky and Princess Luna goes along with it,” I say. Azalea

is looking at me with a smile that doesn't quite hide her confusion.

"A spell? The one that made all those time loops a couple months ago? I... read about that in the paper. Is that still going on?" she asks.

"Sort of, there were some weird side effects but it's kinda technical," I say. No point in launching into an explanation of exactly what's going on. No pony ever seems interested in it. Maybe I should have though, because Azalea seems a little disappointed by my answer. She doesn't think I think she's dumb because of what I just said, right? Arrgh! This is so frustrating. How am I already screwing this up?

"Hey, that's the place right?" she asks.

"I think so, I've never been here before. My friend Fluttershy mentioned it as a place designers and photographers would always take her to eat during her modelling days," I say. "She said they make really good pasta and wheatballs. Unless you'd rather go somewhere else..."

"No, no this looks great," says Azalea. I take a moment to give the place a quick once over and I'm very glad I let Rarity spend so much time making me over. This place looks really fancy. The waiters and maitre' d are all wearing tuxedos. I don't think I've ever seen a tuxedo being worn in Ponyville before. I hope I can afford this place. Azalea and I walk in through the front door, into a dining room lit with dim lights, just bright enough to be inviting. There are only seven or eight tables, and all but one of them is occupied. They're spaced far enough apart that the low light provides plenty of privacy. Not quite enough privacy though, I find out when I look over to Azalea's face and see that it's gone beet red.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"The table over in that far corner, see the yellow earth pony over there? She's my ex," said Azalea.

"Is that going to be a problem?" I ask as we're shown to our table. The other mare looks up and I can definitely tell she

recognizes Azalea, but she just nods to us before she turns back to her own date.

“I don’t think so. She’s not a bad pony, we just weren’t a good match. Sorry, I probably shouldn’t start talking about exes on a first date. I promise I don’t have *too* many horror stories.”

“I understand. The last mare I was interested in romantically turned out to be my own distant ancestor,” I say. As a researcher I don’t like the phrase ‘too much information’ but I’m suddenly seeing how it might be applicable at times.

“That’s... wow. That tops anything I could come up with. Time travel again?” she asks.

“It’s a long story,” I say and before Azalea can ask me to tell it the waiter appears to take our drink orders. I ask for a bottle of shiraz from what I hope is a good year. Pretty sure I’m going to need it at the rate I’m going. We make some casual conversation for the next couple minutes over the menu, suggesting which dishes sound tastiest. In the end I settle on the wheatballs in marinara that Fluttershy recommended.

We start to probe for conversation topics. Azalea mentions that she saw Octavia Philharmonica performing in Baltimore. I’ve always meant to go see a show of hers but our schedules have never quite aligned. Plus a disproportionate amount of the time I spend in Canterlot it seems to be under attack or partially on fire. Still, talking about the concert gets us as far as our main courses arriving. Azalea’s is some sort of breaded eggplant dish while mine is good old spaghetti and wheatballs, albeit with a few extra flourishes and shaved truffles on top to make it worth the exorbitant asking price.

Azalea starts to tell me a story about something she and her roommate did the other day, and I swear that I’m trying to pay attention, really! But then I glance down at my plate and the way my fork is twirling the individual spaghetti noodles around itself in my magic. I can probably get the gist of the story if I just half listen to her, and the other portion of my attention slips back to Star Swirl talking about the time problem using a piece of yarn as a prop. It’s a shame we can’t just tie the strands back together.

But... is there any reason we couldn't tie the strands back together around a common focus? Something they all shared, like...

"I'm the fork!" I exclaim in the middle of Azalea's anecdote.

"Um... what?"

"I'm the fork! I'm the point of commonality! We can wrap most of the divergent timelines up if we just... Hey, can I borrow your napkin? And a quill?"

Azalea looks a little surprised, unsurprisingly. I did just interrupt her story about her university roommates or whatever. This can't wait though. "Just give me a napkin," I say grabbing a quill from the front desk of the restaurant and pulling it over to me.

"Twilight? What are you talking about? Something's wrong with your fork?" she asks.

"No, it's... don't worry about it. Just give me two minutes," I say as I start scribbling notes and equations down on the napkin Azalea just hoofed over. "Sorry, just don't talk to me for a few seconds while I write this down. If I forget to carry a three there's a sizable chance this spell will blow up Equestria. Well, five-sixths of it anyway. I just need to get down a few... more... things... and... done!"

I say to the empty chair across the table from me. Did Azalea suddenly need to use the restroom or something? I look back and forth around the restaurant before I catch sight of her. That's odd, she's headed for the front door rather than the back. It's almost like...

I look down at what I'm writing. On a napkin. During what's supposed to be a date.

What is *wrong* with me?

I don't consider or even think about considering what I'm about to do. I just teleport out in front of the door to the restaurant, so that that I'm the first thing Azalea sees as she walks out on me.

"Azalea, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to-"

“Save it, Twilight. You don’t need to apologize. I get it. You’re larger than life. Unbelievably so. By Tartarus, Luna will rearrange the stars in the night sky for you like it’s nothing. You’re manipulating the fabric of time and space and I just can’t compete with that. I get that I must be pretty dull by comparison. I shouldn’t have ever expected that anything I’ve done could live up to what you have. I’m boring, and probably pretty disappointing. You deserve somepony better than me,” she says. She turns and starts to walk out of my life forever.

How can she... this is... What can I...

I look up at the waxing moon, and consider something that Star Swirl said. Not intentionally, I promise. On the other hoof, though, maybe being spontaneous and unexpected wouldn’t be so bad right at the moment.

“You look absolutely gorgeous in that dress!” I shout, without thinking anything through. Azalea stops, which I take as an encouraging sign. “That’s what I should have said back in the library when I first saw you and you complimented me. Because it’s true, you really do, and I’m sorry. When you mentioned how nice the stars were I should have said that the way they reflected off your eyes was so beautiful, I don’t think you’re boring. I wouldn’t even if... look, I understand why you’re walking away from me now. I haven’t given you the respect you deserve. You aren’t disappointing. I am. I don’t deserve your forgiveness. At all. You’d be totally justified if you just kept walking. But please, I want one more chance. I haven’t earned it, I know, but I want to earn it. I want to make this up to you. I’m so sorry.”

Azalea hasn’t moved, for better or worse. “Why should I listen to you?” she finally asks. “Why should I listen to anything you have to say? You don’t like me, you don’t even know me. You’ve made it perfectly clear that-”

“No! I want to know you, I do. I don’t, yet, but I know that my friends like you, and that we both like Octavia Philharmonica, and that I’ve treated you like dirt tonight but that’s just because...” I trail off and hang my head. There’s no excuse for the way I’ve treated her. “Nevermind. I’m sorry I wasted your time. A mare like you can probably do a whole lot better than

me,” I say. I mean it, too. I’m just about the worst date ever. Nopony deserves to be stuck with anypony as awful at this as I am. Azalea can find somepony way better than...

Why is she hugging me all of a sudden?

“You’re really sorry, right?” asks Azalea, squeezing me tightly between her forelegs. I sink into her grasp, I can’t help it when it feels this good.

“I really am,” I say.

“This is a one time deal, OK? You decide to start scribbling mathematical equations onto napkins in the middle of a dinner date again and I won’t be so forgiving,” she says. Well, maybe if it were really important...

“I won’t, I promise,” I say.

“Do you want to go back inside now? Start over?” she asks.

“I have a better idea,” I say. It just takes a moment’s effort to teleport both of our dinners, as well as the tablecloth they were served on, out to where we’re standing. “How about a late night picnic?”

“But-”

“Azalea, can we just go somewhere else? Somewhere quieter? That isn’t me. I’m awful at formal romance, I really am. Please?” I ask. Beg, would probably be more accurate.

She looks at me for a few seconds. Then a few seconds more, and my racing mind has all the subjective time in the world to think about how badly I’ve already screwed this up. And then...

“Sure. Alright,” says Azalea, and I feel my heart skip a beat as I bring our meals up to us and carry them along in my magic as we head by unspoken agreement towards the park. Azalea has my full attention, finally. How was I not completely captivated from the moment I first laid eyes on her? Did I really almost let this mare slip away? She’s smart, and pretty, and...

She laughs at something I’m telling her about what Rainbow Dash did some time. I could fall for that laugh. I want to fall

for that laugh. We get to a grassy hillside and I spread out the tablecloth. We flop down onto it, our dinners forgotten off to the side for the moment. One of my front hooves finds Azalea's and neither one of us pulls away from the contact.

The conversation turns to political philosophy somehow, and soon she's ranting about the writings of Trotsky. I turn to look at her for a moment while she's in the middle of some diatribe about how wrong he was about something or another, then I roll on top of her and kiss her.

This 'being spontaneous' thing really works. I should plan to be spontaneous more often.

"Sorry. I've always kind of thought Trotsky was kind of overrated," I say.

"You apologize too much," she says.

"Sor-" Azalea cuts me off when she kisses me back, harder than I kissed her. She breaks it off after a moment, though.

"This isn't moving too fast for you, right?"

"I kissed you first. If I shouldn't have-"

"Hey, I kissed you back didn't I? To be completely honest I've had just the tiniest crush on you for the last few months. That's why I jumped at the chance when Applejack asked if I wanted her to set us up. I'm glad I did."

"I'm glad you did too," I say. We lay there side by side for a few more minutes. "You seem like a pretty well-read pony. I'm surprised I haven't seen you around the library before."

"I've been there a couple times, but not that much. I don't even have a library card," she says.

"Gasp! No library card? Then our relationship can never be!"

She giggles. "You know you can't just say 'gasp,' right? Besides, when I was there it wasn't the books I was checking out."

"What else would you check out at a library?" I ask.

Azalea rolls her eyes. "The librarian, obviously."

"Oh. Oh! You mean me?"

“Of course I mean you, silly! I can’t believe you never noticed,” she says.

We look up at the stars again. I move to take a bite of my pasta but it’s gone cold so instead I just lay back down next to Azalea. It’s a bit nippy out on the exposed hillside. That’s all the excuse I need to snuggle up against Azalea’s side. “You were right, the stars really are pretty tonight.”

“I think I found something prettier,” says Azalea. I turn my head and she’s looking straight at me.

“You are just a completely shameless flirt, aren’t you?” I ask, not that I’m not enjoying it.

“Shame is overrated,” she says. “Besides, I like you. This you, anyway.”

“I like you too,” I say and it’s true. I’m glad we aren’t trying to make awkward small talk at a fancy restaurant. This is so much better, and more importantly so much more comfortable. I’m not saying I’ve made an instant love connection with this mare, but I don’t know why I expected I would after one date. I like her. I think being with her more often would make me happy. What else does anypony need, really? Speaking of the restaurant though...

“You know, we should probably bring these plates back to the restaurant. And pay for the food that we, uh, stole,” I say.

“I guess we did, didn’t we? I didn’t realize I was out on a date with such a dangerous criminal mastermind. Very exciting,” she says. She doesn’t make any effort to get up though. Five more minutes won’t hurt.

“That’s us, a regular Bonnie and Clydesdale.”

No moment, especially not the perfect ones, can last forever. Soon enough the cold gets to be unpleasant and we have to get up. Azalea doesn’t seem to mind the temperature, typical pegasus, but I’m shivering. At least until she drapes a wing over my back and we walk side by side back the way we came. We get back to the restaurant and I apologize over and over to the maitre d’ for dining and dashing like that. They managed to give the table to another couple and once I’ve paid

the check and left a sizable tip they assure me there's no harm done. I'm about to leave before Azalea stops me.

"Don't forget that napkin you were writing on. You nearly blew our date to write that down so you might as well," she says.

"You won't mind?" I ask.

"Nah, I don't understand a word of it but it's obviously something important to you."

"Actually, while we were out on the hill I completely forgot about it," I say.

Azalea smiles. "That might be the sweetest thing you've said to me all night, Twilight. Glad to hear that I'm such an effective distraction," she leans over and give me a peck on the cheek. Somehow it makes me blush even harder than the full on kiss she gave me before.

"Did you say something? I was distracted," I say.

"Funny," she says with a wry grin. We leave the restaurant and head back to the library, which is on the way to her place.

"So... here we are," I say as we reach the front door. "That wasn't exactly the date I was planning, but I hope it was OK. I know I had a good time."

"Well it started out really really bad, but then got really really good. So we'll split the difference and say mediocre. Better than the other way around, I guess," she says with a grin.

"It's not that late. You could come inside and we could, um, extrapolate the trendline?" I try.

Azalea throws back her head and laughs, and one of the braids in her mane comes unwound. "You know, Applejack warned me that you were kind of a nerd but I wouldn't have believed how much if I hadn't seen it for myself."

"Sorry," I say.

"Oh, I'm not saying that's bad. Smart mares are very, very, sexy. Besides, I told you to stop apologizing," she says.

“You also kissed me when I did. I’m kind of getting mixed messages on the apology thing,” I say.

“Well then, I should make sure to clear that up for you. This is not for apologizing,” she says as she leans in for another kiss. Not quite as intense this time, but long and lingering and with the promise of more to come. “I’m very tempted to say yes and come inside...” Do it! Say yes! SAY YES! “...but I’m not going to.”

I can’t help but let out a disappointed little moan which Azalea notices. “Maybe next time, though,” she adds quickly.

“So you do want there to be a next time, right?” I ask.

“Of course I do! I mean assuming you want there to be a-”

“I do!” Come on Twilight, try not to sound quite that desperate.

“Good, so do I. So I guess this is goodnight then?”

“Yep.”

She lingers for just a moment longer and I have the briefest surge of hope that she’ll reconsider leaving, but then she takes a step back and the spell is broken. “Goodnight, Twilight,” she says and walks away.

I watch her leave, hoping against hope to catch her looking back but she doesn’t. Just one more thing to do before I go inside, then.

“You know that I can hear you whispering in those bushes, right?” I ask a nearby bush.

For a moment, everything is still, before the bush starts to rustle and a familiar voice emanates from it. “No you caaaaaaan’t. It was just the wiiiiiiiind. Oooooooh.”

“Ah think our cover’s blown, sugarcube. Besides, why are you makin’ ghost noises if you’re pretendin’ to be wind?”

That seems to stump the bush for a moment. “Maybe I’m the ghost of the wind. Like the wind saw something so scary it died of fright and turned into a ghost. And now it goes around and scares other wind into dying of fright and makes them turn

into... Hey! It's like a thing that repeats itself in a self-similar way. Is there a word for that? There totally should be."

I'm in too good a mood to be annoyed with either of them, so I just go inside. I should probably take some notes on my date, or start brainstorming ideas for the next one. You know, something calm and rational.

"I have a fillyfriend. I have a fillyfriend! EEEEEEEEEEE
I can't believe I totally have a fillyfriend now EEEEEEEEE!"

Or something like that. That's good too.

"Owloysius, I have a fillyfriend! Can you believe it?" I ask my assistant.

"Hoo?"

"Azalea! And I know that's just a noise you make and not the word 'who' but I don't even care because I have a fillyfriend and her name is Azalea and did I mention that she's my fillyfriend? Because I have a fillyfriend now. Me! A fillyfriend!"

I dance my way up to my bedroom to take off my dress and makeup and let my mane down. I haven't cast the cloudwalking spell on myself, and yet I still feel like I'm walking on air. A few minutes later I'm cleaned up and in my pajamas, although I still haven't come down from the high I'm enjoying. There's a knock on my door. Pinkie and Applejack must have gotten out of that bush and want to congratulate me because I have a fillyfriend now.

I'm about to hit semantic satiation on the word fillyfriend and I don't even care. Because fillyfriend!

There's nothing that could possibly happen that would ruin this night for me. I head over to the door and open it.

Does the multiverse just get some kind of sick thrill out of proving me wrong?

"What are you doing here, Star Swirl?" I ask. I get a good look as I glare at him. He looks like he hasn't slept in days. My glare softens a bit out of sympathy, but I harden it again when I remember how he treated me earlier this week.

“I wanted to apologize for how I acted earlier, and to be honest I kind of need your help with this problem. I was hoping we could-”

“Apology not accepted. Go away,” I say and close the door in his face again.

“Twilight! Come on!” Comes his muffled voice through the door.

“No! You come on! Do I need to spell it out for you? I don’t like you. No pony likes you, and I’m doing just fine without you thanks very much.”

“Look, I get it. I wasn’t very nice to you before but I’m trying to-”

“Not interested.”

“Would you shut the buck up for one second so I can start treating you in a more respectful fashion?” Star Swirl shouts through the door. There’s a moment of silence. “...There was probably a better way to phrase that.”

“You think?”

“Look, Twilight, please. I know that I’ve earned your contempt. I probably don’t deserve another chance, but I’m asking you for one anyway. Please? Haven’t you ever been in a situation where you just wanted one more chance to prove you aren’t as bad as some pony else thinks you are?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. Damn it. I can feel myself starting to forgive him. Any other night, that line wouldn’t have worked on me.

“Ground rules!” I shout at the front door.

“What?”

“I said ground rules! You say one more mean or disparaging thing about me, or tell me how much smarter than me you are, or treat any pony in a way I don’t like and I’ll throw you out of this library so fast you’ll think you were summoned by the dirt road that’ll be in your face when you hit the ground outside. Understand?”

“Yeah, I understand,” he says.

I open the door. “Come inside before somepony files a noise complaint.”

He blinks a few times before he trots across the threshold. I’m not sure he expected me to let him in. “I’m sorry,” he says, “for everything. Not the least the way I treated you back there.”

I don’t say anything. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying this just a bit.

“Making two mares cry within ten minutes of each other is pretty bad, even for me. I promise I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I don’t know what the prophecy means either, but I won’t let you get killed if there’s any way to prevent it. I swear on my honor and my magic,” he says.

Still not saying anything.

“Princess Celestia yelled at me a lot, if that helps at all. She hasn’t lost her touch with the Royal Canterlot voice over the last sixteen centuries, I’ll tell you that,” he says. We sit in silence for a few seconds before he speaks again. “Damn it, would you please say something? I think I liked it better when you were yelling at me.”

I grab the napkin I had been scribbling on back at the restaurant with my magic and pass it to him. “Thoughts?” I ask.

He looks over the napkin and his expression goes from confusion, to surprise, to realization, and then back to surprise again. “This might actually work,” he says.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised, Star Swirl,” I say.

“It’s just that I didn’t think that...” he stops talking when he looks up and notices that my horn is glowing and my left eyebrow is raised, daring him to continue. “You know what? Let’s just focus on the part of this where you’re right.”

“Good choice,” I say.

“I did some work of my own over the last few days too. This spell you came up with will cover most of the alternate

timelines, but not the most radical divergences. I did some scrying into that, and there's one big alternate history we're going to have to take care of locally. We'll have to actually go there," he says.

"An alternate timeline? Did I win, or did the changelings win?" I ask.

"Well, both. Sort of."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"Twilight, in this other timeline the changelings took over Canterlot. And their queen is, um... you."

The Darkest Timeline

THE DARKEST TIMELINE

A/N: If the title didn't tip you off, this chapter is going to dip back into the darker than dark alternate ending timeline with all the squick and potentially objectionable content that implies. Jump to the middle of the next chapter (first "——") if that bothers you.

"Me? A changeling queen? You need to explain. Right now," I say.

"I know it sounds a bit out there, but your original fate before you changed it with the Elements was to become the new changeling queen and take the throne of Equestria from the old one. Chrysalis, I think her name was?"

"I think that you screwed up. You must have screwed up. A pony can't become a changeling queen. That future isn't scientifically possible," I say.

"I double checked it," says Star Swirl. How can he look so serious when what he's saying is so completely ridiculous?

"So even if that is true, what are we supposed to do about it? Fight her? Make a deal with her?"

"Avoid her would be my preference. I don't know what you would have had to do to yourself to get that way, or how desperate you'd have to be to do it. The ritual should only take a few hours and when it's over it should sever that timeline from ours and pull us back to this one. I'll fill out the details later if you want to check the math," says Star Swirl.

"So can we just arrive in the middle of nowhere and cast it from there?" I ask. I don't want to meet a version of myself that's fallen that far if I don't have to.

"I thought of that. The spell that takes us to the other timeline should deposit us at the point with the lowest temporal integrity, which will almost certainly be the area you disrupted by casting the time loop spell," he says.

“Right in the middle of Canterlot castle, in other words. Fantastic,” I say with a groan. “Do you think we’d be able to slip out of the city without drawing attention?”

“I’m not sure we can count on that. Scrying the library before we leave won’t necessarily work either. We should arrive roughly as long after the casting of the time loop spell as it’s been here, I can’t promise anything more precise than that. We might get there a few hours earlier or later than we expect,” he says.

“Then we just shouldn’t go at all. We’ll find some other alternative. This plan sounds a little bit too suicidal for my taste,” I say.

“It might not be that bad. From what I’ve been able to gather it’s still you, just bigger and scarier looking. You know what they say about books and covers. Plus I saw some other ponies around you that looked like your friends, assuming they weren’t changelings in disguise,” he says. That’s interesting. I guess this other me found some way to keep the Elements from exploding if Canterlot’s still standing. Maybe she’d hear us out. I know that if I ran into an alternate version of myself from another timeline I’d at least be curious.

I sigh. It’s late and the good mood I was in after my date has dissipated. “Well I don’t think we’re going to figure this out tonight anyway, and you look as tired as I feel,” I say.

He smiles. “Yeah, I guess I am. Luna and I still aren’t talking, and she’s usually the one I’d go to about something like this. It’s been a long few days for me,” he says. I look over at him again and wonder if this was what I was like before Celestia sent me to Ponyville. Always lonely and too blind to even realize it.

“She’s really important to you, isn’t she?” I ask.

“More than I could ever put into words. I hate the way we’re always arguing and hurting one another, though. When things are good between us, they’re great. The other times...”

I don’t say anything to that, for fear of tipping my hoof about what Celestia said was in his future. It’s actually a bit

reassuring to know that there's at least one pony out there who's worse at relationships than I am.

"Celestia mentioned that there's a little inn a couple streets down from here. I'll get out of your mane and we can meet up in the morning to talk more about this. I bet together we'll come up with a better plan than we've got now. Worst case we'll be ready for whatever we find when we go," he says as he gets up from the table.

"Do you want to just sleep here? I have a guest room," I say. Star Swirl looks surprised by the offer.

"Why? I mean, yes that would be great but I figured you wouldn't want me around any more than I had to be," he says.

"It's no problem. What are friends for?" I ask.

"I can't say that I know," he says. "After everything you said back there when you hit me, and by the way you have quite the right hook for a mare who hangs around books all day, I figured that we weren't ever going to be friends."

"It's not too late to try again. Just try being a little less like yourself from now on. I'm sorry I hit you though. Come on, I'll get you some blankets," I say and walk over to my linen closet. Star Swirl studies me as I walk by, like he'll be able to puzzle me out if he stares hard enough. Good luck.

I take down some fresh sheets and towels too. I usually sleep in pretty late so I point out the kitchen and bathroom, and mention that Spike might be coming home from his sleepover before I'm up. Star Swirl nods his understanding and walks into the little guest bedroom. "I hope you aren't too cramped. I know it's a bit of a step down from a suite at the palace."

"It's perfect. Thanks, Twilight," he says.

I'm about to say goodnight when a powerful yawn catches me off guard. I'm running out of steam pretty fast, so I just give Star Swirl a little wave and head up to my own bed. I crawl under the covers and the last thing I remember thinking is that tonight was a good night.

I'm awakened the next morning when the odor of hay bacon strips comes wafting up to my nose. I wake up famished,

unsurprising given that I didn't eat very much of my dinner last night. I'm lured down to the kitchen where I'm surprised to see that it's Star Swirl and not Spike making breakfast for us.

"Good morning, Twilight. You're out of orange juice," he says as he takes a sip from a glass of it sitting next to the cooktop.

I'm just gonna let that pass. "Sleep OK?" I ask him without taking my eyes off the frying pan. The strips are just starting to get extra crispy. I love mine extra crispy.

"Well enough. Too many ideas running through my head, though. I got some of my notes out on the timeline shifting spell, and the rituals we'll need once we get there. I'd like you to look them over and tell me what you think if you don't mind. I also saw a few books on illusions and other spells up on your shelves that might help us if we're going to try to sneak out of the city. I'm thinking we should come up with a few options in case we need to blast our way out of a tight spot and maybe a few more in case of-"

"Star Swirl. One thing at a time. First bacon, then we'll see about saving the multiverse," I say as I help myself to half the pan's contents and wrap it in a paper towel with my magic. I'll think better on a full stomach anyway. The two of us buckle down to start working together, and it feels different than when we tried the other day. Star Swirl is really making an effort to be nicer to me, I can tell. Even though he lets slip a few mean-spirited or snippy comments he's quick to apologize for each one once he notices me glaring at him.

Over the next couple of days we'll start to cobble together a contingent of potentially useful spells we'll want to have ready for our little excursion. I got really good at combat magic over all those loops and if this other me is hostile I'm not letting her take me down without a fight. Star Swirl seems to be tailoring his more towards sneakiness and support. He promises to give me a couple of pointers on quick and dirty healing magic too, in case it comes to that. He's got quite a knack for those sorts of spells, which nothing I've ever read about him ever suggested.

Not that I only have time for studying. My friends won't leave me alone until I've given them a full report on how the date went, and the first one to show up at my library is the one who's lack of patience is only matched by her total disdain for behaving tactfully. I can still taste the bacon from earlier this morning when there's a knock on my window and I can see Rainbow Dash waiting to be let in. Still hasn't fully grasped the concept of 'doors,' I see, but it's a step up from her crashing through unannounced. I unlatch the window so she can fly in.

"Hey Twilight! So how'd it go last night?" she asks. Straight to the point, as usual. There's the clattering of a pan from the kitchen where Star Swirl's cleaning and Rainbow's ears perk up. "Wait, is she still here? Did she spend the night? Go Twilight! Up top!" she says as she holds out a hoof for me to bump.

"No, that's not her. Star Swirl showed up after the date was over and crashed here, but the date itself went well. I really like Azalea," I say.

"You gotta let me meet her soon, so I can make sure she's radical enough for my best friend. When are you going out again?" she asks.

"We didn't decide exactly, but we both said we wanted to go out again so it probably won't be too long," I say. I make a mental note to be sure I don't get so sucked into my research that I forget to go see her again soon.

"Yes! In your face, Rarity!" says Rainbow Dash.

"What does Rarity have to do with it?" I ask.

Rainbow Dash covers her mouth with a hoof. "Oh, nothing," she says. "I mean, it's nothing you have to worry about."

"Dash..."

She sighs. "Ok. Fine. Before Applejack picked out your date I bet Rarity ten bits it would be a pegasus that you hit it off with first, while she bet it would be a unicorn who you could do magic with and stuff," she says.

“You can’t bet on who I’m going to date! Besides, what makes you so sure I like pegasi more than unicorns or earth ponies?” I ask. I’m equally mad at both of them, but Rainbow Dash is here right now so she’s going to take the brunt of it.

“Um, hello. Because we’re awesome. Like we say back up in Cloudsdale, ‘it don’t mean a thing if she ain’t got that wing,’ right? You know what I’m talking about,” says Rainbow as she winks and nudges me in the side.

“I happen to think that all three types of ponies can be quite beautiful in their own way, thank you very much. Unless you’re saying you’ve never been attracted to a unicorn or earth pony before,” I say, indignant.

Rainbow Dash suddenly blushes, but chokes out a denial. “I never said that! I’m not some kind of racist or something, it was just a friendly wager. Besides I was right, wasn’t I?”

Star Swirl enters from the kitchen, curious at what all the noise is about. Dash turns to him as he does. “You’re Star Swirl, right? Settle something for us. Which sort of mares are cuter, unicorns or pegasi?”

Star Swirl looks back and forth between me and Dash. From the look on his face I think he’d rather be torn apart by angry manticores than answer that question. “I’m more into alicorns myself, sorry,” he says.

“Ha! Then I win! Alicorns and pegasi both have wings and unicorns don’t,” Dash concludes triumphantly, “checkmate!”

“You don’t even know how to play chess, Dash,” I say. I could point out that her logic has a couple gaping holes in it too but I doubt that would faze her.

“I know you win when you say checkmate. And we’re talking about what sort of mates you check out aren’t we? So it fits.”

I just shake my head. I’m sure in Rainbow Dash’s mind that makes perfect sense. “Star Swirl, this is Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash, Star Swirl,” I say.

“You’re the one who flies fast, right?” asks Star Swirl, “Twilight mentioned you before.”

“Heck yeah I fly fast. I’m the fastest pony alive. Of course Twilight would mention me,” says Rainbow Dash, puffing up with bravado.

“Well, fastest pegasus anyway,” says Star Swirl. “Anyway, all the dishes are in the drying rack so now I think Twilight and I should-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What exactly do you mean by ‘fastest pegasus?’ I said fastest pony. Bar none. Unless you think you can prove me wrong,” says Rainbow Dash. I bite my lip. This looks like it’s about to start going downhill, and fast.

“Guys, it doesn’t matter. Let’s get back to working on-”

“Listen, Rainbow Dash. I’m a unicorn. I can teleport. You can’t go faster than that. There’s no shame in being second best,” says Star Swirl.

“I’m not second best! Teleporting is cheating,” says Dash as she lands on the library floor and pushes a hoof into his chest. Star Swirl rocks back a bit, but quickly rights himself and pushes the hoof away.

“Spoken like a pony who just can’t compete. Moving through all the intervening space between point A and point B is for chumps.”

“Who’re you calling a chump? I’ll intervene *your* space, chump!”

Damn it. I thought Star Swirl was trying to be nice, but then again it is Dash. I really should have seen this coming. I have no idea how to make either one of them back down.

“Star Swirl, I’m warning you...” I try.

“Twilight! She’s *factually incorrect!* What do you expect me to do?” he asks with abject horror.

“Can your fancy teleporting do this?” asks Dash and bolts off the ground to make a quick lap around the library, leaving a rainbow contrail in her wake.

“You like rainbows so much? Here,” he says. He glances down at the book of illusion magic and then back up at the contrail. His horn glows as the semi-transparent rainbow trail starts to

waver and move. A hunk of it detaches from the rest and is flung right into Rainbow Dash's face, where it sticks.

"What did you do? Why did the world get all indigo all of a sudden? Why does the air taste like spicy oranges?" asks Rainbow. She pokes a hoof at the layer of colors covering her face like prismatic cling wrap.

"Star Swirl! Take that off of her right now!" I shout at him.

Dash can't quite process what just happened. "Did you just slap me with my own rainbow? And make it stick to my face?"

Star Swirl seems to realize that he's way out of line. "Oh geez, Rainbow Dash I'm really sorry. I kinda lost my temper there, but if you give me one second-"

"That is *SO AWESOME!*" says Dash. "Can you do that again? Or make them stick to other things? Can you teach *me* how to do that?"

Star Swirl considers the question. "Maybe, you might have to wear a special charm or certain enchanted horseshoes to push them around but I don't see any reason why it should be impossible."

"Forget what I said before. You and me kid, we're going to go places. An entire new world of pranking possibilities just opened up for the two of us if we work together," says Dash, laying a hoof over Star Swirl's shoulder.

"I'm pretty sure I'm older than you, actually," says Star Swirl.

"Not important. Have you met Pinkie Pie yet? You should," says Dash.

"No, he shouldn't!" I shout after them but neither one of them seems to be listening to me. My impending doom sense is flaring up at the prospect of these two working together, and by now it's pretty finely honed. Why can't they go back to fighting?

Star Swirl glances back at me. "That sounds like it could be fun, but Twilight and I really need to work on something. How about later?" he asks.

“Is it about the thingie?” asks Rainbow Dash. Star Swirl looks at her confused but Dash’s question is directed to me and I nod. “Well, that sounded like it was important to you eggheads. I guess later’s cool too,” she says. With that she bids us farewell and leaves through the same window she came in through.

“Another one of the Bearers, I assume?” asks Star Swirl.

“Yeah, she’s Loyalty. Why?”

“Oh, no reason. When I think of the sort of pony I’d want to trust with an artifact possessing world-splitting power that’s *totally* the kind of pony I think of,” he says.

“You’re not exactly in a position to complain about ponies with bad attitudes and a lot of power, you know. There’s no pony I would trust more to have my back,” I say. “Now show me what you’re looking at in that illusion book.”

After a few days of preparation Star Swirl and I are as ready as we’ll ever be for this. We were right the first time about it not being possible to sever the timeline without travelling there, but we’ve worked up spells that should cover just about anything we might run into. I don’t know if it’ll be enough if this changeling queen version of me turns out to be hostile and catches us. I don’t know if anything would be enough. The only reason I’m agreeing to go at all is that Star Swirl pointed out that, this being a stable time loop, he’s assured of making it back. It can’t be a complete debacle if that’s the case.

The plan is to leave at tomorrow’s sunrise, so when it gets to be late afternoon I head over to the market as the vendors are starting to close for the night. I head over to the spot where all the flower stalls congregate, hoping to catch one mare in particular before she leaves. Sure enough, I’m in luck and spot Azalea packing up the flowers she didn’t sell today.

“Hi Azalea,” I say as I stroll up to her. Roseluck is nearby, but she catches sight of me as I walk over and suddenly finds a reason to make herself scarce which I appreciate.

“Twilight! How are you doing? Sorry I’m kind of a mess right now, long day,” she says. I honestly hadn’t noticed before she said that. Even without the ribbons or the evening dress, the sight of her still makes my heart beat a little bit faster.

“I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. Sorry I haven’t had a chance to come by in the last three days, I’ve been busy,” I say.

“Well I’m glad you finally ran out of napkins to write on then. It’s not like I expected to see you much earlier. Three day rule, and all that,” she says. Note to self; find out what exactly a ‘three day rule’ is.

“I still want to go out again, though,” I say.

“Well, I wish you told me a little sooner. I mean I really need to get these flowers into some water back at home and clean myself up a little bit before I could,” she says.

“What? Oh, no I didn’t mean tonight necessarily. Tonight isn’t good for me either. The truth is I don’t know what my schedule looks like for the next few days. I have to go take care of a time thing and depending on how it goes I may not be back for a little while. Although it’s also possible I might get back later tonight before we leave in the morning. In fact, if you do see me later tonight it might be better if you don’t talk to me. You know how paradoxes can be,” I say. It’s also possible I’m never coming back at all, but I don’t think I’ll mention that.

“Oh yeah, those paradoxes. We get them all the time in the flower-selling business,” she says with a small smile.

Do azaleas have some sort of unstudied time-distortion effect I’m not aware of? “Really?” I ask.

Azalea leans in and gives me a peck on the cheek. “Good thing you’re so dang cute when you’re being oblivious. No, not really. Being with you isn’t ever going to be boring is it?”

“I miss boring,” I say, half to myself. “I just feel bad that I had such a good time with you and now I’m about to up and disappear.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. I understand,” she says.

“I might *have* to beat myself up before all this is over. But probably not in the sense you mean,” I say.

“Well, come here and give me a goodbye hug,” she says sitting back and opening her forehooves. I step forward into it and wrap one of my own forehooves around her in return. She smells like flowers. No surprise there, but it’s comforting. “Now what are you trying so hard not to tell me?” she asks.

It’s a trap! Abandon hug! I lean back a bit but I don’t pull away entirely. I open my mouth to try to deny it, but what’s the point? “I’m scared, Azalea. This time thing has me all twisted up as it is and there’s something scary waiting for me where I’m going,” I say and my voice starts to break a little. Why can’t I be strong for her?

“Shhh, it’s fine to be scared Twilight. From what I’ve learned about you though I bet you won’t let that hold you back from doing what you need to do, will it?” she asks.

“No. I have to do this and I’m going to. No matter what,” I say.

“And that is what makes you one of the bravest ponies that I know,” she says. I sink back into her hug, breathing a little harder but I’m proud to say not sobbing into her shoulder. Maybe I’m stronger than I think. I sit there and let her hold me for what seems like hours while I collect myself, but when I glance up at the clock over town hall I see that it’s only been about ten minutes.

I’m starting to suspect that azaleas really *do* have some unstudied time-distorting effect. Or maybe one in particular is just irreplaceably special.

“Azalea, I’ve never told this to anypony before but you are the grounding wire in the electromagnetic surge that I call my life,” I say.

“I would be surprised if you had,” she says.

“No, I mean-”

She’s getting really good at cutting me off by kissing me.

“I don’t know what some of those words mean, exactly, but I think I get the gist. I love you too.”

I want to deny that I meant those three particular words when I said it. Or insist that I’m in no position, emotionally, to decide if I feel that at the moment. Or tell her how incredibly presumptuous it is to say that to anypony after a single date. Instead, I just lean in to kiss her back. I’ll clear all of this up on our next date when I get back from where I’m going.

Not if I get back. When I get back.

“Thanks Azalea. I’ll see you later,” I say with a smile.

“Yes, you will. Good luck out there,” she says to me before I walk away.

I’m much too nervous to sleep tonight. Instead I unpack and repack everything I’m bringing at least thrice, make up a grocery list for Spike and recount the bits I’m leaving him to ensure that he’ll have enough for the next week if I don’t make it back before then. If I’m gone longer than that I’m sure my friends will be able to help him out before I return.

I peek into the guest room around three in the morning and find Star Swirl snoring away. Weird to think that I’m potentially putting my life into the hooves of the pony who I may or may not have briefly considered beating to death with an atlas a week or so ago. He’s been good for the last few days though. Great, other than that brief flare-up with Rainbow Dash. I think I’m starting to see the potential for him to become the pony I’ve read about within him.

I go to toss and turn back in my bed for a few more hours, not really expecting that I’ll fall asleep given what’s coming, until the first rays of Celestia’s dawn begin to peek over the horizon.

By the time Star Swirl emerges from the guest room I’m suited up in everything I expect we’ll need, and I’ve checked all of his things as well. It’s sunrise, and go time. After giving everything a once over for himself and a light snack we’re ready to get started. Given how nauseating and disorienting

even same-timeline teleportation can be, a full breakfast seems like a bad idea.

Star Swirl begins casting the ritual that will take us to the other universe, but at the last second I stop him when I'm struck by a last-second impulse. Dashing back up to my bedroom I fish a special something out from under my bed. I emerge from my front door to where Star Swirl is waiting hoisting what I hope not to need as anything more than a good luck charm.

"A baseball bat? Really?" asks Star Swirl.

"Its name is Home Run, thank you very much. As far as I'm concerned it has a more proven track record against changelings than you do," I say.

"As long as you're the one carrying it, you can bring your lucky lead brick for all I care. For real now, are you ready?" asks Star Swirl. I nod, and he begins casting the spell again. As I feel the spell take hold and begin to pull us away from this universe, I hope against hope that everything will go according to plan and our visit to this other timeline will be uneventful.

Hanging upside down next to an unconscious Star Swirl being carried Celestia-knows-where by a half dozen changelings, I can't help but reflect on how not 'according to plan' this trip has gone so far.

For the record, we would have been fine had there not been a score of changelings patrolling the library just as we arrived. Between the two of us we took down nine or ten of them before we went down. For some reason they decided not to kill us, and captured us instead.

Even upside down and suspended between two poles with some sort of weird gunk covering my horn that's keeping me from casting any spells, I recognize the way we're going. We're headed for the throne room.

We get there in the next few minutes and even after everything Star Swirl told me I'm not ready to face what's waiting for me

there. Sitting there on Celestia's throne is a new changeling queen. I'm not that good at telling one changeling from another and I might have mistaken this one for Chrysalis, but she has a slightly more violet set of plating covering her body and a distinctive purple streak running through her ragged mane. The resemblance between us is as uncanny as it is disturbing.

"Well, well, well, isn't this an interesting development?" she says. "You don't feel like a changeling but if I didn't know any better I might think you were me."

"I'm not you," I say, defiant. The changelings drop me in front of the throne and I wipe off enough of the goo to start using my magic again. Not knowing what else to do, I pull the bat off of where it's strapped to my back and brandish it like a sword.

The changeling queen gasps. "No way! Is that Home Run? I remember that! Do you mind if I take a closer look?"

I don't know what I was expecting from a version of me that's also a changeling queen, but foolish glee at the sight of a baseball bat certainly wasn't it. She doesn't wait for my answer before she effortlessly grabs the bat out of my magic with her own. Star Swirl groans and looks like he's starting to come to.

"It is Home Run! You even wrote the name on it. Wow, that takes me back," says other me. "You really are me. This is so neat! When do I learn to jump between different time loops?"

She thinks I'm from a future loop. Should I go with that?

"Uh... How many loops has it been for you?" I ask, stalling for time.

"How many had it been when you were sitting where I am? Oh! I get it. The future you asked that question so you have to, too. I lost count a few hundred ago," she says.

I was only in the loop for one or two hundred iterations. If she can dismiss 'a few hundred' like it's nothing...

"I'm not from another time loop," I say. Honesty probably isn't the best policy in this particular case but it's what I'm

going with anyway. "I'm from outside the loop."

"So I get out of it eventually? Why? I have everything I could ever want right here. I'm making everypony into my friend, I'm in love, and nothing bad will ever happen again. I'm strong now. Nothing can hurt me."

I'm torn on whether to break the news to her that we're from parallel and not series timelines. "Is Princess Celestia around? Can I talk to her?" I ask.

The queen scoffs at my request. "Celestia is gone. She was holding us back, Twilight. The Elements, being her student, all of it was just lies and manipulation to control our potential for her own ends. You'll see it someday. Trust me, we're better off without her. Who's your friend there?"

Star Swirl is staggering onto his hooves and doesn't look like he can answer for himself. "This is, uh, Shooting Star!" I say, reaching for the first Star-themed alias that comes to mind. "He's not important, don't worry about him. If Celestia's gone, what about Princess Luna? Can I talk to her?"

"You stay away from her! She's mine and you can't have her!" says the queen as she rises from her throne. Several of the changelings around us start to hiss and look like they're about to pounce on us. Her fury dissipates as quickly as it came on, though. "When did you get out of this loop? And how?"

"The Elements. Didn't you ever try using them the right way?" I ask.

"Of course I did. Right after the loop where we first slept with Luna," she answers. Star Swirl's eyes go wide. Horse apples, this is not how I wanted him to find out about that. "But they don't work. They didn't kill me, exactly. I know what that feels like. I always just wake up back in the loop." So that's the point where our fates diverged. The only difference between me and this. "It didn't matter though. I found another way to fix everything. The Elements can't hurt anypony ever again, not any more."

Somepony opens the door to the throne room, and a familiar pink face pops in. "Queen Sparkle? Sorry to disturb you, but I

got an itchy nose and a tingly... Oh-my-gosh-there-are-two-of-you! And she's not a changeling is she?" asks Pinkie.

"Girls! There are two Twilights in the throne room!"

"Oh, my, two of them? That's unusual," Fluttershy's voice says from somewhere behind her.

"Girls? Is that really you? Or are you changelings that just look like you?" I ask.

"Yes! I mean, no! I mean, both!" says Pinkie as she bounces into the room followed by four other familiar ponies. "We're pony-changelings. Or changeling-ponies. We're us, but we're changelings now too! Queen Sparkle took the old pony-us and made us into new pony-changeling-us so we could be part of her hive, isn't that great? So now we're pony-changelings, which is a pony and a changeling and a pony-changeling all in one. I know that definition is circular and a little recursive but it's super accurate."

"Pinkie, I told you, that word doesn't mean..." I trail off as I realize that might actually be a valid example of 'recursive.' What does it say about me that I find the fact she was able to use the word correctly to be the most surreal thing about all of this?

"But you all still look like yourselves," I say as I struggle to understand.

"What can I say, darling? You can't improve on perfection," says Rarity. Changeling-Rarity. Whatever.

"I don't look the same! Queen Sparkle showed me how to make my wings five percent larger for even more flying power," says Rainbow Dash.

"Oh, yes, and she's been showing me all sorts of interesting things we can do with our transformations," says Fluttershy. "Like, I can do this now." She closes her eye and focuses for a moment and there's a flash of green magic and when it dissipates there's a border collie puppy standing where Fluttershy was. "I've always loved animals, of course, but now I can be them too!"

I stare. I've never heard of changelings being able to turn into animals before. "Isn't it fascinating?" asks the changeling queen from the throne. "Spike has been helping me research all the ways that changeling magic and unicorn magic can be mixed and the results are absolutely incredible. Want to see some of my notes?"

"We're just here to cast a quick spell to fix something happening in our timeline, we aren't staying," says Star Swirl.

"Oh, well that's fine then," says Queen Me. "I have to raise the moon in a little while so I can't help, but I'll let the swarm know to leave you alone."

"Doesn't Luna usually do that?" I ask.

The queen shifts on her throne, like she's suddenly uncomfortable. "She's not available. She's been teaching me how to do it myself, though. I'm getting good at it."

"Can we use the library?" I ask.

"Sure. Use anywhere in the castle except for the dungeon," she says.

Star Swirl and I walk out of the throne room. I pause to look back at the changeling queen, who smiles and gives a friendly wave. Odd how the throne room looks just like it always does. I figured once it turned into a changeling hive it would be redecorated in cocoons and slime.

The doors close behind us. "So that happy little reunion felt off to you too, right?" asks Star Swirl. "And why did she flip out when we asked about Luna?"

"I've never met a changeling like that before. Maybe me being turned into their queen made them nice?" I suggest. "What do you make of the fact that she said not to go to the dungeon?"

"Mostly it makes me think that we should go find out what she doesn't want us to see," Star Swirl says.

"You know the smart thing to do would be to cast the spell, leave this timeline and never come back right?"

He says nothing.

I sigh as my curiosity gets the best of me. “The dungeon’s this way.”

We wander over to the door that leads down to the unused cells of the dungeon, at least they’re unused in our reality. The door is sealed shut beyond a simple lock and it takes both my magic and Star Swirl’s before we’re able to pull it open. It opens to a long and dark staircase, far longer than I remember it being. Walking down the stairs, the whole place glows with a faint green light that seems to come from nowhere and everywhere. The stairs seem endless as we descend into what must be the dank heart of the mountain Canterlot is built on. Finally the passage levels out and we come to the dungeon proper. There’s only two cells, one on either side of the hall. At the end of the hall is a door that’s ornately decorated with carvings of the moon and stars. It seems out of place against the bare stone it’s set into.

I trot over to one of the cells and look in, and I do a double take at what I see. “Girls?” I ask.

My five best friends glance up at me with blank eyes, but I’m not sure whether they register that I’m there. Certainly they don’t seem to care. They just stare at me for a few moments before turning back to look at the walls or the floor. “How are you here? I just saw you back in the throne room.” I say.

“Idiot,” says a new voice from behind me. It’s familiar but alien at the same time, like how listening to a recording of your own voice never sounds like what you said. I turn to face it and in the other cell across from the ones my friends are in is, well, me.

There are now officially too many versions of me in this timeline.

“Don’t tell me you thought those actually were the ponies who used to be your friends,” says the other me with a sneer that I’d recognize anywhere. Any shape she took, that sneer was always the same.

“Chrysalis?”

“Correct. This is an interesting surprise. I don’t get many visitors down here other than well, you. It’s obvious you aren’t a changeling. If the queen found out a drone was wandering around wearing that face she’d probably tear it off of you herself,” she says. “Another time loop?”

“You know about that?” asks Star Swirl.

“Unfortunately. The queen had me chained up to her throne for a month and you wouldn’t talk about anything else. Monster to monster, I can appreciate a well-executed coup even if I don’t like being on the receiving end of it. At first I thought you really had it in you to be a good queen, a great one even. I’d been trying to infiltrate Fillydelphia for years and you razed it in two weeks. You killed a lot more ponies than I would have, personally, but A for effort,” she says.

“Stop saying that that’s me up there. It isn’t. I’d never do those things,” I say.

“Oh, never say never Twilight. You have such a natural talent for leadership after all,” says Chrysalis.

“So why are you wearing my shape then?” I ask.

“You think I’d look like this by choice? Whatever power siphoning trick you used to ascend left me stuck without my old changing abilities. You’re the one who decided I should look like this while you tied me up and tortured me. Pretty revealing, don’t you think? We captured a pony whose special talent was psychotherapy once. He called it ‘projection.’ Right before you ate him. That’s the last time anypony dared to challenge the delusion you’d built up for yourself. Easier for you to have a few drones imitate your pals than face the fact that you are what you are,” she says.

I stare at her in horror as she goes on. “And what a delusion it is! You even convinced yourself that you’ve found true love. You’re quite the romantic, aren’t you? The Queen and the Princess. What a beautiful little story you’ve woven in your head. But it isn’t true, Twilight. Changelings take what they want, it’s our nature. Seems that siphoning trick works as well on alicorns as it did on me. And judging from what I hear

coming from the next room that's not the only thing you're taking from her without her consent."

Star Swirl looks like he's about to throw up, and I feel the same way. "No..." is all I manage to say.

"Yes. Oh, it's easy enough to make her say the right words. Your venom is so very versatile that way, but I'm sure you appreciate how that isn't the same thing. But don't worry! You've almost used her all the way up. Would you like to hear what your plans are for her once you have?"

Before I can respond, Pinkie speaks up from the other cell. "Queen Sparkle and Luna are going to be mommies! And I'll throw them a big party for the baby shower and everything will go back to being OK again. Everything will be OK again. Everything will be OK again," she says into the corner. Her voice trails off as she keeps on saying it as she stares into a corner, rocking back and forth.

"It's true. Changeling genetics are quite malleable, they have to be for us to be so flexible. I created dozens of new changeling breeds, but you? You're a better scientist than I'll ever be. Sounds like you came up with something far more powerful than I ever dreamed was possible. But it's so powerful that, oopsie! Nothing you've tried so far survives long enough to bring it to term. An immortal alicorn though, well, that might work. Only one way to find out for sure.

I turn away from Chrysalis who's smirking gleefully and face the door, vastly more terrifying now that I know what's waiting for me behind it. I examine it more closely and see that among all the artiginal carvings there's one that stands out because of how crude it is. A crescent moon and what I recognize as my own cutie mark along with the word '4ever' inside of a heart. After a moment's hesitation, I push open the door.

The room beyond the door is beautifully furnished, and I recognize it as Luna's bedchamber. Whether it's a replica or the queen somehow physically moved the room down here I can't say for sure. It doesn't look like a prison cell, that's for certain. At least not until I squint and get a closer look at a

circle that's inscribed around the bed in the center. It's some sort of binding circle, very powerful and very specific about what it won't allow to pass over it. There's a lump under the blankets, not moving, and a few light blue strands of Luna's mane poking out from it. It's not the epic starscape that I'm used to, but rather the same hue as I saw on her right after we first blasted her with the Elements. Maybe even fainter.

I move to walk into the room but Star Swirl pushes past me. As bad as this is for me it must be even worse for him. He walks right up to the bed and lifts the covers so he can glance under them. I can't see what he's seeing, but the look of despair on his face tells me more than enough.

"We can't leave her like this, Twilight. Not if Chrysalis is right about what's going to happen," says Star Swirl.

"Can we take her back with us?" I ask even as I know it sounds like a long shot.

Star Swirl shakes his head. "I don't think that would be very healthy for our timeline, not long term. And even if we did, I'm not sure she'll get better."

"Well what can we do then?" I ask.

Star Swirl climbs up onto the bed and pulls the bundle towards him in a hug. It whimpers softly, but doesn't resist. "Can I just have a few minutes alone with her, Twilight? I don't think seeing you would be a very good thing for her."

I close the door, gently so that it doesn't make much noise as the latch clicks shut.

"I won't let this happen. I'll stop me. I mean I'll stop her. My friends and I will use the Elements on her. I just have to remind them how important we are to each other and they'll snap out of whatever spell the queen put on them that made them this way and find Spike. Together we're unstoppable," I say gesturing back to the cell.

"You already destroyed the Elements, Twilight. It was the first thing you did. Something about them exploding," says Chrysalis.

“Ha! I knew you were lying. The Elements can’t be destroyed,” I say.

“I didn’t think so either. What can I say? You rose to the challenge. I’m not sure how you figured it out, but there’s one pony who has a strong enough connection to each Element to permanently harm them. Their bearers. You made your friends break their Elements yourself, I was there. You didn’t even mind control them into it. After you’d worked on them long enough they did it of their own free will. There’s a cost, though. You can see how they’ve been ever since.”

“Then Spike and I will-”

“Would you like to hear about how you became a changeling in the first place?” asks Chrysalis. I’d rather not, but she keeps speaking anyway. “There’s a potion. The key ingredient is the heart of a dragon. A heart you carved out of his chest yourself.”

There are no words. I just collapse to the floor. I want to think she’s lying, but she’s taking far too much glee in the way she’s telling me this for it to be anything but the truth.

“You were very economical with the other parts of him too. I had no idea that so many of a dragon’s organs had alchemical properties. Waste not want not, I suppose,” says Chrysalis as she casually twists the knife. Did I twist the knife I used to... no, don’t think about that. Don’t ever think about that.

Chrysalis smiles as she watches the effect of her words on me. Even for someone like her who must hate me so much, her cruelty seems excessive. Eventually I feel a hoof on my back and look up to see that Star Swirl came back out of Luna’s room without my noticing.

“Twilight, come on. Let’s get away from here. Find somewhere where we can finish the spell before the queen finds out we came down here,” he says. He has a hard expression on his face that I don’t think I’ve ever seen on anypony before.

“Aren’t we going to do something about Luna?” I ask.

“I already did,” he replies.

“What?”

“The only merciful thing there was left to do,” he says as he turns away.

Chrysalis figures out what he means before I do. She throws back her head and starts laughing hysterically. “Oh, this is so much better than I could have ever dreamed. This is *perfect*!”

I finally figure out what they’re talking about. “You didn’t…”

“She won’t suffer any more. That’s what’s important. It’s what she’d want,” he says.

“It wasn’t your choice to make! You could have at least asked me, given me a chance to talk you out of it.”

He wheels back around to face me. “Well, you could have told me you were sleeping with her during the time loop.”

“Wow. OK, first of all that’s none of your business. Second, what does it have to do with you deciding that you need to *kill* somepony?” I ask. When I actually say the word he can’t bring himself to meet my eyes.

“Nothing! Everything! I don’t know! If you’d told me then maybe I’d have expected it, known that you’d be with her even as a changeling,” he says.

“Stop saying she’s me. She isn’t me,” I say.

“Why, because the Elements changed your destiny before you were pushed far enough? Because what was in that room *was* your destiny until they did. The potential was all yours.”

“So you’re going to blame me for something I didn’t do? Did you think about what’s going to happen when the queen finds out what you just did?”

“As much as I would love to watch this for hours, you’re right,” says Chrysalis. “In fact, she’ll probably be down any minute to give her special somepony a good night kiss,” says Chrysalis. Just the idea is enough to make her start laughing again. “I can’t wait to see the look on her face. I wonder if she’ll kill you right away. Probably not.”

Star Swirl and I look at one another and the rest of the argument is postponed. We gallop for the stairs back up to the palace, out of this horrible place. My lungs are burning from the exertion, but we burst out through the doorway that had been sealed tightly earlier.

The reason it's unsealed now is that Queen Sparkle was opening it, and we just burst out right in front of her. She seems as surprised to see us as we are to see her.

"I'm very disappointed in you two," she says. She's still smiling, but the smile doesn't look all that friendly any more. More like manic. "Don't you remember that report we wrote on respecting a friend's privacy? I asked you not to go down there."

"Uh..." I say. Imminent death leaves me tongue tied.

"I was just going to see if Luna was awake yet." She leans down to me like she's going to tell me a secret and it takes every bit of willpower I have not to shy away. "Sometimes she's frisky right when she wakes up. The two of us could share her if you're interested."

"No thanks," is all I trust myself to say.

"I can't believe I'd forgotten all about Home Run until now. That was a fun loop wasn't it?" she asks. She pulls the bat off of my back where I've been carrying it and examines it again. She whistles and a changeling drone further down the hall turns its head and buzzes its way over. Quicker than I can blink the queen leaps over to it, bringing the bat down hard on its back. The changeling nearly breaks in half as it collapses to the floor. Queen Sparkle hums a tuneless, off-key little ditty as she casually smacks it over and over again while Star Swirl and I look on in horror. "What are you doing?" I cry out.

"Sorry, did you want to go first?" she asks. "Don't worry, I have plenty more drones where that one came from."

"No! Why did you do that?" I ask.

"The same reason we did it in the time loop. It's fun," she says.

"That was different!"

“How?”

“It... it just was,” I say. I never thought to question my little escapades with baseball bats and chainsaws. I was the good pony, they were the bad scary invading army and that was all the justification I needed. Now I’m not so sure I like how much I enjoyed it.

“You’re making it very hard for me to be a good host, Twilight. Next you’re going to tell me you don’t want to stay for dinner either,” she says. I shake my head and notice that she didn’t specify whether we’d be the diners or the dinners. “Fine. We *are* going to play a game though. I won’t take no for an answer. Nothing complicated, just hide and go seek. I won’t even use any of my changelings so it’ll be more interesting for both of us. You two hide, and if you stay hidden long enough to finish that spell you win and I’ll forgive you for going down to the dungeon when I asked you not to.”

“What if you win?” I ask. Whatever it is I’m sure I’m not going to like it.

“If I win, you’ll do me a favor. The Elements were too dangerous to keep around, but the only ones who can get rid of them for good are the Bearers. For some reason the Element of Magic doesn’t think I count any more. I bet it would work for you, though.”

“I don’t think I want to take that bet,” I say as I remember the five pairs of dead eyes that had stared out at me from my friends’ cell.

“You misunderstand. You’re playing. I’m going to give you as long as it takes me to go down and wake up Luna, then I’m going to come find you. If you aren’t hiding, well, it won’t be a very long game,” she says. She smiles and I get a good look at her fangs, already dripping with venom in anticipation.

“Want my advice? Start running now.”

A Time of Love, A Time of Hate

A TIME OF LOVE, A TIME OF HATE

Star Swirl and I have almost reached the front door when the scream echoes through the palace. Somehow I think the rules of this little ‘game’ just changed. “How quickly can we get the spell off?” I ask Star Swirl.

“It’s supposed to take about two hours, maybe if we cut some corners I can get it down to one,” he says.

We gallop out of the front door of the palace as a loud crashing noise comes from somewhere behind us. I turn to close the door and seal it behind us with my own magic. Every second I can buy counts right now. “Cut them. Turn the thing into an n-sphere if that’s what it takes. We don’t have an hour,” I say.

“Well to cast it any faster than that I’d need a lot more power. Like an order of magnitude more than both of us put together,” he says.

Even through the sealed door I can hear the hoofbeats of something very big and very angry pounding against the stone floor, coming after us. “We’ll think of something. Right now though, I think we’re going to need one of those illusion spells if we’re going to make it through the next five minutes,” I say.

Star Swirl nods and his horn glows as we’re wrapped in a veil that renders us invisible. We move as quickly as we dare, balancing the need to put distance between us and the queen against the need to move quietly. The streets of Canterlot look unusual; empty and abandoned. The shattered windows and broken doors of the buildings don’t look like they’ve been disturbed for weeks. Outside of the castle itself the city is a ghost town.

The doors behind us slam as something impacts them from the other side. I figure that Queen Sparkle will need ten, maybe

fifteen seconds to unravel my ward, and I'm betting she doesn't have the presence of mind to just teleport through.

Turns out she does neither. The door is still for a moment, then an enraged changeling queen bursts through the foot-thick marble wall next to it like it's made of wet streamer paper.

"YOU! BROKE! MY! LUNA!" she screams in the Royal Canterlot voice. Guess she inherited that too while she was draining the Princess. She looks around, but her eyes pass by without spotting us.

"Not again. This wasn't supposed to happen any more. Forever was going to be OK if I could just spend it with her," says Queen Sparkle, more quietly. I doubt she intended that for our ears. **"TWILIGHT SPARKLE, YOU VICIOUS, EVIL MONSTER! I AM GOING TO DESTROY YOU! I AM GOING TO BREAK YOU PIECE BY PIECE, OVER AND OVER AGAIN, UNTIL YOU'VE PAID FOR EVERYTHING! TELL ME WHY! WHY? WHAT DID I DO TO YOU THAT YOU'D SLIP IN HERE LIKE A COWARD AND MURDER THE PONY I LOVED? WHY COULDN'T YOU JUST HAVE COME FOR ME INSTEAD?"** she calls out over our heads in the Royal Canterlot voice again.

She can't possibly expect us to answer her. Maybe I can use this to my advantage. There's a trick I picked up back during a magical sparring match with Luna that got a little out of hoof one time. I cast a ventriloquism cantrip on myself and redirect my voice so it's coming from a nearby clock shop. "That wasn't love. That was something sick and wrong. You hurt her. What did she think of you when you weren't raping her brain with that venom of yours?"

Queen Sparkle rushes past us over to the shop and stops in front of it. Her horn flares as she wraps the entire building in a field and braces herself. Windows and walls crack apart as the frame of the building buckles and implodes. Not satisfied with the sphere of rubble that remains Queen Sparkle keeps casting, squeezing even tighter until it grinds itself into dust and sand.

Holy buck.

“Don’t listen to her, Twilight,” says Queen Sparkle. “Every couple fights sometimes. Luna loved it when you bit her. She said so. It’s her own fault I had to bite her in the first place. If she would’ve just stopped screaming long enough for me to explain, I could have shown her how much better it was this way. No pony can tell you that you were wrong. It was the right thing to do,” she says, a barely audible whisper.

“No it wasn’t,” says my voice from the shell of a nearby cafe. “I know what you went through. I was in the time loop too, remember?”

“YOU AREN’T ME!” screams Queen Sparkle. She surges across the street and through the picture window of the cafe. Tables and chairs come flying out as she rummages through the building looking for us. Star Swirl puts a hoof on my shoulder. I can’t see him through the invisibility charm, but I can hear his whispers. “We should move,” he says. I nod to him, then realize that he can’t see me either.

“Down towards the street corner,” I say. Maybe we can lure her away and then... I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.

“YOU AREN’T ME, TWILIGHT SPARKLE! I DID EVERYTHING YOU DID! EXACTLY! REMEMBER THAT PERFECT RUN, WHERE WE USED THE ELEMENTS ON CHRYSALIS? FOR YOU IT ENDED THERE, BUT NOT FOR ME! YOU THINK YOU DESERVE TO GET AWAY AND LEAVE ME BEHIND? AND THEN YOU DARE TO JUDGE ME?” asks the queen’s voice from back behind us.

When she doesn’t get an answer, the clattering from the direction of the cafe stops. Everything is quiet for a moment, and I start to let myself think that she might have wandered off in another direction.

“I don’t need to see you to find you,” I hear her voice say from somewhere above us. I look up to try to spot where it’s coming from, but I can’t see her in the late evening light. The sound of Star Swirl’s hoofsteps has stopped, and I have no idea where we are in relation to one another. “I can hear your hearts

beating. I can smell you. It's only a matter of time. Every minute you wait to give in to the inevitable is going to mean another month I spend breaking you."

I see a shadow pass over the ground in front of me, but it's gone too quickly to see where it came from. I feel totally exposed out here like this, despite the protection of my spell. I creep silently over the threshold of a nearby house, into what used to be a home. A dusty picture sitting on a nearby table tells me that a family of unicorns used to live here. Their smiling faces speak of happier times and hope for a future that this timeline was never lucky enough to see.

A floorboard upstairs groans. Just the building settling, or am I not alone here? I stand stock still for a long time, but there's no other sound. It's getting progressively darker outside, and it won't be too much longer before my invisibility becomes redundant. I have to make a move, and soon. I gradually slide towards the house's back door. Nothing happens. I strain my ears to listen for anything I can hear, but not even the chirping of evening crickets is audible. This place is completely dead. I push the door open.

Creeeeeeeeak

I should have known the hinges would be rusty.

The ceiling above me explodes. For a moment I pray that a falling rock will just crush me and end my misery before it begins, but instead something heavy lands on me and pins me to the floor. As the dust settles, I feel two jagged hooves rolling me onto my back. I can see my own mane flopping over my face as they do so; the impact must have disabled my invisibility. Because I wasn't helpless enough already.

"Well that didn't work," says the grinning changeling queen towering over me. "Remember that phrase? Remember how beaten and hopeless you felt every time you heard it? Get used to that feeling, because you're mine now. I am going to devote every single second that I would have spent snuggled up in Luna's arms to filling your existence with suffering. You will plead for death, and at first I will deny it to you. Only at first though. I don't know how yet, but I will spend as long as it

takes to trade places in the time loop with you. Then I'll kill you. And then you'll wake up again. And then you'll die again. And then you'll wake up again. Maybe after a few decades of that you'll understand why I chose to do what I did. Meanwhile, your little friend and I are going back to your timeline. The timeline that I earned. You took my future when you killed Luna. Now I'm taking yours," she says. I quiver underneath her, wordlessly, but I look her dead in the eye. I won't give her the pleasure of watching me beg.

Queen Sparkle perks up her ears and looks around the room. "Where is Shooting Star, anyway?" she asks. When I don't answer her she sighs. "Well, I suppose it won't be that hard to flush him out. Scream for me, Twilight. As loud as you can."

I take a deep breath, look up, and spit in her face. She doesn't even flinch.

"Defiant to the end, I expected nothing less. I hope you enjoyed making that choice, because from this moment forth..." she opens her mouth, and those awful fangs slide into place, "...your mind belongs to me."

She brings her head down and bites deep into my shoulder. I do scream, finally, at the sensation of fire in my blood that I grew familiar with over all the loops where Chrysalis took me alive, turned me over to her side until the blessed cleansing flames from the Elements reset everything. But the Elements are gone now. The first hint of the dizziness and confusion to come starts to seep into my head.

"Get off of her, you overgrown mosquito bitch."

A blast of magic from out of nowhere catches Queen Sparkle in her side. Even from a few feet away the residual power coming off of it is strong enough to singe my coat. The queen's fangs leave deep gashes as they're torn away, and Queen Sparkle goes flying. She leaves a hole when she crashes through the nearby wall where a kitchen window used to be.

I struggle to lift my head, and there's a disembodied glow of magic a little ways away. Star Swirl's invisibility falls away as he runs over to me. "Let me see," he says.

His eyes dart back and forth over my hurt shoulder and he frowns. “The cuts aren’t too bad. I can patch them up, although they might scar. I’m more worried about the venom though. How do you feel?” he asks.

I don’t know why he’s so concerned. My shoulder doesn’t hurt at all. In fact all the little aches and pains in my body have just gone away. I’m so tired, but there’s this wonderful feeling creeping through my brain. I’ll slip away into a safe and happy place soon. “Mmm... Feels so good,” I say just to let him know he doesn’t need to worry.

“Damn it. Twilight, pay attention. I prepared the anti-venom spell before we left but it won’t cure you, just delay the poison’s onset. I can’t completely fix that without getting you back to a hospital. The spell will give you a chance, but you’re going to have to try as hard as you can to fight this off.” His horn glows again and I groan as all the aches and pains reappear. The pain sharpens my mind, though, and I find that I can concentrate on my own thoughts again. The happy fog I’d been sinking into recedes, but I can still feel it gently pressing in on me. “Hurry up, we have to move.”

He doesn’t wait for me to get up before he channels a spell as something rustles in the bushes outside. I catch a glimpse of Queen Sparkle readying some fatal burst of magic before the world disappears.

When it reappears, we’re in another room altogether. I can hear a frustrated scream off in the distance as I glance up at Star Swirl’s smile. “Come on, back on your hooves. She’ll be able to track that teleport before too much longer,” he says.

“Hmm?” I say. Focus, Twilight! “Sorry, my head hurts. Get moving, yeah,” I say. He walks out of my field of vision and my head is slow to follow him. I’m not going to be operating at full effectiveness. Soon enough I won’t even have the sense to realize how compromised I am. “Star Swirl, wait.”

He pauses. “We don’t have time for waiting,” he says.

“Just listen, then. I’ve been under the effect of this stuff before, and even with your spell I can feel it. It’s in my head, and I’m not strong enough to fight it off,” I say. Star Swirl

watches me, sizing me up as I go on. “In a few minutes, maybe a half hour tops, I’m going to start to get really suggestible. If Queen Sparkle gets me alone I could go from asset to liability in a single sentence. We can’t risk that. We should split up,” I say.

“And then she captures you and orders you to tell her where I’m going so she can catch me off guard while I’m casting the spell? Thanks but no thanks,” he says.

“No, you wouldn’t tell me where to find you,” I say.

“So how do we meet up later?” he asks.

“We don’t.”

The full implications of what I’m suggesting hit him.

“Absolutely not,” he says, “there’s a stable time loop, so I must be able to get back no matter-”

“Because she’ll take you back! She’ll use you to unleash herself on our timeline. She’ll do to our Luna what she did to this one, is that what you want? Order me to lead her away to the best of my abilities, then deafen me. A few pounds of telekinetic pressure to each eardrum should do it. That’ll buy you enough time to find some out of the way spot to cut this timeline off from ours forever,” I say. It’s disturbing, how quickly this plan came to me. Maybe on some level I started to come up with it days ago, the instant I heard I’d become a changeling queen.

“Buck you, Twilight. I’m not doing that,” he says.

“Why not? Why is my life worth risking all of Equestria for?” I scream at him in frustration. Like this isn’t hard enough for me to even suggest. This isn’t what I want. It’s just the best chance our timeline has. The only reasons not to follow through with this are selfish ones.

“Because, you moron, you’re my friend! Maybe you’ve got enough of those to throw some of them away this casually, but I’ve only got one,” he says back. He seems embarrassed by the outburst and shrinks away from me. There have been a dozen times where he should have been embarrassed by his behavior

before, but wasn't. What's so different about this time? "Both of us go back, or neither of us do," he says quietly.

"You already know you go back," I point out.

"Well then so will you," he says. He's being completely irresponsible and irrational and damn it why is he making it so hard to be angry at him?

"You're a stubborn, completely unreasonable ass, you know that?" I say.

He just smiles.

I get up to my hooves, and shake my head as I try to clear the cobwebs from my mind, unsuccessfully. "I have an idea," I say, although if I'm being honest it's only half of one. "We need to get to the vaults. I know how to open them, assuming the queen never changed the locks. The defensive enchantments there might actually hold her off for a few minutes."

"Then what?" he asks.

"There's no time to explain, and you wouldn't like it if I did. Trust me or leave me, your choice."

We stare one another down for several seconds that we can't really spare, but Star Swirl gives in first. "Fine, right, of course I'm following the plan of the mind controlled pony who's leading me into a completely inescapable corner with the changeling queen from Tartarus chasing us, and she won't tell me what her plan even is beyond that I'll hate it. Surely, this can only end well," he rants and throws one of his hooves into the air.

"Less whining, more fleeing," I say. It's a little harder to focus my thoughts through the haze of venom, but with a burst of magic we disappear again and reappear on a castle balcony. I turn to look out over the city and see Queen Sparkle gliding over the residential district. As the energy around us dissipates I see her head snap in our direction and for just a moment our eyes meet.

I stick my tongue out at her. Because buck being a mature adult right now. Somehow, she gets even angrier than she

already was as Star Swirl and I turn and gallop into the castle.

“Do you hear that?” I ask. I could swear there are voices just at the edge of my hearing, trying to whisper something. I suddenly feel a powerful need to understand what they’re saying to me. It’s a matter of life and death.

“That’s the venom talking. Keep going,” says Star Swirl. We do, through the twisting hallways of the castle. We pass a number of changelings but they make no move to stop us. For Queen Sparkle, this is personal.

Suddenly there’s a surge of noise and pain. I cry out and fall to my knees. I try to cover my ears with my hooves but that doesn’t reduce either one.

Twilight... Why are you running Twilight? Do you expect to get away?

“What now?” asks Star Swirl.

“She’s in my head!” I wasn’t expecting this. Chrysalis could never do this.

Just lay down Twilight, and I’ll make the hurting stop. Isn’t that what we both want? For the hurting to stop?

I feel myself sliding along the floor and look up. Star Swirl’s grabbed my tail in his magic and is pulling me along the floor as he presses on. The sheer indignity of it all inspires me to do something I know I’m going to regret.

“Hey, Queen Sparkle, how much do you want to bet this link of yours works both ways?” I ask aloud. I gather up my magic but instead of projecting it outwards I push it down and into my own brain. The pain is incredible, but I’m not the only one feeling it. The link breaks.

“Twilight, you’re hurt,” says Star Swirl. I wipe my muzzle and my hoof comes away bloody.

“ ‘M fine,” I slur. “Go.”

We press on and thank goodness the vaults are finally in sight. I can feel the toxic pinpricks in my head as the Queen tries to reestablish the link. I stagger to the door and try to focus on the series of commands the doors need to open. They keep

slipping away from me. I can hear the queen coming for us, distantly. The fear helps me push through my disorientation and the last rune of the sequence falls into place. A mechanism inside the door shifts and it swings open. I have to lean on Star Swirl for support to get inside. The door swings shut behind us, and locks once again.

I instantly feel a second wind coming on. The connection the queen was exploiting to weaken me must be blocked by one of the many wards built into its security system. From in here, we have so many more options. I focus my will on the door and reset the passcode that will allow access to it.

Not a moment too soon. A few seconds later something slams into it. I try to ignore that and turn to regard the vault's interior. The treasure horde is untouched, and also completely uninteresting as far as I'm concerned. All I care about is the pedestal in the middle of the chamber. There are six indentations on it, only one of which is occupied. In it is a crown topped by a jet black six pointed jewel. I pause for a moment and reach out to touch it, to remind it of its proper Bearer.

The resulting bolt of energy flings me hard against the wall of the chamber and holds me there for a moment while it rips into me, rejecting every fibre of my being, before it lets me fall to the floor.

It didn't work. It was supposed to work.

“M na hrr,” I choke out.

“Twilight? You OK? What was that you just said?”

Tears sting at my eyes. The Element of Magic was my last hope. It most of all should understand the difference between me and the queen. But it rejected me.

“How many times do I have to say it?” I whimper. “I'm not her. I'm not.”

To his credit, Star Swirl doesn't try to offer me any hollow words of encouragement or false reassurance. He just wanders off to a far corner of the room while I collect myself. It takes much too long. My head seems like it's stuffed full of cotton. I

hate feeling this way, being violated in slow motion like this as my will and capabilities slowly slip away from me.

“You do it,” I say.

“Do what?” he asks.

“Take my Element. Use it to cast the spell. I can’t, it doesn’t want me. Maybe you can.”

“You can’t be serious. The Elements don’t work for just anypony. It’ll rip me apart. I just watched it throw you against a wall, and you’re its Bearer.”

“You said an order of magnitude more power than both of us combined, right? Well, that’s where you’re going to find it. The queen *will* find a way in here within the... *nnngh!*”

A fresh jolt of pain rips through my mind.

“She’ll make us both so happy. Why are we fighting her at all? I should just open the door for her right now shouldn’t-”

Star Swirl slaps me.

“...Ow.” I say, but it knocked some sense into me. “Thanks.”

“Was I helping? I just wanted to slap you because you locked us in here with such a stupid excuse for a plan,” he says, but he’s eyeing the pillar with the Element of Magic on it.

“Star Swirl. I might not be myself for very much longer, so please listen to me. No more snark. No more banter. If anypony is qualified to wield my Element, it’s you. Wielding the Element of Magic is about friendship, and I know you don’t think you can do it, but you can. I didn’t think I could either, my first time. You’re my friend, and I believe in you. Just remember to AHHHHHHHHHGH HHHHH!”

Whatever was holding the queen back she’s found a way around it.

Open the door, Twilight

“...no,” I moan.

OPEN IT!

I black out. A few moments later I come to again, but I've moved from where I was before. I had been in the middle of the vault, but when I reawaken I'm that much closer to the vault entrance, and my horn is tingling in preparation for releasing the locks.

I turn to Star Swirl. The queen's power has even taken from me my ability to speak. All I can do is meet his gaze and beg with my eyes.

It works. Hesitantly at first, he gently touches the sole remaining Element of Harmony. When it doesn't disintegrate him on the spot he lifts it and places it on his own head.

The reaction is immediate, and I'm blown back by the waves of power emanating from the union between the two. I feel a little more like myself, but still with the sickly and miserable influence of the queen clawing at my mind.

"What was that? What's going on?" asks Queen Sparkle. The vault door shakes again.

"Star Swirl's casting the spell," I say.

"Star Swirl? You said his name was Shooting Star."

I smile even though I know she can't see me. I forgot to lie.

"It's not. He's Star Swirl. Yes, that Star Swirl."

"You traitor! It was his spell, he's the one who put us here! How can you work with him after he wronged us like that?" The pressure of the queen's will redoubles. "Kill him. Kill him for what he did to us."

To my horror, my legs start to move of their own accord and I take a staggering step towards where Star Swirl is weaving together the threads of magic to fix the time spell. My horn glows and it's all I can do to press my face into the floor so I won't be able to interfere. Star Swirl glances up and sees what's happening. "Stop, Twilight."

I seize the opportunity to obey the new command and the glow of my horn dies down. The part of my mind the poison does control cools from bloodthirsty to pacified in a heartbeat.

“I said kill him!” The new command overrides the last one, and I take another step.

“Stop!” says Star Swirl and I take it back. This isn’t a long term solution. The spell is getting more and more intricate and soon it will take enough focus that he won’t be able to tell me to stop. Not to mention that having my psyche battered back and forth like a ping pong ball is wreaking havoc on my ability to focus. There has to be something I can say, something I can offer her. If anypony can deduce how she thinks, I can.

After all, she’s me. And if I’d been through what she has I know exactly what I would want.

“Queen Sparkle, wait! The spell he’s using will stop the time loop. It’s disconnecting this future from all the others, so you won’t be able to go back to the beginning again,” I call out. Star Swirl looks over at me, confused, but some of the pressure in my mind starts to lessen.

“...it will?” asks the queen. I can’t see through the vault door, just listen. Without the visual of the giant scary bug monster, that’s just the voice of a very hurt and very scared little filly.

“Yes, it will. Once we cast this, there’s no more going back. No more ‘well that didn’t work.’ I should have told you earlier.” I say. All the effort she put into the lies she’s been deluding herself with for so long, please let her believe one more.

“So the next time I die this will stop? Instead of more loops there will just be nothing?” she asks. She sounds almost hopeful.

“You can rest soon, Twilight,” I say.

“Do you promise?” she asks.

“I promise,” I lie even though the words feel like ash in my mouth. I try to tell myself that this is necessary, that Queen Sparkle isn’t innocent. But the only reason this is going to work is because on some level that’s exactly what she is. “I’m sorry.”

She misunderstands. “Don’t be sorry. I’ll be with Luna and Celestia again. All my friends too, soon.” The spell is growing

in power behind me. “Twilight, do you think I’ll be able to tell them that I’m sorry? Do you think they’ll remember everything I did in all the different loops? Do I have to remember them?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her. My head is pounding, and it isn’t all from the venom.

“Me neither. I think that’s the best part, not knowing what comes after. I’ve spent too long knowing already.”

“Time to go, Twilight,” says Star Swirl. Looks like my distraction bought us the last few minutes he needed.

“We’re leaving now,” I call out through the vault door.

The coins and gems start to rattle and shift throughout the room. I join Star Swirl in the glowing circle and the arcane energy tingles on my horn and skin. The rush of power fills my ears, but I can still make out one more thing Queen Sparkle says. The meanest thing that she possibly could.

“Thank you.”

The trip back to our timeline is a whole lot worse than the one that took us there. Star Swirl wasn’t kidding when he said he was cutting corners in the casting of the spell, and I briefly wonder if I’m going to arrive in three different pieces or four. Somehow, we make it back alive and reappear in the library of Canterlot castle. I only just register that both Celestia and Luna are waiting there for us, as well as all my friends, before I collapse. I feel a surge of nausea well up and I vomit on what I’m pretty sure is an irreplaceable ancient text. All my willpower to fight against the poison is gone, but thanks to the countermeasures Star Swirl took I’m not drifting off into euphoria. I’m just staring at the ceiling watching it spin like I just took thirty or forty shots of Applejack’s special cider reserves.

Star Swirl arrives in far better condition than I do, though still looking worse for the wear. I can’t help but notice that we’ve picked up a stowaway. The Element of Magic crown is still

resting on his head. “Changeling venom,” he manages to gasp out before he too staggers on his hooves.

“Oh my goodness!” shouts Fluttershy and darts forward before any of the others can react. It’s the last thing I see before I mercifully black out.

I come to and find myself lying in an infirmary bed in what’s probably still the castle. The first thing I see is Fluttershy hovering nearby. Not literally hovering, you have to specify that when you’re dealing with pegasi, but knowing her she hasn’t left my side since I collapsed.

“Hey,” I say. The sound of my voice is pathetically weak.

“How are you feeling Twilight?” she asks.

“Pretty awful.” I reply. Not because of the poison though. Because of what I just saw, and what I just did. I decide to try sitting up.

“You lie down right this instant, young mare!” demands Fluttershy.

My back arches and the back of my head slams back down against the pillow without at any point consulting my brain, and it isn’t because of the force of Fluttershy’s personality. It seems the mind control effect of the venom hasn’t worn off yet.

There’s a chuckle coming from somewhere nearby, and I can at least turn my head enough to see Star Swirl sitting up in the bed next to mine.

“Twilight,” he says, “poke Fluttershy’s nose.”

My hoof comes up involuntarily and gently taps Fluttershy right on the tip of her muzzle, which sends Star Swirl into full-on convulsions of laughter.

“This isn’t funny!” I insist, despite all appearances to the contrary. Fluttershy is trying to pretend not to smile too, and poorly.

“Be nice, Twilight,” she says. “After you passed out, Star Swirl told me all about what kind of poison the queen had used on you and helped me mix up an antidote. He even refused to let us help him until you’d been taken care of.”

I look over at the stallion in the bed next to mine in amazement, and I guess it shows on my face. “She’s making it sound like a bigger deal than it was. I only had a few cuts and scrapes. You were much worse off. Fluttershy’s the real hero. If she hadn’t known right where the bloodwort grows in the castle gardens you wouldn’t even be awake yet,” he says.

Fluttershy blushes, but quickly recovers. “The important thing is that you’re going to be just fine, and the last of the side effects will wear off by tomorrow evening. Until then just stay in bed and do what the infirmary nurses tell you to.”

“Not that you have a choice,” Star Swirl feels that he just has to add.

“How is it you were all right there in the library when we came back, anyway?” I ask.

“Princess Celestia told us after you left, and we wanted to be there to surprise you. I guess Star Swirl told her a long time ago exactly when you’d be coming home, and where.”

“After I go back to the past, it’s one of the few details I’ll be able to mention without messing everything up,” he says.

“I’ll go tell the rest of the girls that you’re awake. They’ve all been so worried,” says Fluttershy. She walks out of the room and Star Swirl climbs down from his bed. Once she’s left the room and closed the door behind her, he turns to me.

“I haven’t told them anything about the other timeline. Or what you said at the end there to the queen. How did you know that would work? That she wanted... that?”

I wince at the reminder. “I wasn’t in the time loop for nearly as long as she was, and even when I got out... that’s what I wanted.” I squeeze my eyes shut before looking back up at Star Swirl. “Do you think there’s any chance it might be true? What I told her?”

“Anything’s possible,” he says. That’s just an unnecessarily complicated way of telling me no. “That timeline should be inaccessible from this one now, and vice-versa. I doubt we’ll ever know for sure,” he says.

“You were right,” I say.

“About what?”

“What you wrote. Saying I’d give myself over to madness and death. That’s exactly what I did to her. She wasn’t exactly stable to begin with. How do you think she’s going to react when that last little scrap of hope I dangled in front of her is yanked away? She might even be too far gone to replicate the conditions of that loop.”

Star Swirl scoffs. “She deserves it.”

“No. No pony deserves that,” I say quietly.

Star Swirl shares a moment of silence with me. I don’t know what he’s thinking about, but my mind won’t stop churning through all the ways I already suffered in that loop, and the infinite variety of ways I could have, and how the other me is going to have the chance to live every single one of them.

“I was wrong, actually,” says Star Swirl.

“How do you figure?” I ask.

“Because she isn’t you,” he says.

“Indeed,” says a new voice from a shadowy corner of the room. “Placing blame for our decisions on forces such as fate or destiny is a trap many minds fall into. We cannot be absolved of blame or praise for our actions nearly so easily.” A moment later, Princess Luna steps out from nothingness to join the conversation. “Expending energy worrying over what might have been is a great waste. We must all do our best with what is, even if what is sometimes is the product of great mistakes or tragedies.”

Star Swirl doesn’t look like he’s ready to see her, not after what happened back there. “Luna,” he says, “I... I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you again,” he says.

“What a shame. I was rather looking forward to hearing you do so,” she says with a gentle smile.

“I... There was... In the other timeline...”

“I know. And I would have chosen the same fate for myself as you did.”

“You *know*?” I ask, incredulous. How does she keep *doing* that?

“I always have, though not all the details until today,” she says. “I know you are in great pain, my love. You will be for some time. What you did was traumatic, and consequently it will sometimes be the subject of your nightmares.” She steps over to him and wraps him up in her wings. “Yet you will always wake from those nightmares, and when you do I will always be there for you. Because that is the essence of love, Star Swirl, and I love you. Always.”

Star Swirl is too stunned to do or say anything for a few moments, so Luna just holds him. “What I said before... I owe you an apology,” says Star Swirl.

Luna regards him for a minute in which Star Swirl remains silent. “One traditionally follows such a statement with the actual apology itself,” she says.

“Right. Sorry,” says Star Swirl with a sheepish grin. “Luna, I’m sorry. I came here and I saw that you were different, and I just assumed that you were... somehow worse, or diminished.”

“You were correct. I am somewhat less than I was. And though your method of telling me so was arrogant, and belligerent, and callous, and deplorable, and-”

“I think I get the point,” grumbles Star Swirl.

“Very well. Despite the fact that the way you pointed it out to me was somewhat lacking, I did need to have it pointed out. So I forgive you. If only because these next few days will likely be my last chance to say goodbye to you, and I have foolishly been squandering this great gift for petty reasons.”

I look at the two of them, and it's wonderful to see them back together again. I realize that for each of them this has been bittersweet. For Luna, of course, just seeing him again must be reopening old wounds. She must be acutely aware of just how finite her time with him is. I'm struck by a fresh surge of annoyance at how he treated her in the library last week.

In a way though, for Star Swirl this is even worse. He's going to carry the burden of knowing what happens to Luna, what she does to Celestia and her foal and all the other ponies she's going to kill, and he's going to have to lie to her by omission about it. And yet somehow, they're going to love one another for decades to come. I'm not sure I can comprehend that kind of resilience. I can only hope that it runs in the family.

"You should tell her," I blurt out. I want to kick myself for intruding on the moment they were sharing. "When you go back to the past. Forget keeping the timeline stable. You can make a better future together. You can tell Luna she doesn't have to feel alone, and you can stop the whole Nightmare Moon fiasco before it even starts."

Luna looks over at me, somewhat perturbed at my meddling. "That is a rather arrogant suggestion to make, Twilight. The events are six hundred years distant from one another. Although it is true that in retrospect, several events from around that time were the seeds of Nightmare Moon's genesis."

"They were?" asks Star Swirl. "Like what?"

Luna just smiles, cryptic and sad at the same time. "Tell you? And spoil the surprise? You should know me better than that, dear." She turns to me. "Meddling in the tragedies of the past is an understandable impulse, but tiny changes can have unforeseen consequences. Who is to say what the impact of such knowledge on me would be? Perhaps, as you suggest, I would be able to resist it. Or perhaps I would resign myself to it sooner. If I were banished fifty years earlier than I was, and I returned after the same interval of one thousand years, you and your friends would not yet exist to stop me. Whether Celestia would be able to come up with another plan is unknowable."

“Plus if you don’t become the Bearer you probably won’t be able to use the time loop spell, and then you won’t bring me here to learn the information to give it to her when I go back, and then there’s a paradox. The universe would collapse, and we wouldn’t ever get those snazzy matching hats,” says Star Swirl with a grin.

“The Element of Magic is a tool of the divine. The Leader of Equals. It is an essential part of the fabric of the universe. It is not ‘a hat,’” says Luna with a small frown.

“What are we supposed to do now that we have two of them?” I ask.

“Star Swirl will take the second one back to the past with him,” says Luna.

“I will?” asks Star Swirl.

“Trust in me, love. Some day things will be clear to you.”

I know better than to expect a straight answer out of either Princess when they’re like this. Still, something’s bugging me. “Princess, carrying around all these secrets, I get why we have to but it just doesn’t seem right. I tried to keep everything that happened to me in the time loops to myself and it nearly tore me apart. Wouldn’t it be better to just be completely open with one another?”

Luna smiles. “Many things are less harmful to us when they are brought to light. Others are best left in the dark. Does knowing everything the other you did to become the changeling queen make you feel better?” she asks. She holds up a hoof to forestall my protest. “I know that she was not you, that is not what I mean to imply. You bear no culpability for her actions. Yet I’m sure it doesn’t feel that way to you. Your distress is understandable, but irrational. Others would likely feel the same way. Once the shock of what happened wears off I suspect your angst will dissipate on its own. Give it a few days to see if this is the case before you burden others with your tale,” she says.

Luna’s ear twitches. “Star Swirl, let’s give Twilight some privacy. She’s about to have a visitor. I’m sure her friends will

be by soon as well. Besides, I intend to make the very most of the time I have left with you.” She steps over to him and caresses his cheek with her hoof, slowly and gently dragging it along his skin until it comes to rest on his chest. “Bring your new hat.”

The two walk out of the room and leave me alone with that disturbing mental image for a few minutes before there’s a knock on the door. “Come in,” I call out.

The door opens and Azalea enters. When she sees that I’m awake and alert a wide grin breaks across her face. She rushes over to give me a hug. That’s how I discover I also have a bruised rib. I give a little yelp of pain and she lets go immediately. She lingers for a second, reaching out an unsure hoof to touch me then pulling it away as if she’s afraid I’ll shatter at her touch. I smile and make up her mind for her by laying my hoof over hers.

“Applejack told me yesterday that they were all coming to see you when you got back from where you were going. I followed as soon as I could. I can’t believe I missed you getting back. By the time I got here they told me you had collapsed. I was worried half to death! They wouldn’t tell me anything except that you’d been poisoned somehow. Are you OK?”

“I am now,” I say to her. “Thank you for being here, it means a lot.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Count on it,” she says and leans in to peck my cheek. She glances over her shoulder like she’s afraid she’s being watched by somepony. “Technically, you’re on a controlled diet but I tried some of the food here and it’s not very good. So I snuck something in for you.” She opens her saddlebag and pulls out an azalea. “Sorry it’s a bit smooshed.”

My stomach growls at the sight of the snack and I grab it from her eagerly. My first impulse is to cram it all into my mouth at once, but instead I just pull a few petals off and suck on them, closing my eyes and savoring the flavor. When I swallow them

and open my eyes again, Azalea is looking at me with tears in her eyes. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Sorry. You’re the one who’s hurt, and I’m the one who’s turning into a mess,” she says. “What happened where you were? Was it as scary as you thought it would be?”

“It wasn’t so bad,” I say. It’s a gentle lie, and a harmless one. I’ll see if Luna was right before I spill the entire story to anyone. It would be a lot more to take than even what had happened during all the loops I survived. At least that had a happy ending I could be proud of. But as awful as what I just saw was, it feels a little more detached. Wallowing in it won’t help. I’d rather just move on.

Azalea climbs into bed with me and lays her head down on my chest. My forelegs move automatically around her. A perfect fit. “I’m glad,” she says. “Tell me all about it.”

That moment crystallizes in my mind as I comprehend the words and I realize everything is about to go horribly wrong. It’s just a poor turn of phrase. She could have said, ‘tell me anything about it,’ or ‘do you want to talk about it?’ or ‘I’m here to listen’ or almost anything else that would have meant exactly the same thing. But no, she worded it as a command, albeit a gentle one. And the venom still coursing through my system takes it literally.

I fight it as hard as I can, but a few seconds later the whole story starts to pour from my mouth. It isn’t that bad at first as I’m telling her about getting captured and taken to the throne room and what we found there. The first time she reacts is when I repeat what Queen Sparkle mentioned about our sleeping with Luna. At that she pulls away from my chest and sits bolt upright in bed next to me, looking at me with an expression that’s both a little hurt and a little impressed. I want to scream at her to interrupt me, tell me to hold on so we can talk about that and I can warn her about what the venom actually does. But my mouth is otherwise occupied.

It’s only when I start telling her about going down into the dungeon that I start to truly panic, looking at her with pleading eyes and trying to will her to stop me. To cut me off with one

of those wonderful kisses the way she's done before. But she doesn't. I start to repeat everything Chrysalis said word for word, including every single time she intentionally used the pronoun 'you' to describe Queen Sparkles actions to me. I want to curse myself for having spent so long honing my memory, doing all sorts of exercises so I'd be able to recall in an instant every word of one of Celestia's lectures.

Azalea has pulled as far away from me as she can, working herself subconsciously down towards the foot of the bed. She's staring at me like I'm a completely different pony, her eyes full of fear, but I still can't shut up. When I get to our being pursued by the queen and all the hateful accusations she flung at me Azalea closes her eyes and shakes her head. I've almost reached the part where we holed up in the vault when Azalea says what I would have given anything to hear ten minutes ago.

"Please stop," she begs.

I finally can. "Azalea, I am so sorry. It's the venom that's still in my system, that's all. Otherwise I wouldn't have told you all that."

"But that's what happened?" she says.

"That's what happened. It's over now. I promise," I say.

She stares at me like she's trying to figure something out. "If you had been the one stuck in the loop, that wouldn't have happened to you, right? I mean, you're strong. Nothing could ever push you to do such awful things to a pony you loved, not in a million years. Tell me the truth."

I wish she hadn't added that last part. "The truth is that those were unique circumstances, and it all turned out fine. Those things didn't happen to me."

"That isn't what I asked. True or false; Nothing could ever really make you do any of those things," she says as she stares at me.

"...False," I say. Azalea squeezes her eyes shut like she's trying to block out the whole world. "Azalea, listen. You don't

understand just how bad it would have gotten for her. Any pony in that situation would end up the same way eventually.”

“I wouldn’t. Ever. No matter how bad it got, I would never do to you what you say she was doing to Luna. And I can’t believe that you could even say there’s a set of circumstances, no matter how unlikely, where you could treat somepony that way,” she says. “Just the fact that you say you can understand how she could...”

“Hey, Azalea, it’s going to be OK. I’m going to be OK. I want to put this behind me just as much as you do. Why don’t we talk about something happier, like what we want to do for our next date?” I ask. I reach over to her and stroke a bit of her mane. When I do, the worst possible thing happens.

She flinches away from me as I touch her. Even worse, she’d been sitting precariously on the bed’s edge. The twitch shifts her off balance and she topples backwards to the floor.

“Azalea! Are you hurt?” I ask.

She gets up slowly and stiffly. “I think I twisted my wing a bit. I should go to the nurses station and get an ice pack. I should... I should just go,” she says. There’s a faraway look in her eyes and she won’t meet my gaze. “I think I need a break.”

“A break? You mean from talking about this, right?” I ask, desperate. Please don’t let this be happening. Not like this.

“Just... I need some time to think about things,” she says and walks towards the door. She opens it, and stops in the frame. “I’m sure I’ll see you around town some time, Twilight,” she says without looking back. She steps through and the door closes behind her with a dreadful finality.

I want to leap out of the bed and chase her down, make her understand that she’s wrong about me. About us. I can’t seem to will my legs to move though. After several unsuccessful tries I remember Fluttershy telling me to stay in bed earlier. Until the venom clears or somepony tells me otherwise this bed might as well be a cage. All I can do is bury my face in my pillow and impotently scream my frustrations out.

Later that night, I have a nightmare about being back in the time loop. The first one in months.

Azalea isn't there for me when I wake up.

Author's Notes:

What happened to Queen Sparkle before and after this Twilight arrived is covered in the VERY R RATED [Reign of Queen Twilight Sparkle](#). If you only want to know what happened right after Twi and Star Swirl left you can jump straight to the final chapter, [Breaking My Soul](#), without running into anything worse than in these last two chapters or spoiling any of the rest of the story. That chapter could be rated Teen, but the story as a whole is firmly in the Mature/Sex/Gore category.

Time Out (Featuring Special Guest Narrator Pinkie Pie)

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Wow! Those last two chapters were *super* dark and sad! I don't know about everypony else, but I need something fun to get that out of my head.

I mean, first Star Swirl was like 'Twilight, you're a changeling queen' and Twilight was all 'no way!' but she totally was. And then they went to go erase some lines in time or something, I didn't really follow what they meant. I usually like to color outside the timelines anyway.

So anyway, they got there and then Queen Sparkle was all 'Rar! I am evil and a meaney who does mean things but I'm also a victim of tragic circumstances so you should feel bad for me, rar!' and she bit Twilight with that mind control poison stuff! But then Twilight was all 'no way, I'm Twilight Sparkle and I'm totally too badass for that,' and she fought back against it. Then they hid in a big vault and Twilight was gonna use the Element of Magic but it was like 'nuh uh,' when she touched it and then 'uh huh' when Star Swirl did so he used it instead of her. Meanwhile Twilight was talking to Queen Sparkle and saying that they should let them cast the spell and not kill them, because if they did it would mean that when something killed her it would kill her for real. But she was totally lying!

So anyway, the two of them came home and Twilight was all sick and stuff from the changeling venom so she went to the hospital. Star Swirl and Luna came to see her, and there was this awkward moment where Star Swirl was sorry because he youth-anized her, although I don't know why because she looks *great* for her age. Then she was like 'Yes you dreamed about it in the future-past and I already knew that. Twilight did this in *Hard Reset* too about the timeline where we slept together. Why do so many ponies dream recaps of major plot

points?’ and then they kissed and made up and I was all ‘awww!’

Then Azalea came to see Twilight and I was all ‘SQUEE!’ because even though Twilight hasn’t known her very long the two of them have been ultra totally into each other since they met and it’s adorable, but then Azalea accidentally used the changeling venom to make Twilight tell her everything. And you know, everything is a lot. Like if I told you everything about a normal day for me you’d be all ‘Pinkie, that’s silly,’ or ‘Pinkie, thirty thousand danishes is way too many for eight ponies,’ or ‘Pinkie, that isn’t even physically possible.’ But it was even worse ‘cause Twilight was telling her everything about a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day and Azalea got all freaked out and ran away from her, even though before she had been all like ‘I care about you super a lot and I’ll be there with you forever,’ and last time I checked four evers was way more than a couple of days. That’s not even a tenth of one ever! Not nice, Azalea! Plus now Twilight is all angsty and stuff.

And the worst part is that I never got to make a joke about anything being recursive!

So it’s a sour mood when all of my bestest friends come with me to pick up Twilight from the hospital wing of the castle the day she’s getting out. Not the good lemon candy kind of sour either. She comes out with her travel bag like she’s ready to come home with us, but she doesn’t look as happy as somepony who beat up a giant bug monster should.

“Twilight, dear, how are you feeling?” asks Rarity.

“Same as yesterday afternoon,” she says, which mean she’s still all mopey and cry-ie like she was when we checked in on her before and she told us what she and Star Swirl did. I read the last two chapters myself though, and she so left out a lot of parts. Then she told us about the fight she had with Azalea and Applejack was all mad because she had worked really hard picking her out just for Twilight, and she said that the two of them were going to have words.

I hope that at least one of them is ‘hortatory,’ or maybe ‘tatterdemalion’ because those are really neat words.

“Are you sure that the last of the changeling venom is gone? I’ve never made any antidote for that before, I’ve only really practiced that when Mr. Mongoose and Mr. King Cobra get into arguments,” says Fluttershy.

Gasp! I just had the best idea ever!

“I know, I know,” I say. “Twilight Sparkle, I order you not to be mind controlled anymore. Did that work?”

Twilight blinks a few times and kind of tilts her head a bit like she always does when I use a best idea ever. “You know, I think it did work. Thanks, Pinkie,” she says. More important, she smiles a little tiny bit which was the real point anyway.

“Anyway, Star Swirl wants a couple days to spend with Luna, and the worst of the time problem is solved. A little longer working through the math and we should have a way to tie up all the loose ends now that the big one’s gone. I wanted to get it over with, but Celestia came by after you left and told me that she was ordering me to go home and get better first.”
Wow! A Princess order that’s also a mind control order? That’s one doozy of an order!

“Well, we’ll certainly be glad to have you back,” says Rarity. “Remember that if you ever want to talk about things with Azalea there’s a whole gallon of ice cream in my freezer with your name on it.” There is? I didn’t think they made Twilight Sparkle ice cream. I wonder if it really tastes like her, or it has little Twilight Sparkle pieces inside.

Actually that sounds kinda icky.

“Whoo hoo, Twilight on vacation, finally! Your life has been way too low on hijinks these last few weeks, and those are the friendliest kind of jinks because they’re always saying hi! You’ve been super unlucky lately, like all your hijinks have turned into a jinx. Do you think that’s why you got stuck in the time loop? Have you been buying off-brand jinks?”

“No, Pinkie,” says Twilight.

“Well don’t,” I say. “Now, come on girls. We’re going...”

“...back to Ponyville!” I say as I jump out of the door of the train car.

“Finally,” says Dashie. “Gotta tell you Pinkie, I was getting kinda worried when you just trailed off mid-sentence back there and then didn’t say anything the entire ride home.”

“Silly Dashie! That was a scene transition!”

Dashie rolls her eyes in that way that ponies always do when I’m right about something but they don’t understand why.

“OK, Pinkie. Sure it was.”

Twilight looks really tired, so we can’t have fun right away. I have just the solution, a Pony Problem Panacea Party! There’s so much I have to do to get ready though.

“Twilight, in two nights we’re having a PoProPanaParty!”

“A what?” she asks. Silly Twilight. Who hasn’t heard of a PoProPanaParty?

“You’ll get the invitation soon,” I say, and I run off.

When I come to Twilight’s library the next day, she’s sitting around reading a book. This vacation she’s on is starting to look suspiciously like a not-vacation if you ask me.

Gasp! In the corner! It’s Home Run! She said she left him in the other timeline, but he made it back! This confirms my theory that Home Run is secretly from an alternate universe where Equestria is populated by sporting equipment and when he and his friends were thwarting the evil Empress Walk Off the Elements of Athletics tore a hole in space-time and he fell through it. Now he wields the Element of Strikeouts and travels the multiverse fighting evil and righting wrongs, hoping each time the next leap will be his leap home.

The other girls will probably just say that Twilight bought a new baseball bat yesterday, but I like my theory better. I’m on to you, Home Run. Taking off the name we put on you before we gave you as a present to Twilight might have fooled the others, but not me.

What was I doing here again?

“Hi Twilight, can you tell me what I’m doing here?” I ask.

“Well, you’re carrying an envelope and wearing a shirt that says ‘I Just Invited Twilight Sparkle To A Party And All I Got Was This Neato T-shirt And A Party’ so I’m going to take a wild guess and say you’re inviting me to the party you mentioned yesterday,” says Twilight without glancing up from her book.

That sort of keen deductive reasoning is why we let Twilight do most of the super hard thinky things.

I have a ton of stuff I still need to do before tomorrow night, but something about Twilight’s face makes me stop. I don’t think she even knows that she’s frowning a little and her eyes are just a bit less bright than they should be and all the other tiny things about her that just scream ‘Hug Me!’ so that’s just what I do.

“Pinkie, what’s this for?” she asks.

“I just wanted to,” I say. “Twilight, I’m super duper sorry about Azalea. I know you liked her.”

“It’s OK Pinkie. I mean we only had one date,” says Twilight. As if she could pretend she didn’t have a super good time on that date and really wanted there to be more.

“Maybe it’ll work out. You’re both my friends. I know my friends from A to Z and I think she’s really sorry too. Although I can’t be sure because even though I know her A to Z she still has four more letters after that.”

Now Twilight looks really sad, and not just the general passive background kind of sad. “Do I want it to? When I really needed her, she just made everything worse.”

“But you aren’t gonna feel better if you don’t talk to her. Even if it’s just to tell her for sure you don’t want to see her again and that she made you feel angry and hurt,” I say. “I know a lot of bad things have happened to you lately, but the Twilight Sparkle I love gets out there and happens right back at them!” I say. Twilight smiles, and even if it’s kind of a sad one it’s still

a smile. Mission accomplished! “I’ll see you at the party tomorrow, OK?”

“Okey, lokey, dokey,” says Twilight, returning my hug with a quick squeeze.

I love her to death, but Twilight has got to leave that kind of thing to us professionals.

This party is going to be so great! The guests should be here any minute, only the best and most important ponies along with fun and games and streamers and everything! There a knock on the door and I’ve never been so excited except for right before all my other parties, which means pretty much all the time.

“Surprise!” I say as I open the door and see my five friends standing there.

“Pinkie, you told us about this party. It’s all you’ve been talking about for two days,” says Rarity.

“Exactly! The last place anypony expects there to be a surprise party is at the party they’re already going to! It’s my own special party-judo,” I say.

They walk in, and take a look around the room. I hold out for as long as I can, which turns out to be just under a second and a half, before I have to show them the first party surprise.

“OK girls, let’s get started. I came up with a brand new super special recipe for this party, and we’re all gonna have some,” I say.

“Let me guess, cookies?” asks Rainbow Dash.

“Nope!” I say. “Guess again, guess again!”

“Some new sort of cake?” asks Twilight.

I can’t contain myself any longer. “Nope! Shots!”

I pull out a tray of tiny glasses from wherever it is that I pull anything out of. The others look a little taken aback.

“Pinkie, I don’t know…” says Twilight.

“Just one! Then you can switch to whatever you want to drink for the rest of the night, and if you really don’t want to that’s OK too. I can fill a shot glass with root beer or something for you,” I say.

“You know what? Why not?” asks Twilight. She lifts up a glass with her magic and as she does the others reach for theirs too.

Fluttershy looks down at hers. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Liver,” she says.

“To the best party ever!” I say. We all clink our glasses together and down them. The others all cough and choke as they do.

“Pinkie, what are these?” asks Applejack.

“I came up with the recipe and I thought to myself, ‘Pinkie, what should you call something that makes ponies act all crazy, and do whatever you dare them to, and say things that they regret the next morning?’ and the answer was obvious. I call ‘em Changeling Venoms!”

Judging by the way Twilight starts hacking and coughing again when I say that I just know she thinks the name is great, even though the rest of my friends are looking back and forth between me and her.

“Pinkie, don’t you think that these might be a little tasteless?” ask Rarity.

I giggle. “I wish they were tasteless. They taste awful! That’s why you have to shoot them,” I say. The girls start to chat with one another and I mingle with them for an hour or so. Twilight even takes a second shot of Changeling Venom and I’m a bit surprised. I figured she of all ponies would have stopped after one. Don’t tell her I said this, but she’s sort of a light weight.

There’s another knock on the door from downstairs. “Yay! The rest of the guests are here!”

“Ah thought it was just the six of us tonight. Who else did you ask to come?” asks Applejack, but it’ll be quicker if I don’t answer and just bring up our other guests.

I yank the door open and Star Swirl is there. “Hi Star Swirl!”

“Hello, Pinkie right? Princess Luna and Princess Celestia send their regrets, but they have to work.” he says.

Someday. Someday I’ll have both Princesses cutting loose at one of my parties while they’re both at full power. It’ll be *epic*. “Welcome! Come in, we’re just getting started,” I say.

I lead him back upstairs to the party. Twilight is sitting by the drinks, and there’s a third and a fourth empty shot glass hovering in the wobbly magic around her head.

Uh oh.

“Star Swirl? Horse apples, I didn’t just teleport us all to Canterlot, right?” she asks. She gets up onto her hooves unsteadily, and I wonder if I didn’t make those Changeling Venoms a little too strong.

“Twilight, are you OK?” asks Star Swirl. She’s managed to become the center of attention, and the Twilight I know always likes to stay just at the edge of attention when she’s not being a super great leader, and right now she’s not. I’m not so sure that shots were such a fun idea at all. In fact none of this seems quite as fun as it did a minute ago.

“I’m better than OK!” says Twilight. “Why wouldn’t I be? Just because Azalea and I broke up? Pfft, like that matters. Who cares about a sweet, clever, snuggly, smart, funny, sexy mare like her? I would have hated to end up spending a blissful, wonderful lifetime with a filly like that,” she says. For some reason, I’m reminded about the stuff Rarity was explaining to me about subtext. “Don’t deserve her anyway.”

“You broke up with Azalea?” asks Star Swirl.

Twilight stops all of a sudden. “I should have. I should have dumped her the moment she said that I love her. I mean that she loves me. Who says that after one date? Crazy ponies, that’s who. I’m not crazy, you know. I wouldn’t actually do the kinds of things she thought I would. I don’t know why I told her I would. Just because... just because I saw... hey, are there any more shots?” she asks.

“Nope, all gone. Just water and soda left,” I say as I hide the shots still on my tray behind my back.

“Well get me whatever soda has the most alcohol in it,” she says.

“Hey, know what sounds like fun? A game! Let’s play ‘How long can Twilight lie down on the couch,’” I say. Actually, that could be a really fun game with the right rules for tickling and other props, but tonight I just want Twilight not to do something she won’t want to hear about tomorrow.

“No, I wanna play something else,” says Twilight. “Let’s play ‘How many time loops!’ I’ll name an atrocity, and you girls guess how many loops it took before I was willing to commit it. Closest without going over wins,” but she lets me lead her to the couch and lay her down on it. Our friends obviously know that this is shaping up to be my worst party ever. One of them turned down the music and the others have gathered around us. I take Twilight’s hoof and when I do she grabs me and pulls me towards her. “I’m not her. You know that I’m not her right?” she says.

“Shhh, you’re you,” I say.

Twilight still looks haunted. “Exactly, Pinkie. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

With that Twilight lies down on my couch and closes her eyes. The rest of the girls look sad, but Star Swirl looks really angry. “Where does Azalea live?” he asks.

“Easy there, sugarcube. No need for that. You want to have a nice, calm chat with her, talk to her when she’s sellin’ flowers in the market tomorrow,” says Applejack.

“Maybe I should take Twilight back to the library. I think she’s had enough for one night,” he says. I can’t argue with that.

“I’m sorry, I just thought if she was with all of us she might feel better, but I messed everything up,” I say.

“I’ll come with you and help you tuck her in,” says Fluttershy. “Don’t worry Pinkie, this wasn’t your fault.” But it was my party! Anything bad that happens at my party is at least a little

itty bit my fault. The two of them leave carrying a very sad Twilight, and I sink to the floor.

“It didn’t work,” I say. “I really thought we could remind her of how everything could be good and fun again,” I say. Not only is Twilight all sad still but now I am too! I can’t believe she’d act like that after a few drinks, she’s usually so in control. Even though I made the shots it’s not like when I made up the recipe I secretly poured one shot to rule them all that would let me turn anypony who drank them unhappy.

“Hey, if any party could fix Twilight, this Pinkie Pie party would have done it,” says Rainbow Dash.

“Thanks Dashie,” I say. I really do appreciate her reassurance. Now I’ll need to plan an even better Sorry Your Last Party Wasn’t So Good party for Twilight. I thought this was supposed to be a light and funny breather chapter! This isn’t what I signed on for!

The next morning I go out to the market to buy some ingredients that the Cakes say we’re running low on. When I get there the very first thing I go to do is say hi to Applejack, but she’s not in her usual spot. Instead she set up a few rows down.

“Hi Applejack,” I say as I walk up to her, “how come you’re all the way over here today?”

“Didn’t want to set up so close to Azalea. The way Twi was hurtin’ last night still has me a bit riled up, and it ain’t a good idea for me to talk to her ‘til ah cool off a bit,” she says.

“I’m really worried about Twilight,” I say. “Do you think we could find her a new marefriend? Of the seven thousand, four hundred and thirty nine mares who live in Ponyville, eight hundred fifty three of them like fillies at least a little bit.”

“How do you know it’s exactly that many?” asks Applejack.

How *do* I know that? Oh yeah! A couple weeks ago Mayor Mare was giving a speech and said that the hydra attack that had happened was a senseless act of violence, but I was thinking about balloons and not really listening so I thought

she said it was a *census* act of violence and I thought ‘Silly mayor! You can’t commit an act of violence with a census!’ But then I was like ‘or *can* you?’ and I went around for the next couple days asking everypony in town probing and embarrassing questions and sometimes watching them sleep. Then by the time I was all done I remembered that even if I could commit a census act of violence it probably wouldn’t be very nice of me to do it.

“Pinkie? You there?” asks Applejack. I look up at her.

“If you were doing a hydra census, would you have to count each head separately?” I ask. These are important questions!

“Uh, ah’m not really sure sugarcube,” she says. Before I can ask if she knows what a census act of violence is I happen to look over her shoulder.

“Hey Applejack? You said a second ago that the smart thing to do when you’re furious at a pony is to not talk to them until you calm down a little bit, right?” I ask.

“That’s what ah think, anyway,” she says.

“And Star Swirl’s pretty smart, right?” I ask.

“Twi sure thinks so. Ah can’t make head or hoof of what they say to each other half the time,” she says.

“Then Star Swirl must not be furious any more, because he’s going to talk to Azalea right now.” Applejack turns and sees him going past us. Funny, he still looks pretty furious. “Should we go with him?” I ask.

“No, ah think we should stand back and watch the fireworks. Azalea’s my friend and ah don’t want to say anything to her that ah’ll regret later, but ah’d be a liar if ah said ah didn’t want to see her get a little sass for the way she treated Twi,” says Applejack. Wow! There’s going to be an argument *and* fireworks?

“Maybe he just wants to buy a flower,” I point out.

“Ah think we’re gonna find out one way or the other,” says Applejack.

Star Swirl stomps a hoof on the ground to get Azalea's attention, and whatever he's saying to her I can't make out most of it from here, but he must *really* want that flower. I've never heard of a 'you just threw away your shot with the greatest mare you'll ever meet, you weak and stupid coward' flower. They must not grow around here. I guess Azalea doesn't have what he's asking for and she must have really needed the sale because she's starting to cry. Then Star Swirl tells her she's missing out big time because in his experience mares who have the potential to become dark evil monsters are great in the sack. I'll have to remember that if Azalea and Twilight get back together there's going to be some crazy competition at the Ponyville Track and Field Sack Race next month. Now Azalea's blushing and crying at the same time. That's a neat trick, although a little sad too since, you know, crying.

I guess Star Swirl knows he isn't going to get that flower he wanted, because he turns and stalks off. Applejack is watching him go and she looks a little mad. I don't think she expected him to want the flower that much, and she might feel a little guilty that she didn't do anything to stop him from making Azalea cry. "Pinkie, stay here," she says as she chases after him.

Like that's really going to happen.

"Hey, you!" yells Applejack, Does she know that I'm hiding out here in the bushes? Wow, she's good. I totally camouflaged myself and then I painted over the camouflage paint with another layer of it, so I'm *double* camouflaged.

"What?" asks Star Swirl, turning to face her. "Maybe I was out of line, but that mare can go buck herself. I won't apologize," he says.

"Azalea's my friend. Why did you say what'cha did?" asks Applejack.

"Because she deserved it! She'd just the most miserable... ungrateful... she wouldn't know a good thing if it smacked her in the face!" says Star Swirl.

Applejack raises a skeptical eyebrow. “Why do ah think that by ‘good thing’ you really mean ‘Twilight Sparkle,’ hmm?”

“Of course I do! Twilight... do you even know what she was willing to do? She told me to run away and leave her to be tortured to death for decades to save all of you ponies. I wouldn’t have done that. But then she gets back here and that arrogant brat just dismisses her because of what she might have done! As if the only things she might have done were awful ones,” says Star Swirl.

“Seems like you’re awfully fond of her. Are you sure you aren’t sweet on Twilight?” asks Applejack. Oh man, that would be a totally crazy plot twist if it’s true!

“Ew! No! She’s... I don’t know. She’s special, but not like *that*. She’s just... She’s smart, and she’s so dedicated I want to strangle her sometimes, but when I see her hurting I just want to strangle whoever’s making her feel that way. There’s no word for it.” he says.

“Ah can think of one,” says Applejack. “Family. She’s family to you.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” mumbles Star Swirl.

“Ain’t nothing to be ashamed of, even if it ain’t by blood. Ah feel the same way about her, and ah reckon the rest of the girls do too.”

“I didn’t think any of you were related,” he says.

“You ain’t listenin to me at all, are you? I don’t know every little thing she’s been through, though lord knows ah’ve asked her to tell me. Then again, ah suppose a mare deserves to keep her secrets. Ah’ve seen her pushed way past what anypony’s breaking point should be. Maybe she did do bad stuff, but ah don’t much care. Ah’d follow her to the end of the world if she asked.”

“I wouldn’t. I’d tell her she’s insane.”

“Ah betcha would. That what you said right before you followed her into a whole other universe?” she asks.

“That was different. We were... shut up!” he says.

Applejack chuckles. “You know, Twilight told me a bit about you. Said you were a whiny, arrogant jerk of a pony who’ll never amount to anything unless he changes his attitude, but ah think she was wrong.”

“Oh yeah? What is it you think of me?” he asks.

“Ah think you’re a whiny, arrogant jerk of a pony who just might turn out to be something special despite yourself,” says Applejack. “Try pullin’ your head out of your plot sometime. And stop treatin’ ponies around you so awfully. You might be surprised at how many of them would like you if you gave ‘em half a chance. Now ah’m goin’ back there to comfort Azalea, ‘cause she’s hurtin’ over all this too. Ah don’t know if they broke up for good or not but ah know she’s a pony with a good heart or ah wouldn’t have set her up with Twi in the first place. Don’t follow me.”

Applejack walks off leaving Star Swirl just sitting in the path for a minute before he turns and leaves the other way, towards Twilight’s library. I’m totally going with him to see how Twilight’s doing. I’m really good at being just the sneakiest pony ever and he doesn’t even realize I’m there until I pop out of the door of the library when he opens it.

“Surprise!” I say.

“Gah!” he shouts and staggers back. “Pinkie? How did you get in there?”

“I was following you after you talked with Applejack, and I saw that you were about to go into the library and I thought ‘wouldn’t it be funny if I popped out of there when you opened the door?’ and so I did and it was,” I say.

“But how did you actually get into the library?” he asks.

“Silly pony! I just told you! Pay more attention next time,” I say.

He just walks past me and into the library. Twilight is sitting at the table with her face flat against it with a steaming mug of coffee sitting next to her. “Twilight, you can’t drink coffee through the surface of a table,” I say.

She groans. “Pinkie, please be quieter. I feel like I just had changeling eggs laid in my brain again. This might actually be worse,” she says.

“Well when you’re up to it you should take a look at this,” says Star Swirl. He brings the Element of Magic crown out of the guest room. I guess it’s the second one, because Twilight brought hers back to Ponyville.

Twilight’s the only pony I know for who having something to think about makes her hangovers better instead of worse. She perks up and we both look at it. “Hey, I thought you said the jewel part was black. That looks a lot purplier than I thought it would,” I say.

“The color’s been shifting. What about yours?” he asks. Twilight walks up to her room and carries the other Element of Magic down to the table. I’m in the magicalet library ever!

“Looks the same to me, yours is still a little darker,” says Twilight.

“Yours matches your coat, just like ours! It must mean you’re EMBFFs! Element of Magic Best Friends Forever,” I say.

“I don’t feel any interaction between the two of them,” says Star Swirl. “Do you think anything would happen if they touched?” he asks.

“Omigosh! I totally know what would happen!” I say. Twilight and Star Swirl look over at me. “I bet there’d be a big magical explosion and you would swap bodies or something! And then you’d try to hide it from everypony else because obviously it’s funnier that way and you’d both have to go back to Canterlot to fix it for some reason. Then Star Swirl would look like Twilight and Princess Celestia would think he *is* Twilight and she’d ask you for a friendship report and you’d have to make one up on the spot but you’d have an epiphany about how amazing friendship really is! And while Star Swirl’s doing that Luna will find Twilight who looks like Star Swirl and she’ll be all ‘come to bed, lover’ and Twilight would get to bang Luna again, and it would be super awesome but you’d end up with all sorts of gender confusion issues because at this point I think you should just go ahead and try to collect all the

different kinds of mental problems one pony can have. Plus then you and Azalea can make up but she'll find out somehow and she'll be like 'how could you? We were only taking a break,' and Twilight would be all like 'you're the one who left me!' Then you two would start casting the spell to fix the rest of the time stuff only you have to do it up in the sky for some reason and while you two are casting it Azalea and Luna would have a climactic sword fight on top of a zeppelin to win Twilight's love once and for all and then Star Swirl is fatally wounded but he gets to tell Luna he loves her one more time. Then Twilight will be all 'oh no, but time!' and Azalea will reveal that she's been the real Star Swirl all along! Then our readers will be all like 'I have no idea what's going on *and I love it!*'"

I gasp for breath. The rest of this story is going to be the greatest thing ever!

"Yeah, we're not doing that," says Star Swirl.

"I'll put mine back somewhere safe," says Twilight and levitates it upstairs to her room.

Sorry guys, I tried.

"We should do some more work on the math to collect all the little timelines that are still out there. The divergence won't be as great but if there's enough of them they might create problems eventually," says Star Swirl.

They start to talk to one another and I don't think I'm gonna pay attention to that anymore. It's not fair, my idea was really good and neither of them wanted to do it! I walk out the library and they don't even notice, so I just sit on the steps. I don't wanna stay sad, and at least the time problem made her stop feeling like a fuddy duddy stick-in-the-muddy.

"Hi Pinkie Pie," says a voice from above.

"Derpy!" I say. Finally, a mare whose thought process makes sense to me. "What's up?"

"I am!" she says and we both laugh. "Actually, somepony important said I needed to give a letter to Twilight. Is she in there?" asks Derpy.

“Yeah, but she’s doing time stuff with Star Swirl right now,” I say.

“Perfect! That’s who I’m supposed to tell her to pass it on to. Would you give it them?” asks Derpy.

“Sure,” I say, “I’m always happy to help.” Derpy passes the envelope to me and flies onward, but when I turn it over the letter inside slips out. When I pick it up I can’t help but read what’s written on it. I walk back into the library. “Twilight, Star Swirl, check out this letter,” I say.

“What’s it say?” asks Twilight.

“It says that you and Star Swirl are going to go... to the End of Time!” I say.

...

“It’s a watch store in Canterlot. I guess something Star Swirl ordered came in,” I say.

Wait, what do you mean that was supposed to be the start of the next chapter? If I’d stopped right after ‘the End of Time’ it would have sounded like some kind of big-deal cliffhanger.

Hey! You were gonna do that on purpose! That’s mean!

I’m not gonna stick to the script if you’re gonna write things like that, it’s practically like lying!

Well, fine, maybe I didn’t want to be the narrator any more anyway, you big jerky McJerkypants! I quit!

Time is the Coin of Your Life

TIME IS THE COIN OF YOUR LIFE

I look across the library, from Star Swirl who's reviewing the letter to Pinkie who's mumbling something about 'renegotiating her contract,' whatever that's supposed to mean. I wonder what goes on inside her head sometimes, but I think it's probably a pretty strange place. In the background Spike is reshelving books that came in this morning while I was sleeping off those shots. "You ordered a watch?" I ask.

"Yeah, I collect them," says Star Swirl.

"Why?" I ask.

"What, a stallion isn't allowed to have a hobby? I like watches," he says. a bit defensive.

"I just mean, is it a special watch? Or is the watch store run by somepony who could help us with the time spell, like that pony who owed you money back in Canterlot?" I ask.

"What do you think watchmaking has to do with theoretical thaumatology?" he asks, genuinely confused.

"I just thought, you know, it would be thematically appropriate and..." I trail off as I realize how dumb that sounds now that I say it out loud. "Hey! Wait a minute, you can't bring back a watch! What if it falls into the wrong hooves?" I say, rather transparently changing the subject. "That's sixteen hundred years of metallurgical developments and all sorts of fine machinery they couldn't make back then." Yeah, I'm reaching.

Pinkie gasps and rejoins the conversation. "Oh my gosh! There could be another new timeline, with super advanced machines and stuff," she says.

"Pinkie, that's probably not what would-"

Pinkie is unstoppable. "Instead of fighting changelings in the time loop, maybe it'd be robots instead! And like how you were cursed to become a changeling queen in this loop you'd

turn into a monster in that one too, you'd be recursed to become a half mare half machine cyborg!"

I moan. My hangover is coming back. "Pinkie, do you want me to show you in the dictionary where they actually define that word?"

"Not now Twilight, you have to solve this time thingy before the robot uprising comes. I'll help!"

My blood runs cold at the idea of Pinkie 'helping' with advanced math and delicate experimental magic. "Tell you what Pinkie, if you really want to help go talk to all our friends and tell them to come here and we'll give you a recap on where we are now, OK?"

"Woo hoo! I'm helping!" shouts Pinkie, and she's out the door in a blur to gather up the rest of our friends.

"Was that really such a good idea, Twilight?" asks Spike, coming over to the table I'm seated at. "I thought you said you didn't want any distractions while you were doing the really hard math stuff."

"It's fine, Spike. Maybe describing the problem to them will help Star Swirl and I. Right now the equations just aren't adding up. Besides, Pinkie's heart is in the right place. Speaking of which..." I lean down and hug him "...so is yours. Exactly the right place."

"Does that mean something?" he asks. He can't see it but I smile as I let him go.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Would you mind making up some snacks for when the girls get here?"

"Sure," he says and scampers off for the kitchen.

I look up and catch Star Swirl looking at me. "What?" I ask, probably a bit more accusingly than I should.

"Just thinking about Philomena, sorry," he says. "Come on, let's get back to work."

The girls arrive at lunchtime to eat with me. Rainbow Dash is the first to arrive, which might be unprecedented for her.

“Hey Twilight, you got a second before the others get here?” she asks.

“Sure Dash, what’s going on?”

“Some pony is asking you out,” she says.

I blink. This is coming completely out of nowhere and it leaves me feeling a bit blindsided. “Oh wow, Rainbow, I didn’t think the rumors were true. I really have to figure out how I feel about Azalea first, but if things don’t work out with her I would love to try going out with you,” I say.

Rather than happy or upset Rainbow Dash just looks puzzled.

“Wait, you know I’m not talking about me, right?” she asks.

“What was that bit about rumors?”

“Hey, I really want to hear about this other pony right now!” I say.

“Oh right, her,” says Rainbow Dash and her mercurial attention span is successfully diverted. “She said that she heard you had broken up with Azalea and asked me to see if you would go out with her tomorrow. Do you know Algae Bloom? White coat? Earth pony? Two fish for a cutie mark?” she asks.

I try to think through any ponies I know who fit that description, but nothing pops to mind. “I don’t think so. Who’s telling ponies that I broke up with Azalea? Other than, uh, drunk me. I don’t know what our status is right now.”

“I guess Azalea had a really big fight with some stallion in the marketplace about it earlier this morning. Everypony’s talking about it,” says Rainbow Dash.

I suddenly notice how conspicuous Star Swirl’s absence is. Ponyville does love its gossip. Nothing for it now. “What did you think of her?” I ask.

“Ehh... she’s cute I guess, but to tell you the truth I got kind of a sleazy vibe. I think I’ve seen her around the bar scene too. I don’t know, I just figured I’d pass the message along,” says Rainbow Dash.

“Well, I’ll trust your judgement and as long as everything with Azalea is in flux I should probably keep myself off the market.” It’s nice to know some other ponies are interested in me, but everything about that date sounds like a bad idea.

The others arrive and after they’ve all been served from the big bowl of salad Spike made the seven of us get down to business. “Basically, assuming we...” I sigh wistfully but Star Swirl insisted, “...skip all the math, it boils down to the way Star Swirl and I have to split our efforts. I was the one who was in the time loop so I’m the one who has to, well I guess ‘steer it’ would be the best way to think of it. That’s going to take pretty much all of my focus so the other part of the spell, consider that the support and driving force behind making it work, falls to Star Swirl. With me so far?”

I look around the table at five nodding heads, as well as Star Swirl who already knows all of this. “Great, so the problem we keep running into is that Star Swirl just doesn’t have enough power all by himself to run the spell even with his Element of Magic. We’ve been trying to change the spell around so it takes less power but we keep running into brick walls.”

“Well, perhaps another unicorn could help reinforce the spell with their power? I thought that was commonplace in ritual magic like this,” says Rarity.

“It is,” I agree. “Unfortunately with a spell this complex, finding an archmage that can understand it well enough to contribute is a problem. Star Swirl and I barely understand it as it is, and we’re the ones developing it.”

“Well maybe Star Swirl can use both Elements of Magic, and I’m not just saying that because I still want to see the zeppelin sword fight thing,” says Pinkie.

“No,” I say flatly. “I even thought about unearthing the mirror pond and making a clone to use my Element for support, but that’s... ethically dubious.” Also the Princess said no.

“Well what about the other Elements then?” asks Rainbow Dash.

“That would certainly give us enough power, but I already said I’m not going to be able to use my Element, I’ll be busy,” I say. I’ve been through all these options in my head. There has to be something I’m missing.

“Any reason ours wouldn’t work with Star Swirl and his Element?” asks Applejack.

“Only if you were all to become friends,” I say.

The other five look between one another. “Um... but Twilight, we are his friends.”

What?

“Huh?” asks Star Swirl.

“You didn’t know that? I thought that’s why we were here,” says Pinkie.

“When did this happen?” he asks.

“Well I for one very much enjoyed the breakfast the three of us had together, and that example you gave me with the yarn is the only reason I can follow any of this at all,” says Rarity.

“You gave me that awesome idea for a new prank. You still have to come try that with me,” says Rainbow Dash.

“When you helped me figure out the antivenom for Twilight even though you were hurt too well, um, I thought that was very selfless of you,” says Fluttershy.

“You came to my party! Although if there’s pranks going down I want in on Rainbow’s thing too,” says Pinkie.

“You protect the ponies who’re close to you when they’re hurtin’. Just gotta work on your methods a little bit,” says Applejack.

“I wasn’t trying to be your friend when I did those things, though,” says Star Swirl.

“Tends to work better that way anyhow, sugarcube,” says Applejack.

Star Swirl looks stunned, but then breaks into a big grin.

“Alright, why not? The way Twilight keeps going on and on

about it maybe there is something to this friendship thing,” he says.

“Group hug!” says Pinkie and the others gather around Star Swirl. He actually look really happy.

“Twilight, are you going to make me put up with these five all by myself or are you coming too?” he asks.

I roll my eyes, but maybe he’s not quite as bad as I thought he was. I guess he’s earned this.

“Alright, one hug. Then I think that there’s an old teacher of yours who’s been waiting a very long time for the report you’re going to be writing her,” I say

With a plan in place for dealing with the time spell once and for all I’m feeling a lot better. There’s still a lot to do both here and in Canterlot so eventually Star Swirl has to bid us goodbye. The girls head back to what they were doing and he goes to catch the next train to Canterlot. I’m writing a letter to Princess Celestia explaining our idea when there’s a knock on the door and I open it. The mare who I can’t decide if I wanted to see again is standing there.

“Hello, Azalea,” I say and those fleeting moments of good cheer are gone.

“Hi Twilight, how are you?” she asks. I say nothing and she looks down and kicks at the dust with her hoof. “Could I come in? I’d really like to talk to you. Maybe I could finally get that library card,” she says with a hopeful little smile. Celestia help me, I still get goosebumps from that smile.

“Sure,” I say and move to let her pass. She steps inside and I close the door behind her with a thud.

“Twilight, I’m really sorry for the way I treated you back there in the hospital,” she says. She glances up and tries to make eye contact but then looks away after a moment. I wonder what she’s seeing in my eyes.

“Why did you leave?” I ask and my voice breaks a little on the last word. I can already feel my chest tightening up, and I

know my self-control isn't going to last.

"I was scared, and I was weak when you needed me most. I didn't know you'd been injected with changeling queen venom, I just knew whatever it was had made you so sick. Then you started talking about what you had done... No, not you exactly. I understand that much. This you, the pony in front of me, isn't responsible for what the changeling queen did. I didn't think that for even a second." She squeezes her eyes shut and she's remembering it again. "But I imagined you, doing that and even you doing that to me and it made me so scared."

"Then you should have talked to somepony about it! Like me!" I shout. She flinches and I remember the way she did that the last time I touched her.

"I tried! I wanted you to tell me that of course you never would, but that's not what you said," she says.

"Oh, right, you could never do that no matter how many years you spent being tortured and killed and pushed over the brink of sanity. I forgot how much *better* than me you are," I spit the word 'better' out at her and hate the way it tastes in my mouth. I may be somewhat angrier at her than I realized.

Azalea stares at me for a moment. "You think... that I think... that *I'm* better than *you*?" she asks. "Twilight, it's true that I can't imagine myself doing that but I can't imagine the same kind of things you can. I just don't have the context to wrap my head around it. Maybe you're right that I would break eventually, probably sooner than you would have. You're the strongest pony I know. You're Twilight Sparkle! You're a special pony who lives in a special world the rest of us only ever get to look in on."

I don't say anything, because I know that's true. My life certainly has been an interesting one.

"Applejack came up to me, *me*, and asked if I wanted to date you. Just out of nowhere like you were any other mare. You know I only even said yes because I was curious? I did have a crush on you but I figured I'd just get a little peek into your world and then fade back into the background, and you'd

barely even notice I was there. You almost didn't and that hurt more than I thought it would," she says.

"I came after you though, it was a good date after that," I say, gently as I can.

Even though she's tearing up she does smile at that. "It was perfect," she says. "I almost thought I had dreamt the whole thing the next day it was so impossibly wonderful. You were impossibly wonderful. It's like there are two Twilight Sparkles, the special one who practically walks on water and does all the things ordinary ponies like me can't do, and the normal, approachable one who I fell for that night. Then when I saw you in the hospital I got the first one when I was expecting the second one, and it reminded me I'd never understand that world. I just grow flowers. If you'll let me I'd still like to be with that second Twilight, though. If I haven't blown my chance already.

I stop to think about that for a moment. "Wow, you really do not understand me at all," I say.

"Twilight, what do you-"

"You're right. I'm special. I'm the Element of Magic. My teacher is Princess Celestia. My last marefriend was Princess Luna, for goodness sake," she winces at that. It might have been a bit of a cheap shot but I am far too angry at her to care. "You think it's just something I turn on and off like a switch? Like I schedule all the crazy things that keep happening to me and mark them down on my calendar? There's one, and only one, Twilight Sparkle and she's the mare you met that first night. I want somepony... I need somepony who can handle both of those things. And it sounds like you're saying you can't."

"Twilight, I want to. I want to be a better pony, a pony who can be that for you and I promise I will try so, so hard if you just give me another chance to be," says Azalea, pleading.

"So what, we get back together and I let you even deeper into my heart than you already are and *maybe* the next time I need you you'll be there? What kind of relationship is that? Where you decide 'sorry Twilight you're just too *special* today,' and

take off on a whim?" I ask rhetorically. Now we're both crying, and it pains me to see her this way. Even though I want her to feel how much she hurt me I also want to just rush over to her and tell her everything's going to be OK.

"What do you want me to say? Just tell me what I have to say and I'll say it. Anything in my power. Please Twilight, I'll do my best."

"You sure weren't this lost for words when you told me you loved me. You love me? You don't even know me," I say.

"I want to know you, though. I ran away last time because it was just... too much too fast and I wasn't ready for it. Tell you what, how about tomorrow night we sit up with one another and talk about anything or nothing or whatever you feel like? There are so many things I want to share with you. We'll just take it a little slower this time," she suggests.

"Sorry, I have a date tomorrow night. It turns out my life just kept right on going even after you left," I say. Oh, look at that, I just spontaneously decided to take Algae Bloom up on her offer after all. Being spontaneous has served me well in relationships so far, right?

Azalea stares at me and her shoulders slump. Her mouth is open, her lips are trembling and she doesn't say anything for a long moment. "You... I didn't know you'd decided that..." suddenly she perks up her ears and tries to smile. It's a pretty noble effort all things considered, although nopony would believe it to be genuine for even a moment. "That's great Twilight, I'm really glad for you. You deserve to be with somepony special, not me. I'm sure you'll make her just as happy as I was." Azalea starts to breathe harder. "I'll just... I should just..." she doesn't even bother to finish the sentence, she just walks out the door.

That didn't feel as good as I thought it would, but what's done is done. My last date went really well, and sure maybe this other mare doesn't come Applejack-approved but look how well that turned out this time.

I feel very alone there in that empty library all of a sudden. There's equations to finish balancing and dishes to clean up

and books to resshelf, but I can't bring myself to care about any of it. I don't think I even have all that much to do before the date I'm apparently going on tomorrow. The one I agreed to because I guess just stabbing Azalea in the chest with a dull knife didn't seem like it would have caused enough pain. Plenty of time on my hooves.

I think I'll spend most of it curled up into a ball and crying.

I've managed to mostly cry myself out by the middle of the following day, and clean myself up a little bit. I wrote a quick note to Algae Bloom since I was in absolutely no condition to meet her face to face saying I was accepting her offer, and she wrote back to let me know that we'd be going somewhere casual, and not to worry about getting dressed up. I'm happy to comply seeing as I have no desire to spend hours with Rarity fancying me up. I just know that she'll want to talk about Azalea and right now I just can't.

Still, I'm not completely hopeless at doing my own makeup and mane style. I can at least hide the puffiness around my eyes and make myself presentable. Spike's been shipped off to another Crusader's sleepover, this time at Applejack's. Whatever develops, I'll be ready.

She's late, at first just a minute or two and I think that the clock is running fast. When it hits ten after, I start to pace and go recheck the letter to confirm that, yes, she said she'd meet you here when you thought and no, it hasn't changed since the last three times you looked.

It's almost quarter past when there's finally a knock on the door. I'm so high strung I completely forget myself and bolt for it immediately. I've opened it before the knocks have even finished echoing. The mare who must be Algae Bloom is standing there. She wasn't kidding about being casual, her blue mane is disheveled like she just rolled out of bed. Neither of us are wearing anything and yet I still feel overdressed. "Hi, you must be Algae Bloom, nice to meet you. I'm Twilight Sparkle. I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place?" I ask.

“Hi. No, how could I? It’s a giant tree in the middle of the street,” she says. I guess she’s not going to explain why it took her an extra fifteen minutes to get here then. Or apologize. Fine, moving on.

“So, Algae, what did you feel like doing tonight? Dinner, or maybe some sort of a show?” I ask.

“Oh, there’s a great bar back by my apartment where they know me, we can get some cheap drinks,” she says.

Well, OK, mingling over a cocktail isn’t the worst way to start a date. “Sounds like fun! Then what?”

She looks at me blankly. “I guess we’ll see what we feel like from there,” she says.

Remember Twilight, you’re being open minded. Your date with Azalea started badly too.

Do *not* start thinking about Azalea again. Tonight is about a fresh start for you.

“Well, are you ready to get going?” I ask. She nods so I step out and close up the library. Algae Bloom leads the way along the dark streets. “So your cutie mark is something to do with fish? That must be interesting. Ichthyology is a really fascinating field of study,” I say to try to get a conversation going.

She laughs. “What kind of nerd uses words like ‘ichthyology?’ I work at the pet store, keeping the tanks clean mostly. All sorts of slimy plants build up on top of the water and in the filters,” she says. Technically, what she’s referring to aren’t plants but I don’t think I want to contradict her, it seems like a silly thing to risk starting a fight over.

“My cutie mark is for being good at magic although I work at the library and study day to day,” I say once it becomes apparent that any conversation that happens is going to be initiated by me. “Do you have any books you’ve been reading? Favorite authors?” I ask.

“I don’t really read much,” she says. Somehow I’m not surprised.

“Oh, I read all the time!” I say.

Algae Bloom stops. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks.

Huh? “Just... I mean I live in a library so I guess it’s obvious,” I say.

“I don’t think I like your tone. You read more than I do and you’re smart, so you think you’re better than me or something?” she asks.

I’m taken aback. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything like that,” I say. Did... did I just apologize for reading and being smart? Why did I do that? Azalea loved that about me. *I* love that about me.

“Whatever, we’re here. Head in and I’ll get us a round of drinks,” says Algae Bloom

“Soda for me,” I say. The memory of those Changeling Venom shots Pinkie made for her party have turned me off of the idea of alcohol for a while.

I walk into the main area of the bar. This place isn’t a total dive, but it’s close. It’s dark, there’s only three or four other ponies standing around, or maybe ‘lurking’ would be a better word. The cement floor feels gross and sticky under my hooves. The furniture and wallpaper are at least trying to be bright and cheerful, but they’re fighting a losing battle against the low lighting. I pick a booth that’s reasonably well lit and sit down. Luckily I’m only there for a minute or so before Algae Bloom returns with a tray supporting three glasses. She places the mug of cider down on her side of the table and the cocktail glass full of something green and fruity smelling in front on me along with the soda. “Have you had the appletinis here? You didn’t say if you wanted anything other than the soda.”

I didn’t. “Algae, why did you ask me out?” I ask. The mare hasn’t asked me a single question about myself, or said much of anything. And everything she does say tells me she’s all wrong for me.

She shrugs. "I heard you just broke up, and thought you might be in the mood for some sort of casual rebound thing. Forget about Azalea. I've dumped mares before, and been dumped too. Believe me, something like this hurts a lot less. You don't care about me and I don't care about you, we're just using each other to get what we both want. It's practically a business transaction," she says as she reaches over and takes a sip of the appletini for herself. "These are really good, wanna try?"

I sigh and take a sip, just to humor her. My face twists up as I taste it. "A little strong," I say as I lower it back down.

"Look, if you don't want to hang around here let's just skip ahead to going back to my place. I know lots of ways to make you forget all about her for the rest of the night." say Algae.

"I don't want to forget her," I say, quiet. I look up again. "You can finish the appletini, I don't think I want anything else to drink right now. Which way is the restroom?" I ask.

"Back there," she says and gestures. I trot on over as quickly as I dare and push open the door. Inside the dank and mildewed bathroom I head straight for the sink and mirror. I run the tap and splash some water on my face as I try to figure out what the right thing to do next is.

I can't deny that Algae's offer makes a certain kind of jaded sense. I deserve a night of raw, emotionless, bitterness-driven release don't I?

You deserve to be with somepony special.

Azalea's words come back to me in full force. I had a pony who was special, and I threw her away. But I had a good reason, didn't I? She didn't know how special she was. If I told her she wouldn't have believed me, and as long as she doesn't really think she deserves to be with me there's the chance she'll leave again, right when I'm counting on her most. She hurt me so badly when she left, I can't go through that again. I guess I can struggle through the rest of this evening and then start picking up the shattered pieces of my love life tomorrow morning. I wash my hooves just out of force of habit and head back out to our booth.

There's a second appletini waiting for me on the table when I get back.

Some moments just throw everything into sharp relief. Unfortunately they never seem to reveal anything you want to see when they do, at least they never have for me. In this case, it shows me exactly what I've been so willing to put up with instead of thinking about Azalea, and the difference couldn't make things any clearer.

"Cyanobacteria," I say.

"What? Is that some kind of nerd code word?" asks Algae Bloom.

"What you scoop out of the fish tanks. They aren't plants, they're cyanobacteria. You know, pond scum," I say.

"Oh," Algae Bloom says. "So what? What's the difference?"

"Proper classification is important, and those are two completely different things. Just because you don't appreciate them doesn't mean they aren't good and important things. They provide something like twenty or thirty percent of Equestria's oxygen, and they're essential to the nitrogen cycle too. None of us would even exist without them," I say.

"Well to me they're just squicky, worthless ooze," says Algae.

"They survive almost anywhere, you know," I say, "from salty ocean water to rocky desert soil. You can try to kill them over and over again but they just always seem to bounce back. I just wanted you to know so that if some other mare in the future thinks it's clever to tell you that you're pond scum because you've treated her the way you're treating me, it's not as much of an insult as you think. If anything, it's an insult to the cyanobacteria. Frankly, you aren't worth cyanobacteria's attention," I say.

Algae Bloom just doesn't care at all. "It's a good thing you're hot piece of flank, because I don't know how anypony could put up with how weird you are if you weren't. Seriously, you should just shut up and have a few more drinks."

"Yes, I'm weird. I say and do crazy things sometimes. Things nopony understands, not even me. But some ponies, not

horrible little stupid ones like you, mind, some ponies try. They don't know me, but they want to and they see that all those weird things are actually pretty wonderful. They look past how messed up I am. I thought I had to push one of them away because she doesn't see what I'm really like, but I was wrong." I get up from the table.

"Where are you going now?" asks Algae Bloom.

"To get her back," I say. I could just walk away now, but there's one more thing. "Oh, and by the way? It's not as if it ever would have been fine, exactly, but you picked the worst possible time to try to get me liquored up so you could take me to bed. I happen to just have adopted a zero tolerance policy for mares who try to warp others' minds for their own pleasure, and if I ever hear from anypony that you've been getting fillies drunk and taking advantage of them they will never find your body."

Algae Bloom scoffs, but she looks a bit nervous behind the show of bravado. "Wow, I didn't realize you were going to turn into such a psycho bitch over a drink."

"Don't worry, it takes more than that to bring out my worst. A lot more. You don't even meet the detection threshold to register as something bad happening to me. If you ever do, you'll know. Briefly."

With that I turn around and walk out of the bar. On an impulse I grab the appletini from the table as I'm walking away and splash it into Algae Bloom's face. She's yelling something at me, but she isn't worth the time it would take to slow down and listen. I have somewhere so much more important I need to be.

Twenty minutes later I'm pounding on a front door and hoping to Celestia I remembered this address correctly. Just when I'm about to give up hope, Azalea opens it.

"Twilight? What are you doing here? Didn't you have a date tonight?" she asks.

"We're even now," I say.

“Huh?”

“On second chances. Last time we went out you gave me a second chance to prove myself, it’s only fair that I return the favor. Please say you’ll consider it,” I say.

“That’s sweet, Twilight, I just don’t know what I can do that’s going to change your mind. I want to, but-”

“Put this on.” I hoof her the wing restraints I grabbed on the way over, an old pair Rainbow Dash left at my library way back when and never bothered to reclaim.

“Why?” asks Azalea.

“Please? Just trust me.”

Azalea looks at the harness and slides it on. It’s designed so that the tension forces pegasus wings against their sides for muscle building exercises, and I fiddled with it to turn the resistance all the way up. She tries to move her wings, but can’t.

“Come with me, I want to show you something,” I say.

Azalea follows me, puzzled, but neither of us say anything as we walk through the night. I glance up at the new moon and offer up a quick prayer to Luna in my head. It’s not long before we reach the wide, dark, and deep lake that serves as the Ponyville reservoir. “It’s on the other side,” I say. I take a deep breath and I channel my magic.

I step out onto the surface of the water, and it holds. I take a few more steps and then turn back to where Azalea is standing on the shore gaping.

“I’m special, Azalea. You said that you thought of me as a mare who walks on water? Well you were right. But I don’t want to walk alone,” I say.

“I can’t fly in this harness, just give me one second and I’ll-”

“No,” I say. “You’re missing the point. I want you to walk with me. If for some reason you don’t think you’re worthy or you don’t believe it’s possible, fine. I’ll find somepony who can. But I think you can be that pony, Azalea. I believe in you.”

Azalea dips the tip of her hoof into the water. She doesn't realize the spell won't work without her putting more of her weight on it, but I'm not going to explain that to her.

"Twilight, this isn't fair. You're a unicorn and I'm not. How am I supposed to follow you?"

I shrug. "I'm walking to the other side, and I'm not coming back this time. You can either stay here, or you can take a leap of faith and find out if you're special or not. Maybe it ends well and maybe it doesn't, I can't see the future. It's your call." With that I turn and begin to walk away.

"Twilight!" she calls after me. "*Twilight!*"

I just keep walking.

I hear a scream of frustration from behind me and just as I glance back, she leaps. Oh, thank Celestia, she leaps. She lands on the water's surface flat on her belly with all her legs outstretched, and the surface jiggles but supports her. Her eyes are squeezed shut, but when she opens them she sees me smiling back at her. She rises to her hooves in amazement.

"I'm doing it!" She cries out with joy. "Twilight, I'm doing it! I can walk on water when I'm with you!"

"I love you, too."

Azalea rushes over and tackles me, laughing, and we bounce on the surface of the water. When we come to a stop, she looks into my eyes and I see a hunger there. We both go in for the kiss at the same time and it's better than anything I've ever felt because I'm sharing it with her.

Her forehoof slides down my belly, low enough that her meaning is perfectly clear. "What, right now?" I ask.

"Always wanted to try this on a water bed," she says without looking up at me, her hot breath against my neck. She presses herself against me. The harness is a bit awkward, so I release the buckles and her wings are free to snap open, fully erect. I hold her tight and run a hoof along her back. If I remember my pegasus anatomy right, there should be a cluster of nerves right... about....

When she gives out an ecstatic little gasp I know I found it.

“I bet I can guess what you like, little miss magic,” she says. She pulls herself further up and starts to plant kisses on my forehead, right at the base of my horn. My eyes go wide.

“Azalea, wait! I’m going to lose it!” I try to warn her.

“Already? I didn’t know this felt *that* good,” she says. She moves in again.

“No, I mean I’m going to lose the-”

Too late. With my magic otherwise occupied the universe notices that the surface tension of the lake should not, in fact, be able to bear the weight of two mares. We plunge into the icy water.

We come up gasping for breath. “Ah! This is *freezing*!” says Azalea. Luckily we aren’t too far from shore, and we paddle back as quickly as we can. We get out and shake off, but we’re shivering. I look over to Azalea and she’s grinning anyway.

“Don’t say it. Don’t even think about saying it,” I warn her.

“Gee Twilight, you really know how to get a mare all wet.”

I groan. She just had to say it.

I magic us up a blanket from back at the library, and Azalea flies up into the nearby trees to gather some branches. Soon we’re snuggled up against each other for warmth in front of an impromptu campfire.

“Twilight?” asks Azalea. It’s a good thing she did, I was halfway to falling asleep in her arms.

“Mmm hmm?”

“You never actually finished telling me about the other timeline, you know.”

My eyes snap open. I’m wide awake now. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“You’d just gotten to the part where you were in the vault when I couldn’t take it anymore and stopped you. If you want to tell me the rest, you can. I won’t run away again.”

I bite my lip. “I did something really bad,” I say.

“What the changeling queen you did doesn’t mean anything, Twilight. I get that.”

“No, I mean *I* did something really bad. To her.”

“Oh,” says Azalea. She goes quiet for a minute. “Well for what it’s worth, I forgive you.”

“How can you? You don’t even know what it was I did. It was *really* bad,” I say, confused.

“It doesn’t matter to me. I trust you and if it’s what you had to do to get back, it was the right thing,” she says.

“But what if there was a better way?” I ask.

“Maybe there was. But you of all ponies should know that reliving something over and over and trying out all the ‘what ifs’ isn’t good for you,” she says. For a moment there’s only the crackling of the fire in the night. “Are you happy? Right this second I mean. Because I am.”

I nuzzle her. “Yeah,” I say. Understatement of the eon.

“Is there anywhere else in the world you wish you were instead? Or anything about this moment you want to change?” she asks.

“Not that I can think of.”

She smiles. “Then the rest of it doesn’t matter. You’re one of us mere mortals too, remember. Just take the weight of the world off your shoulders and be here with me in it. Equestria will be there for you to save again tomorrow.”

I lay against her in silence, feeling her chest rise and fall with each breath. I think about what she just said. She has a point. It seems silly to spend so much time worrying about saving the world that I never take the chance to remind myself of everything about it that’s worth saving.

I cast a quick spell, a ridiculously specific tracking spell I researched a few weeks ago. “Hey Azalea? Actually, there is somewhere else I want to be. About a half mile away on an east by southeast heading,” I say.

Azalea looks over at me, confused. “Why? What’s there?” she asks.

“The nearest weather vane. Come on, I’m going to show you something that’ll blow your mind.”

Author’s Notes:

Sorry for the accidental blank chapter, my bad.

Also, the full Carl Sandburg quote I took the chapter title from is:

“Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent. Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you.”

Time Capsule

TIME CAPSULE

For the first time in far, far too long everything finally seems to be going my way. I wince even as I think that and look up from my work at the empty library. Everything stays quiet and still. Usually when I tempt fate by thinking that kind of thing it means something awful is about to happen, but not this time. Just me and a few shafts of late afternoon light coming in through the upstairs windows. A few strains of birdsong drift in as well and all is right with the world.

I'm trying to put the last couple of touches on the ritual we'll be using to patch up the time stream but my mind keeps drifting back to last night on the lake. I still can't quite believe I did that, or that it worked. Everything that came after that was, what's the best word for it? Amazing? Phenomenal? If this keeps up I'm gonna need a bigger thesaurus.

There's a knock on the door. I wonder when ponies will catch on to the fact that during the day they don't actually have to knock, I live in a public building. It's an interesting phenomenon; I can always tell when ponies are here to see me rather than come check out books by whether or not they knock on the door before they come in. While I'm pondering whether or not the pony mind is capable of fully grasping that the same building exists as both my home and a book repository simultaneously, I call out for whoever's there to come in.

The door opens and it's the very mare who was on my mind already. Azalea walks in and comes over to give me a peck on the cheek. "Hey you," she says.

"I was just thinking about you," I say feeling my mouth stretch into an involuntary goofy grin. "Good things, I promise."

"I wanted to come see what you were up to. Don't let me distract you from what you're working on, I'll just grab a book

and cuddle up in a corner to read until you're finished," she says.

"Anything in particular in mind?" I ask.

"Hmm..." she looks over the shelves of books along the wall, stocked with a wealth of options. "What do you think I'd like?" she asks.

My heart leaps. I love it when ponies ask me to recommend a new book to them. Not only do I get to share something I've enjoyed and talk about it with them later, it's a great way to prove how well I know somepony. Picking out the right book for my marefriend should be a breeze, right? Let's see, she must have told me what her favorite genre or author is, right?

...Huh, you know I don't think she ever did. We haven't really had any normal chats about books since that first date. I was always so wrapped up in this work, then with everything that happened in the other timeline and our fight I never got the chance to ask. But I must know enough about her to guess. I know that she... I know she...

I mean I know she's important to me, and that I really like her, and it feels good to be with her. But now I'm looking into her patient eyes and I realize that I really don't know all that much about what's going on behind them. "A mystery," I say, half to myself.

"Ooh, I haven't read a good mystery in a while. Which one?" she asks with a grin of her own and turns towards the shelves. I watch her look, and while that's one question answered about what she likes it's replaced by a few dozen new ones. I gather enough of my senses to levitate a compilation of stories from a nearby shelf, a safe choice.

"How about some Shetland Holmes? I really liked *The Speckled Harness* myself," I say and pass the book over to her. She takes it from me and, true to her word, curls right up in a sunbeam and flips it open, leaving me with my equations and my thoughts. I know she doesn't mean to be a distraction, but as I try to get my mind back to the spell I find my attention keeps slipping back to Azalea. I look over at her, trying to deduce what I can from what I do know.

You sure weren't this lost for words when you told me you loved me. You love me? You don't even know me.

My own words, that hurtful little barb that I flung at her the other day when I was so angry at her. Was that really just a few days back? It feels like it was at least two weeks ago. The reason I knew it would hurt, though, is that there was a little bit of truth under there. Did I go and make exactly the same mistake?

"Take a picture Twilight, it'll last longer. I'll even pose for it if you'd like," says Azalea with a playful little grin. I realize that I've just been caught staring at her while I was thinking.

I sigh and push my papers across the table. "Can we talk for a minute?" I ask. Her smile falls away. I know that I'm going to have to be very careful with what I say next. "It's nothing bad, I just realized that I don't know that much about you. I feel like I'm doing this whole relationship thing completely out of order," I say.

Azalea raises a wing, an unspoken invitation that I accept. I trot over to her and lay down, letting her drape it over me. "What do you want to know?" she asks.

"Umm... Can we just start with 'everything' and kind of build from there?" I ask. Where to begin?

Azalea laughs. "Sure. First off, I'm not a Ponyville native either. I grew up in Trottingham," she says.

"What was your family like?" I ask.

She smiles again. "Well, I didn't have a Princess for a foalsitter, I can tell you that," she says. It dawns on me just how much of my life is in the public record for any pony who's curious to see. I know Azalea meant well, but little comments like that really drive home just how exposed my past is. Lucky I have this soft and downy wing to hide under here in the present, and hopefully the future too. "I'm actually the only pegasus in my family. My parents and my little brother are all earth ponies. Flower growing sort of runs in our blood. I started working in the greenhouse and in their shop as soon as I was old enough," she says.

I nod. Makes sense, plant growing talents usually run in earth pony families. No wonder she gets along so well with Applejack. “How’d you end up in Ponyville then?” I ask.

“I came here after I graduated from school. Growing flowers isn’t exactly lucrative, although we’ve always made enough to get by pretty comfortably. My parents insisted that even if I was just going to take over the family business I needed to get an education too. Still, if it weren’t for the baseball scholarship I’m not sure they could have afforded to send me. For sure the loans would have been worse,” she says.

“I didn’t know you play baseball,” I say looking over at her. I make a mental note to show her Home Run later on.

“Well, played anyway,” she says. “Shortstop. Nothing like a pair of wings when you need to make a diving catch. I majored in Floriculture, with an Economics minor. Mom and Dad were nowhere near ready to retire and hand over the shop when I finished so I thought I’d strike out on my own, maybe open up my own shop someday. Selling flowers from my garden out of a cart might pay the bills but I’d like to have something a little more lasting, you know?” she asks. She gets a bit of a faraway look in her eyes. “It’s harder than I thought it would be. Sometimes it seems like I’m never going to get there.”

“You will,” I say without a bit of doubt in my voice and give her a supportive little nuzzle.

“Thanks Twilight,” she says and returns it. “Oh, and I’m allergic to peanuts.”

I giggle. “Duly noted. I’ll make sure to tell Pinkie Pie no peanut butter cookies at your ‘Congratulations On Opening Up Your Own Store’ party.”

Azalea’s wing pulls me in a little closer. “That might not be for a while,” she says.

“I’m patient,” I say as I wrap my hooves around her. I have a ton of questions I still want to ask her, but I’m willing to take it slow. Going too fast is what put me in this position in the first place. “My favorite color is red, by the way,” I say.

“I like blue, but I’m sure somehow we can overcome our differences,” she replies.

I smile. It’s hard enough to focus through the haze of infatuation when I’m around her, and the way she’s caressing my back with her wing isn’t helping. “I’m sure we will. Hey, I just want to say that I’m sorry about the things I said to you the other day. I was really mad, but you didn’t deserve how I took it out on you like I did.”

“I deserved at least some of it. Plus if you hadn’t then we would have missed out on the best part of the fight,” she says.

“What part was that?” I ask.

She clutches me and rolls over suddenly, pinning me to the floor. “The part where we made up,” she says. I lean in expecting a kiss but she seems content to just lay her head down on my chest and close her eyes. I follow suit, revelling in the moment.

“You would not *believe* how terrible my other date was. The worst part is that I knew she was bad news and I only even agreed to it because I was so angry. Then she tried to get me drunk and take me back to her apartment,” I say.

At that particular revelation Azalea jerks her head up and looks at me. “She tried to *what*? Twilight, that’s not OK,” she says.

“That’s what I told her. I warned her that if ever found out she tried that on any other mare I’d have her head,” I say.

Azalea doesn’t seem satisfied by that. “By the time you find out who knows how many other ponies she’ll have done that to? We should get the word out that there’s a pony who might try that. At least make sure other mares know what to look out for,” she says.

I frown. While I agree with the sentiment, I’m not going to start spreading rumors and bad mouthing Algae Bloom to every mare I know. “What are you proposing?” I ask.

“We should tell somepony who has a hoof in that scene, so she can spread the word around. We can even leave her name out

of it if you want. It's good advice to be careful no matter who's offering the drinks," she suggests.

"You have a pony in mind?" I ask.

"What about Cloud Kicker?" she asks. I groan and roll my eyes at the suggestion. "What?"

"Cloud Kicker's just as bad. She'd probably take it as a challenge to see which of them can bed more ponies," I say.

"Twilight! Cloud Kicker has standards and a conscience. I admit she's a bit on the wild side, but she has a good heart," says Azalea.

Maybe Azalea has a point. I know Cloud Kicker has her own little code, but that whole lifestyle just rubs me the wrong way. I mean she just uses ponies for physical pleasure and then walks away from them without a second thought. Even if it's consensual I just can't wrap my head around that. I try not to be judgemental, but the way she's just so in your face with the flirting at every single opportunity brings the worst out of me. "Hmph. Maybe. I just don't like the way she'll jump into bed with anypony with a pulse," I say.

"What, do you think only sleazy and desperate ponies would be interested in that kind of thing?" she asks. She's gotten up from our comfy little embrace and now she's downright glaring at me. Wow, she's getting really mad about this. What gives?

"That's not what I said," I say. Why would she be so angry at me over Cloud Kicker unless she... and Cloud Kicker... had....

Oh, I'm an idiot.

"Wait, were you and Cloud Kicker..." I start to ask. The way she looks away is answer enough.

"We dated for a couple of weeks. Nothing serious. I had just moved here and I met a ton of new ponies through her. We had fun, but it wasn't a big deal," she says. I try to picture Azalea and Cloud Kicker together and then immediately regret it when I find it's all too easy.

“I thought that that earth pony at the restaurant was your ex,” I say.

Azalea looks at me, a little befuddled. “Twilight, you do know that most ponies have more than one ex, right? Corn Row was my last marefriend before you but she wasn’t my first,” she says. “You’re one to talk, you said the last pony you dated was Princess Luna.”

I shift uncomfortably on my hooves. “Date might be too strong a word. It was more of a one night thing. How many marefriends have you had?” I ask. I’m not sure I want to know the answer.

Azalea thinks about it for a second. “If you count school and everything... I guess you’re my seventh,” she says. I go a little pale. Azalea was with a half-dozen other mares before I met her? I look up and realize I missed a question from her.

“What was that?” I ask.

“I asked how many you’ve had, if you’re not counting Luna,” she says. I’m suddenly incredibly self-conscious and very aware of my own inexperience in this particular area.

“Umm... including you?” I ask, stalling.

“Sure,” she says.

“...One,” I say and hang my head, grimacing and waiting to see how she’ll react.

“Wait, are you saying this is the first romantic relationship you’ve ever been in?” she asks, incredulous.

I nod. “Sorry,” I say. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be apologizing for but it feels right in the moment.

She takes a moment to process that. “Does the fact that I’ve been with other ponies before you and you haven’t make you uncomfortable?” she asks.

The awful thing is that it does. It’s petty and jealous and ugly and irrational for me to imagine she just sprung into existence from nothing the night I met her. I’m the weird one for neglecting something so important for so long, even if there were certain things it took me longer than it should have to

accept about myself. “Azalea, I don’t know how to answer that question without making you hate me,” I say as the first tear drops start to hit the floor. She’s going to walk away again, I just know it. She’s going to figure out that I don’t really know what I’m doing or she’ll start comparing me to those other ponies and I won’t be good enough and she’ll leave again and-

Instead she just wraps me up in a hug. “Twilight, I’m not going to hate you for being honest with me. I really care about you, and I want us to work. You don’t want to break up just because I’ve had other marefriends, right?” she asks. I shake my head. “I didn’t think so. We’ll muddle through somehow. Now come on, cheer up. Fight’s over,” she says.

I tilt my head. “That was a fight?” I ask with a sniffle.

She smiles and pushes my mane out of my face with a gentle touch. “Well, maybe a little one. Not every disagreement has to end with a big blow up and one of us storming away. Did you think everything was always going to swing between perfect and terrible all the time?”

“Sort of. I mean, that’s how it usually happens in stories and stuff,” I say. I feel like a naive little foal even as I say it.

“Well, welcome to real life. It’s a lot messier and a lot more confusing,” she says with a little squeeze.

“So I’m noticing,” I grumble. We hold one another for moment until we’re interrupted when a burst of fire and red sparks erupts above our head. By the time we can pull apart it’s gone as quickly as it came and there’s a letter hanging in the air for a moment before it falls to the table. So that’s how it feels to receive a letter sent by phoenix fire. I open up the note to see what Star Swirl has to say.

Twilight,

Hope everything’s going well on your end and you’re making progress on the ritual

I frown and look over at the pages of half-completed notes that I’ve been neglecting.

I’ve been working on my part but the real reason I’m writing is that I’ve been getting sidetracked by the Element of Magic. I

could spend years trying to figure this thing out, and I suspect that I probably will if I'm bringing it back to the past with me when I leave. Back then, the Elements only existed in a more abstract sense. We knew they were there and permeated the entirety of Equestria, and in a pinch the Princesses could call them up but to actually hold their physical representation or vessel or whatever this crown is in my hooves is a little overwhelming.

I was reading one of your old friendship reports, the one about the sonic rainboom that connected the six of you when you got your cutie marks. It certainly seems like an unlikely coincidence. Given what I know about the Elements and how they rewrite the destinies of their users and their targets, I'm inclined to wonder if it was a coincidence at all. Maybe using the Elements against Nightmare Moon retroactively ensured that the bond would be created all those years before? That sounds like a pretty crazy theory, but I can just tell that there's something more going on. You've gone on at length about the connections between friendship and magic (kudos on that, by the way. Brilliant stuff in some of those reports) and if the rainboom wasn't a coincidence than it would suggest a similar connection between destiny and friendship. It doesn't seem like that much of a stretch to believe magic and destiny are intertwined somehow as well.

Anyway, the upshot of all this is that it'll be a few more days before I'm ready for you girls to come to Canterlot and put this thing to rest. Just let me know when you're done with your part and send me your final draft so I can start putting them together and make sure everything's in order.

*Your friend,
Star Swirl*

“What does all that stuff about destiny mean?” asks Azalea who's been reading over my shoulder.

I shrug. “Probably nothing. Star Swirl never published anything about the Elements of Harmony that I know of, so it's likely just a dead end. I'm not going to risk telling him that, though.”

“So do you need to get back to work?”

“Sounds like I have longer than I thought. A couple more hours and I’ll be all done here, I can probably knock the rest of this out later tonight if you want to go do something for the rest of the afternoon,” I say. I make up my mind; it’s time to rip off the bandage. “Let’s go see Cloud Kicker.”

Azalea looks a bit surprised by the suggestion. “Are you sure? You don’t have to prove anything to me if you’d rather not,” she says.

“No, I want to. Besides, she’s obviously still somepony that you trust and care about, and a friend of yours is a friend of mine. I should at least give her a chance,” I say and lean over to give Azalea a peck on her cheek. We head out the door together and make the long late afternoon walk across town to where Cloud Kicker lives, chatting away. Azalea suggests that after we’re done at Cloud Kicker’s we swing by a particular deli for a quick dinner together. My stomach rumbles in agreement and I realize that I forgot to eat lunch earlier so I’m certainly game.

Azalea knocks on Cloud Kicker’s door. Last I heard both the original Cloud Kicker and her doppelganger who used to be a changeling were living under the same roof. The Elements of Harmony were pretty thorough when they transformed the invading changeling army into the ponies they had been duplicating. While the changelings still have all the memories of their former life, they also seem to have taken on the personalities and even some of the memories of the ponies they became. Given Cloud Kicker’s... proclivities I’m sure the arrangement is suiting both of them just fine.

Cloud Kicker opens the door and confusion turns to delighted surprise as she looks back and forth between Azalea and me. “Azalea, Twilight, hi. I didn’t know you were coming by,” she says. Azalea gives her a small hug and if Cloud Kicker notices that I’m glaring daggers at her she doesn’t say so.

“Hi Cloudy. We were just hoping to talk to you and Kicky if you have a minute. Is she home?” asks Azalea. Cloudy and Kicky?

“Yeah, come on in,” says Cloud Kicker stepping inside to let us pass. We follow her to the living room where the other Cloud Kicker is sprawled out on the couch reading a newspaper. She looks up as the three of us enter, eyes darting from one to the other. After a moment she gets a playful look in her eyes.

“I like where this is going,” she says with a grin. I bite back a snippy retort.

Azalea chuckles. “Not a social call, Kicky, at least not like that. Twilight has something important to talk to you about.”

I look back and forth between the two Cloud Kickers. They seem identical to me. “So one of you goes by Cloudy and the other one’s Kicky? How’d you guys decide to start doing that?” I ask.

Cloudy speaks up from behind me. “Well, it turns out that Kicky has this one spot where if you put a hoof on her inner thigh her back leg starts to-”

I hold up a hoof to silence her. “Please stop explaining now,” I say. Cloudy complies.

“Twilight, tell them about your date with Algae Bloom last night,” prompts Azalea. I wonder if this was a good idea. The first part is hard to get through, and I skip over some of the meaner things I said during our fight. Each time I think I can’t keep going Azalea gives me a supportive little smile and a nod. It’s easier once I get to describing the date itself though, remembering how Algae treated me. Both Cloud Kickers look as serious as I’ve ever seen them by the time I’m finished.

“So I was wondering if you could let your regulars know that she’s out there. It would mean a lot to me,” says Azalea summing up the reason we came over.

Cloudy and Kicky look at each other and exchange a small nod. “Yeah, we’ll take care of it. In fact I think we’ll have a very frank discussion with Ms. Bloom about respect and consent. Besides, if Twilight wanted a drunken rebound fling I have dibs,” says Cloudy.

If Cloud Kicker had said something like that to me about Azalea I'd be really upset, but Azalea just laughs it off. I guess she's just used to it in a way I'm not sure I'll ever be. "Thanks, Cloudy," she says and extends a hoof for Cloud Kicker to tap. Cloudy bumps it and extends a foreleg to give Azalea a chaste little hug.

I jump up from where I've been sitting, my head spinning. I want to protest but I'm not sure what to say. Coming here was my idea, and it's not like Azalea's actually said or done anything wrong. The other three mares are all looking at me, curious. "Would you mind if I went and grabbed a glass of water from your kitchen?" I ask, lacking any better excuse. Azalea frowns.

"Go ahead Twilight, it's just through there," says Kicky. I turn to go as quick as I dare. I get into the kitchen and let out a long and ragged breath. My heart is beating a lot faster than it should be. I run the water from the faucet and splash a little on my face to calm myself down, then pour a glass of it and take a long sip.

"Pour me one too, would you?" asks Cloud Kicker's voice from behind me. One of them must have followed me from the living room. I take down a second glass and fill it before using my magic to pass it to where Cloud Kicker is waiting. She takes a sip of her own. "So you and Azalea, huh?" she asks sitting at the kitchen table and motioning for me to do the same.

"Yeah, me and Azalea," I say, trying to sound casual about it.

"I was still a part of the hive back when those two dated the first time, but I do have a few memories of it. Those were a fun couple of weeks, but they were both ready to move on by the end of it. So stop stabbing yourself in the hoof by acting so jealous," she says.

"I'm not jealous," I say. Not sure who I think I'm fooling with that particular claim.

Kicky smiles. "Twilight, Azalea's not the kind of mare where you need to worry about that sort of thing. Besides, I saw how

she was looking at you back there. She certainly didn't ever look at Cloud Kicker that way."

"How do you mean?" I ask. I didn't notice anything like that.

"Let me put it this way; if I were still a changeling I'd be trying to figure out the best way to wrap you up in cocoon and stick you down in a basement somewhere while I fed off that look for the next three months," she says.

"...Thanks? I guess?"

"You're very welcome," says Kicky and takes another sip of water. "Azalea mentioned that you two were going to Reuben's deli for dinner this evening, right?"

"Yeah, why?" I ask.

"Here's a free piece of Azalea advice. When you get your sandwiches, give her your pickle," says Cloud Kicker.

"I don't know what that means, but it doesn't sound like something I'd be comfortable doing in public," I say as I try to puzzle out the innuendo.

Cloud Kicker snorts and a bit of water goes up her nose. She coughs a few times and wipes it away. "That wasn't a euphemism, Twilight. Azalea loves pickles. Offer her yours and you'll score major marefriend points," she says. She reaches out a hoof across the table and pats mine. "I know how you think of me, but if you and Azalea make each other happy then I really want to see it work out for you two."

She actually sounds heartfelt. I try to look at her with fresh eyes, try to see what Azalea does. I realize that this must be just a little bit awkward for her too. "Thanks Kicky. I really appreciate that," I say. What the hay. I open up my forelegs for a friendly hug and she moves over to accept it.

"You know if you and Azalea are ever feeling *really* appreciative..." she begins. I pull back from the hug and give her a flat look. She grins. "Aww, I'm just teasing Twilight, relax."

Turnabout is fair play. "Just teasing? Oh, that's too bad. I was going to say maybe," I say, teasing back. Her wings snapping

open knocks her glass of water off the table and it shatters when it hits the floor.

“Everything alright in there?” asks the other Cloud Kicker’s voice from the living room.

“We’re fine,” I call back. “Your double here just doesn’t have any self control.”

“I know, isn’t she great?” asks Cloudy.

Kicky has recovered enough to speak again. “That was a joke right?” she asks.

I grin. “Probably,” I say and walk away. You know, I’m starting to see why she does that all the time. I head back to the living room with Kicky following me a moment later.

We leave Cloud Kicker’s place and head for the deli. Sure enough, the pickle thing works like a charm.

Finally! The ritual is done. Every fact and figure I needed to decipher is obliterated in one last caffeine-fueled marathon of a study session. The sun is just peeking over the horizon as I dot the last square root of negative one and cross the final label on the time axis of a graph. I let out a sigh and my quill falls to one side as I massage my temples and reach for the coffee pot I’ve been drinking straight from for the last four hours, only to find it’s somehow already empty. That would explain the double vision.

I think a walk through town to clear my head a little is in order. I still need to double check these numbers before I send them off, and if I swapped a sine for a cosine somewhere in there Star Swirl won’t ever let me hear the end of it. Besides, I’m rarely awake to see the town this early, I might see a side of it I don’t know very well. I walk out the door and wander the empty streets of Ponyville, letting my hooves take me where they may. There’s no sign of activity on the misty streets. That’ll burn off soon enough, tomorrow’s supposed to be a scorcher but for now the air is damp and cool. I pass by Sugarcube Corner, which hasn’t opened yet but there’s already smoke rising from the chimney. I’ve never thought about how

early they must get up to have fresh bread ready by the middle of morning. See? I already learned something new today and it's barely five in the morning.

I stop and breathe deeply, just taking in the smell of a new day full of promise and potential. I glance over to the park and I bet there's a great view of the sunrise from that nearby hillside. I track through the dew-laden grass and settle down on the eastward facing slope. I don't even care about the chilly water soaking into my coat. Watching the sun rise as the world around me starts to come to life gives me this sense of... something. Renewal, I guess you might call it. With the ritual finished, if not actually cast yet, I feel like I can look back at the last couple months and how completely consumed they were with all this time loop nonsense. Relaxing here though, with the first rays of sunlight washing over me, I feel like I'm getting a new start too. Like I'm on the cusp of something bigger and more important than all that, and I can't wait to move on to that next chapter of my life.

Wow, sleep deprivation makes my inner poet awfully loquacious. My eyelids sink to half mast. I can't sleep now because... because...

How long has it been since there was no compelling answer to that question?

'I don't even care,' is the last thing I think before I drift off right there on the hillside, a smile on my face.

"I'll miss you," I say. I'm getting a few embarrassing looks from passers by and the other ponies on the train platform. When I'm with her I take them as a compliment, rather than something I should be humiliated by. "It's not too late to change your mind, you know. Come with us to Canterlot."

Azalea laughs. "How many times do I have to say 'maybe next time' before you stop asking?" she asks.

"You could meet the Princesses though! You'd really like them and I bet they'd like you too. You don't have to worry about it," I say.

“Twilight, if you put me in the room with the Princesses I’d be meeting your mentor, your last marefriend, and the two rulers of Equestria all at the same moment. I’d be an idiot not to be a little worried at that prospect,” she says. “Go and be amazing with your friends, I’ll be waiting right here for you when you get back.”

“C’mon Twi, train’ll be leaving any second,” says Applejack. I guess I’ve stalled long enough.

“Try not to miss me too much, my little grounding wire,” I say as lean in for one last hug.

“You neither, my little water walker,” she says and returns it. “Now get going!”

I jump on the train right as it starts to pull away from the station and wave goodbye to her until she’s out of sight. I turn around to see five grinning faces watching me from further inside the car. “What?” I ask even as their grin spreads to me.

“Nothing, nothing,” insists Rarity although her grin doesn’t fade. “We’re just happy that you’re happy. Now come, we saved you a seat.”

We trot further into the empty train car and settle in for the ride. Pinkie slides into the seat next to me. “Soooooooooooo,” she says, suggestive, “start talking. Tell us all about you and Azalea. I wanna hear about the hugging and the smooching and what you two talk about and what she had for breakfast yesterday and-”

“NOOOOOOO!” cries Rainbow Dash. The five of us look at her. I guess that’s one way to bring a conversation to a screeching halt. “Three days, Twilight. These four have wanted to talk about you and Azalea and nothing else for three. Freaking. Days. I can’t take it for the entire train ride too. She’s cool, right? And you two are happy together? ‘Cause that’s all we actually need to know.”

“Yes Dash, everything’s great. I guess I have been a little sidetracked the last couple of days. I’ll try to make more time for you girls when we get back,” I say. I hope I haven’t been neglecting them. I certainly didn’t mean to.

“It’s fine, dear. It’s perfectly natural for a new couple to spend a lot of time together, even more so because she’s your first. Some ponies just don’t appreciate romance,” says Rarity with a glare at Rainbow Dash before she turns back to me. “But you do! That scene on the lake sounds like was absolutely divine. I wish I’d seen it myself.”

I frown. “Did Azalea tell you about that?” I ask. I know I didn’t.

“Oh, um, a little bird told me and I didn’t know you didn’t want me to say anything. A blue jay, actually,” says Fluttershy. “Did it really happen that way? Not that I’m calling my little friend a liar, of course, but I did wonder if he was exaggerating just an eensy bit. He was saying some things about a weather vane that I don’t think are physically possi-”

“You know, Rainbow Dash is right,” I say. “Dash, what did you want to talk about?”

“How awesome it’s going to be to save the world *again*. Do you think the Princess will let us design the stained glass window? Or do you think we’ll just get another medal?” she asks. I roll my eyes and look out the window at the passing countryside.

“Ah don’t think it’s really that kinda world savin’ Dash,” says Applejack. “Besides Twilight did all the work, why would they put us on there?”

“Hey, I helped! I was there for, like, moral support and stuff. Besides, I’m too awesome not to be on the window. What else are you going to put on there, a bunch of math problems? We gotta punch it up a little so if ponies ask us about it we don’t just say ‘oh, Twilight did her homework really hard and saved all of time,’ I mean who’s going to be impressed by that?”

“Don’t jinx it, Rainbow. I want to cast the spell and be done with this before we start celebrating,” I say. I’m completely confident that the spell will work just fine, but I’ve been wrong about that kind of thing before. “Besides, what about Star Swirl? He can’t even tell anypony back in the past what he did to help or it might create a paradox.” I know he told Celestia a few things, I remind myself to ask her about that

once the summoning spell's been dismissed and the loop is closed.

"Wow, that is rough," says Pinkie, "we'll just have to remember how much he helped even better to make up for it."

"About Star Swirl, he does seem like a gentlecolt and I stand by what I said about being his friend, but if I'm being honest I don't think of him the way I think of all of you," says Rarity as she runs a hoof absentmindedly over his mane, smoothing a few hairs jostled out of place by the vibrations of the train under us. "I hope it's enough to, well, count."

I nod. I thought about that too. "We don't need the full power of the Elements for the spell, in fact it's safer not to use them at their maximum capacity. It should be enough."

"Is that how they work?" asks Fluttershy. "I mean, if we become even better friends than we are now will they get better somehow?"

I shrug. "I don't really know. The Elements are... strange. I've never been able to figure them out exactly, and Celestia says that it's not worth worrying over. It's not like I can take them apart to see how they work, either. They're too important to risk any sort of experiment that could damage them. They work, and that's good enough," I say. It's something that annoys me more than I let on to tell the truth, but I've made my peace with the idea that this particular mystery isn't one I'm going to solve, barring some new development or insight.

Rainbow Dash launches into a suggestion that her Element 'runs on awesomeness' but I'm only half paying attention. I think back to Star Swirl's letter from the other day. He really sounded like he was going to put some effort into figuring out the Elements. Why wouldn't he have recorded any of his results? It's a shame I can't risk a paradox by asking him to write a book he never wrote.

Unless... What if I asked him to hide the book, or even just his notes, somewhere nopony would find them? Then after I send him back I could go retrieve them and see what he found out, and there would be no chance of the information leaking back into the past.

“Twilight?” asks Pinkie. “Why are you wearing your ‘I just had a super smart idea’ face?”

“I’ll tell you later. Right now I want to hear all about what I missed over the last few days when I didn’t see you.”

The girls all start to talk at once about what they’ve been up to. I have a lot to catch up on, and the rest of the train ride is spent sharing the news of their lives with me.

There’s a chariot waiting for us at the train station to take us straight up to the palace. “Well, I could certainly get used to this sort of treatment,” says Rarity. “All of our adventures should be this refined and debonaire.” The guards pulling the chariot drop us off and tell us we’re expected in one of the labs in the East wing. We trot through the halls and I spot Princess Celestia down one of the side corridors speaking with several other ponies who are scribbling down notes about whatever the conversation is about. I catch her eye and we wave to one another but then she turns back to her discussion. I guess she trusts me to handle this ritual myself.

We reach the labs, a shielded and isolated area of the palace where all sorts of experimental magic research is performed. Luna had them built for her own personal use when she got back from the moon, and while the facilities aren’t quite as big as the labs at the Academy all the resources and equipment are top of the line. I knock on the door and hear Star Swirl call out from the other side. “Come in!”

I open the door and the six of us step inside. The lab is completely turned upside down since I last saw it, with open books scattered everywhere and pages of notes stuck to every available surface. There even look to be some stuck up on the ceiling. The only exception is the absolutely pristine ring in the center of the room that’s inscribed with all sorts of intricate little details and runes. It’s clearly expert level work, and I trace over it with my eyes trying to make out which parts I worked on and where his work begins. Star Swirl pops out from behind some shelves, levitating a small inkwell and looking a little manic. “Oh, girls, it’s you. Is it Sunday

already? Here, let me walk you through the ritual and you can help me with the last few bits,” he says. Star Swirl begins to explain the finer points of the spell we’ve designed, although by the end of the second sentence I’m pretty sure he and I are the only ponies who are following the explanation.

“Uh, that’s great and all ah suppose. Think it might be better if you just tell us where to stand and when to use the Elements though,” says Applejack.

“Oh, right. Well I still want Twilight to look over everything with a fresh set of eyes and then we can get going. And I, uh, need to find your Element again actually,” says Star Swirl.

“What do you mean you need to find it? The chest is right over there, what happened to it?” I ask.

Star Swirl suddenly seems eager to look anywhere except at me. “Well, I had taken Honesty out to check a theory I had about some of the engravings on its inner surface, but while I was looking it up I came across something else that gave me an idea, and I needed a bookmark...” I bury my face in my hooves. “I reshelfed a bunch of books after that and I’m not exactly a hundred percent sure which one I left the Element in. Don’t worry, I’ve narrowed it down to a couple dozen.”

“Girls, why don’t you all go take a walk through the palace. If you give me an hour to examine this and for Star Swirl to find the artifact of incredible power that he thought would make a good bookmark, then we’ll get started,” I say.

Rainbow Dash nods and the others turn to go explore for a little while. There’s no reason for them to stick around here, plus I have an ulterior motive too. “You want help looking through all the books or can I get started?” I ask.

“Nah, go ahead. Just let me know if you have any questions,” he says and disappears back into the shelves.

I start to look over Star Swirl’s work but a part of my mind is on formulating a question that’ll sound casual. “So find anything interesting about the Elements? Your letter was kind of vague about them,” I say.

“Oh, yeah. Tons. Like I said though, it’ll take years before I can draw any conclusions that aren’t just wild guesses. I’m glad to be taking Magic back with me,” says his voice from somewhere out of sight.

“Would you do me a favor? Once you’ve studied them for a while, could you put a copy of your notes somewhere I’d be able to find them after you leave?” I ask.

Star Swirl leans out to look at me, frowning. “I figured if I found anything really important I’d publish it,” he says.

“Oh, well, it’s not the same as having the original notes, you know?” I say, hoping he’ll buy it. “If you’d rather not that’s fine.”

He narrows his eyes and looks at me for a long moment but finally he shrugs. “Sure. I know just the spot where nopony will find them. Where are your quarters here in the palace? Any chance they’re in the loft of the north tower?” he asks.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I thought that Celestia might have put you up in my old room, both of us being her student and all. Did you ever find the hidden cubby in the southwest corner I put in?”

“There’s a hidden cubby?” I ask.

“Ha! I knew that illusion spell would hold. It’s the third row of stone up from the floor, about four steps from the column towards the door. I used to hide stuff in there all the time. Poke around and now that you know it’s there it shouldn’t be hard for you to spot. I’ll make sure there’s a decent stasis spell over it, too, so the pages don’t crumble to dust the instant you touch them,” he says. He sits on the floor and sighs. “Time travel gets so frustrating sometimes. Now I know that decades worth of work are sitting in that cubby right now and I can’t just go up and read them. Twilight, will you promise me that you’ll put them to good use? I know there’s something you aren’t telling me about my research and I know you probably have a good reason, but this stuff is important. I can just feel it. If there’s anypony who I’d trust to continue whatever I start, it’s you.” Star Swirl looks at me with a completely earnest smile,

which after a moment morphs into a more puckish grin. “Unless I meet somepony smarter than you in the past, then I’ll just give my notes to them.” The book I chuck at him in response barely misses his head, just as planned. It does, however, knock down another book from the shelf it hits which falls open and drops the Element of Honesty onto the floor.

“Hey, there it is,” I say and levitate it over to join the others in the chest. “And yes, I promise. Whatever’s in those notes, I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks,” he says. The moment passes and he walks over to the circle to talk shop again and go over his work. I poke and probe at every possible objection or flaw I can think of with the spell until I’m absolutely certain that it’s sound and the others have returned from wherever they wandered off to.

“Alright! Let’s get this timey-fixie-magic-thingamajigger started,” says Pinkie, digging out the Element of Laughter and fastening it around her neck. The others did the same and Star Swirl takes out the crown that’s attuned to him while I move into position on the other side of the circle. I cast a few quick little protection spells and even a good luck spell on myself, a spell that I’ve never been able to empirically verify as having any actual effect on probability. It’s just a little charm that Celestia used to tell me brought good luck to little fillies who were worried about upcoming tests, but it always makes me feel a bit more competent and at this moment I’ll take whatever edge I can get. Star Swirl is explaining to the others what he’ll need them to do, but I’m running through the steps of the ritual that I prepared and memorized over and over again. I know this spell like the back of my hoof.

Soon it’s time to finally start. I’m so ready to get this over with at last. I nod to Star Swirl and the Element of Magic on his head begins to glow. The other Elements begin to glow themselves in reaction. I don’t see much of what happens after that, because as the first trickle of power from Star Swirl enters the spell I’m caught up in it and nothing happening over there matters to me any more. Even though I prepared myself for it as best I could the sensation is incredibly overwhelming

as I suddenly feel myself in each of those time loops again, but like I'm a detached observer rather than actually reliving it. I furrow my brow and try to tease out an individual one, and as I get a firm grip of it there's a pulling sensation.

I blink and suddenly I'm in the streets of Canterlot, watching another me dressed up in a cocktail dress and wielding a chainsaw against a pack of changelings to devastating effect. I think I remember this loop. If I'm right there's going to be a changeling coming out from... yep. Ooh, right in my neck. I remember how much that hurt, although only momentarily. I find it a little odd that watching myself being brutally murdered doesn't really phase me, either as a side effect of the spell or because I've gotten just that cynical. I'm hoping it's the former.

Now for the tricky part. I envision myself finding the thread of this timeline's existence and fastening it to my tail. It's not a literal string of course, but boiling down an incredibly complicated feat of magic into the proper metaphor is a huge part of being a successful mage. On the other hoof, choosing the wrong one can cause the spell to go catastrophically wrong in all sorts of fascinating ways. I step back out of the loop and once more I'm a part of every one of the loops I lived through simultaneously. The pressure on my mind has lessened just slightly with the one loop I just came from no longer diverting my attention. In theory the hardest part's over and the pressure will only diminish from here, but fatigue will eventually start to become a concern so no excuse for dawdling.

I jump to the next loop and I see myself standing in the middle of a street, watching the Wall of Horrible Shiny Death rushing towards me. This could be any one of the dozens of times the clock ran out and the Elements went haywire. Even though I'm intangible I still take a step back from it. It burns the other me up in an instant and still keeps coming. I wince as it washes over me and even though I don't, strictly speaking, exist here I can still feel a tingle as it passes through me. Then I'm somewhere I never expected to find myself; the other side of the wall.

I don't know if there's simply no gravity here or if that has something to do with the spell I'm using, but I find myself floating in a bright white void. All I can sense is the power of the wall, most intense directly behind me but its presence is omnidirectional. I'm right by the edge of an ever-expanding sphere of light and fire. It hadn't occurred to me that the explosion would cut down into the earth as easily as it cut through everything else, but I suppose it makes sense. So this is what was left all those times that I failed. A whole universe just... gone. All the more reason to study the Elements of Harmony, I suppose, and figure out a way to keep this from ever happening again.

I take up this timeline and attach it to myself before jumping to the next one. And then the one after that. And then the one after that. I get a good rhythm going, and before long I'm scooping up timelines left and right. Most are pretty mundane, insofar as seeing yourself repeatedly dismembered can ever really be considered 'mundane,' but some of the timelines do stick out. Some are hard to take for reasons that have nothing to do with the violence (seeing Celestia return to a besieged Canterlot right after losing Luna to the changelings and discovering my broken body at the base of a tower is... probably going to haunt me for a while) and some are actually a little uplifting, if embarrassing, to watch (*that's* the face I was making while I was banging Luna?). Dragging myself from one to another is starting to take its toll, though, and I don't have time to linger in many of them. I can't tell if I've been inside the spell for seconds or hours, but eventually I have all the possibilities rounded up and attached to me.

Now for the last step. I picture myself pulling and twisting all the different threads into one, and tracing them all back to their common origin point; the library where I cast the loop spell in the first place. I shudder a little in anticipation of what's going to come next. I take a deep breath, briefly wondering what I'm breathing, exactly, and with a single cut sever every one of the strands from the timeline I'm in now.

The backlash hurts. A lot. It also breaks my concentration and the spell ends as my eyes snap open. I'm back in the library

with six pony-shaped fuzzy blobs hovering over me. “How ya feelin’ Twi?” asks the orange one.

“Tired,” I say. It’s true, I feel absolutely and completely drained. “How long was I...”

“Only like five or ten minutes,” says the light blue one, although there a few hints of a bunch of other colors around the edges.

“Gonna take a nap now, ‘kay?” I ask. I’m unconscious before any of them can answer.

I bolt upright in the bed somepony must have moved me to, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. “Twilight! Don’t worry, everything’s fine. You’re safe,” says Fluttershy, who’s sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed. I look at her for a second before I close my eyes and nod, and when I open my eyes again I can identify the room as one of the guest rooms. Fluttershy and I are the only ones awake; the other four are napping on sofas and other furniture around the room. I glance at the window and it’s dark outside. I must have been under for hours. I think I was dreaming about... something. I can’t remember what though. Jumping between all those different realities has given me a splitting headache. “Just lie down. Princess Celestia says you pushed yourself much too hard with that spell, and you’ve been unconscious all afternoon and evening. You need to rest now.”

“So bright,” I say even though I’m only vaguely aware of why. “So bright behind the wall. Even when I closed my eyes, it just kept coming through. So much nothing.”

“Shh... it was just a bad dream. Just close your eyes now, Luna says she’ll make sure she’s watching over you tonight and we’re all taking turns staying up in case you need anything,” she says. I lower my head back down to the pillow, and even though I’m still exhausted sleep proves elusive. Too many awful memories dredged up by that spell.

I must have drifted off at some point though, because I wrinkle my nose when I find that there’s suddenly sunlight hitting my

face and sit up again, feeling more like a living pony than I did a little while ago. “Yay, you’re awake!” says Pinkie. I look around and it seems that I’m the last one up. “If you hurry we can still get breakfast.”

I roll out of bed and stretch. We head down to the dining room, and even though it’s mid morning, late enough that we have to hurry to snatch up a plate full of food before the serving trays are cleared away, Luna is still awake and chatting with Star Swirl and the others. “Hiya Princess!” shouts Pinkie, entirely too cheerful. I’m not *that* awake yet. “You’re up late, or maybe you’re up early, or maybe you’re up both.”

“It is unnecessary for me to sleep every day. I thought I’d pull an all-dayer and spend a little time with you all to congratulate you for solving this issue,” she says. And by ‘you all’ she really means Star Swirl. It suddenly occurs to me that if the timeline is fixed there’s nothing keeping me from sending him back to the past. In fact the longer he’s here the more likely it is he’ll accidentally learn something he shouldn’t. But then I see the way Luna is looking, no, staring at him any time he looks at anypony else, like she wants nothing more than to commit to memory every single moment she has left in his presence.

One more day won’t hurt.

It doesn’t. The eight of us actually have a really good time together. We even manage to drag Luna out of the castle that afternoon for some sightseeing and shopping around Canterlot. Of course she’s the center of attention wherever we go, but eventually the other ponies get used to her presence and stop the constant grovelling. The day absolutely flies by, and by early evening we reach a consensus that it’s time to go back to the castle.

Star Swirl gives our friends a goodbye hug as each of them wish him well and at his request he and I go to Celestia’s private office. The Princess is at her desk filling out some paperwork, but puts her quill down when we enter. “Star Swirl, Twilight, what a pleasant surprise. Thank you both for all your hard work these last couple of weeks. I know it’s been disruptive for both of you, but it was wonderful to see you

again after so long. I'll cherish the time we got to spend together, and I know Luna will as well," she says.

"Thank you Princess. It's been... interesting. I'm sorry I won't be able to tell you very much about it when I get back to the past," says Star Swirl. He bows his head for a moment.

"Something happens between us, doesn't it." It isn't really a question.

Celestia looks away. "You know I can't answer that."

Star Swirl nods. "I do, and I don't know what it will be, but..." he walks over to Celestia and gives her a hug. "You're a great mentor. Whatever I end up saying to you or doing, I just want you to know that I'll always be grateful for what you gave me."

"Star Swirl, that's..." says Celestia. She looks like there are about fifty different things she wants to say, but can't. Instead she just hugs him back. "You're welcome. And... I was proud of you. Even after what happened, I was always proud to have been your teacher."

"Twilight and I talked about it and she's going to send me back tonight, but before I go I want to be with Luna one more time when she raises the moon," he says.

"Then you better not dawdle here much longer. I hate long goodbyes anyway."

"Goodbye, Celestia. Try not to screw up Twilight however it is you screwed up me," he says.

Celestia laughs. "Oh, I doubt I could even if I tried. I'm sure when I mess up with her it will be in new and exciting ways," she says as she looks over at me with a wink. She glances at the clock on her desk. "Now go. Luna should be getting ready to raise the moon out in the usual spot any minute."

Star Swirl reluctantly backs away from her and walks out of the office. I turn to go with him but Celestia's voice stops me. "Twilight?"

"Yes Princess?"

“I know he wasn’t who you meant to summon, and he probably wasn’t the easiest to work with, but thank you for giving me this chance,” she says.

“You’re welcome Princess. I should-”

“Of course, go ahead.”

I trot out after Star Swirl, catching up to him before he reaches the balcony Luna uses to set the night sky. When we walk out onto it she’s already there and looks surprised to see us.

“I half expected that you would have gone already, Star Swirl. It might have been easier in some ways,” she says.

“And miss seeing the best show in Canterlot one more time? You’ve learned a few new tricks these last sixteen centuries, I hoped you’d indulge me once more,” says Star Swirl.

Luna smiles. “Of course, my love.” She takes a deep breath and her horn flares to life just as the sun dips below the horizon. The first stars start to appear in the heavens as the moon gradually makes it’s way up to join them. Maybe it’s my imagination but it seems larger and brighter than I remember. Luna pours absolutely everything she has into her night. Rippling bands of aurora and an improbable number of shooting stars dance through the sky as the constellations move into place. Finally, her light fades and she gasps for air.

“Beautiful,” says Star Swirl looking right at her.

“Stay longer, Star Swirl. Another week, or even a day. Don’t go back tonight,” Luna begs.

“Do you think this will be any easier tomorrow night? Or next week? Every day I stay here is a day I can’t be with you back then. Some of us get older, after all. You know there are other risks too,” says Star Swirl.

“These last few weeks though, I can’t... I...” Luna runs out of words and instead darts forward, grabbing Star Swirl and pulling him into a long and desperate kiss. It seems to go on longer than should be possible. Maybe it does; alicorns can go a surprisingly long time without breathing when they choose to. I sort of feel awkward just standing here by the third or fourth minute. Luna’s tears start to flow in the final few

seconds of the kiss, and it ends in a small sob. "I never forgot you. Sixteen hundred years and I never forgot what we had together. I don't want to say goodbye again. The first time wasn't-"

"Hey, no spoilers remember? I haven't gotten to live it yet," says Star Swirl as he nuzzles her wet cheek.

"I'm sorry I'm not the way you remember me."

"You're still perfect. I was just too thick to see it at first. Maybe this is how it has to be. Who knows, maybe you'll change again into something else entirely a few centuries from now," says Star Swirl. Luna looks doubtful of that for some reason. "I love you, Lunatic."

Luna bursts into tears again, squeezing Star Swirl against her like she can keep me from sending him back if she holds on tightly enough. Finally her grasp lessens and Star Swirl steps away. "Goodbye," she says with a sniffle.

"Goodbye Luna. I'll, uh, see you in the past I guess," says Star Swirl. "Twilight, I need to grab a few things. Notes I took on what I have to do to make sure the loop stays stable and my Element. Just give me a few minutes and I'll be ready."

I nod and he walks back inside. When I'm positive he's out of earshot I turn to Luna who hasn't moved. "You know he has to go back. Celestia told me about your daughter. Turns out I'm descended from her actually," I say.

"Is that right?" asks Luna. "I confess I stopped keeping track of that sort of thing after the great grandfoals. After he disappeared and Shooting Star died I found that my interest in the rest of my line was rather diminished."

"Disappeared? If you don't mind me asking, how exactly did Star Swirl... pass on?"

"I don't know. He simply left one day on another of his travels and never returned," she says.

"Oh, I didn't know that. I'm sorry," I say. Come to think of it that would explain why I've never read a credible account of his death.

“You needn’t apologize. I’m much too calm and collected to get upset about that. Didn’t you hear me say how I’ve changed for the better since those days?” she asks. There’s an undercurrent of bitter sarcasm to the words.

“Well if you don’t like it you can always change back, right? Just start acting the way you did then and if you feel like you might be losing yourself come talk to Celestia, or even one of our friends.”

“It is not that simple. There are external factors involved. My sister and I have discussed this at length and decided that the perfect mustn’t be the enemy of the good.”

“But what if you just-”

“Twilight,” she says cutting me off with a tone that suggests the matter isn’t open for discussion, “do you remember our conversation back in the infirmary? Some things are best left in the dark, and this is one of them. Now if you don’t mind I would rather be alone with my thoughts right now.” She walks back inside the palace without waiting for me to respond.

I stay out there for a few moments to give her a head start out of respect for her privacy before I head inside as well and turn towards the lab, as that’s where Star Swirl had been keeping most of his things while he worked on the spell. As I walk in he’s gathering up a small sheaf of papers, and his Element of Magic is sitting on the table nearby. “Is that everything? Anypony else you want to say goodbye to before you go?” I ask.

“Just one,” he says. He walks over to me and lays a hoof on my shoulder. “You. Thank you for everything, Twilight. It’s certainly been interesting getting to know you. I know that there’s all sorts of information you have to keep from me, but can you just tell me one thing?”

“What?”

“Do I really have to grow a beard?” he asks with a fake frown and his best attempt at giving me puppy-dog eyes.

I laugh and hug him. “Afraid so. Starswirl the Clean Shaven just doesn’t have the same ring to it. I’ll miss you too,

though.”

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll both meet up again sometime in our relative futures,” he says.

“After what happened with the loop, I don’t think I’ll be messing around with any more of your time spells,” I say.

“About that. It actually wouldn’t be that hard to fix. I’ve already thought of a couple ways you could build in an escape clause. Plus a way to resolve individual loops so you wouldn’t have to go through that whole ritual we just did every time,” he says.

“...what did you say?” I ask. My hug gets tighter. Any resemblance to a choke hold is purely coincidental. “Are you telling me that the version you left for me to find is *intentionally* incomplete?”

“Twilight... air...” he gasps. I reluctantly let go of him and he inhales. “I’m sorry Twilight, but what choice do I have? If you never cast the version that almost breaks the universe-”

“Then I never summon you and you never get the idea for it in the first place. I bucking *hate* time travel,” I say. “So what was the point of any of this?”

“Maybe there wasn’t one,” he says as he levitates the Element of Magic from the nearby table and puts it on. “I’ll put a copy with a fixed version in that cubby with the rest of my notes. I know you’re going to run right up there as soon as we’re done here and see what I wrote anyway.”

I blush. I didn’t think I was quite that transparent.

“It’s what I would do, too,” he says. “I won’t keep you. Goodbye Twilight. Have a good life.”

“I’d wish you the same, but I don’t have to. One spoiler, Star Swirl. The rest of yours is going to be fantastic,” I say. Before he can respond I focus and release the summoning spell that’s been keeping him here. I wish I could say that there’s some dramatic flash or puff of smoke but it’s a disappointingly anticlimactic **pop** and then he’s just not there anymore.

I pause for a moment while it sinks in that he's really gone, and then in a flash I teleport back up to my quarters. They're empty, and I have at least an hour before I need to rendezvous with the others for dinner. Plenty of time to investigate that cubby. I examine the area of the wall Star Swirl told me about, and sure enough there are just a few hints of magic. No wonder I missed them until now; they'd blend seamlessly into the background if I didn't know what I was looking for. With a quick dispel the illusion is removed and sure enough there's a tiny latch. Pressing a hoof against it causes the stone to slide open, and a cloud of dust billows out into my face. Waving a hoof to clear it I reach into the recessed cubby I can feel a thick notebook, with an envelope on top of it. I pull out the envelope, which has my name written on it in florid cursive. I tear it open and begin to read.

Dear Twilight,

You're probably reading this about a minute after you send me back, but for me it's been a bit longer. Twenty years longer, give or take. A lot of what happened back then makes a little more sense to me now. I guess it's easier if I just start at the beginning.

When I got back to the past I found myself right where I'd been the moment that I left, sitting with Celestia in the library. I told her as little as I could, but one thing I did have to explain was the fancy new crown I'd brought back. Both Princesses found the idea of a physical artifact that could exist as a focus for the Elements as intriguing as I did. A few weeks later Luna took the crown and disappeared without a word to anypony, not even Celestia or me. She didn't return for nearly a year. When she did reappear, she had five necklaces she said she had created based on the design of the crown. I'm pretty sure they're the same necklaces your friends use in your time, although the gemstones are differently shaped. They're probably capable of altering their own physical form to match their Bearers.

Celestia and Luna got into a huge fight over the Elements, one that raged on and off for months. Celestia felt that even the existence of such powerful tools that could be wielded by

mortals rather than just the two of them was a gigantic threat to the stability of Equestria, and wanted them sealed away. Luna thought that a counter to Celestia's power was necessary in case she were ever removed or incapacitated and Celestia unchecked became a tyrant.

I have spent the last two decades appreciating the irony.

Luna is the most important pony in my life. We have a daughter, about fifteen now and quite the magical prodigy herself. I almost named her Twilight Sparkle, but Luna knows that name from the nightmares I've had about the other timeline. Instead I picked Shooting Star, the alias you made up for me when you were trying to hide who I was from the changeling queen. It reminds me how different the same pony can be when they're at their best versus their worst, and to try to be a bit better myself. I hope you don't mind.

I have to know what the Elements are going to do to her, how they changed her between now and your present. I studied the Elements obsessively, and that's what led to my falling out with Celestia. She didn't even want them to exist at all, and of course I couldn't tell her why it was so important to me. I'm glad that you're getting this copy of my research, because I'm pretty sure that once I'm gone she's going to have it suppressed. I bet you've never seen it in your time, have you? That's what you didn't want to tell me. I'll keep looking into it, and I'll try to keep these notes as up to date as I can but it's more important they aren't found until your time.

Despite all that, you were right. My life has been fantastic. I've seen and done things that no pony else ever has, and helped ponies overcome what should have been insurmountable odds and dangers. Still, I never quite managed to find the kinds of friends that you have. I guess I just don't have the knack for it the way you do. Cherish them.

Thank you again, for everything.

Your friend,

~~Starswirl the Bearded~~ Star Swirl

I put the letter down, thinking about what I've just learned. It explains a lot. Not everything; I feel like there are still a few

loose ends and details that I can't quite put my hoof on but maybe that's just how it'll have to be. Maybe not everything in life has a satisfactory answer, or at least not one we ever get to learn. The important thing is that this is over and both of us, sixteen hundred years apart, got our own happy ending. That feels like enough of a conclusion all by itself

The dust cloud has settled and I send a little light into the dark cubby.

...That's odd. It looks like there's another envelope in there.

I pull the other envelope out and I'm assailed by the smell of decay and rot. The paper's in good condition, but it's covered in some sticky red-brown splotches. Some of it comes off on my hoof and I give it an experimental sniff before immediately pulling my face away. That's where the smell is coming from, all right.

Is that drying blood? If the cubby was airtight and the stasis spell worked...

I rip open the new envelope. It's another letter, this one scrawled in much shakier writing.

Twilight,

Star Swirl again. Don't have long before I have to get out of this timeline.

We were wrong about the Elements. They aren't tools. They're the users, and we're the instruments. They're intelligent and they have an agenda, and I don't think it's one that's good for ponykind. That alternate timeline with you as a changeling queen isn't the only one they've created, the interference of the time loop spell just kept them from separating cleanly and it's the first one we could detect. There are so many others, if we can get to them before they're destroyed too.

Tried to leave a few hints, but probably wasn't subtle enough because they're on to me. Remember 'madness and death?' Check page 247. And don't share this letter with anypony.

There are coordinates on the back of this letter with where I'm going next. When you think you're ready come meet me there.

Again don't show this to anypony, ESPECIALLY not the Princesses.

If you get this and take it seriously you'll meet me ten minutes from now my time. If you don't I'll be dead in fifteen.

Hope to see you soon.

Author's Notes:

'The Time Loop Trilogy' will conclude with *You Can Fight Fate* coming this summer.

And here it is! [You Can Fight Fate](#)

