



Project: Sunflower

Written by [Hoopy McGee](#)

- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Princess Celestia
- Princess Luna
- Original Character
- Main 6
- Adventure
- Human

Description

It is the year 2038, and the Earth is slowly being consumed by a space-borne monstrosity dubbed the Black Tide, which is using nanotechnology to remake the planet into something hideously alien.

Erin Olsen works for Project Harmonics, humanity's last-ditch effort to find a new world before the Tide can wipe them out. But when that world is found, and it turns out to be occupied, Erin will need to find the courage to face the unknown in order to save the inhabitants of both worlds.

(Many thanks to Easteu for the fantastic cover image for this story!)

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There is now a follow-up to this story: [Sunflower - Side Projects](#)

Sequel: [Project Sunflower: Harmony](#)

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Introduction: The Black Tide

To: Robert Thomson, Chairman of the Committee on Human Survival
From: Dr. Paul Velchiek
Dated: June 15th, 2037

Bob, it's been almost two years since the impact. Two years of tiny machines, semi-biological in nature, swarming in the uncounted trillions from the impact crater, tearing our world apart atom by atom and rebuilding it. Animal, vegetable, mineral, all terrestrial matter that those alien nano-machines encountered, being torn apart and rebuilt as... something else.

Two years of an expanding circle of black matter radiating out from the impact site, creating what looks like a massive oil slick. An oil slick hundreds of miles in diameter and growing at an increasing pace every day. An oil slick that somehow moves and ripples as if it's alive. And that's why we call it the Black Tide.

But I'm sure you know all that. It's your commission that's supposed to be salvaging what's left of humanity and ensuring our survival, after all.

You've tasked the scientific community to come up with a plan to stop the Tide. A noble goal, but one that we become less optimistic about with every passing day.

Nothing we do seems to stop it for very long. We've tried everything... flames, high-voltage electric grids, various chemicals, radiation... Darn it, Bob, even dropping nukes on the blasted thing wasn't as effective as we hoped it would be.

You've also asked the aerospace industry to come up with evacuation ships, in case we need to abandon our planet. You know my opinion on the feasibility of that. We could, at best, "save" a few hundred thousand people. Those people would have the "privilege" of dying in space of starvation or radiation poisoning, rather than dying of starvation on Earth, or being consumed by the Black Tide. After the last several decades of decreasing space budgets, we simply don't have the know-how to build sustainable space stations. Certainly not self-sustainable space stations capable of supporting thousands upon thousands of people.

No. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. We need to leave this world, but not through space travel. I'm asking for Project Harmonics to be reopened. I'm asking not only for my budget to be reinstated, but to be increased. I've heard it said that it's nothing but a pipe dream, but my colleagues and I believe that we've had several very important breakthroughs.

You know the timeline as well as I do. We have, at best, five years before the entire surface of our world is recreated as a gigantic puddle of black sludge. The situation is bleak. You say that we can't afford to waste resources on this? Well, I say that we can't afford not to! If we can get this to work, we can save everyone. Every. Last. One of us. But we need to act now! The technology we need will take months to design and build. We can work on the theoreticals while we're getting the labs constructed, but the longer we delay, the more will die, and the tighter the timeline will be for evacuation.

You've known me for over twenty years, Bob. You know that I wouldn't put my own pride ahead of the entirety of humanity. I honestly and truly believe this is our last, and best, hope. I'm asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to do what's right.

Signed,
Dr. Paul Velchiek

~~*~~

To: Dr. Paul Velchiek
From: Robert Thomson
Dated: July 29th, 2037

I'm putting my neck out here for you, Paul. The men and women on the Commission are a hard-headed bunch, and something like Harmonics is just too far-fetched for them to really understand. Frankly, I don't understand it either, but I trust you.

It took a lot of arguing, it took a lot of pressure, but I finally got your budget approved. Your original budget, I'm afraid. You'll have to make do. I'll do what I can, though, to 'acquire' whatever resources I can from other projects, provided that you understand that I may not always be able to get what you need.

Best of luck, Paul.
Best of luck to us all.

~~*~~

To: Robert Thomson
From: Dr. Paul Velchiek
March 10th, 2038

Well, Bob, you wanted news, and I've got one humdinger for you!

We did it! The first successful test of Project Harmonics! Granted, the emitters blew up, but for a period of time, roughly ten minutes, we saw into an alternate reality! Granted, it was a world that was completely hostile to all life as we know it... It looked like it was comprised mostly of lava fields and gigantic, steaming pits of acid... but that's only one out of an uncounted number of possible alternate worlds! That's why it's called 'Harmonics', after all... we can tune these worlds in like radio stations... The tricky part will be to find one that we can live on and that isn't already occupied. Though, I imagine that "unoccupied" is a little flexible if we can't find any viable alternatives.

I've attached an encrypted file to this note that shows you what we've seen. I'm sure, absolutely 100% sure, that with the right equipment, we can not only view these worlds but actually transport ourselves to them! All we need is resources. Resources that we've been fighting for for months, now. Surely, with this new success, we can at least get some more resources thrown our way? We need to replace those emitters, and we can't skimp on the quality this time.

Also, if we could build multiple labs, we could vastly improve our search speed. It took us almost a month to find 'Lava-world', as my team is calling it. Considering that we may have to go through hundreds, or even thousands of variants before we find a viable world to escape to, we desperately need to speed things up. If it helps, we can build the scanning stations much more cheaply than the actual emitter stations. They just need to look for likely signals, which we can then key into the emitters to check them out for viability. Please tell me that we can do at least that much.

~~*~~

To: Robert Thomson
From: Dr. Paul Velchiek
April 19th, 2038

Bob, as much as I appreciate the Commission's new-found faith in Project Harmonics (though, not as much as I appreciate the additional funding and personnel!), I have to ask... is it really necessary that we have a military observer? Not to mention all these new security measures. It seems a bit crazy to me. Who's going to attack us? Who's going to steal this technology? Honestly, all this... hullabaloo, for lack of a better term, is just making life more difficult. It took me three minutes to get through the checkpoint this morning, and I'm the head of the project!

Please, tell me this has nothing to do with those nut-balls in Houston. We're over a thousand miles away from that! And nobody knows we're here, anyway. The Arks weren't exactly secret, but we here at Harmonics aren't going around advertising our presence.

~~*~~

To: Dr. Paul Velchiek
From: Robert Thomson
April 21st, 2038

Hi Paul. I'm sorry to say it, but yes. The new funding came with those strings attached. The Commission wants the military involved, and that's that. And, yes, the vote on that was unanimous.

I don't think you really understand what's going on with those 'nut-balls'. They aren't just in Houston, Paul. They're all over the US, and the rest of the world. The Earth-First movement is deadly serious about not abandoning our world. They blew up the Ark ships in Houston, because they see evacuation ships as a waste of resources that could be used fighting the Tide, and also the coward's way out. They want to force the world governments into investing all resources into winning back the Earth, not leaving it.

Suffice to say, if they ever did find out about Harmonics, they'd come after you. The security is there for a very good reason. You said when this all started that Harmonics was our best hope, our last hope. The Commission now believes that you're right. And with that comes the realization that you can't be allowed to fail, and you can't be allowed to be stopped by a bunch of short-sighted idiots who don't seem to realize that there's absolutely no long-term way to fight the Tide.

Also, Paul, I'm sending you a thesaurus. Seriously... 'hullabaloo'? You have to stop talking like an old-time professor from the twentieth century, man!

Keep us posted on your progress. And, remember, only use proper, secure channels for communication

from now on. We can't let any of those Earth-First lunatics find out where you are or what you're up to.

Chapter 1: Beginnings

Erin Olsen filtered into the auditorium with the rest of the interns at Project Harmonics. There were forty-seven of them in all, herself included, wandering into the room with a complete lack of haste. Many of the other interns were whispering excitedly back and forth to each other, wondering why they had been called together. Erin found herself unable to summon much enthusiasm.

Project Harmonics was incredibly top-secret, unbelievably well-funded, and, as they were told regularly by management, it represented pretty much the last hope for the survival of humanity. Not only billions of lives, but all of the culture and history of the human race hung in the balance. The work itself, though, was about as exciting as watching paint dry.

Most of Erin's day was spent carefully calibrating her own emitter array, staring at a screen and making minute adjustments until she found something that seemed to fit within the correct parameters. She then would take a "snapshot" of the data she found, sending the information to the actual scientists who worked in the Emitter labs.

Each snapshot she sent was a potential new world, which had really excited her at first. But, since she herself never got to see the results, the work eventually just got boring. After a few months, it went beyond boring and straight into mind-numbingly tedious.

She'd been on the project for a little over four months now, and the most exciting thing she could remember happening was when the cafeteria had "make your own Sundae" day for lunch a week ago. She missed Sundae day.

Erin picked out a seat somewhere towards the back and slumped into it with a sigh. When she'd left her desk, she'd snagged a notepad and pen for any notes she might need to take, since personal tablets were forbidden by security. She laid the notepad on her lap and tucked the pen behind her ear, adjusting her short brown hair in the process.

The reason she'd picked a chair near the back was because she wanted to be one of the first ones out once the meeting was over. Not because she was in any hurry to return to her work, of course. Rather, it was because she might be able to steal a few minutes of personal time just to go for a short walk while everyone else was tied up in getting out of the room. Those brief moments of private time were all that Erin had to break up the tedium of the day.

After a few moments, there was motion at the podium. A stout older man in a brown suit and red bow-tie walked in, and by his massive spectacles, bushy salt-and-pepper beard, and bald head, Erin was able to identify him as Dr. Paul Velchiek. He was the project head, a man she had seen only a handful of times in the half-year she had been at the Harmonics compound. She perked up a little. Maybe this meeting would be interesting, after all.

Dr. Velchiek signaled to the audio technician that he was ready to begin and stepped towards the podium. The lights dimmed, and the interns stopped muttering to each other and instead focused on him. He cleared his throat, and then spoke into the microphone.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, I wanted to thank you for helping with Project Harmonics. I know the work is hard, and especially your end of the work is very tedious, but what we're doing here is, quite simply, the most important thing in the world today."

"You've all been working very hard. I can't thank you enough for that. But it's time, I think, to show you some of the fruits of your labors. Yes, yes," he said, as excited whispers sprung up in the audience hall, "that's right, we're going to show you just a few of the worlds that you've helped us to discover."

He waited for a moment for the excitement his statement caused to die down a little. Erin felt her own heart racing with the excitement of the moment, and resenting the distracting muttering of the other interns around her.

"First up..." there was a click, and what looked like a blurry video filled up the large screen to his left. "This world was actually the first one we found. I apologize for the image quality, but the equipment we had back then was merely an early prototype. Images to follow will be much clearer. The technicians dubbed this one 'Lava-world', and I'm sure you can see why."

Erin could, in fact, see why it was called that. The video was taken at an angle that seemed to be maybe twenty feet above the ground, facing the horizon. There were massive plains spreading out into the distance, black and rocky, and apparently shaking violently. These plains led up to gigantic mountains spewing ash and black smoke into the sky. A few of the mountains were actually in the process of erupting, flinging vast amounts of magma miles into the air.

"As you can see," Dr. Velchiek continued, "this particular location is unsuitable for human habitation. We were able to take several different viewings from this world, and we discovered that it not only is significantly larger than our Earth, implying a higher gravity, but it is volcanically active the whole world over. As interesting as Lava-world would be to a volcanologist, we sadly had to cross it off the list of viable alternate worlds to migrate to."

There was a brief chuckle from the interns at that, which died awkwardly when Dr. Velchiek looked out into the audience in confusion. Apparently, he hadn't intended his statement to be taken as funny.

"You may be wondering how we received the image. Well, to put it simply, when we put the waveforms that you discover into our emitter array, we can, if the conditions are right, open up a window. If the conditions are near-perfect, we can open an actual *doorway* into that world!"

Dr. Velchiek began forwarding through the images, and Erin watched in fascination. Actual alien worlds! According to Dr. Velchiek, not a single one of them was suitable for life, but still!

Many of the worlds shown were simple chunks of rock, either airless or with a poisonous atmosphere. Some looked promising, only to discover some fatal flaw, such as one world with an intense gravity that would have made living on it extremely difficult.

"All of these worlds have been, in a very real sense, a triumph for humanity and science in general. Each of these worlds presents to us marvelous opportunities to study and learn fantastic things about our own universe. We've seen things that, honestly, baffle us. Worlds where the laws of physics as we know them simply do not seem to apply.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "None of these present to us the opportunity we were looking for. A world which would, to put it bluntly, save humankind." He nodded again to the technician, and a new video image popped up on the screen. The professor continued once again.

"No world, that is, until this one, which we first discovered three weeks ago."

Excited interns sat up straighter as the images on the screen progressed. The image displayed was of a world that looked very similar to Earth. The green grass and trees were immediately obvious. Deep blue skies with white cotton-puff clouds spanned overhead. It was picturesque, though it seemed oddly brighter than Erin was used to seeing. Dr. Velchiek let the interns gabble on excitedly for a few minutes, and then raised a hand for silence. Once they had settled down, he began speaking again.

"Now this world, *this* world looks very like our own. Some species of plants are unknown to us, but we see many that look very similar to ones that we have here on Earth. We've seen animals that at least *look* like normal birds, squirrels and rabbits."

Erin stared at the screen in rapt attention. The landscape was picturesque. She was barely registering what Dr. Velchiek was saying as she stared in awe at the plains and hills, with hope burning in her chest. The view on screen suddenly jumped, and they were looking at mountain ranges, with densely wooded valleys and snow-capped peaks. Dr. Velchiek kept on talking.

"We were able to send some probes over—" and here the doctor had to pause as the already-excited interns gasped and whispered to each other in amazement. The noise stopped abruptly as he cleared his throat in annoyance.

"Ahem! Yes, as I was saying. We were able to send over some probes, and I'm pleased to say that, while the atmosphere is very slightly higher in oxygen and the gravity is very slightly less than here on Earth, the environment seems to be totally and completely compatible with human life. We've done it, ladies and gentlemen. We've found a world that can save humanity!"

Erin found herself cheering wildly along with all the others. Her previous frustration with the tedium of her job was washed away in a wave of enthusiasm and joy. It had all been totally worth it, humanity was saved!

Dr. Velchiek didn't bother trying to stop the cheering, which eventually turned into applause, and then a standing ovation. He simply beamed out at the audience with a big, bearded grin, as all the interns (and even the technicians in the back) applauded, whistled and cheered loudly.

Finally, the outburst started to die down, and Dr. Velchiek lifted his hand to get everyone's attention. Soon, all eyes were once again focused on him.

"There is, however, one small problem. Perhaps it's not an insurmountable problem, but it is one we need to take into consideration. Show the next video, please."

Erin focused on the screen again, as a new image popped up. She blinked in confusion for a moment, not sure at what she was seeing, and then suddenly it resolved itself. She was looking at a top-down view of a

large town, with winding streets and brightly-colored rooftops. She felt a sinking sensation in her stomach.

"As you can see," Dr. Velchiek said, "This world is inhabited."

He waved off the moans of disappointment from the crowd.

"Now, now, none of that. It's inhabited, yes, but the population density is nowhere near that of the Earth, at least in the regions we've been able to see so far. Granted, that's only a small portion of this world, as there is something about this one that makes matching harmonics with it... well, tricky, to say the least. But it's entirely possible that we can co-exist with the inhabitants. But first, we need to learn more about them. Because, you see... they aren't exactly human."

Erin's breath caught in her throat, and she heard several others gasp as well. Just finding out that there were other worlds within reach that could support life was thrilling enough. However, intelligent, non-human life was something... well, shocking. Even though it was a known possibility, to hear it stated as fact was simply incredible.

"Now, this is one of the larger settlements we've found. For the most part, they appear to be a community of farmers. It seems fairly similar to the USA in the mid-1800's, actually. If they turn out to be hostile or inhospitable, we could, if we wanted to, simply move in by force and take what we needed."

Erin's stomach churned at the thought. On the one hand, it was the human race's very survival they were talking about. On the other, just the very thought of human beings being like the 'alien invaders' in the science fiction novels she read made her distinctly uncomfortable. She tried to put it out of her mind as Dr. Velchiek continued talking.

"We'd much rather co-exist, of course, but we're talking about the future of the human race, here. We're talking about our survival as a species, and we're talking about billions of lives. Naturally, we're still looking for other viable alternate worlds while we study this one. Maybe we can find an uninhabited one that is similar enough to the Earth that we could move there, instead."

"If not," Dr. Velchiek continued, "then it's entirely possible that they would be friendly and welcome us into their world. They seem friendly enough as it is. We'd still like to get some people over there to study them, unobtrusively, but for now we're just watching everything we can whenever we're able to get a window open. Which is anywhere from five to twenty minutes on average, once or twice a week."

"And now," he said with a chuckle, "I bet you're all just dying to see what our 'alien' intelligence looks like!" He smiled out once again at the brief, but loud affirmation from his audience.

"Last video, please," he said to the technicians. Erin focused her attention once again on the screen. Nobody in the audience even made a peep. Dr. Velchiek, however, continued talking, speaking as if he were narrating a nature documentary.

"And here we see some lovely rolling hillsides, with a fairly large forest off to the west. As you can see, it's a pleasant day. Small insects buzz by, and there you can see a few rabbits grazing on the grass. And what's this coming up over the hillside? Why, it's a collection of this world's most highly developed inhabitants!"

Erin stared as several multicolored shapes appeared at the crest of the hill.

"As you can see, they are-"

"Oh my god, *ponies!*"

Erin looked around in a panic, blushing furiously. Everyone was staring at her. Dr. Velchiek looked positively annoyed. She'd gone and blurted that out loud, hadn't she?

Yes. Yes, she had.

Dr. Velchiek harrumphed and continued on.

"Yes, well, ponies. Though, obviously nothing like what we'd find here on Earth. Note the bright colors. You'd never see a bright purple pony running around here on Earth, unless its owner had dyed its coat that color! Also, these ponies talk. They use tools. They build things. And that's not all. Look at what you see here. Here come more ponies... And not all of them are walking."

The auditorium exploded in chaos, interns leaping from their seats and pointing, talking, and at times shouting excitedly over one another.

"Oh wow, it's carrying a basket! Look at that!"

"Is that one flying? Does it have wings?"

"Look at that grey one!"

"Oh, look, one has a foal, isn't that just adorable?"

"Those *are* wings! It's a winged pony!"

"If they're so smart, why don't any of them wear clothes?"

"Did you see that? Did you *see* that?"

"No *way* those wings can support an animal that size in flight!"

"Oh, man, is that a unicorn? An actual unicorn?!"

"That one's wearing a hat!"

"Oh my god this is so incredibly amazing I can't believe we've found intelligent life out there and it's *ponies*, and it's ponies having a *picnic* and they look so cute and adorable and oh man it's awesome that they can fly and the colors are so pretty and they're all smiling and look so happy and..."

Erin sputtered to a halt as she realized that she was rambling. Luckily nobody else seemed to notice, as they were all staring raptly at the screens and babbling away themselves. She returned her attention to the ponies frolicking on the screen. They were playing games, laughing, eating... one, a purple unicorn, was sitting on a blanket a little way away from the others, apparently reading a book that was propped against her picnic basket.

"It shouldn't surprise anyone," Dr. Velchiek said, "that my team has dubbed this place 'Ponyworld'." There was no response, as the interns were all staring raptly at the screen, chattering animatedly with each other.

"Ahem." The auditorium continued to ignore him. "Ahem." When there was still no response from the audience, Dr. Velchiek sighed and signaled the A/V tech, who cut off the video. The interns all groaned in disappointment, but returned their attention to the podium.

"Now back to business," Dr. Velchiek said, once the muttering had died down. "We need to get a sense of the pony society. How is it organized? What are the people... er... ponies like? Are they religious? Do they have any needs that we could supply for them, in return for letting us live there? Are there any large areas of land that we could move our populations to? Basically, we need vast amounts of information. More than we can get by pushing probes out there and watching through the occasional window. And that's why I called you all together."

He had their attention now. All eyes were glued on him. He was apparently savoring the moment as he smiled slyly and took a sip of water.

"What we need, essentially, are some volunteers."

Erin's hand shot up almost of its own volition.

"Ah, well, that was fast. You're the 'oh my god ponies' girl, aren't you? What's your name, young lady?"

"Um... Erin, sir. Erin Olsen."

"And why are you volunteering for this project, when you don't know what we'll even ask of you?"

Erin thought about it for a moment.

"Well, sir, will this project involve staring at a small screen while making minuscule adjustments for twelve-hour shifts?"

Dr. Velchiek laughed, as did many of the interns in the auditorium.

"No, it will not. But it will involve being subject to an experimental Harmonics gateway, being sent to this new world, and observing the ponies in their environment for some time while we gather data. And, also, you'll be undergoing surgery to have several various probes and sensors inserted into your body, in order to better facilitate our data gathering."

Erin noticed her arm started drooping as the professor went on. Staying there? She thought she'd just help with observation! And what was that about surgery? Being turned into some sort of living cyborg-probe-thing didn't sound like a wise thing to do. Plus, what if the ponies, as cute and sweet-natured as they seemed, turned out to be hostile?

Then again... The entire human race *was* at stake, which was why she spent the last six months doing permanent damage to her eyes by staring at that stupid harmonics screen. *Someone* had to do it. *Someone* had to take the risk! Besides, anything would be better than another few months of staring at that screen.

She forced her arm back up.

"I'm in." she said, resolutely.

"Wonderful!" Doctor Velchiek said, with a grin breaking through his bearded face. "Do we have any other takers?"

Three others volunteered within the next few minutes, and one more hesitantly raised her hand as Dr. Velchiek continued to alternately plead, cajole, and entice others to volunteer. After another five minutes of no more raised hands, it became clear that he had all the volunteers he was going to get.

"Well, then," he said, clearly not satisfied but determined to put a good face on it, "We have five volunteers. Five brave souls who are willing to go the distance and face the unknown, and... er... Apparently that last young lady has reconsidered. Very well. *Four* brave souls. Stand up, then, you wonderful people! Stand up! We salute you!"

Erin stood up, blushing furiously, as Dr. Velchiek led a round of applause for her and the other volunteers. The applause continued for longer than it should have, then slowly and awkwardly died down. Erin remained standing, unsure of what to do next. Dr. Velchiek had apparently forgotten about them, and was leafing through some papers at the podium.

She caught the eyes of another volunteer, a young man she knew as Adam. He shrugged, and then motioned towards the podium. Erin shrugged as well, and when Adam started to make his way down the aisle, she did as well. The other two volunteers also made their way down and they all stood, uncertainly, on the floor next to the raised stage where the podium resided. Finally, Adam cleared his throat.

"What?" Dr. Velchiek looked around, startled. "Oh, yes, of course. Everyone, thank you for coming today. Feel free to take an hour of celebration at the cafeteria before returning to work. We still need to find other viable alternate worlds, just in case this 'Ponyworld' doesn't pan out!"

Then, as the other interns started filtering out the back of the auditorium, Dr. Velchiek turned to the four volunteers and smiled warmly.

"Ah, my dear volunteers! Wonderful, wonderful! Please, for now, join your peers and get something to eat. It's a special day! We ordered in cake and ice cream, it's waiting in the cafeteria. Mention that you're a volunteer, and you should get an extra-large slice! Here you go."

And with that, he handed each of them a folder with a few papers in it.

"Read those over as soon as you can, after the cake of course, and meet me in conference room 4-C in three hours. There are a few things we need to go over."

Erin opened her folder, as did the other three volunteers. It just seemed to be a standard release form, a confidentiality agreement and a medical checklist.

"Well," said Adam, "That was sure interesting. But for now, let's go get some cake!"

Erin couldn't have agreed more, on both counts.

Chapter 2: Gathering data

Conference Room 4-C turned out to be one of the larger rooms, dominated by a large oak table. Erin and the other three volunteers shuffled in, full of cake and high spirits. She was a bit alarmed to see two armed guards standing on either side of the door, but they didn't try to stop them from going in. There were a number of people waiting for them, all grouped at the far end away from the door, relaxing and chatting in the high-backed black leather chairs.

The volunteers were encouraged to have seats close to the current occupants, leaving most of the room empty.

"We were really hoping for a few more volunteers," said one of the people in the room, a scientist Erin recognized as Doctor Maggie Henson, who was her boss' boss and head of the Harmonics Emitter team. She turned to one of her fellow scientists and added, "I told Paul we should have expanded our selection beyond just the interns."

The other scientist shrugged. "He said he wanted to keep it in-house."

There didn't seem to be much to say to that, so Erin fiddled with the paperwork Dr. Velchiek had given her as the others introduced themselves. In addition to Dr. Henson, there was a Dr. Alden Rowe, Chief of Medicine; Dr. Hermann Fischer, who was in charge of something apparently called Project Ascent and who spoke with a slight Austrian accent; and a short, thin, middle-aged man who didn't give his first name and simply identified himself as Dr. Edwards. The last man to introduce himself was Major Mitchell Morris, who said he was there as a military observer.

As the introductions were wrapping up, Dr. Velchiek walked in and seated himself at the head of the table.

"Have we all already introduced ourselves to each other? Yes? Good! Let's get right into it, then! First and foremost, did you all have a chance to go through your paperwork?"

The volunteers all assured him they had.

"Good deal!" Doctor Velchiek said, beaming. "First thing, then, is that we need you all to sign the confidentiality agreement. Basic non-disclosure, under penalty of treason, of any information that you may be told in here. Do any of you have any questions? No? Then sign away, my wonderful volunteers!"

Erin felt a bit nervous and, judging by the looks on their faces, so did the others. However, with only a slight amount of hesitation, she and the others all signed the documents and handed them over to Dr. Velchiek.

"Good," he said as he gathered the papers together into a manila folder. "Now that that is out of the way, I have to say that we're going to be introducing you to some very radical concepts here. Not only the cybernetic implants, which I touched upon very briefly during the meeting, but some cutting-edge stuff that anyone out in the world today would tell you is nothing but science fiction."

"I have to warn you that there's no going back after this point. You can still refuse to participate, once you hear the offer. But if you decline, you will be kept separate from the rest of the personnel on-site. That's non-negotiable, I'm afraid. Your only contact will be with other people who have the same information that you do, at least until this particular project has run its course. Any who wish to leave may do so now, with no hard feelings, and go back to the scanner arrays."

Erin could see fear in the eyes of the other interns, and she was sure they could see the same in hers. One of the volunteers got up, a woman perhaps in her late twenties. She made her excuses, blushing furiously, and then walked quickly out the door. A guard poked his head into the conference room, but Dr. Velchiek shook his head and said that she was free to go. The guard nodded and closed the door again.

"Ah, well," said Dr. Velchiek, "Not as bad as I was expecting. Well, if the rest of you are very sure? Good! Then let's get into some of the data that we know."

Dr. Velchiek clicked a button on the table in front of him, and the lights in the room dimmed. A screen at the back of the room lit up, and suddenly filled with the same pastoral scene that Erin remembered first seeing when "Ponyworld" was introduced.

"There were a few things that we kept from the others. We collected some video and carefully edited it to keep out some of the more... extraordinary aspects of this world. First of all, here you see one of the horned ponies, what most of my staff are calling a 'unicorn', which seems apt enough. What you didn't see was... well, just watch."

Erin watched carefully as a pony trotted into view, smiling gently as she trotted along. Now that she could

take a closer look, she noticed that the pony looked only superficially like a pony from Earth. This one's head was rounder, with larger eyes and a higher forehead. Also, horses and ponies on Earth didn't smile, in her experience. Nor did they have what looked like a tattoo of a four-leaf clover on their rumps.

Also, something else seemed slightly off about her. Erin blinked, and then suddenly noticed that the unicorn's horn was glowing slightly, a pale green a shade or two lighter than her coat. Then, something amazing happened. Several branches on the ground were enveloped in a similar-colored glow, and then rose into the air and sped towards the unicorn. She turned, and trotted back the way she came, branches in tow.

Erin became aware that her mouth was hanging open, so she shut it.

"As you can see, the unicorns seem to possess a telekinetic ability. We suspect that the winged ponies also have some sort of TK ability as well, which enables them to fly. As you can see, there is simply no way that their wingspan, even in Ponyworld's slightly lower gravity, could support a creature of that size. At least, not without the creature being so light that its mass wouldn't be able to overcome air resistance to allow it to move forward.

"This wasn't the only example of telekinesis we'd seen from these remarkable ponies," Dr. Velchiek said. "We've seen many others."

He tapped again on the console in front of him, and the video shifted. Several unicorns flashed by on the screen above. A blue one, apparently male and with a white mane and a safety pin tattoo who was trotting along with a bag full of what seemed to be apples floating beside him. A yellow one with a blue mane was using her telekinesis to put a hat on her head.

And, finally, there was a lavender one with a darker purple mane with a pink streak and a pattern that looked like a starburst for a tattoo. She was walking down the street and apparently reading from the book that she was levitating in front of her. Erin thought that seemed a little bit on the dangerous side.

"Obviously, the telekinesis presents a great unknown factor. This is one way in which this world is different than ours. Who knows how many others there may be?"

"How do you get all these videos?" Erin asked, amazed.

"Ah, glad you asked! The drones that we sent over are very small, programmed to evade notice, and have simply the best cameras money can buy. They stay some distance outside of town, zooming in on whatever their programming takes a fancy to."

"Sir," said Adam, "What's the significance of the tattoos on their hindquarters?"

"Ah, that," Dr. Velchiek replied, scratching his beard. "We honestly don't know. All of the adults have them. It seems to be some sort of ritualistic 'rite of passage' into adulthood kind of thing, but we're really not sure. We have cataloged a few of these, but there seems to be almost no correlation between the pony and the tattoo. Outside of the different types of pony, that is."

"What do you mean?" Erin asked.

"Well, there are the three different kinds of ponies, as you see. At least, if there are any other kinds, we haven't seen them yet! The basic kind is the one without horns or wings. They seem to be mostly laborers and farmers, or craftsmen... or craftponies, I suppose. They tend to have more... down-to-earth kinds of marks. Various kinds of plants, fruits, flowers, tools, that sort of thing."

"The unicorns, though, they tend to have more along the lines of artistic, mystical or scientific types of marks. Stars, for example, or paintbrushes. I saw one with an hourglass, even! The winged ponies tend to have ones based on weather, such as clouds, rainbows, that kind of thing. There is some crossing back and forth, such as the unicorn we saw earlier with the clover mark, but our best guess is that it is some kind of caste system, with the plain ponies most likely on the bottom, though there doesn't seem to be any real social separation between the classes."

Erin was fascinated. There were so many unknowns!

"So, basically," Dr. Velchiek continued, "we want you to go and infiltrate pony society. Find out how things work there. Try the local food, so you can give the sensors we'll implant in your digestive tracts the ability to analyze the nutritional content of it. Mingle with the ponies, learn how the economy works, what the difference is between the classes of ponies besides the obvious. Find out how the government works, that kind of thing. Basically, just gather any and all information that you can, as quickly as you can."

Adam laughed briefly.

"And how are we supposed to do that? Just walk up to them and say, 'Hi there, little ponies, I'm an alien

that wants to gather information about your world'? How would they even understand us? I doubt they speak English!"

"That's one of the most amazing things," Dr. Velchiek replied, chuckling. "One of the probes we managed to get across happened to pick up a brief conversation as a couple of ponies wandered by underneath it. Apparently, they speak perfect English. Honestly, I was still too shocked by the telekinesis to be much bothered about that, but it *is*, perhaps, the most astounding thing, I'm sure you'll agree."

"As for the other thing," he said, clearing his throat and looking mildly uncomfortable, "you won't be aliens at all. We plan to... well, to turn you into ponies."

There was a long pause.

"I'm sorry, what?" Erin said after a minute. She couldn't have heard him right...

"Yes, into ponies. Dr. Fischer, if you could take over?"

"Certainly, Paul." The scrawny old Austrian doctor straightened in his seat and punched a button on his own control panel. The visions of Ponyworld and its colorful, wonderful inhabitants faded from view, to be replaced by what looked like very strange, slightly mechanical and oily-looking grains of rice.

"I work on Project Ascent. This project had one goal in mind: to figure out how to counter the Black Tide's nefarious little nanomachines with nanomachines under our own control. Unfortunately, their machines are much more advanced than ours, and simply consume them like they consume everything else."

"In any case, what you see here is the fruit of our labor. Each of these little pellets is invisible to the naked eye and yet has the ability to rearrange matter in much the same way that the Tide's own nanomachines can. Only, in this case, we can control it."

"I'm done." said the third volunteer, a young man that Erin knew as Richard. "No way that's going to work for me, sorry. This sounds *way* too 'mad scientist' to me."

"Very well," said Dr. Velchiek, disappointment evident in his voice. He stood and escorted the young man out the door, where he murmured briefly to the guards standing outside the doorway. Richard was escorted away by one of the guards, and Dr. Velchiek returned to the head of the table, lowering into his seat with a heavy sigh.

"And then there were two. Please continue, Doctor Fischer."

"Ah, yes. Of course."

The Austrian fiddled with his pen briefly, obviously trying to recollect his thoughts. Finally, he continued.

"The procedure is perfectly safe, I assure you. We will turn you into ponies, of the plain variety, and give you what we hope will be an appropriate mark on your flanks."

Erin felt a brief moment of disappointment. Not that the thought of being turned into a pony by what appeared to be, admittedly, a mad scientist didn't scare the willies out of her, but... "Why can't we be a winged ponies?" she asked. "I'd like to be able to fly!"

Dr. Fischer seemed mildly amused by that.

"If you can tell us how they fly, and describe for us the anatomy of their wings," he said, "then indeed we'd be happy to make you over into a winged pony. As it is, though, we have no idea how to replicate the abilities of the horned and winged ponies that you see in our videos."

Erin was surprised to note that she was feeling disappointed by that. It wasn't like there was any chance that she would actually *let* these people remake her body into that of a pony. Was there?

Dr. Fischer continued. "We can do this, we assure you. We've already done significant animal testing, and we believe we have the flaws worked out."

"And you have my personal word," broke in Dr. Velchiek, "that you will be turned back at the first opportunity when you return from Ponyworld. And, just to sweeten the pot, if helping to save the world isn't enough, I will personally guarantee that you will be compensated well enough that you will never have to work again. Also, you will be heroes the world over, once this is all said and done. So, what do you say?"

Erin exchanged a long, doubtful look with Adam.

"Where did this technology come from?" Adam asked. "I've never heard of anything like this, ever. This seems like it's years beyond anything we're capable of."

Dr. Fischer looked uncomfortable. He looked at Dr. Velchiek, who shrugged and nodded.

"We... have studied the nanomachines of the Tide," Dr. Fischer confessed. "We were able to retrieve some damaged ones and figure out some of the properties by which they work. Our own nanomachines were built using that knowledge."

"So, you're saying you're planning on using technology based off of the *Black Tide* to turn us into ponies," Adam said flatly. Both Dr. Velchiek and Fischer confirmed that this was true.

"Then I also have to say 'no', sorry." said Adam. "I agree with Richard, this is just too crazy. Sorry, Erin. Looks like it's down to you."

Erin felt her heart racing as Dr. Velchiek escorted Adam out the door and into the hands of the waiting guard outside, who took him away.

"And then there was one," Dr. Velchiek said, as he lowered himself to his seat. "What do you say... Erin, was it? The fate of the world rests in your hands. No, the fate of two worlds. Ours and theirs. Because I guarantee you, whether or not we gather the information we need, humanity is moving into Ponyworld in about eight months' time.

"We already have emitter stations going up all over the world in preparation for the event. We plan on doing this as diplomatically as possible, but the survival of the human race *has* to take precedence. The information you gather could make that transition so much easier on both species. Will you do it?"

"Sir, I..." she glanced away. She never liked being put on the spot, and here she was being told that she was partly responsible for the fate of the human race. Oh, and the mostly-unknown pony race, come to think of it.

Why did I ever volunteer in the first place? she thought miserably. *If I'd known this was going to be based on Tide technology...*

"Can I sleep on it?" she asked finally.

Dr. Velchiek agreed and then escorted her to the doorway himself. The others in the room went their own separate ways. One of the guards had returned by this point, but Dr. Velchiek waved him off and walked her down to a specially prepared dorm himself. The whole way, he kept up a steady monologue about the Good of Humanity, Saving the Earth, and how she could be one of the heroes of the modern world, much like the astronauts who walked on the moon almost a century ago.

She really wished he'd stop talking. It was making it hard for her to think.

Finally, they reached another guarded door.

"Well, here you are, my dear. I really hope you take us up on this opportunity. You'll be doing everyone a lot of good, if you agree."

And with that, Dr. Velchiek turned and left. Erin entered the doorway and looked around. She was in a large sitting area, with several screens on the walls, though none of them were on at the moment. The central area had a large sofa and several comfortable looking chairs. There were bookshelves around the walls, and off to one side she saw a bar and a decent-sized kitchen area. Richard and Adam looked up as she entered, apparently interrupting their conversation.

"Well, that didn't take long," Adam said with a grin. "I didn't think anyone would go for that. It's just too crazy!"

"Actually," Erin said hesitantly, "I haven't made up my mind, yet."

Both Richard and Adam gaped at her.

"You have *got* to be kidding!" Richard said, looking astounded. "They want to break your body down and recreate it! Recreate it as a stupid *horse*! Using technology inspired by the *Black Tide*! How can you even consider that?"

"Because a *lot* of lives are at stake, that's how!"

"Don't be stupid," Adam said, rolling his eyes. "Nobody is going to die. We've got a world to move into. Getting information is pointless, we're going in whether or not those ponies like it. And if they fight us, well... we're not exactly leaving any of our military hardware behind, are we? I doubt those winged ponies can out-fly a jet!"

Both he and Richard started joking about how over-matched the ponies would find themselves against fighter jets, tanks, and helicopters. She thought back to the videos they had all seen. Ponies laughing and

playing, talking and reading. Building things, farming things. A community, and one that seemed to be happy and cohesive.

She had a sudden vision of what was going to happen. Ready or not, humanity was going to pour through Harmonics gateways by the millions. No, by the *billions*. People in general weren't bad, but with the survival of the entire species at risk, would the plight of these little ponies even be considered?

Almost definitely not. Not unless someone went in and came back with information. These ponies were living, thinking creatures, and unless that information came out, Erin was afraid that they'd be treated as little better than animals by a good portion of humanity.

And maybe even worse, by some people. Talking animals? That would seem a threat to certain kinds of people. Erin was convinced that most people were good and kind in the world, but even still, she knew that there were plenty of small-minded racists and xenophobes out there. If there were people that hated other people based on nothing more than skin color, how many people would hate the ponies based on actual species?

The full weight of it suddenly hit her. Dr. Velchiek was completely right. It was two worlds, not one, that hung in the balance. And the one that was in greater danger was Ponyworld.

She made up her mind. Turning, she opened the door she had just walked through. The guards jumped a little, and one of them raised a hand as if to bar her.

"Sorry, ma'am," he began, "but you can't leave--"

"Please send for Dr. Velchiek," she said, cutting him off. "Tell him I've made up my mind. Tell him..." she took a deep breath. "Tell him I'll do it."

Chapter 3: Decisions

It was an hour later, and Dr. Velchiek was beside himself with joy as he escorted Erin into yet another conference room. He was talking a steady stream of encouragement and reassurance, which Erin barely listened to. She felt almost like she was walking through a daydream, it all felt so unreal.

It felt surreal to Erin, to be sitting there and calmly discussing having her entire body redesigned and manipulated into that of a pony. She couldn't believe she was actually planning on doing this. A small part of her mind was screaming warnings at her, and she did her best to block that voice out.

"Very well," he said, once everyone was seated, "we can now get into more of the details involved in this project, which we are calling... Project Insertion? Really, that's the best we've got?"

He sighed and shook his head. "All right, then. We're going to have each head go through and give you a brief summary of what we're doing. First things first. Maggie?"

"Thank you, Paul." She turned to address Erin, passing her a tablet. Erin took it, but didn't turn it on. It seemed to be a fairly ordinary tablet, touch-screen, like everyone else in the world had these days.

"That tablet has all of the data that we've collected from Ponyworld up to this point. All video, all pictures, all scientific data, as well as all of our best guesses as to what Pony society is like. Please study that in depth, and don't allow anyone else to see it. It's keyed to your thumbprint. Please turn it on now."

Erin pressed her thumb to the corner of the screen, which immediately lit up. The logo "Project Insertion" came up on the screen, with the words "Top Secret: Authorized personnel only" written in red underneath.

"Thank you, Doctor Henson," she said, tapping on the logo. It vanished, to be replaced by an index. There were several sections, including a video section, a data section, an analysis section, and a section on various pony tattoos.

"Oh, please," she said, smiling, "Now that we're working together, you can call me Maggie."

Erin smiled back. "Thank you, Maggie," she said.

"You're quite welcome, dear!"

"You can continue to call me 'Doctor'," said Dr. Edwards tersely. "I'd like to get my part of this out of the way, if you don't mind. I have to get back to my labs as soon as possible. We're still developing the implants we're going to be using for this little field trip, and I'll need all the time I can get in order to get them completed on time."

"Certainly, Dr. Edwards," said Dr. Velchiek, after a slightly awkward pause. "Please continue."

"Very well. Young lady, open the tablet under the part of the index titled 'cybernetics'. I'll take you through a brief rundown of what we're hoping to accomplish."

Erin did so, feeling a little intimidated by the crabby scientist.

"You'll see that, for the most part, the implants will be chemical analyzers of various sorts. You will have several in your digestive system, analyzing the chemical and nutritional content of the food you eat. You'll have further sensors in your nostrils and lungs, analyzing everything from the composition of the air you breathe to the pollen and dust that you manage to inhale."

"Your eyes will be given a boost. They'll have spectral analyzers built in, so you can measure various sorts of radiation, beyond those normally visible. Don't worry, you won't be distracted by any of that. You will perceive only the 'normal' information that your current eyes do."

"However, we were also told to give you whatever physical advantages we could, so you will be able to, at will, tap into both night vision and infra-red vision. Also, your eyes will be able to see far more clearly at further distances than any organic eye would be able to. You'd be able to read a postage stamp from a mile away, if you wanted to do so for some reason. Keep in mind, though, that this focus will make you extremely far-sighted until you return your eyesight to normal."

"Your ears will be much the same. They will pick up and record sounds far outside your normal range of hearing, but they won't pass on anything too far outside the normal range. Once again, though, you should be able to focus your hearing to an extent that you'll be able to hear far beyond what any animal is capable of without augmentation."

"There is also information storage and retrieval, and a communications array. You will have a data storage device implanted in your body, and whenever we can, we will open a window to download the data you've collected, in order to analyze it here.

"Also, you will have a microphone built into your jaw, and a small speaker in your ears. This is in order to give us the ability to communicate with you while in the field, so that we can give you instruction if needed."

Dr Velchiek broke in at that point, to say, "In addition, we're asking that you keep a log. Just speak normally, and the microphone will pick it up and record it. Include any thoughts you have on the ponies you meet, the society you've come in contact with, any feelings or intuitions you may have, that kind of thing."

"Yes, yes," Dr. Edwards said, sounding annoyed. "All that touchy-feely stuff that apparently we won't be able to discern for ourselves as we go through the data. Now, if you don't have any questions, I'd like to be on my way."

"Ah, yes, actually, I do have a question," Erin said, trying to ignore Dr. Edward's grumbling. "Is there any way I'd be able to turn the recorder off for short periods of time?"

Dr. Edwards looked at her as if she'd asked him to pull a rabbit out of a hat.

"Why," he said after a moment, in a voice made of icicles, "in the name of all that's holy, would we ever make it so that the recorder could be turned off?"

"Well... sometimes... A girl wants some privacy, you know?" Erin was blushing.

"My dear girl," he shot back condescendingly, "If you want to have some hanky-panky with the local stallions, I'm sure that's your own concern, but don't—"

"No! No no no! God, no, are you kidding me?" Erin was now beet-red and mortified. "I was talking about normal things like having to go to the bathroom or whatever! I don't want you guys watching that! Good god, you thought I was talking about sex?! What is *wrong* with you?!"

There was general laughter in the room after Erin's outburst. Only she and Dr. Edwards weren't laughing, Erin because she was too angry and embarrassed, and Dr. Edwards because he was affronted.

"My dear," he said once the laughter died down, "If you think that I'm going to cater—"

"Oh, Tom, just do it, ok?" Dr. Henson broke in. "It's not that big of a deal, is it? Just put a pause function in the recorder, and have it auto-restart after twenty minutes if she forgets to turn it back on, or something."

"Are we seriously going to compromise our research in order to cater to the whims of this girl's modesty?" Dr. Edwards snapped back.

"Tom," said Dr. Velchiek in a reasonable but firm tone, "she's agreeing to undergo the most radical body modification and surgery ever attempted, and then be the first human ever to be sent to an alien world. I think a little catering to whims is the least we can do to make it easier on her."

Dr. Edwards glared around the room briefly, and saw that he had no allies there.

"Fine," he grated. "I'll do it. Now if you'll excuse me, these further modifications will take even more time and even more of my attention. Good day to you all."

And with that, Dr. Edwards stormed out of the room. Erin breathed a sigh of relief. She really didn't like that man. After a moment, Dr. Velchiek spoke again.

"He's really not a bad man, Erin," he said, softly. "He, like many of us, is just under an ungodly amount of pressure. Ordinarily, he's about the most even tempered man you'd care to meet."

Erin nodded mutely, still upset from the earlier exchange. Doctor Fisher was up next, and Erin, with some difficulty, turned her attention to him. She rapidly forgot about the antagonistic Dr. Edwards as the kind-sounding Austrian man spoke.

"Like Doctor Henson, Erin, I would like you to call me by my first name. We're going to be working together for a while, after all, and a little familiarity will go a long way towards making things go smoother. So, please, call me Hermann."

Erin managed a weak smile, still feeling slightly shaken-up. "Thank you, Hermann."

"Of course," he said, smiling. "Now, my team is in charge of designing and building the actual body that all of Dr. Edwards' lovely toys will go into. We started with a basic design, based on the ponies you would

find here in our world, but we rapidly ran into problems.

"As you watch the videos, you will see that the ponies of that other world have fantastic degrees of dexterity, both in their forelimbs and hooves, as well as with their jaws and mouths. The plain ponies, as well as the winged ones, don't have telekinesis to move things about, and yet they manage to carry and build things all the same. It took a considerable amount of work for us to be able to design joints, muscles and tendons that not only could duplicate the Ponyworld ponies' actions, but would also look like theirs do.

"In addition to this, as Dr. Edwards mentioned, we were told to give you all the benefits that we could, in order to ensure your safety. To that end, you will be physically much stronger than any creature that size has a right to be, able to lift several times your own weight easily. You will have endurance and speed far beyond what you would ordinarily have. In addition, your skeletal structure will be enhanced to be able to support the weights and speeds that you will be capable of.

"Furthermore, your reflexes, coordination, and muscle memory will be enhanced as much as possible. It shouldn't take you long at all to get used to your new body, and to pick up any tricks you need to once you actually arrive in Ponyworld.

"And one last thing. We've seen the ponies eat vegetation, and apparently some kinds of breads. However, we're not sure what else they may eat. Rather than making you a pure vegetarian, we've made your digestive system capable of processing almost anything organic. You won't be able to be poisoned easily, and you won't starve as long as there is something organic nearby that you can actually chew and swallow."

"What about the flank tattoo?" Erin asked. "What will that be?"

"From what I understand, Erin, you will be allowed to pick whatever it is you like, from a pre-approved list that you should find on that tablet that Maggie gave you."

"Oh..." Erin glanced at the tablet again, suppressing an urge to start going through it right away.

"That is, in summary, what we're planning on having as the end result. Did you have any questions?"

"Um, yes." Erin considered for a moment, then asked, "Can you tell me exactly how this is going to work? What are you going to do to me?"

"Ah, well. Basically, what we do is we program the nanomachines with the end result we have in mind. Then we put you in a nutrient solution that is filled with these nanomachines. They enter your body, and they change you on a cell-by-cell basis.

"In addition, the actual surgery will be automated, but overseen by the best doctors we have. Once your skeleton is rendered malleable, it will be manually re-shaped by the various robotic limbs in the vat."

Erin stared at him in disbelief. Did this guy just say her skeleton would be rendered 'malleable'? It made sense, but... Her stomach flipped over gently at the thought, and she did her best to put it out of her mind as the doctor continued his explanation.

"It works in stages. Each stage that passes, you will be a little less human-like, and a little more pony-like. All together, the process should take about two weeks."

"Two weeks?!" Erin's desire to run, screaming, out of the room ratcheted up another notch. "And... will it hurt?"

"Oh, no, my dear, of course not!" Dr. Fischer shook his head emphatically. "For you, the time will pass like nothing. You will be unconscious the entire time, while we tend the process and make any adjustments needed. You will simply go to sleep on one day, then wake up on another, as a pony. The process to reverse the change will work much the same way, only this time we'll have a template to go off of, so it will be much smoother. We would be able to return you to your current form in about a week or so."

"And, if you like," said Dr. Velchiek, "we can include some of the upgrades that you will have had as a pony. The enhanced reflexes, strength, and so on. Consider it a positive side-effect, if you want."

Erin considered that for a moment. It would be kind of cool to be essentially a super-hero when she got done with this...

"I'll... think about it," she said.

"Well, that's about it for the presentations," Dr. Velchiek said. "Did you have any other questions?"

It turns out that she did. The conversation lasted another hour or so, as Erin came up with question after question.

How long was she going to be in Ponyworld? As long as it took but no longer than a few months.

What if they couldn't bring her back? That wasn't even possible, she was assured. As long as they had the equipment and the harmonics wavelength, they could tune into Ponyworld and, eventually, find her, using the implants she had in her new pony body.

What if something happened, and she ended up dead or worse than dead, either from the procedure or from other unforeseen circumstances? In that case, her parents would be informed, and, if she was still alive, she would be cared for as best as they were able to do for the rest of her life. Also, she would be remembered as a hero.

What kinds of things could she discuss with the ponies? Could she mention humans? Under no circumstances was she to mention humans, or the plans to migrate the human population to Ponyworld. Her mission was not diplomatic, it was to gather information. That may change, she was told, but it wasn't up to her to bring up the subject without authorization.

When would the actual... ponification process, for lack of a better word, take place? At the end of the week, in about four day's time.

Finally, the meeting wrapped up. Dr. Velchiek told her to study up on the information on the tablet she was given, and she was reminded once again not to share the information on it with anyone who wasn't currently in the room, or Dr. Edwards, if she thought she could get a civil word out of him.

Once again, Dr. Velchiek escorted her back to the dorm she was staying in, the whole way heaping praise on her for her bravery and courage, telling her that she would be remembered as a hero for as long as humanity survived.

"So, it's important that we make sure that humanity survives, right?" he said, laughing as they approached the door. Erin joined in, laughing weakly, feeling completely overwhelmed and in shock.

Dr. Velchiek took her hand in both of his, and shook it solemnly.

"This is important work, Erin. You'll see. You're doing a great service to your species, and I thank you, most sincerely."

Erin managed to mumble something in return, and then stumbled through the guarded door back into the dorms. Richard and Adam were still sitting on the couch, though now they were watching a football game on one of the big screens in the room. Adam grabbed the remote and muted it.

"Wow," he said, "I wasn't expecting to see you again, at least as a human. Aren't you supposed to be a pony now? Or did you chicken out?"

"I didn't chicken out!" she said, as Richard sniggered. Honestly, they were supposed to be college students, scientists in training. Did they have to act like her little brothers? "It's going to take a few days for them to get ready, and in the meanwhile, I have to study!"

"Oh, ok, fine." He stood up and walked over to her. "Erin, I'm sorry I made fun of you. I really, honestly think this is an amazingly brave thing you're doing. Crazy, but brave." He held out his hand and, after a moment's hesitation, Erin shook it.

"There are about eight rooms here, all pretty good sized. No doubt they were hoping for a lot more in the way of volunteers, but we're the only ones they got. Go ahead and find the room with your stuff in it, they moved it all in while we were stuffing our faces with cake earlier. And, if you don't like the room they gave you, go ahead and move into any of the empty ones."

"Sounds good. Um... Thanks, Adam."

"No problem," he said, waving as he walked back to the couch. Erin went to look for her room, and heard the volume come back on for the football game. She found her room on the third try, one of the doors being locked, which she guessed belonged either to Richard or Adam. The room itself was, as Adam had said, very large. There were four single beds in it, a large video screen on one wall, and a desk by each bed. Her belongings were stacked by the foot of one of the beds, and Erin decided on a whim to claim that bed as her own. Suddenly exhausted beyond rational thought from the stress brought about by the day's events, she flopped down into the bed, intending to rest just for a moment.

She was sound asleep less than a minute later.

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The next few days passed by faster than she'd expected while Erin tried her best to focus on the materials presented. She watched every video multiple times, trying to get a feel for how the ponies interacted with

each other. It seemed really relaxed and casual. She read the reports, noting with interest that the makeup of the air was similar to Earth's almost to an astonishing degree. Gravity was slightly weaker, though, which might help to explain a little about why the winged ponies could fly.

She listened to the one audio snippet they had of ponies talking, over and over again. It was amazingly perfect English with no discernible accent. Just one pony, walking by, saying to another "and she makes the most amazing muffins I've ever eaten!"

Ok, so ponies baked, and apparently they had muffins. Pony bakers, who knew? That was definitely something she'd have to check out!

As the days passed, Dr. Fischer and Dr. Velchiek would pester her from time to time, asking her about the flank tattoo that she'd want. She went through the list of "approved" ones over and over again, but none of them really seemed to call out to her. She was on the verge of just picking one at random, when she decided to take a sanity break and just browse the internet for a while.

She had no access to email or social networking sites. That was all heavily regulated as soon as she came on board Project Harmonic's main compound. However, there were a few approved news sites that she was allowed to browse through. Figuring that this would be the last chance she had in a while to get caught up on current events, she started reading.

That's when it happened. She clicked on a link to a news story, and suddenly her screen filled up with a field full of sunflowers. The title of the article was "Our Vanishing Land". Erin read the first few lines of the article.

"As the Black Tide continues its seemingly unstoppable march across our planet, and our government seems powerless to stop it, more and more people are clamoring for an escape route. As they should, since protecting humanity's survival is of paramount importance. But what of our forests and plains? Our lakes, parks and fields? Those are doomed to vanish, consumed by the Tide in the single largest multi-species extinction event ever to have occurred on our planet."

"As plans advance for the possible evacuation of the human race, are any plans being made to save our precious plant and animal species? We're talking today to Doctor Anne Richter, head of the Conservation Committee..."

Erin stopped reading, and returned her attention to the sunflowers. They looked so vital, so alive, growing in a vast field that seemingly stretched all the way to the horizon. This field, along with everything else on the planet, would soon be wiped out by the Black Tide. Intellectually, she had known that for years. But looking at this field, she felt a throb of cold despair in her chest. Nothing she could do could save this field of flowers. It would be consumed by the Tide, like everything else.

Something moved in Erin's heart, then. She may not be able to save *this* field, but sunflowers would grow again. Her work with Project Harmonics would make sure of that. She felt a growing determination, and a sense of rightness about that thought, and suddenly she knew what she wanted for her flank tattoo. It wasn't on the approved list, but she didn't care. It was going to be a sunflower, end of discussion.

She left the dorms, one of the ever-present guards falling in behind her as she walked down the brightly-lit hallways of the Harmonics compound, quickly reaching her destination of Dr. Fischer's office in the Project Ascent lab. After a short wait, she was escorted in, and was surprised to see both Hermann and Doctor Velchiek waiting for her in his office. They both greeted her warmly.

"Ah, my dear!" Dr. Velchiek said, pumping her hand with both of his, as was his habit. "Have you finally decided on your flank tattoo? You know we're starting the process tomorrow!"

"Yes, Dr. Velchiek, I have..."

"Excellent! What did you pick? The corn? Perhaps the wheat stalks?"

"No," she said, then held up the tablet with its field of sunflowers. "I want this."

The two scientists exchanged a glance.

"Well, it's not on the approved list, my dear," Dr. Velchiek began. Erin shook her head and cut him off.

"I don't care. It's going to be a sunflower. It just... feels right. This article, and this picture, it moved me. It hit me, when I looked at this picture. This field may be gone in a few years' time, but a new field can be planted. And it can be just as beautiful as the original, if not more so. To me, this picture means hope, and it means renewal. Everything that Harmonics represents to me. You said to trust my intuition? Well, my intuition says it's got to be this."

"Well, it seems appropriate enough," said Dr. Fischer. "After all, plants are pretty common, and I don't

recall seeing another pony with a sunflower, which was the primary criterion for the initial selection of flank tattoos."

Dr. Velchiek considered for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well, my dear. If it's a sunflower you want, then it's a sunflower you'll get!"

"Oh, it is," Erin said, nodding vigorously. "And, if you don't mind, I have another suggestion, regarding the name of this particular project. I seem to remember you weren't too pleased with 'Project Insertion'? Well, how about 'Project Sunflower'? For hope, and for renewal, and to remind people what's at stake."

Dr. Velchiek stared at her for a moment, then started boozing with laughter. "That... is an excellent suggestion. 'Project Sunflower' it is!"

They talked for a bit longer about the next day's upcoming events. Erin knew it all by heart, of course. She was to be here, ready to go, by 10:00 sharp. She'd be allowed to send a last letter to her parents, omitting certain details, of course, which would be sent as soon as she entered the nutrient bath in the Ascent labs. Then, in approximately two weeks, she'd awaken in a new body and undergo training in how to use it. Then, when she was ready, she'd be sent through the first available doorway they were able to make, and take her first steps into Ponyworld.

Erin figured it was too late to back out now, even though the thought had occurred to her more than once over the last few days. At the very least, picking out her flank tattoo had made her feel more comfortable with the decision, as if she were taking some control over her destiny.

Finally, she went back to her room. Richard and Adam were there, of course, playing video games and loudly trash-talking each other. Erin decided to take the rest of the night off, and asked if she could join them. After all, she had all the information on that tablet practically memorized by now. She was as prepared as she could be, apart from still being human.

After a few hours of playing around, she decided to go to bed. She was pretty sure that she was too worked up about tomorrow's events to sleep. She lay down anyway.

It turned out she was right. It took her almost three hours to fall asleep.

Her alarm woke her up at 8:30 the next morning. Grumpily, she shut it off. She'd had nowhere near enough sleep and was feeling groggy. She made her way into her personal bathroom and showered, then got dressed in her most comfortable jeans and a sweater that had her high-school mascot on it. The mustangs. She'd never made that connection before, and now she found it oddly funny.

She exited the room and found Adam in the kitchen, cooking away.

"Ah, good morning," he said. "How do you like your eggs?"

"You're cooking for me?" she asked, surprised.

"Seems like the least I can do. Today's your last day as a human, right? At least for a while? I wanted to do something nice for you before you left."

"Oh... you don't have to—"

"Come on, please? I've already gotten started. Besides, you're kinda my hero for doing this."

"Sheesh," she said, blushing, "Laying it on a little thick there, aren't you? Scrambled, then."

"Scrambled it is! I can do scrambled. In fact, I'm a natural when it comes to scrambling eggs!"

They talked about small things while he cooked. Where they were born and raised, what their families were like, where they each went to school. Eventually, breakfast was served. Scrambled eggs, ham, toast with grape jam. Erin stared at it for a moment, realizing that this was the last meal she'd eat as a human for, most likely, months.

"Is everything okay?" Adam asked. "It doesn't look that bad, does it?"

"No, no, it looks good," Erin said, shaking herself out of it. "It was very sweet of you to cook for me, thank you."

"Not a problem. I really like y— er... cooking." He looked down at his own plate, and Erin noticed with a shocked thrill that he seemed to be blushing. A thrill, and a slight bit of amused annoyance. Now is when he starts opening up? The morning she's going to become a pony? Wonderful timing!

Erin smiled, then dug into her meal. The eggs were a little rubbery. The toast was slightly burnt. It was

one of the most delicious meals she'd ever eaten.

Richard came out of his room as they were finishing up, yawning widely. "Hey, where's *my* breakfast?"

"Make your own breakfast, you lazy jerk," said Adam, good-naturedly.

Richard started whining, in the overly dramatic fake way that he had when he thought he was being funny. Adam retorted that if he wanted to have breakfast made for him, he'd have to go volunteer to be a pony as well. Erin smiled as the boys fake-fought for a while. It was distracting her from the clock, which was good.

When it reached 9:50, she decided that it was time to go. She said her goodbyes to Richard and Adam, both of whom hugged her. Though, Adam hugged her slightly longer and whispered "Stay safe" into her ear as they separated. Erin felt like crying a little as she left. She was no good with goodbyes. Waving one last time, she turned and walked out the door.

Chapter 4: To be a pony

Erin groaned and opened her eyes. Too bright. She closed them again.

She felt nauseous, like the room was slowly spinning and tilting. She also felt completely exhausted, but somehow too wired to sleep. Sounds, smells, everything was too sharp, too... present. The assault to her senses was too much. She wanted to be sick, but there didn't seem to be anything in her stomach. She smelled disinfectant, soap, people. Hospital smells. Beeps and whistles and pings. Hospital noises.

Deduction: She was in a hospital. She hoped the accident hadn't been too bad. Oddly, she was having a hard time really caring.

Probably the sedatives, she thought.

She tried opening her eyes again. Nope. Still too bright. She closed them again. After a while, she drifted back to sleep.

Odd dreams. Disjointed, random images flashing by. There were ponies, galloping across a plain. Birds flying, and she was one of them. No, she was a doll. And some horrible child dressed in surgeon's scrubs was getting ready to take her apart.

That last one was *very* unpleasant.

There was no time, that she could tell. Eventually, she floated up out of the depths of sleep like a dumpling rising from the depths of soup.

Well, I feel better, she thought, but my similes sure do suck.

She heard footsteps approach her bed. She opened her eyes. It was Dr. Fischer. He was saying something she couldn't quite make out. He looked so serious. He was too nice to be so serious. She tried to think of something funny to say to make him smile.

"Erin isn't in right now. Please leave a message after the beep. Beeep!" Only, her mouth wasn't working right. So what came out instead was "Mumble bub mumble blugh... Beeep!" She started giggling. It was too ridiculous.

"Ah... I'll come back later, Erin, okay? But just so you know, the operation was a perfect success. I'll see you later. Get some more rest, okay?"

She tried to assure him that she was fine, that it was just that her mouth was weird and her eyes were too heavy but that she was perfectly fine, perfectly fine. Instead there was more mumbling, and possibly some drool, in the middle of which she fell asleep again.

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Erin slowly became aware of the fact that she was awake. She was in what looked like a hospital room. And she could *kind of* feel her body, but she couldn't really move it. That... was worrisome.

She blinked slowly and tried to look around, but her head didn't want to move properly. Plus, it felt way too heavy in the wrong places, and way too light in the others.

I suppose I'm a pony now, she thought. Maybe it was the remaining sedatives in her system. Maybe she had just reached the point where nothing really shocked her anymore. But she simply had a hard time caring. She was content to just lay there, feeling mellow and comfortable.

Eventually, she started humming. A happy little tune she remembered from her childhood, but she couldn't remember where it was from. Then she couldn't remember how it went. She decided to freestyle it. Then she thought she'd make up some lyrics and sing along.

"Ohhhh! There once was a girl who wanted to be a pony, fiddley-aye, diddly-aye, ay. She went to the doctor and gave him some mone-ay, fiddley-aye, diddley-aye, ay. He said to the girl, I'll make you a pony, but it turns out the doctor was just such a phony. So the girl stayed a girl but she lost all her mone-ay, fiddley-aye, diddly-aye, ay! Oh, hi there. How are you?"

"That was a lovely song, dear. How are you feeling?" The nurse was a pretty older lady with lovely red hair and a sweet smile.

"Oh, I'm sure that was a pretty crappy song, but thank you! And, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm a little loopy but I'm fine. Could you check to see if my legs fell off? I can't seem to find them."

"That would be the sedatives, dear. We have to make sure you don't thrash around and hurt yourself."

"Ah, that would explain a lot. Thanks, um... what's your name?"

"Jane. And your name is Erin?"

"Yup! And I really just love your hair, Jane. It's so red!"

"Yours is lovely too, dear. Why don't you try to get some sleep? I'll turn off this sedative drip now. The next time you wake up, you should be able to actually get out of bed if you want."

"Oh, that would be lovely. I feel like I've spent days just lying in this bed. I'd love to go... for... a walk..." and Erin was asleep again.

Jane left, grateful that she didn't have to tell the young pony how long she'd actually been asleep in that bed.

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"Let me get this straight." Erin said, scowling. "Converting me to a pony took two weeks, like expected... but then I was stuck in this bed for another month?"

Dr. Fischer looked embarrassed.

"Well, you see... It took longer for you to finish... well, I guess 'cooking' would be an appropriate analogy!"

"No, it wouldn't," Erin said.

"-and your body wanted to reject the implants that Doctor Edwards provided."

"Big surprise, there."

"-but we finally got it all worked out! Everything should be working just fine now!"

"Should'?!"

"Er... yes. You can try getting up, if you like."

"You'll have to unstrap me, first."

"Of course, of course! We just wanted to make sure you didn't hurt yourself. Keep in mind, you're pretty strong now for such a relatively small creature."

Erin winced slightly as Dr. Rowe, the Chief of Medicine himself, began unstrapping her.

"Please, don't call me a 'creature', Doc. I feel weird enough about this already."

Doctor Rowe, whom Erin hadn't worked with much recently, finally got the last leather restraint off of her leg. Erin levered her head up off the bed, still feeling woozy, and looked down at her body.

That might have been a mistake. A small bubble of hysteria started rising in her brain, gaining both size and momentum as she looked at these limbs that were hers and not hers at the same time.

Focus on the sunflower, she thought, and so she did. The sunflower on her flank had turned out beautifully. Even though it was made up of tinted hairs, it looked almost real. More like a photograph that had been grafted to her flank, rather than a tattoo. It looked almost too real. The scientists had done a very good job with it.

She felt herself calming down, so she started looking at the rest of her body. Light brown coat, okay. Kind of boring, compared to the bright colors she had seen on the Ponyworld ponies, but that's fine. It looks nice, and it complements the sunflower tattoo really well. Her legs were well muscled, but sleek, and suddenly she felt herself starting to panic again, as she stared at these unfamiliar legs. She returned her attention to the sunflower until she had a chance to calm down.

Ok, she decided after a few more minutes. Back to the assessment, and stop being a baby about this.

She glanced down each leg, and then tried to move each one individually. She was able to get them to twitch in response, which caused another few moments of sunflower-gazing until she calmed down.

"Are you alright, Erin?" Dr. Rowe asked her.

"I'm... I'm fine." she replied, taking her eyes off of her body. "It's just extremely freaky, that's all. I'm... it's like my brain doesn't accept that these are my limbs and this is my body, now."

"That's to be expected," Dr. Rowe said. "Take your time with it, and try to keep calm."

Erin nodded, grateful for the man's understanding. She looked back down at her body again. Hooves. Okay, she had hooves now. No big deal. She only had to look at the sunflower for a few seconds this time before she could go back and study the hooves in more detail.

The hooves looked delicate, almost dainty. They were a slightly darker brown than her coat, so close in color that it was hard to tell where her... ankle? No, pastern. It was difficult to tell where her pastern ended and the hoof began.

Not really thinking about it, she brought her hoof up to her face. The joint bent much like her arm would have, which surprised her somewhat. She amused herself briefly by touching the bottom of her hoof to her muzzle. It tickled, and she started to giggle a little bit.

"Erin? Everything alright?"

"Oh, yeah... it's just... my leg shouldn't even be able to bend this way! Plus, the hairs on my muzzle tickle a little bit... this is all just so weird."

"Well, remember," Dr. Fischer said, "*we did* design your limbs to be very flexible, like the Ponyworld ponies. You should have a range of motion similar to how your arms worked before."

"Really?" Erin started stretching her forelimbs around, rotating them in circles, waving them, and just generally moving them however she pleased. It was still pretty freaky (quick, calming glance at the sunflower tattoo) but her fascination with her new body was starting to outweigh the sense of wrongness she felt looking at it.

After a few minutes of hoof-waving, she decided to try actually getting out of bed. That was a bit trickier than she had expected. Her entire center of gravity had changed, plus the bed seemed a lot farther off the floor than she would have expected.

Finally, and with a little help from Dr. Rowe, she was standing, somewhat shakily, on her own four hooves. She noticed with some dismay that her eyes were about on the level of the others' navels. *That* would take some getting used to. She had been shorter than average, as a human, but she still hadn't been abnormally short. Being this much smaller than everyone else was going to take some major adjustments.

Until I go to Ponyworld, at least, she thought.

She was pretty wobbly, though. She kept trying to compensate for where she *thought* her center of gravity would be, rather than where it actually was. She tried concentrating on just maintaining balance, but that made things worse. Finally, she closed her eyes and stopped trying to think about standing at all, just letting her body take over.

That seemed to work. Much like her human body, the pony body automatically adjusted itself to stay upright, without any

conscious effort on her part. Instead of thinking about standing, she instead focused on the feeling of her hooves on the ground, and the feeling of air moving over her body. She'd thought that being all fuzzy would cut down on that sensation, but instead, it seemed to heighten it, as even the most minuscule current of air brushed against thousands of hairs all over her body.

Hmm... *all* over her body. She pondered that for a moment, then suddenly a thought occurred to her. She stiffened up and immediately fell over on her side, then tried, unsuccessfully, to scramble back up on her hooves.

"Erin, calm down!" Dr. Rowe shouted, sounding extremely concerned by her evident panic and apparent seizure, "You're all right! Calm down! You're okay!"

"I'm not okay!" she wailed, "I'm naked!"

Both doctors burst into laughter at that, which had the calming effect of a bucket of ice water on Erin's nerves. She went from frantically embarrassed to embarrassed but pissed off in the blink of an eye.

"It's not funny! Get me some clothes, or something!" She glared at them as they ignored her completely. Dr. Rowe was at least attempting to straighten his face, but Dr. Fischer was leaning up against the wall, gasping for breath.

"It's *not* funny," she muttered, finally managing to get to her hooves. She stumbled her way over to the bed and tugged on one of the sheets with her mouth until it came loose, trying her best to drape it over herself. Instead, she collapsed on the floor again, and the sheet settled over her like a shroud.

"What's all the hullabaloo?" another voice asked. Erin peeked out from under her sheet and then groaned as Dr. Velchiek came walking into the room.

Great, another one, she thought.

Dr. Rowe had regained enough of his composure by this point to talk. "Well, you see, the thing is, Ms. Olsen is a bit embarrassed about... well, being in the altogether. Naked."

Oh, neat, Erin thought sourly, *it turns out ponies can blush!*

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Dr. Velchiek said sternly, "but this is no laughing matter. We're programmed from a very early age with a sense of propriety, women especially, and naturally she's going to be upset about this."

Erin felt a surge of gratitude as Dr. Velchiek lowered himself to one knee to be closer to her eye level. Erin peeked out at him from underneath her sheet.

"Still, though, and I'm sorry to say this," Dr. Velchiek said, "but you're just going to have to get used to it, my dear. Most of the ponies on Ponyworld don't seem to wear much in the way of clothing, and to fit in, you will also have to go without. Go without, and at least *look* like you're comfortable with it."

Somehow, the thought had never occurred to Erin. She'd been worried about the procedure, been worried about being a pony, worried about whether or not they'd be able to change her back, and definitely worried that she'd be shoved through a doorway between worlds fairly soon, but the thought that she'd be walking around basically nude had never occurred to her.

"Can't I just at least wear clothing for now?" she asked plaintively. "I mean, I've been through so many changes recently, can't you just give me that?"

Dr. Velchiek sighed, then shook his head.

"I am sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid that would turn out to be a rather crippling psychological crutch fairly quickly. Our team predicts that the next viable window we'd be able to use to send you over will happen in roughly three weeks' time. That gives us very little time to get you used to your new body, and to going without clothing. You may as well get used to it all at once."

"If it helps at all," Dr. Rowe said, "just remember that you're a pony now, and you are covered with fur. It's not like you're a naked human woman, you're a pony without clothes. Which, when you think of it, is actually pretty normal."

"Yeah, surprisingly enough, that doesn't help much at all," Erin said peevishly. Then she sighed. "Fine, I'll get up and try to start walking. But anyone who so much as makes a comment or laughs is getting bucked. And you *may* want to consider at about what level my hooves would be if I kicked backwards."

The three men all flinched simultaneously as the thought hit them, Erin smugly noticed. Then, with some effort, she struggled back up to her hooves. That much was getting easier, at least. Then, with a sigh, she stepped out from underneath the sheet, face burning with embarrassment.

"There we go!" said Dr. Velchiek, clapping his hands. "Oh, how amazing! You do look wonderful, my dear! I imagine you'll want to see a mirror?"

"I suppose so," Erin grumbled. Even those few steps she had just taken had seemed precarious and dangerous to her. Dr. Rowe was wheeling out a large, full-length mirror on a wheeled stand. He angled it towards her, and Erin found herself staring raptly at her own reflection.

A pony stared back at her. Definitely a pony; indistinguishable, as far as she could tell, from the ponies she had seen in the videos that Dr. Hanson had provided her before her change.

Her eyes were still green, but a deeper green than she had before. Almost a pine green. That was surprising. Somehow, she had expected that her eyes would stay mostly the same. Light brown coat, yes, she'd seen that before, but what she hadn't noticed, because she was laying on it, was her new tail. A deep auburn in color, it complemented the brown of her hide quite beautifully, and matched the sunflower on her flank as well. Her mane, the same auburn, was a tumbled mess on her head, lush and thick and incredibly tangled at the moment.

How am I supposed to brush that? she thought, worried.

All in all, she looked... cute. Like a pony. And not at all anything like she had before. None of her features had really translated across. The face that looked back at her now was a stranger's face. Her hair had been brown before, not auburn. Her eyes were a different color. There was nothing there at all that looked like her.

Somehow, she was disappointed. She thought she'd still be able to recognize her own face. Still, though, concerns about nudity were starting to feel a little silly. She was obviously not human, not anymore. Modesty just didn't seem to apply now.

She stood and stared for quite some time, angling her body this way and that, swishing her tail and moving her ears around. The freakiness of the situation, though strong, was rapidly fading, and the fascination was definitely on the rise.

Finally, she became aware once again of the three men in the room with her, and how she was wasting their time as she stared at herself in the mirror.

"Sorry about that... It's just... it's just so cool!" she said.

The three men all chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad you like it," said Dr. Velchiek. "Do you think we could start with a few exercises now? Start getting you used to your body? I'm thinking that we should start by teaching you to eat. Unless Dr. Rowe still has any concerns about your health?"

"No, she should be fine," he replied. "I've had plenty of time to monitor her vitals. Everything is ticking along nicely. Besides, it will be good to get some solids into her."

As he said that, Erin suddenly realized how extremely hungry she was. Her stomach grumbled loudly. Dr. Velchiek laughed his booming laugh.

"Well," he said, "that definitely seems to be a vote for 'get Erin something to eat'! Let's see if you can walk to the cafeteria!"

"The cafeteria? Aren't I supposed to be secret or something?"

"Oh, no concerns about that. You'll be staying in the scientist's compound now, and they've all been notified as to your change. You may get some stares, in fact I can pretty much guarantee that you will, but they've all been briefed."

"Ooo-kay," she said hesitantly, suddenly feeling stage fright. She tried walking, and stumbled almost immediately. Straightening herself out, she tried again, and this time nearly fell over.

"Erin, try this," said Dr. Rowe. "I've owned horses before, and they walk with the following gait: back left, front left, back right, front right. Try labeling those legs as one, two, three and four, then counting it off as you move."

She had a bit more success with that, counting silently under her breath. After a few false starts, she was finally moving at a slow but respectable pace down the hallway. She was so focused that she didn't notice any of the nurses or other personnel stopping to stare at her.

"One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four, one..." she was frowning as she concentrated on the order of moving her legs.

"Very good, Erin! You're doing wonderfully!" Dr. Velchiek said suddenly, startling her.

"...three, two, no, dangit!" she said, collapsing in a heap. She groaned and managed to pull herself up again. She reflected ruefully that at least she was getting plenty of practice falling down and standing back up, she barely stumbled at all that time.

"Ah, so sorry my dear! I'll keep my mouth shut this time. Please, continue."

Erin nodded, and started counting again as she started walking once again.

In the distance, she could smell the food from the cafeteria. Her stomach rumbled again, and she unconsciously began hurrying her steps. After another twenty feet or so, she had stopped counting, and was just moving her legs. After thirty, the movement almost felt natural. Erin marveled at that, then remembered what Dr. Fischer had said about enhanced muscle memory.

I hope everything is this easy to learn, she thought, walking more confidently. At least, confident until she walked into the lunchroom, when all conversation stopped and all eyes turned towards her. Erin had never felt so on the spot and exposed before in her life.

"Um..." she managed to say, when suddenly one of the scientists in the room stood up from his seat and started clapping. Several others joined him, and soon the entire cafeteria was applauding and whistling their appreciation to her. The blush she managed now put all her previous ones to shame with its sun-like intensity.

She managed a weak smile, but more than anything wanted to bolt back to her room. Only her lack of confidence in her walking abilities kept her rooted to the spot. Dr. Velchiek must have noted her discomfort, because he raised both hands and called for quiet.

"Thank you, thank you everyone! I'm sure Erin is quite happy at your approval, but right now she is feeling just a little overwhelmed... not to mention hungry! If you would all be so kind as to give her some space and as much privacy as you can, considering this is an open area, I'm sure she would appreciate it!"

The applause and well-wishing died down. People waved at her, then returned to their meals, though she caught most of them glancing up occasionally in apparent fascination. She tried to put them out of her mind, and concentrated on walking towards an open table that Dr. Velchiek indicated.

"That way, my dear. I'll go grab a few things that I think you may like. Please make yourself comfortable over there, if you can."

Erin nodded, and slowly made her way over to the table. Her ears swiveled madly on her head as she heard people whispering around her. Talking about her. Still blushing furiously, she tried to shut them out, and simply concentrate on walking.

Finally, she reached the table, and realized that she was going to have a problem. Her chin was about level with the table top, which meant that it would be tricky to eat, but the chairs weren't designed for ponies to sit in. She considered it for a moment, then pulled one of the chairs back slightly by hooking a hoof around a chair leg, then she tried climbing up into the seat.

Doctor Rowe offered to help her, but she waved him off. She had to learn to do things for herself, after all. After a few attempts, she managed to get her rump and rear hooves up on the seat. She sat down on her haunches with her front hooves up on the table top. She almost felt normal and very pleased with herself, until she heard several people in her unintended and nearly forgotten audience all go "d'awww...." at the same time.

She buried her face in her forearms and could have died of embarrassment right then and there. Fortunately, the food that Doctor Velchiek was bringing back provided a nice distraction. He had a platter that had a variety of raw vegetables, including carrots and celery, broccoli, and cauliflower. He also had some apples, several pastries, some ice cream, and what appeared to be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He also had a large plastic tumbler of water. Erin eyed that warily, not sure how she'd manage to drink from it.

"I know you could eat meat if you wanted to, my dear, but I'm afraid the thought of watching a pony eating a hamburger gives me the heebie-jeebies, so I hope you don't mind the more vegetarian options I brought for you."

"That's fine!" she said, laughing tensely. All the stares were putting her on edge, so she concentrated on eating. The carrots were delicious. As was the celery, which was a vegetable that she really never appreciated before. She moved her way through the vegetables, picking each morsel up with her lips, and then passing them back into her mouth for chewing.

The apples were a bit more complex. She didn't feel like eating the core, which meant that she'd have to hold it and take bites out of it, rather than shoving the whole thing in her mouth. She carefully took one between her forehooves and bit into it. It was delicious, and the juice ran down her chin. She didn't care, as she turned the apple carefully and took another bite. Once she got the hang of it, she rapidly finished off the first apple, then moved on to the other two, finishing them in the same fashion.

The pastries took a bit more delicacy. When she tried to pick up the first one, it simply crumbled to pieces before she could get it to her mouth. With the second one, she used her right hoof to nudge the pastry onto the surface of her left hoof wall, using it like a plate. She brought her left hoof up to her mouth and took a bite. Having got the knack for it, she finished off the rest of the pastries in record time.

She was still pretty hungry, though. What next, peanut butter and jelly, or ice cream? She noted that the ice cream was melting at an alarming rate, so she decided to eat that next.

Unfortunately, handling a spoon with hooves was not an easy feat, even when those hooves are on limbs which are modified to be especially nimble. In order to hold the spoon, she had to press it between her forehooves, which was difficult to maneuver. She managed to get the spoon into the ice cream, but really only managed to make a mess, flinging melting gobbets of it all over the table.

Finally, frustrated, she just lowered her head to the bowl and took a big bite of ice cream.

"Aaaaagh! Ice cream headache, ow, ow ow!"

Rubbing at a temple with her hoof, Erin decided that she was done with the ice cream and moved on to the sandwich. After the practice with the other foods, she managed to pick up the sandwich with only minimal squishing, and ate the whole thing in a few big gulps.

Finally satisfied with food, she now realized that the peanut butter had left her pretty thirsty. Erin looked at the tumbler full of water cautiously, then managed to pick it up delicately with her hooves. She put her lips to the rim... and then realized that she had no way at all to tip the glass back and pour the water into her mouth. Putting the water back down for the moment, she considered the possibilities. Could she balance it on the table and use that to tip it back? It may work, but she would probably end up spilling.

Erin had another idea. Once again, she used her hooves on either side to raise the plastic glass of water. Then she clamped on to it with her teeth, then shifted her hooves around to the bottom, and then pushed up. Cool water poured into her mouth, and she gratefully swallowed. She downed the whole thing, then set the tumbler back on the table top, grinning in triumph.

"Well, my dear, I'm very impressed. You've come a long way in a very short time! Soon, we'll have you doing all sorts of pony things just like a Ponyworld native!" Doctor Velchiek laughed at that, and Erin smiled at him. She was pretty proud of herself, figuring out how to eat like that so quickly. She also felt a little foolish, being so proud of something she had first mastered when she was still in diapers.

"Did you want any more food, my dear?"

"Actually... what I really want is a bath. I feel pretty gross right now, honestly. And then I want to try brushing my hair and mane. None of the ponies I saw on Ponyworld looked anywhere near this disheveled, so obviously they groom themselves. I'd better figure out how to do that, don't you think?"

"That's an excellent idea! Doctor Rowe, would you be kind enough to take Erin to her new quarters? I have to go talk to the Harmonics team to see if we can verify when the next likely window will be."

"Absolutely. Please come with me, Erin."

Erin slid off of her chair and started following him out. She became aware of more whispering behind her, so she stopped at the entrance to the cafeteria, turned back, and waved briefly with a big smile on her face.

"Later, everyone!" she said, and most of the people there replied cheerfully back.

Erin turned away, smiling, and walked behind Doctor Rowe. She had a feeling that she might like being a pony, after all.

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"Aaargh!" Erin screamed in frustration, "I hate being a pony!"

Once again, the comb had gotten stuck in her wet mane, caught up in one of the many, many tangles she was trying to work out. She fumbled with it, trying to get a grip on it with her forehooves, and then tried to get hold of it with her teeth. Neither worked, as the comb simply became more and more entangled in her out-of-control mane.

"Fine, stay in there, stupid comb!" she yelled, then sank sulkily into the bathwater until only her nostrils and the top of her head were above water. She was contemplating just asking someone to cut her mane and tail really short when there was a sudden knock at her bathroom door. Modesty, honed by years of instinct, made her shrink back in the tub before she remembered that she was a pony, and therefore not really naked.

"Er... who is it?"

"Hi, Erin! It's Maggie! Can I come in?"

Erin breathed a sigh of relief. "Sure, come on in."

The door opened and Maggie walked in. She stopped abruptly, staring at the mostly-submerged pony with her knotted-up mane. "Oh, my, you look simply *adorable*!"

"Um, thanks, I guess." Erin blushed. "What can I help you with?"

"Paul asked me to stop by and run a timeline past you, to see if you were okay with it. I've also brought some more video footage that we've managed to take since you started this process. Nothing much new, just more of the same things, but we thought that we should run it by you."

"Oh, that's fine then. Sure, go ahead."

"Before I start that, though, did you want some help with that?" she asked, indicating the hopelessly-tangled comb.

"Oh, yeah. I mean, if you wouldn't mind," Erin replied, straightening up so her head was completely clear of the water. She was grateful to have someone else around who could deal with the quite probably demon-possessed comb.

Maggie smiled, and started to untangle the mane around the comb as she talked.

"You know, I'm kind of surprised that they just gave you regular grooming objects. I wouldn't think ponies would have items like this."

"You don't think they'd have combs?"

"What I meant is," Maggie said, as she started working the comb free, "I'd imagine that pony grooming tools would be, of necessity, things that ponies could use easily with hooves. Maybe with some kind of strap that you can put on, so you don't have to fumble trying to hold it with both hooves while you work. Ah, got it!"

The comb came loose, and Maggie started running it through her mane as she kept talking. Erin closed her eyes and sighed in contentment. It felt pretty good.

"You know, when I was a little girl, I always wanted a pony," Maggie said. "I mean, it's a common cliché, I know, but I did. We didn't have enough money, though, when I was growing up. Now I have enough money, and I don't have the time. So, I guess what I'm saying is, thanks for letting me fulfill a childhood fantasy by combing out your mane for you."

"Believe me, it's completely my pleasure." Erin grinned back at her, and they shared a laugh.

"Well, regarding when it will be time to actually head over to Ponyworld, we predict that we have roughly twenty days before we have a window between worlds that will be stable enough to push you through. There are several less stable ones before that which would probably work just as well, but we'd rather wait for the best shot that we've got."

"I really appreciate that," Erin said, and Maggie smiled briefly.

"What that means," she continued, "is that we have to make sure that we've trained you and gotten you used to your new body as soon as possible. We've designed a number of tests and challenges for you, which we will be running you through starting tomorrow. Also, we're going to restrict your food as closely as possible to actual pony foods that we've seen them eat."

Erin grimaced as Maggie tugged on a particularly stubborn snarl.

"We'll also need to do a complete run-down of your cybernetics. We've already verified that the record functions are working, we did that while you were asleep. Also, the data transfer works just fine. We still need to check to make sure that the two-way communications works, though. Also, we need to make sure that you can access the enhanced functions of your eyes and ears."

"Mmm-hmmm..." Erin said, relaxing as the older woman continued to comb away.

Maggie stopped talking for a while and concentrated on the grooming, and Erin was on the point of dozing when Maggie suddenly put the comb down and declared her mane well-combed and snarl-free.

"Climb on out of that tub," she said, "and I'll get your tail, too."

"Oh, yeah."

Erin clambered out awkwardly of the tub and stood there dripping on the tile floor of her bathroom. Maggie grabbed a towel and helped to dry her off, then picked the comb up again. Erin sighed at the ease with which the older woman managed these once-familiar chores.

"I really, *really* miss my hands," she said, and Maggie laughed again.

Once Erin was relatively dry, Maggie brought out a tablet and keyed up the videos that she wanted Erin to watch, propping the tablet up on the counter so Erin could watch comfortably while she had her tail combed.

Once again, she was watching the ponies of Ponyworld, only this time it seemed to be mostly younger ones. Colts and fillies were running around playing while being watched by a few smiling adults. Erin watched as most of the young ones played a game that seemed to involve one of them kicking a ball as hard as they could, then having the whole mob of them chase after it, only to have it kicked in another direction. There didn't seem to be any rules at all, just youngsters being young and having a fun time.

She smiled. Ponyworld really did seem idyllic. In some ways, she couldn't wait to go there. In others, of course, she was completely scared to death.

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Training was hard, at first, mostly due to Erin's impatience. There were many activities, like running, or picking things up, or writing, that she was used to taking for granted, having been able to do all these things most of her life. Being a pony, and not having hands, meant that she had to learn most of that all over again from scratch.

Trotting, cantering and galloping took a few days for her to pick up. Once she got it, though, it seemed second nature. That is, until they put her on an indoor obstacle course, and then she started over-thinking everything once again. For a few more days, she ended up either flat on her face or crumpled in a heap on the floor at the slightest provocation.

Manipulating things with her mouth and hooves took a lot longer. As the days went by, though, she rapidly started to learn how to use her hooves in ways she'd never thought of. For example, when it came to drinking, she was now able to balance the glass neatly with one hoof while tipping it back with the other. Even combing and brushing her mane and tail got to be much easier as time went by, in spite of the fact that the combs and brushes were still the ones made for humans.

She brushed her teeth by a simple method of pinning the tooth brush between her hooves. It still seemed odd to her that she was able to press the bottoms of her hooves together, but there was no doubt that it was definitely very useful that she could do so.

Writing was what got to her the most. She tried using her hooves at first, but that was far too clumsy. Instead, she ended up taking the pen in her mouth, clamping down with her teeth, and then moving it with her lips. It took days before her letters even started to look recognizable, and weeks before she could write legibly, though crudely.

All the while, they kept showing her new footage from Ponyworld as they collected it. They even managed to open a window in the middle of one of the towns, showing that ponies had shops and stalls, and apparently even money, as they exchanged small golden coins for various goods. Doctor Velchiek got a team going on minting up some gold coins of roughly the same shape and size of the ones they saw exchanged.

Erin was glad about that, but also a little nervous. Didn't that count as counterfeiting? She didn't want to find out if ponies had a jail! She resolved that she would use the Earth-made coinage only as a last resort. Maybe she could find a job, or something.

The days ticked down. Erin first became competent at the obstacle course, and with her day-to-day activities, and then she began to excel. She was still a little clumsy sometimes, but she was steadily improving.

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It was on a Thursday, twenty-one days after she woke up as a pony, that the window was scheduled to be opened.

Erin stood on the platform in the clean room, heart thundering, as she fidgeted on her hooves. She was wearing saddlebags filled with various objects: combs and brushes for her mane and tail, her toothbrush, a couple of blankets made of thickly quilted cotton, some raw fruits and vegetables, and a bag full of little golden coins with a string that she could use to hang it around her neck, if she chose.

She had been waiting in this tiny room for hours, waiting as her nerves slowly wound up, because they weren't sure exactly when the window could be opened other than "soon". She'd been put through a purifying process to cleanse her as much as possible of any bacteria, viruses or fungi that she might have had living on her body. She'd insisted on that much, not wanting to carry some horrific disease or invasive species into Ponyworld.

Still, even though she knew she couldn't, she yearned to leave the clean room and go for a quick run. Or get something to eat, or read, or do anything, anything at all to take her mind off of the fact that, at any second, a very rare two-way window would open up, and she would step through to another world. She should have brought a book, she should have brought something in to distract her, she should have—

"This is it, Erin!" Dr. Velchiek's voice suddenly boomed over the intercom, making her squeak in sudden terror as she jumped straight up off the ground. "The window is about to open!"

She wondered if it was too late to ask to use the bathroom.

The emitters began to hum as they warmed up, rapidly rising in volume until Erin's teeth started to vibrate. Suddenly, there was an incredibly bright flash, and Erin screwed her eyes shut. She opened them again as a gust of warm air brushed across her cheek.

Green, inviting and peaceful, Ponyworld stood directly in front of her. A few steps, and she'd be in.

Even at this late stage she was terrified of taking those steps. A whole different world. The prospect was exciting... but also terrifying. She gulped nervously. For a moment, she wavered, her nerves frayed, and she considered backing out. For a horrible moment, the only thing that kept her from doing so was the shame she'd feel facing all those scientists and technicians, knowing she'd failed, knowing she'd let humanity down.

And suddenly, she remembered the sunflowers. She wasn't just an explorer. She was someone who was looking for hope. Not just for her own species, but for the playful, innocent ponies that she'd grown to love watching over the last few weeks. They needed her too, even though they didn't know it yet. It was up to her, really, to determine if humanity was going to come to this new world in partnership as friends, or as ravagers, like a swarm of locusts.

Determination welling up within her, she took the first steps into a whole new world.

Author's Notes:

Some fanart for this chapter:

Nocara:

Upstream reported 404 Not Found

Lightfalls:



Auto-pencil:

FINE, STAY IN THERE,
STUPID COMB!



Chapter 5: First steps

Erin stepped forward through the doorway, bracing herself as the feeling of the ground underneath her switched from concrete to grass. The dim light of the lab gave way to natural sunlight as she looked around with her heart thundering in her chest. This was it! Ponyworld! The location she was in looked similar to the gentle hills of the first pony picnic she had seen, though the rich green grasses were long enough to reach halfway up her legs and were dotted with colorful wildflowers.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that there were no native ponies around. It would be awfully hard to be inconspicuous if any of the local ponies had seen her step out of a hole in the air. The environment around her seemed just as peaceful and idyllic as she had hoped it would be. It was warm, though not oppressively so, the Ponyworld sun gently warming the soft hairs of her coat as she stood in this new world.

A mild breeze rustled the grass and the hairs of her mane and tail. The air itself smelled... clean. Fresh. It reminded her of the fields behind her aunt's farm in Nebraska, far away from the smell of cities and humanity.

She closed her eyes and breathed deep, some of the tension melting from her as she let the alien sun warm her body. Insects hummed in the air, birds sang in the distance, but otherwise it was pretty much silent. This place was so peaceful and serene, it was like—

"ERIN!" a voice bellowed suddenly in her ear.

She screamed, nearly jumping half out of her skin in shock.

"ERIN, CAN YOU HEAR ME?" the voice continued.

"Yes, Dr. Velchiek, but can you turn the volume down? You nearly blasted my head off with that!"

"OH, SORRY! How's this?" The voice coming through the implanted speaker in her ear lowered to a much more acceptable volume.

"Better," she said. "I'm here, in Ponyworld. It's amazing!"

She bounced on her hooves, giddy with excitement.

"I can see that, my dear. We're getting very good data! We've got the transmitter going full stream right now, gathering live data from all of your implants. So far, so good! The information is coming through beautifully. It's as we expected, Ponyworld is astonishingly Earth-like!"

"Yeah, it's really beautiful here. I don't think I've ever seen grass this green before!"

"Speaking of that, Erin," Dr. Velchiek said, sounding eager, "If you wouldn't mind, could you take a little nibble?"

"Um, a 'nibble'?" Erin replied, confused. "You mean... you want me to eat some of this grass?"

"Very much so, if you don't mind! The sensors in your stomach will give us data on the chemical and biological makeup of it as you eat it!"

"Ugh... Well, I suppose that's what I'm here for..."

With a sigh, she lowered her head and gave the grass between her hooves a tentative bite, then started chewing.

"Hmm... Actually, it's not as bad as I thought it would be." She said before swallowing the few blades of grass she had in her mouth.

"Glad to hear it! Erin, as you see new plant life, I strongly encourage you to take a sample of it. The data would be invaluable! And remember, even if it tastes awful, it can't hurt you. You can eat nearly anything organic, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Hey, I think I'll eat this flower, now. It looks like a daisy." She chomped down on it and started chewing. It was actually kind of tasty.

"That's the spirit! I'm going to close the doorway, now."

"Wait, what?!" Erin said in a sudden panic, spraying half-chewed daisy from her mouth as she whirled around just in time to see the Harmonics lab behind her blip out of existence. She felt a cold wave of panic wash over her. She was stuck here, now. No way back, for better or worse, completely cut off from—

"Erin, can you still hear me?" Dr. Velchiek asked.

"Augh! I mean... yeah, I can hear you." That was the second time he'd managed to scare her! "I thought you closed the connection?"

"I closed the two-way doorway between worlds, yes. But I wanted to see if one of the smaller ones would be enough to allow us to still communicate. It's less obtrusive, that way."

"Oh, I see."

"Yes, see, the wavelengths between worlds matching up to such an extent that we can create a large doorway between worlds is very rare, and it also requires a lot of energy. Smaller ones, like the one I'm simulating now, come along maybe once or twice a week. I was afraid we'd be waiting weeks before we could collect more data from you!"

"Oh. Well. Yay, I guess?" Erin said, still feeling a little abandoned.

"Why don't you wander around, my dear, and see what you can see. We've got some time before this window closes, and I want to be sure that we utilize it as much as possible."

"Oh, sure. Of course."

Erin tried to put out of her mind how exposed, alone and vulnerable she felt on this alien world as she began trotting across the landscape, picking a direction randomly. She looked around herself in fascination. This really didn't *look* any different from Earth. Small hills, the occasional copse of trees, a large, spooky-looking forest off in the distance... Well, okay, the creepy forest was a little different, but otherwise it was a *lot* like where she grew up.

As she walked, Dr. Velchiek would stop her and ask her to take a bite out of some local plant life. In short order, she had eaten another daisy, some dandelions, some thistles, and a wild rose, being very careful not to eat the thorns. It was during this roaming vegetarian smorgasbord that she heard the sound of running water in the distance and decided to make her way towards it. She finally found a small stream that gurgled its way along, and Erin trotted up to get a closer look.

"What a lovely little stream!" Dr. Velchiek said in her ear, and Erin shuddered at the reminder that even the things she saw were being transmitted back to the Harmonics lab. It was more than a little creepy.

"Could you drink some of the water, please?" Dr. Velchiek continued. "For the data?"

"Oh, sure." She lowered her head and took a gulp. She quickly learned a very valuable lesson: when you wade into a shallow stream of water to take a drink, make sure you drink from upstream and not down. Her hooves had stirred up silt from the bottom, and she got a mouthful of it. "Blech! Agh, gross, it was all muddy!"

"That's wonderful, Erin! Now we have water *and* soil samples!"

"Wonderful", he says, but he's not the one with grit in his mouth," Erin muttered, rolling her eyes.

"You know that I can hear that, Erin?"

"You were meant to!" she shot back. His constant demands of "eat this" and "nibble that" had already been starting to get a little annoying even before she had sucked up a mouthful of mud-water.

Still grumbling, she rinsed out her mouth with clean water and spat before she stomping back to the bank and clambering up onto the dry grass. She looked around, totally lost, before deciding to walk upstream for a while.

Erin's irritation dwindling rapidly as she walked, helped along by the feeling of her muscles stretching and warming up from the exercise while she was simultaneously being cooled by the gentle breeze that bent the grasses around her. It was a picture-perfect day, and it was nearly impossible to hold on to a bad mood when it was this beautiful out.

Erin sighed, letting the last of her bad mood dissolve as she walked through the idyllic Ponyworld countryside. She had missed this, she suddenly realized. Simply being outdoors and walking in the sunlight. This was the first time she'd even *seen* the sun for around two months. Or, rather, an alien sun that was indistinguishable from the one on Earth.

First, she had been locked away from the rest of the interns while she waited to be converted into a pony, then she was unconscious for a month, then she was locked away for nearly another month while she practiced on indoor tracks with her new body. They hadn't let her outside in order to keep her a secret. This was her first time outdoors as a pony and, much to her surprise, she loved it!

She grinned impulsively, feeling the sudden need for a little mischief. She started at a trot, at first, and then broke into a wild gallop. She sped along the ground at a breakneck pace, noticing that having her eye line closer to the ground made it seem like she was running even faster than she really was. Which was honestly pretty darned fast, already, and *much* faster than she was capable of as a human. She started laughing with pure joy as the grass whipped by under her hooves, ignoring Dr. Velchiek's voice buzzing insistently in her ear.

The landscape of Ponyworld became a new obstacle course. She rounded bushes, jumped smoothly over depressions and rocks, climbed hills, and would suddenly cut in random directions as the whim took her. Her new, enhanced pony body responded beautifully, making the physical effort feel like nothing at all. All she felt was the sheer exhilaration of running.

She reached the top of a hill and leapt as far as she could, and for a moment she felt like she was flying. Landing, she skidded to a halt, digging furrows in the soil with her hooves as she glanced back the way she'd come. She couldn't even see the stream anymore, or any other familiar landmarks. She wasn't sure how long she'd been running, but it only felt like a few minutes. And in that time, she was pretty sure she had run for miles. She was barely even sweating, and wasn't even breathing hard.

I love this body! she thought joyfully.

Finally, Erin sighed, and decided to acknowledge Dr. Velchiek's frantic questioning in her ear.

"Sorry, Dr. V," she said, feeling slightly irreverent, "I just suddenly realized that I'd been cooped up indoors for weeks and decided to take the new body for a test-run. It works great, by the way!"

"Well, that's wonderful Erin," he replied, sounding stern, "but please keep in mind that we've got lots of testing to do, and a short time to do it. I'm not saying you can't enjoy yourself, from time to time, but at times like this, when we actually have a window open, we should really concentrate on testing!"

Yes, daddy, she thought, but out loud she said, "Oh, ok. Sorry. I'll be good!", and secretly resolved to have as much fun as possible while still accomplishing her mission to save both human and pony kind.

Smiling, and thoroughly pleased with herself, she took off towards a grove of trees she saw in the distance. She moved at a brisk trot, still enjoying the sense of health and well-being this body gave her.

As she got closer, she noticed that they were apple trees, heavy with bright red fruit. Nothing but apple trees, as far as she could see.

"Wow, neat! Apple trees!" she said, trotting up to them.

"Hmm... yes, they *do* look remarkably like apples. Do they seem like normal apples to you?" Dr. Velchiek asked.

"Yeah, they look like perfectly normal apple trees."

"Interesting. There must be some sort of parallel evolution between our worlds to allow for so many similarities. You will, of course, be eating one of them, right?"

"Um..." She stretched her head out towards a low-hanging fruit, and then shook her head. "This looks cultivated. Doesn't that mean it's someone's orchard? I don't know the laws, here. I want to get along with the other ponies, so I probably shouldn't start out by trespassing or being a thief."

Whatever Dr. Velchiek said in reply was drowned out as, at the same time, another voice said "You got that right, sugarcube!"

Erin "eeped!" and jumped in surprise. There was a native pony trotting around from behind a tree, not ten feet away from her! She had a light orange coat and blond mane and tail, and she was wearing, of all things, what appeared to be a cowboy hat on her head. She had three apples on her flank, and spoke with what sounded to Erin like a southern accent.

Erin felt a moment of panic. She wasn't ready for this! She tried to remember the cover story she had come up with and realized her memory was a complete blank. What was she supposed to say? This pony had an accent! Should *she* talk in an accent? She'd probably sound stupid if she tried! Would this pony attack her for trespassing? Was she going to get in trouble? She didn't want to go to pony jail!

The strange pony smiled at her, and said "I can appreciate folks bein' honest, though. So, as a reward for not *stealin'* an apple, how 'bout I just give ya one for free?"

"Ah? Buh...?" Erin scrambled mentally as her train of thought derailed. "Erm... I mean.. Ok, thank you! I'd really appreciate that!" Erin grinned nervously back at the other pony. She could hear Dr. Velchiek's excited breathing in her ear and found herself wishing with some irritation that she could mute him somehow. She didn't need a distraction from him right now! This was first contact with alien ponies!

The pony walked up to the tree Erin was standing by, turned, and tapped it lightly with a rear hoof. A single apple fell out of the tree, which the strange pony head-butted towards Erin. Acting on reflex, Erin snatched it out of the air with a snap of her jaws. As her teeth crunched into the apple, the juices ran into her mouth, and her eyes widened in shock. She quickly ate the whole thing, core and all, in a couple of bites and some noisy chewing, much to the stranger's apparent amusement.

"Well?" she asked, at the same time Dr. Velchiek said breathlessly in her ear, "How does it taste? Does it taste like an apple?"

Erin swallowed and answered them both at the same time. "That was... quite simply, the most delicious apple I've ever eaten in my entire life."

"Well, now, that's mighty kind of you to say, missy!" the strange pony said, laughing warmly. "Even though I know it's true, it's sure nice to hear somepony else sayin' it! I'm Applejack, by the way."

"Oh, er..." Erin thought quickly. Applejack... She had three apples on her rump. So, did pony names and their tattoos have something to do with each other? In that case, she'd need a name that reflected her own. She blurted out the only thing she could think of. "Sunflower! Um... I'm Sunflower. It's nice to meet you?"

Erin smiled back at her warily, waiting to see if the name seemed at all weird or wrong to Applejack. Her fears were quickly laid to rest, though, as Applejack came up, somehow clasped Erin's right fore-hoof in both of her hooves and began shaking it vigorously.

"Mighty nice to meet'cha, Sunflower! You've gone and wandered inta Sweet Apple Acres, best apple orchard in all of Equestria! I don't reckon' I've seen ya 'round here before. You new to Ponyville?"

"Ponyville? Oh, is that the nearest town?" Erin shook her hoof slightly. It had gone numb from the shaking. How strong *was* this pony?

"Yup, you'd be able to see it if we were on the other side of the farm. So, what brings you to these parts?"

"Oh, well, I'm just exploring, I guess. I want to meet new people, see new places. I want to learn as much about—" what had Applejack called it? Oh, yeah. "—Equestria as I can, you know?" Erin said, glad she was able to tell the truth about that much, at least.

"I can understand that. Why, when I was a filly, I thought it'd be a good sight better to live in Manehattan. O' course, I soon figured out that I belonged here, at home, and I ain't never looked back. But I recon' you gotta see those sights when you can, so you can remember what's so important about home. So, where ya from, originally?"

Erin considered for a moment. Equestria, Ponyville and now Manehattan? Horse-themed names seemed pretty common here. She briefly considered saying she was from Maneapolis, just to see if that would work, but then she thought it would be better not to lie. A lie could unravel and undermine any attempts she might make to integrate with pony society. Better to just withhold information, when possible, until she learned enough to fake it more convincingly.

"I'd rather not talk about that, Applejack," she said, shaking her head. "I mean, if that's okay with you. I can't go back there now, anyway."

"Oh, I see," Applejack said, looking sad. "Trouble at home, then?"

"You could say that," Erin said, thinking of the Black Tide.

"Well, I won't pry, but if yer lookin' fer a place to settle down, then' I reckon' you won't find anywhere better'n Ponyville!"

How 'bout we celebrate yer arrival by havin' you join the Apple family fer lunch? I was just about to head back thataway, and if your headin' to Ponyville, it's in the right direction!"

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to impose..."

"Shucks, it ain't no imposition! Granny always cooks up a heap o' vittles more'n we can eat, anyways. Come on, then!"

And, with that, Applejack trotted off. Erin stood there for a moment, feeling awkward and afraid, before finally shaking herself and starting after her.

As she trotted along next to Applejack, she couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement about being in the company of a non-human intelligence. She kept glancing at her companion out of the corner of her eye. Applejack was a little bigger than she was, probably about two inches taller at the shoulder, and heavily muscled to boot. She smelled slightly of sweat and dirt, but not offensively so. Not like a pony that hadn't been washing, but more like a pony that had been working hard all day out in the sun.

As she watched the pony move confidently through the orchard, Erin felt a little worm of shame nibbling at her soul. She hadn't technically *lied* to Applejack... well, not about anything other than her name, at least. But she had been raised to know that a lie of omission, or intentionally telling the truth in a way that would be interpreted incorrectly, was as good as telling a lie. She sighed, hoping that it would all end up being worth it. She could only do what she could, after all, and it was unlikely that Applejack would be the last pony she'd have to deceive.

"Erin, listen," Dr. Velchiek whispered in her ear, as if he was afraid Applejack would overhear. Erin tensed and tried not to show any reaction on her face. "We're about to lose this window. You'll be on your own in a moment, but you're doing great! You've already given us tons of valuable data, such as the real name of this world. But there's so much more to learn! Remember, take care of yourself and keep a low profile. You'll be—"

There was a crackle, and Dr. Velchiek's voice cut out. Erin shivered. She really was alone, now. Completely and totally cast off in an alien world. The natives seemed friendly enough, at least, but it was still frightening. She thought about her first night at college, off in a strange town and on her own for the first time in her life. This feeling was similar to that, but much, much more intense. At least, then, she could call her parents if things got too bad. But now she was in a world where she didn't understand the rules, and she had literally nobody to fall back on, should things get rough.

She should have been terrified. And, in truth, she was scared, straight down to the tips of her hooves. But she was also excited, she couldn't deny that!

It was a few minutes after Dr. Velchiek's voice had cut out that Applejack stopped suddenly, looking into the sky.

"Well, would'ja lookie here," she said with a tone of annoyance that didn't match the amused look on her face. "Looks like we're about to get us some company." She waved a hoof in the air and shouted, "Howdy, Rainbow Dash!"

Erin looked up and saw a light blue winged pony, with a surprisingly prismatic mane and tail, turning in the air and starting to descend rapidly in their direction.

"Wow! A winged pony!" she said, forgetting for a moment that Applejack was standing right next to her. She started, glancing over at her orange companion guiltily, to see the look of confusion on Applejack's face.

"Sunflower, ya ain't never seen a pegasus pony before?" she asked.

"Oh, um, er..." Erin's thoughts scrambled briefly, and then she decided that the half-truth option she'd been following before would probably continue to work. "No, actually... where I grew up there weren't any..." Erin faltered briefly. What was the plural of that? Pegasuses? Pegasi? She decided to skip it. "Um... Just regular ponies kind of like you and me."

"Really? No unicorns or pegasi, just earth ponies?" Applejack's eyes were wide with surprise.

Erin's heart skipped a beat at "earth" pony, before she realized that Applejack probably was referring to a type of pony, like the pegasus-types. She shook her head "no", and was about to try to elaborate when the pony Applejack had referred to as "Rainbow Dash" landed in front of them with a flourish. Erin stared in complete awe.

"Cooool!" she said, amazed. Rainbow Dash looked startled for a moment, then grinned and puffed out her chest, wings spread wide.

"You know it! Hey, Applejack, who's your friend?" Rainbow Dash's voice was rougher than Applejack's, though still obviously feminine.

"Rainbow Dash, this is Sunflower. Sunflower, this is Rainbow Dash. Who, somehow, seems ta always manage to be just casually passin' by when it's about time for the Apple family to take a break and eat lunch."

"Yeah, that's an amazing coincidence, isn't it?" Rainbow Dash said, covering up the blatant lie with an air of complete innocence that Erin couldn't help but chuckle at. "Does that mean that you're on your way to lunch now?"

"Yup, an' like always, you're welcome to join us. Along with Sunflower, here, who apparently ain't never seen a pegasus before!"

"What?! Seriously? What kind of a backwater village did you come from where you've never seen a pegasus?" Rainbow Dash was looking at Erin in shock.

Erin cringed, flushing red and looked down at her hooves. Was this where everything came crashing down? Had she already told a lie that would unravel everything and expose her?

"I was... um... ponies where I'm from are very different, I guess you can say. It's one of the reasons I left home. I mean, I'd heard about unicorns and pegasi, but I'd never seen them in person, and I wanted to." She kept staring at her hooves. There was no way that would go over, would it? Any second now, they'd catch on, call her out, probably run her off...

"I think I've heard o' that," Applejack said, "Places where a group o' earth ponies all get together and try and do things on their own, without no help from unicorns and pegasi. Goin' it alone, if ya see what I mean."

"Yeah, but... who does their weather for them?" Rainbow Dash asked, then shaking her head in confusion and adding, "It doesn't make sense!"

"Now, Rainbow, Sunflower's my guest, and she already said she don't wanna talk about her home town. I don't want ya pesterin' her with a bunch o' questions she don't feel like answerin', got it?"

"Yeah, but..." the light blue pegasus cringed back from Applejack's sudden glare. "Okay, okay, I got it! Sheesh! I still think it's weird, though."

"Does it help if I do, too?" Erin asked. Applejack guffawed at that, and Rainbow Dash chuckled after a moment. It was then that Erin heard a clanging sound in the distance.

"Come on, y'all," Applejack said. "That'll be the dinner bell. Race ya back to the farmhouse!"

Applejack took off running, and Rainbow Dash grinned and ran after her. After a moment of hesitation, Erin smiled and ran after them.

She felt buoyant, almost like she could float through the air through sheer relief. The earlier fear of discovery was gone, or at least greatly muted. The first hurdle had been passed. She was on her way to being accepted into pony society! Next, she needed a job and a place to stay.

Her stomach growled noisily, in spite of the sparse vegetation and the apple she had munched on earlier, interrupting her train of thought.

Correction, she thought as she ran. First lunch, THEN a job and a place to stay!

She started laughing as she chased after the ponies ahead of her.

Author's Notes:

Art for this chapter, by Lightfalls:



Lineart - M
Character - Hoopy
Mcbee

Chapter 6: Lunch with the ponies

At first, it was just a friendly run, with everyone keeping up with each other but not really straining. But apparently Applejack and Rainbow Dash had a bit of a rivalry going on. One of them would take a small lead, and the other would increase her pace to regain the lead and extend one of their own. Erin noticed that Applejack would glance back from time to time to make sure that she was keeping up.

"Well, nuts to that!" she thought, deciding to show off what her new body could do. She grinned and sped up herself, coming up between the two ponies.

"Is this really the fastest you guys can go?" she asked them with outrageously faked innocence.

Applejack chuckled at that, and Rainbow Dash grinned back and said "Oh, you want a *real* race? You got it!"

Both the orange and blue ponies kicked it into high gear, and suddenly there was a gap growing between them and Erin. She stared after them, momentarily surprised at their sudden acceleration. She then gave herself a mental shake and increased her own efforts accordingly. They may be fast, but hers was a body built by the best that Earth science had to offer.

The scent of apples was strong in her nose as she galloped along, the sound of wind and her own breathing loud in her ears, while her mane and tail streamed out behind her. Trees whipped past them as they ran, hooves thundering across the soft earth beneath the trees.

The occasional fallen apple turned out to be an additional hazard, requiring some fancy hoofwork to avoid stepping on the possibly semi-rotten fruit. At the speed they were going, stepping on one of those squidgey apples would be like suddenly hitting a patch of ice. It wouldn't end well for whatever pony ended up putting a hoof wrong. Enhanced reflexes or no, Erin exercised extra caution. She'd been a pony for just a few weeks, and she wasn't nearly as graceful as the other two.

The three of them burst from the trees, very nearly neck and neck. In the distance, Erin could see a large barn-like structure, which seemed to be their destination. No longer needing Applejack as a guide, and with no further obstacles in the way, Erin let loose a wild whoop and pushed her body as hard as she could, a wide grin plastered across her muzzle. With her enhanced speed, she was sure that there was no way the other two could keep pace with her.

That's why Erin almost tripped over her own hooves in shock as Applejack caught up to her and tipped her a wink. Rainbow Dash's prismatic mane could be seen streaming on the other side of the farmpony's head. Her previous grin was replaced by a frown of determination as Erin turned her attention back to the race, pushing harder than ever. Her breathing was labored now, coming more ragged and strained, and she felt sweat pouring down her back and across her flank.

The three ponies shot past a large picnic table that was set up with various foods, Erin barely registering the surprised looks on the faces of the three ponies already sitting on convenient piles of hay in front of the table. By some unspoken signal, that was the end of the race, and they slowed from their gallop and into a walk. Erin's knees felt decidedly wobbly as she finally came to a full stop, head down and breathing heavily.

For the life of her, she wouldn't have been able to say which one of them had passed the table first.

It was some consolation to her that Applejack and Rainbow Dash seemed just as out of breath as she was. Nobody talked for a minute or so, while the three of them all caught their breath. Finally, Applejack straightened up, pushed her hat back on her head slightly, and looked Erin straight in the eye.

"Land's sake, girl!" she said, still sounding slightly out of breath, "Ya sure gave us a run fer our money! I didn't take you for an athlete when I first saw ya, but you got some serious speed, there!"

Erin grinned at her weakly, while Rainbow Dash said, "Yeah, but which one of us won?"

"I don't know," said Erin, "does it really matter?"

The pegasus gave her a look of stunned disbelief. "Of course it matters! How could it not matter?"

Erin shook her head. "I don't know. I was paying more attention to running than to who was in the lead. Maybe we should just call it a three-way tie?"

"Fine by me," Applejack replied, as she turned and started walking back towards the picnic table they had passed.

Rainbow Dash trotted up next to her, snorting and rolling her eyes. "Whatever," she said. "Maybe next time, we should do a *real* race. You up for a rematch, AJ?"

"Ha! You just name the time an' place, Rainbow, an' I'll be there!" The farm pony looked over at Erin and said, "How 'bout you, Sunflower? You interested in another race?"

"Sure, I guess," Erin said, still feeling a little stunned by the race results. She was supposed to have been modified past any natural creature's abilities! No Earth pony would have been able to keep up with her, she was sure of that. How did these ponies get to be so fast? The supposed "survival advantages" that the scientists had given her suddenly seemed like a much flimsier thing, basically amounting to no advantage at all.

Erin found that thought more than a little disturbing. She had been counting on those advantages to keep her safe.

Caught up in her thoughts, with her eyes on her hooves, Erin almost bumped into the table before she realized that they had reached it. She glanced up in surprise to see three ponies looking at her and the others. She didn't have much time to register the other two, because one of them, an old green mare with her white mane tied back in a bun, was coming around from the far side of the table, scolding the three of them fiercely.

"Now, lookit what'cha did here, ya giddy buncha half-brained foals! Ya went and kicked upp'a bunch of dust all over er vittles! Ain't a one o' you got a lick a' sense in yer silly heads! Rainbow Dash, Ah expect this kinda thing from yer, but Ah reckon' Ah expected more from you, AJ!"

The ancient pony then turned her eye on Erin and poked her in the chest with a hoof, saying, "And you Ah don't know at all, but Ah'd guess yer just as big a block-headed lump as these two idjits here!"

Erin started stammering out apologies, but was distracted when another one of the ponies at the table stood up and shouted, "Yeah! Granny an' I worked real hard making this food!"

Erin stared at the small filly who had piped up. She was yellow in color, with a red mane and tail, and was wearing a big pink bow. Whatever apologies Erin had been trying to make got derailed into mumbles as she stared at the filly, all the while thinking, "*Oh my god she's so cuuuute!*"

Fortunately, a shame-faced Applejack started talking, distracting Erin before her staring at the adorable filly turned *too* weird.

"Granny, I'm mighty sorry that we made a mess o' lunch. Tell ya what, Rainbow Dash an' I'll do the cleanup all by ourselves ta make up fer it."

"What?!" Rainbow Dash said, looking startled, "I kinda have a thing I wanted to do..."

"Practicin' more tricks?"

"Well... yeah, or a nap..."

"I'll help too," Erin said, "It's partly my fault, after all."

"Ah, now, you don't need to do that, sugarcube! Yer a guest an' all!"

"And what am I, chopped parsnips?" muttered Rainbow Dash, just loud enough to hear.

"No, yer a freeloader," Applejack snarked back. The rainbowed pegasus stuck her tongue out at her.

"It's okay, I don't mind!" Erin said, smiling. "Besides, I was kind of thinking I should help anyway, what with the free lunch and all."

"Well, that's mighty kind o' ya, Sunflower! Oh, I suppose introductions are in order... Sunflower, this here is Granny Smith..."

"Nice to meet you!" Erin said.

"Eh, fiddlesticks!" said Granny. There was a short, awkward pause. Then the orange pony started the introductions again, this time pointing a hoof at the filly.

"This here is my lil' sister, Apple Bloom."

"Nice to meet you, Apple Bloom!"

"Likewise," the filly said, still obviously annoyed about the dust on the lunch table, but trying to be polite.

"And this big lug here," Applejack went on, "is my big brother, Macintosh. We all just call 'im Big Mac."

"Er, nice to meet you, Macintosh," Erin said, a little intimidated by the big red stallion. As strong as she knew Applejack to be, it was hard to imagine how incredibly strong this guy was. He was much bigger than Applejack, to begin with, and incredibly well muscled. He looked like he could knock over brick buildings. By accident. He was also staring resolutely at the picnic table.

"Eeyup," was all he said.

Rainbow Dash leaned over and whispered into Erin's ear, "He's also single, you know."

Erin stiffened in shock, and judging by the sudden deepening of the red on Big Mac's face, Rainbow's "whisper" had carried a bit further than she had intended. Or maybe not, judging by the way she started snickering at the stallion's obvious discomfort.

"Oh, ah... That's... er... nice?" Erin really *really* hoped that she didn't look too embarrassed right now. Suddenly, she remembered what Dr. Edwards had said about "hanky panky with the local stallions", and blushed furiously. Rainbow Dash noticed that and started laughing hysterically, flapping her wings to stay airborne while she hugged her ribcage with her forelegs.

"Oh, wow, you should see your *face*, Sunflower!" the pegasus gasped. "We could pop popcorn, you're so red!"

"That doesn't even make sense!" Erin snapped at her, flushing more heatedly than ever. Rainbow responded by laughing even harder.

Erin glanced around, looking for an ally. Big Mac just looked like he wanted to sink into the ground, which was a sentiment that she shared. Granny Smith, meanwhile, was looking at her with what Erin was mildly horrified to see was a calculating look on her face. Applejack had pulled her hat down over her eyes, trying her best to not laugh at the whole mess. She was failing.

Little Apple Bloom was looking back and forth between Erin and her big brother, looking confused. Then, suddenly, a look of comprehension flashed across her face, quickly followed by a mischievous grin. Erin worried about the grin. She decided to study her hooves for a while, until all the laughing blew over and her face returned to its normal complexion.

Finally, Rainbow and Applejack stopped laughing enough for the light blue pegasus to say, "Oh, that was hilarious. And now, I'm famished. Let's eat!"

Erin, who had spent the last minute staring at her hooves while waves of embarrassment rolled over her, started walking towards the far end of the table, as far away from Macintosh as she could. Rainbow dashed in front of her, saying, "Oh, no, this is my seat. Sorry, Sunflower!"

Erin glowered at the smug expression on her blue face. Applejack was already seated at the center of the table, leaving the only open spot...

"Right across from Big Mac," she noticed. "Great. This won't be awkward at all."

Reluctantly, she made her way to the little pile of hay left and sat down, staring fixedly at the table. She glanced up briefly and saw that Big Macintosh, too, was studying the table in-depth. Relieved with the lack of eye contact, Erin took her first real look at the food. And she was amazed.

When Applejack had first invited her to lunch, she was thinking that, maybe, if she was lucky, they'd have some sort of salads. After all, that's what ponies eat, right? Vegetation? And, while there were indeed plenty of raw fruits and veggies, what she caught her eye instead were loaves of steaming bread, obviously just pulled out of the oven, several jars of jam, piles of greens heaped on plates and smothered in what appeared to be butter, some sort of pasta salad and, most gloriously of all, a variety of pies, cookies, muffins and other baked goods. Erin swallowed to avoid drooling as her stomach growled loudly again.

The Apple family dug in, and Erin decided to try a bit of jam on some of the warm, crusty bread. Spreading the jam would have been a pretty difficult trick if she hadn't seen Apple Bloom do it first, grabbing the spreader in her mouth and smearing the jam all over a slice of bread.

Erin was a little uncomfortable, at first, using the same utensils that others had just had in their mouths, but then shrugged and shoved her issues aside. "*When in Equestria...*" she thought. She grabbed the spreader and plunked a generous blob of the sticky red jam on her slice of bread, balanced it on a hoof and brought it up to her face, then took a big bite. She stopped, then, eyes wide with disbelief.

Not only was it quite definitely raspberry jam, but it was also simply the best raspberry jam she'd ever eaten. Like the apple she'd had earlier, this food just made her taste buds sing.

"This jam is amazing!" she said, earning a smile from Apple Bloom and a mutter from Granny Smith about how "mebbe she ain't such a big idjit after all..."

Erin made fast work of that slice of bread, and determined that she would try a little bit of everything on the table. This was a task made a little more awkward by the persistent questioning of Apple Bloom, who was apparently determined to get Erin's entire life story. The little filly peppered her with questions, like where she was from, what she did for a living, whether she was moving to town or not, whether she had a "special somepony" (which triggered another round of blushing and gaze avoidance between her and Big Mac, much to Dash's amusement) and how she got her "cutie mark". The cutie mark question confused Erin briefly until she realized that the filly was referring to her flank tattoo. She wondered, briefly, if that term applied both to males and females. Most men, in her admittedly limited experience, wouldn't want to be associated with something that had "cutie" right in the name.

Erin did her best to deflect the filly's question barrage, until, thankfully, Applejack stepped in and scolded her for pestering their guest. Apple Bloom obeyed her sister with bad grace, pouting adorably.

Thankfully, the meal apart from that was fairly low-key. Applejack mainly talked to her family about the work that she was doing out in the south field that day, where Erin had met her. Big Mac ate like a machine, not quickly, but not slowing down for anything. He didn't say much, answering any question put to him with a standard "eyup" or "nope". Rainbow Dash mainly just concentrated on shoveling food into her face for a while, and then got visibly bored waiting for the others to finish eating.

Once everyone was mostly sated and reduced to casual nibbling, Applejack asked Erin if there were any questions she had, "what with you bein' new ta Ponyville an' all." She considered that for a moment, and then decided to get the most obvious needs out of the way.

"Well, as you know, I'm traveling and looking for a place to settle down... Do you know if there's any work around Ponyville I can do, or any place I can stay while I'm here?"

"Ah, shoot, hon," Applejack said, looking slightly downcast. "If'n you'd got here a few weeks from now, we coulda used an extra hoof or two for applebuckin'. But right now is the slow time fer the farm, and we ain't lookin' to hire any extra help."

Applejack looked really distressed that she couldn't help, so Erin hurried to reassure her. "Oh, no, Applejack, you don't need to feel bad about it! I'm the one who just showed up with no plans or preparations. I wasn't expecting you to hire me, especially if you don't need help!"

"Don't worry too much about it," said Rainbow Dash, idly flicking a stray pea back and forth across the table with her hoof. "Loads of ponies in town need help. You can probably just look for help wanted signs. As for somewhere to stay, well, I'd offer to let you crash with me, but, you know, cloud house and all."

"Umm... Right," Erin replied, wondering what she meant by "cloud house" but hesitant to ask about it. "Well, odd jobs sound good. That way I'll get to meet a lot of the ponies in town, right?"

"I reckon' so. And for a place to stay, there's always the Ponyville Guest House. Ya just need to stop by Town Hall and talk to a clerk. They'll get ya all set up with a place to stay. It's just a bed and blanket, nothin' fancy, but no visitors to our town have ever had to sleep in the streets! I reckon' that'll do ya until you find a place you can rent."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Thanks for the guidance," Erin said, thrilled. She now had a solid (and delicious) meal in her, a place she could spend the night, and the prospect of work. She considered that things were definitely looking up for her.

"Ah'm gonna take a nap!" Granny Smith said loudly, startling everyone at the table. The old green mare creaked to her hooves, hobbling her way back to the barn-house that was apparently where the Apple family lived. As she walked slowly away, she shouted over her shoulder, "Mind ya clear this table like yer said, Applejack!"

"And I'm gonna go find Sweetie Bell and Scootaloo, we've got some crusadin' to do today! Nice to meet ya, Sunflower!" And, with that, the little filly ran off.

Big Mac stood up, then, cleared his throat, waited a moment, and then said "Eeyup." Then he walked off as well.

"He doesn't talk much, does he?" Erin said, as Big Mac walk away.

"Nah," Applejack shook her head, "He's just shy. Once he relaxes 'round ya, ya can't get him ta shut up less'n ya stick a caramel apple in his mouth."

"I think he likes youuu!" Rainbow said in a sing-song voice. Erin blushed again. She didn't know the blue pegasus very well, but this wasn't the first time she'd met someone who took great joy in embarrassing

others and wouldn't stop a joke as long as she got a reaction.

"Now, Rainbow, quit it," Applejack said, in a voice that was half joking and half stern. "Poor Sunflower here's new to town and here you are, pesterin' her like this. Let the girl get her hooves under her before ya start prankin' her! Give her, oh, at least two days!"

"Oh, sure, fine." the rainbow maned pony said, flapping her wings and hovering just off the ground in a way that made Erin's brain hurt with the way it seemed to defy physics. "You got two days, Sunflower, then BAM! all bets are off!"

Rainbow and Applejack both chuckled at this. In spite of herself, Erin joined in as well.

"Fine, two days it is," she said.

"Well, come on now," Applejack said as she stood up, "This table ain't gonna clear itself!"

With that, she grabbed a plate in her teeth and, with a deft flip, transferred it to her back. Then she did the same for a couple other plates. Erin stared, amazed at the dexterity she showed. She knew better than to try such a flip herself, though. Instead, she gingerly took a serving platter in her teeth and carefully transferred it to her back, then managed to stack a plate on top of it. It felt too precarious to try to add more, so she left it at that and walked slowly after the farm pony, careful to avoid dumping the dishes off of her back. Rainbow Dash, grumbling, grabbed up a few more dishes of her own, balancing them on her outstretched wings rather than her back.

"Come on, slowpoke!" she said to Erin as she trotted past her. Erin, still afraid the load on her back would shift and fall off, decided to maintain her slow but steady pace.

She followed the other two into a charmingly rustic kitchen, up to a large sink where they divested themselves of their burdens. Washing dishes as a pony turned out to be quite an interesting experience. Following Applejack's lead, she would hold a dish in her fore-hooves, balancing her legs on the rim of the sink, while holding a scrubbing brush in her teeth. Rainbow Dash took a couple more trips to gather everything up off the table, and then asked pointedly if there was anything else she could do, since there wasn't any more room at the sink. Applejack rolled her eyes and told her she could go, at which the rainbow-maned pegasus grinned, said goodbye, and flew off.

When they were all done washing up, Applejack took some of the leftovers, including a small pot of jam, and wrapped it up in a small towel. She put it down on the counter next to Erin, saying, "Here, take this with you. Least I can do is make sure that you got a decent meal ahead o' you."

"Oh, Applejack, you didn't have to do that!" Erin said, honestly touched. "You've been so generous already!"

"Aw, shucks, it ain't a big thing. Consider it a 'welcome ta Ponyville' present, if you want. Now, I gotta get back to my chores, but I can point the way to town if'n you'll just follow me."

Erin undid a flap on one of her saddlebags, grabbed the package the generous pony had given her, and placed it inside. There was barely any room for it, but she managed to get in in there without squishing the bread *too* badly. Then she refastened the flap and hurried after the orange pony.

"Now, if ya head up the road that way, you'll find Ponyville," Applejack said, pointing a hoof. "Won't take ya more than a half hour, at a good walk. Now, I gotta get back to work, but feel free ta stop by an' say 'howdy' once ya get settled!"

"Thanks for everything Applejack!" Erin replied, smiling. "And, please thank your sister and granny for me, too, when you see them next. The food was really amazing!"

"I'll be sure to do that. Oh, and when ya get to town, say 'hi' to Pinkie Pie for me."

"What?"

"You'll see," Applejack said with a chuckle. Then she waved her hoof in farewell and trotted away, back towards where they had first met.

Erin smiled, feeling much more relaxed about being in Ponyworld... rather, make that Equestria... then she had earlier today. The locals were obviously very friendly, and the situation was looking up. Humming an aimless little tune, she turned and walked down the road to Ponyville.

The road on either side of her was brimming with apple trees at first, and then those abruptly stopped as she left Sweet Apple Acres property. The land returned to the familiar fields that she was starting to think of as the default landscape for the area. She trotted along briskly, taking in the sights and sounds, reflecting on how beautiful it was here. She'd been in the countryside before, but everything here was so

vibrant, so *alive*. Like the plants on Earth had just a little less color than the plant-life here.

After a short while, Ponyville proper came into view. She had plenty of time to look at the town as she approached, noting the rustic design of many of the buildings, thatched roofs and all. Some of the buildings looked really odd, though. Erin stopped trotting for a moment, deciding to get a closer look at the town before heading in.

She concentrated briefly, and the cybernetic implants in her eyes responded. She activated the telescopic feature, and suddenly the far away town jumped up close. The town was arranged around a large building that she took to be town hall, with a small river flowing nearby. Erin would have to cross a bridge to get to it. Ponies were wandering around, many with saddle bags. She saw a few unicorns for the first time since she arrived, some of them levitating things around, walking through the town.

There also seemed to be an open-air market, which Erin resolved to visit immediately after she stopped at Town Hall and got herself a place to stay for the night. The odds of finding work were probably much higher in the marketplace than anywhere else.

Most of the buildings followed that same rustic pattern, but a few were odd. There was a shop that looked, for some reason, like a jester's hat. Another looked like a crazy gingerbread house. Her contemplation of those buildings was suddenly cut short as her long-range vision was cut off by a wall of... pink?

"Hi!" a voice said right in front of her.

"Gaaaah!" Erin replied, stumbling backwards in shock. With her concentration broken her eyesight returned to normal and the pink wall in front of her resolved into a grinning pink pony with a slightly darker pink mane. The pony was staring at her with blue eyes from under her wildly curly mane.

"Ooooh, sorry! I didn't mean to scare you! You were just staring at Ponyville for so long, I thought maybe you were scared to go in or something! And I wanted to let you know it was okay, since everypony in Ponyville is super-incredibly nice and friendly, especially me! And I tried waving at you, but I guess you didn't see me, which was weird, because I was just right over there. So, you must be new in town, since I don't know you, and I know everypony in Ponyville! Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie!"

Erin stared at her in shock. The pink pony had rattled all that off without even seeming to stop for breath. Wait, did she say 'Pinkie Pie'?

"Applejack says hi," she managed to say.

"Oh, really? That's neat! How can you tell? Do you have super-duper hearing or something?"

"Um, no, I just met her at her farm, and she gave me directions to Ponyville and said to say hi when I saw you... Um. So, hi Pinkie Pie, it's nice to meet you, I'm Sunflower."

"Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie, but you already know that! It's nice to meet you, Sunflower! Are you going to be staying in Ponyville?"

"Well, if I can find work and a place to stay, I will." Erin eyed the strange pony warily. Pinkie was bouncing on her hooves as she talked, clearly extremely hyper.

"Great! I'll have to throw you a surprise party! But for now, I have to go see Applejack about getting some baking apples for Sugarcube corner."

"Ah, you don't have to... wait, a 'surprise' party? How can it be a surprise party if you just told me about it?"

"Oh, silly! I told you I'd give you one, not *when*! That's the surprise!"

"Ohh-kay," Erin replied. "Well, it was really nice meeting you, Pinkie Pie. I've got to get to town hall to see about getting a room at the guest house. Is that the big building there?" Erin pointed with her hoof, and the pink pony aligned herself alongside her and squinted down her leg as if she were sighting down a rifle barrel.

"Yup! That's it! It was nice meeting you, and I'll see you later!" Pinkie turned barely had taken two steps when she suddenly stopped and stared at Erin with a surprised look on her face.

"Uh-oh..." she said. "Knee twitch, itchy back, rumbley tummy... My Pinkie sense is telling me that somepony is keeping a major secret from me!"

Erin stared at her blankly. Pinkie sense? Pinkie looked away from her, towards Sweet Apple Acres

"Applejack!" she said, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. Then she turned back to Erin, her eyes returned

to their normal giddy friendliness. "Well, I gotta go see what humongous secret Applejack is keeping from me. Bye for now, Sunflower!"

And with that, and while humming a happy song, Pinkie Pie bounced down the road in the oddest gait Erin had ever seen a pony use. She shook her head in confusion, and then started to walk down to the town ahead.

If there was one thing for certain, judging by the ponies she had already met, her stay in Ponyville was going to be *interesting*.

Chapter 7: Ponyville

Erin's nervousness dwindled as she crossed the bridge into Ponyville proper. So far, none of the ponies had reacted as if she were in any way unusual. There was no pointing, no odd looks, no screaming in fear. In fact, the only reaction she got from the ponies was the occasional smile, wave, or friendly greeting such as "Nice weather today, isn't it?"

She broke into a grin as she walked along. This town was such a happy place, and the ponies were all such wonderful people, that she just couldn't help but be in a good mood. In fact, the only thing that was disturbing her at that moment was an itchy feeling she was getting under the canvas that was holding her saddlebags across her back. Not really surprising, considering how much running around and sweating she'd done since arriving. But hopefully, once she got a room at the guest house, she'd be able to get her bags off and give herself a good brushing.

With that in mind, and with a spring in her step, she bounced up the steps to the door to Town Hall and let herself inside. The first thing she saw was a large, impressive open area in the center, with pillars running along towards a podium. In the center of the room was a wooden portable desk on wheels, and behind the portable desk was a slightly tired looking beige earth pony with a grey-streaked green mane.

"Can I help you?" the pony asked her.

"Um, yes... I'm thinking of moving to Ponyville, and I was told that I should stop here and ask about getting a room in the guest house?"

"Oh, welcome to Ponyville!" the receptionist said, perking up slightly. "My name is Lime Swirl, what's yours?"

"I'm Sunflower, nice to meet you!"

"Same here," the mare said cheerily, then opened up a drawer in her desk and pulled a ledger out. She flipped the book open, paging through what seemed to be a list of names until she reached a page that was only partially filled in. Then the green-maned mare picked a pen up in her teeth and scribbled a date and the name "Sunflower" in there.

"Okay, Sunflower," Lime Swirl said as she returned the ledger to its drawer, "how this works is that you can stay, for free, at the Guest House for up to three nights. After that, we charge you a bit a night, or five bits for a week. Does that sound all right?"

"It sounds perfect, thanks!"

"And here is your complimentary 'Welcome to Ponyville' gift pack!" the beige mare said, pulling out a folder from another drawer. Erin took it gingerly in her teeth.

"It's got maps, coupons, a brief history of the town, and the local railroad schedules! Also, there's a paper inside that you need to give over to Meadowlark, who runs the Ponyville Guest House."

"Ahh...ank 'oo," Erin mumbled around the edges of the folder, momentarily at a loss with what to do with it. Then she placed it on her back, untied her bag with her teeth, and delicately slid the folder inside. The older pony hadn't finished talking yet, though.

"Speaking of being new in town, have you seen Pinkie Pie yet?"

"Um, yes," Erin said, blinking in surprise. Was that mare famous or something? "She said she was going to throw me a surprise party some time later, and that not knowing when was the surprise."

"Oh, good. That's taken care of, then. Make sure you go to the party and enjoy yourself!" Lime Swirl said, smiling chirpily. Then the smile faded and a deadly serious look came over the mare's face. "If you don't enjoy yourself, Pinkie's going to cry. You don't want to make Pinkie cry."

"Why, what happens then?" Erin asked nervously.

"Oh, nothing," the mare said, waving a hoof. "It's just heartbreaking and really awkward for everypony watching."

Erin stared at her in confusion while the green-maned mare smiled back at her.

"Anyway, you want to head north once you exit here. The Guest House is right across the town square, with a big red door on the front of it. And, if you don't know which way is north, just remember that Canterlot is to the northeast!"

"Um, Canterlot?"

"Canterlot. Yes. You know? Canterlot?" Erin continued to stare at her blankly. "Uh... The castle that the princesses rule Equestria from?"

"Oh, yeah," Erin lied smoothly, "I know what Canterlot *is*. But how do I know which way it is from here?"

"You're kidding," Lime Swirl said, a deadpan expression on her face. "You're kidding, right?"

"Um..."

"Go out the door and take a left, then follow the curve of the building around. Look above the tops of the houses. Trust me, you'll see it."

"Ah, okay. Thanks again for all your help!"

"It was my pleasure, Sunflower! And, welcome to Ponyville!" Lime Swirl replied with a once-again cheerful demeanor, waving a hoof. Erin waved back and walked out of the town hall.

Taking a left turn, she trotted around the building, shaking her head. She hadn't noticed any castles nearby when she had looked down into Ponyville earlier, but she thought maybe it might be really small and easily overlooked. She was quickly disabused of that notion when she rounded the bend and saw the not-exactly-subtle castle protruding off the side of an even less subtle mountain.

"How did I miss THAT?!" Erin thought while gaping stupidly at the castle and the city that surrounded it.

The castle glimmered in the distance, and looked almost delicate, with many towers and spires. It was so obviously a fairy-tale castle that Erin half expected Tinkerbell to come flying out of it while waving a magic wand. All in all, it was simply gorgeous, with the late afternoon sunlight glinting off of it. Erin made up her mind that she would like to visit that place, once she had gotten all the information she could out of Ponyville. After all, if that was where the princesses ruled from, then there was bound to be good information to be collected there.

She considered that for a moment. Equestria was ruled by princesses? How many? Why not a queen, or a king, or for that matter princes? Not that she had a problem with ruling princesses, but she determined to ask some very careful questions and listen closely to conversations in order to find out how this government was organized.

For that matter, maybe she should check the town map to see if there was a library in Ponyville. She could probably gain a lot of information just by reading a couple of history books. She put that on her mental "To do" list as something to look for after she got settled in the Guest House.

Speaking of which...

Erin trotted forward, finally tearing her eyes away from the gorgeous castle. Lime Swirl hadn't been kidding, the Guest House was hard to miss. Directly in front of her was a large, mostly square building, though still with a thatched roof. It was a bit bigger than the other buildings in the area. She walked up and regarded the door, which had a small golden plaque on it that confirmed that this was, indeed, the "Guest House".

She considered the door for a moment. Should she just go in? Knock first? Then she spotted what looked like a doorbell, and pushed it gently with her nose. Delicate, musical chimes sounded inside. After a moment, the door was opened by a bright yellow unicorn mare with a light grey mane pulled back into a no-nonsense bun. She looked fairly young, at least compared to Lime Swirl and especially to Granny Smith, so Erin assumed that the gray was cosmetic and not due to age.

"Yes?" she asked, looking at Erin curiously with her light green eyes.

"Um, hi, my name is Sunflower. Lime Swirl sent me over. I was going to see if I could stay a night or two?"

"Oh, of course! Did she give you the welcome kit?"

"Yeah, it's in my left saddlebag..." Erin quickly untied the flap again and pulled the packet out with her teeth. Then she jumped in surprise as the packet suddenly started glowing with a yellow light, and then floated gently away from her. Meadowlark didn't act as if anything were wrong at all as it floated up to her, flipped itself open, and then a sheet of paper was pulled out, all without any obvious means of support.

Erin's mind was buzzing with shock and wonder. Telekinesis. Right in front of her, this unicorn was using telekinesis, and acting like it was no big deal! Meadowlark looked up and frowned at the stunned expression on Erin's face.

"Is anything wrong?"

Erin shook herself and closed her mouth with a snap.

"No, no, of course not!" she said, giggling shrilly. "Why would anything be wrong?!" She was unaware that her eyes were practically bugging out of her head.

"Oooh-kay," Meadowlark said, tilting her head to her left. "What, have you never seen a unicorn use magic before?"

"What? Magic? Oh! No, of course, I've seen magic loads of times!"

"At birthday parties, in movies..." Erin thought, slightly giddy with excitement. She wondered why they called it "magic" instead of something more sensible like "telekinesis", but decided that she could find that out later.

Meadowlark stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "All right, follow me," she said, turning and heading into the guest house. As she turned, Erin caught a glimpse of her cutie mark, what looked like an open ledger. She wondered briefly what it meant.

Erin followed her in, taking the time to glance around at the decor. As with Applejack's kitchen, it looked startlingly like an old-fashioned human home, the kind you sometimes might see in a movie or old TV show. The walls were a creamy off-white, with red wood trim. The dark hardwood floors were in good shape, a few scuffs and scratches but nothing serious. The floors also had several area rugs, probably to cut down on the number of additional scratches that the floor would receive. The rugs themselves were simple and well made, though showing some signs of wear, and made of simple colors and patterns. The room itself smelled mildly of soap and flowers, a combination that Erin found vaguely comforting.

Meadowlark led her into a large common area with scattered furniture, mostly low couches and small end or coffee tables, and most of the tables had vases of fresh flowers on them. Several doors were scattered at regular intervals down on of the walls, and a small hallway jutted down one end of the room. There was also a staircase going up. Meadowlark turned to talk to her again.

"Well, this is the living area, as you can see. The rooms are pretty small, so feel free to relax out here, as long as you don't disturb other guests. The rest room and the bath are down that hallway," she said, pointing with a hoof, "and it's first come, first served. There are two other guests staying here at the moment, so it shouldn't be hard to get in there if you need to, but it's probably a good idea to not wait until the last minute, just in case."

Erin nodded at that, thinking that it was pretty sensible advice.

"Upstairs is my apartment," the yellow unicorn continued. "Please, don't bother me up there unless it's an actual emergency. If it's not urgent, you can just write a note and put it in the box, there," she said, pointing to a red box with the word "Manager" written on it in black.

"Sounds good!"

"So, Sunflower, how long were you planning on staying? Lime Swirl explained that we start charging after the third night, right?"

"Oh, yes! Well, I'm not sure. I'm hoping to move to Ponyville, but that means I need to find work. I really don't have any... er... bits right now."

"Well, ponies are always looking for help around here. In fact, over by Town Hall there's a board where ponies can post notices for different kinds of help needed, and that might be a good place to start. If you decide to stay past the third night, just let me know by dropping a note in the box, and I'll collect the money daily."

"Sounds good!"

"Also, I'm the manager here, but it really doesn't take much of my time. My *real* job is to do the town census and make up population reports for the Mayor. So, if you're moving here, I'll have to ask you a few questions. Don't worry about that now, though, I can wait a couple days until you settle in before I start harassing you for information!"

Meadowlark laughed briefly at that. Erin chuckled back weakly. What kinds of questions was she going to ask? She decided that it would probably be best to do some research before finding work. She had to know enough about Equestria and how it worked to be able to fake it accurately. Her food supplies should last her a couple days, at least, and she could always graze after that ran out, so her only real worry was getting the bits needed to pay for the room after the third night.

"Research definitely comes first," she thought.

"Here we go," Meadowlark said, "this is your room." She pushed the door marked #4 open and Erin peeked inside.

The room was tiny, which was to be expected. There was also a small bed stuck in one corner of the room, which Erin found mildly surprising. She had half expected a pile of hay, or something. There was a small bureau with five drawers in another corner, opposite the bed, and a desk with a low bench for sitting on in another. A tiny window was against the wall, between the bed and the bureau.

Like the common area, the furnishings in the room were sturdy, simple, and a little worn. But clean, very clean and cared for. Meadowlark was obviously a good manager, if she kept things in such good order. The bed was made with a red and black checked blanket, and a large green comforter was folded up at the end of the bed. There was also a large chest, apparently made of cedar, at the foot of the bed.

"It's very nice!" Erin said, genuinely pleased.

Meadowlark smiled at the praise. "Well, it's small, but I keep it clean. I'll ask you to do the same. I'm not a maid, so I'll be asking each guest to do their own laundry and cleaning. The bedding is fresh right now, and I'm asking that you wash it when you're done with your stay. I'll show you where the laundry area is in a minute."

"Is it okay if I leave some of my things here?"

"Yes, naturally." Meadowlark replied. "It's your room now, at least for the time being. Here, come with me and I'll show you the rest of the house." Erin quickly stripped off her saddlebags and dropped them on the desk, sighing with relief. She still felt like she could use a good brushing, but at least the darned things were off!

Meadowlark continued with the brief tour of the rest of the facilities. The hall way to the restroom and bathing area ended with four doors, the one at the very end leading outside, with the restroom door on the left, and the door to the bath and the linen closet on the right. The restroom was a bit larger than Erin's room, and she looked in, curious to see what an Equestrian bathroom would look like. She'd only used modified human bathrooms as a pony so far. What she saw was basically a raised trough with a foot pedal that she guessed acted as a flusher, and a small bidet-looking device that also seemed to be operated by foot-pedal. There was a pedestal sink as well, with a bar of soap.

The linen closet was just outside the door of the bath, and had a variety of towels in it. Meadowlark repeated that she expected the guests to wash and put back any towels that they used. Erin nodded agreement. The bath area itself was actually pretty tiny, with a small claw-footed tub and a shower head, which pleased Erin to no end. She much preferred showers over baths. There was another pedestal sink in there as well, most likely for the brushing of teeth, and a small mirror.

The building manager then led Erin out the back door and into the yard, where she was vaguely surprised to see an old-fashioned washtub with a washboard, and clotheslines strung up. There were a couple of towels drying on the line already, Erin saw, guessing that those were from the other guests. There was a small cabinet outside that held soap for washing, and in the center of the yard there was a long-handled pump for the water. She stared at it briefly, never having seen an actual water pump before, though she had heard about them.

As that concluded the tour, Meadowlark wrapped up by saying, "Now, I know that sometimes accidents happen, and I've had ponies break or damage things before. If it's an honest accident, I'll probably let it go, or maybe just charge a couple of bits for it, but you have to tell me right away. If you don't tell me, I'm going to have to assume that you did it on purpose or are trying to hide it, and I'll charge you full price for a replacement. We're operating on a very small budget, here, and I can't have ponies breaking things, okay?"

"Okay, that makes sense," Erin said, resolving to be super careful.

"Well, that's about all. Did you have any questions before I go back up to my apartment?"

"Um, yes, if you don't mind... Could you tell me if Ponyville has a library I could visit?"

"You *could* just check your welcome packet, you know," Meadowlark said with a sigh as Erin blushed with embarrassment. She had already forgotten about the map. "But yes, we do have a library. It's in the center of town, that way," again pointing with a hoof. "Just look for a large tree. You can't miss it."

"Okay. Thank you so much for all of this! It's a great relief having a place to stay!"

"You're quite welcome," Meadowlark replied with a small smile. "Make yourself at home, clean up after yourself, respect your neighbors, and try not to make too much noise. That's all I ask of anypony. Have a

good stay!"

And with that, Meadowlark turned and trotted back into the building. Erin shouted a quick "Thank you!" after her, and then moved off in the direction that the yellow unicorn had pointed. As she trotted along, she regarded her surroundings curiously. The common theme for housing still extended here, but she could see that many of the homes had small businesses on the first floor. She guessed that it was a similar situation as the Guest House, where the business happened on the first floor, and the family lived on the second. It seemed like a really sensible arrangement to her.

Small colts and fillies filled the streets ahead of her, playing various games, often involving hoops or balls. Some of them were obviously playing hide and seek, or some variant of tag. Erin smiled to see them play. They seemed so much like human children in their interactions, but so much cuter, at least to her. She found herself wondering again about how the ponies chose their cutie marks, seeing that none of the children had any. How did they choose them, and what did they mean?

Erin shook her head, deciding it was a mystery for another time, and focused on getting to the library. She did see the leaves of a large tree up ahead, up above the rooftops, and made her way towards it. That was likely to be the tree that Meadowlark was talking about, with the library next to it. As it came into view, however, Erin stopped in her tracks, once again shocked right down to her hooftips.

The library wasn't *next* to the tree. The library *was* the tree! It was, indeed, a large tree. And obviously alive, if the green leaves adorning it were any indication. But it had a large door set into it, and several windows. And a balcony! A balcony in a tree!

She shook her head again, trying to clear it. Maybe one of these days, she thought as she made her way up to the library door, this town would stop surprising the heck out of her. She knocked, and heard a young, male-sounding voice say "Hold on, be right there!"

The door cracked open, and the voice said, "Yes, how can I help you?"

Erin would have replied, but she was far too busy being shocked once again. She felt the strength go out of her back legs and her rump hit the ground as she stared at the small, bipedal purple lizard-thing with green spikes on its (his?) head. The lizard-thing blinked its green eyes at her, then grinned impishly and said, "Don't tell me, let me guess... first time seeing a dragon?"

"A...d... dragon?" Erin stuttered. A dragon. And it talks? While most of her brain was stuck in neutral, a small part of her analyzed the situation. A dragon, which means another race in Equestria that humans didn't know about. And it talked, meaning another *intelligent* race in Equestria! Maybe it wasn't even the ponies in charge, but the dragons! Or, maybe Equestria was just one nation, and the dragons had their own country! And who knew what they were capable of? They had just barely started studying the ponies, dragons were a huge unknown!

"Yup, a dragon! That's me, thirty pounds of muscle and awesomeness!"

Erin blinked at the tiny dragon. "And you talk?" she said, still pretty shocked. The dragon rolled his eyes.

"Nope, it's all in your imagination. I'm Spike, by the way."

"Oh, um, Er... Sunflower. I'm Sunflower." She stood up shakily, hoping Spike didn't notice her near-slip when giving her name. "You're the librarian here?"

"Oh, no, that's Twilight Sparkle. She's out at the moment, though, hanging with a couple friends. I'm her number one assistant! You can come in, if you want." And, with that, Spike opened the door the rest of the way and stood aside, allowing Erin to step past him into the library.

She wasn't sure what she expected the inside of a tree to look like, but it definitely wasn't like this. It was much roomier, for one thing. The large, round center area with shelves carved, apparently, from the tree itself was surprising enough, but there was also a staircase going up. There were a few small windows letting light in, and a doorway into what looked like a kitchen going off to one side.

"Wooow," she said, looking around to take it all in. "This place is incredible!"

"Yeah, I guess, if you like books," Spike said, shrugging. "Anyway, what are you looking for?"

"Oh, ah.. well, I guess if you have a book that tells about the history of Equestria, that would be a good start. Also, I'd like one that has the history of Ponyville. And maybe an atlas? If you have one?"

"No problem, coming right up! Do you want detailed history, or an overview?"

"Well, probably an overview to start, and then I can get into the detailed stuff later," she said.

"Gotcha," Spike replied, and scooted off. He brought back the books one at a time, staggering a bit under

the weight of the atlas, placing them on a small desk.

"Did you want to read these here, or take them home with you?" he asked.

"Oh, I can check these out? Um..." she thought about her cramped room for a moment. Also, she had left her saddlebags behind, how would she get them back to her room? "Maybe I should read them here for now, then check them out later if I haven't finished them. Is that a problem?"

"Nah," the little dragon said. "We have ponies coming by all the time for research and stuff, and that's what this area is for. I've got some more chores to do, though, so I'll leave you to it. Just give a holler if you need me, and don't go upstairs... that's where Twilight's and my bedroom is, nothing else interesting up there."

"Okay, thank you!" Erin said. Spike waved and walked off, and she nosed open the first book, which happened to be the atlas, and started glancing through the various maps.

Equestria, as far as she could tell after studying the atlas for a few minutes, was a large country, but not the whole world. She blinked in surprise when she saw various other nations listed on the map. "The Griffon Kingdom" was one, "Zebrica", another, far across the ocean. There were several more as well, though those were the largest. There was also a section of the world map that was simply marked "Here there be dragons", which made Erin smile until she realized that, in this case, that was probably literally true. She studied the maps inside, and then decided that it was too much all at once to take in. Instead, she glanced briefly at each page, confident that her implants would record the data for Dr. Velchiek and the Harmonics team to go through at a later date.

Putting the atlas aside, she opened up Equestrian History by Sunfire Brand and started reading. Almost immediately, she was lost. Windigoes? Some sort of "magical" creature that fed off strife and created cold weather? Was this history, or mythology? She flipped through the book detailing the original founding of Equestria by the three pony tribes, stopping at the first mention of the "royal princesses". Apparently, originally, there were two royal princesses, though the book was vague on where they came from. Celestia, the princess of the day, and Luna, princess of the night.

Actually, on re-reading that section, Erin realized that the book was insinuating that the princesses were somehow *responsible* for the day and the night. She shook her head. She couldn't be sure how much of this was accurate and how much was fairy tale.

She continued reading, getting more and more confused as she went. Apparently, the royal sisters had shown up to battle some malevolent force or deity known as Discord, which was making ponies' lives miserable back then. They had shown up and imposed order, then took over the nation. It sounded like an allegorical tale to Erin. Probably Discord was some sort of internal strife between the pony tribes. And then the sisters showed up, most likely at the head of an army, and took things over, imposing order like the Romans did in Europe a couple thousand years ago.

It got odder still, though. There was, close to a thousand years before this book had been written, some sort of war between the two sisters over the throne. One of them, Luna, had started calling herself "Nightmare Moon". Apparently, she wasn't getting enough attention on the night shift, or something. Erin sympathized a little, and gave the princess points for picking an awesome-sounding super villain name. The book certainly had no trouble branding her as "Wicked" and "Evil", proving once again that history was written by the victors.

Then she realized something odd, and double checked the dates. The first mention of Celestia and Luna were centuries before the mention of Nightmare Moon. But the princesses in the Nightmare Moon story had the same names. Also, a rough illustration seemed to show that the princesses had both wings and horns, which would indicate, if they actually existed outside of myth, that they represented a fourth variant of ponies.

Erin read on. After the Nightmare Moon incident (where, apparently, Celestia had used something called "the Elements of Harmony" to banish her sister to the moon, whatever that meant), Equestria had been fairly peaceful. A few hundred years after Luna's rebellion, there was a near-war with the expanding Griffon kingdom, which another princess, apparently also called Celestia, managed to avert. That was by far the most interesting thing that had happened in the intervening years, at least according to this book.

Erin closed the book, thinking about what she'd read. She had no idea how recent the so-called history in the book was, and how much was myth and how much was real. She had a feeling that what she had just read was more along the lines of a holy book rather than a pure history. Maybe when the librarian returned she could ask her some more details about what actually happened.

She'd have to be careful, though. If these ponies had their mythology and history so intertwined like that, any indication that she didn't believe the same way could be seen as an indication of heresy, which could be... uncomfortable. She had a hard time imagining the ponies she had met so far as a torch-wielding mob, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Also, finding out the current date would probably help put things in perspective. She had no idea how contemporary the book she had just read was. The date stamped on the inside cover said that it had been published in "AF 1482", whatever that meant.

Sighing, she pushed the book aside and was just opening the History of Ponyville when the front door opened. Erin glanced over to see a light purple unicorn make her way inside, horn glowing as she lifted her saddlebags off with telekinesis. The unicorn had a straight dark blue mane with bangs, with a streak of purple next to another streak of magenta. Erin wondered briefly if that was natural, or an added highlight.

"Spiiike!" the strange unicorn called out, then noticed Erin looking at her. "Oh! Sorry, I didn't see you there. I'm Twilight Sparkle, and..."

Twilight trailed off, staring at her oddly. Erin cleared her throat.

"Um, I'm Sunflower. Spike let me in to do some studying, I hope that's ok?"

The mare blinked in apparent surprise, then smiled and said "Of course, that's perfectly fine. Um..."

Twilight's smile faded as she looked at her again. Erin started feeling distinctly uncomfortable. The fear that she had felt earlier in the day, when she still half-expected the ponies to notice something odd or weird about her, started trickling back. No other pony had looked at her in any way as if she were at all odd or different, but the way Twilight Sparkle was staring at her made her wonder if this one had noticed something all the others had missed.

As fresh fear coursed into her, Erin decided that it was time to go.

"Um, is it okay if I borrow this book?" she asked, pointing to The History of Ponyville. "I can bring it back tomorrow, I just wanted something to read tonight."

The unicorn shook her head as if to clear it, and when she looked at Erin again, her expression seemed perfectly friendly. And yet, she never stopped staring at her, a look of mild confusion on her face.

"Of course!" she told Erin. "You can actually keep it for a week, if you want, just bring it back by then."

"O-kay," Erin said, then edged her way around the unicorn, placing the book on her back behind her withers. "I'll see you when I return the book, I guess."

"Oh, sure, that's fine." Twilight was still looking at her.

"Um... So, have a good day, then," Erin said, backing nervously out the door.

"You too!" the unicorn said.

"Um... 'kay, bye!" And with that, Erin turned and walked quickly away from the library. Once she'd gotten about twenty feet away, she glanced back. A chill ran down her spine as she saw Twilight Sparkle standing in the doorway, staring directly at her with a small frown on her face. She returned her gaze forward and took the first side street she could, turning left out of the unicorn's field of vision.

All the way back to the Guest House, Erin felt like she was being followed. She kept glancing behind herself, but nobody was there, at least that she could see. Still, she walked quickly, being careful to keep the book centered on her back. With all the glancing behind her, though, she quickly managed to get lost. The formerly idyllic Ponyville now seemed vaguely threatening to her, and she thought that some of the ponies she passed were now giving her odd looks, too. Hopefully, it was just her imagination.

Finally, as the sun was starting to set, she found herself back in the town square again. Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned until she found the Guest House, then trotted up to it, pushing the door open with her hoof.

She stepped into the common area and froze in surprise as she saw a stallion there, reclined on one of the sofas, apparently reading the newspaper. The stallion was an earth pony, with a light brown coat and a black mane. He had what looked like a sack tied with twine on his flank. He looked up as Erin entered, a smile on his muzzle and a look of cold calculation in his eyes.

"Well, howdy, miss! I take it you're another member of our happy Guest House family?"

Erin nodded, too shaken up from the encounter with Twilight Sparkle and getting lost in town to really want to talk, but not wanting to be rude to the new pony.

"My name is Quick Sale, I'm a traveling salespony from Maresburgh, east of Hoofington. Or, I should say, originally from Marseburgh, because I'm kind of from all over right now. What's your name, pretty filly?"

Erin decided she wasn't fond of the stallion's grin. It seemed just a little too familiar, with more than a hint of a leer. It was an unwelcome reminder that, even though she didn't find ponies to be attractive in the slightest, that didn't change the fact that she currently *was* a pony, or at least shaped like one, and the feeling may not be mutual.

"*Ugh, I really, really don't want to deal with this right now,*" she thought.

"My name is Sunflower. And yes, I'm new here, and pretty worn out from traveling today. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll just head to my bedroom right away."

"Well, of course, pretty lady. Just let me know if you ever want... company," he said smoothly, with an accompanying eyebrow-waggle that caused Erin to flinch with repulsion.

Eyes fixed firmly on the floor, she marched past Quick Sale and up to the door of her room, opening it quickly. As she went in, she looked back and noticed that the stallion was looking her way.

"*Oh, god, is he staring at my rump?*" she thought with a feeling of queasy dread working through her stomach. He glanced up, saw her looking at him, and winked. Erin managed to swallow a scream of horror, which instead came out as a strangled mew of disgust. She entered her room and shut the door, barely managing to avoid slamming it. She heard Quick Sale chuckling to himself on the other side of the door. Taking a deep breath, she held it for a moment, then breathed it out, shuddering.

So far, she had met two male ponies. One of them had been too shy to talk, the other was an over-the-top slimeball. Hopefully they represented the absolute extreme ranges of the stallion population, or this could end up being a very tiresome stay in Ponyville.

She flopped down in the bed, closing her eyes and just concentrating on breathing. It had been an eventful day. Not that long ago, she had been on Earth, her home. Since then, she had gone through a portal into another world, met talking alien ponies, some of whom could fly, others of whom could use telekinesis, and others of whom were apparently disgusting perverts. She also met a talking bipedal dragon and an overly curious librarian that had made her distinctly uncomfortable with her scrutiny.

It had been a *long* day so far. She decided that she would give herself a quick brushing to calm herself down and finally relieve her itchy back. She made her way over to her saddlebags and started unpacking them, sticking the blankets and many of the supplies in the drawers of the bureau. When she got to the food that Applejack had packed for her, a quick rumbling in her stomach reminded her that lunch had been hours ago now, and that it was starting to get late in the evening.

She grabbed her brush with her mouth and began to brush out her coat, then her tail. Switching the brush to her fore-hooves, she brushed her mane and neck. By the time she had gotten the worst of the day's tangles out, she was feeling much better and more relaxed. She snacked quickly on more of the bread and jam from the lunch earlier, and it was almost as delicious as it had been earlier that day.

Finally, feeling calm, well-fed, and comfortable, she decided to forgo brushing her teeth so as to avoid another upsetting encounter with Quick Sale, and to try and get some sleep. She lay down in the bed, slipping between the sheets and closing her eyes. Something was nagging at her, though, something she had forgotten...

Oh, yes. Her daily journal. Quietly, so as to not be overheard through the walls of her room, she started to whisper.

"Erin's journal, day one. Dear Dr. Velchiek and the rest of the Harmonics team. This is the end of my first day here in what we called Ponyworld, which we now know is called Equestria. Or, at least this nation is called Equestria, because I've found out that there are other nations here as well. After having met a talking dragon, and seeing places on the map called 'The Griffon Kingdom' and such, I've come to the conclusion that ponies are *not*, as previously suspected, the only intelligent form of life here on this world. Though, it remains to be seen if the 'Griffons' are actually griffons, like from our mythology, or something different, perhaps even ponies calling themselves 'griffons' in order to sound tougher or something."

"That makes our task much more complex, as I'm sure you know. Instead of trying to visit those other nations, I think it's wiser if I stay here and learn as much as I can about them from the locals, and from their books. Though, that librarian makes me nervous. Maybe I can go visit the library when she's not there. I'm sure there are plenty of times that she leaves for errands and the like, and I only have to be there long enough to return books and check out new ones."

"So far, everyone... or, 'everypony', to use their vernacular, has been really nice, with the exception of a certain slimy sales-pony who shall remain nameless, and please slap Doctor Edwards for me if he says anything inappropriate about my encounter with him."

Erin rolled over to make herself more comfortable, snuggling deeper into the blanket with a contented sigh.

"This nation is apparently a monarchy, with the center of power in the city of Canterlot, located to the northeast of Ponyville. Apparently there are at least two princesses again, though the history book I read indicated that there was only one, after the second princess was banished after a failed coup. It seems like the name "Celestia" must be passed down from generation to generation. I'm not sure if it's actually a name, or if it's a title. I'll try to find that out.

"Also, the Apple family has some amazing bakers in it. I really wish you could have tried those pies and other treats, they were incredible!"

Erin yawned hugely all of a sudden, and her eyes felt too heavy to hold open much longer.

"Anyway, it's been a long and tiring day. Even though it's a bit early, I'm going to sleep now. That's the end of day one. More info to come in the morning. Signing off, Erin Olsen, aka Sunflower."

Her eyes closed, and she was asleep seconds later.

Chapter 8: Job hunting

The sun was just cresting over the horizon as Erin galloped along in the meadow just outside of Ponyville. She had always enjoyed going for a morning run when she had still been human, but that was something that she hadn't really been able to do once she started working for Project Harmonics. She had missed this, running through the quiet mornings as life was just waking up. She had a feeling of both seclusion and of connection to the vastness of the world around her.

It was slightly chilly this morning, as autumn was apparently approaching, though it was not yet cold enough for frost. The crisp air invigorated her as it rushed through her nose and lungs, heavy with the scent of dampness and growing things. The dew-laden grass brushed against her legs as she ran, leaving her soaking wet halfway up her legs. In the distance, she heard birdsong as the first of the morning birds began greeting the new day. It all made her smile with the simple joy of it. The morning was so perfect that it was almost like it was carefully crafted by a master artisan.

Finally, feeling pleasantly tired and warmed by the exertion, she trotted back over the bridge and into town, walking back to the Guest House once again. She noted the first stirrings in the Ponyville market, as yawning ponies ventured outside to start the process of opening their stores. The sweat cooling on her back and flanks caused her to shiver, and she decided that it was well past time for a shower.

One thing she'd noticed when she'd left the Guest House that morning was that the door wasn't locked. It did have a lock installed; just a simple slide bolt on the inside. But, judging by the look of it, it was apparently seldom used. She wasn't sure if that was because the Guest House was semi-public, or if ponies in general were just that trusting.

She stopped by her room to grab her brush and other toiletries, and then made her way down the hallway towards the bathroom. She quickly snagged a towel in her teeth from the linen closet as she went. Luckily, it was early enough that the shower was unused. Dropping her grooming supplies, she went in, slid the bolt on the door, and started up the water. The pressure for the shower was a bit lower than she liked, but still more than sufficient to spray yesterday's dirt and this morning's sweat from her coat. She sighed in contentment as the hot water massaged her muscles, relaxing away aches that she hadn't really been aware of before.

Conscious of the other guests staying in the house, she didn't linger too long. She scrubbed herself quickly and shampooed and rinsed her mane and tail, and was soon stepping out of the tub into the steamy air. She dried herself as well as she could with the towel, and then brushed her teeth. Following that, she quickly combed out her mane, tail and coat.

Once cleaned and groomed, she took the towel out back, filled up the washtub, poured a measure of soap into it, and scrubbed the towel out quickly, placing it on the line to dry. Then, with a rumbling in her belly, she retired to her room and made a quick snack out of what was left of the parcel that Applejack had left her the previous day, which included another delicious apple, a couple of apple tarts, and the last of the bread and jam.

Finally, she felt ready to face the day in Ponyville. She slipped on her now mostly empty saddlebags, in case she had more things to carry, and left her room. The rest of the house still seemed to be asleep, so she proceeded as quietly as she could out the door once again, closing it softly.

By this time, the Ponyville open-air market was a bit livelier, as shopkeepers were setting up stands and stalls around the market square. Not much business was being done yet, just a few early morning shoppers eager to beat the rush, but every pony she saw was still friendly and smiling, though sometimes the smile morphed into a yawn.

With some surprise, she saw that Applejack had her own stall set up, selling apples and a small selection of baked goods. She trotted over to see her, and to thank her again for her earlier hospitality.

"Ah, shoot, sugarcube, it weren't no big deal," the orange pony said with a slight blush. "Did you get all settled in okay?"

"Oh, yeah! The Guest House is amazingly comfortable. I can't believe it's so nice for how little it costs!"

"Well, we may not be all that fancy here in Ponyville," Applejack said proudly. "But we sure do know how to treat a guest."

They chatted for a bit longer, but Erin started feeling a little uncomfortable as ponies started lining up at AJ's stall. Unwilling to get in the way of her business, she excused herself to go look for work, promising the farm pony that she'd stop by again when she had the chance.

The Help Wanted board was right where Meadowlark had said it would be, and Erin spent some time reading it. She disregarded a recruitment poster for the Equestrian Royal Guard, which asked her "Do you have what it takes to join the Elite of the Elite?" Erin decided that, on the balance, no, she did not.

She then saw an ad for help with gardening, posted by a mare named Carrot Top. Studying the address for a moment against her map in order to memorize the location, she trotted off. She'd never really gardened before, but honestly, how hard could it be?

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"I'm so sorry. I just don't know how this happened..." Erin said, tears in her eyes. A badly-kinked garden hose lay between her front hooves, looking deceptively innocent.

"It's... Fine. Really, don't worry about it," Carrot Top said, scraping the mud off of her flanks. "I don't think I'll be needing any more... *help* from you today, though."

Erin walked away morosely. She glanced back once to see the mare shaking clods of dirt out of her orange mane. Who knew that gardening could be so tough?

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Back at the Help Wanted board, Erin scoped out the remaining jobs, eliminating any that had anything to do with gardening. She saw another likely job that was asking for help re-thatching several roofs in town, specifically stating that they'd take young, untrained individuals.

"Okay." Erin thought, "Time for round two. This shouldn't be too hard!"

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Click-click-click, click-click, click-click, click, click... click... click...

Erin opened her eyes again as the wheel finally slowed to a halt. The cart full of dry straw for the thatching was only half visible in the street, as the front half was protruding out of the side of one of the houses they had been intending to thatch today. The foreman, a green earth pony named Burly Bale, took off his hardhat briefly to massage his temple with his hoof. He then surveyed the damage before him. There were a couple of small stands knocked over, some slight damage to one house, and a nearly-empty rain barrel that had been knocked over. Fortunately, no ponies had been hurt.

Erin stood in front of him, trembling slightly in shame and humiliation. She opened her mouth to apologize, but green stallion held up a hoof to cut her off.

"Just go," he said.

Head hung low, Erin walked glumly away.

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By the time she returned to the Help Wanted board, Erin had managed to reclaim some of her confidence. She stared again at the board. *Something* in here had to be a job that she could manage. Grimacing in concentration, she looked at, then rejected, post after post. Finally, she lit upon something that she knew she could do. She'd done it in college, after all, to earn some extra money.

Once again memorizing an address against her map, she trotted off, determined that *this* time, she'd be able to do it. After all, it's not like painting houses was *hard*, or anything.

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In a foul mood, Erin once again returned to the board. She had just returned from her second shower of the day, this one administered from the end of a garden hose, rinsing the white paint off of her hindquarters and tail. She still felt pretty damp, but at least *this* time, the only pony that she had messed up had been herself.

"Oh, yeah, she thought, snorting ironically. "I'm doing much better now."

Trying to regain some optimism, she once again started scanning the board. Aha! Some couple named the Cakes needed baby-sitting. How hard could that...

Erin caught herself quickly. Each time she had thought that, it had ended up in disaster. She shuddered briefly and decided not to take a chance on babysitting quite yet. Besides, did pony babies wear diapers? How would she change them if they did? She didn't exactly relish the thought of changing a diaper using her mouth.

One ad caught her eye, yellowed and faded, covered up with newer ads. After she moved the newer ones aside with a hoof, she stared blankly at a very familiar-looking purple and orange logo in stunned disbelief. She had to blink several times before she could make out what it said: "Fet-Ex looking for dependable ponies for deliveries!" followed by an address to apply to, and the name of the local manager, Mr. Speedy Parcel. Erin marveled at the coincidence at how a company could have such a similar name and logo, and yet be on a completely different world. Whether or not she got the job, she decided that she had to check this out.

As she headed towards the street listed, she determinedly stopped herself from thinking in any way about how easy this would be.

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The bell above the door chimed as Erin opened it. The interior of the Fet-Ex store was slightly dingy and dusty, with only one thin, elderly stallion standing behind the counter.

"Hello, and welcome to Fetlock Express!" he said, clearing up one small mystery regarding the name of the store. "Did you have a package you wanted delivered?"

"No," Erin replied, and the gray stallion behind the counter sagged in apparent disappointment. "I've come to apply for the job? My name is Sunflower."

"Oh, that's fantastic! We could use the help!" The gangly old stallion perked up and walked around from behind the counter. He was wearing a bright purple jacket with brass buttons, under which his coat was a dark brown in color. Under his peaked purple cap he had a steel-gray mane, which matched his tail. On his flank was a cutie mark that looked like a plain brown package with, for some reasons, flames shooting out the back of it. "My name is Mr. Parcel, and it's a real pleasure to meet you, young filly. Now, have you been in town long?"

"Actually, I just arrived yesterday. I'm staying in the Ponyville Guest House for now, and I needed work. I wouldn't mind being a delivery pony, and I'm willing to work hard!"

"Hmm... well, I don't usually hire ponies without references, but we're really short-hooved these days. I've been having trouble hiring anypony, so I've been losing business to the REPS."

"Reps?" Erin asked, confused.

"Royal Equestrian Postal Service," Mr. Parcel said, pointing a hoof towards the window. Erin glanced outside and saw a large, ornate building across the street. A gray pegasus pony with a bright yellow mane and wearing a navy blue uniform was just walking out the front door, adjusting her heavily-weighted saddlebags. She glanced up, saw Erin looking, and waved merrily before winging off into the sky.

Mr. Parcel sighed.

"It's a darned shame you aren't a pegasus, but I'm more than happy to sign you up on a trial basis. The pay for now is twenty bits a day, up to thirty if you should work out and are still around after a month. Does that sound good to you?"

"Oh, absolutely! Though, um, would I be able to get paid soon? I mean, I don't have any bits right now. I'm okay for the moment, but after tomorrow the Guest House will start charging me. Not to mention that I'll need to buy food soon."

"Well, I'm sure I can see my way to paying you for a day's work at the end of your shift. That should give you enough bits to get by until payday. That's on Fridays, by the way. Now, come on into the back room, and let's see if we've got a spare uniform that will fit ya!"

Erin trotted after him, excited to finally have a job, though she didn't relish the thought of having to wear a jacket like the one the old stallion was wearing. She was fairly sure the bright purple would clash with her mane and coat. Mr. Parcel nosed around in a few old bins, finally pulling out a jacket and matching pair of heavy-duty saddlebags to go with it. Erin struggled briefly to get into the uniform, and when she finally popped her head out of the collar, the old stallion plopped a hat onto her head.

"And there we go!" he said, sounding pleased. "Welcome to the family! There's just three of us right now, including you, so we've got a tremendous backlog. Do you know your way around town very well?"

"Nope," Erin said cheerfully, "but I do have a map!" She walked over to the locker that Mr. Parcel had given her to hang up her own saddlebags and took the map out with her teeth, tucking it in to her new saddlebag.

"That'll do. You'll eventually get to know your way around. Come on, now, and we'll get you loaded up and on your way out."

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Mr. Parcel seemed pleased as Erin trotted in through the door for the third time that day, having already made two delivery runs.

"My goodness, miss, you sure do work hard! I hope you're pacing yourself, and not just doing this to impress me."

"Oh, no, I could keep this up all day!" Erin replied cheerfully. As she had gotten more familiar with the layout of the town, she had managed to pick up her pace considerably, and needed to consult the map less and less often. "Although, I could use a lunch break soon," she said, as her stomach rumbled briefly.

"Well, I'll tell you what, let's give you an hour off. Oh, did you say you were short on bits earlier?" At Erin's nod of confirmation, he reached down and pulled up a small, jingling bag and tossed it to her. Erin caught the drawstring in her teeth. "There you go. Half a day's wages for half a day's work! Ten bits, you should be able to pick up something to eat with that. But first... come on in the back room and we'll get you out of those saddlebags!"

Erin nodded and trotted after him, taking out the signature sheet as she went. She had been given a clipboard with pen attached to it by a length of string. Every delivery required a signature, and the sheet attached to the clipboard had a list of names and addresses, as well as tracking numbers for the deliveries, which mostly turned out to be small packages. Each time she had completed her deliveries, she had returned to the office, dropped off the old form and picked up a new one, along with a fresh batch of deliveries in her saddlebags.

So far, the ponies of Ponyville remained pretty friendly, with the exception of a few that had obviously been woken up by Erin's knocking, or otherwise interrupted. Still, even those ponies that seemed the most annoyed at the interruption had still thanked her, which was nice.

In the event of no pony being home, she left a prepared self-adhesive note that told the resident of the delivery attempt on the door, and checked the box marked "Absent" on her sign-in sheet. There had been just a handful, or rather, a hoof-full, of those, though.

As she walked past the front desk, she dropped her latest sheet into the "Delivery Completed" basket, and placed the clipboard on top of a stack of similar boards on the counter-top. She then followed Mr. Parcel through the swinging doors into the back room. Once in the back, she struggled out of her over-sized, heavy-duty saddlebags and back into her more normal sized ones, dropping the bag of bits into one of them. She opted to keep the coat on for now, since it was too big of a pain to get on and off casually. The hat, however, got left behind. Then, thanking Mr. Parcel, she trotted out of the store, completely content with her current lot in life.

She wasn't sure where to go for lunch, so she decided that she would take some time to go see Applejack in the town square. Her deliveries had taken her past the apple seller several times, but the orange pony had been too busy selling her apples to notice her. Erin had noted that there seemed to be quite a line for Applejack's goods, which was not surprising, considering the quality of the apples and baked goods.

As she entered the town square, she saw that Applejack had a customer. Only one, though; a familiar poofy-maned pink pony was standing at the front of AJ's stall and staring at the farm pony with intense suspicion etched into her features. AJ, in return, was glaring back at her. As Erin approached, she heard the orange pony speaking angrily to the pink one.

"I'm tellin' ya fer the last time, Pinkie Pie, I ain't hidin' nothin'! Ya got that?"

"Well, my Pinkie Sense is telling me that *somepony* is hiding a really big super-duper-important secret!" Pinkie retorted. Then she saw Erin approaching out of the corner of her eye, and turned to wave at her, the suspicion replaced instantly by a big, sunny smile. "Oh, hi Sunflower! Are you still expecting that welcome party?"

"Hi Pinkie Pie. Well, I wasn't a minute ago, but I am now that you reminded me."

"Oh, darn it!" Pinkie said, pouting. "I wasted the opportunity! Oh, and there goes my Pinkie sense again! If it's not Applejack, then..." Pinkie trailed off thoughtfully. Just then, a rainbow streaked overhead. Pinkie's eyes narrowed back into their former suspicious manner.

"Rainbow Dash!" she growled, scowling fiercely at the rapidly-receding prismatically-maned blur. Then her face popped back into its normal cheerfulness. "Well, I gotta go force a confession out of Dashie. See you guys later, and sorry for bugging you, Applejack!"

"I swear," Applejack said with a sigh as Pinkie bounced away, "I don't know what goes on in that girl's head sometimes."

Erin laughed at that. Pinkie's behavior did seem a little erratic.

"Anyway, what can I do ya for, Sunflower?"

"Well, I just wanted to mention that I've got a job now!"

"I figured that, what with the uniform an' all," AJ replied with a grin.

"Also, I was just starting my lunch break, and I was wondering if you knew of any places around here that were good but not too expensive? I got some of my pay, but it's only ten bits."

"Well, ten bits'll get you a pretty fancy meal, if'n youh wanted to spend it all at once. But I reckon' you want to keep most of it?" At Erin's nod, Applejack continued, "Well, there's the Cafe Kartie over yonder, they make a pretty mean daffodil and daisy sandwich, and not too pricey, neither."

"Well, that sounds good!" Erin said, in spite of her reservations about a flower sandwich. Just then, several ponies started approaching Applejack's stall, so Erin quickly

asked about the cost of the apples. It wouldn't hurt to have a few for a snack later on, after all.

"Those are four for a bit, or a dozen for two, take yer pick!" Applejack said cheerfully.

"Oh, well, heck... I guess I'll get a dozen, that sounds like a pretty good deal!"

Applejack helped load the apples into Erin's saddlebags and then waved before turning back to her new customers. Erin waved back, and made her way in the direction Applejack had pointed.

A few moments later, she was sitting on a bale of straw at a table, sipping a glass of ice water, and looking through the menu curiously. There were, unsurprisingly, a large number of various salads for sale, as well as fresh plates of veggies and fruits. There were also a variety of appetizers, such as hay fries, egg rolls, cheese curds, and the like, and a truly stunning variety of soups. Erin found the sandwich section and decided to give the daffodil and daisy sandwich a shot.

A surprisingly short time later, the waiter brought out a plate that had a fairly large sandwich on it, along with a gigantic pile of what the menu had called "hay fries". Erin stared briefly, overwhelmed. The portion sizes were more than generous, and the whole meal had cost her only three bits so far.

She delicately picked up the sandwich and peeked inside. Definitely daffodils and daisies, all right, but no stems were in evidence. Instead, the flowers rested on a bed of what appeared to be an oddly broad-leaved variety of grass, and the whole thing had a slightly spicy smelling sauce drizzled lightly over it. Erin took an experimental nibble, and the flavors exploded in her mouth.

She wondered briefly if the food here in Equestria would ever stop amazing her, or if she was in for a steady diet of amazing foods. She wasn't sure what the sauce was made of, but it complimented the greenery beautifully, and the bread was thick, soft and wholesome, with an almost nutty flavor. Erin did her best to not simply gobble the whole thing down like a greedy pig, but it was hard to avoid it. Instead, she tried the hay fries.

Well, she thought after a moment, I guess the only surprise here is how flavorless these are, compared to everything else around here. She nabbed another hoof-full and munched on them. *Still, they seem to be pretty addictive.*

Erin chewed her way through a few more fries, and then took another bite of the sandwich. Leaning back on her straw-bale seat and occasionally helping herself to another hoof-full of the fries, she glanced up at the sky. It still amazed her to see pegasi flying around, and once again she found herself regretting that she couldn't have been one of them. It would have been a blast, being a pegasus. To be able to get up above the rooftops, and see the world spread out before her. To ride the air currents, and to experience that kind of freedom. To be able to push the clouds around with her hooves...

Erin blinked, staring, not really sure that she'd seen what she thought she'd seen. She shook her head, and then looked again. Above her, a light purple pegasus with a blond mane was maneuvering a cloud over the town, pushing on it with both of her front hooves. Erin stared in awe as the pegasus brought the sullen-looking black cloud over to a small patch of grass in the town square, leaving it suspended just twenty or so feet off the ground.

Then her jaw dropped open as the pegasus flew to the top of the cloud and... jumped up and down on it. A short burst of rain dropped from the cloud, which faded from black, to gray, and then to white. Nodding in satisfaction, the pegasus flew underneath the cloud and pushed it back up to the sky, returning a minute later with another sullen-looking black raincloud for a different patch of grass.

Erin was having trouble believing the evidence of her own eyes once again. She had dismissed previous talk about pegasi "working on the weather" or similar as just some form of hyperbole or euphemism, assuming that the pegasi in question worked in meteorology. That had made sense to her, seeing as how they could get right up to the clouds for observation.

Seeing this, though, Erin was in a state of pure wonderment. The unicorn's telekinesis had been an amazing, though expected, thing for her to see. This, though... this was purely magical to her. She looked around for more pegasi, and saw that many were doing the same or similar things, maneuvering rainclouds over various patches of vegetation and triggering a brief downpour, or moving clouds out of the way of the sun so that the plants below could get plenty of light.

Erin realized that she was smiling, a big ear-to-ear grin that she couldn't seem to control. She probably would have spent hours staring at the pegasi in wonder if it hadn't been for her waiter breaking her concentration by asking her if she needed anything else.

She jerked her attention back to her meal, surprised to see that she had somehow managed to finish off the tasteless-but-addicting hay fries without even realizing it. Half of her sandwich remained on the plate, though Erin felt absolutely no hunger at the moment. The waiter bagged up the sandwich for her, and Erin paid the bill, leaving an extra bit as a tip. Counting the apples she had bought earlier, she was now down to four bits. Time to get back to work and earn some more money!

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Most of the rest of the day passed without incident, though Erin still would stare raptly at the occasional pegasus moving the clouds around, whenever she happened to see one.

One of the things that had been an unintended side-benefit of taking this job had been a discovery of the current date, which put her previous studies of the history of Equestria into some context. Apparently, the ponies used the same names for the months and days of the week, and today was Wednesday, September 24th, 1507 AF. She still had no idea what the "AF" stood for, though.

One of her deliveries had been to a small cottage on the edge of what the locals called the Everfree Forest. Mr. Parcel had very sternly required a promise from her that she wouldn't enter the forest under any circumstances. Erin had given it, but a spark of curiosity had started burning in her. Mr. Parcel had told her only that the forest was extremely dangerous, and full of deadly creatures and plants, but hadn't really said much else about it.

"Nopony knows much about it, because nopony with any common sense ever goes in there," he had said.

Erin had brought the delivery, which consisted of several large packages, out to the cottage. The nearby forest did look pretty foreboding, in a general sense. Erin realized that it was the same creepy-looking forest that she had seen the previous day, when she had first arrived in Equestria. She decided that exploration could wait after all, and knocked on the cottage door in order to complete her delivery.

The pony in question, named Fluttershy, hadn't answered at first. Erin had been about to leave a note and leave when the door cracked open slightly, and a timid voice said, "Yes?"

"Hi, are you Fluttershy? I have some packages for you."

"Oh, thank you," the pony said softly, opening the door and stepping out. She was a lovely thing, a soft yellow with a flowing pink mane that hung over her eyes. Erin could tell instantly that the "shy" part of her name was spot-on, as the pony both refused to meet her eyes, and also was apparently trying to hide behind her own mane.

"This must be the medicines and supplies I ordered two weeks ago," Fluttershy continued. "Will it usually take this long to get deliveries?"

"Sorry about that. Fet-Ex has been a little understaffed recently. I just started today, and we're catching up. According to the manifest, though, it looks like this arrived back at the office last week, on Tuesday."

"Oh, I see. That's good. Luckily, I still had plenty of supplies on-hoof, so no little animals had to go without treatment."

Erin glanced around as Fluttershy signed for her packages, noticing for the first time that there were a large number of creatures around, some small and fuzzy, and some small and feathery.

"Are you a veterinarian, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, um, yes. I take care of all of the creatures around Ponyville that I can, so it's very important that I get my supplies. Do you think that they'll come faster now...?" Fluttershy trailed off, looking uncomfortable at having to have been so "forceful". Erin shook her head. Something about this pony just made her want to give her a great big hug.

"Well," Erin said, "like I said, I started now, and my manager seems to think I'm doing a good job, so things should start coming in much faster. I'll tell you what, though. As long as I work there, if I see a package come in for you, I'll make it a priority to get it out to you as fast as I can, okay?"

"Really?" Fluttershy said, looking her in the eye for the first time. At first, she just looked surprised, and then suddenly a big smile broke out on her face. Erin blinked as a pair of wings unfolded from the pony's back and flapped a couple of times. She hadn't realized that Fluttershy was a pegasus until just then.

"Oh, thank you so much!" Fluttershy said, looking genuinely happy. "That is so amazingly nice of you! Could I offer you some tea? I just brewed some up, it should still be hot."

"Oh, thank you, Fluttershy. I would love to, but I still have lots of deliveries to make. How about the next time I come out, if time permits?"

"That's a deal. And thank you, um...?"

"Oh! Sorry, my name is Sunflower. It's a pleasure to meet you, Fluttershy, and I hope to see you again soon!"

"Thank you, Sunflower, and I'm looking forward to it!"

Feeling good about her encounter with the shy pony, and having drawn her a little out of her shell, Erin trotted back to the Fet-Ex office, humming a happy little tune.

Erin made several more runs that afternoon, much to Mr. Parcel's evident pleasure. Apparently, she had already moved through almost three days' worth of backlog in one day.

"I'll tell you what," he said as she returned from her fifth trip after lunch, "I'll just make this your last run, and you can call it quits for the day. Just drop off this last order, and I'll pay you and you can have the rest of the night off."

"Oh, are you sure? I'm okay to keep going for a while!"

"It's okay, girl. Honestly, as hard as you're working, we'll be caught up in no time! Keep this up, and I'll knock your trial period down to two weeks, instead of a month. Now, where's that manifest?"

As Mr. Parcel started digging around through the paperwork on his desk, Erin started humming to herself, rocking back and forth on her hooves. After the day's earlier disasters at finding work, it was nice to find a job that she not only could do, but apparently could excel at. At the moment, it felt like nothing could spoil her good mood.

"Ah, there we go!" the old stallion said triumphantly, pulling a shipping manifest out of a folder. "One load of books, seven in all, going to the Ponyville library, to the attention of one Twilight Sparkle."

Erin stopped rocking abruptly.

"Well, dang."

Author's Notes:

Some art for this chapter by Lightfalls:



Chapter 9: A Slightly Awkward tea

Erin stood outside the treehouse library and adjusted her saddlebags nervously. Then she adjusted her hat. Then she adjusted her uniform. As she started adjusting her saddlebags once again, she finally admitted to herself that no amount of adjusting would make her less nervous about facing the scrutiny of the Ponyville librarian once again. It briefly occurred to her that she could simply quit her job, but she shoved that thought roughly aside. Gulping down her fear, she knocked a hoof against the door and stood there awkwardly.

Any hopes she might have entertained that nobody would be home were dashed within seconds as the door creaked open. This time it wasn't a small dragon answering the door, it was the lavender librarian herself.

"Oh!" Twilight Sparkle said, obviously surprised to see her. "Um, Sunflower, right? My friend Applejack has nice things to say—"

"Packages!" Erin interrupted, shrilly and awkwardly. Internally, she flinched at her own clumsiness. "Um, I mean, I have a delivery for you. Sorry." She tried smiling at Twilight, but she had a feeling that it came off as a really awkward grin. "Ah, I'm new," she said, intending that to be some sort of an explanation. She gave herself an angry mental kick. Could she act like any bigger of an idiot?

"Oh? Oh! These must be the books I ordered, how wonderful! I was starting to think they'd never arrive!" The librarian's horn glowed with a purple nimbus and the packages lifted themselves out of Erin's saddlebags. Simultaneously, the pen lifted itself off of the clipboard and scribbled a quick signature.

Erin snatched the clipboard away as soon as Twilight's telekinetic aura stopped surrounding it and stuffed it into her saddlebag, intending to beat a hasty retreat.

"Well, you have a good night, I'll be going now, enjoy your books and thanks for using Fetlock Express!" she said, while backing away and grinning like a loon. Twilight Sparkle simply stared at her with a measuring expression.

"Sunflower, stop." She said once Erin stopped babbling long enough to take a breath. "I'd like you to come inside, if you don't mind."

"Oh, ah... I really should... I have work... It's getting late?"

"Just for a few minutes. I'm sure you can spare the time. Applejack is a friend of mine, and she mentioned that she knew you and liked you, and I like to know my friend's friends."

Erin continued to simply stare at her. Twilight smiled and stepped to one side of the doorway, leaving enough room for her to enter.

"Just a quick chat. I promise."

Erin saw no polite way to refuse. Her options were to either bolt and run screaming through the streets of Ponyville, which was tempting but would draw unwanted attention, or go inside and have a "chat" with this incredibly strange unicorn.

"O-kay. Thanks." She stepped gingerly past the lavender mare and back into the large round main room once again. She saw Spike on a ladder with a feather duster, whisking away busily at a shelf full of books. Twilight called out as they entered and asked him if he wouldn't mind bringing in two cups of tea, and the little dragon cheerfully complied. Twilight watched him leave with a tender smile on his face.

"He's my number one assistant, you know. He's been with me since he hatched, such a sweet little guy," she said, as she settled down into a cushion by a low table. Twilight's horn glowed again as she picked up and started fiddling with an old-fashioned quill pen.

Erin took off her empty saddlebags and lowered herself awkwardly down on a cushion on the opposite side of the table, her eyes darting around the room as if looking for a means to escape. Twilight just smiled at her, though, and told her that she should relax.

"Please," she said, shaking her head, "I really just wanted to learn a little more about you, that's all. AJ said you didn't say much about where you were from, is that right?"

"Um, yeah. Things were... very different there." Erin decided that her best course of action was the one she had followed the day before when talking to Applejack. Evade, but avoid outright lies and fabrications. If this unicorn was the head librarian, she'd be extremely hard to fool even with a good lie, and Erin didn't know enough about Equestria to make up anything resembling a good lie.

"Different, how?" Twilight asked, tilting her head curiously. They were briefly interrupted by Spike, as he brought out two teacups on a tray that also held some lemon slices and a bowl of sugar cubes. "Thank you, Spike!"

"No prob, Twi!" he said with a grin, then shimmied back up the ladder to start dusting again.

"Would you like any lemon or sugar with your tea?" the librarian asked Erin, as she put down the quill and levitated one of the teacups over to her while simultaneously picking up her own.

"Ah... I'll take three sugars, please."

"A bit of a sweet tooth, eh?" Twilight Sparkle said with a chuckle, levitating three lumps of sugar out of the bowl and delicately placing them in the cup before setting the cup and saucer on the table in front of her. Erin delicately picked the cup up in her forehooves and took a sip. The tea was very nice, a blend she'd never tasted before, a bit more peppery than she was expecting but still very good. And very hot. She placed the cup back in the saucer, resolving to let it cool a bit before taking another sip.

She glanced up and saw that Twilight was stirring her own cup with a spoon, wielded by her magic, while looking at her curiously.

"I'm sorry, you were saying how your home town was different?" the librarian asked.

"Ah, actually, I hadn't, but... Well, to start with, there were only normal ponies." Erin flinched at that, thinking that it probably sounded like the equivalent of pony racism. "Um, sorry. I mean, no unicorns or pegasi."

"Applejack mentioned that, yes. It's very strange, but not completely unheard of. There have been the occasional villages that try to go it alone, villages of just earth ponies, unicorns, or pegasi, but usually they're pretty small and don't last very long. And the ones that do, like Cloudsdale, tend to have cities or towns very close by that they can barter with."

"Cloudsdale?" Erin asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard of it?" Erin shook her head, and Twilight continued, "It's a large pegasus pony town, not too far from Ponyville. They manufacture a lot of the regional weather there. Of course, since it's in the clouds, it's pretty hard for non-pegasi to visit!"

It suddenly occurred to Erin that if she could keep the unicorn talking, then maybe she could avoid having to give any answers as well as gathering information at the same time. She resolved to ask as many questions as she could.

The unicorn chuckled, remembering fondly, "Of course, when Rainbow Dash entered the Best Young Flier competition, I was able to find a spell that let most of the rest of us walk on clouds, so we could go and cheer her on!"

Erin blinked slowly. Twilight was talking about magic and spells as if it were perfectly normal, and it seemed to be a lot different than the simple levitation that she had assumed most ponies meant when they said "magic". Erin's skepticism kicked in and immediately wanted to reject the very notion of "magic" and "spells", but then she remembered two things:

First, Twilight Sparkle, and every other pony she'd run into since she got here, apparently believed in magic. In order to fit in, therefore, it would be best if she at least pretended to believe in it as well.

Second, and more disturbing, was the fact that she had spent a good chunk of the day watching pegasi pushing clouds around just to water the grass. While there was almost definitely a rational, scientific explanation for all of that, she still couldn't help but wonder if, just maybe, magic really worked here.

It would sure explain a lot.

Erin considered that for a moment, and then noticed that the conversation had lapsed. She decided to try again to keep the librarian talking.

"'Most' of the rest of you?" she asked.

"Oh, yes." Twilight took a sip of her tea, but didn't put it back down, simply levitating it off to the side slightly so it wasn't in front of her face. "Fluttershy is a pegasus, so she could already fly and cloud walk. And, at first, I tried to cast a spell to give a pony wings. But that was extremely difficult, and the wings I made were very delicate. So, the only one of us that got them was my friend Rarity. I'll let either her or Rainbow Dash tell that story, though, since it's properly theirs to begin with."

"Oh, okay." Creating wings on a pony was definitely way outside of what she thought telekinesis was capable of. So, either the unicorn was lying or exaggerating, or something else completely different was

at work here. Definitely something to think about.

"So, this village of yours, were unicorns and pegasi forbidden?" Twilight asked after another sip of tea.

"No, not as such... just that we'd never seen any. Well, not in real life, just in pictures and the like. And we had stories about them. But I'd never seen an actual pegasus pony in person until I met Rainbow Dash at Sweet Apple Acres, and I think the first unicorn I met was Meadowlark at the Guest House."

"Wow, that's really amazing, Sunflower," Twilight said, and Erin couldn't detect any sarcasm coming from her. She seemed honestly interested. Erin smiled tentatively at her, and Twilight smiled back.

"So, you don't have much experience with magic, outside of an earth ponies' inherent magic?" Twilight asked, leaning forward eagerly.

"Ah, no. None at all, really." Erin felt confused for a minute, and tried to disguise it by taking a sip of her own tea. Earth ponies had magic? She hadn't seen any examples of that yet. It was something else to be on the lookout for.

"So, why did you leave your village?" Twilight cocked her head as Erin set her tea cup back down.

"Well, one big reason is... It's a big world, you know? I wanted to see more of it." That was absolutely true. Now that she was actually here, and safe, Erin's appetite for learning had awoken. Even without the menace of the Black Tide back home, she would have wanted to explore this place. Hopefully, she'd have the chance to do so even after she'd been turned back to a human.

"Just one reason? Not the only one?" Twilight was being way too insightful for Erin's comfort.

"It's a big reason, yes, but... Well, the other reason I don't want to talk about, if that's okay." Erin studied the table, blushing at the quasi-lie she was telling. All this hiding made her really uncomfortable.

"Of course, that's completely fine." Erin glanced up in confusion. Had she heard some sympathy in Twilight's voice? Alarm bells rang in Erin's head.

"Well," said Twilight, sounding kind, "Applejack is your friend, and Rainbow Dash seems to like you as well. And any friend of those two, I'd be honored to call a friend of mine, if that's okay with you?"

"O-of course!" Erin stuttered in reply, blinking in surprise. "Um, I have a lot to learn about Equestria. I guess you could say that... um... I'm a little sheltered that way. Would it be okay if I came by to read up on things? I don't like feeling like a stupid pony."

"Of course you can!" Twilight said, standing up with a look of shock on her face, which quickly turned to anger. "And who told you that you were a stupid pony?"

Erin flinched back in surprise at the fierceness of the formerly mild-mannered librarian's reply. "Um... Ah... well, npony recently, I guess... I just feel that way sometimes. Especially just recently, you know, since there's so much I don't know."

Twilight Sparkle frowned at her, and then spoke quite seriously. "There is a massive difference between being ignorant of some things, and being stupid. Everypony is ignorant of something, but only those that refuse to learn can ever be considered stupid. Remember that, okay?"

"Ah, okay. Thank you. Okay." Erin said, blinking with surprise at Twilight's intensity.

"And, as far as learning goes, feel free to use the library any time, provided it's not the middle of the night. I usually leave the door unlocked, and if I'm not in, you can just help yourself to any books you need. Just don't take them out of the library without Spike or myself here to check them out for you, okay?" Erin nodded, and Twilight continued, "And, if you have any questions, I'm always happy to answer them!"

"In excruciating detail," Spike said quietly as he moved the ladder from one section of shelves to another.

"Sorry, Spike, did you want to repeat that?" Twilight asked, purple eyes narrowing in mock-fury at her scaly assistant.

"I said, 'in exquisite detail,'" Spike lied smoothly, and the mares both laughed.

They chatted for a little longer, mostly about Erin's experiences in town. Erin blushingly related her earlier blunders in trying to find work, and both Twilight and Spike laughed at her misadventures, though Twilight herself seemed oddly uncomfortable laughing about the gardening incident.

After perhaps a half hour of talking, Erin glanced down and noticed that her tea was nearly gone. She downed the rest of it and stood up, satisfied with how this meeting had gone. Twilight seemed perfectly

nice, if a little nosy. Nothing much to worry about, as long as she was careful what she said around her. Still, it was time to get going.

"Well, I think I should go finish off my shift, Twilight. Thank you for the tea and the conversation, both were very nice." As the librarian smiled at her, Erin turned to Spike and said, "And thank you for serving the tea, Spike, it was very nice of you. And you're doing a great job on the dusting!"

"Well, well, well," the dragon replied smugly, "See that, Twilight? SOME ponies show a proper appreciation towards hard-working dragons!"

"You missed a spot," Twilight said, pointing with a hoof. "Just there, see?"

Grumbling, the dragon shifted the ladder back to the previous set of shelves and started climbing back up them. Twilight laughed, and then turned towards Erin.

"Well, thank you for taking the time to talk to me, Sunflower. I look forward to knowing you even better in the future. Maybe one day, you can trust me enough to actually tell me why you really left your village."

"Um... I'd like that, Twilight. We'll see. Thank you for the tea and the nice chat."

Erin picked her empty saddlebags back up and flung them across her back, not bothering to strap them back on. She walked out of the door to the library, turned, and waved to Twilight, who was standing in the doorway with a slight smile on her face.

Feeling much relieved, Erin turned and started trotting back to the Fet-Ex office, humming a happy tune.

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Twilight Sparkle watched from the doorway as Sunflower walked away with a spring in her step. She smiled as the tan earth pony turned back to wave at her. She was quite different than the nervous, jittery mare that she had been when she first came into the library.

Twilight's smile faded into a slight frown as Sunflower turned a corner. Of course, she was probably nervous about anypony knowing her secret, and was probably worried that Twilight had guessed it on the night that they first met. Hopefully, she had managed to convince her that her secret was safe. She turned back inside, closing the door.

As she walked inside, Spike stopped dusting the shelves and walked up to her.

"Well?" he asked. "How did it go?"

"Well, she was definitely hiding *something*, but she never actually straight out lied to me," Twilight said. Just before the tea had been brought out, she had cast a spell to detect lies. It had been slightly difficult to remember to keep manipulating things in the room in order to provide a reason as to why her horn had been glowing, but the results had been worth it. She was sure, now, exactly what Sunflower's secret was, even though she wasn't completely sure of all of the details.

"Are you sure she's not a spy?" the purple dragon asked excitedly. "She was studying maps, history... I mean, come on! Maybe she's a zebra in disguise or something?"

Twilight laughed and rubbed a hoof on Spike's head. "Don't be silly, Spike. If the Zebra nations wanted to know about Equestria, they could just ask. Besides, Zecora lives nearby. She'd make a better spy than Sunflower. At least she doesn't look like she's about to be pounced on by a manticore just because somepony invites her in for tea!"

"Well, then, how do you think it happened? She seems like such a normal pony, and she's pretty nice."

"She is, and I don't know. I've never encountered a pony with no magic at all, before."

That's what had stopped Twilight Sparkle in her tracks the night before. Every pony had magic in them, though the unicorn had never really noticed that before. It was like a sound that was always in the background. Once you got used to it, you never noticed it until it suddenly stopped. And, not until she'd run into the one pony, probably in all of Equestria, who didn't seem to have any magic at all did she notice that she could feel the magic of other ponies.

At first, she wasn't sure what it was that she had sensed coming from the strange pony. Just a feeling of... oddness, of something out of place. Finally, it had clicked. Magic simply swerved around Sunflower, as if she didn't exist. As if she weren't an actual part of Equestria.

"Well, however it happened," Twilight said darkly, "I'm betting it's the reason she got kicked out of her village."

"You think she got kicked out?" Spike looked surprised, and maybe a little angry. "Why would anypony do that?"

"What use is an earth pony without earth pony magic?" Twilight said, bitterly. "You saw how embarrassed she looked when I mentioned earth pony magic, and how ashamed she was when I asked her why she left? I think that something happened. Some accident or malady, with Sunflower right in the middle of it. Suddenly, Sunflower no longer had any useful magic, so she was probably made to feel very unwelcome at home. Did you hear Carrot Top complaining today at the market about the mess Sunflower made in her garden? What kind of earth pony can't even garden? It's just too sad!"

"Can you fix her?" Spike asked, tears in his eyes. Twilight Sparkle smiled warmly at him, reminded of what a kind, sensitive little dragon he really was.

"I can't even imagine what kind of affliction would cause a pony to be completely cut off from magic like that." The librarian shuddered in suppressed horror. She couldn't imagine what she'd do if she were separated from her own magic in a similar fashion. "But I promise you, Spike. I'll do everything within my power to find a cure for her."

Horn glowing, Twilight took down her copy of "Magical Maladies and Common Cures". A fairly simple book, but it was as good a place as any to start.

"But what if it isn't in your power?" Spike asked her. "And, do you really have time for that? Don't we have to get going soon?"

Twilight sighed and put the book aside. "You're right, Spike. We do have to go. But don't worry too much. If it isn't within my power, I can always ask Princess Celestia."

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"That took longer than expected!" said Mr. Parcel as Erin walked through the front door.

"Sorry about that," Erin said, "Twilight Sparkle wanted to talk to me for a little while, and since this was my last delivery, I thought I could take the time."

"Oh, it's not a problem! She orders lots of books. One of our best clients! It's always good to maintain good relationships with a pony as important as that. Did you know she's Princess Celestia's own pupil?"

"What?" Erin blinked in surprise. "No, she never mentioned that."

"Ah, well. That filly doesn't like to brag all that much, but it's funny as heck to watch her lose her mind whenever the Princess is scheduled to visit Ponyville!"

"Lose her mind?" Erin repeated, handing over the clipboard. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, she just tends to get a tiny bit nutty over-preparing things when we're expecting a visit from royalty. A good pony, though. Incredibly talented magically, of course, but you'd expect that from Princess Celestia's own student. Anyway, go on and get that uniform off, and I'll get your pay together."

"Okay!" Erin said, as she trotted into the back room. Mr. Parcel sure had given her a lot to think about. If Twilight Sparkle was the personal protegee of the princess, then she could probably tell her a lot about how the government here worked, as well as what the princess herself was like.

She hung up the oversized saddlebags in her locker, stuck her hat on the locker's shelf, and then struggled out of the uniform jacket. Once she'd gotten that hung up, she belted on her own saddlebags and went back to the front area.

Mr. Parcel had her sign off on the signature sheets that she had brought back that day, and had her sign another in a ledger stating that she had been paid twenty bits for one day's labor. He then forked over another ten bits, which Erin added to the four already in the drawstring bag that he had given her earlier. She placed that into her bag and, promising to be back at 9:00 sharp the next morning, trotted out the door.

Erin was still in a fantastic mood, made even better by the sound of bits jingling around in her saddlebags. She'd make sure to hold on to at least five of those, in order to pay for a room at the Guest House for a week. It was a considerable relief to her to have the issue of housing resolved.

Still, she was feeling peckish, and decided it might be nice to get something to eat. It was then that she remembered that she still had half a sandwich from Cafe Kartie in her pack, along with a dozen apples. The sandwich, and maybe an apple or two, would do nicely as a late afternoon/early evening snack. All she needed was a place to sit and eat, maybe a park or something. With that in mind, she trotted back to the market square, hoping to see Applejack again for a recommendation.

Sadly, the orange mare was gone, as was her stall. Erin pouted briefly, then decided that she should just explore for a little while by herself. She had gotten a pretty good look at Ponyville today, delivering packages around, and one building in particular had stood out, both for the design and for the wondrous smells coming from within. After all, a confection or two would *really* round out her evening meal.

In short order, Erin found herself standing in front of a store with a sign out front that said "Sugarcube Corner". She stepped inside, and stopped in surprise. The shop was mysteriously dark for some reason. Erin wondered briefly if they were closed or something, and had just forgotten to lock the door. She was just turning around to walk out when she heard the scuffling of hooves in the darkness beyond.

Turning back, slightly scared and mildly creeped-out, Erin called out meekly into the darkness.

"H-hello? Is anyo... anypony there?"

There was a short giggle, rapidly stifled. Erin backed quickly to the exit, but froze in horror as she bumped into something. Turning her head slowly, she saw a dark shape between her and the door. Just as she was about to scream, the light suddenly flicked on.

"Surprise!" said Pinkie Pie, a massive grin on her face.

Chapter 10: Party time!

"Wow, Sunflower, you should see the look on your face!" Pinkie Pie said, laughing. "You sure were surprised, weren't you?"

Erin could only nod while her heart galloped maniacally in her chest. She managed a weak smile at the grinning pink pony, who took that as encouragement to help her up.

"Well, don't just sit there, come on! I'm going to introduce you to everypony!" Pinkie hooked a hoof under Erin's forearm and hauled her to her hooves.

"Everypony, I'd like to introduce our guest of honor, a brand new resident to our happy family here in Ponyville... Sunflower!"

Erin, still recovering from the earlier shock, smiled as best she could at the small crowd of ponies packed into Sugarcube Corner's main floor as they started stomping their front hooves and cheering. She felt herself blushing at the attention, and also noted that ponies applauded by stamping. That was good to know, it would help her fit in.

"Come on, Sunflower," Pinkie said as the applause died down, "Let's go meet everypony!"

There were a surprising number of ponies at the party that Erin had already met, mostly while doing deliveries, but the bulk of the ponies were new to her. Most of them, oddly, seemed to be mares, with only an occasional stallion in the mix. She was amused to find out that the scientists' initial assessment of pony names was correct, and that many of the mares had flower-related names. This included a trio of apparently close friends named Rose, Daisy and Lily. Erin smiled at that, noting that their names wouldn't be at all unusual back on Earth.

Once again, she noticed that all the ponies were very friendly and greeted her warmly, even those that she had met already during her deliveries. Though, she wondered how many of them were more interested in free cake and snacks than in meeting her.

When Pinkie had introduced Erin to everyone to her satisfaction, the pink pony then said, "Okay, everypony, enough with the chit-chat! It's *cake time!*"

With that, the cake, which was roughly the height of a pony itself, was sliced and distributed on small paper plates. Erin held hers in her upturned hoof awkwardly, wondering how she was going to eat it. Looking around her, she saw that most ponies were simply holding the cake and taking large bites out of it. Giving a mental shrug, Erin did the same.

She was expecting it this time, and she wasn't disappointed. The cake was amazing, perfectly moist without being too heavy, and with just the right amount of sugary frosting to compliment without being overwhelming. After she swallowed her mouthful, she turned to Pinkie and complimented her on the cake.

"Oh, thank you! I've been getting better at it, though Mrs. Cake actually helped with the decorations. I get too impatient to do a really detailed job like this!"

"Well, it tastes incredible, Pinkie," Erin said. "And, thank you so much for throwing this party! I know you said you would, but really, I'm just so touched that you would go through all this effort just for me."

Pinkie Pie laughed at that and said, "Well, you're welcome, but it's not like I need much of an excuse to throw a party! Here, have a second slice of cake!"

Erin was about to turn it down, out of habit. Then the thought occurred to her that, if the scientists in the Ascent labs could turn her back from a pony into a human, they could definitely take a few extra cake-related pounds off as well. With a grin bordering on the maniacal, she had a second slice. And then a third.

A good chunk of the rest of the evening was lost in a sugar-induced blur.

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Twilight Sparkle was standing near a table, chatting with Applejack and Pinkie Pie. Rarity was off in a corner keeping company with Fluttershy, who didn't like mingling with crowds but who hated being alone even more. Rainbow Dash hadn't shown up yet, but that was most likely due to a nap running slightly longer than expected.

"Well, she sure looks like she's havin' a good time," Applejack said suddenly to Twilight, as the unicorn sipped from a cup of punch. Setting the cup aside, Twilight looked towards the guest of honor. Sunflower was busily swinging away, blindfolded, at a piñata hanging from the ceiling. Just twenty minutes earlier there had been a rousing game of Pin the Tail on the Pony which Sunflower hadn't come anywhere near winning. But she had apparently just enjoyed the game for its own sake.

"Well, good for her," Twilight said, with satisfaction. Ponyville wasn't like her old village, wherever that was. Nopony was going to kick Sunflower out of town while *she* had anything to say about it. Granted, nopony knew her secret, that she couldn't use magic, but Twilight herself wouldn't tell anypony about it.

"She sure does seem to be fittin' in pretty well, for only havin' been here a little over a day," AJ continued. Twilight nodded at that.

"Well, the ponies here in Ponyville are extremely welcoming and friendly. I found that out myself on my first day here, if you'll recall. And I hope she makes just as many friends as I did!"

Something in the forceful way that Twilight said that seemed to strike the farm pony as odd, as she gave her a look.

"Somethin' goin' on, Twi?"

The librarian shook her head in wry amusement. With the way she talked sometimes, it was easy to forget how insightful her hard-working friend could be. And how direct she could be.

"Well, I may have found out a little more about what her secret is, but... AGH! Pinkie! What the heck?!" Twilight spluttered, as Pinkie Pie finished a rather prolonged spit-take that had launched a mouthful of punch into her face.

"Wait, are you saying the pony with the big-big-super-big secret is SUNFLOWER?" Pinkie asked, aghast.

"What are you talking about, Pinkie?" Twilight asked, annoyed. Horn glowing, she began toweling the punch off of her face using a wad of napkins.

"For the last couple of days, my Pinkie sense has been going off randomly," Pinkie Pie replied. "I knew that somepony had a big, dark secret. I thought it was Rainbow Dash!"

"An' yesterday, y'all thought it was me, remember?" Applejack said wryly.

"I apologized for that," the pink pony said, waving a hoof dismissively. "I wonder what the big secret is?"

"Pinky Pie!" Twilight said sternly. Pinkie turned to her, looking startled. "I have... *some* idea of what her secret might be, but it's personal and it doesn't concern you, okay? I want you to promise to leave her alone about it."

"Well, duh," Pinkie said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to corner somepony at her own welcome party and try to harass a secret out of her. I only did that to Applejack and Rainbow Dash because I thought it was funny. And because we're best friends. But *mostly* because it was funny."

"It weren't all *that* funny," muttered Applejack.

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Erin finally felt the wooden bat in her teeth connect with the piñata. The ponies around her started cheering as the candy spilled out of it and onto the floor. Dropping the bat, she pushed the blindfold up out of her eyes. She grinned at the smiling ponies around her.

This was really just too much fun. She hadn't had this much fun at a party since... well, ever. When she was little, her parents always had given her small birthday parties, just her brothers and her with a cake, no big deal. High School parties had just been awkward and uncomfortable, and when she had gotten into college, parties had been more about standing around and talking. Usually with loud music and alcohol thrown in to make the conversations just slightly shy of comprehensible.

But this, *this* was amazing. The simple party games, the laughter, the incredible foods, *this* is what a party should be. She glanced around, trying to find Pinkie Pie, intending to thank her once again for the party and let her know just how much she appreciated it.

She finally found the pink pony standing near a table chatting with Applejack and Twilight Sparkle. She left the huge mound of candy behind her, already being divided up by eager ponies, and walked over to talk to them.

Perhaps it was the sugar. Maybe it was how much fun she'd been having. Either way, she was in a giddy and mischievous mood when she reached the table. Pinkie's back was to her, talking to her friends, so Erin sneaked up behind her. Once she had determined that she was close enough, she put her plan into action.

She crouched down, tensing her muscles, and then suddenly sprung at the pink pony while shouting "Surprise hug attack!" Pinkie screamed in shocked surprise as Erin's forelegs wrapped around her neck in a hug. Both ponies collapsed to the floor in a heap, Erin giggling like a maniac and Pinkie too momentarily stunned to react. Once her brain caught up with current events, the pink pony started giggling too.

"Good one, Sunflower!" she said. Applejack was chuckling, and Twilight was just staring at the two of them as if they'd both lost their minds. Erin untangled herself from Pinkie and sat down as Pinkie started to pull herself up off the floor.

"Pinkie Pie, I just wanted to say 'thanks' once again," Erin said as seriously as she could while still having a slight case of the giggles. "This party is incredible, and I'm having such a good time."

"Of course!" Pinkie said, giving her a big hug around the neck.

"Ah, if I'm interrupting something, I can come back later," Rainbow Dash said, coming up behind them. Erin laughed and disentangled herself from the hug.

"Hey, Rainbow! When'd you get here?" Applejack asked, obviously happy to see her friend.

"Just now, and sorry I'm late. I didn't expect the printers to take this long. They said they'd have the order ready by noon!" The frustration was evident in the blue pegasus' voice.

"You mean, they're finished?" Applejack said excitedly. "Let me see 'em!"

"Hold your horses!" Rainbow replied, laughing, and dug a brightly colored page out of her saddlebag. She passed it over to Applejack, who laid it flat on the nearby table to take a good look at it. Erin poked her head around the side, curious as to what it said.

The page was a flyer featuring a large trophy with a rearing pony superimposed on it. In bold, colorful lettering was the following:

YOU!

Think you got what it takes to be an iron pony?

You are invited to the first-ever, all-comers IRON PONY Competition!

Saturday, October 11th at Sweet Apple Acres!

Entering the contest is free, so what have you got to lose?

If you don't want to compete, why not show up to cheer on your favorite competitor?

Tickets are only four bits each for an adult, two for a filly or colt, foals get in for free.

Free catering provided by Sweet Apple Acres.

Bring the whole family! The contest starts at 10:00 am

(Rules available upon request. Contestants, please register by the end of the day on Wednesday, October 8th with Twilight Sparkle at the Ponyville Library)

"Iron pony competition?" Erin raised an eyebrow at the poster. "What does that mean?"

"Well, ya see, Rainbow an' I had a bit of a... disagreement, last year, over which of us was the better athlete..."

"It was me," Rainbow Dash interrupted. Applejack glared at her.

"Only because y'all cheated!"

"Did not!"

"You used yer wings in almost all the events you won!"

"My wings are a part of me, so I didn't cheat!"

Applejack was just inflating her lungs to respond to this when Twilight stepped between the two ponies.

"Girls!" the librarian said sternly, "What's past is past, and I thought everypony learned their lesson last year?"

Both Applejack and Rainbow Dash looked sullenly at their hooves for a moment, and Twilight continued.

"Besides, with the new rules in place, there won't be any talk of *cheating* this year, will there?"

"I reckon' not," Applejack said, at the same time Rainbow said, "You bet there won't."

"Anyway, as I was sayin'," Applejack said, with a last glare at Rainbow Dash, who stuck out her tongue. "We had ourselves a little competition, and it attracted a mighty big crowd. So, I reckoned, why not do this every year? Sweet Apple Acres sure could use the money, and maybe *this* year, we can settle this once and fer all."

"And I thought that it would be nice if more ponies could enter," Pinkie Pie said. "After all, it would get boring if it were just Applejack and Rainbow Dash every year!"

"Oh, wow, neat! I'd like to go and see that!" Erin said.

"Oh, no you don't!" Rainbow Dash said. "You aren't going to go *see* it Sunflower."

"Um, what?"

"Your going to be *in* it! After all, you nearly outran me yesterday! You've *got* to go, just so we can have our rematch!"

"Oh, uh... weren't we just going to race again?"

"The last event for the competition is the Running of the Leaves. Which is a race. So, no matter how we all do in the Iron Pony competition, it's still going to end up as a race at the end."

"I finished fifth place last year!" Twilight Sparkle said proudly.

"Yeah, which isn't bad... for an egghead!"

"I beat you, Dash, remember?" Twilight said with a frown.

"Yeah, yeah, only because AJ and I were concentrating more on beating each other than in winning the race," the pegasus said, waving a hoof dismissively. "So, Sunflower, are you in or what?"

"I'd sure like to see you in the competition, Sunflower," Applejack said.

"Oh, well... um... Yes. Yes, why not? I'll be there!" Erin said with rising determination. A contest sounded like just the thing to test her new pony body. The race the other day had been an unwelcome surprise, but over the course of a whole competition, she'd hopefully be able to surprise everypony.

"Great! I've got the rules printed up here." Rainbow quickly rummaged in her other saddlebag and pulled out another sheet, which she handed to Erin.

Erin glanced at the rules quickly, then placed the sheet in her own saddlebag. She would read them later, once she had more time.

The conversation continued from there, well into the night. Against her better judgement, Erin had yet another slice of cake, and plenty of punch. It was fairly late at night when most of the ponies, most of them yawning, started making for the door.

Erin herself had worked through her sugar rush during the party, and now felt a major crash coming on. She was swaying gently back and forth on her hooves, staring glassily into space. She blinked in surprise when she realized that a pony had been talking to her and looked up into the concerned face of Twilight Sparkle.

"I'm sorry. What was that, Twilight?"

The unicorn laughed warmly and said, "You look really out of it, Sunflower. Maybe it's time to go home and get some sleep?"

Erin smiled and replied, "Bed sounds really good right now, I admit it. But I don't want to leave while there are still ponies here. This is my party, after all! I should be the last one to go."

"Look around you," Twilight said, pointing with a hoof. Erin looked and saw that almost every pony was gone. Besides herself, only Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash had stayed. Applejack had left a couple hours earlier, stating that she had to be up at dawn to start her daily chores. Rarity had taken Fluttershy home even before that, the yellow pegasus having reached her limit as far as company went.

Erin had honestly not noticed that the other ponies had left. She was exhausted, but in a good way. She was feeling pleasantly mellow, slightly full from all the cake, and well disposed towards every pony. She was also unsuccessful at stifling a yawn.

"Well, I suppose since there's so few left, I could get going..." she said, when Pinkie Pie suddenly popped up beside her.

"Aww, you're leaving already?" the pink earth pony said with a slight pout.

"Well, I was thinking of it," Erin said carefully, not wanting to hurt Pinkie's feelings after she had gone through all this effort. "I mean, I had a wonderful time, but I'm also really tired. It would be nice to get some sleep."

"Hmm." Pinkie said, staring at her. "Well, you can't go yet. Not until I get you... A take-home box!"

With that, Pinkie bounced away, rummaging briefly behind the counter until she came out with a couple of large, folding cardboard boxes. Ignoring Erin's protests, she started placing large slices of cake, several cupcakes, a variety of cookies, and a lone cherry turnover into the boxes, wrapped them up, and bounced back to balance them across Erin's back.

"There you go! Plenty of cake and goodies! That should last you, oh, at least through noon tomorrow!" Pinkie said with a wide grin.

Erin could only laugh, and hugged Pinkie around the neck.

"Thank you, Pinkie Pie. I'll always remember how much fun I had today."

Pinkie hugged back, and shortly afterwards Erin was waving goodbye as she walked out the door, a tricky thing to do when you're walking on all fours. Pinkie and her friends waved back at her, wishing her a good night.

It was fully night time when she left Sugarcube Corner, but the light provided by the extremely bright full moon was sufficient for her to see by, once she'd let her eyes adapt. Then she facehoofed, remembering that she could adjust her eyes to see in low light. A quick mental exercise later and the streets of Ponyville were as bright as day, though with the colors oddly muted.

She walked back to the Guest House, humming a happy tune, though quietly enough to not disturb any sleeping ponies. She arrived back home feeling whimsical and in the mood for a little nonsense. Smiling, she remembered the story about the two princesses, one of whom raised and lowered the moon every night. What was her name? Oh, yes...

"Thank you for the wonderful moonlight, Luna. It helped me find my way home tonight." Erin smiled and, feeling extremely silly, waved at the moon. Then she let herself inside, walked through the empty common area and into her room, barely taking the time to remove her take home boxes and saddlebags before collapsing into bed.

This time, she remembered to make her report. Once she was done yawning again, she began speaking quietly, summing up the day's events.

"Erin's journal, day two. Dear Dr. Velchiek and the rest of the Harmonics team. Well, today was sure exciting. Before I get into why it was exciting, I'll just give you a quick status update. First, I have a job, yay! It's nothing too fantastic, just making deliveries, but I've figured out that I'll be able to live off the salary I get with a few bits to spare for fun. Oh, that reminds me, I should check how closely the bits that were made for me compare to the actual Equestrian bits I have in my saddlebags right now. Eh, I'll do that tomorrow, I'm exhausted.

"Anyway, like I said, my job is to deliver packages. What's good about that is that I'll get to know this area pretty well and meet lots of different ponies. Maybe soon I can save up enough to stay for a while in Canterlot, which is the capital of Equestria. Oh, and I've apparently become friends with the local librarian, who's offered to not only help me learn about Equestria, but is also the personal student of one of the princesses, Celestia. That could be invaluable if we're to open negotiations for migrating our population to Equestria.

"That would be exciting enough, but there's also the fact that I've recorded several instances of telekinesis amongst the unicorns, which I'm hoping will provide you with lots of data. Also... and I don't know how to describe this, I really don't, but apparently the local pegasi can directly maneuver clouds for the purposes of irrigation. I know, it sounds crazy. But seriously, I saw them do it. They push them with their hooves, and then jump on them to get the water out! It sounds like a fairy tale, I know. But it's completely true! I can't wait to hear the analysis of the data.

"And, though this has nothing to do with the mission, the single most incredible thing that happened today was that one of the locals, Pinkie Pie, put together this amazing party for me. Just for moving here, can you believe it? The cake was amazing... honestly, I've got some in a box here, and if you somehow manage to open a portal before it goes all stale, I'll pass it through just so you can try some.

"Anyway, that's it for now. I'd make a longer report, but I am completely wiped out. Between delivering packages and that party, I don't think I can keep my eyes open for much longer."

Erin yawned again, then rolled over in bed. She was just drifting off when suddenly a thought occurred to her. Eyes springing open, she said,

"One last thing. I'd really, *really* appreciate it if you just deleted the footage of all my attempts to get work before I started working for Fet-Ex. In fact, don't even watch it, if you don't mind.

"This is Erin Olsen, aka Sunflower, signing off."

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Several weeks prior:

A swarm of small autonomous vehicles flitted through the gap, each of them about the size of a raven, and each with four spinning fans to keep them flying and upright. They moved out in a coordinated pattern, spreading away from the portal on pre-determined flight paths.

Though each of them was capable of acting completely independently of the others, they were all connected wirelessly in order to communicate and coordinate their reconnaissance. All data was shared, in case one or more of the drones suffered damage, so that all information could be transmitted back to the Harmonics lab by any one drone. They never strayed far enough away from each other to cause a communications breakdown. Each drone, at all times, was within communications range of at least two others.

From time to time, other portals would open up, spilling more small drones into the atmosphere and greatly expanding their range. They were programmed to avoid habitation and ponies in general, ducking out of sight should a creature get too close to it.

One drone in particular buzzed its way over the threatening expanses of the Everfree Forest, flying between trees, studying life forms, taking readings. It even happened to stumble across a small and currently unoccupied hut, around which it circled widely around before zipping off deeper into the forest.

For several hours each day the drone hovered above the trees, angling its solar panels to catch the rays of the Equestrian sun to recharge its batteries. Then, swooping back underneath the canopy, it would once again begin its mindlessly dogged collecting of information.

Two months into its mission, the day that Erin came to Equestria, the small drone discovered a small area of the forest, dozens of miles away from any kind of civilization, where the trees were stunted, barren and twisted. The trees here were dying, looking as if they'd been exposed to an extended drought, though immediately outside the ring of dead trees green life grew in riotous abundance. The only life that seemed to have any real purchase within the ring were small scrub bushes, and even those were twisted and yellowed.

In the exact center of this area, the sensors on the drone discovered a small cave. It flew around the cave in a complex, weaving pattern, examining the life and environment around it. Finally, it buzzed its way into the cave itself, and the sensors on the drone completely failed to notice the faint shimmering of a shield spell that completely failed to stop it from entering.

A small light clicked on, chasing away the shadows as the drone moved about the cave, recording everything it saw. Not that the cave was very large, just a small depression in the earth, carved out of dark brown stone. However, into the walls of the cave were carved many runes and elaborate pictures, which triggered a subroutine in the drone's programming that made it stop and record every inch of writing that it could find.

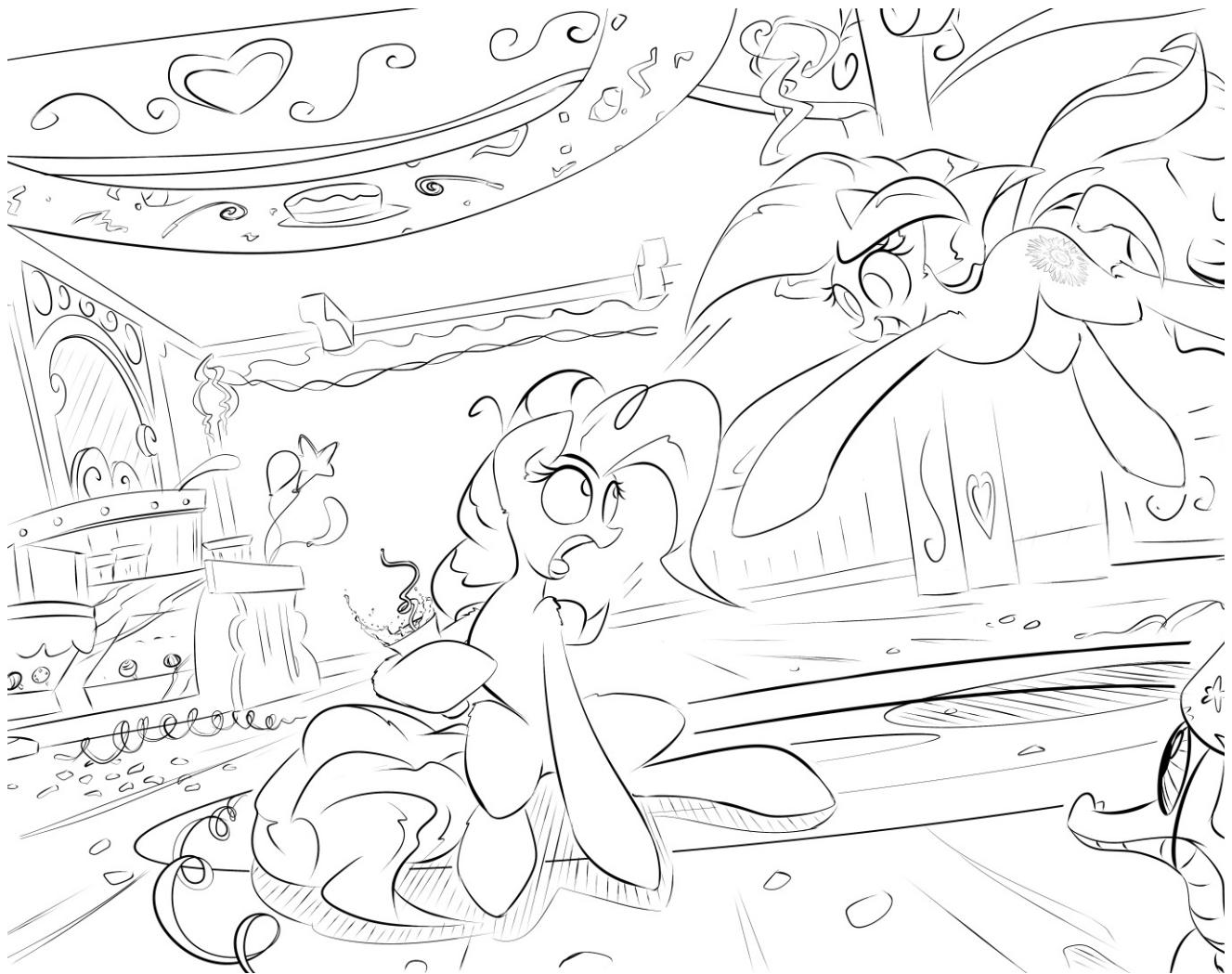
Once that was completed, the drone turned to leave. However, it found absolute darkness in front of it, darkness that its small light couldn't dispel. Had it been a living creature, it might have reacted with fascination or terror. Instead, it simply observed the unusual phenomenon for a moment, still recording and transmitting continuously. Until, suddenly, the shadows rushed forward, engulfing it.

The last thing the drone was able to record as it tumbled to the stony floor was a voice, with a buzzing resonance that seemed to be comprised of a thousand voices speaking all at once. The voice said one thing as the drone fell.

"Mine!"

Author's Notes:

Some art for this chapter from Lightfalls:



Chapter 11: The Dangers of Cake

The day after the party, Erin followed pretty much the same routine as the previous day. Wake up early, go for a run before most of Ponyville even woke up, then return to shower. She helped herself to some breakfast from her saddlebags before she left for work, including the now slightly-stale but still delicious sandwich from the Cafe yesterday, a couple of apples, and a generous portion of cake.

Having cake for breakfast made her smile as she thoroughly connected with her inner eight-year-old.

As she was packing up her saddlebags, the jingling pouch of bits reminded her that she had intended to compare the real Equestrian bits with the fakes she had been given. She pulled the pouch of gold coins out of the drawer in her room and spilled a few of them on the table. Then she took a few of her hard-earned Equestrian bits out and laid them side by side.

The first thing that became obvious was that the Equestrian coins weren't gold. Or, at least not *pure* gold. Erin had no idea, they could be brass for all she knew of metallurgy. Or perhaps they were some mystery element found only in Equestria. The bits she had earned yesterday were a bright golden in color, similar to the gold coins from Earth, but slightly paler. They were also lighter, she decided after hefting a few. She didn't have a scale, so she wasn't sure by how much, but they definitely weighed no more than half as much as a similar volume of the pure gold coins she had received from the Harmonics team.

The bits were plain, with a slightly raised ridge going around the edge. Her gold coins were just flat. Still, if gold was rare in Equestria, maybe they still had value. Perhaps she could sell them or trade them for real bits. She decided to keep her eye open for a money changer or a bank or something, and to maybe ask a few casual questions to find out if gold was worth anything at all.

With that, she scooped up the bits and put them away, the Equestrian ones back in her pouch in the saddlebags, and the Earth ones back in their drawer. She belted her saddlebags on, cinching them tight with her teeth, and trotted out the door.

It was another beautiful day in Ponyville, though a bit on the chilly side. Her earlier exercise had warmed her, but now she felt a little chill from her still slightly damp mane and tail. She'd have to make sure to dry more thoroughly in the future. Still, in spite of that, she was happy, going to a job she liked in a town that was rapidly growing on her.

The thought occurred to her for the first time that, maybe once her mission was over and humanity started migrating, she could get her own house here. Of course, she was planning on returning to her human form, but hopefully the ponies here would be just as welcoming to her then as they were now. The idea of owning a small cottage near Ponyville, like Fluttershy's, had a massive appeal to her, and she couldn't help the goofy smile that spread across her muzzle.

She knew that being welcomed as a hominid wasn't a sure thing, though. But she had reason to be optimistic. Ponies welcomed dragons, after all, and there had been hints of other intelligent creatures that the ponies dealt with. Surely they could accept humans as just one more species?

It was while pondering that idea that she suddenly had a realization that stopped her in her tracks for a moment. If she was going to move to Ponyville after the human migration, that would require telling her new friends about what she had been up to, and that she wasn't really a pony after all. She frowned slightly at that.

How would Applejack feel when she realized that her new friend, as casual as their acquaintance currently was, turned out to be a spy? An *alien* spy from an entirely different world? For that matter, how would Rainbow Dash, or Twilight Sparkle, or Pinkie Pie react? All of them had been so kind to her. Would they accept her as a human? Would they continue to be friends once she revealed her purpose for coming here?

She hated to admit it, but she didn't think it was too likely. She tried to put herself in their shoes. How would she feel if an alien had befriended her, in order to gain the information it needed to invade her planet? Would the alien's desperate situation make any difference to the feelings of betrayal she would be sure to feel?

Maybe, she admitted. But probably not enough of a difference to ever trust that alien again. Especially if the aliens came in with guns blazing, or making outrageous demands and pushing the locals around.

The thought of it made her miserably sad as she resumed walking to the Fet-Ex office, the spring entirely gone from her step. Maybe she could simply not tell her Equestrian friends? Sunflower would just disappear, and suddenly there would be a human named Erin. A brief sparkle of hope kindled at the thought before she squashed it.

No. Once she was done with this mission, she was done with lies. She would tell her new friends the truth, and face the consequences. Her only hope was that they would understand the desperateness of humanity's situation, and that she did what she needed to do, not what she wanted to do.

Of course, that all depended on humanity being welcomed to Equestria, rather than just barging in by the billions, cutting down trees, ripping up fields, building new houses all over. And, while she was convinced that the vast majority of humanity would be just as charmed by the locals as she was, she was under no delusions that a large number of people would be belligerent or even hostile to the ponies.

That thought made her incredibly sad. Though, the one good thing was that it may not be a permanent move. Humanity might come here in the billions, but if they brought the Harmonics equipment with them, then there was no reason that another world, an unoccupied one that would support humanity's multitudes, could be found in a year or two. The only reason that there was any interest in Equestria right now was that there were currently no other options.

With that in mind, she felt her resolve to find a way to make this transition as smooth as possible well up within her. She would do everything she could to open diplomatic relations, *before* humanity came in. She would find a way for humans and ponies to get along peacefully with one another. She would figure out ways to minimize the damage that having that many creatures suddenly appear would do to the Equestrian environment.

Somehow.

She sighed, then glanced up and found herself in an unfamiliar location. Glancing around in confusion, she realized that she had walked right past the Fet-Ex office without even noticing. Giving herself a mental kick in the rear for being so out of it, she turned and walked back to the office.

The door was locked, and Erin realized that she must be a little early. However, she could see someone moving around in the background, so she gave a quick knock. The figure moved to the door and opened it. To Erin's surprise, it wasn't Mr. Parcel, but instead a young stallion with a dark grey coat and a short black mane.

"Uh, hi. We're not open yet, can you come back in about twenty minutes?" the stallion in the doorway said. He started closing the door without waiting on her reply, so Erin quickly wedged a hoof in the door.

"Um, I'm not actually a customer," she said. "I started working here yesterday."

"Oh!" the stallion said, breaking into a smile. "You're Sunflower! Yeah, Speedy was just telling me about you. Wow, you're early."

"Really?"

"Yeah, our last employee usually didn't show up until at least a half hour after we opened. I'm Lucky, by the way." He turned and held the door open for Erin, who walked into the office. As he did so, Erin made out the three four-leaf clovers that made up his cutie mark. She wondered which came first, the cutie mark or the name.

"Nice to meet you, Lucky," she said as she made her way inside.

"Likewise! Let's get you suited up and start getting caught up on those deliveries!"

Mr. Parcel, working in the back room, was also surprised to see her, Erin noted. She felt a mild curiosity over who this last employee was, that her just showing up for work a few minutes early would cause such excitement. A few minutes later, she had her uniform on, her over-sized delivery saddlebags on, and was heading out the door.

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It was another pleasantly busy morning for Erin. She was able to lose herself in her deliveries, which put all the dark thoughts about the future out of her head. She really didn't know how she was going to handle dealing with Applejack and the others once the truth came out. But, at least for now, she didn't have to worry about it.

She had been delivering packages for just a couple of hours when she heard an odd little click, and then a brief sound of rushing air. She stopped, startled, looking around to see if anyone else had heard it. The other ponies were all just walking around and talking normally. She was just about to dismiss it as her imagination when she suddenly heard a familiar voice in her ear.

"Erin, this is Doctor Velchiek. Can you hear me?"

She jumped, startled, and then looked around. She spotted a nearby and empty alleyway and walked into

it.

"Hi, Dr. Velchiek," she whispered. "I'm kind of in the middle of town right now, so I can't really have a conversation..."

"Oh, I can see that, my dear," the doctor said. "I'll make this brief, then. We're in the midst of downloading all the data you've accumulated since we last talked. Is everything going well?"

"Yes! Everything is going great. I now have a place to live and a job, so no worries there. The ponies are really friendly. I think opening diplomatic relations with them will be pretty easy. Also, they aren't the only intelligent species here."

There was a brief, tense pause.

"What do you mean, 'not the only intelligent species'?" Dr. Velchiek said, sounding surprised.

"Well, I've seen references to griffons and zebra nations, and I actually met a dragon." Erin couldn't help but feel a little smug about that last part. After all, how many people can honestly say that they've had a conversation with a dragon?

"A dragon. Seriously?"

"You'll see for yourself in the footage, but yes. They're really adorable creatures, though. Nothing like in myths and legends. His name is Spike, and I don't think you need to worry about him burning down Lake-town or anything."

"Lake-town? What are you talking about?" Dr. Velchiek replied, sounding slightly confused.

"From... the Hobbit? Smaug burned down Lake-town after Bilbo... um..." she cut herself off, sensing some annoyance from the other end of the line. "Never mind, all I meant was that he's smaller than me, and looks about as vicious as a puppy. A purple, scaly puppy, but still a puppy."

"Ah. Very well, then. Interesting. If ponies are used to dealing with other intelligent species, then hopefully they won't be too xenophobic about meeting humans."

"Oh, speaking of which," Erin said, as a thought occurred to her. "I know I'm not on a diplomatic mission, but one of the ponies I met happens to know the ruling Princess of Equestria, who is named Celestia. If you wanted me to, I could see if I could arrange to talk to her? Maybe start negotiations..." Erin trailed off hopefully. Those hopes were dashed with the doctor's next words.

"No, Erin. Absolutely not. Continue gathering data, but don't try to act as a representative of humanity. We have actual diplomats that will negotiate with the Equestrian leadership. You are a brave and intelligent young woman, but to put it bluntly, we can't have an amateur stirring things up."

"Oh..." Erin felt pretty disappointed by that, and stared at the ground by her hooves.

"Erin... You seem upset. What's wrong?"

"It's just... I don't like being a spy, Dr. Velchiek. These ponies are nice people, and some of them have been very friendly to me. And here I am, lying about what I'm doing here and even lying about what I *am*. I could be real friends with some of these ponies, except for the fact that I'm doing nothing but deceiving them."

There was a long pause, long enough for Erin to worry if she'd crossed some kind of line. Finally, Dr. Velchiek started talking again.

"I understand that this is difficult. That these ponies are so kind to you, no doubt, makes things even worse in that fashion. However, what you are doing is extremely important. And, at most, it will be just a few more weeks before we feel we have enough data to begin trying to open negotiations. At that point, you can come home, if you wish. Do you feel like you can manage for that long?"

"Um, yeah. I guess..."

"Everything okay in there?" an unfamiliar voice asked. Erin glanced up to see a mint-green unicorn with a two-toned green mane looking at her with concern. She suddenly realized that she'd spent the last couple minutes muttering to herself in an empty alleyway.

"Ah, yes. I'm fine, thank you! I just had to, um... consult my map. Yes." Erin said, pulling her map out of her saddle bags. The unicorn mare shrugged, smiled at her, then trotted off.

"Well, they certainly do seem friendly," Dr. Velchiek observed. "Just remember, you're not a representative of humanity. Erin, this window is about to close. Was there anything else you were concerned with?"

"No, not really. Just, keep me posted on when they'll open negotiations, please?"

"Absolutely. Nice to see you're doing well, Erin. Take care!"

And with that, there was another crackling noise, and Dr. Velchiek was gone. Erin sighed and stepped out of the narrow alleyway and continued on to her next delivery location.

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Erin munched disconsolately on her dandelion salad at the Cafe Kartie. When Mr. Parcel had let her off for her lunch break, she had swung by the Market Square to see Applejack. But the orange mare had been too busy to talk much, and definitely too busy to take time off for lunch. Also, apparently in another couple of weeks, Applebuck season would start up, which meant that AJ would be too busy to come to town very often. Apparently, Applebuck season was when the Apple family harvested and stored the bulk of their apples in preparation for the upcoming winter.

Erin couldn't really fault her friend for needing to work, but ever since she had talked to Dr. Velchiek, she had felt the need for interaction with someone. Obviously, she couldn't really discuss what was on her mind, but just being able to talk might have lifted her spirits somewhat.

She finished off her salad and paid, being sure to leave an extra bit for a tip. Her waitress, a yellow earth pony named Junebug, smiled at her as she left. Erin smiled back, in spite of her current mood. Junebug had been a little spacey, but she was a good waitress. No need to let her current funk affect the perky pony, who was just trying to do her job.

Erin trudged through the streets of Ponyville, noting that she still had a considerable amount of time left for her break. Mr. Parcel had given her an hour, and only twenty minutes or so had been taken up actually getting lunch. Still feeling slightly peckish, she suddenly decided that the only treatment for her current mood was an application of welcome-party cake, and made her way to the Ponyville Guest House once again.

She opened the door to find Meadowlark inside, humming to herself and dusting away with a telekinetically-wielded feather duster in the common area. She smiled at Erin as she walked in and put the duster down.

"Hi, Sunflower! I'm not trying to be a bother, but did you work out where you were going to be staying?" the mare asked.

"Oh! Yes, I meant to talk to you, actually. If it would be alright, I'd like to stay here!"

"That's no problem. It's just five bits for a week." As Erin dug her coin-purse out of her saddlebag, Meadowlark continued by saying, "You're our only guest at the moment. Vinyl Scratch and Quick Sale both checked out this morning."

"Vinyl Scratch?" *Odd name for a pony*, Erin thought, counting out five bits and handing them over. "We never met. I did meet Quick Sale, though." She shuddered at the memory.

"Yes... Him..." Meadowlark frowned. Then she smiled and said, "Changing the subject, have you met my daughter?"

"Daughter?" Erin looked back into the common room and saw a small filly curled up on the couch. She was gold colored with a dark red mane, and was looking at her with quite serious pale green eyes. "Oh, no, I don't think we have."

"Marigold, this is Sunflower. She's a guest. Sunflower, this is my daughter Marigold."

"Hi," the little filly said, expressionless.

"It's nice to meet you, Marigold," Erin said, smiling. The filly was simply too adorable. A thought struck her, and she whispered to Meadowlark, "Say, would it be okay if I gave her some cake? Pinkie Pie threw a welcome party for me yesterday, and she gave me tons to take home."

"Oh.. Well, sure, as long as it's not too much. I don't want to spoil her lunch." Meadowlark turned to her daughter and said, "Honey, would you like some cake?"

The filly on the couch perked up instantly and nodded enthusiastically. Erin and Meadowlark shared a laugh at the filly's suddenly-earnest expression, and Erin went into her room. She took out one of the huge boxes Pinkie had given her and brought it out. Even minus what Erin herself had eaten that morning, it was still a massive amount of cake.

"Wooow," Marigold said, appreciatively. "I can have *all* of that?"

"No, you can have a piece of it," her mother said sternly. Marigold's face fell, and Erin couldn't help but chuckle.

Meadowlark cut the cake, giving each pony a slice. As they ate, Erin and Meadowlark chatted briefly, as Meadowlark seemed interested in finding out what Erin thought of Ponyville so far, and where she was working. Erin filled her in on many of the events of yesterday. She skipped out on her job hunting before ending up at Fet-Ex, though. No need to go through all *that* again.

Marigold didn't really participate in the conversation, having finished her smaller slice of cake before the two adults. She now was spending her time staring at the rest of the cake in the box. Meadowlark sighed and smiled fondly at her daughter.

"She starts school next year, you know. She kept pestering me to let her go this year, but I kept telling her she's not big enough yet."

"Am too!"

Marigold had torn her gaze away from the cake long enough to scowl at her mother. Meadowlark smiled back and mussed her mane with a hoof.

"Not yet, you're not," she said, as the filly tried in vain to bat her mother's hooves away from her head.

Erin couldn't help herself. Her bad mood was just dissolving in the face of all the cuteness. Sure, Marigold was a bit of a crab, but she was just a little filly, and completely adorable.

"Well, I suppose I should be getting back to work," Erin said, glancing at the grandfather clock in the corner. "My break is up. Oh, feel free to hold on to that cake, if you want. No, it's okay," she said, as Meadowlark started to protest, "Maybe you can give some out to other guests, if any show up today. And, besides, I have another whole box of it back in my room. There is no way I can eat all that before it gets all stale, so it's better to share it, right?"

"That's true, I guess. Well, thank you, Sunflower. Marigold, what do we say?"

The filly seemed to consider that quite seriously for a moment before looking up and saying, "Thank you for the cake, Sunflower."

"You're very welcome, Marigold," Erin said, smiling back.

Erin said her goodbyes to the two unicorns, and trotted out the door.

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The rest of the day went smoother. Erin knew she'd have to deal with things eventually, but for now she was happy just doing her job and enjoying the weather. Even carting packages around wasn't so bad. The exercise tired her out, but in a good way, that made her feel pleasantly warm. The breeze blowing through Ponyville kept her from getting *too* warm.

She didn't see Lucky around at all, and Mr. Parcel explained that it was his job to take the cart out and make deliveries all around the outskirts of Ponyville. Apparently, most of the surrounding area was farmland, with ponies living, in some cases, miles away.

"And, once we get caught up with in-town deliveries," Mr. Parcel told her, "I'll have you join him. I have a second cart, after all, and that's where a good chunk of our backlog is."

"Oh... I thought I was getting caught up, but I guess not?"

"Don't get me wrong, darlin', you're doing a bang-up job," the older stallion told her, "You've got our backlog down considerably! But the hardest deliveries are the ones way out there, in the countryside."

"Oh, I see," Erin said, and since there didn't seem like much more to say, she loaded back up and trotted back out again.

The day went by quickly after that, and before she knew it, it was time to take off the uniform and head out for the day. She asked Mr. Parcel if it was alright to take the uniform home so she could wash it, and the elderly stallion gave his enthusiastic approval. With some difficulty, Erin managed to wedge the bulky uniform coat into her saddlebag.

She stepped outside the Fet-Ex office, noting that the sun was already getting close to setting. On a whim, she decided to drop by the library and see if she could borrow some books, then realized with a start that she had never even started on the History of Ponyville book she'd borrowed the other night. She gave a mental shrug and decided to try it anyway.

Twilight Sparkle greeted her warmly at the entrance to the Books and Branches library. Erin explained that she was hoping to check out a couple more books, asking if there were any that talked about the Griffons or the Zebra kingdoms. Twilight came back quickly with a pair of books, which Erin stashed away in her saddlebags.

Twilight apologized about not inviting her in for tea again, but apparently she had a research project that was taking up a lot of her time. Erin smiled and said that it was perfectly fine. She wanted to get into reading that night, anyway.

Having made that determination, Erin trotted back to the Guest House. She didn't bother going inside, at first, instead stripping off her saddlebags out back and taking her uniform coat out. Giving it a sniff, she flinched back. Yes, two days worth of sweating into it, and it was definitely getting a little ripe. Not to mention, who knew whether it had been washed before she tried it on the first time?

Erin suddenly regretted not insisting on washing it before wearing it. What if she had gotten fleas? Could ponies even get fleas? She stomped in frustration. She was supposed to be a pony, and here she was, not even sure if she could get fleas or not.

She pumped some water into the tub and scrubbed the jacket out thoroughly, then wrung it out. She hung it up on the line to dry overnight, and then trotted in through the back door of the Guest House.

Maybe one last slice of cake before starting these books, she thought as she opened the door to her room. Then she froze, locking gazes with an intruder. A gold-coated, red-maned intruder with a guilty look on her face, an open cake box in front of her, and cake smeared generously all over her face. The little filly even had managed to get some of the frosting in her mane.

Erin couldn't help it. Her back legs gave out and her rump crashed to the floor as she started laughing. The indignant and yet still embarrassed look on the filly's face didn't help, making her laugh even harder.

Finally, she wound down. Ribs aching, she stood back up and looked at the shame-faced filly.

"You know that you shouldn't go into other pony's rooms, right Marigold?" she asked.

"...'es," Marigold mumbled, looking at her hooves.

"And..?" Erin prompted. The filly looked confused for a moment, then blinked in understanding.

"And... I shouldn't take things that aren't mine?"

"Very good! And?"

"Umm... And... I'm sorry?" Pale green eyes on the verge of tears looked up at Erin from over a quivering lower lip. Erin's defenses melted in an instant.

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you what, Marigold. You promise to never come into somepony else's room without permission again, and I'll accept your apology. And, I won't even tell your mom, because I'm nice that way. Do you promise?"

"I promise! Thanks, Sunflower!" the filly said, hugging Erin's leg somewhat stickily before running off.

Erin smiled, thinking that at least she had made another friend today. Then she regarded the remains of the cake. The filly had disdained the rest of the pastries, leaving cookies, cupcakes and the single turnover behind, but had made a brave attempt at eating as much cake as humanly... ponily? possible. She had just started cleaning up when the commotion from the manager's apartment started.

Erin winced as she recognized the "angry mom voice," which was apparently the same in every dimension.

"Oh, I *really* should have told her to clean off her face before she went upstairs."

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An observer would have noted the air of badly-contained frustration. They may have also noted the small black shape in the center of the shifting, roiling shadows.

There weren't any observers, though. There hadn't been for centuries.

The drone slipped through the entity's grasp once again, and it barely caught it before it hit the ground. There was a low growling sound, which cut off suddenly. Carefully, almost delicately, the entity placed the drone into the furthest corner of the cave, then backed away. Only when it had retreated as far away from the drone as it could did it act, thrashing about wildly and howling with a voice that echoed and harmonized oddly with itself.

The entity vented its spleen as fully as it could, lashing out at the walls of its prison and cursing in languages long-dead and forgotten. Spectral limbs smashed walls and floors, leaving not so much as a mark. However, even in its madness, it was careful to keep away from the corner where the solitary drone lay, completely dormant.

The entity finally slowed to a halt. Most creatures, after such a display, would have been short of breath. But there was no sound of breathing. There was no sound at all. Until, with a scream of purest rage, the shadows threw themselves towards the entrance to the cave.

As it impacted the magical barrier, the scream of rage mixed with a howl of pain as the entity was thrown back in a flash of golden magic. It hurled itself at the door to its prison, still raging, again and again. And every time it did, the shield at the door would flash golden, and the shadows would be thrown back.

Each time it threw itself at the entrance, with the outside so tauntingly near, a little more rage faded from its voice, replaced more and more with agony. A last attempt and it gave up, retreating back to the darkness, whimpering with the memory of the pain.

Then it slept, or came as close as it ever could to sleeping.

Days passed, and finally the entity felt in control of itself once again. It made its way to the darkened corner of the cave and once again picked up the drone.

Chapter 12: Stress and Relaxation

With her coin purse jingling in her saddlebag, Erin trotted happily out the door off the Guest House and into Ponyville. She had forsaken her traditional morning run today in order to sleep in a little, as this was her first day off of work since arriving in the small town. It was after ten on Sunday morning before she had finally staggered her way into the shower and, yawning, washed the sleep out of her eyes.

Mr. Parcel, caught up in the throes of enthusiastic optimism, had asked both Erin and Lucky to work an extra day on Saturday to help with the remaining backlog for package delivery, paying for the time and a half out of his own pocket. The in-town backlog was now completely gone, which meant that Erin would be hitching up to the cart come Monday to help deliver the backlogged packages to the outskirts of Ponyville.

And now she had a bag full of bits and the desire to spend them. She had received her regular salary on Friday, plus the bonus on Saturday for the overtime. She had even managed to pick up a little more extra money Saturday night by babysitting Marigold while her mother went out on a date with a handsome (according to Meadowlark) young pegasus from the weather team.

Erin smiled as she recalled how much fun it had been to babysit the serious-minded young filly. In addition to playing games together, Marigold had been eager to show off some of the rudimentary magical skills she had learned from her mother, most of which consisted of her shooting sparks from her horn and then grumbling about how it had just worked the other day, *really*.

However, the young filly *had* successfully levitated a feather. Erin, remembering how difficult the students had found that in the Harry Potter books, had sincerely told the proud filly how impressed she was. Marigold had beamed with joy at the praise.

Erin had then shown the filly how to levitate a feather "Earth pony style", by standing underneath it and blowing it back up in the air whenever it got too close to her. Marigold had, for some reason, found that completely hilarious. So Erin had continued to keep the feather in the air with controlled puffs of breath until she had almost passed out from a lack of oxygen.

Dinner had been accompanied by one of the few, slightly stale cupcakes remaining from Erin's welcome party. Before handing over the bonus confection, Erin extracted a sincere but slightly giggly promise from the young unicorn not to tell her mom about it, on the pain of *both* of them getting in super-serious big trouble.

It was a serious risk. After the cake incident, not even the power of a prolonged pout and a bushel of crocodile tears was enough to get Meadowlark to relent on the "no desserts for a week" punishment she had laid down. It was a punishment that Erin had gleefully helped to subvert almost as soon as Meadowlark had walked out the door. She couldn't help it. Her heart turned to melted butter every time that filly smiled at her.

After being put to bed, and after a bedtime story, Marigold had hugged her around the neck and pecked her on the cheek. Erin had left the bedroom with a big idiot grin on her muzzle. It was obvious that Marigold had her wrapped around her hoof like a bracelet, but Erin found it difficult to care.

And now it was time for shopping! She hadn't had much of a chance to explore the actual stores of Ponyville since arriving, though she was now very familiar with the town's layout. Aside from food, which she either bought daily at the market or from the café, she hadn't had much of a chance to buy anything. And there were a few little stores that she had seen that had interested her.

There was, to her amazement, also a Ponyville spa. Erin was, admittedly, extremely curious about how similar a pony spa would be to a human one and had made an appointment there the other day for "Sometime in the afternoon". She was nervously looking forward to it.

She was also planning on picking up a present for Marigold. Nothing too fancy or extravagant, but hopefully something that a filly would like. Due to her current punishment, sweets as a present were out.

The sun was shining brightly today, though apparently the pegasi had scheduled a light rain shower in the evening. That was plenty of time for Erin to get her shopping done and get back to her room to do some reading. She had already finished several books that Twilight had lent her, detailing the history of Ponyville and relations between the ponies and the Zebra and Griffon lands. She had also read up on pony politics, and was now currently reading a book on basic pony magic. Twilight had handed it over to her with a strange look on her face when she had asked for it.

The book on magic had been both interesting and confusing, detailing a variety of unlikely effects unicorns could create with their horns, as well as various ways pegasi could directly influence the

weather besides just pushing clouds around. Earth ponies, like Applejack, apparently had greatly enhanced strength and endurance, as well as what the book called "green hooves", being able to coax abundant harvests out of even the poorest soils.

That last part might explain why all the food here was so fantastic, if the earth ponies had some sort of horticultural abilities.

Erin had decided to take her skepticism and shove it into a box in the attic of her mind. Taking things at face value was really the only way she could get through this, after all. She would never get anywhere if, every time a reference to "magic" or something similar popped up, she stopped and immediately thought how silly it was or attempted to disprove or rationalize it.

Besides, there was a not-insignificant part of her that really *wanted* to believe in magic. Her college professors would be so disappointed.

The first place Erin stopped into was a store that had been designed to look like a jester's hat. She'd been burning with curiosity about the oddly-shaped building since the first time she had seen it. Pushing the door open with a hoof, she stepped inside.

She wasn't sure what she expected to find in a "joke shop", but she had to admit that the interior more or less exactly right for it. Bright, primary colors and interesting shapes adorned the walls, and the shelves were placed all askew, rather than in straight lines. On the shelves were a collection of items any foal would be sure to love, from the classic arrow-through-the-head gag, to hoof buzzers and whoopee cushions.

There didn't seem to be any kind of organization, just different items piled seemingly at random. Erin wandered up and down the aisles, poking at the occasional pair of chattering wind-up teeth or giant fake rubber bugs. Even though she had quickly come to the conclusion that there was nothing here that she wanted to buy, it was still fun to look.

It was also amusing to see many of the gags she remembered from her own childhood represented here. Fake vomit, sneezing powder, disappearing ink, snakes-in-a-can... Erin found herself mildly surprised, even after a few days in Ponyville, at all the parallels between human and pony society.

Finally, she left the joke store and continued on. She stopped in a variety of stores after that. She went in to a store called Quills and Sofas and was surprised to find out that they did, in fact, only sell quills and sofas. When she asked the proprietor about it, he just shrugged and said, "I like quills. I like sofas. I own a store."

She also stopped into a store that sold saddlebags and spent a considerable amount of time looking at them. She had to admit, her current canvas saddlebags, though very functional and sturdy, were fairly ugly compared to what was for sale here. She eventually settled on a smaller set of dark green denim saddlebags that would be good for small purchases.

Trying them on, Erin was amazed by how much more comfortable they were. It made sense, though. As solidly constructed as her canvas Earth saddlebags were, they were designed by humans. It made sense that ponies would be better at making comfortable accessories for ponies.

The maroon earth pony mare with a needle and thread cutie mark who ran the store even offered to sew a sunflower buckle on it, to match Erin's own cutie mark. It was an extra two bits for the service, but Erin considered it well worth it. When she left the accessory store some time later, she had the new saddlebags folded delicately into her old ones.

She also picked up a small, dark red saddlebag for Marigold, which would go well with her coloration. Since the filly was going to school the next year, Erin thought that maybe she could use the bag for her new schoolbooks. That thought triggered another thought for Erin, and, a quick trot later, she found herself outside a stationery store.

When Erin had been a little girl in elementary school, nothing had made her happier than new school supplies. She quickly grew out of that around Junior High, but still, a filly Marigold's age would, hopefully, get a real kick out of having her own notebook and pencils.

Erin ended up buying not only a notebook and pencils, but crayons, erasers, a pencil sharpener, and a ruler with stencil shapes in it, very similar to the one she herself had owned as a girl. She took out Marigold's saddlebag and placed those items inside before closing it all back up inside her ugly utilitarian bags.

Feeling good about her purchases so far, but still desiring to spend more money, Erin wandered around town wondering what to buy next. She was about to give it up for the moment and get some lunch when she saw a mare walk by wearing what looked for all the world like a sundress.

Erin broke into a grin. Clothes! Of course! She could buy a dress, maybe a hat... the sun was starting to get into her eyes, after all.

She broke into a trot. There had been some kind of clothing store on the outskirts of town, as she recalled. She was trying to remember what it was called when the building itself came into view, looking like a large barn. The sign above the door labeled the store as "The Dress Barn", another odd parallel between Earth and Equestria. While she'd never been much of one for wearing dresses as a human, and as such had never gone into the human version of that store, she could definitely see how a dress would make more sense for a pony than, say, pants.

She trotted into the large open door and looked around. Colorful dresses of various styles hung from the racks. Erin walked up to the nearest one and looked at it with confusion. Not only were the dresses dowdier than anything Erin had seen a pony wear, the dresses on this rack were also much larger than she had expected to see, far larger than it needed to be for any pony she had seen so far. Thinking she must have wandered into the "big and beautiful" section of the store by mistake, she turned to go to a different rack. What she saw standing in front of her made her stop in complete astonishment.

"Well, we don't see too many ponies in here, don'tcha know," the large cow wearing an apron said to her.
"Are you buying a dress for a friend?"

Erin stared at the genially smiling cow for a long moment. Then she glanced around and saw that every customer in the shop was also a cow. Cows trying on dresses, cows looking at hats and little purses, cows having quiet conversations about the merits of various frumpy dresses. Then, without a word, she returned her gaze back to the shopkeeper that had talked to her and just stared.

The smile on the cow's face slowly changed from warm and friendly to awkward and forced. Finally, the bovine shopkeeper spoke again.

"Everything all right there, dearie? You look like you've seen a ghost or something."

Erin numbly backed away from the cow, turning around only when she'd reached the entrance to The Dress Barn. Then, projecting calm from every pore, she walked to the nearest park. Her brain still hadn't quite processed what she'd seen, but that was fine. Everything would be fine. All she had to do was find a nice, quiet tree to sit under for a little while until things started making some semblance of sense once again, and she'd be perfectly fine.

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Twilight Sparkle groaned and shoved the book she was reading to the side before laying her head on her desk. Spike, concerned, looked up from the comic book he was reading.

"Everything okay, Twilight?" he asked.

"It's been three days, Spike. Three days, and still nothing that would explain Sunflower's condition." Twilight lifted her head off the desk and rubbed a hoof at her temple. "Not that I was expecting this to be *easy* or anything, but I thought I would have found *some* clue by now."

"Maybe it's just not in your library, then?" Spike suggested. "There's tons more books in the Canterlot Royal Library. Should we try going there, instead?" As Twilight frowned in consideration, Spike continued. "And, maybe while you're at it, you can get some advice from somepony?"

"Spike, I wanted to keep this confidential for her. Asking somepony for advice on how to fix this isn't exactly keeping it a secret!"

"Yeah, but you wouldn't have to say *why* you were asking. You could just say it was a... hyperthetical question."

"It's 'hypothetical', " Twilight corrected automatically with a preoccupied frown.

She considered the dragon's suggestion seriously for a few seconds and decided that it had merit. As much as she wanted to figure this problem out all on her own, she wasn't making any progress by herself. And it wasn't fair to Sunflower to keep her waiting any longer than necessary before a cure or treatment was found.

"I suppose I could go to the Royal Canterlot medical center and talk to some of the researchers in the Magical Maladies wing, maybe they have some thoughts," the unicorn said thoughtfully after a moment. "Maybe I could just say it was for a story I was writing, or something along those lines. I wouldn't have to say that there's a pony actually suffering from this condition."

"Yeah. And then maybe we could stop by Doughnut Joe's?" Spike asked hopefully.

Twilight laughed and gave the little dragon a noogie hoof-rub. "Sure thing, Spike."

Then she regarded the large pile of books stacked on the table with a sigh. None of these books held any clue as to Sunflower's condition, and now they had to all be put away. Days of studying and frustration had culminated in a mild headache and stiff shoulders.

Well, her friend Rarity had shown her the best way to deal with that!

"Say, Spike," she said, "Would you mind helping me re-shelve these books? And after that, I'll treat you to a trip to the spa."

"Deal!" the dragon said, bouncing up out of his little chair. Twilight giggled at the dragon's eagerness for a spa treatment, and then began to re-shelve the books.

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"Erin, can you hear me?" a baritone voice said suddenly.

She shook herself out of her daze and glanced around. She was sitting under a large oak tree on the outskirts of town. Spotting nopony within listening distance, she replied, "Yes, I can hear you, Doctor Velchiek."

"Is everything all right? Anything odd happened since the last time we talked?"

"I just had a conversation with a cow."

There was a long pause, followed by Dr. Velchiek's flat "What?"

"I just had a *conversation* with a *cow*," Erin repeated, some of the frustrated confusion she was feeling leaking through in her tone. "Well, I say 'conversation', but really, all I did was stare in shock and then run away. I think I owe somepony, or rather some *cow*, an apology for acting like an idiot."

"You're saying... they have talking cows, there?"

"Yes."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"*Yes!*" Erin almost shouted.

"Erin, I need you to calm down," Dr. Velchiek said, which just goes to show that very educated doesn't necessarily mean very wise. Telling someone who's upset to calm down rarely has the effect that's intended. Erin's already fragile grip on reality slipped a couple more notches.

"Calm down? *Calm down?* Doctor, I had almost gotten used to this. *Almost!* The ponies here only *kind of* look like the ponies back home. Everything else is some brand of normal or near-normal. But this was a cow. An actual *cow*, that looked like any cow you'd see on Earth. And it *talked* to me. Can you get that? Can you maybe understand why I'm a little freaked out?"

That's what she had been contemplating for the last half hour or so, since leaving the Dress Barn. Since she had arrived in Equestria, there were things that were either completely different, like ponies that flew around and pushed clouds. That was surprising and amazing, but in an odd way, she could accept it as just the way things were here.

Then there were the things that were slightly different but in a way that made sense, like the designs of the buildings around Ponyville. That was fine too, it was almost like being in a different country on Earth, maybe some old-world Swedish village or something.

But a talking cow? That wasn't fair.

When she was little, her parents had taken her to the State Fair every year, and she loved to see the cows and other farm animals. And the cow that had spoken to her had looked exactly like any cow from Earth. Maybe a bit more intelligence in the eyes, and then there was the little fact that she had *talked*, but aside from that she could have fit into any herd of farm cows back in the Midwest.

The only thing Erin was sure of right now was that she would definitely never eat another hamburger for the rest of her life. A sudden feeling of weariness started to creep over her, and she sighed and closed her eyes for a moment.

"All right, all right, Erin," the doctor said in what he probably assumed was a calming fashion, "I understand as best I can. But is a talking cow really all that different than a talking pony?"

"Doctor, the ponies here only *superficially* resemble the ponies on Earth. You know that!"

"Erin, that's true. But panicking won't help. We need to proceed with the spirit of scientific curiosity-"

"No." Erin replied.

"I beg your pardon?" Dr. Velchiek sounded a bit irritated at having been interrupted. Erin drew in a deep, shuddering breath and then continued.

"No, I can't do that. I've already decided that I'm going to put my skepticism aside for the duration of this trip. Every time I see something unexpected, I try to reconcile it in a way that would make sense on Earth. But I'm not *on* Earth. I just have to take things as they come, and try to figure it out later."

Having heard herself say that, she grinned ruefully, "Which is kind of the exact opposite of what I did when I encountered a talking cow." She shook herself again. She was suddenly feeling much calmer now, and the realization that she had violated her own "no skepticism" rule pacified her in a way that Dr. Velchiek's attempt at a soothing voice had completely failed to accomplish.

Now slightly clearer-minded, a somewhat horrifying thought occurred to Erin. She quickly spoke up, wanting to bring it to the project head's attention as soon as possible.

"Doctor, if the ponies talk here, and the cows do, we have to assume it's at least possible that other animals here are also sapient. Back home, we have people who hunt deer and other animals for sport. I don't like it, but it's something humans have always done, and I can kind of justify it in my own mind because 'they're just animals'. But here, it wouldn't necessarily be *sport*, it could very well be outright murder."

There was another long pause, and then the doctor said, "I see. Yes, that's a very valid point. And there's also the fact that we were planning on bringing our livestock with us when we came over. No doubt the residents of Equestria would be horrified to see that we killed and ate cattle, if they're used to talking with them."

"Yeah... good point," Erin said, more morose than ever. She doubted that humans would give up eating meat while staying here. Would the Equestrians see livestock as a kind of slavery? How would they react to the butchery for meat? It was just another obstacle to a smooth transition of humanity settling in, one that further underscored the vast differences between human and Equestrian society.

"Well, as fascinating as that is, I'm afraid we only have a short time here. Erin, I need to run some diagnostics on your implants, if you don't mind."

"Oh? Why's that?" Erin asked.

"We've reviewed the data from our last conversation a few days ago, and something startling was revealed. Or, rather the complete lack of something startling."

"What do you mean?"

"Unicorns levitating things, and pegasi moving clouds around, just like you said. And yet, aside from your visual recorder, we received no data whatsoever."

"What, nothing?" Erin asked, confused. *Something* should have come up, she was sure. She had every type of analyzer and recorder known to humanity wedged into her pony body somewhere. Some form of radiation, magnetism, *something* should have shown up in the data.

"That's right, nothing. I'm going to turn you over to Doctor Edwards, now, who will be running the diagnostics."

"Oh, okay," Erin said, while thinking '*Great, this guy again.*' There was a short delay, and then Dr. Edward's brusque voice came over Erin's audio implants.

"All right, Ms. Olsen. I need you to remain as still as possible. You may experience some disorientation and discomfort, but remain calm."

And then, before Erin could even reply, the whole world simply shut off.

She sat, frozen with a creeping terror, in total darkness and complete silence. She realized that she couldn't hear the birdsong in the distance, the wind in the trees, or the distant sounds of a busy Ponyville. She couldn't even hear her own breathing, which nearly caused her to panic for a moment before she realized that this must all be part of the test.

Still, even knowing that, it was little comfort. She couldn't feel the ground under her hooves. She couldn't feel the breeze on her hide. She couldn't even smell anything.

Without any kinds of reference points, time seemed to stretch on forever. Erin wasn't sure how long she had sat there, completely devoid of any sensation and trembling with near panic, when without warning the world snapped back into place. The sudden blast of light and sound caused her actual pain, and she flinched and let out a little scream of panic.

"Settle down," Dr. Edwards said shortly. "I just rebooted your sensors."

"You... Don't... You complete *ass*," Erin seethed. "You could have warned me that was going to happen!"

"I thought I had," the scientist replied caustically. "If you find a little sensory deprivation to be too much to handle, then perhaps we're better off scrubbing this mission and bringing you home."

Erin hadn't felt this angry in years. There were a hundred things she wanted to say, and the clamor of all those things made it impossible for her to say anything at all. She settled for grinding her teeth and standing up, walking away from Ponyville. The white-hot anger she was feeling for Dr. Edwards was threatening to explode out of her, and the rational part of her mind made her think that some distance from the other ponies would help to prevent an awkward scene.

"We aren't done yet!" Dr. Edwards snapped. "Sit down, young lady!"

"Go stuff yourself!" Erin snapped back, breaking into a gallop.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, coldly.

"You don't have it, you condescending, stuck up, arrogant jerk! I've had enough of you and the way you treat me! I'd had enough within ten minutes of meeting you! If you think that telling me that I 'may feel some discomfort' is enough warning for making me completely blind and deaf, then you're crazy! If you ever, *ever* do anything like that again without my permission, I swear to you that the first thing I do when I get back to Earth will be to kick your lungs out through your back!"

Erin was rapidly approaching a large forested area. Not the creepy forest she had been warned away from, but another forest near Ponyville. She angled her approach and leaped over some bushes into the forest itself. She slowed to an angry march as she worked her way between the trees. Over the audio feed, Dr. Edwards was spluttering and incoherent. *Good*, she thought, fiercely.

"Since day one, *Doctor* Edwards, you've treated me with nothing but disdain and contempt. Well, I don't deserve it! I never have! You expect to be treated with respect? Fine and dandy, but you can treat me with some as well! I may not be a doctor myself yet, but I'm out here, and I'm doing my best! I volunteered for this when nopony else would! You have *no* idea what I'm going through out here, or what it's like to actually be here! If you think it's so easy, then maybe you should undergo the process yourself. *If* you had the guts! And, if you expect any cooperation or respect from *me*, then you'd better show me some in return!"

Erin stood amongst the trees, still shaking in the aftermath of the rage she'd felt. Now that she'd vented, she was starting to feel calmer. One part of her was afraid of what would be coming, that she might get in trouble. She banished that thought angrily. What kind of trouble could she possibly get into? She was in an entirely different *world*, for goodness sake.

There was silence from the audio, silence that implied more than just someone not talking. It sounded like the microphone was turned off. It went on for a few minutes, long enough for her anger to fade to dull embers, with a mild side of embarrassment, as another wave of weariness and melancholy washed through her. She hadn't lost control of her emotions like that since she'd been a teenager. Now, more than anything, she simply felt tired and worn out. It had been a long week, and the emotional upset of today had simply been too much.

As she calmed, she realized that a talking cow wasn't really *that* big of a deal, at least not with everything else taken into consideration. She'd been turned into a pony using experimental nanotechnology, after all. When you compared that to a talking cow, the latter actually seemed pretty normal.

With her new perspective on the situation, she realized that this mini-freakout had been building for a while. She was experiencing pretty severe culture shock, after all. She'd been shoving her doubts and confusion off to the side for days, simply not dealing with it. Seeing a talking cow had just been the straw that had broken the camel's back.

"*Actually, I bet the camels here talk, too,*" she thought, wryly amused. Just then, a soft click indicated that the audio was back on. She heard someone, presumably Dr. Edwards, take a deep breath.

"Very well, Erin. I've been told—" she heard Dr. Velchiek's voice say something very sternly in the background, and Dr. Edwards amended stiffly, "I mean to say, that is, that I apologize. Of course you deserve respect, and I was wrong not to warn you specifically as to what would happen. Now, if we're done with this, I'd like for you to please sit down and try to stay still. We still need to finish these

diagnostics."

"All right," Erin said, deciding that this was probably the best "apology" she could expect from the condescending scientist. "For what it's worth, apology accepted. Now, could you please just let me know what to expect before it happens? It's been a long and few days, and further surprises aren't going to help me."

"Yes. Fine. I'll be sure to do that. Right now, Erin, I'm going to test various wavelengths of light. You're going to see things changing color."

And from that point on, the diagnostics went fairly smoothly. Dr. Edwards, in an icily polite fashion, explained what to expect before every test. After testing color depth, he continued on to other tests. It was actually a little bit fascinating to see Equestria's magnetic field, as well as seeing in infrared and ultraviolet. Then he switched to hearing, and Erin heard an incredible variety of sounds explode around her. Every rustling leaf, every moving animal was suddenly clear to her. Even the insects and worms burrowing under the ground could be heard.

She was suddenly intensely glad that she was restricted to a more "normal" range of hearing. All of this was fascinating for the moment, but it would be an unbearable din if she heard it all the time.

After maybe another twenty minutes, Dr. Edwards informed her curtly that the tests were over and that he'd put Dr. Velchiek back on the line. After a moment, a familiar deep baritone came across the audio.

"Hello, Erin. How are you holding up?" he asked her.

"Fine, Doctor, thank you," Erin said with a sigh. "I suppose I should apologize for that meltdown. He just picked a bad time to push my buttons, is all."

"No need to apologize, Erin. I work with the man, I know how insufferable he can be. And you're under considerable strain as it is. It's our job to make your burden as easy as possible, not to add to it. Rest assured, he and I will be having a discussion about this later on tonight."

"Thank you, Doctor." There was a moment of silence, and Erin scuffed a hoof across the forest floor, upsetting a few dead leaves.

"Well, Erin, I wanted to let you know that you're doing a fantastic job. The information that you've been retrieving for us has been invaluable. If I could make a suggestion, though?"

"Sure."

"If you can, try to get to Canterlot. We need to know more about how the local government works. You had said something about a Princess, or perhaps Princesses, who ruled. But even if that's the case and they aren't just figureheads, no one rules alone. She should have some form of government underneath her who handles the day to day things. Also, if there are other nations, there should be ambassadors and the like."

Dr. Velchiek cleared his throat and continued.

"We'll need to know how these things are situated. We're moving into the final stages of planning, now, and we want to be able to present ourselves to the Equestrian leadership as soon as possible. There's a good-sized window opening in about a month that should be sufficient for us to get our ambassadors through, and I hope to have the information needed by then."

"Oh, sure," Erin replied. "Actually, I've been reading up on that, you should see the data in this batch. There actually are two Princesses, and they share the rule. They're called Celestia and Luna, which is either a traditional name passed down through the generations, or each princess is actually over a thousand years old," Erin said with a snort of amusement. "It seems like we just got a new Luna almost two years ago. Also, it turns out that there's an entire noble caste underneath the Princesses that helps out, as well as counselors, ministers and the like. The details are in one of the books that I've read over the last couple of days."

"Good work, Erin! That's fantastic! Now, if you can get us the names of some of the ponies we need to talk to, we'll be several steps closer to being ready than we had anticipated at this time."

"I'll work on it, Doctor," Erin said. "Is it urgent enough for me to take time off of work to do so, or should I just wait until next weekend? I should have some free time, then."

"It will hold until the weekend. It's more important that you maintain a sustainable presence in Ponyville, if possible."

"Okay, that sounds good," Erin said as she turned to walk back towards town. "I'll try to get more

observations of the ponies' telekinesis and cloud moving. Oh, and so you know, apparently earth ponies like Applejack have some agriculturally-based abilities. The books I've read have said something about that."

"Interesting," Dr. Velchiek replied. "Is there anything else you're concerned with, Erin?"

"No, I think that's it for now," she said, re-jumping over the hedge leading into the forest. On the way over, she snagged her canvas saddlebag on a branch, causing a small tear. She glowered at the damage for a moment and then sighed. Maybe it wasn't too early to go to the spa. She could really use some relaxation.

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Twilight sighed in appreciation as she reclined in the hot bathtub at the spa. She'd decided to go all-out today and get the full treatment, which started out with a cleansing bath, followed by a mane and tail shampoo and scalp massage, a facial, a pony-pedi, and then a mud bath and seaweed wrap followed by an herbal soak. She opted against having her horn shaped, as she didn't like other ponies filing her horn.

Spike was already lying face down on a bench getting his back rubbed by a slightly nervous looking Aloe. Not because she was afraid of dragons; Spike came in here pretty often, after all. No, she was worried that she'd push too hard on the small dragon's tiny frame.

"He's tougher than he looks, you know," Twilight told her with a smile. Aloe looked startled for a moment and then smiled warmly back. When she returned to Spike's ministrations, it was with a decent amount of force, causing the assistant librarian to groan happily.

Twilight giggled and was just leaning back again when Lotus came in, leading a slightly lost-looking Sunflower. Twilight called out to her, making her jump, and waved her over.

"Hi Twilight!" The earth pony said with a smile. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Oh, I decided to treat myself. I have a... pretty tricky research project I'm working on, and it's been giving me a headache. I decided to clear my head before going back to it."

"That sounds like a great plan," the other mare said with a slightly laugh. "I'm feeling pretty run down, myself."

Twilight had to agree with that assessment. The light brown mare had bags under her bloodshot eyes, and was swaying slightly on her hooves. She looked almost ready to drop. If they hadn't already been in the spa, Twilight would have recommended that she go and get some sleep. As it was, there was nothing wrong with passing out in the bath here at the spa. She had done it herself several times, after all.

Lotus led Sunflower over to the shower area, where she rinsed off of the dust and dirt of the outside world. She then almost pushed the startled-looking earth pony into the tub with Twilight. After some initial surprise, Sunflower simply shrugged and stepped in, lowering herself gingerly into the steaming water. Once fully immersed, the earth pony sighed and seemed to relax.

"Oh, this is *nice*," she said, a sentiment Twilight definitely agreed with.

They chatted casually for a short while, and then Aloe and Lotus teamed up on them to start the shampooing. Talking was sporadic after that, as both mares simply enjoyed the pampering that followed.

When it came to the hooficure, Aloe took up one of the earth pony's hooves and then looked at it with mild confusion. A nervous-looking Sunflower asked if anything was wrong.

"Your hooves, Miss. They are... unique. Please, do not be concerned. I shall have them trimmed and shaped nicely soon enough!"

The analytical part of Twilight's brain noted that Sunflower looked distinctly uncomfortable at the mention of anything being unusual with her hooves. Something clicked in her mind. Could it be that whatever caused Sunflower's condition was related to her hooves? It made a certain amount of sense, after all. Just as a unicorn's magic was centered mostly on their horns, an earth pony had their magic focused primarily in their hooves. Whatever this mystery malady was, it could very well either be rooted in, or at least show some symptoms, in the mare's hooves.

The librarian wondered briefly if she could figure out some way to get Sunflower to let her examine her hooves before ruefully shaking her head. There would be no way to conceal that she knew something was wrong if she did something like that. Maybe she could invite her over for a sleepover and they could paint each other's hooves? No, that was silly, only little fillies did that, according to a book she had read on advanced slumber party techniques.

She sighed with renewed frustration. Sunflower's malady was just too intriguing of a mystery for her to give it up, but it was annoying to have so many answers just out of reach.

Twilight realized that she had let her attention wander briefly while Sunflower was talking. She suddenly realized that Sunflower had asked her a question and was waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry, I was miles away," she said, "What did you just say?"

"Um, I just said that I was thinking of going to Canterlot next weekend, just to see what it's like, and I asked if you'd ever been there."

"Oh, yes! I grew up there. It's a beautiful city, and the center of Equestrian government and culture. It was established in 543 AF to be the seat of Princess Celestia's power, and it took the best craftspories from all three tribes more than a decade to finish the initial construction, which has since been overshadowed. The current area of Canterlot is more than three times the size of the original castle."

"Here we go," Spike muttered from a nearby lounge chair. "She's gone into lecture mode. Good luck, Sunflower."

Twilight blushed as Sunflower giggled at the dragon's comment. "It's okay," she said, "I like learning these things. What does 'AF' mean, anyway?"

"It's... After Founding, after the founding of Equestria," Twilight said, honestly surprised there was anypony who lacked that basic information. She guessed that some of her surprise must have shown through, because Sunflower just said a meek "Oh" and sunk her head back down on her bench, looking embarrassed. She kicked herself for that. Obviously, the earth pony had led a very sheltered life in whatever backwater village she came from, and her education had suffered greatly.

"It's no cause for embarrassment, Sunflower," she said firmly. "Whatever reason you don't know these things isn't important. What matters is that you're doing your best now to learn and improve yourself. That's more than many ponies can say."

Sunflower seemed both pleased and self-conscious at the unexpected praise, blushing rosily. "Thanks, Twilight," she mumbled.

"In any case, yes, I know my way around. You said you wanted to go up there next weekend?" At Sunflower's enthusiastic nod, Twilight grinned and said, "I was planning on heading up there this week, maybe tomorrow. I have a research project and I need to access the Royal Library, and maybe ask some questions of some local experts. I'm sure I'll still be there this weekend. Would you like to meet up on Saturday and I can show you around?"

Sunflower's genuine smile and eager acceptance made Twilight happy that she had made the offer. And, who knew? Maybe she could get some more information out of the earth pony during the trip.

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Erin found herself relaxing more and more as Aloe massaged her muscles, working out kinks that she hadn't even been aware of. She had worried briefly that something was wrong with her hooves, but Aloe hadn't mentioned anything else wrong after that, and had simply filed and shaped her hooves quickly and efficiently.

She cracked an eye open and regarded the hoof at the end of her outstretched foreleg. It had always been daintier than she would have expected from a pony. But now it was even smaller, formed into a perfect half-circle at the base. It had been smoothed off across the wall and coated with some kind of clear polish, like a nail polish only applied slightly more thickly and buffed up much brighter. Her hooves gleamed in the spa's mild light with a satiny finish.

"I have such pretty, shiny hoofsies," Erin thought, and would have giggled at the thought if she hadn't been so completely tranquil. At a guess, the spa's pony initial concern had probably come from the lack of care Erin had shown her hooves. She was ashamed to admit it, but they had been a little ragged, overgrown and uneven.

Twilight's offer to meet her in Canterlot removed even more of her stress. Having a friendly face there to show her around would be more than welcome. With any luck, she could even get some information out of the librarian on who the humans would need to talk to in order to establish diplomatic relations.

After the massages, it was time for a mud mask and bath, which Erin thought might be a bit hard to handle with her tail and fuzzy coat. Still, it was very soothing, the heated mud supporting her weight in a way that even water didn't. She floated in the mud bath like a leaf, her feet barely touching bottom.

They continued with the small talk, though Erin let the small unicorn carry most of the conversation,

mostly just asking the occasional question. Spike was right, the librarian really *did* like to lecture. Not that Erin minded, she learned a lot from Twilight, and the mare's eagerness to pass on information helped to trigger her own desire to learn.

Finally, it was time to exit the mud baths and enter a shower. Aloe and Lotus helped to scrub them down and get the last remaining bits of mud and grit out of their coats, manes and tails. Another quick shampoo, this time with a generous dollop of some herbally-infused conditioner, and the two mares were then dried off and given robes, with their manes bundled up in towels on their heads. After that, they relaxed in the sauna while another bath was prepared for them, this time using some aromatic herbs.

It took around twenty minutes for the tub to fill up with hot water. It took less than a minute for Erin, lulled by the steamy heat of the sauna, to drift off to sleep. Twilight glanced over and saw her snoozing, chin resting on her forelegs, and decided not to wake her up. Only when Aloe and Lotus came in to announce that the bath was ready did Erin snap awake with a start, feeling oddly lethargic.

The tub they eventually got into was a large, round, wooden thing; large enough for easily a dozen ponies if they didn't mind being slightly squooshed together. At the moment, though, the only ponies present were Erin and Twilight, with a possibly sleeping Spike idly floating by on his back. Erin sat down on her haunches and leaned back against the tub wall, enjoying the warm water and the pleasant scent of the herbs.

Through it all, Twilight Sparkle had kept up a near-constant monologue, telling Erin all about various features of Canterlot. She went into a lot of detail on the Royal Library, which apparently housed the largest collection of knowledge anywhere in the world. She talked about the history of the Royal Equestrian Orchestra, and the Orchestra Hall where most of their concerts were performed. She talked about her favorite hangouts as a filly and as a young mare, and what it had been like going to school at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns.

Twilight's enthusiasm was infectious, and Erin found herself getting more and more excited about her upcoming trip to Canterlot. She made a mental note to be sure she had plenty of bits, both for souvenirs and to see the various sights. There were museums and art galleries that Twilight bragged about, though she eventually admitted to rarely, if ever, visiting them herself.

"I was usually too busy studying," the lavender mare said, mildly embarrassed.

"Well, we should definitely go see them together!" Erin replied with a grin. "That would be a lot of fun, don't you think?"

"Actually, I *was* planning on getting some research done..." the unicorn trailed off in the face of the puppy-dog eyes Erin was presenting and relented. "Fine, we can stop at the museum. And maybe *one* art gallery, if there's time."

Erin laughed, and Twilight joined in after a moment. After that, the two of them started planning in more detail. Twilight offered to spare Erin's budget the cost of a hotel room by asking Princess Celestia if they could have rooms at the palace, which excited her to no end. With any luck, she'd get to meet the Princess!

It was then that Erin's stomach rumbled loudly, reminding her that she'd skipped lunch. She had been too upset before the spa trip to have much of an appetite, but now she was feeling tranquil and more than a little bit hungry. Twilight giggled at the noise, and Spike proved that he wasn't sleeping by bursting out with a quick guffaw.

"Well, I suppose I should go get something to eat," Erin said, mortified. She began pulling herself up out of the tub only for Aloe to pop up seemingly out of nowhere to help her. The blue-maned pony then helped to dry her off with a towel, and then brushed her down quickly, efficiently and thoroughly.

When she was done, she guided Erin over to a mirror. The former human could only stare. The treatments had done wonders for her coat and her mane, both of which were shining and glossy in a way she'd never seen before. Though her mane and tail hadn't exactly been restyled, they were both brushed and orderly, falling in dynamic waves rather than in near-tangles like she was used to. Along with her now-perfectly-shaped hooves, she projected an image of near-pony-perfection.

Erin had to admit, she was pretty darned cute at the moment. Her human self would so want to hug the living daylights out of her pony self, if it weren't for the fact that it was a complete impossibility.

"I look amazing," she said, awed. Then blushed, as Aloe laughed. Erin glanced over and saw that Twilight was getting a similar treatment from Lotus, with a similar, though less radical transformation.

"You look amazing too, Twilight," Erin said, and then grinned at the pony's blush.

"Um, thanks." Twilight said

They walked out of the spa together, after paying. It took up almost half of Erin's remaining bits to pay for the spa, but she considered it well worth it for all the good it did her. She stepped back out into Ponyville feeling fresh and renewed down to her very hoof-tips.

She and Twilight chatted for a bit longer, mostly just to finalize their plans. Erin asked the unicorn where she could go to pick up some clothes, thinking it would probably be nice to have a dress to wear while in Canterlot, and Twilight recommended her friend Rarity's boutique. After getting directions there, Erin resolved to visit it right away after work on Monday.

They made their goodbyes, and Erin waved at Twilight as the unicorn trotted off. Then she stood there for a moment, wondering where to go eat. It had to be inexpensive, since she was getting pretty low on bits.

As she was contemplating that, Twilight came marching back up rapidly, blushing furiously. Erin was about to ask her what was wrong, but the unicorn muttered "I forgot Spike," as she passed. Erin stood there blinking for a moment. Then, chuckling, she wandered off to find something to eat.

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The shadowy figure wanted to smash the thing. To take the device and break it in two, and then slam the two halves together until it was nothing but small bits. And then to take the small bits and grind them into a fine powder.

The machine wasn't working. The entity couldn't deduce out how to make it work. This thing was far beyond its comprehension, a thought that nearly drove it into a blind rage once again.

The small, rational corner of its mind gibbered at it that there was no advantage in destroying the machine. It would be better to just put it down and leave it be.

The entity also wanted to smash that rational part of its mind. It would have done so centuries ago, if it had been able to. Instead, it had to be content with slowly strangling it with irrationality over the years.

It was pointless. The device would never work again. Frustration and rage boiled up inside of it. To have been taunted with the possibility of freedom after so long just to have it yanked away was more unbearable than it could have ever believed.

Rather than smash the device, the entity simply flung it away. It skittered across the floor, one of the fans breaking off and another becoming badly damaged as it fetched up against the side of the cave wall, near the entrance.

The shadows retreated to a far corner of the cave, sulking in a petty rage. Days went by, and the rage was subsumed by a deep depression. A depression which was suddenly broken by a noise. An unusual noise that the entity had never heard before.

A clicking, whirring noise, coming from the entrance to the cave.

Cautiously, the entity moved towards the discarded drone, as if it were afraid of startling the machine. The few undamaged panels on the contraption's back were moving. Just slightly moving, angling to catch the last dying rays of the setting sun.

Chapter 13: Arrival in Canterlot

It felt like a very long time since Twilight had last been in Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, but the mare next to her hadn't changed a bit. Moonlight Glimmer was currently looking at her with a quizzical expression in her bright pink eyes.

"So, it's a story about a mare who has no magic at all?"

"That's right," Twilight Sparkle said.

"Hmm... intriguing premise, Ms. Sparkle."

"Thank you, Professor Glimmer!" Twilight smiled at her former teacher as they walked down the hallway towards the Library proper.

"So, how would this mare heroine of yours become afflicted with such an ailment?"

"Well, that's what I was hoping you could help me with, ma'am", Twilight said to the older mare. "I'm kind of stuck on that part, and I want to make sure I get it right."

The older mare laughed and brushed her bone white mane away from her face.

"Twilight, you haven't changed after all," she said to her former student, who looked mildly perplexed.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, when you came to me and said you were writing a work of fiction, I was surprised. It seems so unlike you to undertake something that a younger version of yourself might have considered frivolous. And yet, I can see images of the filly I once knew peeking out in your desire to get every detail right, even when it comes to an ailment that you invented out of whole cloth." The albino mare smiled down at her former pupil, who was frowning slightly.

"Just because it's a work of fiction," Twilight said, somewhat defensively, "that doesn't mean it can't be scientifically accurate!"

"And that's what I meant, dear! I was concerned for a moment that my super-serious Twilight Sparkle had given up scholarly pursuits in order to have a little fun."

"I'm not..." Twilight began to protest, then stopped and smiled as she realized that her former professor was baiting her. "Okay, okay, I can take things a little too seriously at times. But still, it's important for me to get it right. So, do you know of anything that could make a pony unable to access magic? As in, she'd be totally untouched by it in any way."

"Hmmm...." Professor Moonlight Glimmer stopped walking and pressed one hoof up underneath her chin in thought. Twilight waited patiently next to her, confident that she'd get a thorough answer from the older mare.

When Twilight had first come to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, she had been afraid of the pale mare. Albinism was pretty rare amongst ponies, and the only color on the mare was her startlingly pink eyes. Even her cutie mark was a black circle that depicted a waning crescent moon.

That fear had quickly changed as the professor displayed a genuine warmth and patience with her, even though she'd been a nervous and somewhat timid little filly. Moonlight Glimmer had rapidly become one of Twilight's favorite teachers, and her subject was Magical Biology. If anyone, short of Celestia or Luna, could answer the question of how Sunflower had lost her magic, it would be Professor Glimmer.

"I have no idea," the aforementioned mare finally said, and Twilight groaned. "Why don't you just make up something plausible? It can literally be anything. After all, it is just a work of fiction, right?"

"Yes... I suppose," she replied morosely.

"Of course, if your heroine was born that way, she wouldn't have a cutie mark." the professor continued. "That would make for an interesting story, I think. You know, how she deals with being different, and all, which is a subject close to my own heart."

"No cutie mark?" Twilight replied, surprised.

"Yes, after all, you need *some* inherent magic to get a cutie mark. Both donkeys and zebras are closely related to ponies. But zebras, with their inherent magic, get their glyph marks the same way ponies get cutie marks, and donkeys never get any kind of mark at all. Zebras have inherent use of magic, and

donkeys don't."

Twilight was surprised. Why hadn't she thought of that? She had been working under the assumption that Sunflower had been normal and "something happened" to take her magic away, and now she had confirmation. Whatever had happened to Sunflower had obviously happened after her cutie mark had come in! It wasn't much more of a lead than she already, but at least it was *something*. It meant the mare had obviously had magic at one point, and then lost it. She couldn't have been born without it, or she'd have never received her mark!

Twilight frowned and thought about it for a moment longer. Something seemed wrong with that argument, and it took her a moment to pin it down.

"But wait a moment, professor. Mules and donkeys are part of the magic field. They can't use magic, but magic itself doesn't part around them, like it does from... er... the main character in my story."

Professor Glimmer blinked in surprise and said, "You can see magical fields, Twilight?"

"Um, yes?"

Her old teacher beamed widely and hugged her unexpectedly around the neck, causing the purple unicorn to stiffen in shock.

"Oh, Twilight! I'm so proud! Only a very few unicorns in all of recorded history have the ability or insight to see the magical field that permeates Equestria! I can, and Professor Starfall can as well, and maybe a half dozen others, but that's all that we know of right now. Oh, and the Princesses, of course!"

"Oh... really?" Twilight replied, smiling weakly back at Moonlight Glimmer's proud grin. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to her that other ponies would be able to sense what she'd sensed about Sunflower's lack of magic. How could she have been so stupid?

Obviously, they couldn't stay in the palace. She wouldn't be able to keep Sunflower's condition a secret from the Princesses. And she couldn't take her to the library or the school, either.

Unless...

Twilight suddenly realized that she had been working under the assumption that Sunflower would want her condition kept a secret, that she didn't want other ponies to know about her lack of magic, but was that actually the case? Perhaps the earth pony desperately wanted help, but didn't know who or how to ask? The studious unicorn realized that she couldn't make that assumption, either way. She'd have to talk to Sunflower about it when she arrived, and leave the choice up to her.

Of course, that meant that she'd also have to reveal that she herself knew the secret of the mare's lack of magic. She really hoped that Sunflower wouldn't be too upset about that.

Twilight shook her head and re-focused on the task at hand, which was currently to extricate herself from the professor's enthusiastic hug.

"Well, I just realized that I could see it a short while ago, really," she said, as Moonlight Glimmer released her. "That's how this idea occurred to me, a sort of 'what if a pony wasn't a part of this?' kind of idea."

"Well, like you said, even donkeys and mules, and every other living thing in Equestria for that matter, is a part of that magical field, but that doesn't mean that they can *use* it, like a pony can. The only way your hero could be a pony *and* outside of the field is... well, maybe if she were a zombie pony!"

Moonlight Glimmer laughed at that, and Twilight, wide-eyed at the previously-unconsidered possibility, forced herself to join along.

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"Letter for you!" Meadowlark said happily before passing her a heavy cream-colored scroll.

"For me? Really?" Erin said, completely nonplussed. She had no idea who would be sending her a letter, especially one on such expensive-looking stationary. She took the scroll with her hooves and pulled the ribbon off with her teeth before unrolling it on a nearby coffee table. It turned out to be several pages, all rolled together. Erin quickly scanned the top page.

"Oh!" she said with surprise. "It's from Twilight Sparkle."

Dear Sunflower, the scroll began, written in small, precise letters, *I regret to say that there are no rooms immediately available in the castle, and that we may not be able to meet the Princesses as I was hoping. That may change once you get here, though. I will discuss it with you then.*

In the meanwhile, I have arranged to stay with my parents. I can stay in my old bedroom, and they would be happy to put you up in the guest room.

I was able to procure a round trip pass for you on the Canterbury Express (ticket enclosed with this scroll). Please be sure to catch the 10:15 a.m. train to Canterbury, which you can catch at platform B. I've attached a train schedule, as well (see attached second page), however the 10:15 is definitely the train you want to catch. You should make sure to arrive at least thirty minutes early, to be assured of a place to sit on the train. The Saturday trains tend to get fairly full very quickly.

Present the enclosed ticket when the conductor comes down the aisle. He or she will punch the ticket for you and return it to you. Be sure to not lose this ticket after it is returned or you will have to purchase a new one for the return trip!

The train should depart by approximately 10:15, though sometimes they do leave a few minutes late. I have written several letters to the Equestrian Railway Committee about the importance of efficiency and punctuality, but to no effect. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, that should place you in Canterbury by 12:00 noon, at the very latest. I will meet you at the arrival platform, and take you to lunch at my favorite restaurant near the station, Balle de Foin. Attached (page three) is a copy of their menu. Please go over it and make a decision now, as that will save time in the restaurant, which will make sure that we stay on schedule. I have reservations at 12:15 exactly, so please don't miss the 10:15 train!

After lunch, which I estimate will last for approximately 65 minutes based on average serving time and the duration of small talk, we can head to the Royal Museum of Canterbury. We should be there by 1:30, in order to stay on schedule. I have budgeted 90 minutes, which should be plenty of time to see the displays that interest you the most. See page four for a list of attractions, and select the ones you most wish to see. Keep in mind, the more exhibits you wish to see, the less time we will have to see each of them. I'd recommend no more than twenty attractions, as that will give us four minutes to enjoy each, plus an extra ten minutes of time for walking around.

Once we leave the Royal Museum, I have a grand tour of Canterbury planned, where we will see a series of important cultural locations (see attached itinerary, page five).

I'm looking forward to seeing you on Saturday, and don't forget: Make sure to make that 10:15 train! Maybe you should show up 45 minutes early just to be sure you catch it?

See you Saturday.

Twilight Sparkle.

Erin blinked in surprise, and then flipped through the other sheets of paper that were rolled up with the first one. In Twilight's precise writing, she found each of the attached documents, also written in the librarian's exacting script. Also included, she found a golden ticket with a fancy black scroll-work border and the words "Canterbury Express Dual-pass" stamped on it.

"Well... she's nothing if not thorough," she said, and Meadowlark laughed.

"You should see her during Winter Wrap Up!" the unicorn replied.

Erin smiled, even though she had no idea what that meant. She made a mental note to look up "Winter Wrap Up" in the library when she next visited.

"I'm going to go take my saddlebags off before tea, if that's okay," Erin said to Meadowlark, who nodded. She trotted into her room and took off her new, green saddlebags, then placed Twilight's letter, the ticket, and the other pages all inside. Then she walked back out into the common room, where Meadowlark had set up a small platter of tiny triangular sandwiches, some cookies and a pot of tea, with three cups. Marigold was frowning intently at her cup as if she were trying to decide if she really liked tea, or if she should just fake it so the adults wouldn't send her away.

Erin and Meadowlark had grown closer over the last few days, ever since she had surprised the single mother by asking if it were okay to give her daughter the gifts she had bought on Sunday. Since then it had become something of a custom for them to meet and chat over tea and sandwiches when Erin returned from work.

Marigold had been extremely excited over her new saddlebags and school supplies, just like Erin had suspected she would. The filly had immediately taken everything out of the bags, spent almost an hour going through everything and organizing it, and then meticulously put it all back in. Then she carefully removed her box of crayons and the drawing paper Erin had given her and drew a careful picture of a smiling pony standing under a big glowing sun in a grassy field with occasional flowers. Erin had recognized her own coloration on the pony and was honestly touched that the filly would draw a picture of her, and even more so when the picture turned out to be a present.

The picture was now carefully tacked to her bedroom wall, the only personal decoration that Erin had in her room. There were other pictures scattered around the Guest House now, and Marigold had spent a lot of her time recently producing drawing after drawing. Most of them were of Meadowlark, or of her friend Dinky, but a few had Erin in them as well.

In fact, the filly was coloring again as Erin re-entered the common room. She had a seat across the table from Meadowlark, who was currently pouring out the tea. Erin spooned some sugar into the cup and stirred it.

"So, how was work today?" Meadowlark asked brightly.

"Oh, it was very interesting," Erin replied. "I had to make a delivery to Rainbow Dash's house. I've... never seen anything like that, before."

"Yes, she does have a very nice house," Meadowlark replied, grinning. Erin cocked her head at the unicorn, thinking that she seemed *far* too happy about her having seen Rainbow Dash's cloud house.

"What's going on?" she asked curiously. "Did something happen between you and Starburst?"

Meadowlark blushed in response to her coltfriend's name, and Erin noticed that Marigold, though still apparently coloring, had slowed down considerably and had swiveled her closest ear in their direction.

"Oh... Nothing all that important," the mare said evasively, catching Erin's eye and giving a meaningful look towards the filly. The look said *I can't talk about it now, but yes!*

"Oh, I see." Erin said, as realization hit. She cleared her throat, and then smiled warmly at the still-blushing unicorn.

She was extremely happy that the mare had someone in her life, and apparently Starburst was touchingly dedicated to her. During previous conversations, Meadowlark had mentioned that she had been very lonely since Marigold's father had passed away. It had been a freak accident, and the filly was still in diapers when it happened. And, unfortunately, being a suddenly-single mom had taken up all of Meadowlark's free time. Not that it wasn't worth it, the filly was Meadowlark's entire world. But she hadn't had many ponies her own age to talk to or get close to in that time.

Starburst had asked Meadowlark out about two weeks before Erin had started staying at the Guest House, and they'd gone out maybe a half dozen times since then. The pegasus stallion had also developed a habit of stopping by occasionally in the evenings and having dinner with the single mother and her filly.

They would have gone out more often, but it was difficult for Meadowlark to find a babysitter, which was a situation that Erin's arrival had neatly alleviated. She was more than happy to watch the filly at night, allowing the budding couple to spend more time together outside of the house.

"Well, I'm happy that things are going so well for you two," Erin told the grey-maned unicorn quite sincerely. "He seems like a perfectly nice stallion, very sweet. Don't you think so, Marigold?"

"He's a butt," the filly replied.

"Marigold!" Meadowlark replied, shocked. Erin just laughed, she couldn't help it. She had *not* expected that reply.

"You shouldn't say that kind of thing, young filly," Meadowlark said, giving Erin a glare that dried up her giggles. "Why would you say that?"

Marigold, not even pretending to color anymore, just shrugged and stared at her paper.

"Sweetie," Erin said gently, "Is it because you're worried he's going to take your mommy away from you?"

There was a short pause, and then a sharp nod from the filly. Meadowlark's shocked annoyance vanished instantly as she bundled the filly up in a fierce hug.

"Oh, Marigold," the unicorn said to her daughter, "There is no way anypony will take me away from you. Not ever, you understand? But sometimes mommy needs to see adult ponies her own age. Sort of like how you have friends. Is Dinky Doo going to take you away from me?"

The filly shook her head, which was currently buried in Meadowlark's chest.

"There, you see? Starburst isn't going to take me away from you any more than Sunflower is. He's a good friend, okay? And I'd like him to be an even better friend. Is that going to be okay with you?"

There was a long pause as the filly mulled it over.

"Okay, mommy," the filly eventually said.

Meadowlark released her daughter, who sat there for a couple of seconds before once again taking up the crayon and coloring, though Erin thought she seemed a little happier than she had a few minutes ago. *Sometimes all a kid needs is reassurance*, Erin thought.

"So, you were saying about Rainbow Dash's house?" Meadowlark asked, trying to get the conversation steered away from her love life.

Erin had actually been stunned by the pegasus's home, which was apparently carved directly out of clouds. She'd never even dreamed that such a thing were possible. She wondered how it kept together; surely, if it were actually made of cloud, it would have drifted apart by now? And yet, not only did it stay together, but it stayed in place even in the face of a mild breeze. And that didn't even count the liquid-rainbow waterfalls or the apparently permanent rainbow arching over the roof.

Rainbow had simply glided down at Erin's arrival, apparently having just woken up from a nap even though it was in the early afternoon. Her eyes were half-closed and her mane and tail a snarled mess. She had signed for the package, mumbled a quick thanks and then something about the Iron Pony competition that Erin had just nodded dumbly to, and then winged back up to her house. After staring in dumbfounded silence for a few more minutes, Erin had trotted away, glancing back over her shoulder from time to time to make sure the house was still there and hadn't vanished like a mirage.

It shouldn't have been possible. It *wouldn't* have been possible on Earth, at least not as it appeared. There must have been some kind of trick to it, like it was some elaborate hologram or something. It was the strongest challenge to Erin's "accept everything" policy that she had encountered yet.

Still, she managed to avoid obsessing over it. Well, obsessing over it *too* much. She really did want to know how it worked, though. She'd have to ask Rainbow Dash the next time they met when she wasn't working. When she'd delivered the package, she'd been in too much shock over the whole thing to ask her.

"It was... very interesting," Erin said.

"Yes, I always thought so. It's one of the more interesting cloud-homes around Ponyville. I understand her parents gave her that house when she moved out of Cloudsdale."

"Oh, that's nice of them," Erin said.

"She *used* to have it on the south side of town, but moved it a few weeks ago to the west. I'm not sure why, maybe she likes the view better?"

Erin laughed at that. Of course the house could be moved. A stiff breeze couldn't move it, but it was still made out of clouds, right?

She felt a tinge of hysteria coming on, so she quickly changed the subject, asking how Meadowlark's day had gone so far.

The two of them chatted for about an hour about any old thing, and then Erin excused herself, explaining that she had to go pick up her new dress from Rarity. The elegant white unicorn had told her to that the alterations would be done by today, and to stop by after 6:00 to pick it up.

Saying good-bye to the mother and daughter, Erin trotted across town to the Carousel Boutique. Rarity opened the door and ushered her in. Levitating the dress off of the dressing dummy, the white unicorn insisted that Erin try it on right then, even going so far as to provide a privacy screen. The screen confused Erin... weren't ponies usually naked anyways? Was there some sort of taboo to being seen getting dressed that didn't apply when either naked or fully dressed? It was just another one of the many things she didn't understand about pony culture, she decided, and stepped behind the screen to try it on.

She had less trouble getting the dress on than she'd thought she would, no doubt due to all the practice from getting her uniform on and off every day. She stood on her hind legs and dropped the dress over her head, with her legs through the sleeves, letting it settle naturally. Then managed to push her tail through the gap in the back of the skirt.

Finally, she tightened the dark green belt with her teeth, and stepped out from behind the screen.

"Oh, darling, you look marvelous!" Rarity cooed. "That dress fits you wonderfully now, and the colors compliment you perfectly, if I do say so myself."

Erin glanced in a mirror, and she had to agree. The light yellow blouse with sleeves fit her loosely but well, not restricting her movements but also not looking baggy or gappy anywhere. The cuffs on the sleeves were a dark green, matching the belt, which tied up right in front of her back legs. The pale green

skirt hung down to just under her hocks. Low, but not so low as to drag along the ground. The bell of the skirt stretching from her hindquarters angling up to the belt, so that her back legs were both completely covered and also unrestricted. To finish off the look, the skirt also had dark green spade-shaped leaves embroidered on it, and the same dark green border on the edges.

Erin smiled at her reflection. It really *did* look good. And it was so well cut that, if it weren't for the slightly unusual feeling of something touching the hairs of her coat, she wouldn't have known she was wearing anything at all.

"It's perfect, Rarity!" she said, smiling at the designer. "Just what I asked for. No, *more* than what I asked for! Casual but stylish, completely comfortable... Honestly, I've never owned a nicer dress!"

All that was true. Erin didn't like dresses in general, preferring pants or, very rarely, skirts. However, she *did* own a few, for special occasions, and none of them looked as nice as this, or were nearly as well-fitted or comfortable. Rarity beamed at the praise, accepting it all as her due but enjoying it anyway. Erin got the feeling that this was a pony who knew perfectly well how talented she was, somehow without letting that knowledge go to her head.

"Well, we're not finished yet, my dear!" Rarity said. "You paid for a hat as well, after all. And now that we have the dress completed, we simply *must* find the perfect chapeau!"

Erin blinked. Did Rarity just speak French at her? Come to think of it, Twilight's letter mentioned a restaurant with a French name... No. Erin shook her head. She had decided not to over-analyze anything. Besides, ponies speaking occasional French was hardly more strange than ponies speaking English. Or, indeed, speaking at all.

Rarity was pulling hat after hat towards her with telekinesis, frowning at them with an evaluating expression, and then discarding them one after another. Finally, she trotted over with a broad straw hat with a wide, circular brim.

"Try this on, darling. I believe that this will do nicely, complementing the casualness *and* the style of the dress."

With that, the purple-maned unicorn settled the hat on top of Erin's head. She had to fold her ears down, but the hat fit well, and it did look good. The unicorn wasn't quite satisfied, however.

"Hmm..." she said, tapping a hoof to her chin. "Something is still missing. Ah! I know exactly what we need!"

And, with that, a dark green ribbon snaked out of Rarity's supply room and wove itself into a bow on top of the hat. Erin glanced back at the mirror. It really did look right, the ends of the ribbon dangling down over the back of the hat.

"Oh, this is perfect!" she said, and Rarity graciously inclined her head in agreement. "Do I owe you anything else for the ribbon?" she asked. She'd already paid for the dress and hat back on Monday when she'd first stopped in.

The designer shook her head. "No, my dear. That ribbon simply *belongs* with that hat, and I would never dream of charging for it."

"Well, thank you very much, Rarity! I can't wait to wear this dress this weekend!"

"Oh, yes! You're meeting Twilight Sparkle in Canterlot, aren't you? She mentioned that to me earlier this week."

"Yes! I'm so excited! I've never been there before, I'm sure it will be wonderful."

"It is, indeed! The high point of Equestrian society. However, if I could give you a word of advice, dear?"

"Yes?"

"Never forget where you came from," the Rarity said, then continued with a slightly sad smile, "Canterlot society can go to one's head, and it's very possible to forget what's really important while you're there: friends, family and home."

"Believe me, Rarity, I won't have any problem remembering that!"

Rarity smiled, and then instructed her to step behind the screen and remove the dress, so it could be carefully folded and placed in a large paper bag. Erin, not wanting to ruin her new dress before she had a chance to wear it in Canterlot, eagerly obliged. A few minutes and a warm goodbye later, Erin was on her way back to the Guest House once again.

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Across the aisle, a greyish unicorn stallion lowered his paper and scowled over the top of his half-moon glasses at her. A rosy pink unicorn mare sitting next to him added in the weight of her own disapproving stare. Erin barely noticed, she was far too excited, bouncing on her hooves as the Equestrian countryside flashed by, with her nose almost pressed up against the glass.

"Tourists," the mare said to her companion, with an accompanying eye-roll. The stallion snorted in derisive agreement, and then snapped his paper with a quick flick of telekinesis and raised it back up to eye level, quite obviously deciding that she was worth no further consideration.

That was the first hint that Erin had that the open friendliness shown to her in Ponyville may not extend to all of Equestria. Her heart trembled a bit at the thought, seeing as she was now heading full-tilt towards Canterlot, the hub of Equestrian society and politics, and the third largest city by population, behind Manehattan and Fillyadelphia.

She forced the thought out of her mind. It didn't matter. However rude the citizens may or may not be was inconsequential, as she'd be meeting Twilight there. The overly-prepared unicorn's itinerary and various lists were packed away in her dark green saddlebags, and her coin-purse was stashed away in a handy pocket sewn into the front of her new dress. She also had the bag of fake bits in her saddlebags, just in case she found a money-changer in Canterlot. Ponyville hadn't had one, but then the relatively small town probably didn't *need* one.

She could barely wait. She had spent the whole week up until this point getting more and more excited. Not wanting to spend bits unnecessarily, she had even resorted to grazing during her morning runs, rather than buying breakfast, just to be sure she'd have plenty to spend on souvenirs and attractions.

Eventually, the train ascended on to a mountain path, and Erin found herself more fascinated than ever at the landscape stretched out before her. She couldn't see Ponyville, the angle was all wrong, but she could see parts of the creepy Everfree Forest below. Other than that, it was all farmlands, grasslands and occasional large copses of trees and shrubs.

In the distance, though, was something new: a large, stationary cloud bank. Erin stared at a moment, trying to figure out why it seemed odd, and then triggered her long-distance viewing. The clouds suddenly appeared to leap closer to her, and she could make out dozens of what looked like pegasi flying around. Similar to Rainbow Dash's home, there appeared to be buildings constructed of clouds, along with waterfalls and... Erin scrambled for a word. Rainbow-falls? It worked. Because that's what it looked like.

With a shiver, Erin realized that she was looking at Cloudsdale, home of the pegasi and manufacturer of weather for most of Equestria. The feeling of awe that she felt looking at it was almost immediately joined by a feeling of sadness. It was unlikely that she could ever visit that city. All she could do was look at it from a distance.

With a sigh, she returned her vision to normal, and sat down in her seat. She wasn't able to stay down for long, however, because every once in a while a bend in the track would show her the city in the distance, getting ever closer: Canterlot.

Up close, it was even more impressive than she'd seen from Ponyville. The delicate, white marble spires with sunlight glinting off their gold caps, the cascading waterfalls, all hanging gracefully off the side of the mountain. The city looked fragile, especially when compared to the harshness of the mountains. And it was bigger than it looked. The palace itself was enormous, rising up like a skyscraper.

It was the palace that gave the illusion that the city was actually suspended in the air, Erin noticed as the train got closer. Most of Canterlot was actually built on level ground, but it was the palace with its tall towers that hung over open space. She stared at it every time it came into view. Something like that shouldn't exist. That much weight... how did it stay up? She was no engineer, but it looked to her like at least part of the palace should have snapped off and tumbled into the valley below by now. And many of the towers looked far too delicate to support their own weight.

Perhaps it was a special construction material? Some special stone, or something. Or, perhaps the towers themselves weren't made of marble, like she'd assumed. Could it be some sort of steel infrastructure, with a facade on the front designed to make it look like stone?

Maybe it's magic, she thought to herself with a snort. She reminded herself once again to simply accept what she saw, rather than analyzing it to death. "Magic" was a good shorthand for "things I don't understand", after all.

Finally, the train pulled into the station. Erin saw Twilight Sparkle standing patiently on the arrival platform, looking at the windows. She waved, but the small lavender unicorn didn't see her. Erin quickly cinched up her saddlebags and trotted out the exit, trotting up to the waiting mare.

"Hi Twilight! Thanks so much for the ticket, I appreciate it so much!"

"Hi Sunflower! I love how that dress turned out! Did you have a good trip?"

"Oh, it was amazing! I could even see Cloudsdale in the distance!"

Chatting amiably, the two mares made their way to the Balle de Foin restaurant, Erin rubbernecking as she tried to take in all the sights. Twilight Sparkle, having much experience with friends from Ponyville arriving in Canterlot for the first time, smiled at her companion's enthusiasm, and resisted her urge to rush her along.

They arrived at the restaurant, a large affair with columns out in front of the door, and a maître d' who escorted them to their table before turning them over to their waiter, a young but scrupulously groomed white-coated stallion who took their orders with a minimum of fuss.

They chatted as they waited for the food to arrive, but Erin sensed that something was bothering her unicorn companion. Finally, she just stopped and said, "Twilight, is something bothering you?"

Twilight sighed, then looked her in the eye.

"Sunflower," she said, "there's no easy way of telling you this, so I'll just say it straight out."

The librarian glanced around and then, apparently satisfied that nopony else was close enough to overhear, cleared her throat and leaned forward. Erin leaned in as well, curious as to what could make the mare look this serious.

"Sunflower," Twilight said, voice pitched low, "I know your secret."

Erin had an unpleasant feeling of coldness run through her, as if she'd just drunk a gallon of ice-water. She blinked at Twilight's serious expression, and then realized she had been holding her breath. She drew in a shaky breath and asked, "What secret, Twilight?"

Even to her, it was obvious that she was trying far too hard to be casual. The unicorn glanced around again, and then said, "I know that you can't do magic. I noticed it on the first day that we met. Not only *can't* you do magic, you're completely *untouched* by magic. That shouldn't even be possible, but it's true."

Erin was feeling pretty close to panic by now. There was no way she could fake her way out of this. She really couldn't do whatever it was that Twilight was referring to as "magic". She tried to say something, *anything*, that would allay suspicion, but it was as if an icy hand had clasped around her throat. Mouth hanging open, all she was able to do was make strangled noises.

Twilight's eyes widened, and she laid a hoof over Erin's own hoof.

"It's okay!" she said, patting her hoof, "I haven't told anypony about your ailment, and if you don't want me to, I won't. That's a promise! But if I can sense that from you, then certain other ponies could, too. That's why I said we'd discuss whether or not to meet the Princesses when you arrived. I wanted to leave it up to you if you wanted to meet them and ask for their help."

Ailment? Erin blinked in surprise. Slowly, it sunk in that she hadn't been "outed" as a non-pony. Twilight just thought she'd suffered some sort of illness, or something. She fought down hysterical relieved laughter for a moment before she trusted herself to talk.

"Um... Thank you. I don't... I don't think I want anypony else to know about this, though, if that's okay."

Twilight looked distressed by that and immediately started to protest.

"But the Princesses could help you! They've been alive for well over a thousand years, they've seen all sorts of things! They've *forgotten* more about magic than anypony who's ever lived! They can help you, Sunflower. I know I can't, I couldn't even figure out how or why it happened."

Erin noted the "alive for over a thousand years" part of Twilight's statement, and wondered why she felt surprised. After everything else, finding out that the pony Princesses were immortal wasn't all that big of a deal. Then something else Twilight said sunk in.

"Twilight, have you... Am I your 'research project'?" Erin asked, mildly alarmed. Judging by Twilight's guilty flinch, she realized she'd guessed right.

"Um... Please, don't be angry. I was just researching it because I wanted to help you. And, I'll admit, I was curious as to how it could happen. But I really just wanted to restore you to magic, that's all!"

The unicorn sighed and then looked away before continuing.

"But there was nothing in my library, or in the Canterlot Royal Library that I've been able to find so far, that tells me even any possibilities of how it *could* have happened."

Erin didn't know what to think. Ever since she'd first met the librarian, she'd been talking about her "research project". And now it turned out that what she was researching was how to fix an ailment she didn't even have? A wave of guilt crashed over her when she realized what she'd put her friend through, albeit unintentionally. She made a quick decision, and started talking.

"Okay, Twilight... I suppose I owe you *some* explanation. Yes, I can't do magic. You're right about that. But I can't... I don't want to go into why that is, okay? And... I really, really appreciate it, but please... don't try to fix me. I'm fine the way I am, honestly. I'm *happy* the way I am. I have lots of friends, I have a job... I'm not suffering! So, thank you, but please... leave it alone."

Twilight looked distressed and sad for a long moment, and then laughed ruefully. "I suppose, if I'd just been honest with you from the start, that we could have had this conversation much earlier and I could have avoided all that wasted effort. Still, though, the greatest magical and medical minds of all Equestria are here in Canterlot. And the two *best* belong to the Princesses. If they can't fix you, then it can't be done."

"It's okay, Twilight. I don't actually *want* to be fixed. I'm happy right now. And you're a really good friend for trying to help me. A better friend than I expected or deserve, to be honest, since I was hiding this from you."

Twilight blushed and busied herself with fiddling with her water glass. Then she looked up and asked, "Can you at least tell me how it happened?"

"No, sorry." At Twilight's hurt expression, she quickly amended, "I mean that I *can't* tell you, not that I don't want to. Honestly, I really don't know how I'm different. It's just the way I am."

Twilight blinked at her in surprise, then asked carefully, "You've been this way your whole life, then? You've never been able to use magic?"

Erin suddenly felt wary. Something in Twilight's tone warned her that this wasn't a simple question. She thought quickly, and opted for another variant of the truth.

"I was pretty normal a couple months ago. I didn't become... um... I guess you could say, a different kind of pony, until a few weeks before I arrived in Ponyville."

Twilight looked mildly relieved for some reason. But then she frowned, and in a deadly serious voice, she said, "All right, Sunflower. I accept what you've told me, and I'll have to live with the curiosity of how it happened, since you can't tell me, but I do have to ask one question. It's very important, and you have to answer me honestly, understand?"

"Um... I understand."

"Sunflower... Are you... a zombie pony?"

Erin snorted with surprised laughter, and Twilight's deadpan expression quickly dissolved as she joined in. And that's how their waiter found them a few moments later, vainly trying to stifle the giggles that were drawing semi-hostile glares from the other diners. Rolling his eyes, the waiter placed their dishes in front of them. Walking away, he muttered one word under his breath.

"Tourists..."

Chapter 14: A Day in the City

"Well, good morning, sleepyhead!" her mother said to her as she came down the stairs. "Breakfast is on the table, and please keep the noise down. Your father had a late night last night."

"Good morning, mom," Twilight Sparkle tried to say, though it came out more like "G'mergngl mmm" thanks to the yawn that broke in as soon as she opened her mouth. She looked around, blinking her eyes in the early morning light. "Is Sunflower up yet?"

"Oh, yes, she was awake a couple of hours ago. Said she wanted to go for a quick trot around town first thing this morning. Earth ponies are so interesting, don't you think? Up at the crack of dawn and already raring for work!"

Twilight smiled at her mother's assumption. While it was true that *some* earth ponies, such as her good friend Applejack, would often be up and hard at work before the sun even cleared the horizon, she knew for a fact that others, such as Pinkie Pie, woke up only when they were darned good and ready to.

"Did she already eat? And what's for... ooh! Oatcakes!" She scooted up to the table, early morning weariness forgotten. Almost feeling like a filly again, she dug into the freshly prepared cakes. They were just as delicious as she remembered them as being.

"Oh, no, she said she'd eat and shower when she got back from her exercise. It makes sense, I suppose. If you're going to go running around right away in the morning, you may as well shower afterwards."

Twilight mumbled a statement to her mom, who scolded her to not talk with her mouth full. Twilight swallowed her current mouthful and tried again.

"She must be trying to get some training in before the Iron Pony competition next week," she said. "I should probably do some physical training as well, for the Running of the Leaves. I'm planning on entering again this year, you know."

"Oh, yes? That's wonderful! You took.. it was fifth place last year?" Twilight nodded, too busy eating to reply. "That's really impressive, dear. Especially in a town full of earth ponies!"

The scholarly unicorn smiled and blushed slightly. It was true, her fifth place finish was something she was fairly proud of. She was hoping to do even better this year, though her planned training had constantly been put off for 'just one more day', typically in order to study.

"Well, I may not do as well, this year. And last year, I probably would have taken seventh, if it weren't for Applejack and Rainbow Dash sabotaging each other the whole way."

"I'm sure you'll do fine. More cakes?"

Twilight considered turning the scrumptious treats down. After all, packing on pounds before a big race wasn't going to help her move up in the standings!

But then again, how often these days did she get a chance to experience her mother's home cooking?

"Yes, please!"

~~*~~

Erin slowed to a trot, and then to a walk, her breath puffing out in foggy clouds. It was much cooler here in Canterlot than it was in Ponyville, probably due to the elevation. She shivered with the cold as the sweat ran down her sides.

Running through the streets of the city was far different than running through the fields near Ponyville. For one thing, it was louder. She should really look into getting some sort of sneaker-type thing if she was going to keep running on streets early in the morning. Her hooves had made a little bit of a racket. Hopefully, she hadn't woken anypony up.

Not that she'd been able to actually *run* for any great distance at a time. This city definitely loved its architectural diversity, and it was built on many layers, often with spiraling ramps or long flights of stairs connecting the layers together. Erin had spent more time climbing and descending those ramps and stairs than she had actually running. But it was a good workout; she'd been using different muscles than she typically had, and now her legs were pleasantly tired and a bit wobbly.

The few early risers around town had stared at her oddly as she ran by, no doubt wondering what she was up to. It didn't seem like many ponies ran just for the sake of exercise. Though, to be fair, they generally

led more physically active lives than most humans she knew, and even the adults liked to play games that involved lots of running and jumping. She hadn't seen many ponies that were overweight, that was for sure.

She stopped in front of a large marble statue of a pony rearing up on her hind legs. The pony's wings were spread wide, and she had a crown on her head, just behind her large horn. The pony depicted by the statue was proportioned differently from other ponies as well. Taller, though there was no way of knowing if it were to scale, and with much longer legs and a relatively thinner frame than most ponies she'd seen. There was a definite air of majesty about this pony, with her flowing mane and tail. The look on the statue's face was one of serene wisdom and mild sadness.

Erin wondered briefly if this was an accurate representation of Celestia, or if it was Luna, or some other winged unicorn that she'd never heard of. She looked around for a plaque of some kind, but was distracted by a sound or rushing wind and a blast of air from behind her. She turned, and saw an incredible sight.

"Hey, pony." the creature said. "Saw you running around like an idiot, thought I'd come down and see what's up. Or, were you just that excited to see a statue of Celestia that you had to run all the way to see her?"

"You're a griffon," Erin said, pointing with a hoof.

The yellow eyes in the bird-like face rolled with contempt.

"No. Really? What was the first clue, genius?"

"Sorry," Erin said. "I've never seen a griffon before. I'm just... wow. You look so cool!"

The griffon grinned ("*How does she do that with a beak?*" Erin wondered) and preened slightly.

"I guess you're not so dumb after all. Name's Gretta, by the way," she said, holding out an eagle claw. Erin gingerly extended a hoof, which was firmly clasped and shaken. "I'm part of the envoy from the Griffon Kingdom to Equestria."

"Sunflower," Erin said, warily eying the large, wickedly sharp talons encircling her fetlock. "I'm just a tourist from Ponyville."

"Oh? And what were you running around for?" Gretta asked, releasing Erin's leg.

"Just exercise. I like running."

"Wow. Ponies are weird," Gretta said, laughing.

"Yeah, I guess we are," Erin said, grinning back awkwardly. Here was another talking and sapient non-human species, even more different than ponies or cows. And she couldn't help but stare at her.

The griffon was everything she'd thought she would be when Erin had first read about them, as they'd been described in mythology. Gretta had an eagle-like head with a fiercely curved beak, large white wings and enormous front talons in front, and a golden, heavily-muscled lion's body and rear legs. She looked fierce, even when smiling ("*Seriously,*" Erin thought, "*how does she do that with a beak?!*")

Erin would have expected it to look strange, as if it had the parts of two different animals joined together, but it didn't at all. Gretta looked like a single, homogenous creature, blending seamlessly from feathers to fur. There was no awkward joining of parts, no specific part of her that she could point to as the exact spot that she changed from eagle to lion.

"So, um," Erin said, as the silence started to get long enough to be awkward. "if you don't mind my asking, what's it like in the Griffon Kingdom?"

"Eh, more or less a lot like here. We even have a few ponies that live in our borders. It's a lot drier, though. Less hills, except right up by the mountains. Lots of open grasslands. That's where we do most of our hunting."

Erin nodded, and then noticed that the griffon was giving her an odd look.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You're not going to freak out about us hunting? We eat meat, you know. Most ponies get all creeped out when we bring that up."

"No, it doesn't bother me at all," Erin said, to Gretta's apparent disappointment. "As long as you don't eat ponies, or other things that can talk, why should it matter to me?" Then she thought about that for a

moment. "Um... You don't actually eat ponies, do you?"

"Ha! No, it's against the law to eat anything intelligent. So, no. Griffons haven't eaten ponies for... oh, I'd say at least a couple hundred years. Ah-ha! There's the look I was hoping for!"

Erin smiled weakly, hoping that Gretta was just trying to get a rise out of her, but queasily suspecting that she wasn't.

"So, um... Griffon embassy, huh? What do you do there?" she asked, trying to change the subject away from diets.

"I'm just a staffer. I take notes, file things, do busywork. Why so curious? It's a boring job."

"I like learning new things," Erin said. "And I've never met somep~ er... Someone who worked in an embassy before."

"Well, like I said, it's dull," Gretta said with a wing-shrug. "I take notes at meetings. I do research on pony law or trade agreements, or on various financial reports. Sometimes I sit at the front desk and greet everyone who comes in. That kind of thing." She shrugged yet again, which was impressive with the gigantic eagle wings. "It's really dull, but the pay is good. My tour should be up soon, just in time for me to go home and see my eggs hatch, then it's my mate's turn to go find work for a while so I can raise 'em."

"Oh, wow, you're going to be a mother? Congratulations!"

"Thanks, I guess," she said noncommittally. "I'm not really looking forward to it, it sounds like a gigantic pain in the tail. My own mom said it's a lot different when they hatch and imprint, but right now it they're just a bunch of eggs. May as well be rocks. I never really meant to have a clutch right now. I was just having some fun with a guy I knew, and surprise! eggs. Oh, well. It's only for a couple of years, I'll manage."

"It only takes a couple years for griffons to grow up?" Erin asked, surprised.

"Nah," the griffon said with a laugh. "Once they get old enough to hunt on their own, they get sent off to the academy. I guess, if I haven't bonded with them by then, then I probably won't ever see them again. Some griffonnesses don't even bother keeping track of their kids once that happens."

"Oh," Erin said, downcast. It sounded like a really sad way to grow up, but Gretta broke in to correct her misapprehension.

"Don't do that. You ponies always do that, when we talk about how we're raised! I had a great time growing up with the other cubs! Heck, I feel bad for *ponies*. Sure, you get parents with you all the time, but we had adult griffons around all the time, *and* you miss out on having dozens of brothers and sisters! My family is huge, and we all keep in touch."

"Oh. Sorry. When you put it that way, that actually sounds pretty nice. It's just not what I'm used to, I guess."

"Apology accepted. Anyway, I suppose I should get going back..."

Gretta spread her wings and crouched in preparation to launch, but Erin frantically held up a hoof and shouted, "Wait!"

"What?" the griffon asked, looking annoyed.

"I just wanted to ask some questions about the embassy. Who runs things on the Equestrian side?"

"You mean, who do we deal with?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, that's easy. It's the Equestrian Ministry of Diplomatic Relations. Anyway, I gotta fly. Later, Sunflower!"

And with that, the griffon sprung into the air and flapped her wings. Erin squinted her eyes against the debris that were kicked up and watched her fly away into the early-morning sky.

She smiled as a feeling of wonder welled up within her. A griffon. An actual griffon! She always loved mythology, especially the Greek myths, and to have had an actual conversation with a griffon was the coolest thing that had happened to her since... Well, since she'd arrived in Canterlot, really. So, basically since this morning. The cool things kept happening, that was for sure.

And now, she had a lead on where to look for answers on who the human representatives would have to

talk to in order to establish relations. All she had to do was find out who ran the Equestrian Ministry of Diplomatic Relations, and see what the protocol was for establishing relations. It had been a very lucky encounter!

Erin's eyes narrowed at the thought. Maybe it was a little *too* lucky. What are the odds that she'd be out for a morning run, barely anypony around, and she'd run into someone who happily gave her not only some of the information she needed, but also a fair amount of detail on griffon culture?

She thought about that as she began walking back to Twilight's parent's house. Since she'd arrived, she'd had a series of extremely fortunate encounters. She'd met Applejack literally within an hour of stepping into Equestria, and she had provided her with the information she'd needed to establish herself in Ponyville. She'd met Rainbow Dash minutes after *that*, which gave her insight on what pegasi were like, and who also suggested where she could look for work.

The more she thought about it, her experiences in Equestria so far had been either extremely lucky, or some magical force was guiding her steps. A month ago, she would have laughed at that thought. But now it seemed eerily plausible, which made her shiver in apprehension. She didn't believe it, not *quite*, but still, after all she'd seen...

Of course, if it were just luck, than she was probably due for something unfortunate to happen to her soon. That was not a pleasant prospect, either.

With that thought, she looked up, and realized she had absolutely no idea where she was. Chuckling wryly, she began retracing her steps, hoping to find some familiar landmarks.

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There was a knock at the front door. Twilight put down her father's copy of The Canterlot Times and went to open it, revealing a very relieved and frazzled-looking Sunflower.

"Twilight! Oh, thank goodness... I got so lost! This city is crazy!"

Twilight giggled, and replied "Well, maybe to you, but I was born here. It makes perfect sense to me!"

"Scary," Sunflower said with a grin as she wiped her hooves on the doormat and stepped inside. "To think that the convoluted street plans of this needlessly complex city could actually seem *normal* to somepony. That's amazing!"

Twilight laughed and shut the door as the mare walked into the living room. "You've mostly missed breakfast, I'm afraid. My mom made oatcakes. There's still some batter left, though. I can make some up for you if you want. Though, maybe you should shower first?"

"Huh?"

"Well... Not to be rude, Sunflower, but... you kind of stink, just a little bit."

The earth pony mare blushed a deep red and immediately excused herself to visit the washroom. Twilight shook her head in amusement, and then went to heat up the griddle. She had a respectable pile of cakes completed and stacked on a plate by the time Sunflower came out, mane and tail combed but still slightly damp from the shower.

"Help yourself. There's butter on the table, and I just warmed up the syrup for you."

"Wow, these smell incredible. Thanks, Twilight!"

Twilight watched with mild amusement as the earth pony fumbled with trying to pick up a fork, which she eventually did by pinning it between her front hooves. Then she noticed Twilight looking at her and blushed self-consciously. Twilight smiled, then stepped back into the other room, levitating her paper back up to read it.

That was something she had noticed the previous day, at the restaurant. Sunflower was *very* awkward when it came to eating with utensils, more so than any earth pony she'd ever seen who wasn't still a foal. Just another in a long line of mysteries about the mare. She glanced over the top of the paper at her guest and saw that Sunflower was eating slowly and clumsily, but managing not to make a mess.

Twilight sighed and tried to return to her paper, but she was finding it hard to focus. After re-reading the same paragraph for the third time, she grunted with exasperation and put the paper down, opting to stare out of a nearby window, instead.

Sunflower had asked for her to ignore her condition. It was a difficult thing to do, but Twilight was determined to make the effort. Still, it nagged at her, incessantly. How did it happen? What, exactly, *had* happened? Why would Sunflower not want a cure? Why didn't she take every opportunity to fix it? And,

even more so, what was she hiding? Any questions about her life before Ponyville were answered either vaguely or not at all. Trusting your friends and respecting their boundaries was one thing, but this was bordering on the ridiculous.

"Sunflower," Twilight said, suddenly. The green-eyed mare looked up at her with a mouthful of oatcake. "I want you to know... I want to be your friend. And I respect that there are things about your past that you don't want to talk about, things you want to keep secret."

Sunflower looked guilty at this point, which was another thing that Twilight had noticed. Whenever her past was brought up, she looked guilty, like she was hiding something. She watched as the earth pony quickly swallowed her mouthful of cake in an apparent effort to reply. Twilight held her hoof up to forestall her.

"I want to let you know that it's okay. Really. Friends have to respect a friend's boundaries, and I understand that." She caught the relieved look on the mare's face, and continued with, "But friends also trust one another with their secrets. You don't have to tell me everything, and you don't have to tell my anything right now, but I hope one day you'll trust me enough to share *some* of your past with me."

Sunflower was staring at her plate. With some alarm, Twilight noticed that the mare seemed near tears.

"Wait, I didn't mean... Sunflower, don't be upset, okay? I just... I wanted to let you know... You can *trust* me. I won't judge you and I won't think any differently of you, I promise."

"Don't." It was barely a whisper.

"What?"

"Don't promise that." Sunflower drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Still staring at her plate, she continued. "I promise, Twilight... I'll tell you everything eventually. Not now, because I... just can't. But I will." Then she muttered something under her breath that Twilight *thought* might have been "I owe you that much."

There was a long pause. Twilight noted that the atmosphere in the dining room had become beyond uncomfortable.

"Okay, well... Um... Good talk, I guess." She started edging away from the melancholy mare at the breakfast table. "I'm just going to go... um... Up to my old room for a bit, okay? Then we can go shopping, if you want. You said you wanted to do some shopping today?" Sunflower nodded, still downcast.

"I'll take you to some good stores I know, okay? And, in a little while, my mom should be back with Spike, and we can hit up Donut Joe's for some donuts. I kind of promised him, they're his favorites. I used to go there all the time when I was studying at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, and I got to be on a first-name basis with Donut Joe, the pony who owns the place. He makes the *best* donuts and I just realized I'm babbling, so I'll head upstairs now, okay? Okay."

And, with that, Twilight fled from the awkward situation to the relative safety of her old bedroom.

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The diminutive unicorn's hoof-steps rattled up the stairs, and then a door opened and closed. Erin stared at the oatcakes in front of her. They were delicious, but her appetite was totally gone. The ones she'd already eaten sat like lead in her gut. And there was the burning sensation of unshed tears behind her eyelids.

She fought with herself, even now. She so desperately wanted to tell Twilight what was going on that it burned in her. For the most part, she was able to put those thoughts out of her head. But after being confronted like that, they were front and center. She was miserably depressed, but also angry. Angry at Dr. Velchiek, for forbidding her to talk. Angry at humanity, for needing to come here, and at the Black Tide for making it necessary.

But mostly, she was angry with herself, for making friends just to lie to them and to string them along without ever really returning their friendship. Twilight was right, friends trusted each other, and friends share. She wasn't sharing, so how could she consider herself to be a friend to them? What kind of person makes a friend for the sole purpose of getting information out of them?

She should have avoided making friends in the first place. It was better to be lonely than to face this kind of guilt. If there was no pony close to her, then there would be no pony to deceive.

The oatcakes were cooling on the table in front of her. With a sigh, she laboriously picked up her fork once again and began eating. She had no appetite, but she wasn't going to be rude and leave the food half-eaten on the table.

Things weren't going to get better by acting all depressed and mopey, after all. And she still had a mission to finish. It was time, she decided, for her to stop being so angsty, and to just deal with the situation as it was. When Twilight came back down, she'd pretend like nothing happened. They'd go shopping, they'd go get donuts with Spike, and they'd have a great time.

She shoveled a forkful of oatcake into her mouth. She didn't even taste it.

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The room was decorated with a white and purple checkerboard floors, and greyish-blue walls. The drawings taped up on the walls were childish and mildly embarrassing. Various stuffed animals, dolls, and toys decorated the shelves, keeping the large collection of children's books company. The magenta-curtained canopy bed itself had more pillows on it than any sane pony would ever require, with a few more stuffed animals sprinkled in.

"*I remember it being bigger,*" Twilight thought with a sigh. She'd been flipping idly through some of her old books for about half an hour, now, skimming through and looking at the pictures, which had a side effect of triggering wave after wave of nostalgia. Sighing, she put down her current book, which had a story involving a young colt trying to bake a suit of clothes out of bread for no adequately explained reason. She was just about to pull out another when she heard the front door open and her mother's call asking if anypony was home.

Bracing herself, and hoping that Sunflower had recovered from her earlier upset, Twilight stepped down the stairs and greeted her mother. The older mare had several large shopping bags levitated in the air around her. She was amused to see Spike perched on her mom's back, like he often was on her own.

"Did you have a good time, Spike?" she asked, as the purple dragon hopped down.

"Oh, yeah! After we got the groceries, we went to the park and she bought me ice cream! We had a lot of fun."

"And he was a perfect little gentleman. So helpful!" her mother said, patting Spike on the head. The little dragon beamed at the praise. "I'm just going to go put these bags in the kitchen."

The older mare trotted away, and Twilight heard her greet Sunflower, who replied back with what sounded like good cheer. The lavender unicorn sighed with relief, glad her guest was in a better mood now. Hopefully, she could avoid spoiling it again.

Then she heard her mother's voice say, "What are you doing? No, you don't need to do that. Put the dish down! You're a guest, you don't have to clean up! Put the dishes down, and back away from the sink, missy!" Twilight grinned as she heard her mother's falsely stern voice coming from the kitchen. Scolding, but in a joking manner, her mother chased Sunflower out of the kitchen, ending with, "Now, you go keep Twilight company, and make sure she stays out of trouble today. I don't want to find out she's been playing in the fountains again!"

"Mo~om!" Twilight whined, "That was ages ago! I was two!" Spike giggled, and Sunflower grinned sheepishly.

There was another awkward moment, as both she and Sunflower stared at their hooves for a while. Spike looked back and forth between the two of them, picking up on the uncomfortable atmosphere.

"Sooo," he said, breaking the silence. "How about that weather? Read any good books lately? What do you think the Trottingham Titans' chances are of winning this year's Hoofball Cup?"

Slightly annoyed, Twilight frowned at him. "What are you talking about, Spike?"

"Just making small talk," the dragon said with a shrug. "I figured it was better than sitting around in an uncomfortable silence."

Twilight was about to scold her assistant when she heard a chuckle from Sunflower. She looked up to see the earth pony mare smiling at the little dragon, a smile she soon shared.

"*I'm going to have to buy the little guy an extra donut,*" she thought. Out loud, she said, "Well, maybe we should get to shopping. We only have half a day left before we have to catch the train back to Ponyville. That is, if you want to make it back by a decent hour.

"Yeah, you're right," Sunflower said slowly. "Um. Spike, were you going to come with us?"

"Naah," he said, "I've done enough shopping today. Besides, your mom said she was going to bake cookies, and that I could help!"

"I thought you wanted donuts?" Twilight asked, confused.

"I do! But I want cookies, too!"

Twilight frowned at her assistant while Sunflower laughed.

"All right, but if you're going to have donuts as well, then you only get one cookie," she said sternly.

"Awww..." Spike whined.

"No, you'll make yourself sick with too many treats. Remember the ice cream incident?"

"But..."

"One cookie or no cookies, Spike. Which is it?"

"...one, I guess. Sheesh, Twilight. Way to take the fun out of the day."

"You're just a baby dragon, Spike. You need proper nutrition!" Twilight said, putting her hoof down.

"He's just a baby?!" Sunflower blurted, eyes wide as she pointed a hoof at Spike.

"Well, duh," Spike said. "Did you think I was all grown up? Grown up dragons are *huge*. Bigger than a house, even!"

"Wow, uh..." Sunflower stammered. "I did not know that."

"Sure is a lot you don't know," Spike muttered.

"Spike!" Twilight scolded, but relented as Sunflower apparently found that funny. At least, the mare was laughing, though it sounded a touch self-deprecating.

"You're right, Spike. There sure is," the light brown mare said.

There was another pause, though this one was less awkward. Twilight cleared her throat, then said, "Well, should we get going?"

"Sure!" Sunflower said enthusiastically. "I'll go get my saddlebags."

She trotted off to the guest room, and Twilight accompanied Spike into the kitchen, where her mother was just finishing up washing the dishes. Horn glowing, Twilight helped to dry them, finding pleasure in helping her mother do a chore that, when she was younger, she hated doing.

Sunflower came back out of the guest room with her saddlebags on and wearing her straw hat, but not her dress. Horn glowing, Twilight opened the door, and both mares stepped out into the bright Canterlot morning.

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The initial awkwardness had passed quickly, and Erin soon found herself honestly enjoying the experience of a more casual day spent in Canterlot with Twilight Sparkle. Last night had been informative but a little hectic. They had adhered closely to Twilight's schedule, rushing through the various items on the list in order to stay on track. Today was a day just for wandering and for poking their noses into various neat little shops.

So far, she had bought very little. Mainly because they had spent a good hour or so just in one bookshop. Erin had to practically drag Twilight out of there, and the librarian had purchased so many books that they had to drop them back off at her parent's house, just to avoid being overloaded.

Then they had simply wandered and browsed. Erin bought a small emerald-green hair clip that she thought would look good with Marigold's mane color, and another red one that would look nice with her mother's. However, her rapidly dwindling supply of bits made her finally summon the nerve to ask Twilight a potentially risky question.

"Twilight, this might sound stupid, but... Are gold coins worth anything here?"

The unicorn blinked, looking confused for a moment. "Gold... coins? Like actual gold, but in coins? Nopony has used those for ages, we went on the bit standard in... oh, I think in 745 AF. The bits we spend now only have a trace amount of gold in them, and the crown purchased back most of the gold coins over the years."

"Oh. Well... I have a bag of them," she said, eying Twilight warily. "They were given to me when I left home. I guess they didn't know that I couldn't spend them here."

"Wow, really? How strange! I didn't know there were any villages still using gold coins."

"Not *using*, really. We just had some lying around. It was a gift when I left, but no pony here or in Ponyville has been using them, so I felt weird about having them. So, are they useless, then?"

"I wouldn't say *useless*, but you can't use them to directly buy things, no. Did you want to sell them?" Erin nodded, and Twilight started walking, saying, "Come on, we can take them to a jeweler and get them appraised. Maybe we can get some bits for you to spend!"

Erin grinned happily and trotted off after her friend. Then she hesitated. Not friend. She had no right to call Twilight a friend. Her good mood slipped a little, but she pushed the grin back onto her muzzle and trotted off after the small purple unicorn.

Shortly after that they stopped into a jeweler's store and walked up to the pale blue unicorn stallion behind the counter who stared down his nose at the both of them. Erin dug her bag of gold coins out, and the shopkeeper's jaw nearly hit the counter as he levitated first one coin and then another in front of his disbelieving eyes.

"Ahem," he said finally, apparently over his shock. "Well, the coins are pure gold, but of course there's a fee for transferring them to bits. I could give you... oh, let's say three bits per coin?"

"I don't *think* so," said Twilight. "The legal exchange rate is more like twenty per similarly sized coin, and these are larger besides."

"Ah," the stallion said, a spark of interest in his eye. "But one has to take into account the fees and taxes involved. I imagine I can go as high as four, in that case."

"No deal," Twilight said firmly. "The taxes only apply in regards to your profits, and there are no fees for transferring gold to bits. Nineteen."

"Nineteen?! My dear filly, you *wound* me! And yet, I feel I can manage to find compassion enough in my wounded heart to raise my offer to five per coin."

"Five?!" Twilight seemed offended, and then the haggling began in earnest.

Erin watched as the two argued fiercely, with the stallion bringing up the woes of a poor shopkeeper, and Twilight mentioning how cruel he was to try and steal from a poor filly from Ponyville, who had barely a bit to her name. Offer after offer was rejected, and the discussion gained in intensity, until finally a price was reached: eleven bits per coin. Erin was ecstatic with the amount of wealth coming towards her, and very glad she'd brought Twilight with her. The small unicorn was a fierce bargainer, and Erin doubted she'd have been able to do anywhere near as well.

The blue unicorn counted out ten bars, which were apparently worth a hundred bits each, plus a hundred bits for smaller purchases. Erin's coin purse was now pleasantly heavy in her saddlebag. As they turned to leave, the stallion behind the counter called out after them.

"It was nice seeing you again, Miss Sparkle! Don't take so long between visits, next time!"

"It was nice seeing you too, Professor Nimbus! Life as a shopkeeper suits you."

"Not quite the hustle and bustle of university life, certainly. I'm actually able to sleep at nights!"

Twilight laughed and waved, and she led a very confused Erin out of the shop.

"Wait," she said as they exited. "You know him?"

"Oh, yes. He was my economics teacher back at Celestia's school. We didn't *just* learn magic, you know!"

"But... that was... What was all that about?!"

"Oh, just a little bit of fun. I came here because I knew he'd give us a fair deal, but he'd want to argue about it first. Anyway, you've got a bag full of bars and bits. Let's keep shopping!"

It was just too ridiculous. As Erin trotted next to Twilight, she couldn't help but laugh.

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It was starting to get late. Sunflower had filled up her saddlebags ages ago, and now had many of her purchases slung and strapped across her back. Twilight envied the earth ponies' endurance. She would have collapsed hours ago.

Of course, she would have probably just used her magic to carry everything.

Most of Sunflower's purchases were in the form of gifts for other ponies, apparently. Twilight helped to

advise her on purchases for some of her friends, including an apple brooch for Applejack and a super-deluxe Wonderbolts gift pack for Rainbow Dash. They stopped in a party supply store for Pinkie Pie. There was also one store, a curio store, where Sunflower had asked for her to remain outside. Obviously, that's where she was planning on buying gifts for her. She pretended she didn't know, and Sunflower pretended that she didn't know that she knew.

They stopped back at her parent's house, collecting Twilight's earlier book purchases and an excited Spike. After a quick stop at the local Fet-Ex in order to have their purchases shipped to Ponyville, they turned their hooves in the direction of the fabled Donut Joe's Donut Shop. Spike kept up a chattering monologue the whole way, talking about the great time he'd had at the house, and the terrific new cookie recipes he'd learned. Twilight rolled her eyes, suspecting that the young dragon's hyperactivity could be explained, at least in part, by the violation of the "one cookie" rule.

Still, she was in a pretty good mood, so she decided not to pursue the subject.

Twilight cracked the door open to the store, and the delicious smell of freshly made donuts wafted out. Joe was behind the counter, as usual, and greeted them warmly as they arrived. It was after the typical rush, which was according to Twilight's plan. She disliked coming during the busy hours, as the shop would be packed with peckish ponies.

They purchased a box of assorted donuts, which Sunflower proclaimed as delicious, eating three of them in short order. Which amused Twilight and horrified Spike, who quickly grabbed more donuts for himself from the rapidly dwindling assortment.

Small talk commenced, which mostly consisted of Sunflower asking Twilight about her life in Canterlot so far. However, the earth pony mare had hesitantly raised one subject.

"I ran into a griffon named Gretta today," she said. "It was during my morning run. She said she was with the Griffon Embassy."

"Oh? That's interesting! Did she mention anything about what the job was like?"

"Mostly boring, according to her," Sunflower said, laughing. "But it did make me wonder, how do those get started?"

"Embassies?" Sunflower nodded, and Twilight considered a moment before considering. "Well, I know it's the Ministry of Diplomatic Relations that runs all the embassies. I forget who the head counselor is... Oh, wait, no. I remember. It was in my father's paper this morning. High Counselor Rosy Oats. I guess she runs the whole thing."

"Oh, that's... interesting. I wonder how a new nation would get an embassy set up?" she asked, oddly casual.

"Hmm... Well, if I remember my civics lessons correctly, they'd just send an ambassador to the Ministry building in High Canterlot, near the palace. Why do you ask?"

"Um, no real reason. Idle curiosity. I'm going to have another donut," she said, and Spike moaned in dismay as she did so. Twilight laughed at the little dragon's reaction, and to mollify him, she bought another box of donuts just to take home.

"But you don't get to eat any until tomorrow. No, Spike," she said sternly as he protested, "I mean it. You've filled up on nothing but sweets so far today. And that's okay, since it's a special occasion, but you're done for the night."

Sunflower also purchased a box of donuts, apparently to share at the Guest House the next day. Twilight wondered if, now that she had a decent amount of bits on her, if she'd be looking for her own place to live now. Surely, she couldn't want to stay in the Guest House forever?

Celestia's sun had been down for a while when Twilight said that it was time to go. Sunflower slid the box of donuts carefully into her saddlebags, and Twilight levitated hers. They arrived in the train station with plenty of time to spare, which Spike didn't seem to be pleased with as she was.

"It's cold out, Twilight!" he whined.

"It's not that cold. Don't be such a baby!" Twilight replied

"How come whenever I want to do anything you don't want me to, I'm just a baby, but whenever I act like a baby, you tell me not to?" Spike asked sourly.

"Well, um..." Twilight didn't really have a response for that.

"Here, Spike," Sunflower said, providing a welcome distraction by pulling a green scarf out of her

saddlebag. Spike gratefully wrapped it around his neck and head.

"Thanks, Sunflower," he said, voice slightly muffled by the scarf

"No problem, Spike," the mare replied, giving him a hoof-noogie. "That was going to be a present for somepony else, but it suits you, so you can keep it if you like."

"Thanks!" he said, enthusiastically, hugging her around the leg. "Wait... does this mean I get one less present, now?"

"Spike!" Twilight scolded, but Sunflower just laughed.

"Don't worry about it, kiddo. I probably bought Marigold too many gifts as it is, I'm sure she won't mind giving up that scarf to a poor, cold, baby dragon."

"Awesome!" said Spike, snuggling into his scarf.

Shortly after that, the train arrived. The ponies and baby dragon all climbed aboard and made themselves comfortable. A short while later, the train left the depot with a lurch, and they left Canterlot behind.

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Erin yawned hugely as she fumbled with the front door to the Guest House. It was close to midnight, and she was asleep on her hooves. Making her way inside, she crept across the floor quietly, not wanting to cause a disturbance for any ponies in the house who were trying to sleep. She made her way into her room, divested herself of her hat and saddlebags, and promptly collapsed on the bed.

"Dear Dr. Velchiek," she mumbled, then stopped to yawn. "Sorry. Um. Eventful day today. Too tired to go into details. Saw a griffon, she was awesome. Found out the procedures for establishing an embassy in Canterlot. Review today's recordings for the information, but the summary is as follows: Visit the Equestrian Ministry of Diplomatic Relations in High Canterlot. Ask to see a pony named High Counselor Rosy Oats.

"Also, gold *is* valuable here. We may be able to use it as a commodity for trade. Probably other stuff I should mention, but I'm *so* tired. This is Sunflower, blah blah blah, signing off and good night."

She was asleep less than a minute later.

Chapter 15: A Magical World

Indistinct and fuzzy light burned at her eyes. Or was it the semi-gelatinous liquid she was lying in? It was hard to tell. It was warm, but itchy. Her whole body itched and tingled uncomfortably, her skin twitching in reaction.

She attempted to block the one source of discomfort, reaching towards the light to shield her eyes. But then she noted the fingers on her hand and stopped. She was very confused for a moment. Something seemed very... wrong... with that.

She sat up and glanced down at herself. Naked. Was that a cause for concern? She couldn't recall. She was naked and sitting in a large tub of goo, which sheeted off of her as she stood on her feet, and then stepped out of the tub.

Around her, various scientists smiled warmly. Welcoming her back. She calmly regarded the large, bearded figure before her.

"Welcome back, my dear," Paul Velchiek said. He held out a coat, which she shrugged into.

"Thank you," she replied, and walked away.

The corridors of Project Harmonics loomed large around her. They must have remodeled. The halls weren't this tall before, or this wide. She left the Ascent laboratories behind her, looking for something. She wasn't sure what, but she'd know it if she saw it.

More scientists. Standing with clipboards and watching her, occasionally taking notes. Their faces were expressionless. Or perhaps judgmental. Had she failed them some way? She couldn't remember, but she felt a twinge of shame all the same.

The Emitter room, she thought, standing in front of it. There was something she was supposed to see here. A pair of scientists, wordless, moved to block her way.

"You can't come in with that", they told her. Erin looked where they pointed.

"My tail?"

"Yes. Get rid of it."

She walked away, confused and mildly ashamed. They weren't supposed to see her tail, she realized. She should have hidden it. She walked around the corner and then tucked her tail up under her coat uncomfortably and walked back.

The scientists regarded her with matching frowns.

"It's gone. See?" she said, indicating that there was no tail in evidence. Still, she was afraid that something she couldn't see would give her away. She could feel it, pressed up against her back. They examined more closely, almost rudely. No, extremely rudely. She felt a surge of anger and humiliation, mixed with the anxiety that she might be found out.

Finally, grudgingly, they stepped aside and nodded her in. Into the Emitter room. A large window hung in the air, suspended in nothing, showing a green countryside. Her heart ached for it.

But that wasn't it. There was something else here to see.

And suddenly she saw it. Or, rather, her. Standing on a mesh grate, with each hoof tied with rope through the mesh. A lavender unicorn with a magenta streak in her mane looked at her with wise and knowing eyes.

"You're here," the unicorn said.

"Am I?" she replied.

"Yes."

"Why are you here?"

"Because what we did for you, can be done for her," a male voice said, and there he was again. Doctor Velchiek. Who signaled someone off to the side. A switch was thrown, and the grate raised in the air, the unicorn on top. Not struggling. Not fighting. Apparently unafeard.

But she was afraid. She turned to the man beside her, who was watching the unicorn impassively.

"What are you doing to her?" she asked Doctor Velchiek.

"I told you," he replied. And the grate was lowering, into another vat of goo. Like the one she herself had climbed out of.

"Stop," she said. Her voice sounded calm, but she was pleading. "Please. Don't do this."

"Did you know you have a tail?" he asked her, disapprovingly. She glanced and saw it was true; it had slipped out of her coat, bushy and brown, just as she remembered it.

"Tails aren't allowed here. That's why we're doing this."

She looked at the unicorn, who gazed back knowingly, serenely. Not accepting fate, but not fighting the inevitable.

"I'm sorry," she said to the unicorn.

"I know. But does it matter?" she replied.

Her hooves entered the liquid, which oozed up through the holes in the grate. And still she descended.

"I can stop this. Can't I?"

"Can you?" the unicorn asked, knee deep already. The machinery started knocking and clanking "Can you really stop this, Erin?"

"Erin?" she replied. "Twilight, you can't know that name."

"Isn't it your name?"

"Yes. But... You aren't supposed to call me that."

"What should I call you then?" Twilight asked, submerged up to her chest now, and still sinking.

"Sunflower," she said, pointing to the window suspended in the air. The field in view was full of them, as far as the eye could see.

"So pretty," Twilight said with a sad smile, only her neck and head still showing. "It could have meant something, too."

"Can't it still?"

"Not if it's a lie."

She looked back. The sunflowers were gone. Just ashes left.

She looked back. Only Twilight's head was still visible. Erin rushed ahead, trying to stop what was happening. The scientists in the room all stopped to stare at her, muttering in harsh disapproval. She didn't care. She reached out, but she was slow. Too slow. Her hand closed around the air where Twilight's horn had been just a moment ago. She stared at her closed hand, a feeling of tremendous loss echoing inside of her.

"Well," said a voice behind her. She looked back. Doctor Velchiek loomed above her. "If you want to be a pony so badly, I can arrange that."

He lunged at her suddenly, and she shrieked as her head was plunged into the vat of sludge.

Her breath caught in her chest as her eyes snapped open. She stared ahead, frozen, for a long moment. Then she exhaled and tried to begin breathing normally. She held her arm out in front of her. Still a hoof at the end. She was still a pony. And she was still in the Guest House.

"Okay," she said, shuddering, to the room at large. "No more chocolate sprinkle donuts right before bed. Never, ever again."

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Unlike most of her dreams, which faded away almost as soon as she woke up, that one stayed with her for days. She didn't need to be a psychiatrist to have a pretty good idea of what it meant, either.

Upon Erin's return from Canterlot, she immersed herself in her day to day life as a pony. The days began to blend together, as each morning she would either struggle into her saddlebags or hitch herself up to

the cart for her rounds. She worked as hard as she ever had, and the ponies of Ponyville often remarked to her how glad they were to get their packages so much sooner. Fet-Ex's stock amongst the locals was definitely on the rise.

The weather around Ponyville remained nice during the day, though the mornings were colder. Erin noticed that the leaves of the local trees had rapidly started changing colors. The woods around Ponyville were a riot of reds, oranges and yellows, which did wonders for her mood.

There was always something so nostalgic to her about the autumn. It had always been her favorite season as a young girl, playing in the piles of leaves around her house. The smell in the air, the sounds of dry leaves crackling under-hoof, all of it reminded her of home, of her childhood. Also, it was nice to see that the seasons, unlike the weather, didn't need any intervention from ponies in order to behave normally.

That reminded her; there was the Iron Pony competition this Saturday, wrapping up with the Running of the Leaves on Sunday, which was apparently a run through Whitetail Woods. Applejack and Rainbow Dash had incorporated the Running of the Leaves into their competition, which meant that whichever Iron Pony competitor finished before the others would get the most points, and they'd get even more points if they finished first overall.

Erin found herself excited about the race, though her initial desire to prove herself equal to or better than the other ponies had faded considerably by this point. It would still be fun, and it wasn't like she needed an excuse to run and exercise.

Now that she had a fair amount of bits saved up, she had decided to splurge. On Monday she'd stopped by the Carousel Boutique after her shift was over and talk to Rarity about what she wanted. Erin ended up deciding on three dresses: a dark green one that would be slightly heavier for the coming colder weather, a casual yellow one, and one very elegant dress that she could wear to formal functions. All told, it would cost her slightly less than three hundred bits, but Erin considered that to be well worth the price.

The dressmaker had asked her to return on Wednesday for a final fitting before the garments were sewn. She reflected that she could have bought dresses in Canterlot, but none of them had the simple elegance or flair of the dress that Rarity had previously made for her.

"They're all trying too hard," she told Rarity, who looked up at her with a smile as she was pinning fabric around Erin's body. This particular dress was the formal one, and would be a dark burgundy in color. Erin's thoughts on commissioning the dress was simply that she wanted something nice in case the situation called for it. Not that she was thinking of maybe, possibly, sneaking into High Canterlot when the human ambassadors arrived in the next week or two. Of course not. It was unthinkable that she would disobey a direct order from Doctor Velchiek.

Of course, as a civilian, it was debatable exactly how much trouble she could get into for violating orders. She was reasonably sure she couldn't be arrested. Almost one hundred percent. Well, maybe more like ninety. Okay, eighty.

Maybe she could ask Celestia for asylum?

No use dwelling on it, she thought, trying to put it out of her mind.

"This was an excellent choice of color, darling," Rarity said, as another pin levitated into place. "And I agree. Simple elegance will always trump excessive and pointless frills. Though, I do have to say I enjoy a frill as much as the next mare."

Erin smiled. She hadn't been too sure if she was going to like the unicorn when she'd first met her, but Rarity had an effortless charm about her that had simply put her at ease. And that was no simple task when she was standing on a pedestal and being meticulously measured and examined.

"Would it be alright if I had you keep these dresses here for a while after they're completed?" she asked. Rarity raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

"Of course, dear. But may I ask why?"

"Well, I don't have a lot of space in my room at the Guest House. I'm currently looking for an apartment somewhere in town, but until I find one, I don't want to ruin these dresses by trying to shove them all into a small closet or dresser drawer."

"Oh, indeed not!" Rarity agreed with a shudder. "Any luck finding a place of your own?"

"A little, yes. There's a lovely little house on the outskirts of town that is leasing the top floor, which I'm seriously considering. But I'll have to wait until the mare that lives there now moves out at the end of the month. I was hoping for something sooner than that, but honestly, there doesn't seem to be much in the way of room."

Erin wasn't sure what the future held. She was almost positive that her mission in Equestria would be over and done with in a few weeks, and that she'd be returned to Earth. Once home, she'd be changed back into a human, and that would be that. But as eager as she was to get back home and to get the use of her hands back, she knew she'd miss this place, and all the ponies she knew here.

"Yes, it wasn't like that a year ago," the designer said, adjusting a hem and eying it critically before moving it again. "Ponyville's population has grown by leaps and bounds in the last year, in large part thanks to the new railway to Canterlot."

"Oh. Well, the Guest House is comfortable and inexpensive, at least. And the company there is good."

Rarity gave a small noise of agreement, still fixated on the dress. Erin decided to remain quiet for a while, to let the designer work without distraction. Finally, Rarity announced the piece completed, and helped Erin to slip it off before placing it on a dressmaker's dummy prior to sewing.

"Say, Rarity," Erin said, remembering something. "Could I ask you a question?"

"Why, of course, darling," Rarity said, stepping back and eying her creation critically, with one forehoof pressed up under her chin.

"On the ride back from Canterlot, I saw Cloudsdale off in the distance, and it reminded me of something Twilight had said a while ago, about how you all visited the city."

"Oh... ah... really?" the dressmaker looked distinctly uncomfortable, for some reason. "What else did she say?"

"Only that you were there to cheer on Rainbow Dash. And that she'd cast a spell to give you wings, and another for the other ponies to walk on the clouds. I was thinking of visiting there, someday. Were those very difficult spells?"

"Ah. Well, the one that gave me wings was difficult enough that dear Twilight could only cast it on me, giving me the most lovely iridescent wings you can imagine. As she's the most magically talented unicorn I know, if Twilight struggled with it, then it must be a very difficult spell indeed. The cloud-walking spell was quite a bit easier, from what I understand, though it's not a spell I can cast myself."

"Oh?"

"No, I'm afraid not. My talents lie along the lines of fashion and fabulosity, not cloud-walking. You'd have to find a unicorn who had talents related more to weather or air than my own, I'm afraid."

"Wait, magic isn't just magic?" Erin asked, confused. Then she blushed. "I'm sorry, that probably sounds really ignorant..."

"Not at all, darling," Rarity said, smiling kindly. "You're not a unicorn, and I understand there weren't any where you grew up?"

Erin nodded, mildly surprised Rarity had heard that. She must have gotten that story from one of the other ponies she'd told it to, most likely Twilight Sparkle.

"Well, as you know, we all have our special talent. And, with unicorns, that guides and directs our magic, probably in much the same way you're familiar with as an Earth pony. Different ponies had different skills where you're from, yes?"

Erin hesitated, then said, "Yes." It was largely true, after all. Different people had different talents. She, herself, couldn't sing worth anything, but she could draw fairly well. As a human, at least.

"Well, my talent lies along the lines of art and design. Which is why I so love fashion, naturally. Anypony can learn well enough to operate a sewing machine and make a simple garment, but to study the science of it, to make something remarkable out of ordinary materials at hoof, that's my talent. And so, my magic exhibits itself in such a direction."

"How do you mean?" Erin asked, intrigued.

"Well, my magic helps me to alter fabrics to my design, as well as helping me to find gemstones and precious metals if needed. My special talent gave its first overt display when I was a mere filly, before I had received my cutie mark. Would you like to hear the story?"

Erin perked up. A chance to hear a story about how a pony chose her cutie mark? She *had* to hear this!

"Yes! Ahem. I mean, yes. Yes, I would. Very much."

"Such enthusiasm! Well, if you like, we can retire to the sitting room to continue our conversation. I'd like

to make some tea, if you don't mind, as I'm positively parched."

"Oh! Of course. Um... I don't want to take up too much of your time, though."

"Don't be silly, my dear. I can certainly take the time to talk to someone who is not only a customer, but a friend of Twilight Sparkle and Applejack. As you're friends with them, I would like to consider you a friend as well, if you don't mind?"

Erin opened her mouth to reply, then hesitated. If she befriended Rarity, that would be another pony she had to lie to. But what else could she do? Say 'no, I don't want to be your friend'? So, instead, she forced a smile and said, "I would like that very much, Rarity, and thank you."

If Rarity had noticed her hesitation before answering, she made no comment about it. Instead, she led Erin into a large, airy room, decorated with several chaise lounges, in various shades of red designed to set off the red of the overall room.

Inviting Erin to have a seat and make herself comfortable, the white unicorn vanished for a few minutes, returning with a tray holding two cups, a teapot, several scones, and both a sugar bowl and a pot of honey. She laid those down on a small table between them and levitated her own cup to her lips. Erin laboriously managed to get her traditional three lumps into the cup without making a mess, and raised the cup to her own lips in an upturned hoof.

"Now, where were we?" Rarity asked. "Ah, yes. My cutie mark story. Well, you see, when I was a filly, I had been put in charge of the costumes for a production that we were putting on for our parents. The costumes were... well, they were sufficient, but nothing special. And I wanted them to be *extraordinary*. In despair, I tried everything I could think of to improve them, but there was nothing I could do. For the first time in my young life, I was having doubts about my chosen career. Maybe I wasn't meant to be a fashionista after all?"

Rarity paused to refill her cup, then levitated the honey dipper out of the pot to drizzle a small amount of honey into her tea. Once again, Erin found herself envying a unicorn's ability to levitate objects.

"That's when something extraordinary happened. My horn began to glow, all of its own accord! And I was drawn from my room and out into the streets, and eventually out of Ponyville itself. For what seemed days to me, but was probably more like hours, my horn's own magic pulled me along. But I knew that, wherever my magic was taking me, it was leading me directly to my destiny. Of that, I was quite certain."

Rarity laughed, then, a warm sound of remembered nostalgia.

"You can imagine my surprise, then, when I came to a halt in front of a large rock. For a moment, I felt crushing disappointment. My destiny was a rock? A plain, old, boring rock? But then there was an explosion of light and color, and the rock cracked, and then split open. Inside, there was the most fantastic assortment of gemstones I'd ever seen."

She stopped to nibble daintily on a scone, which Erin had already discovered to be a delicious apple flavor.

"These are quite tasty, are they not? I purchased these this morning from dear Applejack." Erin nodded and murmured agreement.

"The explosion, of course, was Rainbow Dash performing her first-ever Sonic Rainboom. If you haven't seen her perform one yet, then I advise that you ask her to do so at some time, it really is a remarkable thing to see."

"In any case, the gems had given me a fantastic idea. I brought home as many as I could, hauling them both with magic and with my own muscle. I attached them to my costumes, and *that*... that was my first experience with true success in the world of fashion. I had succeeded beyond my own aspirations. I really could be a designer. When I fully realized that, I felt a slight tingle along my flanks. And, to my utter joy, my cutie mark had appeared."

Rarity turned her head to gesture at the three diamonds on her flank, which was a good thing, as she missed Erin's dumbfounded look of incomprehension.

Cutie marks just... appeared? Ponies didn't select them? They weren't some kind of tattoo? That... That was clearly imp-

She shook her head. *Just roll with it, Erin!* she thought to herself. She had herself largely composed. Rarity gave her a slightly odd look. She quickly slapped a smile on her face.

"That's a lovely story, Rarity. And thank you for telling me that. Any thoughts on what your sister... Sweetie Belle, was it? What her cutie mark might turn out to be?"

"There's no way of telling what a cutie mark will look like before it appears, of course, though I'd hazard a guess that it would have something to do with her remarkable singing voice. She also has a gift for musical composition. Of course, nopony can simply be *told* what her natural talent is, she has to discover it for herself. It's the epiphany, the realization, that causes the mark to appear. But, rather than look inside to find out who she is and what she loves, she seems convinced that if she and her friends simply try enough random things that she'll simply stumble onto her special talent."

Rarity sighed, continuing with, "We, meaning Applejack and I, keep trying to tell our sisters that a cutie mark comes from who you are, and not what you do. But sadly, our advice falls on deaf ears." She set her cup down and looked up at Erin. "And what of you, my dear? How did you gain your cutie mark?"

Erin froze up. *Stupid, stupid!* she thought at herself furiously. *You should have known that she might ask when she offered to tell you hers!* Her mind raced, but she couldn't think of anything.

So, she did what anypony might do in that kind of situation: stall for time.

"I'd be happy to, Rarity, but before I do, and not to be indelicate, but... may I use your restroom?"

"Oh, of course, my dear. Up the stairs, first door on the left."

Erin climbed the stairs, trying to exude an air of calmness. Inside, though, she was panicking. She let herself into the tastefully decorated restroom and closed the door, and almost immediately started to hyperventilate. The words *Oh, crap! Oh, crap!* kept repeating in her head on a loop.

She cast her gaze frantically around the restroom, noting the seashell-shaped guest soaps, the fluffy white towels with Rarity's name embroidered into them in purple, the watercolors of paintings on the walls, the window, the large, clawed bathtub...

...wait, window?

She trotted over to it, eying it thoughtfully. It was large enough, She could easily open it up and slip through. There was a drop of maybe ten feet on the outside, she'd probably be fine. Maybe a sprain, but she'd be fine.

For a wild, brief moment, she honestly considered it. But, no. She'd run into Rarity again, eventually. Escaping now, as tempting as the thought was, would only delay and massively increase the awkwardness. She had to think of a cutie mark story. Something realistic, and based only on Rarity's story. What did she know about cutie marks?

According to Rarity, cutie marks were a measure of who you were, and appeared when you discovered your "Special talent". She quickly thought through the ponies she knew, what they did for a living, their cutie marks and what those marks might mean, making a mental list:

Rarity - Fashion designer - three diamonds - Meaning: Art and design

Twilight Sparkle - Librarian - Pointy star-things - Possible meaning: a compass of some sort? Maybe she liked stargazing?

Meadowlark - Open ledger - Ran the Guest House - Possible meaning: Has to balance books and run the house

Applejack - worked on an apple orchard - three apples - Meaning: She worked on an apple farm, duh.

Rainbow Dash - Weather team - Cloud with a rainbow lightning bolt - Possible meaning: She flies and goes fast?

Mr. Parcel - Manages Fet-Ex - Parcel with flames - Possible meaning: He likes to make fast deliveries?

She reviewed a few more as well, ponies she'd met but didn't know as well. One thing she could determine was that a cutie mark often, but not always, had something to do with a pony's job. Which was good, because she had no idea how she was going to tie together package delivery and a sunflower. It seemed to have more to do with the pony's passion, what drove them, what they truly cared about.

Erin considered herself frankly. What were the things she cared about? What were the things she was passionate about?

She made another mental list, considering each item before rapidly discarding them. She enjoyed being with and talking to friends, but who didn't? That didn't make her special, and she wasn't exactly *passionate* about it. She enjoyed seeing movies, but that was a problem because, as far as she'd seen so far, ponies didn't have movie theaters and, again, she wasn't passionate about it. She liked music, but was completely terrible at singing and couldn't play any instruments even *with* hands.

The only thing she could think of that she was passionate about right now was saving humanity, and doing it in a way that the ponies would be minimally impacted. But even if she could share it, she doubted that would qualify as a cutie mark story.

She was frantically aware of the clock ticking. She couldn't stay in here forever. Finally, she remembered something that had happened when she was a little girl, something that had made her happy. Maybe a quick adaption of it would make for a good story.

She left the restroom, flushing the unused toilet and running her hooves under the tap for a few moments before patting them dry on a towel, in order to maintain the illusion that she'd come up here for that purpose. She then went back downstairs feeling apprehensive, but not panicked. Rarity greeted her with a warm smile and refreshed her teacup for her. Erin climbed back on the chaise lounge and decided to just go for it.

What's the worst that could happen? she thought, then shuddered as several unpleasant scenarios played out rapidly in her imagination.

"Well," she began, "As for my cutie mark, when I was young, I was helping my aunt plant a new garden. She was very kind to me, and my favorite aunt. She would help me with all sorts of things, often watching me and my brothers when my parents were busy, and I wanted to help her for that reason. She was very important to me, you see?"

Rarity nodded, motioning for her to go on.

"I enjoyed being with my aunt. But I didn't enjoy gardening. In fact I always really disliked it, and never wanted to do any gardening when it was a chore that my mother set for me. But this was different. It was for my aunt, who I loved, and I enjoyed helping her. Then I realized that even the most unpleasant of tasks can mean something more and bring you joy when you're doing it for somepony that you truly care about. And that's how it happened, for me."

All of that was true, roughly speaking. Except, of course, that she hadn't received a cutie mark for that realization. She held her breath, hoping she hadn't messed up, but Rarity was smiling warmly. Erin breathed a sigh of relief. Had she passed this test?

"That was a lovely story, darling," Rarity said, "and quite a valuable lesson! Something I've often felt myself, as the Element of Generosity."

Erin stared blankly. The who of the what, now? She just smiled and nodded at the mare as if she knew what she was talking about.

They chatted for about a half hour longer, with Erin mainly keeping the unicorn talking about herself. Which was not, unsurprisingly, very difficult. All she had to do was ask about recent pony fashion trends. After a while, though, Rarity called an end to the conversation.

"It's been a lovely chat, Sunflower," she said, standing up. "I do hope you don't mind, but I have quite a few things I need to finish up tonight. Not the least of which is the sewing of your dresses!"

"Oh! Of course!" Erin said, scrambling up to her hooves, bumping the table lightly in the process. Fortunately, nothing broke.

"You should be able to pick the three of them up on Friday any time after opening, if you like. Or, of course, you may leave them here until you need to wear them or until you find a place of your own to live. You are paid in full, after all."

"Thank you, Rarity. If they get to be in the way, please let me know and I'll find a place to keep them."

"Oh, nonsense!" she replied with a wave of her hoof and toss of her head while walking with Erin to the door. "I can keep them here indefinitely. If nothing else, I can show them to customers as a display piece!"

"That, you could," Erin replied, smiling. "Well, thank you for the lovely time and the wonderful conversation. I really enjoyed it, and look forward to doing it again, when you have the time."

Having reached the doorway, they said their goodbyes, and Erin trotted back to the Guest House in high spirits.

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The enormous private study had a large map of Equestria pinned to the only part of the walls lacking windows or not covered with tall, dark-stained oak bookshelves. The bookshelves were ancient, and as solidly built as a mountain, which was fortunate, because the books in the shelves ranged from thin to massive. Many of the tomes had old-fashioned bindings and titles that were, in some cases, written in languages that had been extinct for centuries.

Scroll racks dotted the floor, some holding dozens of ancient, yellowed rolls. The number was dwindling every year, as unicorn scribes very carefully took the typically delicate scrolls off of the racks to

transcribe the contents into a book. Even the books themselves were occasionally being re-written, as even the best preservation spells could only preserve them for a few centuries.

During the day, the large glass roof and windows let in plentiful light. But at the moment, with the sun having long-since set, the light was provided by several dozen gas lanterns around the room. Not that she needed the light. For her, the moonlight alone would have provided more than enough to read by. Even starlight would have been sufficient. However, she was expecting company, and it would be rude and nonsensical to make her guest stumble in the dark.

And "rude" and "nonsensical" were two words that could never be used to describe Celestia.

She gazed at the map on the wall, deep in thought. She'd been troubled lately. Her sister had been, as well. But Luna was busy at the moment with the duties of the night and would be unable to join them. There were a swarm of meteors that she had carefully guided towards Equestria for the last several months in preparation for the meteor shower she'd intended tonight for her small but devoted collection of stargazers.

Celestia smiled at that thought. While most ponies still did sleep through the night, there were quite a few who would delay or eschew altogether the traditional bedtimes of their hardworking ancestors, specifically to stay up and enjoy her sister's night sky. And that number was growing, slowly but steadily. Many ponies would now often stay awake at least one or more nights in a week, just for the magnificence that Luna would display. She knew that her own favored student, Twilight Sparkle, often stayed up later than she should, simply to gaze at the stars.

Celestia was very pleased about that. During her sister's exile, she had raised the moon and had generally kept things on course. However, she was well aware that she lacked her sister's artistry and quiet grace with the night sky. Ponies who had, for generations, considered the night to be nothing special were now finding a sweeping beauty and grandeur that had been lacking before. There had even been a large number of artists who had painted vistas of the night sky which, she was informed, were largely instrumental in getting even more ponies to venture outdoors at night.

Luna, initially taken aback by the unaccustomed praise, had responded like a flower opening to the sun. Each night became more subtle and lovely than the last, a reflection of the Night Princess' joy. It amazed Celestia, and it touched her heart, that Luna wasn't lonely. Not anymore. The ponies of Equestria truly loved her, and Celestia could think of nopony more deserving of that love than her dear sister.

Still, such artistry kept her incredibly busy. Luna wasn't one to repeat a performance, if at all possible. While the night sky stayed largely the same each night, Luna was constantly planning small changes, enhancements, and, occasionally, meteor showers, simply for the pleasures of the ponies who braved a sleepless night to appreciate the efforts of the earnest Princess. A small part of Celestia wished that her sister put less effort into the night sky, if only so that they could visit and talk more regularly.

A quiet knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Her guest had arrived. Celestia called out for her to enter, and a stark-white unicorn with pink eyes walked confidently through the door. Celestia smiled at her former student, pleased at the difference in her demeanor now, as compared to how she'd carried herself as a filly.

Moonlight Glimmer had been a shy creature. Self-conscious about her odd coloring and eyes, she'd avoided interacting with other foals her age, and had become quite withdrawn and introverted. Though Celestia hadn't been her direct mentor like she now was with Twilight Sparkle, she had taught some of the classes that the albino filly had attended. She'd done what she could to encourage and reinforce the filly's confidence. And Moonlight Glimmer had bloomed, from a quiet filly who was easily overlooked, to the confident scholar she was now, and one of the sharpest minds Celestia had known in the last century.

As she was thinking that, Moonlight Glimmer tripped over a footstool, stumbled and fell flat on her muzzle. Celestia winced in sympathy. The unicorn was brilliant, it was true. But she wasn't the most observant of ponies, and was unfortunately clumsy as well.

"Whoops! Hahah, sorry about that," the scholar said as she struggled to her hooves, her blush highly visible under her white coat. "I should pay more attention."

"As long as you are uninjured, Moonlight Glimmer, then that is all I care about. How have you been?"

"Very well, Princess, thank you for asking. The school is doing well, too. We've finally found a replacement for Professor Nimbus, a relatively young mare named Aurora. And, with her help, we've discovered what happened to those missing funds! It was a simple accounting error, which we found during an audit."

"That is wonderful! Very good news. But now, I'm afraid, I have to talk to you about something more serious."

"Oh? Nothing dangerous, I hope?"

"We shall see. I am uncertain, as is Luna. Very strange things are happening in Equestria these days, the likes of which I've never felt before. Perhaps I should start at the beginning."

Celestia studied the map once again, gathering her thoughts for a moment before speaking.

"Let us start this way. Tell me what you know of the Veil of Equestria."

Moonlight Glimmer nodded, and began speaking.

"Well, to put it simply, the Veil of Equestria is a metaphor that we use to describe the logical separation of our realm from other worlds. Within its bounds, it contains the whole of what we would call 'reality'. Not only this world, but the sun and the moon, all the stars, and the vast night sky."

"Outside of the Veil is the Chasm, sometimes referred to as the Void or the Infinite Unknown. Though, usually as just the Chasm. And across that Chasm are other Veils, surrounding other worlds. Which we know about only because those Veils sometimes brush against our own, causing a ripple. Or, very rarely, a fissure, where part of the alien world and part of ours overlaps, and you can actually step from one world to another. Is that what you meant, Princess?"

"Very good, Moonlight," Celestia said with a nod. "And that is the reason I brought you here today. There is one thing that isn't well known, not because it is a secret, but simply because it is rarely relevant. And that is that Luna and I can both sense ripples when they happen within the borders of Equestria."

"Oh! That's fascinating! What's that like?"

"A sense of unease. Almost of being watched, or like an itch of the mind. The problem is that we get that feeling, but it is difficult to ascertain where the ripple is coming from. Which makes this current situation all the more concerning."

"Why? What's happening?"

"For the last several weeks, there have been an unprecedented number of ripples occurring with alarming frequency all over Equestria. Where, in the normal course of things, we sense a ripple or two in a decade, and a fissure once every few centuries, for the last few months we have been sensing one or two ripples a week, along with perhaps a half dozen or more actual fissures."

"That... That is unprecedented," Moonlight Glimmer said with her eyes wide. "What could it mean?"

"I am uncertain," Celestia said with a small frown. "It could be a coincidence. Though, if that were the case, it would be one the likes of which neither I nor my sister have felt in all the centuries of our lives, or read about in the histories of our world. If we discard coincidence, though, then we must look at it as either the result of a natural change or as a deliberate action. We may be facing some kind of inter-dimensional catastrophe, or we may be on the verge of an invasion from another world."

Moonlight Glimmer gasped at the thought. Either could spell disaster for Equestria.

"Is there anything we can do to stop it?" she asked.

"Yes, there are a few things we can do. I am working with my sister and several of the Court scholars to try and find a way to strengthen our own Veil, to prevent further fissures from happening. It will require considerable power to cast those spells, though. It will make things much easier if we knew more about the particular nature and potential threat posed by these ripples. And so, I must ask you a favor."

"Anything, Princess!"

"As I mentioned before, we only get the vaguest of notions as to where the ripples are forming. Typically, they are too brief for us to more than register them before they are gone. However, with as many as we've been sensing recently, we believe we have finally been able to narrow down the most likely place where the majority of these ripples are occurring."

"The majority?" Moonlight Glimmer repeated.

"Yes. They are happening all over Equestria. However, the greatest concentration of them, by far, we believe are happening fairly close to Ponyville."

"I see," the albino said, nodding. "And you would like me to go there, in order to determine what is happening?"

"Yes. I believe that you have the talent needed to sense the ripples yourself, provided that you are close enough to one as it happens and know what to look for. Also, I would like for you to take Professor Claustrum with you."

"I thought he'd retired?"

"He has. But he is also the most learned scholar on the subject of the Veil of Equestria alive today, apart from my sister and myself. I will be visiting him in the morning to ask him if he'd care to undertake this journey with you."

"It would be nice to have him along," Moonlight Glimmer replied sincerely. "I haven't seen him in ages. Will he be up for the trip?"

"You will have the use of my Royal Carriage, as well as a number of Royal Guards and a select group of support personnel. This will include a nurse to care for the good Professor, should he decide to take this trip."

"He will," the white mare replied with confidence. "That old stallion could never resist a mystery. What is it you would like us to do when we're there?"

"Simply, I would like you to look for any anomalies that you can find. Try and see if you can track down any trace of a ripple or a fissure, or of any odd creatures or items that may have come through. And, if you find anything alarming or out of the usual, I ask that you send a scroll to me right away. Anything you discover could help us to determine the nature of any potential threat, and try to find a way to counter it."

"Of course."

"We have booked all of the rooms at the Ponyville Inn, starting on Saturday. Will that be enough time for you to be ready?"

The albino mare nodded. "I will begin packing immediately when I get home. I have some specialized equipment I would like to bring."

"Very good. Unfortunately, I have a few matters of state to wrap up before I can leave the castle. I am hoping I will be joining you in the middle of next week. However, once I join you in Ponyville, our search for answers will increase rapidly in pace. For the first few days you are there, I expect that you will settle in and make yourself comfortable. I have already sent a letter to Twilight Sparkle, both to let her know what is happening and to let her know that you are coming, and I have asked her to assist you in any way she can while you are there."

"Oh, that's right! Twilight lives in Ponyville now, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she does," Celestia said with a fond smile. "And the other Elements of Harmony, as well. I pray we don't have to use the Elements, but it's nice to know they'll be on-hoof if they are needed."

Moonlight Glimmer chuckled briefly. Celestia shot her a questioning look.

"Oh, sorry," the professor replied. "I was just thinking of what an odd coincidence it was. Twilight visited me at the school just last weekend."

"Oh?" Celestia was surprised. And, if she must admit, a little hurt that Twilight had visited Canterlot but hadn't stopped by the Castle. Typically, the earnest unicorn would try and spend as much time with her as Celestia's schedule allowed.

"Yes. She stopped by to ask me about a book she was writing."

"Twilight is writing a book? What is the subject, if I might ask?"

"Oh, it's apparently a work of fiction. I know!" Moonlight Glimmer replied to Celestia's surprised reaction. "I thought it was unusual as well. Dear Twilight loves to read stories, but I'd never have imagined her as one to try her hoof at writing anything other than non-fiction."

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's to never assume you know everything about anypony," Celestia said with a warm smile. "Well, well... Twilight Sparkle is writing a work of fiction. I look forward to reading it! Did she happen to mention what it is about?"

"Well, that's the thing. The subject she wanted to write about was impossible. See, she's recently learned that she can sense the magical fields of Equestria, and her thought was to write a story about a mare who was completely separated from the field. As in, no magic at all."

Celestia felt a moment of vertigo as pleasure at hearing that her prized pupil could sense magical fields quickly turned to an icy dread at the subject she had chosen to write about.

"Did Twilight say why she wanted to write about such a thing?"

"Not really. I believe she just said that when she realized that she could see this magical field through

everything, she wondered what it would be like for a pony to not be a part of it."

Celestia was concerned. It was plausible that Twilight had simply come upon this idea herself, but it was an unwelcome coincidence that she would have this idea at the same time an unprecedented number of ripples were appearing very near where the unicorn lived. Also, Moonlight Glimmer, as knowledgeable as she was about magical biology, was wrong about one thing.

It was very possible for there to be a pony with no connection to the magical field of Equestria.

"I believe that there are a few things that I can clear off of my schedule after all," Celestia said, without a hint of her concern showing. "I should be able to join you this Sunday."

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Erin was just making her rounds outside of Ponyville on Friday when she heard an earth-shattering roar coming from uncomfortably close to her location. Once she'd gotten over being startled, she trotted ahead, pulling the laden delivery cart behind her. With Ponyville within easy sprinting distance, she felt reasonably safe in investigating the cause of the noise.

As she got closer, she heard a single scream in the distance. She froze for a moment, and then quickly pushed the cart's yoke off of her. She ran in the direction of the scream, wondering frantically what was going on. As she ran, three terrified ponies ran past her, heading towards town, but none of them stopped to respond to Erin's questions as to what was happening. Now extremely nervous, but wanting to help any ponies in distress, she continued cautiously on towards the original roaring noise.

Slowly, she crested a hill and immediately saw the cause of both the roar and the terrified fleeing ponies. She stared in stunned amazement at the creature stalking across the ground some distance away from her.

The first thing she noticed was its size. Easily the size of the average Ponyville house, and with great leathery wings folded across its back. A reptilian head, brightly scaled in a blood red, poked out beside one of the wings, and Erin's disbelieving mind initially labeled the creature as a dragon.

But that wasn't what it was, she realized a moment later. A dark black goat-like head lifted up opposite of the first one. And another massive roar bellowed out of the center head, that of a lion. A lion head large enough to eat a pony in two bites, if it wanted to.

The beast snuffled along the ground, occasionally scratching with its lion-like front paws. Its rear quarters, covered in coarse black hair, resembled that of a goat. Erin could only stare at it. A strangely calm corner of her mind informed her that this was a chimera, from Greek mythology. What else could it be? And, quite obviously, it was a predator. The beast's appearance struck something primal in Erin's psyche, striking her down to the basic reactions that any mammal will have to the sudden appearance of a creature that it knows will kill and eat it the moment it has a chance.

She was trying to force herself to flee, but her hooves felt cemented to the ground. She had to run before the chimera noticed her. But the creature had the scent of something else, she noticed. She cast her gaze along its path and saw that it was heading towards a large boulder in the field. A boulder behind which cowered at least two fillies that she could see.

One of the fillies had a yellowish coat with a red mane.

Marigold! her mind shrieked in a panic.

With a massive surge of adrenaline, her hooves came unstuck, and she was running faster than she'd ever run before. Her hooves seemed to barely touch the ground as she ran, focused solely on getting to the fillies behind that rock before the chimera did.

As Erin ran, she became vaguely aware of a tolling bell sounding behind her. Ponyville had set off the alarm, but at this distance, there was no way that help would arrive soon enough.

As she ran, she tried to scream, shout, *anything* that would draw the monster's attention away from its prey, but her terror had locked her throat up tightly, and all that came out were ineffective squeaks.

Still, she ran, barreling towards the massive predator for all she was worth. The head nearest her, the goat's head, looked at her in dull-eyed confusion while the dragon and lion head remained focused on the boulder. The creature had the scent, now, and it knew where its prey was hiding.

The chimera reared up, and its massive paws slammed down upon the boulder. All three heads focused on the fillies below, and time seemed to slow down for Erin. She felt like she was charging through molasses, and she suddenly remembered her dream. Of trying to save Twilight, her hand closing just moments too late. Despair wrenches through her and tears of frustrated desperation streamed unnoticed from her eyes.

as she tried to run faster, *faster*. The three fillies backed away from the monster with terror-widened eyes, and Erin barely registered that the filly she had mistaken for Marigold was, in fact, Apple Bloom, with her two friends Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

The dragon-head reared back, inhaling deeply for what seemed like minutes, then darted forward as a tongue of orange flames shot out towards the helpless fillies. Erin finally found her voice, shrieking in dismay. The strength went out of her, and her legs tangled around each other. She fell, tumbling and rolling, to the ground.

Erin pushed herself up unsteadily, dreading to look towards the fillies, but hoping beyond hope that they were somehow still okay. She looked, and saw a sight that struck her to her very core, shifting something profound deep within her soul.

Twilight Sparkle was standing in front of the fillies, unburned and unafraid. From her horn came a nimbus of lavender light, bright even in the noon sun. Legs planted firmly and squarely on the ground, the unicorn stared defiantly at the confused chimera while the three fillies, unharmed but clearly still terrified, huddled behind her tail.

"Girls, get close to me," the unicorn commanded. Erin suddenly realized that she was *much* closer to the beast than she'd realized if she was able to hear the unicorn speak so clearly. The three fillies grouped themselves under Twilight's legs, clutching at them like a drowning man would clutch at a life preserver. The unicorn's horn began to glow, much brighter than Erin had ever seen it glow before.

The chimera, sensing that things were going amiss, growled in frustration, and the dragon head shot a gout of flame that was much more intense than its previous one. Erin watched with stunned amazement as the flames sheeted over and around of a dome of lavender light that suddenly sprang up around Twilight and the terrified fillies.

The goat head bleated in confusion while the dragon and lion heads snarled with annoyance. A massive, wickedly clawed paw reached out, but from Twilight's horn there came a sudden burst of light so bright that Erin reflexively lifted a foreleg in front of her eyes to protect them. When she lowered her leg, Twilight and the others were gone. Not dead, not burned, but entirely gone. The chimera, robbed of its meal, roared in frustration from three heads simultaneously.

"Sunflower, get out of there!" Twilight's distant voice shouted behind her. Erin spun and saw that the unicorn mare was now on the distant hill behind her. She wondered briefly how the unicorn had gotten there, and then she heard a low, rumbling growl behind her.

Without stopping to look back, Erin ran. That reaction saved her life as two gigantic paws slammed down where she'd been just a moment before. Terror energized her as she ran blindly, not thinking of anything but self-preservation.

It slowly sank in, as the fear ebbed somewhat, what she was doing. She was running directly *towards* Twilight Sparkle, who still had the terrified fillies with her. Behind the unicorn was Ponyville, and more innocent ponies. And Erin was leading the monster right to them.

She angled to her left, which allowed the chimera closed in behind her, huffing and panting through three mouths at once, as it closed some of the distance. She kept circling until she'd completely lost sight of Ponyville, and the forest loomed ahead of her, several hundred feet away but getting closer. It was the forest that she'd been warned about, the Everfree, but it didn't matter. If she could get into the trees, she'd at least have a chance of escaping.

Pouring everything she had into running in a straight line, she felt a euphoria overtaking her as she realized that the chimera was falling steadily farther behind.

I can do this! she thought, almost giddily.

Then there was a loud and puzzling "whumpf!" sound behind her, followed by a sound that reminded her oddly of sails catching the wind. A massive shadow engulfed her.

Oh. Right. Wings. she thought with dismay. With growing dread, she realized that she probably wouldn't make it, now. She could feel the damned thing getting closer to her, she could swear she felt its breath on her tail.

"That's far enough, buddy!" a rough voice called out, right before the sound of a meaty impact and a roar of pain.

Erin was tossed off of her hooves as a shock wave rumbled along the ground. She rolled back to her feet and looked behind her to see the chimera lying less than ten feet away, flat on its belly in the dirt. On its back, directly between the massive wings, was one extremely angry-looking Rainbow Dash.

The pegasus sprang up off of the beast, bucking the lion's head directly in the snout as it tried to raise itself off of the ground, using the buck to boost her momentum as she flew away from the crashing jaws of the goat head as it tried to snag her.

The dragon head, beady eyes fixed on the retreating pegasus, began drawing in a deep breath. Erin didn't even remember making the decision to charge it, but suddenly she was there, closing the distance in the blink of an eye. She planted her left front hoof, spinning her body round in a pirouette. Planting her forehooves, she delivered the hardest kick she could to the bottom shocked dragon's jaws, knocking the fiery blast off-target. Then she ran, getting some distance as the scaly head flopped to the ground, unconscious.

Behind her, the chimera was getting groggily to its feet, still slightly stunned by the crash to the ground. Before it could rise fully, a lasso shot seemingly out of nowhere to tighten around the goat head. The rope yanked hard to the side, causing the beast to stumble and collapse onto its left side.

Erin's eyes followed the rope to a furious-looking Applejack, who was pulling hard on the rope clenched in her teeth. The horned head bleated in distress, and the lion growled in acknowledgement as it tried to rise up and pull back.

It didn't make it, though. A heavy iron chain, engulfed in a mystical lavender light, wrapped itself tightly around the right wing and front leg, binding the two limbs together. The chimera roared in frustration as it tilted over once again, this time to its right, scrabbling with its remaining limbs.

Another chain, this one wrapped in a blue aura, wrapped similarly around the left wing and front paw. The beast crashed chest-first into the grass, effectively immobilized, as the rear goat legs dug furiously but ineffectively at the ground.

The center lion head glared and rumbled at Twilight Sparkle, who had immobilized the beast's right side. The goat head on the left snapped at Rarity, in spite of the fact that the unicorn was standing much too far away for it to reach. The ponies stared back, unwavering and showing no signs of fear towards this creature that could have eaten any of them in two bites.

Erin couldn't believe it. These ponies had immobilized such a massive, dangerous creature, and they'd made it look almost *easy*. She felt laughter welling up inside of her, sheer joy mixed with the aftermath of terror and an adrenaline high.

"Hey, Sunflower," a voice chirped as Pinkie Pie popped up beside her. "Are you okay?"

"AHH!! Ahahaha! Ah.. hi, Pinkie. You startled me. Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Is everypony else okay?"

"Oh, yeah. It hasn't managed to hurt anypony yet, but it sure scared the living daylights out of Daisy, Lily and Rose. I swear, those three are, like, Ponyville's early warning system or something."

Pinkie grinned at her, and Erin smiled back, still giddy. And still worried, as she was trying to keep one eye on the bound chimera as well. Pinkie noticed that and laughed.

"Oh, don't worry about Mister Snarly-Snappy-Flamey Guy over there. The girls have got him. We're just holding him down while we wait for our secret weapon to arrive."

"Secret weapon?"

"Her," the pink pony said, pointing with a hoof. Erin blinked in surprise as the yellow, pink-maned pegasus landed lightly in front of the snarling, drooling creature on the ground. The dragon head was still unconscious, and the goat's head was still being pulled sharply off to the left by Applejack, but the lion head stared at the pegasus with red-eyed fury.

"You." the pegasus said, in a voice that radiated a pure fury that Erin wouldn't have guessed *anypony* to be capable of, let alone Fluttershy.

"How *dare* you attack ponies!" The lion head blinked in surprise. Erin guessed that this wasn't how these things typically went for the massive predator. "You tried to eat the Cutie Mark Crusaders. You almost *burned* them up! How **DARE YOU!**"

Fluttershy marched, stiff-legged, towards the lion head. The goat head rolled its right eye towards the proceedings, trying to see what was going on. The lion head suddenly darted forward, trying to catch the pegasus in its jaws, but Fluttershy had stopped just out of range. The wickedly sharp teeth missed her by a hair's breadth as the jaws snapped shut on the air before her. Fluttershy didn't even flinch, and Erin could see real fury in the formerly timid pegasus' eyes.

"You will stop." she said, in a voice that brooked no argument. The lion head blinked in confusion, then lunged forward again, still missing the winged pony.

Fluttershy's eyes hardened even further, if that was possible.

"You *will* listen to me. *Do you understand?* Ponies are *off limits*. They are not on your menu. Not *now*. Not *ever*. You are to *never* hunt any creature that can talk. If you do, I *will* find you. Wherever you are, I will find you, and I will *not* go easy on you. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

The lion looked at her with disbelieving eyes, and with no small amount of confusion and, amazingly, fear. Fluttershy took several steps forward, and was now well within range of the creature's jaws. The lion head drew back in shocked surprise, but Fluttershy didn't stop until she was almost nose to massive nose with the leonine head. Her bright turquoise eyes bored into the chimera's bloodshot brown ones, not blinking.

"I *said*, 'do I make myself perfectly clear?'"

Erin's breath caught in her throat. She was expecting the massive head to lunge forward and bite the pegasus in two. In fact, she opened her mouth to protest, but a pink hoof suddenly covered her muzzle. In confusion, Erin looked over at Pinkie Pie, who just shook her head and said, "Watch."

Erin glanced back at the chimera, still feeling the dread she felt before, but now with a sense of wonder. She was actually able to see the exact moment when the creature's will snapped. The head lowered, and it gave a piteous whine.

Fluttershy stepped back and regarded the monster critically.

"Well," she said after a long moment, "since you haven't eaten anypony that I know of quite yet, I suppose we can let you go. But you are to fly straight back to the Everfree forest. And you are never, ever to come back. Do you understand me?"

Completely cowed, the tawny head nodded. Fluttershy nodded towards the two unicorns, who unwound the chains from the chimera's limbs. With a quick snap of her head, Applejack pulled the lasso off of the goat head. The massive beast lurched to its feet, stumbling slightly.

All the ponies around it maintained a state of wariness. Applejack glared daggers at it, while swinging her rope in case she needed to cast the lasso around it again. Rarity and Twilight held their chains at the ready, prepared to disable it, if needed. Erin noticed for the first time that Rainbow Dash had returned, hovering in the air behind it and apparently ready to pounce again at the slightest sign of aggression.

Pinkie Pie, on the other hoof, was completely relaxed and, astoundingly enough, had produced a bucket of popcorn that she was eagerly munching hoof-fulls of.

"Want some?" she asked Erin, who shook her head in dumbfounded disbelief.

The chimera gave a tentative growl, halfway between a challenge and a question. Applejack and the two unicorns tensed, but Fluttershy didn't even blink. She simply stared at the beast and said one word.

"No."

It sounded like a dismissal. Like the chimera wasn't even worth her time. The lion's eyes dropped to the ground, and the goat's gaze did the same a moment later. Erin noted, with some alarm, that the dragon head was starting to rouse.

"Remember," said Fluttershy sternly. "I gave you one last chance. And *this is it.*"

The lion head whined and the goat head bleated. The dragon head, newly woken and somewhat bleary, regarded the other two heads with muddled surprise. Then it focused on the butter-yellow pegasus in front of it. With a wicked grin, it began to inhale.

Fluttershy didn't even react, simply standing her ground with her wings spread. The goat head noted the dragon's activity and bleated with alarm, and the lion head suddenly darted out and closed its jaws around the draconic snout just as it started to breathe fire. The flames spumed out of the scaled nostrils, and scaled head yelped in pain, pulling back and shaking itself frantically to get the flames out.

The lion head glanced warily at Fluttershy, as if to see what her reaction would be. When she didn't move or say anything, it unfurled its great wings and launched itself into the sky. The dragon head gave a grunt of surprise and glanced back towards the seemingly helpless lunch that it was inexplicably leaving behind. The lion head growled at it, and it kept on flying slowly and resentfully towards the forest.

"Rainbow Dash?" Fluttershy said.

"Yo!" the pegasus replied.

"I think our friend needs a little encouragement and a reminder that Ponyville should be left alone. Do you

think you can manage a Sonic Rainboom?"

"In my *sleep!*" she said with a joyful laugh, snapping a quick salute before shooting straight up into the air.

A moment later, there was a massive BOOM! sound. A rush of wind nearly knocked Erin off her hooves once again, but she barely noticed that. Her eyes were fixed on the rush of colors expanding in a circle from the pegasus' flight path, a circular rainbow of incredible beauty and magnificence.

The colors rushed rapidly away from the center point, and Erin made out a rainbow trail streaking away like a missile, Rainbow Dash at its head. The shock wave hit the fleeing chimera, bowling it over as it bellowed in fear and distress. It righted itself, and began flying away in a much more vigorous fashion than before.

But Erin barely even noticed that. She was staring at the rainbows. One, a vertical line arching through the sky, followed the rainbow-maned pegasus as she flew at an incredible speed. The other, an expanding, horizontal ring of almost liquid color, rippling and changing as it spread across the sky.

It triggered something in her, something she hadn't felt since she was a little girl and her father had taken her to her first fireworks festival. She had snuggled into her father's lap, and he had wrapped his arms around her, making her feel utterly safe, in spite of the dark night and the strangers all around.

Then, the first of the fireworks had shot up into the sky, exploding into amazing patterns, the color and sound melding into one breathtaking instant in her mind. Then another, and then still more, as the night sky was transformed into a riot of color and sound. She had stared in as complete joy and wonderment at the sight of the fireworks then as she was staring at the rainbows now. That feeling that she'd never felt since, and was convinced she would never feel again, was now growing once again in her heart.

And, for the first time in her adult life... in fact, for the first time since she was a little girl in her father's lap... Erin found herself firmly and truly believing in magic, down to the very depths of her soul.

And, after that, nothing could stop the laughter of pure, undiluted joy from pouring out of her.

Pinkie Pie hung a leg around her neck in a casual hug.

"Yeah," she sighed, "I remember *my* first Sonic Rainboom."

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Several hours later, and the party was still going strong. Pinkie had insisted. It was a "Chase the scary monster away/Save the Cutie Mark Crusaders" party, and it seemed like pretty much all of Ponyville had stopped by at one time or another. The mayor had declared the rest of the day a holiday, which helped to enhance the already festive mood, and Pinkie had to set up extra tables in the yard outside of Sugarcube Corner to accommodate all of the ponies who came by, a few just for the cake, but many to congratulate the "heroes of the day",

Erin, still floating on a fluffy pink cloud of wonder and joy, was vaguely alarmed to find herself categorized as one of the "heroes".

"All I did was run away from it," she protested.

"That ain't all you did by a long shot!" Applejack protested. "Apple Bloom saw you *chargin'* that thing! You were tryin' to save 'em!"

"Not to mention trying to lure it away from Ponyville," Twilight Sparkle added. "I saw you turn when you realized that you were taking it straight towards us."

"And you kicked the dragon-head in the schnoz when it tried to toast my tail," Rainbow Dash put in.

"But still, you guys did so much more," Erin protested, blushing. She hadn't planned to do anything heroic. In fact, pretty much the whole thing was a vague blur to her at the moment. She'd been running on pure terror and adrenaline for most of the encounter.

"You did enough, sugarcube," Applejack said, hugging her around the neck. "When a monster from the Everfree tried to eat my sister, you ran *toward* it, not away. I wish more ponies could say the same," she added, staring darkly at Daisy, Lily and Rose. .

"I wouldn't be too hard on them, AJ," Erin said, quietly. "You saw that thing... Charging at it like I did was almost certain suicide. And they ran away, but if they hadn't alerted the town, there's a good chance you wouldn't have gotten there in time to save the girls."

She nodded her head in the direction of the Crusaders, who were trying to cope with being in the

confusing position of having ponies treat them like minor celebrities for having almost been eaten by a ravening beast. They seemed torn between being proud and being profoundly embarrassed.

"I reckon' yer right," Applejack said, grudgingly.

The party continued late into the night. Erin had far too many cupcakes to be good for her, and when an impromptu band struck up to play some lively tunes, she actually tried dancing, copying Rainbow Dash's moves. Initially clumsy, because she'd never once tried to dance as a pony, she got better quickly, and was soon matching the athletic pegasus' moves with ease.

The revelation that the magic of Equestria was in some way real had washed away a great deal of Erin's stress. She felt like she was fully awake and aware since the first time she'd walked through the portal into this place. And, though her earlier joy at the Sonic Rainboom had dimmed, it hadn't gone out. The embers were carefully banked in her heart, and would burn there for a long, long time.

Not to say that magic didn't work alongside *some* sort of scientific principal. Erin decided, right then and there, that she would spend the rest of her life studying the magic, provided that the ponies let her stay. Assuming Twilight Sparkle forgave her for her deceit, maybe they could even work together on it.

It was a worry for another time. Tonight, everything just seemed perfect. She lost herself in food, in dancing, laughing and talking. She even sang along with the other ponies, finding out that her singing voice was just as bad as it was when she was a human.

And, all the while, she held on to the revelation of magic in her heart, like a precious secret flame.

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It was the sunlight that gave it strength. That was very ironic.

The probe tried to fly. But two fans were damaged, and one had been snapped completely off. With only one fully functional fan, it had zipped awkwardly into the air in a wicked curve, slamming into the cave wall. Limbs of shadow darted frantically to catch it before it fell.

The shadowy creature pinned the device to the ground, studying it warily. It wasn't sure what to make of it. In some ways, it seemed alive. But it was clearly artificial.

It extended its mind towards the probe, and was amazed to find a kind of intelligence there. A very simple, highly structured mind. Rather like the mind of an insect, though vastly larger and more complicated.

It felt a moment of amusement. A mind. Living, yet non-living at the same time. The ironies kept coming.

It poured more of its awareness into the probe, pushing and prodding, until it finally found a way in. It removed the shadowy appendage keeping it on the ground, as it was no longer needed. The probe lay there, motionless.

The creature concentrated briefly, and the panels on the back of the device adjusted. It felt a fierce joy. Success! It concentrated again, and the fan whirred to life, and then stopped again on command.

It noted that the device had senses, of a sort. It found itself looking through the thing's "eye" at the interior of the cave. It heard through its "ears", wherever those might be located. And a host of other information, very little of it making sense, but still there.

It was wondering how best to use the new toy when it noticed something odd. With all of the new information coming towards from the probe, the creature had been too distracted to notice a pulse. It happened fairly rapidly, some sort of... touch, for lack of a better word. Something outside the cave kept touching the device on the floor. And the device was sending out its own pulse, as well.

Excited, but terrified of being disappointed, it cast its mind along with the pulse the device was sending. For the first time in longer than it could remember, a part of its mind was outside of the cave. A small part, the pulse could only carry so much of it, but still... the joy the creature felt was sublime. Freedom! Even only a taste of it was enough to make it nearly lose its grip on the probe in its excitement. Frantically, it calmed itself, and kept extending its mind along the pulse, until it found the source.

The source was another device, identical to the one his mind dominated in the cave, though undamaged. It was, at best guess, perhaps a half mile away.

It flooded as much of its mind as it could into the device, overwhelming it much more quickly than the first one, thanks to the familiarity it had gained in that first possession.

Terrified of damaging the second probe, the creature simply let it hover in place. It was wondering what to do with the thing when it suddenly became aware of something amazing.

There were more pulses, identical to the one that the first probe had sent out. They came from all over. And there were hundreds of them.

Chapter 16: The Iron Pony Competition

It tried to free itself using the new, functional device, but that didn't work. The device, not exactly dead but definitely not alive, was unable to undo the seal. Frustration and despair nearly overwhelmed it again.

The new device hovered in the sun outside of the cave. There was a side-effect of the possession, it noted. A mist, dark green almost to the point of blackness, seemed to surround the device as it hovered patiently outside of the seal. It turned its attention to the broken device in the cave, but it was far too dark to see if that one had a similar corona about it.

It wasn't an unexpected effect, but it was an unwelcome one. It would be much more difficult to hide its activities when all of its servants were surrounded by a dark green mist.

It calmed itself, releasing its earlier despair. One step at a time. It had servants outside of the cave, now. Though its soul was still trapped, unable to go past the golden barrier or the rune-carved walls, the signal could carry more and more of its awareness outside. It could see through myriad eyes, hear through uncounted ears.

If the current servants could not do what was needed, then it would use them to find a servant that would.

More and more of its mind poured out of the cave, carried on the strange signals that these devices were sending out. Other than taking them over, it didn't bother trying to move them or have them act. It learned early on that moving them too far away from each other broke the connection between them. The pulse only reached so far.

For now, there was just a frenzy of find and possess, find and possess, tracking down each one it could find, then using that one to find still others.

Slowly, it expanded, its mind covering all of Equestria, and some ways beyond.

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"Whew, that was a fun party!" Twilight Sparkle said as she stumbled into the library.

"I'll say!" Spike said, hopping off of her back.

"This sure was an exciting day. Seeing an actual chimera! I would have loved to have a chance to study it, though I suppose it was far too dangerous to keep around. Still, it's not every day... you..."

She trailed off, noticing a scroll with the Royal Canterlot seal rolled up on her desk.

"Spike? What is this?"

"Oh, uh... That... Sorry, that came for you this morning, but you were out, and then the alarm went off... I forgot. I'm sorry!"

Twilight sighed, then patted the dragon on the head.

"It's okay, Spike. I know you didn't do it on purpose. Still, I'd better read it..."

Wrapping the scroll in the glow of her horn, Twilight unfurled it and started reading the contents. Then, frowning, she read them again.

"Oh no.. This is bad..."

"What? What is it? Is it zombie ponies?"

"What? No! Spike, this is serious! Professor Glimmer is coming to town tomorrow morning for some research expedition. And Celestia is going to show up some time next week!"

"Oh, boy," the dragon said with an eye-roll. "Here we go again."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just... you get a little bit crazy whenever the Princess is coming to town."

"I do not!" Twilight replied defensively. The little dragon just stared back at her. "Okay, maybe a little. But it doesn't matter! Both the Professor and the Princess can sense what I can about Sunflower!"

"The whole lack of magic thing?"

"Yes. I need to let her know to keep indoors, or hide for a while."

"So, why are they coming here, anyway?"

"Well," said Twilight, pacing, "there seems to be some sort of strange phenomenon surrounding Ponyville. Ripples are appearing all over. Professor Glimmer and another Professor, Claustrum, are coming out to see if they can find out what's going on."

"What's a 'ripple'?" Spike asked, confused.

"Other worlds are bumping into ours, causing ripples in the fabric of our reality," Twilight explained, trying to keep it simple. However, she could see that the little dragon was already completely lost. She sighed, and tried again. "Like in your comic, the one with the invaders from another world? Where all the ponies in the other world were really buffalo, for some reason?"

"Ohhh... Okay, I get it."

Twilight wondered about that, but smiled anyway, and continued.

"The Princess has asked me to help them, and to keep an eye out for anything unusual. Things from other worlds could be coming through..."

She stopped, and felt a chill run down her spine.

"Twilight? Twilight! Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm fine, Spike. Just a little tired. Why don't you head to bed? I'll be up in a minute."

"Okay," he replied, looking back with a concerned expression as he walked up the stairs to the bedroom.

Twilight felt a shocked sense of clarity. It all fit. Almost all, at least. It would certainly explain an awful lot. Of course, it would also mean that a lot of her initial assumptions were wrong, but still...

What if the reason Sunflower existed outside of the magical field of Equestria was because she wasn't *from* Equestria in the first place?

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She woke up that morning in absurdly high spirits, still running off of yesterday's high. Today was the day of the Iron Pony competition, and she was bright and eager to get started.

First, though, was the matter of breakfast. She decided to eat light that day, and headed to the Cafe for some fluffy wheat cakes that they sold there, with syrup but no butter. She didn't want too heavy of a load in her belly today, but plenty of carbohydrates would help to keep her energized.

The other patrons were chattering away. Erin listened with half an ear, but she caught mention of the Iron Pony Competition more than once. It seemed like the turnout was going to be pretty large. She smiled, thinking how good that would be for Applejack and her family.

Yesterday's revelation was still hissing and popping in her brain like an unattended chemistry experiment. Doctor Velchiek had even said, during the initial presentation, that some of the worlds they'd seen didn't have "traditional physics". She shook her head ruefully. She'd wasted so much time and energy dismissing what the ponies said about magic just because they'd used the word "magic". What did it matter what they called it? Whatever it was, it obviously worked, and it existed in this world.

Trying to pound the reality of Equestria into the physics model she knew from Earth was a pointless and stupid exercise. She'd kept saying to herself that she should just accept things as she saw them, but in reality, she was always trying to figure out what she would have considered to be the "common sense" solution to the problem. She just hadn't seen that the common sense solution was that things were simply different here.

The wheat cakes arrived, and Erin drizzled a ton of syrup over them, eating with gusto. She had three glasses of orange juice while she was at it, too.

By the time breakfast was done, it was not quite 9 am. The competition didn't start until ten, which left her plenty of time to get to Sweet Apple Acres for the sign-in. Still, she decided it was better not to dally, so she paid for her breakfast, trotted out the front door, and made her way to Applejack's family farm.

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Twilight yawned hugely as she left the library. She had spent the night tossing and turning, not sure of what to do. Her suspicions weren't evidence, she knew that. But still, it fit. The questions Sunflower had asked had demonstrated a significant lack of common knowledge. She didn't know much about magic, and was remarkably ignorant on many aspects of pony life. She'd never seen unicorns or pegasi before coming to Ponyville.

Furthermore, that explained why she didn't want Twilight researching a cure. After all, if she'd never had magic to begin with, then there was nothing to fix.

But that didn't explain the cutie mark. How did a pony with no magic get a cutie mark? Could she be some sort of changeling? But no, that wasn't it... Even the changelings had been a part of the magical field.

It wasn't like she could just march up to Sunflower and demand to know if she was an alien from another world. Could she?

She considered that course of action for a moment. Technically, she could. But there were only two possible answers to that. One, Sunflower could just say "no". Which would leave Twilight with no further answers, since it would possibly be a lie. Or, she could answer "yes", and then Twilight would have to...

Well, she'd have to figure out what to do next.

And what should she do about the Princess? It was her duty to tell the Princess about anything odd happening in Ponyville that might be related to the ripples. But that would also be betraying Sunflower. But if Sunflower were really from another world, she had a responsibility to tell the Princess.

She didn't *want* to betray Sunflower, but she didn't want to hide anything from Celestia, either.

Twilight groaned and rested her head momentarily against a street post. She was no closer to solving this dilemma now than she had been when it first occurred to her last night.

She was tempted, briefly, to not warn Sunflower about the arrival of other ponies who would be capable of sensing her... oddness. If Professor Glimmer or the Princess came across Sunflower, then the matter would be out of her hooves. But, no. That's not what friends did. She had to at least *talk* to Sunflower first, try to get her side of the story.

Maybe then she could make up her mind on what to do.

With a sigh, she headed out towards Sweet Apple Acres and the Iron Pony competition.

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She came in third place at the Barrel Weave, due to a nicked barrel. If it hadn't been for that, she would have come in half a second behind Applejack, and a full second before Rainbow Dash.

She didn't let it bother her. There were twenty events today, and each of the top three competitors for each event got points. Three points for first, two for second, one for third. Erin was satisfied for the moment that she was at least on the board. If she could finish the day within striking distance of first place, then taking the win in the Running of the Leaves tomorrow would give her the overall win. The first Iron Pony competitor across the line would get three points, unless she was first overall, in which case she'd get five.

There were nowhere near the number of competitors that Erin had expected for this event. A mere dozen, mostly earth and pegasus ponies, with a couple of unicorns thrown in. She knew most of them, at least by face if not by name. Lyra was bouncing excitedly on her hooves with a big grin on her face, waiting for the next event. Junebug was standing next to her, rolling her eyes at the other mare's out of control excitement.

Rose was also in the event, though the other members of the "panic trio", as Erin mentally considered them, were rooting for their friend from the stands. Erin saw them waving at a blushing Rose, who was a little downcast after having finished tenth place.

Erin had her own cheering section, she'd noticed right away. She smiled and waved at Meadowlark and Marigold, the little filly positively bouncing with excitement as she waved a flag. Meadowlark smiled and waved back, before scolding her filly into sitting down.

From her booth by the stands, Pinkie Pie announced the final winners of the first event. Fluttershy acted as scorekeeper, putting the points up on the board. Pinkie then announced the next event, the Bronco Buck.

Apparently, unlike last year, there were no volunteers this year for the bucking contest. Instead, each

contestant had a straw dummy lightly tied to his or her back. Erin was slightly taken aback to notice that the dummies were roughly human in shape.

The referees wandered around the paddock, keeping a close eye on the contestants and making sure each dummy was strapped on properly, so no pony had any unfair advantage or disadvantage. One of the referees was her co-worker, Lucky, who had actually managed to find a black and white striped shirt to wear. He'd tipped her a wink as the dummies were strapped on and wished her good luck.

First pony to get their dummy off would win. The rules were: no untying the rope, no rolling, no scraping the dummy off. Only a pony's own natural movement counted. Any pony who got their dummy off in an incorrect manner would be disqualified from this event.

The whistle blew, the crowd started cheering, and all the ponies started bucking, watched by the careful referees. Erin's strategy was to leap as high as she could, land on her back legs, then plant her front legs and kick as hard as she could in the hopes that the dummy's shifting momentum would tear it off of her back. She smiled in satisfaction when her dummy went flying, but it wasn't fast enough to beat Applejack, who took her second win in a row. The farmer's own dummy was danging from a nearby tree.

Rainbow Dash took third, using an odd, vibrating tactic. That left Rainbow and Erin tied at second place, but gave a widening lead to Applejack.

"I don't get it," Rainbow Dash said to AJ after the event was over. "I totally beat you on that one last year. What gives?"

"Last year we had a live rider, if'n you'll recall," she replied. "I took it a might easy, 'cuz I didn't want ta hurt Spike."

"Well, you got lucky twice, AJ," Rainbow replied. "Don't expect it to keep going that way!"

"I sorta do, Rainbow," Applejack replied smugly. "Y'all remember last year's competition?"

"Yeah?"

"Did ya do any special trainin' for it?"

"Nah, just my usual training every day, which is plenty," Rainbow said smugly.

"Well, I didn't do no trainin', either. *Last* year, that is. But *this* year was the Equestria Rodeo Competition."

"So?"

"So, I trained my tail off fer that. And I never stopped afterwards." Applejack grinned at Rainbow's sudden look of dread. "Y'all are gonna have ta step up your game a bit, Rainbow."

"Yeah? Well... So are you!" Rainbow Dash replied. AJ just chuckled and punched her lightly in the shoulder with a hoof. They walked side by side to the next event, still bickering. Erin walked behind them with a smile.

It went on like that for a few more events. Typically, AJ, Rainbow and Erin were in the top three, but there were a few that broke the pattern. For the Ball Balance competition, Rainbow finished first, but a unicorn named Sparkler finished second, with Erin in fifth and Applejack finishing seventh. For Jump Rope, Erin finished a disappointing last place, having never jumped rope as a pony, and unsure how to even hold the rope with her hooves. She'd gotten hopelessly tangled up and had the indignity of requiring another pony to come by and untie her.

Surprisingly, first place for the jump rope competition went to a pegasus named Blossomforth. Rainbow muttered darkly about the other pegasus' "freaky flexibility" and grumbled about her second place finish.

One event that particularly interested Erin was the Hoof Wrestle, where ponies went one on one. Erin beat out Rainbow Dash, much to the latter's obvious discontent. Rainbow had to go up against Applejack's defeated opponent to see who would win third place, which meant that Erin would have to go one on one with the heavily muscled farm pony herself. As they approached each other, AJ gave her a wide grin.

"Now, don't be thinkin' I'm gonna go easy on ya, sugarcube," she said, pushing her hat back on her head.

"I was about to say the same to you," Erin replied, grinning.

They braced themselves, getting ready to start. Pinkie, up in the announcer's booth, narrated along.

"It looks like our two finalists are ready to get started, mares and gentlecolts. Who will win? Applejack, the honest workpony, or Sunflower, the super-duper delivery mare? Only time can decide! Well, time and whoever actually wins, of course. Ooh! It looks like we're about to get started! Aaaand.... *there they go!*

Applejack seems to have the upper hoof... but Sunflower pushes back! I don't believe it! I expected AJ to win this one in a snap! Some serious concentration from these two... Neither one giving so much as an inch, except for Sunflower, who just lost about two of them."

Erin tried to block out Pinkie's voice with limited success, as she concentrated on pushing AJ's hoof back upright. Her whole leg felt like it was on fire. That pony was seriously strong!

"Sunflower has regained some lost ground, but AJ's still going strong... it's still any mare's game, folks! By the way, after the Iron Pony competition today, why not stop by Sugarcube corner for a tasty snack? Tell 'em Pinkie sent you, and don't worry, they'll believe you, because I'll be working behind the counter! Oh, they're still going... What an amazing, yet still kind of boring competition! Wow, look at the veins popping out on their heads, that's kind of cool! They're both struggling not to lose any ground. Right now, it looks like the win will go to whoever blinks last!"

Erin felt her limb trembling. It was only a matter of seconds before she lost. Applejack was just *too* strong, it was like she was pushing against an iron bar sunk in concrete. There was no way... wait. There was *one* way she could win. It was a tactic she'd used on occasion to beat her brothers in arm wrestling. It was risky, and it would cost her her dignity if she lost, but still... Even though this *was* a game of strength, it was also one of concentration.

Erin stared Applejack straight in the eyes. AJ stared back, grimacing with the effort. Once Erin was certain she had AJ's full attention, she quickly crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

"Bleeeehhhh...." she said.

Applejack stared in shock and then burst out laughing. Erin was able to push her hoof over easily after that.

"*What an upset!*", Pinkie cried. "Newcomer Sunflower employed a clever psychological gambit that completely broke Applejack's concentration to become the winner of the Hoof Wrestle! Whew, glad *that's* over, I was afraid one of their eyeballs was gonna rupture, or something. And that would have been really icky. We're at the halfway point, folks. And our current leaders are: Applejack, with a total of nineteen points, with Rainbow Dash and Sunflower tied for second at seventeen points each. The outcome is still up in the air, folks. Which reminds me, the next event is the High Jump! But first, a half hour intermission for everypony to rest up and grab some lunch!"

Applejack grinned ruefully at her loss, waving off Erin's apology.

"It was a fair tactic, Sunflower. One I shoulda thought of, myself. Ah think my leg's gonna fall off," she said, giving her shoulder a rub. Together, they made their way to the food tables.

The Apple family had set out a free buffet for everypony that had paid the admission price. The stands emptied quickly, as eager ponies rushed the heavily-laden tables to try and get their favorite foods before they were all taken.

As a competitor, though, Erin followed the others to their own, slightly secluded table. Her mouth watered at the sight of all the foods, but she was still resolved to eating high-carb but low-weight snacks. As such, she regretfully passed up several desserts, and instead went for some bread, crackers, and lots of apple juice.

"Sunflower, can we talk?" a voice said behind her after she returned from getting seconds.

Erin turned, surprised, to see Twilight Sparkle standing behind her. She nodded, swallowing her current mouthful of food.

"Sure, Twilight. What's up?"

"It would be better if we spoke in private," she said, turning to walk away. Confused but curious, Erin walked behind her as Twilight led her to a secluded area behind the bleachers.

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Twilight stopped, turning to face the earth pony. Or, whatever she was. Sunflower took a good look at her and gasped in mild surprise.

"Wow, Twilight. You look really rough. Are you okay?" Sunflower asked her, sounding concerned.

Of course she was concerned. Sunflower was nice. That's what made this so difficult. She considered the mare a friend, and she was pretty sure Sunflower felt the same back.

"I... had a rough night," Twilight admitted, without going into details. Then she steeled herself.

"Ponyville is getting some visitors, starting today, that you might want to be aware of."

"Oh?"

"One of them is my old Professor. She can sense magical fields, just like I can. She'll be able to sense your... um. Difference, I guess."

Sunflower already looked worried, and she didn't even know the half of it yet.

"I wanted to let you know," Twilight continued carefully, "because I consider you to be a friend. But, you'll want to be careful around the library and around the Ponyville Inn. And probably around town as well, and outside. Everywhere, really. Also, they're bringing Professor Claustrum as well. I don't know if he's got the same ability, but you should probably assume he does."

"Thank you for letting me know, Twilight," Sunflower said, sounding concerned. She was staring at her hooves with a preoccupied frown.

"There's more," Twilight said with a sigh. "Princess Celestia will be coming out within the next few days as well."

Sunflower's gaze snapped up, fear replacing worry on her features.

"And that's not the worst of it, I'm afraid," Twilight said, getting finally to the hardest part. "They're looking for something specific. You see, they can sense... I'm not sure how to describe it, but they call it a ripple. It's where part of another reality brushes up against our own. Do you know that there are other realities out there? Different worlds, some similar to ours, others completely alien? Did you know that?"

Twilight stared into Sunflower's wide green eyes. The mare looked stunned, and sat down heavily on her hindquarters as her rear legs folded behind her. Twilight knew that feeling. Also, with a sinking in her stomach, she knew that she was right. The look on Sunflower's face was, in an odd way, confirmation. It wouldn't hold up as any kind of real evidence, but Twilight had learned to trust her instincts.

"They're looking for things that may have fallen through from one reality to another, Sunflower. I think... that they're looking for you."

~~*~~

Erin was completely dumbfounded. Her rump in the dirt, she stared at the bedraggled unicorn in front of her. Twilight knew. She *knew*. Somehow, she'd figured it out.

And Erin wasn't ready for that, not yet.

"Twilight, I don't... that isn't..." she stopped. What was she doing? Just *what* did she think she was about to do? Lie to her? There was no half-truth that would get her out of this, no evasion. Twilight had her, dead to rights. She looked back into Twilight's purple eyes and saw herself reflected back in them.

An odd sense of relief settled over her. Well. Nopony could blame her, now. Her cover was completely blown. No more lies needed. No more hiding. She could finally tell everypony what was going on. She'd been ordered to keep quiet, but how could she, now?

Furthermore, they could take their rules and shove them up their tail-holes. She was *sick* of lying to these ponies.

She felt oddly lightened, as if some huge burden had lifted off of her. She stood up, her back legs shaky, but she felt the resolve forming in her.

"Twilight... I think it's about time!"

She was interrupted by a loud air-horn.

"Five minute warning, everypony!" Pinkie's voice shouted over the loudspeaker. "Finish your snack and get on back!"

Completely derailed, Erin stuttered for a moment. Twilight shook her head.

"It's okay," she said. "Sunflower, you don't have to explain now. I realize you're... kind of busy at the moment. Look, the Professors and their entourage are all coming in early this afternoon, and I need to meet them and help them get set up. Why don't you take the rest of the day to think things over, and we can talk tonight. Does that sound good?"

"Um... I guess. Sure. That's fine. After the Iron Pony competition, then?"

"Okay. Thank you, Sunflower. And... for what it's worth, I trust you." Twilight hugged her briefly around the neck, then trotted off. Erin stared after her in shock for a long moment, and then returned to the games.

~~*~~

A new signal. Interesting. Something had contacted all of the devices under its control, and the probes were all responding, each one sending a massive burst of information to the source of the new signal. This signal had a single source, unlike the others which were scattered across the land. It allowed its mind to follow, flooding along multiple paths back to the source.

And then, a change. It was a transition of a sort, like walking from dry air into cool water. It found the device that was sending the signal, unlike anything it had ever encountered before. The mind was still insect-like, rigidly organized and unshifting, but it was massive, completely unlike the drones it was controlling now.

It flooded its mind into the device, attacking it where it could. The previous experience with the drones helped somewhat, but it was still a massive struggle. Finally, it found a gap, forced it wider, and wedged its awareness through it.

It was a world of information, most of which made no sense at the moment. It reveled in what it had found, completely bewildered by most of it. The feeling was like standing in front of a wall of solid crystal. It was impossibly beautiful inside this new device, yet completely inscrutable. What did any of this mean?

"Erin, can you hear me?" a voice spoke.

The entity froze in shock. That was the first voice it had heard, other than its own, in centuries. The voice sounded male, authoritative.

Who, or what, was "erin"? The answer came quickly as another voice whispered fiercely back, this one either a very young male or a female, as far as it could tell.

"Little busy at the moment, Doctor V," it said tersely. "Hold on."

Then the second voice spoke again, much more loudly.

"I'll be back in a second, girls. Just need to use the little fillies' room."

There was a chorus of confirmations, which confused the entity briefly before it realized that it was hearing what the owner of the second voice was hearing. There was the sound of trotting, then the opening and shutting of a wooden door.

It listened intently.

"Okay, I can talk now, Doctor. Listen, we may have-"

"Hold on, Erin, I've just been informed of a problem."

There was a feeling of disconnect. The entity explored along the signal that seemed to connect the two voices. Sound had stopped coming through from one direction. From the other, it heard a sigh of exasperation and some sullen muttering.

However, what the owner of the second voice apparently couldn't hear, the entity itself could.

"Any idea of what the problem is?" the first voice asked.

"No, sir. Just some really sluggish data feeds. Like all the probes are buffering," a third voice said.

"What could cause that?"

"Probably some widespread weather phenomenon. Most likely, it's sunspots. The data is coming in, but it's coming in very slowly, like we're only getting about 25% of the full output from each device."

"Keep looking into it," the first voice added, and the third replied with an affirmative.

There was a click, and the first voice began speaking again.

"Sorry about that, Erin. Slight difficulty with the probes. We'll get it sorted out. Now, you were saying?"

"I was saying that we have a problem. Twilight Sparkle figured out that I'm not from around here."

"What?!" the first voice said, sounding alarmed.

"Apparently, they've noticed that Equestria is getting a lot of attention from... outside, recently," *the owner of the second voice said*. "Twilight's no idiot, she figured things out and asked me about it."

"And what did you tell her?"

"Nothing yet, though I was planning to tell her everything later tonight." *the second voice, Erin, replied*, sounding slightly defiant.

"Erin, no. You will jeopardize all our efforts if you go blundering in there like that."

"I don't think so," *Erin replied*. "The Princess herself is coming out here to investigate. This is a big deal, we're scaring them. At this point, any information could help to avoid unnecessary tensions. And, besides, I'm sick of lying."

It felt the disconnect again, and knew that the owner of the first voice had stopped sending information. Erin, the second voice, kept talking on, unaware.

"We need to let them know what's going on," *she said*. "Besides, Twilight will tell the Princess if I don't fess up. In my opinion, it will be the lesser of two evils if I simply tell them what's coming, and that an actual diplomatic mission is on the way. It will put their minds at ease, and make things easier when the diplomats arrive."

"Inject solution A-7 and prep the override," *it heard the first voice say as Erin was speaking. Someone replied with an acknowledgement*. "Set it to take over if she tries to talk to this Twilight Sparkle, or any other pony, about any of this."

The voice in the background replied with a query.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Make her... fall asleep, or something. Put her in a coma until we send a release signal. No," *the first voice said in response to another question*, "I don't want you to do it now. Give her some time for the drugs to kick in and for her to think it over."

"Doctor Velchiek?" *Erin asked. she'd stopped talking a few seconds ago, and was waiting for a reply. There was a click as the audio came back on.*

"Erin, I know you want to tell all the ponies what's happening, but... please, consider your actions. Anything you say could have profound implications for humanity's survival. Simply, you're not qualified to open negotiations between our worlds."

"Worlds"? How very interesting!

"I'm not making this an order right now," *Doctor Velchiek continued*. "But what I am asking is that you take some time to think it over. Can you do that?"

"Twilight said the same thing," *Erin muttered, and sighed*. "All right. I promise I'll think it over."

"Very good, Erin. We've only got a short time remaining before this window closes. Was there anything else you needed to bring up?"

The entity panicked. It had just realized that it had a large portion of its mind in a device that rested on the other side of a fissure between worlds.

A fissure that was apparently about to close.

As rapidly as it could, it began drawing its mind back into Equestria. The voices continued chatting, but it was no longer paying attention. It was far too busy trying to withdraw from the magnificent machine on the wrong side of the fissure.

It was nearly complete when there was a sudden sense of loss, and an intense feeling of pain. It howled in agony, the very rocks of its prison trembling with the force of it. A small part of its mind had been cut off, amputated neatly by the closing of the fissure.

All around Equestria, probes dropped out of the air as the creature in the cave howled and gibbered in torment.

~~*~~

The door to the outhouse slammed open and Erin marched out in a foul mood. It didn't help her composure that she'd had to have that conversation in an outhouse. And the thing about outhouses, whether Equestrian or human, they always pretty much stunk.

Talking to Doctor Velchiek had poked some holes in her earlier resolution. Somehow, her urge to defy him

always seemed to fade after their talks. Something about the way he spoke always seemed so rational to her. She wished she knew how he did it.

"C'mon, sugarcube! Yer up!" Applejack called, and Erin ran to join the other contestants. This particular competition was to pull a laden cart around a track. Whichever pony got the best time without losing any of her load would win. Erin grinned. It looked like her working at Fet-Ex was going to pay off for this particular competition.

Putting the frustrating conversation with Dr. Velchiek out of her mind, Erin trotted up to get harnessed up.

~~*~~

It wasn't sure how long it had lain there. Minutes at least. Hours? The sun hadn't set, so it couldn't have been days. Eventually, the pain faded to an ache, and it began casting its mind back out, once again capturing drone after drone. Some had been damaged, it seemed. But, for the most part, they were fine.

A thought occurred to it. There was something else out there, that was definitely not a device. She was, presumably, still on this side of the fissure.

It sent its probes looking, trying to find the one called Erin.

~~*~~

"And the final results for today's competition... It should be no surprise who landed in the top three!" Pinkie's voice echoed out over the playing field. "In the lead is the intrepid farm pony, Applejack, with thirty-seven points!"

The ponies in the stands cheered and stomped their hooves.

"But wait! Because Rainbow Dash is only a half step behind, with thirty-six points!"

More cheering and stomping, especially from Scootaloo, who was wearing a rainbow-colored wig.

"And tied for second, we have Sunflower... Thirty-six points!"

More cheering, and Erin blushed. Not that she minded the accolades so much, but still, having that much attention on her was slightly embarrassing. She saw Marigold in the stands, hopping up and down and enthusiastically waving her little flag.

"Unfortunately, npony else who scored today is nearly high enough in points to have a shot at finishing in the top three. But, as far as who will win and be crowned our first-ever Iron Pony, that question will be answered tomorrow, at the Running of the Leaves! Hope to see all of you there! Good night, everypony!"

There was some more cheering, and then the crowds in the stands started to break up. Erin was pleasantly tired, and decided that she'd take a trip to the spa again to help her relax after the day's activities. Applejack was at the end of the field, personally thanking everypony for stopping by.

Rainbow Dash was not exactly happy with her second place finish.

"I shouldn't have agreed to so many 'wing restricted' events," she groused. "Last year was a total shut-out, or nearly. This year I'm in second place. *Second* place!"

"Tied for second, actually," Erin reminded her, chuckling as the pegasus groaned in frustration. "Look, don't worry about it. If you win tomorrow's race, then the absolute worst that you can do is tie for first. If you win first in the race overall, then you'll *win*."

"Yeah. Yeah!" Rainbow's face brightened at the thought. "Once I win the Running of the Leaves, then I'll be all set!"

"You make it sound like a foregone conclusion. I'm not planning on making it easy on you, Rainbow Dash," Erin warned her, smiling.

"I wouldn't expect you to!" Rainbow said, checking her lightly with a shoulder. "What are your plans for the rest of the night? Want to hang out, maybe get something to eat?"

"Sure, but I was planning on going to the spa really quick. And I have to talk to Twilight about something later tonight, I kind of promised." Erin still wasn't sure what she was going to do about that. Her earlier resolve to tell the unicorn everything had been replaced by massive amounts of self-doubt.

"The *spa*?!" Rainbow replied, sounding horrified. "Sunflower, *why* would you want to do that? It's all... frilly frou-frou nonsense!" Rainbow gestured with her hooves, trying to adequately convey the horrors of

frou-frou-ness.

"You know, Rainbow Dash, athletes go to spas all the time." Erin said, smiling.

"What? Really? No way!"

"Well, not necessarily *spas* so much as, like, massage centers and stuff. Think about it, don't you have any sore or kinked up muscles right now?"

"Um..." the pegasus replied, looking at her back leg and flexing it. "Maybe."

Erin smiled at her. She'd known that Rainbow had injured that leg slightly during the long jump, and the mare had been favoring it more and more as the day went on. She'd really hoped that Rainbow would come along and hopefully get that taken care of. She, herself, had been feeling oddly tingly since the last event.

"Well, what's wrong with going in and getting a massage to work out some kinks, and then relaxing your tired muscles in a nice warm bath? That's not silly or frou-frou, that's taking care of your body. Nopony is saying you have to get your hooves done or anything."

"Fine," Rainbow said with a sigh.

"I'm glad," Erin said. "You'll see, you'll feel like a million bits once we're... Ooof!"

Rainbow laughed as Erin unexpectedly tripped over her own hooves and face-planted.

"Nice one, Sunflower!"

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up..." Erin said, rolling her eyes and getting back to her hooves. Or, at least, trying to. Her right front leg wasn't responding, suddenly becoming stiff as a board and sticking straight out. She collapsed again, and Rainbow Dash stopped laughing.

"Hey... are you okay, Sunflower?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"Yeah, I think... Agh!" her leg started twitching and jerking around briefly before stopping, and then her rear legs both stiffened up as well. Erin flopped back into the dirt, helplessly. Ponies gathered around, looking concerned.

"That's not right, Sunflower. Hey!" Rainbow shouted, pointing at a stallion in the gathering crowd. "You, go get one of the nurses. Now! Go!"

"I'm fine, Rainbow," Erin said as the stallion ran off. She was struggling to get back up. She'd lost control over all her legs, now, though, and could only watch in stupefied horror as they twitched and convulsed.

"Yeah, right, you're fine. Try to relax, okay?" Rainbow said, holding her down with a hoof.

Erin tried to protest, but then her limbs all stilled and fell, dead weight for a moment. She tried to move them, to exercise some control, but they didn't respond.

And then, Erin noted with creeping horror, they started moving in a more normal fashion all by themselves. Slowly, and without any input whatsoever from her brain, she began to stand.

"Well, that was weird. Are you feeling better?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I'm not doing this," Erin said, horrified. She looked up into the pegasus' shocked eyes. "Rainbow, I'm not doing this, they're doing it on their own."

"What? Sunflower, don't be... hey, what's going on? Are you on fire?!"

Erin looked back down. An eerie, dark mist, colored a sickly, toxic green in the afternoon sunlight, began oozing out of her hooves and creeping up her legs. The crowd around her gasped in shock and pulled back.

"What's going on?!" Erin cried, completely panicked. Her legs didn't feel like they were on fire. She could still *feel* them, she just couldn't move them. She felt a shiver run up her back as she realized that she couldn't move any part of her body except her head.

And then, without warning, her head slumped forward and began twitching and shaking. She could feel the ears flopping madly on her head. She was aware of Rainbow calling her name, and general panic around her, but she couldn't move a muscle of her own volition. Finally, her head stilled, and then raised.

Erin, just a passenger in her own body at this point, stared out of her own eyes in mute terror as her head

looked around. All around her were ponies staring at her with fear. Many of the surrounding crowd had vanished. Two that had remained were Meadowlark and Marigold. Erin noted with distress that the filly was crying and struggling to get out of her mother's grip to come to her. Meadowlark, fear written large across her features, was wisely holding her filly back.

Rainbow Dash grabbed her face and pulled it towards her own.

"Hold on, Sunflower! Are you okay? Can you hear me? Hold on, the nurses are almost here!"

Erin saw the green mist curling off of her muzzle as her lips twitched themselves into a smile. One of her hooves came up and knocked Rainbow's leg away from her. Then she felt her body step backwards.

Then, there was a click. The same one that Erin had learned meant that there was an open line of communication to the Harmonics lab. She felt a burst of hope. If there was something wrong with her body, then the Harmonics lab could help her!

But the voice she heard coming over the line chilled and terrified her. Oddly echoing, as if there were one main voice being repeated by dozens of other, smaller voices.

And the voice that only she could hear said, "*Well, hello there, my little pony. And, oh, my goodness, what interesting things you have in your head!*"

Chapter 17: Running Through the Darkness

She could feel her heart hammering in her chest, she could feel the sweat drying on her body. She felt the ground under her hooves and the breeze in her mane. She could see out of her eyes and hear out of her ears.

But she couldn't *do* anything.

The whatever-it-was in her head spoke, using the implanted receivers in her ears.

"Oh, this is magnificent! All these sensations I'd forgotten! I have to thank you, I haven't felt like this for... What year is it? Oh, never mind. You can't talk right now, can you?"

Erin saw the nurses come charging up the field, medical saddlebags slung across their backs. They screeched to a halt and stared in shock.

"Help her!" Rainbow Dash cried.

"That's... That's not an illness or injury," Nurse Redheart replied. "I don't know *what* that is, but it looks magical. Rainbow Dash, go get Twilight Sparkle!"

"You got it!" the pegasus replied, shooting into the air and leaving a rainbow contrail behind her.

"Just what the hay is goin' on?" Applejack said, just arriving to the scene and watching Rainbow Dash shoot off. "What the... Sunflower, sugarcube, are you okay?"

"Sunflower?" the voice in her head repeated. "*I thought your name was Erin. That's odd. Very interesting, but odd.*"

Then Erin felt her muzzle curl into a smile, and heard her own voice say, "I'm perfectly fine, miss. Perfectly fine. Don't mind me, I think I'll just go for a walk."

Erin felt her body turn and start walking clumsily forward. Applejack stepped in front of her, shaking her head.

"Nuh-uh, nothin' doin'. You ain't goin' anywhere until Twi gets here and we figure out what's goin' on."

"Oh, is that so?" the thing said with her voice, and Erin felt her muzzle curl back into a feral grin. Applejack's eyes narrowed as she stared back, looking grimly determined.

Erin felt herself rush forward. Applejack stepped in front of her to try and stop her, but something black and shiny whirred out of the sky and impacted with the back of her head, knocking her to the ground. Ponies all around screamed in terror as several more drones descended, forming a perimeter around Erin as her body clumsily jumped over the prone earth pony.

Her body stumbled upon landing, nearly falling before righting itself. It then charged directly toward the crowd, causing the ponies to scream and pull back. She heard her voice laughing in glee as it ran, and the voice sounded once again in her head.

"Oh, this is such marvelous fun! I could do this all day. Unfortunately, though, time is off the essence. I don't know what this Twilight is capable of, but I have no wish to find out. So, you'll have to excuse me, dear, if I borrow your body for a bit. I have one simple task I need you to do."

"I need you to free me."

~~*~~

"Oh, Twilight, this is lovely!" Professor Glimmer said, stepping into the library. Twilight smiled back.

"Thank you, Professor. Having such an extensive library at my disposal was one of the key reasons I love living here in Ponyville."

"Well, I was referring to the tree itself, but I understand why you'd be more impressed by the books," the Professor said with a chuckle. "And, Spike! I haven't seen you in ages, boy! How have you been?"

"Great, Professor! I like living in Ponyville too!"

Twilight showed the albino mare around the library, and they finally settled down in the living room with some tea and cookies. Spike, bored by the adult conversation, pulled out another of his seemingly-endless supply of comic books and began reading.

Twilight was distracted throughout the conversation, though. Talking to her old professor was fun, but she had no sleep the previous night, and her stomach was still tied up in knots thinking about Sunflower. What was she going to do? What if the mare refused to cooperate?

"Twilight, are you all right?" Moonlight Glimmer asked, setting down her teacup.

"Mmmh? Oh... Yes, sorry, I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine, my dear. You seem horribly distracted. Is anything wrong?"

Twilight started to say that everything was fine, but then reconsidered.

"Yes," she sighed, "Quite a few things are wrong, really. But... It's okay, I'll deal with it."

"You don't have to deal with it alone, though. You know that, right? I'm always willing to lend an ear."

"Oh, I know. It's just... this particular thing can't be solved that way. It's between me and somepony else, and I'm basically waiting on them to make a decision."

"Oh... My goodness, Twilight... could it be?" Moonlight Glimmer asked, leaning forward with her eyes sparkling. "Are you in love?!"

Twilight spit out her tea in shock while Spike goggled at the two of them over the top of his comic book.

"What?! No! No, of course not! And, it's a *mare* I'm concerned about, not a stallion!"

"Nothing wrong with that, dear, as long as you're in love."

Twilight sputtered with incoherent shock until Moonlight Glimmer reached out and patted her with a hoof.

"I'm just teasing, dear. Don't take everything so seriously!"

Twilight grimaced. She wasn't in much of a laughing mood, but the shock had at least shifted her out of her melancholy mood.

"Do you think Professor Claustrum will be okay at the inn?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Oh, yes, the poor dear was absolutely frigid after the flight. He had himself a hot toddy and retired to bed to warm up and get some rest. He'll be as right as rain tomorrow!"

"Well, I'm glad you got all settled in. Would you like me to show you-"

Twilight was cut off as Rainbow Dash burst through her front door, frantically calling her name.

"Rainbow! What's going on?"

"Twilight! Thank Celestia! You have to come, now! Something is wrong with Sunflower!"

"What? Is she hurt?" Twilight asked, standing.

"I don't know! She was just walking, and then she fell over and her legs started freaking out! Then she stood up and said that it wasn't her doing it! And green smoke! Twilight, she had *green smoke* coming out of her!"

"Green smoke?" Moonlight Glimmer put her cup down and surged to her hooves. "Dark green smoke?"

"Yeah!" Rainbow replied, dancing frantically on her hooves. "We gotta go! You gotta help her!"

"Yes, we have no time to lose," the Professor said. "How far away is this?"

"Sweet Apple Acres?" Twilight asked. Rainbow Dash nodded frantically. "About a twenty minute sprint away."

"We'd better fly, then. Come on!" Moonlight said, leading the way out the library door and to the Inn. Twilight, Rainbow Dash and Spike trailed behind her.

The albino mare pushed the door to the inn open with telekinesis. Several guards, out of uniform, were gathered in the common area. They looked up as the group entered.

"Captain!" Professor Glimmer barked.

"Yes ma'am!" a sturdy grey pegasus said, bolting to his hooves.

"I need your two fastest fliers outside and hitched up to the Royal Carriage, and I need it five minutes ago."

The captain was an old veteran. There was no pause between receiving the order and making commands to see it done.

"Thunderflash! Vortex! The two of you, out in the yard, now!"

"Sir!" the two pegasi said, and reached for their armor.

"No time for the armor," Professor Glimmer said. "A young mare's life is at stake!"

The two guards bolted away from their seats, unfinished meals left forgotten on the table behind them.

Twilight stared at her former mentor in shock. Not because of the sudden transformation from a placid mare drinking her tea to a brusque, take charge type of mare who ordered Royal Guards around like she'd been doing it her whole life. After all, Twilight had been a student of hers, and she wasn't unfamiliar with this side of her old mentor.

No, it was the statement that Sunflower's life was in danger. Twilight felt a creeping dread at the thought.

"Do you know what's happening, Professor?"

"Not for certain. From the description your friend gave, it may be fae sprites, but they were all thought to be extinct centuries ago. Certainly nopony has seen any in that long."

"Fae sprites?" Twilight repeated. "Are those related to parasprites?"

"No, not really. Though, there are some similarities in behavior. Come, Twilight, let's see how our ride is shaping up. I'll explain on the way."

~~*~~

Erin, or rather her body, ran at a full-out sprint. Her lungs pumped like bellows, her hooves pounded the ground. Whatever it was that was controlling her body was getting better at it, less clumsy. She'd already fallen several times during this run. Each time she fell, she hoped she'd break something or get knocked unconscious. Anything that would stop her from running farther from help.

Desperately, she clawed at her own body with her mind, trying to regain control. Nothing she did worked in the slightest.

"Such a lovely countryside, don't you think Erin? Or Sunflower? Maybe I should call you Erinflower? Would you like that?" the voice said, then giggled.

Erin, of course, didn't answer. She was merely a passenger in her own body at this time, watching in despair as the land rushed by, horrified at the sound of the voice in her head. She'd never in her life felt more helpless.

"I am sorry about this. I really am." the voice continued. "Desperate times, and all that. Believe me, if there was any other way I would have taken it. Do you know, you're the first person I've talked to in I don't know how long?"

Her body jumped smoothly over a fallen log and landed with barely a stumble. Erin saw that they were making quickly towards the Everfree forest. Maybe they'd bump into the chimera again. She should be so lucky.

Fairly quickly, they crossed the threshold into the forest, and Erin quickly decided that the reputation for spookiness wasn't unearned. The plant life here was lush and overgrown in a way she'd never seen before in Equestria, reminding her a little of an Amazonian rain forest.

"I don't mean to sound crass, my dear, but your body is simply magnificent. I knew earth ponies were strong and fast, but this... this is incredible! Though, you seem oddly lacking in magical abilities. Did you know that?"

It went on like that for what seemed like forever. Erin's body ran, growing more and more fatigued as time went by, while the creature controlling her babbled inanely in the background.

"You know, this is boring. And frustrating. I mean, it's lovely running around and such, but I finally have someone to talk to, and she can't talk back. Hold on a moment, let's see what I can do."

She felt an odd tingling in her head, and then in her throat.

"There. I think that should do it. Try talking, now."

"Who are you?" Erin gasped. "What are you? And get out of my body!"

"Again, I apologize. But, no. You're stuck with me until I am freed, you see. As for who I am... well, ha, that's a clever question, isn't it? Names are power. And, I'm sorry, but I prefer not to give you that power. For now... Ha, just call me 'Swarm'."

The strange voice giggled again.

"What... do you want from me?" Erin managed. Her breath was short, and her lungs burned badly. She'd never run this fast or this far before. Her hooves were aching and her legs felt ready to fall off, yet they continued to pound across the ground relentlessly.

"I already told you," the voice said. And then, after a moment, "What year is it?"

"Year..? It's... 1507 AF"

There was a long moment of silence, and then the voice raged in her ear.

"Eight hundred years?! Eight **hundred** years! By Celestia's flowing mane, I was imprisoned for eight centuries?!"

Erin would have flinched if she had been able to do so as the thing shrieked in her ear. As it was, the only thing she could do was add her own voice to the noise.

"Stop it! Shut up! I'm not the one that imprisoned you!"

Eventually, Swarm quieted and regained its composure.

"Quite right, my dear. Quite right. Besides, I should be free soon. Hopefully, in just a matter of hours. I imagine it depends on how long you can hold out running." The transition from ranting insanity to cold and clinical calculation would have made Erin shiver, if she'd had any control over her body. "By the way, as you now have a name to call me, what should I call you? Is it Erin? Is it Sunflower?"

"I don't... want you... to call... me anything," Erin managed between gulps of air. "I want... you to... let me go!"

"Let's not be insufferable, shall we?" Swarm said, patronizing. "After all, I gave you your voice back. I can take it away just as easily. What do you say? Should I do that?"

"No!"

"You'll cooperate?"

"...yes."

"Excellent! And, your name is?"

"...Sunflower."

~~*~~

Applejack was getting her head bandaged by Nurse Redheart as the carriage landed. Twilight jumped out before they came to a full stop, running to her injured friend. Rainbow Dash, who had been flying beside the carriage, had beaten her there by a few seconds.

"What happened?" Twilight demanded of the crowd surrounding the injured farmer. The ponies looked at each other, but no pony answered her. "Applejack, are you all right?"

"Yeah, Twilight. Just got a little smack on the noggin', that's all. Some sorta critter wallop me a good one so Sunflower could get away."

"What?"

"It were the creepiest thing I ever seen, Twi. She said she was goin' fer a walk, but I know it weren't her sayin' it. More like, somethin' in her body was sayin' it. I tried to stop her, and some... big metal bug-thing whacked me in the head, and she ran off."

"Big metal bug?" Twilight repeated, nonplussed.

"Ayup. And then Sunflower ran off, towards the Everfree."

"We need to go after her, now," Moonlight Glimmer said, joining them. "But first, we need to let Celestia know what's going on. Spike, can you take a letter for me?"

The baby dragon nodded and took out a quill and pen, writing furiously as Moonlight Glimmer dictated a short note to him. Twilight turned her focus to her injured friend.

"Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"Not really, Twi. Exceptin' she had some sort of... greenish-black smoke haze hangin' around her. It was the weirdest thing."

There was a burst of flame, and the Professor's note was whisked away to Canterlot. Moonlight Glimmer turned back to Twilight.

"We should go, immediately," she said. "Miss... Applejack? Element of Honesty, I believe?"

Applejack nodded, then grimaced and held her hoof gingerly to the back of her head.

"Do you feel fit in joining us in the carriage? We may need your help to secure your friend. She'll fight us if we catch her. She won't want to, but she will."

"You bet your horseshoes, I'm comin' with ya!" Applejack said, standing unsteadily. "Lemme just get my rope. I'd rather tie her up than knock her out, if it comes to that."

"Agreed," the Professor said. Twilight was a little envious. She'd taken over the situation so effortlessly, and Twilight herself was feeling a little... useless. She wasn't used to that, seeing how she was the one who usually organized things.

Applejack staggered away, returning shortly with a length of sturdy hempen rope coiled around one shoulder.

"I'm ready. Let's git."

The land-bound mares, along with Spike, piled into the carriage while Rainbow Dash hovered impatiently at one side. Then, heading in the direction that Applejack indicated, they flew off as fast as the pegasi's wings could take them.

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"She began hunting the fae swarms then," Swarm said. "And I doubt I would have been an exception. So, of course, I took steps. I made myself a cozy little shelter far, far away. I inscribed it with every protective rune known, and powered it using the life force of the very life outside the cave. It was a perfect defense. Nopony could come close to it without their very lives being sapped to further protect me. I don't think Celestia herself could have broken me out of that cave. Not without knowing how to disable the shield at the entrance."

Swarm seemed proud of himself. He'd been gabbling on for what seemed like hours as Erin ran. The agony was unbearable, but she literally couldn't complain. When she'd tried, Swarm had simply taken her voice away again.

"So, there I was, safe as houses inside my little bunker. The plan was, I would stay in there for a few years. Celestia would hunt down all the fae swarms, and I would be safe and undetected in my cave. But I did one foolish thing. Can you guess what that is?"

Aching hooves pounding along the dark ground, Erin wouldn't have replied even if she could have.

"Why, I locked myself inside, with the key on the outside! Can you believe that? Such a foolish mistake! And that's why I need you, my dear. You're my new key. You must let me out of my sanctuary."

There were a few minutes of silence, a pregnant pause, as if Swarm expected her to be able to reply somehow. Then the creature sighed, and Erin's body came to a stop beside a small stream.

"I suppose this is as good a place as any to rest, Swarm said. "Keep in mind, though, that I will take control again if you do anything other than rest."

Erin found that she could once again control her body. She groaned and collapsed to the forest floor, panting heavily. She could only lay there, shuddering, for a few minutes, gasping in pain as her legs cramped up.

"You can relax. I'll keep a watch out," Swarm said, and dozens of drones shot off from the group to patrol the forest. Erin watched them with an unconcerned eye. She didn't really care whatever else this... *thing* was doing. Right now, she was in incredible agony.

Eventually, the cramps died down enough for her to be able to wedge herself up into a semi-standing position. Hauling with her front legs, she managed to pull herself to the stream, plunging her head in and drinking heavily. The cold water shocked her system, and she vomited. Groaning, she lay down in the mud, not caring at all about the filth in her coat and mane.

After a few minutes, she felt recovered enough to try again, drinking more cautiously this time. The water stayed down, though it chilled her to the bone. Shivering, she flopped back down on the riverbank and tried to think of a way out of this.

There had to be some way to stop Swarm from resuming control. Something she could do to deter it. She had no idea how to disable the cybernetics in her body, though.

Maybe she could knock herself out? Would the creature even be able to control her, in that case? She thought that it might, which scared her down to her hoof-tips.

She still hadn't been able to think of a way to escape when Swarm spoke in her ear once again.

"*It's time to go*, it said, tersely. "*We have company coming. I'm afraid our little break is up.*"

Erin groaned in protest as her body tingled, and then forced itself back to its hooves.

"*Sorry*," Swarm said, "*but I'll have to take away your voice again. I can't have you shouting for help. That would become... awkward.*"

And, with that, Erin's body vaulted over the river and ran back into the dense undergrowth of the Everfree forest.

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"Can you please tell me what fae sprites are?" Twilight asked. If the information could help her friend, then she was determined to have it.

The wind whipped by as the pegasi guards beat their wings rapidly. Rainbow Dash, too impatient to stay with them, flew some distance ahead of them, trying to see any sign of Sunflower. Applejack and Spike both looked at Professor Glimmer, waiting to hear her answer.

"They are, or rather were, creatures of shadow and magic," the professor explained. "They were hives of creatures that existed mostly in the spiritual plane, comprised mainly of magic. They had a marginal physical presence, but mostly existed out of phase with the rest of reality, intersecting in the magical and spiritual realms. They would possess creatures, overwhelming them, and forcing them to do menial tasks until... well, eating them."

"Eating them?!" Applejack repeated, aghast. Twilight felt nauseated.

"Yes, though not physically. They'd eat a creature's magic first, and then their... well, their spirits. Their life energies. Vicious little brutes. The hives were each ruled by an individual queen, who gave the entire swarm its direction. The captive creatures would slave away, building dens, bringing in more captives for them to possess, that kind of thing."

"That's horrible," said Twilight with a shudder.

"And that's why they were hunted to extinction. There was a village, called Heartstone Ridge, that vanished overnight, taken by a particularly large swarm. Celestia decided then to wipe them off the face of Equestria."

"She did?" Twilight asked, surprised.

"Oh, yes. Don't let her calm demeanor fool you. When her subjects are threatened in any way, Celestia will become fiercely protective."

There was a startling explosion of magical light, and Twilight cried out in shock. Blinking her eyes, she was amazed to see Celestia herself flying beside them, with another carriage being pulled by two more pegasi guards.

Celestia flew in close and looked over at them.

"I received your letter, Moonlight Glimmer. What is the situation?"

"We're pursuing the pony in question now."

"Are you certain that it's fae sprites?" she asked Moonlight Glimmer.

"As certain as I can be without actually seeing the effects in person," the professor replied.

"We have lost enough ponies to these vile creatures in the past," the princess said grimly. "I will *not* allow them to resurface after all this time. They *must* be destroyed."

"Um, Princess, what about Sunflower?" Twilight asked hesitantly. "Can you free her?"

Celestia smiled warmly at her student. "I don't plan on letting those creatures have their way with anypony. If I can not free her myself, then I will have to allow the Elements of Harmony to do it, instead."

Twilight blinked with realization, and then looked closely at the second carriage for the first time. Pinkie Pie waved enthusiastically at her, and she recognized the top of Rarity's head as the style-conscious unicorn tried to duck down out of the wind. Fluttershy's pink tail could be seen streaming from the back of the carriage as the timid pegasus, unlike Rainbow Dash, opted to ride rather than fly by her own wingpower.

Twilight smiled as her hope was renewed. There was nothing that she and her friends couldn't handle together, *especially* with the Princess by their side.

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Her body was panting for breath, but at least she wasn't running any more. Swarm had made her hide underneath some bushes. It hadn't relinquished control, but it was allowing her to rest.

All around her, drones were laying on the ground, inactive. Apparently, some sort of pursuit had been noted. Swarm was muttering incomprehensibly in her ear, but Erin didn't care. She was far too distracted by the pain in her legs and hooves. She wished she could close her eyes and rest, but Swarm didn't allow that. Instead, the creature was using her eyes to scan the sky behind them.

"Princess! I've found her!" Erin's spirits surged as she recognized Rainbow Dash's voice shouting excitedly. "She's over here!"

"No!" Swarm screamed, both in her ear and using her voice at the same time.

Her body surged to its hooves and began running while dozens of probes shot up into the sky.

"No, no, please no, almost free... no!" Swarm was ranting in her ear, non-stop denials and protests.

Swarm pushed her harder than ever, her hooves flashing along the ground, leaping over falling branches and blundering through undergrowth in a desperate attempt to flee.

Erin certainly didn't care about being found out, anymore. She wanted this to stop, at any cost. She hoped, desperately, that the Princess would find them and be able to help her.

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The sun was setting before any of them finally spotted her.

"Princess! I've found her! She's over here!" Rainbow Dash shouted.

Celestia looked where the pegasus was pointing and saw a light brown shape bolt from underneath some bushes. All around the fleeing pony, odd looking black things rose up into the air, taking on a defensive perimeter. Celestia had no idea what those were, but she wasn't about to let them stop her from saving anypony.

"After her!" she commanded, and the pegasi angled quickly to intercept.

"Get in front of her, cut off her means of escape," she commanded. "When we land, I want you to incapacitate her, if you can. Stop her from running. Then we shall see about ridding her of those creatures. Be prepared to use the Elements."

The girls shouted back acknowledgements to her last command. They were already wearing the Elements of Harmony. The pegasi sped up, trying to get in front of the fleeing earth pony. However, as they were closing in, dozens of the strange black things encircling their target rose up and flew straight at them.

The guards whinnied in surprise as they were swarmed by the things, several managing to connect with brutal impacts. Rainbow Dash, the only pegasus free of encumbrance, dodged and twisted frantically in the air to avoid being hit. The ponies in Twilight's carriage screamed in dismay as their unarmored pegasi guards were knocked unconscious by the assault and the carriage began to fall. The other guards were hardly faring any better, though they remained conscious thanks to their helmets.

Celestia herself had been pelted by a few of them, though they were unable to hurt her to any extent.

"Enough!" the Princess shouted. Horn flaring, her magic cascaded out in a golden sphere. The black devices were knocked back, many of them falling, broken, to the forest floor. She wrapped Twilight's carriage in a golden bubble, carrying it as easily as a mother would carry her foal.

As an afterthought, she wrapped the other carriage in a similar golden bubble, bringing both of them close to her.

"Rainbow Dash! To me!" Celestia commanded, and the rainbow-maned pegasus drew in close. The mare below, Sunflower, was just reaching a small clearing in the forest. Celestia determined that this would be an ideal place to resolve the situation.

Celestia's horn flared once again, and the whole group of them were teleported directly in front of the fleeing mare, settling down in the grass in front of her. Sunflower skidded to a halt, her hooves throwing up large clods of dirt as she tried to shift direction and scramble away.

"No, no, no, no..." she heard the exhausted-looking mare say. She grimly noted the blackish green haze surrounding the pony. There could be no mistake as to the source.

"Halt!" she commanded. "There will be no escape. You will release that pony and surrender yourself to me immediately."

The mare cast a terrified eye in her direction and began fleeing towards the forest. She didn't make it very far, though, as a rope flashed out and caught her around one foreleg. Screaming in fear and frustration, Sunflower crashed to the ground.

The group, minus the two unconscious guards, surrounded the struggling mare. Celestia heard Twilight gasp as she got close enough to get a good look at her friend. Sunflower was much the worse for wear. Her flight through the forest had come at a high cost.

Blood streaked her coat from numerous gashes from thorns and branches. Dirt, leaves and other debris were matted into her coat and mane, and her tail had so many twigs and small branches in it that she seemed to be dragging a small bush behind her. A large bruise covered half of the mare's face, swollen and painful looking.

Worst of all, her hooves were cracked and broken, blood and muck caking them. The fae sprites had forced her to run on, even in that condition. Celestia's resolve, already firm, hardened even farther. The creature that had done this had no right to exist.

"Please, please, please, no, Celestia, please!" the creature possessing the pony gibbered.

"Release her," Celestia commanded. "I will not ask again. If you do not, you will be pulled out of her by force and exterminated like the vermin you are, faesprite."

"I'm not... Celestia, no, it's me. Don't you recognize me?"

"I'm not on a first-name basis with any fae sprites. Your tricks will gain you nothing."

"No! It's me! Please, don't kill me Celestia! I only wanted to serve you! To live forever, so that I could serve you!"

"Absurd. I'd never accept your kind as a servant."

"I'm not a fae sprite! It's me! It's been eight hundred years, but please, tell me you still remember me!"

"Eight hundred...?"

"I was your student. I was your friend. I am Malachite. Please, princess... remember!"

"That... That is impossible! Malachite died centuries ago!"

"No! I told you then, I had found a way to live forever. Remember? Immortality for regular ponies. You wouldn't have to be alone anymore! You forbade me from continuing my research, but the loss of your sister... I knew it pained you so. But, through my research, there was a way for ponies to stay with you. You wouldn't have to be alone anymore!"

"Malachite... Sun's mercy, it is you." Stunned by this turn of events, Celestia took a step back, staring at the bedraggled creature in front of her. A pony she'd thought long dead had come back. "How?"

"I found a swarm, Celestia. I used spells of my own devising, and I destroyed the queen, leaving the hive intact. Then, using the forbidden arts, I separated my soul from my body and merged the hive with me. I control it, now! My mind lives on! Immortal and endless. My body died, but I can take another! As I took this mare! Please, Celestia! I only wanted to serve you."

"Serve me? By bonding yourself with this... monstrosity? My dear Malachite, no. I would never accept such a thing. You should know that. What you have, it isn't life. It's stealing the lives of others, like the fae sprites themselves. You must release her, Malachite. Release her, and surrender yourself to me."

"No! You'll destroy me, like you did the fae sprites! I don't want to die, Celestia! That's why I hid all these years. Please!"

"I am so very sorry, my dear student. It breaks my heart to do this, but if you will not release her, then I shall have to force you."

The possessed pony on the ground suddenly lost its fear, and looked into Celestia's eyes with a serene expression.

"I can stop her heart, you know," Malachite said, sounding oddly calm. "In a way, she's the perfect hostage. I can break her in any number of ways. Why not let me go? I promise to release her once I find a more suitable body."

"I can't allow that. You know that."

"I know. But if I'm to die, then I'm having some company. So, what shall it be? If I see your horn so much as glow, I will end her life."

"Very well. I shall not do anything. Girls?"

Malachite blinked at her in confusion, not seeing the glow from behind before it was too late. Gasping, he jerked Sunflower's head around, having time to scream one last "No!" before the rainbow light of the Elements of Harmony washed over both him and his prisoner.

The rainbow flared, bathing the surrounding woods with pure, white light. Celestia was the only one who could still see, her eyes capable of staring into the sun itself. She saw the green haze ripped and shredded away from the young mare's prone body.

The light faded. Twilight Sparkle and her friends returned to the earth as the Elements lost their power. Celestia, concerned, stepped forward towards the mare lying in the grass before her. With relief, she noted that her chest was moving rhythmically. Sunflower was still alive. And, judging by the lack of mist, she was free.

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"No!" Erin's voice screamed. She, herself, was far too exhausted to be frightened as a rainbow of light rushed towards her.

The light washed over her, filling her with an oddly warm sense of peace and comfort. And pain, but she realized that the pain was external. Swarm, or Malachite, whatever it was called, was being forced out of her. The process hurt, more than she would have expected. Her scream echoed with her possessor's for a brief moment.

And then, the pain was gone, and only the warmth remained. Erin felt herself collapse to the ground as the light faded. For a minute, she didn't even try to move, content to just lay there. She tried to move her legs, and was overjoyed when she could do so very easily.

Staggering slightly, she tried to stand. Her injuries seemed to be healed, but her strength was badly sapped. She also felt very dehydrated. Still, being in control of her own body was a wonderfully euphoric experience for her, now.

It took her a few tries, but she finally managed to raise herself to her hooves, standing shakily. She glanced up, and looked into the eyes of Princess Celestia herself, who was standing directly in front of her.

Erin's breath caught in her throat. The statue hadn't done her justice, not even slightly. The princess towered above her, tall and graceful. Her wings, slightly flared out at the moment, were a dazzling white, with just a hint of rose color at the tips of her feathers.

Spiraling out of her head was a horn, shifting with colors like mother-of-pearl. Her mane and tail flowed on a wind that Erin couldn't feel, encompassing all colors of the rainbow. And the Princess glowed in the evening light, a soft white light seeming to emanate from her.

But all of that, as beautiful and awe-inspiring as that was, was not what caused her breath to catch. It was Celestia's eyes that caught her.

They say that the eyes are the windows to the soul. What Erin could see in Celestia's gaze was a deep and abiding compassion and concern. Sadness, gained through years of sacrifice and loss, echoed by the

wisdom one gained from those experiences. And a core of loneliness, balanced by the strength that allowed her to continue on.

Erin no longer doubted that Celestia had lived for centuries. She was in the presence of more than just royalty. Celestia was a goddess. Erin had no doubt of that.

"Are you quite well?" Celestia asked her.

Erin, stuttering, tried to assure her that she was.

"Y-yes, your majesty. I'm just... a little tired, that's all. Thank you."

Celestia nodded.

"I am glad. Even though you are not one of my little ponies, I am glad that you are safe. But I have to wonder, what are you, really? What other world did you come from?"

Erin heard a gasp of surprise behind her and glanced back. Twilight looked sad, hearing her suspicions confirmed. Various expressions ranging from surprise to stunned confusion ranged across the faces of her friends. A strange white mare that Erin didn't recognize looked at her with clinical interest.

"Wait, wait," Spike said. "Are you saying Sunflower is an *alien*?"

"I musta hit my head harder than I thought," Applejack muttered.

"This isn't the appropriate time or place for questioning you," Celestia said. "You've just been through a harrowing ordeal. We will return to Ponyville so that you may rest and recover. But, naturally, I am concerned for the well-being of my ponies. Once you have rested, would you be willing to answer a few questions to put my mind at ease?"

Erin's mind reeled. She should have been more prepared for this. She was speechless as she found herself thrust into the very situation that Doctor Velchiek had so desperately wanted her to avoid.

But, still, Erin was sick of the lies. And now, she was being asked by a *goddess*, one who had just saved her from a nightmarish situation, to answer a few questions. A princess with the saddest, strongest, kindest eyes she'd ever seen.

Erin didn't even have to think about it to make her decision.

"I'd like to tell you everything, Princess," she began. "You see, I'm..."

With a horrifyingly familiar sensation, Erin felt her whole body lock up. She panicked in the depths of her head. Was Malachite back? Was she being possessed again?

Erin watched as Celestia's eyes flashed with concern, and she heard several ponies behind her call out her name, but she was already tumbling forward as her eyes dimmed.

She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

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The light burned him as he fled, pulling his mind back along the signal as quickly as he could.

But not fast enough. The edges of his mind and soul were being burned to ashes by the lights of the Elements of Harmony.

Malachite felt nothing but fear, now. A few of the remaining drones under his possession exploded in a shower of sparks as the light chased his mind. He released the rest as he fled, hoping to spare at least a few of them.

Soon, he'd managed to pull his mind back into his cave. His prison. His sanctuary. The place he'd built to protect himself from Celestia's wrath against the fae sprites.

The lights of the Elements washed over the cave, and the golden shield at the entrance flared brightly. The runes on the cave walls glowed with a sickly light. Malachite couldn't see outside, but he knew that the ring of unlife around the cave was expanding, as the runes he'd carved into his prison drew in more and more of the surrounding life force in order to keep him safe.

Finally, the light stopped. The glow in the cave dimmed. He was safe, once again. Secure, once again.

Trapped. Once again.

Malachite, his body consisting of thousands of tiny, shadowy, indistinct creatures, slumped to the floor of

his cave and screamed with the agony of loss.

Chapter 18: Fallout

Dr. Maggie Henson trailed along behind the human vortex of pure anger that was Dr. Thomas Edwards. The two of them marched through the Harmonics lab, ignoring the startled stares of the scientists and engineers working there, and went straight to the a door on the second level.

A plaque on the door announced that, on the other side, you could find the "Office of Doctor Paul Velchiek".

Tom slammed the door open with considerably more force than was necessary, startling both Paul and Major Morris, who were sitting at a table and discussing something, most likely about the project.

"You'd better have a damned good explanation for this, Paul!" Tom said, waving his tablet around.

Paul scowled, and resumed sitting after having bolted half out of his chair at the unexpected intrusion.

"If the internet is down again, you should talk to IT. And, if you *ever* burst in like this again!"

"Shut it," Tom growled, marching forward. Even though Paul towered over the skinny scientist, the larger man pulled back defensively. Maggie mentally applauded her firebrand colleague. She was extremely angry, herself, but nobody could do "furious" as well as Doctor Thomas Edwards. You had to hand it to the man, he'd turned it into an art form.

Tom slammed his tablet down on the table between them.

"There," he said. "Explain that code. What is that doing in my implants?"

"I'm not a programmer, Tom," Paul said, pushing the tablet away. "Perhaps we should discuss this after you've calmed down?"

"We're discussing this *now*." Tom snapped back. "Which one of my team did you coerce into supplying you with this code?"

"I think we should all just settle down," Major Morris said. Maggie liked the young man, and dearly hoped he'd be on their side. Only in his thirties, he was handsome and reserved, and, though not a scientist himself, had proven himself to be no slouch when it came to critical thinking and scientific understanding.

If only I were twenty years younger, she sighed, then put the thought out of her mind to address him.

"I think you'll be interested in what we've discovered, Major," Maggie said

"Oh?"

"It involves an abuse of the Auto-Override function," she continued.

"I see. Please, explain," the major said, taking out his tablet and tapping the screen briefly. He lay the tablet on the table in front of him, folded his hands, and looked at the pair of them expectantly.

Tom snatched up his own tablet, typed a few commands, and then handed it to the major.

"On the left, you'll see my original code. Not that I expect you to understand it," he said, and Maggie flinched. The man had no tact. "But I assure you, it works exactly as discussed in committee. Usable only if Ms. Olsen was passed out or incapacitated, and she could easily veto the override if she woke up."

"On the right, you'll see the bloated, Frankensteinian mess that some fool hacked together and uploaded without my consent or knowledge. Instead of being an emergency retrieval function, it became a remote control. Ms. Olsen would no longer be able to override the override, and it could be set to perform certain actions under specific sets of criteria."

Major Morris looked... displeased, Maggie was happy to see.

"What sort of criteria?"

"Any criteria, essentially," Maggie said. "Such as, oh, let's say she wanted to tell her friends that she was from another dimension, it could shut her down completely, leaving her in a coma."

She looked at Paul, who was scowling at her.

"You may head up the project, Paul," she told him, "But these are *my* labs. My teams. And, after you activated it yesterday, several of my team came forward to me with ethical complaints. I reviewed, and

copied, the security tapes here."

She took a data stick out of her pocket and waved it at him.

"There's also the small fact that you've been administering mood altering drugs to her pretty much the entire time she seemed to assert any independence from you," she continued. "There were supposed to be anti-anxiety meds and anti-depressants, which were to be used only in the event of an absolute emotional breakdown if immediate retrieval wasn't an option. In addition, there were supposed to be a variety of medicines: painkillers, antibiotics and the like. But according to what I've found, you've changed her medical loadout for various mood-altering compounds."

"We couldn't risk her blowing the mission due to a momentary weakness," Paul asserted firmly. "If I hadn't done that, she would have told the ponies all about us a week ago."

"It's not right, Paul," Tom said, "And I won't stand for it."

"You won't have a choice," Paul said. "I'm sorry, but you're both fired."

"You can't do that!" Tom protested, shocked. "The project..!"

"The project," Paul interrupted smoothly, "is far enough along to survive the loss of a couple of its senior scientists. And I can't have you questioning my orders. Major, if you'd be so kind as to have these two placed under arrest and confined to quarters?"

"Sorry, Doctor," Major Morris said. "I'm here in an advisory capacity. Not only am I not in your direct chain of command, I don't have the authority to arrest any senior members of the Harmonics staff. However, I *do* know someone who can."

He picked up his tablet and addressed it, "Did you get all that, sir?"

"I did," a voice said from the tablet. "Let me address Doctor Velchiek, please."

Major Morris held out his tablet so that the rest of the room could see the screen. An elderly man, dressed in a suit and tie, stared back at them through a webcam. Maggie recognized him as Robert Thomson, Chairman of the International Committee on Human Survival, which ran all official efforts opposing the Black Tide.

"Hi, Paul," the man on the screen said.

"Bob," Paul replied. "It's always a pleasure."

"Typically, yes. But perhaps not so much today. Did I hear that correctly, Paul? Did you authorize the change of programming on the override to prevent Erin from partaking in an action you objected to?"

"That's correct, yes. But I considered-"

"A simple 'yes' or 'no' will suffice," the chairman replied. Paul frowned at the interruption. "And, you've been manipulating her moods with implanted drugs?"

"Well, yes. She had to be kept on-task. All that 'worrying about her friends' that she was doing was a distraction and a danger. Not to mention that she was showing an alarming resistance to following orders."

"I see. And you thought your actions were appropriate?"

"Yes, of course. It was for the greater good. Why am I the one being questioned, here? Everything I did, I did to ensure humanity's survival."

"A goal I happen to share, Paul. However, I question your methods and I question your ethics."

Maggie smiled with relief. It looked like things were going to go their way, after all.

How they were going to construct the pony body had been discussed at length long before Erin had even volunteered. All sorts of scenarios were considered before determining the final configuration. The Auto-Override itself was supposed to be there only to make sure they could retrieve a badly injured or unconscious explorer. The drug injectors were meant to only be used in the case of a psychological or medical emergency. But Paul, according to the records, had been abusing the drugs any time Erin had shown a contrary attitude, and had primed the override on no less than three separate occasions, now.

She had needed some sort of evidence, though. And, working with Tom, they'd found it. Not only in the communications logs and the security tapes of each session during an open window, but also in the very code that had been pushed out to Erin's pony body after she'd been deployed.

They had bundled that information and sent it to the rest of the Harmonics Committee members and the entirety of the International Committee on Human Survival about an hour before the confrontation. However, she had been afraid that they would have no backup, that everyone would agree that these steps were necessary. She'd prepared herself to be arrested the moment they confronted Paul about the ethical violations.

"When it comes to the greater good," Robert continued, "there comes a point when you cross a line, and you have to consider whether the "greater good" is really worth it. Erin is a volunteer, and a very brave young lady. If she was determined to take a course of action that would undermine our diplomatic efforts, the correct course of action would have been to pull her out of the field. Under no circumstances could I, as a retired officer of the United States Army or as a citizen of this great nation condone what is, in essence, a form of slavery. She deserves our respect and support, not our manipulation. Major?"

"Sir?"

"Outside of the office door you will find two MPs. Please inform them that Doctor Velchiek is to be confined to quarters until further notice."

"WHAT?!" Paul exploded. "You can't do this!"

"I just did," Bob replied wearily. "Doctor Velchiek, you are relieved. Doctor Hanson, you are now in charge."

"Yes, sir," Maggie said, stunned by the turn of events. Major Morris let the MPs in, who proceeded to escort the apoplectic Paul Velchiek out of his office.

"You can't do this! The project needs me!"

"If the project can survive the loss of two senior scientists, Doctor Velchiek," said Senator Thomson from the tablet screen. "Then I'm certain it will not have a problem with the loss of just one."

The door closed. Maggie could hear Paul's voice fading in the distance as he was escorted out of the labs. On the tablet screen, which was currently resting on the table, she heard the chairman sigh.

"That man's been my friend for years. I had no idea he would do something like this."

"He's not a bad man," Maggie said. "He just... got a little overzealous, I think. Maybe the stress got to him."

"These are tough times for everyone," Thomson agreed. "Well, it's something we'll have to work out later, I'm afraid. For now, I have a considerable amount of paperwork to complete. Enjoy your new office, Doctor Hanson."

"Maggie, please," she prompted him.

"Maggie, then. Have a good day."

With that, the screen went dark as the call was disconnected. Still feeling rocked by the day's events, Maggie stared at Tom, who frowned back at her.

"Why didn't I get to be in charge?" he asked.

~~*~~

The seven of them, which included Spike, were in a large private lounge in Canterlot Castle. After Sunflower had passed out, Celestia had quickly examined her and determined that there were no obvious physical reasons for her unconsciousness. Concerned for the mare's well-being, Celestia had issued a few last-minute instructions and then teleported both herself and Sunflower back to Canterlot.

Professor Glimmer, along with the now-aware but still slightly woozy Thunderflash and Vortex, had all climbed into the second carriage to make their way back to Ponyville and continue their mission investigating the ripples. The rest of them had climbed into the first carriage and, with Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash flying, had made their way to Canterlot, stopping occasionally on the way for the pegasi to rest.

They had arrived a short while ago and were informed that Sunflower was still unconscious, a fact that baffled the Royal Doctors who had examined her. With her friends eager for explanations, Twilight had suggested that they find a private area to discuss things.

"Okay, okay," Rainbow Dash said, waving a hoof. "Forget about the ripples thing. I get that Sunflower is some kind of an alien. What is she doing here, though?"

Rainbow Dash was hovering near the ceiling with her forelegs crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face. Pinkie Pie was curled up in a ball on a nearby couch, with her back facing the rest of the group. Twilight would have assumed she was asleep if she hadn't seen her pink ears twitching every once in a while as she talked.

Fluttershy was sitting placidly next to Rarity, who looked both intrigued and overwhelmed by the information. Applejack was sitting on the floor, frowning down at her hooves. Spike was busily serving drinks while wearing an adorable little apron he'd found somewhere.

"I don't know," Twilight replied. "She spent quite a lot of time at the library, learning new things..."

"So she was a *spy*," Rainbow interrupted angrily.

"I didn't say that!" Twilight said, annoyed. "If you suddenly found yourself in a strange world full of ponies who were completely different than you, wouldn't you try to learn all you could about them? That doesn't make her a spy!"

"But she could be," Rainbow countered acidly. "Right?"

"She could be," Twilight admitted reluctantly. Pinkie sighed heavily at that, but otherwise didn't move.

"I *trusted* her, dangit. I *liked* her. And now she's some sort of spy for an alien world!" Rainbow said, getting worked up.

"Like I said, we don't know that. We don't *know* anything, and we won't until she wakes up."

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know, Rainbow," Twilight said, sadly. Initial examinations of Sunflower indicated that she was perfectly healthy. There was no reason for her to be in a coma, as far as anypony could tell. A specialist was examining her currently, and they might know more soon.

"I still think she's nice," Fluttershy said, softly.

"What?!" Rainbow was incredulous. "How can you say that?"

"She always took the time to talk to me and ask after my animals when she came to visit," Fluttershy said.

"She was probably gathering information to send back to her alien masters."

"Well, what about making my medical supplies a priority? Two times in the last week she visited me after work hours just to drop off a package that had arrived, that wasn't due to be delivered until the next day. She didn't have to do that," Fluttershy asserted.

"Whatever," Rainbow said, clearly not willing to concede the point. Twilight could understand that. She, too, had been very upset at discovering that Sunflower was from another world.

"What do you think, AJ?" Rainbow asked, challengingly.

"Well, I'm mighty hurt. I trusted her too," the farm pony replied. "But I also reckon' that Sunflower was a mighty nice mare, always smilin' at everypony, willin' to drop what she was doin' to lend a hoof if needed. She bought us presents, too. She didn't have to do that."

"You mean 'bribes'," Rainbow Dash said.

"I mean *presents*, Rainbow," Applejack responded, annoyed. "She didn't ask for nothin', she just wanted to give us presents 'cuz she liked us."

Rainbow Dash grimaced and rolled her eyes, while AJ continued.

"There's also the small matter of how she tried to fight off a chimera to save Apple Bloom, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, if'n you recall. I don't reckon' I know if I can ever forgive her for lyin' to me, but I reckon I owe her a chance to explain why she did."

"She *did* try to save the girls' lives at great risk to her own," Rarity said, thoughtfully. "Anypony that does that... well, they have to have *some* good in them, don't they?"

"Fine," Rainbow sulked. "I'll give her a chance to explain. Just... don't expect me to trust her ever again."

"Nopony can ask for anything else, Rainbow," Applejack replied, standing up. "Well, if'n y'all will excuse me, it's been a mightily long day, it's late, and I could use some sleep. G'night, y'all."

With that, Applejack left, head low. Rainbow Dash left without saying another word, flying out through a

nearby window and up to her room. Rarity and Fluttershy, both with a concerned glance towards the unresponsive Pinkie Pie, excused themselves as well.

That left Twilight Sparkle alone with the curled-up pink pony.

"Pinkie?" she asked, "Are you okay?"

"No," said Pinkie, her voice sounding odd without its usual bubbliness.

"You're upset about this too," Twilight said. It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"Yes."

"I'm here to talk about it if you want, Pinkie," Twilight said, laying a hoof on her friend's shoulder. Pinkie's head popped up, and Twilight heard her sniffle. Still facing away from her, Pinkie reached back with a leg, hooking Twilight's leg with her own and bringing it around in a hug.

"I don't like it when my friends lie to me," Pinkie said quietly, hugging Twilight's foreleg tightly.

"I know," Twilight said, stroking Pinkie's mane with her free hoof. "I know."

~~*~~

The specialist had found nothing wrong, and had since been dismissed. In desperation, Celestia had called her sister in to look at the comatose mare.

"There are devices planted through her body," Luna said after examining her briefly.

Celestia blinked at her sister in surprise, then glanced back at the unconscious form of the mare Sunflower. She extended her senses and found what Luna had been talking about.

"What *are* those things?" she asked, vaguely horrified.

"I cannot say," Luna replied. "I have never seen anything of the sort in my entire life. Nor have you, I would guess."

"No, never."

She wasn't surprised that her sister had discovered the devices implanted in the mare before she had herself. Luna's magic and mind had always been the more subtle of the two.

"Do you believe they could be safely removed?" she asked.

"I don't see why not, for most of them. They don't impact any vital areas. However this one," Luna said, highlighting an area at the base of Sunflower's skull with her magic "this one goes directly into her spine as well as her brain. If I were to guess, I would say that this is the one that makes her sleep."

"It would be... risky, to remove it, sister." Celestia said.

"Indeed. But would it not be riskier to leave it in?"

"How so?"

"The one you called 'Malachite', I am guessing that was what he was referring to when he said he could stop her heart. As you can see, it controls all autonomous and voluntary muscles in the body. It is likely that, whoever sent Sunflower here, they implanted this device in order to control her."

Luna didn't have to say any more. Celestia considered the implications of that. A creature that gained control over that device implanted in the mare's head would have full control over every action that she could possibly do. Including hurting herself or other ponies.

Not to mention, her masters may decide to terminate Sunflower the moment they discovered that she'd been captured. Forgetting even the valuable information that they could attain from her, Celestia wasn't about to let her be murdered just to keep her quiet.

"You are right, Luna. We should remove it immediately. Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes," she replied simply.

"Very well, then. We shall begin at once."

~~*~~

Erin groaned, opening her eyes. She felt like she'd been pulled backwards through a meat grinder. Her whole body throbbed, and her head felt like it was splitting open. She moved her head slightly, and her stomach roiled with nausea.

"Ah, you're awake," a voice said.

Erin blinked, then cautiously turned her head. There was an unfamiliar earth pony in a nurses' uniform standing in the corner of the room. Erin regarded her groggily.

"I'll just notify the Princesses. You try to relax, all right?"

The mare slipped out the door, which closed with a soft click.

Erin let her aching head drop back into the pillow, and regarded her surroundings with a certain amount of wariness.

The room she was in was huge. Almost the entire Guest House, both floors, could fit in here. And that wasn't counting the door that apparently led to a private bathroom. The high, sky-blue ceiling was decorated with clouds and flying birds. The walls themselves were a pale blue, almost white in color. The floor was an odd blue and red checkerboard pattern, with several large rugs over the top of it.

The furnishings spoke of simple elegance, delicately carved dressers and wardrobes, a writing desk and stool, all in white-painted wood. Several framed paintings were hung on the walls, in frames of dark oak with gold trim.

At a guess, Erin thought, I am in the castle.

She glanced down at her own body, which was covered with a sheet. Finding very little strength in her limbs, she began pulling the sheet off. What she saw confused her.

Her entire body, or at least most of it, was covered in wrapped bandages. She reached up and felt at her head. Another bandage. But she distinctly remembered that the light that had driven Malachite out of her had also healed her injuries. Her face, swollen from running head-first into a tree when Malachite was still first learning to control her, had stopped hurting and returned to its normal dimensions. The stings and scrapes along her sides and flanks had closed up. She'd felt the unusual sensation of her hooves, some of which had cracked open and all of which had at least one rock lodged in them, joining back together and expelling any foreign matter.

So, why was she covered in bandages? And why did she ache so badly?

The door opened shortly after that, and Princess Celestia walked in.

"Good evening, Sunflower. I'm glad to see that you're awake," the princess said, sounding sincere.

"Thank you, Princess," Erin replied, looking down at her sheets. "And... thank you for saving me."

"How do you feel?" Celestia asked.

"Like I've been taken apart and put back together," Erin said.

"This isn't too far from the truth, I'm afraid," Celestia replied. Erin glanced up, confused.

"We found a number of devices all over your body. One in particular was attached to your brain and nervous system, and connected thusly to all of your muscles, including your heart. We believed it was that device that was forcing you to stay unconscious, and we also considered it to be a risk to your life. So, we removed it."

"You removed my implants?" Erin said, surprised.

"Just the one. We weren't certain what it was for, but we knew that it could be used to control you in exactly the same way Malachite had."

Erin flinched back at the reminder, glancing away from the beautiful princess.

"The device had... threads, I imagine you could say, running through your entire body. It took some time to remove them all, even with magic. My sister, Luna, did most of the work. She is very curious about the devices, and may stop by once you're recovered to ask you about them."

Erin nodded, unable to meet Celestia's gaze.

"You are a guest here at the castle," Celestia continued. "I'm not certain what brings you to our world, but the picture I received from talking to your Ponyville friends makes me believe that you don't intend us any

harm. For now, I would like you to rest and recover. There will be time for explanations later."

With that, Celestia began walking away. A thought occurred to Erin.

"Princess?"

Celestia stopped, looking back at her. "Yes?"

"You said you talked to my Ponyville friends. Does that include Meadowlark from the Guest House?"

"No," the princess replied. "I spoke to Twilight Sparkle and her friends. Is Meadowlark a friend as well?"

"Yes, and her filly Marigold" Erin replied. "And, they saw me... become possessed. Could somepony let them know that I'm okay? I don't want them to worry."

Celestia smiled gently.

"I will do that. Thank you for considering their feelings, Sunflower."

"Princess? One last thing..."

"Yes?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath and expelled it, bracing herself.

"Please, call me Erin."

Chapter 19: Discussions

Celestia closed the door behind her gently, so as to not wake the sleeping mare inside. When she glanced up and saw Luna patiently waiting in the hallway, she stepped forward to nuzzle her little sister affectionately.

"Celestia!" Luna whispered, blushing. "Stop, the guards are watching!"

She chuckled and drew back. Her sister always had found public displays of affection to be embarrassing. Glancing at the guards, she saw that they were staring forward stoically.

"She's currently asleep," she told them. "Please ask the nurse to check in, quietly, every hour to see if she needs anything."

The guards saluted, and Celestia inclined her head, indicating to Luna that she'd like to walk together. Luna nodded and fell in beside her in the wide hallway of Canterlot Castle.

"How is she?"

"She seems well. She is in some pain, but that will pass."

"Ah, that is good," Luna said, relieved. "You were in there for quite some time. I was concerned that something was wrong."

"The poor dear simply wanted to talk. I kept insisting she rest, but she had so much that she wanted to say. I gather that she's been eager to talk to us for quite some time, but her superiors have forbidden her to do so."

"Indeed? So she is from another world, then."

"Yes. Her actual name is Erin, and she's something called a 'human'. They used technology to turn her into a pony and fabricate a cutie mark."

"Such technology exists?" Luna asked, looking skeptical. "It's difficult to imagine such a thing. Even using magic, it would take considerable skill and effort to change a creature from one species to another."

"She says that it is true, and I have no reason to doubt her. Apparently, magic doesn't exist on her world, which they call 'Earth', oddly enough. They've had to excel in technology to compensate."

"No magic?" asked Luna, shuddering at the thought. "I don't believe I would like that world."

Celestia nodded in agreement. Magic was such an integral part of pony life, not being able to access it would be difficult, like losing her wings or her eyes.

The sisters turned at a corner, walking towards Celestia's private study. The tapestries on the wall, some of which were centuries old, gave the otherwise stark hallway some life and color.

"So, what is it they want with us? Are we under threat of invasion?"

"No," Celestia replied, "and 'yes' at the same time. Apparently, their entire world is being taken over by some sort of plague they call the Black Tide. It destroys all life it contacts, and is slowly consuming their world. They are looking for a new home, and our world is the first one they've come across that they could actually survive in."

"I'm sure we can accommodate some refugees, considering the situation," Luna said. "How many are there?"

"Apparently, there are around seven billion of them," Celestia replied, taking a small amount of guilty pleasure at Luna's slack-jawed expression of surprise.

"Seven *billion*?! Is that correct? 'Billion'?" When Celestia nodded, Luna continued with, "Are you certain that the word 'billion' on their world means the same as it does on ours?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure," Celestia said. Luna was momentarily dumbstruck, as Celestia herself had been when she'd heard that same news from Erin.

"Celestia, it is not possible for us to accommodate that many of these humans for any length of time. Not unless they are all the size of ants."

"Apparently, they are larger than the average pony, standing about as tall as you or I."

"Oh, my. This will be difficult, indeed. How will we help them?" Luna asked.

Celestia stopped and smiled, nuzzling her sister affectionately once again.

"What was that for?" Luna asked, blushing again.

"For asking *how* we would help them, rather than asking if we *should*, or how we could stop them from coming." Celestia smiled, then. "Regarding your question, I have some ideas. I'm going to convene some of my ministers and advisers in my private study to discuss some of our options."

"We should also talk to the ambassadors for the foreign nations, in order to keep them informed."

"A very good idea, sister. Come, let us make some plans for the future, shall we?"

"No," Luna said. Celestia looked at her in surprise. "Sister, you have just spoken to a former student and protegee of yours who returned, apparently from the dead, by practicing some of the foulest, most forbidden magic I can imagine. You then saw him destroyed by the Elements of Harmony. Please, do not pretend you are unaffected."

Sometimes, life gives you burdens. And occasionally those burdens can be too much to bear on your own. When you live a life spanning centuries, that is even more true. There are simply times when even the wisdom of a millennium can't guide you through the rough spots.

There are two ways to deal with the burdens of life, when they get to be too much. You can lie, both to others and to yourself, pretending that you are strong enough to deal with these things on your own. Or, you can face the harsh truth, admit that it is too much for you, and rely on those who love and care for you to help you shoulder your burden.

Celestia bowed her head.

"You are, of course, quite right, Luna. My heart has been tied in knots since the encounter."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

Celestia considered that for a while, then nodded.

"I think I would. Very much. Thank you, Luna." Celestia nuzzled her sister again. This time, the younger sister returned the gesture.

"Of course, Celestia. What are sisters for?"

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The friends were sitting in the dining area of their private apartments, eating a quiet dinner. The chefs had gone all out, but Twilight had very little appetite, mostly just pushing the food around on her plate. She had quite a few things to think about, and the Princess hadn't been willing to share any of the information that Sunflower had told her two days ago.

They had been forbidden from seeing the mare, not by Celestia, but by her doctor, who refused to let her undergo any stress while she was still recuperating. The wait was frustrating, and they were all dealing with it in their own ways.

While they were waiting for Sunflower to be ready to talk, Twilight had sent Spike to stay with her parents. The little dragon had protested at first, but the promise of warm, fresh-baked cookies lured him away in the end.

The door cracked open, and Celestia walked in. All activity around the table ceased as the Princess spoke.

"She is awake," the princess stated. "She would like to see you all."

Twilight put down her fork and stood, glancing at the others around the table. Pinkie Pie looked excited and determined at the same time. Applejack looked reluctant, and Rainbow Dash looked angry, which was not a surprise. The pegasus had been working herself up ever since she'd found out about Sunflower not being from Equestria.

Rarity couldn't be read at all as she dabbed gently at her mouth with a napkin before standing. Fluttershy simply looked nervous, but that was hardly unusual.

Twilight, herself, was concerned, anxious, and curious. She wanted to know everything about where Sunflower was from, but on the other hoof, she was worried that what she'd find out would make her hate the mare.

The walk to the room in which Sunflower was resting was oddly quiet and subdued. No one said anything, as they were all caught up in their own thoughts. It didn't take long before they reached a room with two armored unicorn guards standing out in front. Celestia indicated that this was, indeed, the room that Sunflower was resting in.

"You have guards on her door?" Twilight asked. For some reason, that bothered her.

"A simple precaution, though I no longer really believe they are necessary," Celestia replied. "I truly don't believe she means us any harm, though her presence here will no doubt cause us... difficulties."

"You've talked to her, Princess?" Rainbow Dash asked. "She definitely is a spy, then?"

"I will let her explain it to you, Rainbow Dash. It's really her story to tell."

With that, Celestia opened the door and let the six friends inside before entering the room herself and closing the door behind her. Twilight's horn began to glow softly as she cast her lie-detector spell. She didn't bother hiding it this time, and she had told her friends earlier that she would be casting this spell once they had a chance to talk to Sunflower. Celestia glanced at her horn, but aside from a nod of acknowledgement, didn't say anything.

Sunflower, her head wrapped in a thick bandage, was sitting up in the bed and propped up by several pillows. She glanced up briefly as the door opened, and then returned to looking down at her front hooves, which were on the bed before her. Twilight was alarmed to notice she had several other bandages around her body as well.

"What happened?" she asked the Princess. "Did she get hurt?"

"Ah, the bandages? She had some sort of device implanted in her body. Luna and I thought it would be a good idea to remove it, as that was what was keeping her asleep. Unfortunately, doing so required some surgery. We've accelerated her healing as much as is safe, and she will be right as rain in a day or two."

Sunflower glanced up again briefly, before quickly returning her gaze to her forehooves. Twilight detected shame in that quick glance, and it looked like the mare had been crying recently. A moment of awkward silence ensued before Twilight broke it by clearing her throat.

"Um, so... Sunflower, how are you feeling?"

"Better than yesterday," she replied in a quiet voice. "I still have some pain, but it's no big deal. And.. my real name is Erin."

"I don't *believe* it!" Rainbow Dash said angrily. "Even your *name* was a lie? And what kind of a stupid name is that, anyway?"

Sunflower... or, rather, Erin, flinched, unable to meet anypony's gaze.

"Rainbow, we promised to let her explain herself," Twilight reminded her friend gently. Rainbow snorted and sat down heavily.

"Fine, then. Let's hear it," Rainbow said. "But this had better be *good* 'Erin'."

"Okay, well... I suppose I'd better start from the beginning," Erin said. She gathered her thoughts for a moment before continuing. "Well, as you know now, I'm not from Equestria. I was sent here because our world is... well, not to be melodramatic, but it's doomed. There's this thing that we call the Black Tide. It came from space almost three years ago and crashed into our world. It... it's hard to describe what it is, because we don't really even know ourselves. But imagine this ooze that is spreading out of where this thing landed. Everything it touches, it... melts it, I guess you could say. It absorbs it, and turns it into more of itself. It's doing that to everything. Plants, animals, people... even the dirt and the rocks."

"That's why I came here," she continued. "We very recently found out how to travel between different realities, and we are looking for a place where we can evacuate everyone to. It's really the only hope for our people. Otherwise, billions will die."

"Billions?" Twilight asked, astonished. Erin nodded.

"Well, why didn't y'all just ask us, instead o' sneakin' around like this?" demanded Applejack.

"We didn't know anything about you. We didn't know anything about Equestria, really. Well, wait, no, that's not completely true. We knew a little bit. We'd opened some windows... er, what I gather you call ripples, from our world to yours. We even created a few fissures and sent some probes through.... I've never seen them before, but I'm sure that's what those black things were that Malachite was using to try and stop you from reaching me."

"So why did your probe things help out a bad guy?" asked Pinkie Pie.

"I don't know, but I can guess. Somehow he was able to... well, we call it 'hacking', when you bypass the security on a device and take it over. Somehow, he was able to take them over one by one. And, somehow, that led him to me. I still don't know how he managed to take *me* over, though."

"I think we're getting off track with the probes," Twilight said. "I accept your explanation on them for now, but I think we should return to why you came to Equestria, and why you didn't just ask us for help. You were saying how you didn't know much about us?"

Erin returned her gaze to her hooves, fiddling with them awkwardly.

"Yes, that's right. We didn't know a whole lot about you. We knew what you looked like, we knew a few basic details about Equestria, like your gravity is slightly less than ours. What we didn't know were details like, could we eat the food here, or would it poison us? Was there any kind of weird radiation or something that we didn't know about that would kill us? And, for you ponies, would you accept us? Would you try to help us or try to fight us? We had to find these things out, and so I volunteered to come here."

"Wait, 'you ponies'?" Twilight said. "You're not a pony?"

Erin flinched again.

"No, I'm not. I was turned into one to fit in better," she admitted.

Twilight noted that her friends reacted very differently to the news. Applejack and Rainbow Dash just seemed more angry, whereas Rarity and Pinkie both seemed more confused than anything. Fluttershy was staring at Erin with unease, as if she expected the bandaged mare to suddenly spring at her.

And how do I feel about it? Twilight wondered. Probably much the same as her friends, she realized... but also curious. Very curious, indeed.

"So what were you?" Twilight asked.

"I'm a human," she said. "I suppose I could describe us for you. We call our world the Earth. We stand... oh, I'd say the average is slightly shorter than Princess Celestia, if you include her horn. We stand on two legs, and we have arms with hands, kind of like Spike, though without the claws. Um. We're mostly hairless, except for the tops of our heads and... um... a few other places. Unlike ponies, we wear clothes pretty much all the time. Since we don't have any magic on Earth, we had to get really good with science and engineering..."

"Wait, wait," Twilight interrupted. "You don't have magic on Earth? How did you get turned into a pony?"

"We used something called nanotechnology. Basically, um... Well, we made these very small machines, too small to even see. There were billions of them, and they basically broke down and rearranged my whole body to become a pony."

Twilight was fascinated and mildly horrified by the thought of those machines.

"That sounds like a load of horseapples," Rainbow Dash said.

"I know how you feel," Erin said, "I felt the same way about magic when I came here."

"So you were able to change like that without magic? That's... wow." Twilight said, amazed. "If your technology can do that kind of thing, I would really like to study it!"

"And I wanted to study magic," Erin replied with a sad ghost of a smile. "It's so different than anything I've ever seen."

Rainbow Dash didn't seem satisfied, but also didn't seem to be able to figure out any specific reason as to why. She sat there, scowling at the floor, looking directionlessly angry.

"Wait a moment, then," Rarity said. "Erin... that cutie mark story you told me. Was it a lie?"

Erin blushed.

"I'm sorry, Rarity. The story itself was true, that really did happen when I was little, but humans don't get cutie marks."

"So, what does that sunflower on your butt mean?" Rainbow Dash asked, acidly. "Did you just pick it out of a hat, or something?"

"Almost," Erin admitted, and Rainbow snorted in disgust. "We knew from our probes and such that all

adult ponies had a cutie mark, though we didn't know that it was called that at the time. We thought they were some sort of tattoo, and that ponies just picked one when they got old enough.

"They gave me a list of what they thought would be acceptable cutie marks, but none of them seemed... well, right to me. None of them seemed to fit. And then, one day... I think it was the day before I was due to start the process to become a pony, actually... I saw an article. It had a picture of this field of sunflowers on it, and they looked so... so vibrant and alive, you know?"

"The article itself was about how we were going to lose so much of our natural world to the Black Tide. I was looking at that picture, and I was thinking that the Tide would roll over everything, including that field of sunflowers. It made me incredibly sad to think that those flowers, and even the field they were planted in, would be gone forever within the next few years."

"And then I realized something. The mission that I was on was to find a new home, not just for us, but for as much life as we could save. That field of sunflowers would be gone soon. But if we survived, then we could plant more. Life would go on, we would go on, and I was determined that I was going to help to make that happen. So, in a way, my mission was about renewal, and survival, and hope."

"After that, the sunflower seemed like the only choice for me. It felt like a symbol of what I wanted to accomplish by coming here. It just seemed... right."

There was a long moment as the ponies looked at each other. Rarity spoke, breaking the silence.

"Well, I don't know about you girls, but that sounds like a cutie mark story to me."

"Indeed, it does," Celestia agreed.

"How do you mean?" Erin asked, obviously confused.

"You struggled, and then found a purpose and an identity for yourself," Celestia said. "In the end, you reached an epiphany that helped you discover who you were, and what you wanted to do. And then, you received a cutie mark."

The Princess smiled and added, "It's not exactly in the traditional way. But as cutie mark stories go, it's not bad."

There was a moment of silence as they mulled that over. Twilight conceded that Celestia had a point. Erin looked mildly pleased by Celestia's statement.

"So, what now, then?" Applejack asked. "What's gonna happen next?"

"Well, from what I understand, we're going to be sending some human ambassadors here within the next week or two, to meet with the Princesses and come to some sort of diplomatic arrangement."

"I meant, 'what's gonna happen with you', Erin."

"Oh, I really hadn't thought that far. I mean, all the humans are coming over here, so I'll be staying too. I really like Ponyville... I've never loved living in any place as much I've loved living there." She heaved a sigh and continued. "But I suppose I've screwed everything up, there. I don't expect anypony to trust me anymore, especially once I get turned back to a human."

"You aren't staying a pony?" Pinkie Pie asked, surprised.

"Probably not, Pinkie," Erin replied with a wry smile. "I can't imagine what my mother would say if I did."

"Hold on, hold on," Rainbow said, scowling. "Nopony said that you humans could come here. What if we just told you 'no, tough luck'? What then?"

"We've been looking for months, and Equestria is the only world that we've found that has even the chance to support human life. Our world is ending. We have, at most, maybe another three years left before the whole thing is engulfed by the Black Tide. Unless they've found another habitable world while I've been here, then the answer is simple. Regardless of what you say, we're coming over. We don't have a choice. It's that, or we all die. Besides, I don't think you would do that, Rainbow Dash."

"Oh? Wanna bet?"

"I don't think you *could*. Could you look a mother in the eye and tell her to take her children back to her doomed homeworld to die? Could you say that to a million mothers?"

"Of course not," Fluttershy said firmly. Rainbow Dash looked like she wanted to say something, but then just looked away, deep in thought.

Into the awkward silence that followed, Pinkie Pie calmly stepped forward.

"That leaves one very important question, though," she said. "Probably the most important one, and nopony has even asked it yet."

"Okay," Erin said, visibly bracing herself. "What is it?"

"Sunflower. Erin. Whatever you want to call yourself. I have to know just one thing," Pinkie said, walking forward until she was standing directly in front of the alien mare, who looked back at her warily. "I need to know: Are you sorry at all for lying to us?"

Erin flinched back in surprise, and then her face contorted as her composure shattered.

"Yes!" she sobbed. "Every day! Every single day, I hated myself for it. I hated every minute of it! I wanted to tell the truth, but at first I was too scared to. And then they kept telling me I couldn't. And, I'd make up my mind every other day that I would tell you, I'd tell you all everything, and then they'd just end up talking me out of it."

Erin was crying hard now, and Twilight started tearing up as well. She knew that Erin wasn't lying, her spell told her that much. The other girls gave her a questioning look, and she nodded. Erin was telling the truth. She really *was* sorry.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, you deserve so much better than me, I didn't deserve your friendship, I'm sorry..."

Pinkie reached out with a hoof and touched the sobbing mare gently on the shoulder. Erin looked up, her eyes red-rimmed from the tears looking into the bright blue of Pinkie's eyes. Pinkie drew her into a tight hug, and Erin's eyes widened in surprise as she said, "In that case, I can forgive you."

Slowly, Erin reached her own hooves up and hugged Pinkie back, and then she started bawling again.

Fluttershy, kind heart that she was, was already joining in on the hug and was crying herself. Rarity was dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief as she moved towards the three of them, placing a hoof on the crying mare's shoulder. Applejack had her hat pulled down low to hide her eyes. Rainbow Dash was looking away, muttering about having 'something in her eyes'.

Applejack stood up suddenly, and then hesitated, looking indecisive for a moment.

"Aw, shucks. Me, too, I guess." she said, moving towards the bed. "I forgive ya, Erin." She didn't join in the hug, but she did put a hoof on Erin's shoulder, opposite of Rarity.

Twilight examined her own feelings and found that, in spite of everything, she didn't hold a grudge. Erin truly *did* have a good reason for lying, with her whole world at stake and not knowing if the ponies would help or not. And, she obviously felt awful for the necessity. It was as if an iron band that had been constricting her heart suddenly released when she realized that she forgave the strange mare, and that she still considered her to be a friend. Smiling, crying, she moved to the bed and put a comforting hoof on the mare's leg.

"Rainbow Dash?" she asked, looking back at the pegasus. Rainbow scowled at the rest of them for a moment before heaving a heavy sigh.

"Fine, I forgive her, I guess," she said, grudgingly. "But don't expect me to do a group hug when I'm still pretty mad, okay?"

Twilight nodded at the pegasus. Then she heard the door open, and glanced back to see that Celestia was leaving.

"Princess?"

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle, but no. Group hugs really aren't my thing," the Princess said with a smile to let her know she was joking. "I'm glad you've all reconciled. I have a considerable number of preparations to make before the human ambassadors arrive, so I will leave you all to become reacquainted."

The door closed with a soft click. Near the center of the group hug, Pinkie looked back up and caught Erin's eye again.

"Well, I guess there's just one more thing I need answered, in that case," she said.

"What is it?" Erin asked.

"Do humans like parties?"

Erin laughed in surprise at that, the first sign of joy she'd displayed since she'd woken up.

"Yes, Pinkie," she replied, smiling. "We humans like parties a lot."

"Well, then, you're all okay in my book!"

Erin laughed more, and the hug finally broke up, all the mares sniffling in the aftermath of emotion. Applejack was doing a fairly passable job of pretending that she hadn't cried at all.

Erin cleared her throat a couple of times, then finally managed to talk, her voice thick with emotion.

"Thank you so much, girls. I honestly didn't expect you to forgive me..."

"You're not in the clear yet," Rainbow Dash said, and Applejack nodded in agreement.

"Yup. You really hurt me with this whole thing, Erin. I expect you to not ever lie to me again. If'n ya do, well... I may not be so forgiving, next time."

"What she said," Rainbow added.

"I understand," Erin said. "And, I still have a lot more I need to tell you, if I'm coming clean now. And I want to tell you everything. But, before I start, can I just ask you all one thing?"

"Sure thing, sugarcube."

"When I was... possessed, in the forest," Erin said with a shudder, "What *was* that, with the rainbow? How did you *do* that?"

The friends laughed, and Twilight said, "Well, let me tell you a story about the Summer Sun Celebration two years ago..."

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"Uh... Director?"

"Yes?" Maggie replied, on her second day on the job as the new lead of Project Harmonics.

"We... um... seem to be missing a few probes."

"Oh? How many?"

"Ninety percent."

Maggie goggled at the tech for a moment.

"We have ninety percent left, or we're missing ninety percent?" she asked

"Uh, we're down by ninety percent. Actually, ninety-two. There are thirty-eight left responding. And, of those, about a third are damaged in some way."

"What the heck happened?"

"I don't know... pulling the data now, but it's going to take a while to review."

"Okay, well, keep me posted on that. Do we have a link on Erin yet?"

"Just about, ma'am," a different tech stated. "She's a bit further out than usual, we had to move a couple of the surviving drones around to act as relays, and it... oh."

"What?" Maggie asked warily. "Is she okay?"

"Vitals are fine, but... er... somehow she's missing the Auto-Override implant."

Dead silence filled the Harmonics lab while she rolled that over in her mind.

"Okay," she said. "Get going on that data, I want to find out what happened as soon as possible. Get me a comm link to Erin, if you don't mind."

"Yes, ma'am!" the two techs replied in unison.

~~*~~

"That... wow, that's so cool!" Erin said, impressed. "So, this Discord guy is a statue now?"

"Yeah, he's out in the gardens, getting crapped on by a bunch of birds," Rainbow Dash said, laughing.

"Rainbow Dash!" Rarity objected. "That's vulgar!"

"True, but that's what makes it hilarious."

The friends were now sitting around the dinner table in the private apartments. Once they realized that they'd be talking for a while, with all they had to say, they decided to move somewhere more comfortable and to also finish their dinners. Erin was more than happy to get out of bed, in spite of the soreness. The nurse had objected at first, but had finally relented after extracting a promise from her to avoid strenuous activity.

"Well, I think that's enough about Equestria for now," Twilight said to her. "Why don't we find out some more about Earth? I'd love to hear about your technology!"

"Um... well, okay," Erin said, slightly disappointed. This had been the first time she'd been able to ask questions without having to be careful to not be discovered, and she'd been relishing the experience.

"Hmm... well, first of all, we were about where you guys are now, technology wise, about... oh, I'd say about a hundred and fifty years ago. We had steam power, electricity, that kind of thing. But, as time went on, we found newer and better..."

She trailed off as she heard the soft "click" of an open connection in her ears. Momentary terror froze her. The last time she'd heard that sound, the voice that came through was Malachite's. Dread filled her as she waited to hear what came through next.

"Sunflower, are you all right?" Twilight asked, concerned.

A moment later, a voice came over the line. Not Doctor Velchiek, but a voice she hadn't heard in nearly a month.

"Erin, can you get away to talk?" Doctor Maggie Henson asked. "I have some big news."

"Maggie?!" Erin said, surprised. The other ponies in the room looked at each other in confusion.

"Who or what is 'maggie', sugarcube?" Applejack asked.

"Ah. Erin, maybe you'd better excuse yourself?" Maggie suggested.

Erin shook her head.

"No," she said. "They already know I'm not a pony, they may as well know the rest too."

She saw that the six of them were now looking at her with confusion and mild concern. Erin decided that she'd better explain, quickly.

"I was meaning to tell you," she desperately told the ponies in the room, "but I hadn't gotten around to it yet. I have all sorts of implants in my body that are intended to measure and analyze things here in Equestria. One of the implants I have is in my ears, mostly so that the people back on Earth can talk to me using... well, a wireless signal, which I can explain later. When a ripple happens between our worlds, we can actually force a fissure into being. Sometimes they're big enough for... well, for me to walk through. Sometimes they're only big enough to get a small signal through, like right now."

"They're talking to you now, aren't they?" Twilight asked, excited.

"Ah, Erin?" Maggie said, sounding nervous.

"Sorry, Maggie. I already promised to tell them everything. Yes, Twilight. They are connected right now. I can hear them, and they can hear everything I can hear, and see everything I can see."

"The... humans can see and hear us?" Fluttershy whispered, eyes wide.

"Um... Yes, Fluttershy. Sorry."

Fluttershy 'eep'ed, and bolted for the door. Erin watched her go, feeling sad. Of course Fluttershy would find an invisible audience unnerving, but it felt like she'd committed yet another betrayal against the pegasus. She sighed and turned back to her friends in the room, and was slightly startled to see a grinning Pinkie Pie standing barely an inch away from her face.

"That... is... so... awesome!" Pinkie said, and then grabbed Erin's head in her front hooves.

"Hellooooo Huuumaaaans!" she said, speaking slowly and loudly. **"Myyy naaaame is Piiinkie Piiieee!!!"**

"Um, they can hear you just fine, Pinkie," Erin said, laughing.

"I'm going to get into so much trouble," Maggie said in her ear.

"Why is that?" Erin asked.

"I dunno," Pinkie Pie replied. "Is it because they have really good ears?"

"What?" Erin asked.

"Huh?" said Pinkie Pie.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Erin?" Maggie asked.

"Yes, I think it is." Erin replied.

"It is because they have good ears?" Pinkie asked, cocking her head to the side questioningly.

"Who has good ears?" Erin asked, slightly lost.

"The humans have good ears."

"We do?"

"That pony is confusing," Maggie complained.

"Well, you just said you did!" Pinkie replied, crossly.

"That's true," Erin said in response to Dr. Henson. Then, in response to Pinkie, "Wait, I didn't say that."

"You're flip-flopping!" Pinkie stomped her hoof in frustration.

"I am not!" Erin asserted.

"We need to talk, Erin," Maggie said.

"You need to be a little less confusing, Erin," Pinkie said.

"We sure do," Erin replied to Maggie.

"Hey, what's with this 'we' business?" Pinkie asked. "I'm making perfect sense!"

Twilight was laughing hard at this point, holding her ribs, and Rarity was chuckling. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were just grinning in confused amusement.

"I'm talking to Maggie, Pinkie!"

"So Maggie is confusing, too?" Pinkie asked.

"I like this one," Maggie said, chuckling. "Who's on first?"

"She's unique, that's for sure," Erin said.

"Waaiit a minute!" Pinkie said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. "Did you mean me or Maggie?"

"Yes," Erin replied, grinning. Pinkie frowned at her for a moment, then grinned back and started giggling.

"Oh, that was fun!" the pink pony said, and Maggie laughed in her ear.

The laughter died down after a moment, and Maggie turned serious.

"Anyway, Erin, some big things have happened here. There's a reason why I'm talking to you, instead of Paul Velchiek."

"Is he okay?" Erin asked, concerned. Dr. Velchiek had been overbearing, but he'd been the only human voice she'd heard for weeks, now.

"Depends on who you ask. If you ask me, he's fine. If you ask him, he was unjustly placed under house arrest for ethics violations."

"What?" Erin asked, stunned.

Maggie sighed in her ear.

"You'd better be sitting down for this, honey, because it's a doozy," she said.

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"He did what?!" Erin shouted, bolting to her hooves. Twilight flinched in surprise, as did the other non-human ponies in the room.

Twilight decided that, on the whole, it was really creepy and weird being in the same room with somepony who was having a conversation with invisible people.

Erin started pacing back and forth. She was obviously very upset, but nopony wanted to interrupt the conversation to ask what was wrong. Twilight herself was sure that Erin would tell them once the conversation was done.

"Did you know this was going on?" Erin asked, angrily. The five friends exchanged worried glances. There was a lengthy pause while Erin listened to the voice in her head, after which she said, "Wait, Doctor Edwards? We're talking about the same guy?"

Another pause, after which she said, "Well, I'm grateful for that. Please thank him for me."

More listening for a short while, and then: "Okay. Okay, Maggie. No, I think I should just talk to the Princess myself. Well, that's not really fair to them, is it? No, absolutely not, I already said I would... Yes. Yes, I'll do that. Okay. You too, Maggie. I'll talk to you later. And... thanks for telling me."

Erin slumped down by the table, seemingly exhausted. She rested her chin on the dark wood and stared off into space.

"You okay, sugarcube?" AJ asked her.

"Not really, Applejack. I just found out that one of my implants included a bunch of drugs that Doctor Velchiek, the man who *was* running things, used to try and manipulate me. Whenever I got too stubborn, he'd inject me, and suddenly I'd end up doing what he wanted. I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"That's horrible," Rarity said, eyes wide. "Why would he do that?"

"Because I wanted to tell you about humans," Erin said.

"Wait, what?" Rainbow Dash sat up, looking shocked. Then her eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me that the reason you didn't tell us about humans weeks ago is because some stupid *human* was making it so you couldn't?"

"Apparently. And I was stupid enough to trust him," Erin said, throwing her forearm over her eyes and sighing.

"Okay, now I really *do* forgive you, Erin," Rainbow said, practically vibrating with indignation. "If you want to buck that guy, I'll hold him down for you."

Erin laughed weakly.

"Thank you Rainbow. But that's not even the worst of it. I found out what the implant that the Princesses removed from me did."

"What was it?" Twilight asked.

"It gave them full control of my body. Like, they could move me around like a puppet, if they wanted to," Erin said bitterly.

Twilight felt horrified. *These* were the creatures they were planning on inviting to Equestria?

"That ain't right," Applejack said, sounding upset. "That ain't right at all."

"Well, the way it was supposed to work, it shouldn't have been able to take over if I was awake. It was *supposed* to be in case I was knocked out, sick or drugged or something like that. That way, they could get my body back through a fissure and hopefully save my life. But Velchiek decided to modify the programming on it... er, the way the thing worked, that is... so that he could just control me however he wanted. That's why I passed out in the forest. He'd set it to put me in a coma the moment I tried to tell anypony what was really going on."

"Well, *he's* off the guest list," Pinkie said, looking shocked.

"Lucky for me, Maggie found out about it and lodged an ethics complaint. As soon as everypony... everyone else found out, he was removed from his position and placed under arrest, and she was put in charge. So,

that's good, I guess."

Erin idly drew a circle on the table with a hoof-tip, then said, "I wonder if the Princesses would be willing to take the rest of these implants out of me? I should ask them... I don't want them anymore."

"Erin," Twilight said hesitantly, "Do you think that's how Malachite managed to possess you?"

"Almost definitely," she replied dully. "He was talking to me through my implants, just like the humans do. If he could do that, then it makes sense that he could have taken over the override."

"Are you going to be okay?" Rainbow asked, looking concerned.

"I don't know," Erin said with a weak smile. "Probably. I just need time to process this."

A few moments passed, and then Pinkie said, "Well, pooh. This sure put a damper on things."

"Sorry, Pinkie."

"Not *your* fault, Erin."

"Maybe this just means it's time for bed," Erin said with a sigh while standing. "I'm kind of tired, anyway."

"That ain't a bad idea. It's pretty late, after all," Applejack said. "Was Spike plannin' on stayin' at your mom's house again tonight, Twi?"

"Yes," Twilight said, trying to quash her frustration at not being able to ask Erin more questions about Earth. "She loves doting on him, and he loves being doted on."

She smiled fondly. Spike was such an endearing little guy. As much as she relied on him, it was sometimes easy to forget that he was still a baby.

"I'll walk you to your room, Erin," Applejack said. Rainbow Dash quickly asserted that she was going, also, as did Pinkie Pie. Rarity demurred, citing a need for beauty sleep. She bid Erin a sincere farewell, with an accompanying hug.

"If you ever feel the need to talk, darling, my door is always open to you."

"Thank you, Rarity," Erin replied. Rarity left for her suite, leaving just the five of them.

"You comin' too, Twilight?" Applejack asked.

"No," Twilight said after a moment of deliberation. "I think I should find the Princess and let her know how things went tonight."

Then she smiled at Erin, saying, "And my door is open as well, Erin. If you ever feel the need to talk, let me know, okay?"

"You got it. And... thank you, Twilight."

"It's not a problem, Erin. But, remember, you still owe me some answers on what Earth is like!" Twilight smiled to let her know that she meant it only partially seriously. Erin smiled back.

"I owe you all a lot more than just some answers," she said.

Twilight gave her a quick hug, and then left to go find Celestia.

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The four of them walked down the darkened hallway, the sun having long-since set. It didn't take long for Erin to reach her room. She almost didn't recognize it without the guards; many of the doorways in this corridor looked very much the same. Tentatively, she opened the door and looked inside, smiling with relief when she recognized the interior.

"Well, this is it," she said to the others. "Thanks for walking me back."

"Ain't no problem at all, Erin," AJ said, and gave her a quick hug.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said, adding, "And remember, I'll help you clobber that... V-whatever guy, whatever his name was, if you want."

"And, remember, we're all here to talk to you if you need us," Pinkie put in.

"Thank you, I really appreciate it. And, there's so much more for us to talk about. You deserve to know

everything."

"I trust ya," Applejack said, smiling. "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," Erin agreed.

They said their good-nights, and there were a couple more hugs. The three ponies started walking away as Erin was closing her door.

She made her way to the bed, and then noticed a large, brown package on her nightstand. Concerned that she had, in fact, wandered into the wrong room by mistake, she was about to leave before she decided to look at the shipping label.

It had the Fet-Ex logo on it, and it was addressed to "Sunflower, Royal Castle, Canterlot."

Intrigued, Erin ripped the brown packaging off. Inside was a card and a thick cardboard box. She managed to open up the card well enough to read it.

Dear Sunflower,

We heard that you had a bit of trouble after the Iron Pony competition, and that you had to go to the castle for the Princess to heal you up. We also heard that you were doing better, which is great news!

We wish you the best, and hope that you have a speedy recovery. This place just isn't the same without you!

Get well soon!

Warmest Regards,

Your co-workers and friends,

Speedy Parcel & Lucky

Honestly touched, Erin carefully put the card to one side. Then, curious, she opened the box. The familiar smell hit her, and she grinned.

There was nothing like a big box of expensive chocolates to take the sting out of a bad day.

Chapter 20: Things get complicated

"I'm a bit concerned."

"Yes, sir, I know."

Maggie tried to stay relaxed, which wasn't the easiest thing to do. They were in a large conference room, with a solid oak table that probably cost more than Maggie made in a year. Around the table with her were several very serious men and women in very serious suits. Under her lab coat, Maggie was wearing an old, faded brown sweater and a pair of washed-out denim jeans. She was really regretting her choice of casual wardrobe at the moment.

"She's entirely off-mission," the man continued. He was a skinny, balding man in his fifties with round, steel glasses and the pinched face of someone who'd taken a bite out of a lemon. Maggie could tell that she was going to just have *lots* of fun with him.

Not for the first time, she wished that Paul hadn't turned out to be such a bastard. He was much better at dealing with this sort of thing than she was.

"Yes, sir. I'm the one who reported it to you, remember?"

He looked at her, frowning, over the top of his glasses.

"Yes, I remember. The question is what are we going to do about it?"

"Use her," Maggie replied, simply.

"Excuse me?"

Maggie sighed. It was too early for this. She was still only halfway through her first cup of coffee. She took another sip before continuing.

"She wants to be of use, so use her. She's our only point of contact with the Equestrian Government right now. She's got a direct line to the Princesses, and she's on good terms with many of the ponies there already. Let her do what she's already doing so well, and just give her some guidance."

"Yes, well," the man, whose name was Frank Adams, said drily, "for what it's worth, we agree with you. But only to the extent that we need to do some damage control. Melissa?"

One of the other women in the room, a slim blond lady in her mid-50's with a figure that Maggie was trying very hard not to resent her for, came around and handed her a tablet.

"Here you go," Melissa said. "Please go through this documentation as soon as you can, before the next time you talk to Erin."

"What is all this?" Maggie said, activating the tablet and looking through the index.

"Well, there are a few things," Melissa said. "Instructions for Erin, a prepared speech that we want her to read to the Princesses as soon as possible, a shipping manifest for the equipment that will be arriving here in the next few days for our ambassadorial staff, that kind of thing. It's all in there, and if you have any questions, you can always call us."

"Instructions. I see." Maggie quickly scanned them, then frowned. "Well, I'll be sure to pass these on, and inform Erin to use her best judgement when it comes to following them."

"We were hoping you could be a bit more... persuasive than that," Mr. Adams said.

"Ah. I see. Let me just remind you all of something," Maggie said. "Forget for a moment that Erin is a volunteer, and a free citizen of the US, and on a completely different planet, and therefore can't really be *coerced* to do anything, okay? Instead, focus on this being a young lady who's sacrificed her very humanity, albeit temporarily, in order to undertake a mission to an unknown world in order to make first contact with an alien species. During this mission, she was lied to and manipulated by the previous head of the team in one of the most horrific and invasive ways I can imagine. Have you all seen the latest data?"

The people around the table affirmed they had.

"But I don't see..." Mr. Adams started.

"No, you don't. Erin's... *hardware*, for lack of a better term, was compromised. This allowed an alien being

named Malachite to take over her entire body, nearly killing her with exhaustion by running flat out for over four hours, with only a twenty minute break for water. Can you imagine what that was like for her? She could have died. If she'd been a regular pony, she likely *would* have died, or at least have been permanently crippled.

"None of that would have been possible if it hadn't been for Paul Velchiek's unethical alteration of the override. Add to that the fact that she was being manipulated with controlled injections of mood-altering drug cocktails-"

"Which she wouldn't have known about if you hadn't told her," he replied archly.

"Irrelevant," Maggie shot back, annoyed. "She was victimized, she deserved to know, and *never* suggest to me again that administering mood or mind altering drugs to someone without their knowledge or consent is the right thing to do. *Never*. Do I make myself clear?"

"I *wasn't* suggesting-"

"Good. Don't. Anyway, I can't imagine Erin will react well to *any* sort of attempted manipulations at this point. I will take your... suggestions. I will present them tactfully, and I will let her know that the top minds working for our upcoming diplomatic mission suggested that we do things this way. But I won't try to order her, and I won't attempt to bully her. You're forgetting something very important, sir."

"And what's that?"

"The success of our entire diplomatic mission is currently resting squarely in the hooves of Erin Olsen." Maggie leaned forward and said, "Let's try to keep her happy, shall we?"

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"Hi, Erin. It's Maggie. How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing okay. Just a little tired, I guess."

"That's not surprising. You've had a rough couple of days. Say, I hate to do this, but the ambassadorial staff came by yesterday and they have a bunch of things they wanted me to tell you."

Erin sighed.

"How much trouble am I in?" she asked.

"You don't worry about trouble, okay? They can disapprove all they want, but they're not the ones over there. If they were so worried about it, then they should have sent a few of their own over. We did make the offer, after all."

"You did?" Erin sounded surprised at that.

"Yeah, not a one of them volunteered to go, ponified or not. So, they have no say in how you deal with Equestria, if they don't have the guts to go themselves. That's what I say. Anyway, I did say I'd pass this on. But you're under no obligations to follow any of this, understand?"

"Yeah, okay."

"First, they want you to recite the following prepared statement. Maybe you should get a pencil and paper or something?"

"Sure, hold on..."

There was the sound of Erin rummaging around coming over the connection, lasting for a few seconds.

"Okay, shoot," Erin said, and Maggie cleared her throat.

"Ahem, here's the message..."

Maggie rattled off a series of formalities, with Erin interrupting from time to time to ask for clarification, or to spell a certain name. Then, once those were completed, she got into the actual substance of the letter.

The letter itself was simply a statement of humanity's hope that they could negotiate peacefully, and went on to not-so-subtly state that Erin had no authority to make agreements for humanity, and that an official ambassadorship would be coming within three to four days.

"Really? That soon? I thought we had a couple of weeks left," Erin said.

"We did, but with recent... developments, they decided to advance their timetable. Honestly, I have no idea why it's taken them this long as it is. They should have had diplomats over there weeks ago, in my opinion."

"Huh. Well, the ponies are worried, Maggie. I'm not so sure I've done a very good job representing our species. I may have been too honest..."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Erin. I think it's better to tell an unpleasant truth than a pleasant lie, in any case."

"Yeah... I suppose. Was there anything else?"

"Yes. They want you to ask for room for twelve to fifteen people, preferably in the castle and near the Princesses. If you could get electricity for them, that would help, as they plan on bringing a lot of equipment with them."

"Woah, that's a lot of people!"

"Well, honestly, only four of them are diplomatic staff. The rest are scientists and a documentary film crew."

"What? A film crew?"

"Yeah. Apparently, they want to do a documentary on Equestria, so we can show folks back here what our new home looks like. Or, at least, what it will look like if negotiations work out. So far, Project Harmonics has remained top secret, but I gather that they're going to start making announcements and putting out short movies pretty soon, to get people excited about it."

"Oh. Well, that makes sense, I guess."

"Would you be able to arrange for transportation? Most of our portals are opening near Ponyville, so that's where they'll probably come out. They'll have a bunch of gear and stuff as well."

"I'll ask the Princesses if they can loan us a few pegasi with carriages. If not, then maybe we can have you all pile on the train. I'll leave it up to them how they want to do it."

"Sounds good. Also, they want you to stop talking to the ponies in general. They say that they want you to simply say 'I'm not authorized to speak for my people' and tell them that the ambassadorial staff will be arriving in a few days."

"Huh. And is that an order?"

"Not from me. They said it was a 'suggestion'. As far as I'm concerned, feel free to ignore that one. You've got friends there, and it seems like they think pretty highly of you, all things considered. I think you're doing far more good than harm. But, it's up to you how you want to deal with it."

"Okay. I'll take that under advisement," Erin said in a dry tone.

"Forget all that for now, though. How are you healing? Are you feeling any better?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm due to get these bandages off tonight. Physically, I feel fine. Maybe a little restless. I just... well, I haven't been sleeping well, honestly."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But, things will get better, you know."

"Yeah... I know."

They talked for a while longer about unimportant things, and then signed off. Malachite sighed, putting the drone back down. Erin herself was far outside of his reach. He'd only been able to hear this last conversation because it used the surviving drones as relays.

He'd been deep in thought the last few days. Thinking of the nature of life. Thinking of what he'd done. He was surprised at the guilt he felt. If she'd required this long to recover, then she'd been in worse shape than he'd thought. The pony he'd once been would have been horrified at what he'd done.

Still, it wouldn't be long now, if he knew Celestia. One way or another, his existence in the cave would come to an end, and that very soon.

He found himself looking forward to it.

The trees flashed by, blurred and indistinct, half-hidden in shadows. Strange, unseen creatures growled, snarled and glared at her as she ran past. She was sprinting at a mad pace once again through the dark and overgrown forest, her heart banging in her chest, and her lungs pumping like a bellows. She had no control. Her legs and body moved on its own. Voices whispered in her ear, sometimes Malachite, sometimes Paul Velchiek.

The darkness of the forest pressed in on her, and she could swear she saw shapes moving in the undergrowth. Hostile things were hunting her, waiting for her to drop. Waiting for her to be vulnerable. But she couldn't stop. They wouldn't let her.

The feeling of menace closed in around her. She knew that she was running towards some terrible destination, an inevitable doom awaiting her, even though she wasn't sure what that was. She was desperate to stop herself before she got there, but she had no control. The voices in her head just laughed at her.

She burst into a clearing. For a moment, she was confused. It hadn't happened this way before, she suddenly realized. She looked up and saw six mares standing before her, smiling gently. Her heart leapt suddenly.

"Help!" Erin gasped to them. "I'm possessed!"

"Possessed?" Pinkie asked, looking alarmed. Then, grinning, she said, "Well, in that case... the power of Friendship compels you!"

A rainbow of light surged over Erin, tingling through her. When it was done, she was on the ground, gasping for breath. She struggled to her aching hooves, blood flowing from her many scratches and cuts.

"You okay, Erin?" Pinkie Pie asked, looking concerned. The other mares had vanished, but Erin hadn't noticed when.

"I'm hurt, Pinkie..." she said, swaying on her swollen and bleeding hooves.

"Silly," said Pinkie, "the Elements healed you, remember?"

"Oh yeah," she said.

Pinkie looked around with a frown on her face.

"This is a pretty depressing place, Erin. We should go somewhere more fun, don't you think?"

"Like where?"

"Hmm... How about Sugarcube Corner! Oh, wait... How about... Your very favorite place in the world!"

And that's just where they were. They were standing in dew-laden grass in the early morning light, in the park that was a block away from her childhood home.

She gaped in wonder at the playground equipment all around her. It was just as she remembered it... the concrete tube she used to crawl through, pretending it was a tunnel to a magical world. The swing-set, empty swings swaying in the breeze. On a nearby hill stood the twenty foot tall structure shaped like a lighthouse that had a slide coming out of it about halfway up, and the hill it stood on was just perfect for sledding in the winter time.

And dominating it all was the expansive wood and steel pipe jungle gym that could be almost anything to a child's imagination... It could be a spaceship, a pirate ship, a fortress, a house or a place to run and hide from the aliens, who were usually her brothers.

Erin hadn't been here for years, but she remembered the place fondly. She'd spent many days of her childhood playing here, until becoming a teenager had briefly made this place 'uncool'.

"How... Pinkie, how did you bring us here? This is on Earth!"

"I didn't bring you, you brought me! Besides, I'm not really here."

"What?"

"Nothing. Wow, this is neat!"

Pinkie disappeared into the jungle gym, laughing with joy. Erin smiled and walked after her, feeling her spirits lift. She trotted after her friend, but couldn't find her amidst all the columns and platforms. She wondered momentarily how it could be possible to lose a bright pink pony like that, when Pinkie's head suddenly appeared upside down in front of her.

"I know you're trying to be strong, Erin," Pinkie said, uncharacteristically serious, "but part of being strong is trusting your friends to help you when something bad happens to you."

"Nothing bad has happened to me!" Erin protested.

"No?" Pinkie said, hopping down and landing neatly on her hooves. "Then, why the nightmares?"

"Nightmares?" she asked, confused. What kind of nightmares could exist in a place like this?

"Like that one," Pinkie said, pointing with a hoof. Erin turned to look and saw a massive wall of black sludge slowly oozing towards her hometown. Oddly, there was no fear. Just an aching, hollow sense of loss. This park would be gone, soon. A part of her childhood, snuffed out forever as soon as the Black Tide reached it.

"Talk to us. Tell us how you feel. Even if there's no way we can understand what you went through, you don't need to go through this alone. Promise me that."

"Um... Okay, Pinkie."

"Pinkie Promise?"

"Huh?"

"Here, I'll show you..."

Pinkie quickly ran her through the process, and Erin followed along, finishing with "stick a cupcake in my eye."

"There you go! I bet you feel better already, right?"

Erin considered that.

"You know what, Pinkie? I think I do!" she said, smiling.

"Great! Well, I've got to get going. And it's time for you to wake up!"

"What are you talking about, Pinkie?" Erin asked, then blinked in confusion. She was in her apartment in the Royal Palace of Canterlot.

Erin stared around owlishly for a few seconds, wondering where Pinkie went, until the realization slowly filtered in that it had all been a dream. An amazingly realistic dream, at least the last part of it.

The first part was familiar to her, now that she was awake. Each night since she'd first woken up in the palace she'd had the same nightmare. Running, out of control, slowly coming closer and closer to some hidden horror. Last night, though... this dream was the first one she'd had with her pony friends waiting for her in a clearing, the first night she hadn't woken up in a cold sweat. The first morning she'd woken up actually feeling somewhat well rested.

Today was her first day without bandages, as well. The doctors had taken them off last night and pronounced her fit. And today was the first time in days that she felt good enough for an early morning run. She could see out of her window that the horizon was glowing, but that the sun hadn't risen quite yet. Her favorite time of the morning.

She opened the door to her suite and grinned at her two startled unicorn guards.

"Hey, fellas. I'm going for a run. Want to join me? I'll buy breakfast!"

~~*~~

Celestia smiled as she saw Erin began a brisk run around the gardens, trailed by two confused-looking armored guards. It was good to see her up and about again. She'd spent the last few days recovering, both from the sheer exhaustion caused by Malachite's possession, as well as the later surgery.

"Princess?" a light brown unicorn stallion asked her, waiting patiently on the far end of her balcony.

"Oh, yes. I apologize, Chancellor. You were saying?"

"The spell is complete, your Highness. Princess Luna was correct, the Veil can be strengthened to an extent that would prevent the fissures from opening, if we so desire."

"Ah, excellent. Let's hope that we don't need to use it. And was I correct in my assumption as to why the majority of these fissures appear near Ponyville?"

"Yes, Princess. Professor Clastrum's analysis has confirmed that."

Celestia had deduced that, since the original fissure had happened near Ponyville, it had weakened the veil slightly, increasing the likelihood of the next fissure occurring in the same vicinity. Each fissure that opened there further weakened the veil, causing more and more of them to open within a few miles of each other.

"And, are we in any danger?"

"Oh, we would say not, Princess. It would take years' worth of continuous fissures to cause permanent damage to the Veil. If these incursions, for lack of a better word, were stopped now, the Veil would heal itself completely within a matter of months."

Celestia considered that for a long moment. She wanted to help the humans. Erin herself was charming and earnest, with a sincere desire to help her people, but she also obviously felt compassion for what that would mean to the citizens of Equestria and beyond. Not everyone would be so selfless as to consider the well-being of others when their own people were under such a threat.

Also, she'd been surprisingly and refreshingly blunt while divulging humanity's nature. War, violence and hatred often seemed to play a role in her people's history, and Erin hadn't shied away from mentioning it, like many others may have done in her position. Though, she had also stressed that this was not normal behavior, and that humans were capable of art, music, love and joy. They sounded like an incredibly diverse people, capable of both incredible cruelty and heartwarming compassion.

Celestia knew that she would help them in whatever way was possible, but she had to be wary of the darker aspects of those people.

"Let me ask you this, then," she asked of the patiently waiting counselor. "Could we shift the location of that damage, in order to make new fissures more likely to appear in a different location?"

"Hmm... Tricky. I'd have to consult with my peers, and Professor Clastrum of course, to be certain. But I believe so. Why do you ask?"

"Because I would like to make Canterlot the location in which these gateways open. It would make diplomacy so much easier, after all."

Celestia returned her attention briefly to Erin, who was currently leading her guards on a merry chase around the gardens. On impulse, she decided to speak with her privately before the business of the day started up in earnest.

"One last question, then, before I go," Celestia said, flaring her wings. The stallion nodded, waiting for the question. "Could we cast a spell that would help keep these gateways open indefinitely?"

"Hmm... an interesting question. I can't think of why not. It's simply a matter of stabilizing an existing fissure."

"Very good. Please look into it and let me know for certain."

"Of course, your highness."

With a final farewell, Celestia sprung from her balcony and glided down to intercept the human.

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Erin ran through the gardens, lost in thought and unaware that she was leaving her poor guards behind. It had been a rough few days, and the hardest part was the daily meetings with Celestia and her ministers and counselors, which often felt more like interrogations than planning sessions.

The ponies were scared, and it didn't help Erin's mood to realize that it wasn't without basis. After all, the ponies had almost as much to lose as the humans, here.

According to Celestia, the total population of Equestria was around two hundred million, and that included *all* the species that lived here. Ponies, mules, zebra, cows and buffalo, the occasional griffon, and so on... The human population would eclipse that thirty-five to one, and that wasn't even counting pets and livestock, and whatever other animals they hoped to rescue from Earth. Even counting in all the rest of the known sapient species in this entire world, the total came up to slightly under a billion souls, total.

To say that Equestria was about to be overwhelmed would be an almost comical understatement. But, try though she might, she still was no closer to figuring out a solution than she had been weeks ago, when she'd first become a pony.

She'd also been filling them in on human nature, as she'd promised. She'd initially been tempted to only

mention the positive things about humanity, but instantly realized that she couldn't live with herself if she refused to give the Princesses a complete picture of human nature. And, though it made her cringe inside to say it, the truth was that humans were occasionally violent, and on a large scale. Various groups of humans hated other groups enough that they would go through years of effort just to eliminate the other group, and often times these grudges lasted centuries.

Not that the inhabitants of this world hadn't had the occasional war themselves. Erin's reading of Equestrian history had uncovered several. The griffons and minotaurs were seemingly always at each other's throats, and occasionally either of those races came after Equestria. Ponies had the occasional border skirmishes with both of those races, as well as the occasional marauding dragon, Diamond Dog raids, altercations with the zebra tribes, these things happened on a fairly regular basis. There had even been a minor skirmish with the otherwise very friendly buffalo over a small pony settlement that just happened to be located on buffalo territory, though that one ended with no bloodshed.

So, it wasn't that war was unknown here, it just wasn't typically pony-on-pony violence. Trying to explain that humans would fight each other was hard enough. Explaining *why* got to be more difficult, especially when a lot of times a war was fought in response to the last war. To many of the ponies, it made humans seem insane. They really didn't get that there was a massive difference in theological, political and social ideologies that often separated one "tribe" of humans from another. Internal pony history had been peaceful since Celestia and Luna had arrived, well over a thousand years ago.

Many of the ministers seemed to be of the opinions that humans were brutish thugs and wanted nothing to do with them. Anything Erin said to try and paint a more complete picture of humanity was largely ignored. She mentioned charitable efforts, large scale disaster recovery efforts, and so on. Many of the counselors and ministers, who were completely happy to accept the worst things about humanity at face value, were dismissive of anything positive that Erin had to say, assuming it was all just her exaggerating in order to make her species sound better.

Celestia and Luna appeared to be reserving judgment until they got the full picture, or at least the overview of the full picture. There was far too much history for Erin to go over all of it, even just what she remembered. She was never a history buff, and she was pretty sure she'd gotten quite a few details wrong as it was.

Much more fun to her was going over the state of current Earth technology and society. She'd answered quite a few questions on that end, but a lot of it wasn't 'clicking' with the ponies. How can you explain things like the internet and computer tablets to a society who'd never heard of anything more technologically complicated than an electric light bulb? Just the vastness of the Earth's power grids seemed to confuse them.

Twilight Sparkle, by the request of Princess Celestia, was encouraged to attend these sessions. That led to the unfortunate side-effect of her friend having a million questions to ask after each session. Twilight said she'd already had a few ideas for improvements in Equestrian society. Erin could only warn her to be cautious with the changes she introduced, as many of them could have far-reaching and unforeseen side-effects.

Really, the only thing she'd refused to do in session or while talking to the Princesses privately was to speculate on the strategy of the human ambassadors, who would be coming soon enough, or to speculate on whether humans would wage war with the ponies if they refused to allow the evacuation. She didn't bother explaining that the humans would come regardless of the pony's wishes; Celestia and Luna already knew that, but if they'd decided not to tell their counselors and ministers, then it wasn't her place to do so for them. And, in any case, she didn't know what the plan was, and she wasn't about to guess.

Unfortunately, that meant that she'd been harassed with various amounts of intensity by different ministers who reported to Celestia and Luna. Some of them had even been downright rude and/or accusative.

One minister had even pushed his way into Erin's private quarters, demanding explanations and assurances that Erin couldn't and wouldn't give. She'd resolved the situation by leaving her room, running a large lap around the corridors as he'd followed, circling back to her room and slamming the door in his face and engaging the lock. He'd hammered on the door for twenty minutes, bellowing his questions through the door, until Celestia herself had shown up to tell him off.

Erin, cognizant of the fact that she was representing her entire species, tried to stay calm and smile during these times, even though she'd sometimes finding herself grinding her teeth. Those stuffy old ponies could be completely insufferable! They would ask questions that were impossible to answer, like how she, personally, could guarantee that no human would ever hurt a pony. And they were unsatisfied with explanations that she had no control over any human but herself.

The guards, who had briefly been removed, were now back, though that was more to ensure that she wouldn't be harassed by any more overzealous ministers than to keep Erin herself in check. But Erin also

got the sense that the guards were there to reassure the frightened ponies that she was being kept under close observation.

She was fine with that. Anything that made the ministers less afraid, and therefore less hostile, was welcome to her. It was a hard enough battle as it was.

She *did* have to roll her eyes (discreetly, of course) at some of the things that were discussed. For example, an elderly unicorn stallion named Heart's Bloom had spent apparently an entire evening drafting a letter to humanity that strictly forbade them from entering "sovereign Equestrian territory", and went on at some length, using extremely impressive and flowery language. Naturally, he insisted on reading out in its entirety during committee, but the declaration never specified what the Equestrians would do to stop humans if they ignored it. In the end, it was just well-written posturing.

Erin's thoughts were interrupted as a large shape swooped out of the air and landed gracefully in front of her. It was the Princess herself, and Erin was suddenly *very* aware of the fact that she'd been running around and sweating without having had a shower yet. She was sure her mane was a mess, and had to resist the urge to brush a hoof through it self-consciously to try and straighten it; her feet were muddy, and hooves didn't make good combs in any case.

"Princess," she said, bowing as she'd seen others do. "How can I help you this morning?"

"Good morning, Erin. I just had a few things I'd like to discuss with you this morning, if you have a moment."

"Oh, of course!"

Erin was vaguely aware of her guards, panting with effort, catching up to her. She glanced back and saw them wearily draw themselves to attention.

"What happened to you guys?" she asked, concerned. To her surprise, the guards glared at her briefly before snapping a salute to the Princess. Celestia nodded graciously to them, and the guards fell in behind them as they started walking together.

"How are the arrangements for the human ambassadors coming? Are they to your satisfaction?"

"Absolutely, Princess. The suite of apartments are... well, they're more than generous. The furnishings will work well for humans, and the menu is just perfect."

"It won't be a problem if we don't include meat on the menu?"

"No, we're omnivores. We can survive indefinitely without meat. In fact, quite a few of us are vegetarians."

"Oh? I hadn't known that."

"Yes, Princess. And eggs will do nicely as a meat substitute. Also, you have plenty of fruits, grains, and greens that we can eat. We can't eat hay, though. I had to take that off the menu, along with a few other things."

"I see. I hope the chefs weren't too upset with that?" The Royal Chefs of Canterlot were notoriously touchy regarding their menus, and were oftentimes known for their scalding tongues.

"Oh, no, they've been most understanding," Erin replied. "I think they enjoy the challenge. The only thing I'm concerned about is that only two of the rooms have electricity. But I'm sure they can work around that. I can't imagine that they wouldn't prepare for that by bringing at least a few solar chargers."

"Solar chargers?" Celestia asked, lifting an eyebrow at her.

"Ah, yes. They basically absorb sunlight and convert it to electricity."

"Fascinating," Celestia replied, sounding impressed. "So many things we could learn from each other..." she trailed off, looking thoughtful. Then she shook her head.

"That's all for later," Celestia continued. "Regarding the pegasi and carriages to bring the human diplomats here from Ponyville, that may not be necessary. We are working on a method to shift the Veil to make it more likely for the fissure to open in Canterlot. Probably out here in the gardens, away from prying eyes and curious crowds."

"You can do that?" Erin asked, amazed.

"Oh, yes. We can manipulate the Veil directly with magic. And that's another thing I wanted to ask you about, Erin. This whole incident has led us to unprecedented study of the Veil of Equestria. I know that

you're of the opinion that humans will come through one way or another, whether we welcome them or resist them, but that simply isn't true anymore."

Erin felt a chill as the Princess calmly stated a possible death sentence for her entire species.

"And your question, Princess?" Erin asked, cautiously.

"It is simply this." Celestia stopped walking and turned to face Erin directly. "We know from what you've told us that humanity has both the numbers and the weaponry needed to completely dominate our world. In your opinion, what would happen if we forbade those weapons from our world?"

"I... I don't want to speculate..." Erin said, panicked and at a loss.

"Please, Erin. This isn't a diplomatic conference. Nothing you say now will be considered binding by me. I wish to resolve this situation as peacefully as possible, but it makes me... uneasy... thinking of those weapons here. Once across into our world, humanity would be able to dominate us as completely as you dominate your herd animals. I don't want that. I don't believe that you do, either."

Erin stared at the ground by her hooves, torn with indecision. What should she say? The truth was that she didn't *know* how humanity would act in that situation. Honestly, there would be no single way they *would* react. The more she considered it, the more she realized that there wasn't an easy answer.

"There's no way to say, Celestia," she said, finally. "If such an ultimatum were leveled, I think the reactions would be... very mixed, to say the least. Some would be willing to do it. Many would refuse, and try to force their way in, regardless. I'm thinking many governments and individuals would try to sneak weapons in, in spite of your wishes."

"By asking that, you're essentially asking them to be completely helpless. We don't have magic or wings like ponies do, we just have our technology to protect ourselves. Basically, they're giving up their homes and their lives and their lands already, and you'd essentially be asking them to give up their ability to defend themselves, as well."

"There's really no way to say how humanity in general will act, because we don't speak with one voice. I think... if you banned weapons of war like tanks, bombs and jets, that would probably be accepted. At least, by most people if not by most governments. Trying to take away personal weapons like rifles and guns... I think that would make people afraid of what you were planning on doing to them."

"Hmm... I hadn't thought of it that way," Celestia replied. They walked together in silence for a few seconds while Celestia mulled things over, then the Princess spoke again.

"And how are you doing yourself, dear?" the Princess asked. "Have you recovered fully?"

"Yes, Princess. The doctors said so last night, and I feel pretty good now, actually."

"I'm very pleased that you suffered no lasting damage from Malachite's misuse of you," Celestia said.

Erin glanced at the Princess and saw a slight frown on her regal features. She recalled, suddenly, some parts of the conversation between Malachite and Celestia. Most of that night was a blur, but one thing did stand out.

"He was a student of yours, wasn't he?" Erin asked. Celestia's eyes looked pained when she mentioned that. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No, my dear, it's all right. Yes, he was, many years ago. I'd rarely met a mind as brilliant as his. He made vast inroads into the study of pony physiology and the biological nature of magic. Much of what he discovered is still being taught today. I'd thought I'd lost him centuries ago," Celestia continued with a sigh. "Instead, I was instrumental in his death."

Something clicked over in Erin's mind, as another part of that nightmarish night surfaced in her head.

"I don't think he's dead," she said without thinking.

Celestia halted in her tracks and stared at her intensely.

"What was that?" the Princess asked her.

"I.. um, I- I'm sorry, I should have mentioned sooner, but I was exhausted, and it was all a blur... I just forgot, and then I passed out..."

"Erin. Erin!" Celestia interrupted, laying a gentle hoof on her shoulder. "It's all right. Just explain what you mean."

"He... he babbled. A lot. When he was... controlling me," Erin replied, shuddering. "I think he was lonely. He said he hadn't talked to anypony in eight hundred years. But he was talking about a sanctuary. Somewhere he built to hide, while you eliminated the fae swarms from Equestria. Somewhere, he believed, that you wouldn't be able to break into."

Celestia looked away towards the horizon while Erin was talking, frowning slightly.

"Go on," she said. "What else did he say?"

"Something about... using life force to generate a shield, and locking himself in, somehow. He said it was a foolish... no, 'foalish' mistake."

"Did he say where this 'sanctuary' was?" Celestia asked.

"No... but I had a feeling that he was running me straight to it. If you follow my path from Ponyville, you'd probably find it somewhere along that route. He kept saying we were close when you found us."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Erin. If you'll excuse me, I need... I need to take care of this."

Erin watched as Celestia flew away, feeling uneasy. She'd never expected to see the Princess out of sorts. Something seemed significantly wrong with that.

"Miss?" one of the guards asked, interrupting her train of thought.

"Oh, um..." Erin shook herself, looking away from the Princess. "Yeah, let's head back. And, I guess I owe you guys breakfast, right?"

She trotted back towards the palace, not hearing as one of the guards behind her said, "She knows we get our food provided by the mess hall, right?"

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Twilight Sparkle wasn't exactly an early riser. She tended to study until late at night, going to bed only a few hours before most ponies woke up. That may be why she felt a little cranky that morning, not joining in very much in the early morning banter around the breakfast table.

The door opened and Erin, mane and tail still slightly damp from her morning shower, made her way into the room. The rest of the friends were already seated and eating. Along the wall, several trays of food were set out buffet-style, so that everypony could take as much of her favorites as she wished.

Rarity was nibbling delicately on some blueberry crepes, Applejack had oatmeal and toast with jam, Rainbow Dash was busily demolishing a stack of waffles, and Pinkie had a truly impressive stack of pastries in front of her.

For Twilight's breakfast, she was trying the castle kitchen's oat cakes. She hated to admit it, but they were as good as her mother's. Maybe even a little better.

As was now routine, Erin and the other ponies exchanged cheery greetings, and Erin trotted over to the buffet to grab a plate of food for herself.

"No Fluttershy today?" she asked, throwing a couple of oat cakes, some jam and assorted fruits onto her plate.

"She went back home on the train late last night," Rarity said. "She was missing her animal friends and wanted to check on them. She'll be back as soon as she's certain that Zecora is doing a good job caring for them, of which I am certain that she is."

"I'd like to meet Zecora one day," Erin said, bringing her plate to the table. Twilight scooted over to give her some room.

"Spying on zebras now, too?" Rainbow Dash asked teasingly around a mouthful of waffle. Rarity scolded her for talking with her mouth full, to which the pegasus rolled her eyes and grinned.

"You bet!" Erin said, with an echoing grin. "I won't be happy until I know everything about everything that lives here. Hopefully you won't mind when, once the humans get here, we install spy cameras in every room of your house."

"You aren't really going to do that, are you?" Rainbow asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course not!" Erin said, laughing. She took a bite out of her apple.

"Sorry we couldn't find a big bucket of meat for you, Erin. I know you humans like that stuff."

"Rainbow Dash, that's repugnant!" Rarity protested.

"Well, she does! She admitted it!"

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure I'm going to be a vegetarian for the rest of my life after coming here," Erin said. "Besides, I wouldn't eat meat as a pony. It would be... weird."

"You know, my griffon ex-friend Gilda used to eat live rats," Rainbow Dash said thoughtfully. "I always wondered what that was like."

Rarity groaned in disgust and shoved her plate away, glaring at the pegasus.

"What?" Rainbow asked, innocently.

"You do *quite* destroy one's appetite with that kind of talk," Rarity replied.

Twilight could sympathize with how Rarity felt, even though she didn't quite feel the same way herself. After all, Owloysisus hunted and ate mice. Then again, Opalescence would occasionally hunt, as well. Twilight wondered how much of her friend's revulsion was genuine, and how much was for the sake of drama.

"You're sure that the human's ponies and cows don't talk?" Twilight asked Erin again.

"Absolutely sure," Erin replied. "I've seen them, actually. The ponies look almost nothing like the ponies here. The cows *look* a lot like the cows here, but they definitely aren't intelligent at all."

"It's just that it's hard to wrap my mind around it," Twilight said. "We're going to have to figure out how to be very sure that humans don't try to eat anyone that's intelligent."

"I hope that won't be a problem," Erin replied, though she frowned as she said it. "I worry about it, though. Like I've said before, humans aren't used to sharing a world with other intelligent races. There may be some that simply can't accept it. It wouldn't hurt to be careful around strange humans until you get to know them."

"The thought of being eaten is utterly horrifying," Rarity said with a shudder.

"We'll just have to trust Celestia to make sure that doesn't happen," Twilight said. She was utterly confident that the Princess would take all the necessary steps to ensure everyone's safety.

"Maybe we should change the subject?" Erin suggested.

"To what?" Applejack asked.

"Well, how about to the fact that Malachite is probably alive?" Erin offered glumly.

Twilight sat up in shock.

"You're sure about this?" she asked.

"Not *sure*, no. I was talking to Celestia this morning, and-"

"You talked to Celestia?" Twilight interrupted, feeling a twinge of jealousy.

"Yeah, it was during my morning run. She came down to ask me a few things, and then we talked a little about him, and it suddenly occurred to me that he might still be alive."

"But... but we hit him with the rainbow!" Pinkie protested.

"Yeah, but he wasn't really there," Erin said. "He was controlling me remotely. It's like... like I was a puppet, and he held the strings. When you hit me, you cut the strings, but he's still out there."

Now *that* was unpleasant news, as far as Twilight was concerned.

"What did the Princess say about it?" she asked.

"I think she's going to try to find him. I told her that he's probably along the path I was running, since he apparently needed me to free him." Erin frowned at her breakfast, idly pushing a grape across her plate with her fork.

"Don't worry. If the Princess is going after him, she'll get him," Twilight assured her confidently.

"Yeah, something like that is no problem for the Princess," Rainbow Dash said.

"I suppose," Erin said, though she still looked preoccupied. Suddenly, a thought seemed to occur to her and she looked up at Pinkie Pie.

"Say, Pinkie, did you have any strange dreams last night?" she asked

"You bet I did!" Pinkie said, surfacing briefly from her abundant hoard of baked goods.

"Oh?" Erin asked, looking slightly spooked. "What was it about?"

"I was in a land that was made... entirely out of donuts!" Pinkie said, eyes wide. "It was the weirdest dream I've ever had!"

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah! Usually it's cake!" Pinkie flashed a grin around the table before returning her attention to Erin. "Why do you ask?"

"Um, I just had kind of a weird dream last night, and you were in it," Erin said.

"Oh?" Pinkie cocked her head to one side inquisitively. "What kind of dream?"

"Well..." Erin hesitated, then sighed. "Okay, I've been having nightmares every night since coming to the castle. Basically... well, I'm running through the forest again, with no control over my body, and either Doctor Velchiek or Malachite are talking in my ear. And I'm running towards something bad, really bad, though I don't know what it is. And I can't make myself stop."

"Last night was different, though. Usually, I just wake up right before I get to the big scary whatever-it-is that I was running towards. But last night I came out into a clearing, and you all were there, and you hit me with the Elements. After that, all of you but Pinkie were gone, and then she said we should go to my favorite place in the world."

"Ooh, neat! Where did we go?" Pinkie asked, bouncing slightly.

"A park where I used to play when I was a little girl," Erin said, smiling fondly at the memory. "And you... I mean, *dream*-you, said that I should talk to my friends about my nightmares."

"Dream-me is pretty smart," Pinkie said, nodding. Erin laughed and nodded at that.

"Yes, she is," Erin replied, smiling.

"It ain't no surprise it's bothering you, Erin," Applejack said. "That situation was scary enough on the outside, I can't imagine what it was like to go through it."

"It doesn't help to know that he's probably still out there, too," Erin said morosely. Something in her voice made Twilight's heart catch. A kind of hopelessness that reminded her of when Discord had turned her friends against their own natures.

Twilight glanced around the table and saw her own feelings reflected in her friend's eyes.

"Erin," Twilight said, laying a hoof on her shoulder, "we're here now, and we're willing to listen. Do you want to talk about it?"

Erin glanced up to see the same warm expression on each of the friend's faces. Twilight saw her smile as tears gathered in her eyes.

"Yes, I would. And thank you all."

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"That's completely absurd!" An elderly teal unicorn mare named Thistlewood shouted. "We can't do that, it's monstrous!"

"I don't see that we have a choice," Blizzard replied, shaking his ice-blue mane. "We simply can not provide an adequate environment to support potentially billions of herd animals. If these creatures are really as unintelligent as the human says, then we simply must leave them behind."

"And I tell you that suggestion is wholly unacceptable. We can't leave those animals to die!" Thistlewood responded fiercely.

"It doesn't matter. They'll die regardless, either from this... *Tide* thing on the human world, or of starvation here. Equestria simply can't contain that many living creatures and still thrive."

"Neither of you are listening to me!" Heart's Bloom said in his oddly deep voice. "The humans aren't coming here regardless! I've already written a declaration-

"Nuts to your declaration!" said a burgundy pegasus mare that Erin was unfamiliar with. "We're not going to leave an entire sapient species to die, just because it may make life difficult for us!"

"What about my lottery suggestion?" Ivory Wing said, spreading his namesake pure-white wings to make himself more noticeable.

"Your lottery idea is even worse nonsense than Blizzard's idea to leave the herd animals behind," Thistlewood snapped.

"I don't see why," Ivory Wing said calmly. "We obviously can't support seven billion of these humans. Why not just allow fifty million or so in? That's plenty for them to continue as a species without overloading our resources to the breaking point."

The argument raged on. Erin frowned, resisting the urge to rub at her throbbing temples. These sessions were always worse when Celestia wasn't here. The meeting had started on time for once, but the Princess hadn't arrived yet.

"We simply have to tell them to stop having children until the population gets down to a manageable level," a blue unicorn was saying in what she probably thought was a reasonable tone of voice. "And then we can allow the rest of them to come over."

Erin stifled a snort of irritation. Humanity had seen the lowest birthrate since the Black Tide impact in all of recorded history, and even after three years it still wasn't enough to put a significant dent in the worldwide population. It could take decades before enough humans died of old age for Equestria to be comfortable with allowing the remaining humans to come over. Decades that the Earth didn't have.

The debate continued in that vein for another half hour before Celestia arrived, spreading her wings in a signal for silence.

"My dear ponies," she began. "I appreciate the time and effort that you've put into this discussion. However, the time for planning is over. The humans will be here soon, and my sister and I have made our decisions."

Erin perked up, scarcely daring to breathe as she waited for the Princesses' decision.

"We are going to help them," Celestia said, and Erin breathed a sigh of relief. The Counsel Chamber erupted with protests.

"Your Highness, I must protest!" Heart's Bloom shouted, his voice echoing loudly around the chamber. "We can't allow a species as warlike as this to come to our world!"

"I understand your concerns. However, from everything that Erin has told me, they are no worse than ponies."

"How can you say that, Princess? Ponies have never warred with ponies in all of recorded history!"

"Oh?" the Princess said, arching an eyebrow. "I happen to predate recorded history, if you recall. Do you remember the Hearth's Warming Eve story of the founding of Equestria?"

The ponies in the Counsel chambers muttered to each other in confusion.

"Do you believe the Windigoes were able to blanket the land with snow over a simple argument?" Celestia asked, gazing around the chamber. "What is left out of the modern day retelling of that story is much the conflict that caused ponies to seek out a new land in the first place. The different tribes of ponies did not just argue. They fought. And they killed, trying to impose their wills on one another. The three tribes were devastated almost to the point of extinction before they fled their ruined land."

Erin could hear the whispered protests coming from the crowd below.

"I assure you, this is completely true. And, when the first settlers arrived here and found the other tribes arriving as well, they began again to kill one another once again over old slights. It took a revolution from the so-called 'lower classes' to overthrow the old nobility and bring peace to the land. And, since that time, we have learned a better way to live. A cooperative way. There were only two other inter-pony wars since then, and those were very minor affairs, fought between surviving nobles and the new Equestrian government."

"Why have we never heard of this?" Thistlewood asked, wide eyed.

"Because nopony wants to remember the horrors of our past, and what we did to each other in the name

of what we thought was right. If you go back far enough in the archives of the Royal Library, you will find the scrolls that describe these wars."

Celestia looked calmly around the room, stating, "You say that we can't allow humanity to come to Equestria, because they are warlike barbarians. But I assure you, they are no worse than we were, in our time. We have learned a better way. Judging by what I've seen of Erin's behavior, I believe that humanity can, as well. Regardless, we shall help them, because it is the correct and noble thing to do, and we are correct and noble ponies, are we not?"

If there were any who disagreed, their voices weren't heard as the rest voiced their affirmations.

"However, we are going to help them on our terms." Turning towards Erin, Celestia said, "Erin, I know you are not authorized to speak for your people, but I would like you to pass these terms on, if you could."

"Of course, Princess," Erin said apprehensively. "Assuming that we're able to talk again before they arrive later this week."

"Understood," Celestia said, inclining her head. "The first condition is that we will allow all humans who want to come here, provided that they each swear an oath to not harm any sapient creature native to our world, excepting in self-defense. That is non-negotiable."

"Can we trust these humans to keep their words?" Blizzard asked. Celestia raised an eyebrow to Erin in an unasked question.

"Well," she said nervously, "I believe that most of us will. Not all of us keep our promises, though."

"You see? We can't trust them!" Heart's Bloom said. "Princess, I really must protest—"

"It's noted, Heart's Bloom," Celestia replied, as placid as calm water. "That is good enough for me, Erin."

There was some grumbling in the chamber, which quieted as Celestia continued.

"The second requirement is that the humans acknowledge that, whilst in Equestria or any other nation of this world, they are bound by the laws of that nation. They can pass their own laws, but the laws of their host nation supersedes their own in the case of any conflict."

"That sounds reasonable, I don't see that being any kind of a problem," Erin said.

"The third touches on what we discussed earlier today. I won't allow them to bring their war machines to our world. However, I will allow personal weapons such as these... guns, I believe you called them? They may bring those, so that they can protect themselves as a species, and so that they may still feel safe."

Erin was relieved. The governments probably wouldn't be happy, but she believed that most people would.

"What about support vehicles, Princess?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, our military has a lot of machines that aren't specifically designed to hurt people. Transports, trucks, helicopters, things like that. Will they be allowed over, provided they aren't weaponized?"

"I believe that would be acceptable, though I would want a representative of our government to review these vehicles first," Celestia said. "There is one final condition. We won't evacuate humanity to our world until we are absolutely sure that we've tried everything we can to destroy the Black Tide on Earth. We may be able to make this migration unnecessary."

"Um, Princess," Erin replied hesitantly, "We've tried everything we can think of. Nothing did anything more to slow it down."

"You tried everything on *your* world, but there's something that you missed," Celestia said, smiling. Then her horn started glowing.

"Magic!" Erin said, excitedly.

"Indeed. It might be possible that we can solve this problem for you, thus eliminating the need to evacuate your home world. I would like for you to extend my offer to your people. We will do everything in our power to save your world, if they allow us access."

Erin felt hope flare in her chest at the thought. Maybe magic could do what science couldn't! It seemed almost too easy of an answer, but wasn't that what magic was for? To surpass the boundaries of physics?

"That's... wow, Princess, thank you! I mean... I can't say yes, of course, but I can't see that they'd turn you down!"

"Don't get your hopes up too far," Celestia said, chuckling at her obvious excitement. "It may very well be that we have to bring humanity here, regardless. And, for that, I have another suggestion."

Celestia's horn glowed again, and a large roll floated into the chambers. Celestia unrolled it, and Erin recognized it as a large map of the world.

"Here we are," Celestia said, indicating a portion of the map. "As you can see, we are a large nation. Only the Zebra tribes cover more territory than us, and they're much more sparsely populated. I've been in negotiations with the zebra ambassadors for the last few days, and we have finally reached an agreement, pending an unsatisfactory resolution of our attempts to eradicate the Black Tide."

Celestia floated a pointer out with her magic and tapped on a section of northern Equestria.

"The Zebra Nations have agreed to exchange some of our territory, specifically this area here, for the much larger and nearly unpopulated land of Zanibra, here."

Celestia tapped a large land on the map that looked roughly fifty percent larger than Australia.

"This land is mostly inhospitable desert right now. But with some pegasi volunteers controlling the weather and with earth ponies working together with the human farmers, I'm certain we can turn it into a land of abundance and comfort within a decade. This is where we will settle the humans."

"A decade?" Erin asked, alarmed, though her voice was drowned out by the outraged protesting of several counselors.

"Give up our sacred land?" Heart's Bloom's voice boomed out angrily. "Why should we do such a thing?"

"Because life is more sacred than land. And because giving up a few dozen square miles of land that we're barely using is an extremely small price to pay to save the lives of so many. And, most importantly, because *not* helping them in such a desperate time would make us into something less noble than we currently are."

Celestia said all of that calmly, firmly, but without any kind of sternness or anger. The protests in the chambers muted to a dull muttering.

"And, yes, Erin. It will take a decade before that land is able to support the human race. It will be crowded, as well, but I understand that your kind are very good at building compact housing. And, once your kind has acclimatized to living on this world, the various nations can allow migrations of the human populations within their borders.

"If humanity accepts my offer, you have my personal guarantee that they will not starve. I've already asked the farmers to begin increasing their crop production. By this time next year, Equestria will be producing enough food to make up for any shortfall from the land of Zanibra.

"In return, we merely ask that you send us teachers, so that we may learn your science, and engineers, to help us build some of the wonderful things that you've told us about. But that would be on a voluntary basis, and they will be compensated for their time."

Celestia smiled gently at her, and said, "It may be that you will have to ration your food for a few years, but we will do everything we can to keep you alive."

Erin didn't know what to say about that. On the one hand, it was a good solution for many problems. Keeping the humans separate would prevent any unfortunate misunderstandings with the local sapient creatures, and would also probably comfort the more xenophobic of both humans and ponies. On the other, it seemed a little bit too much like segregation for her to be completely comfortable with it.

Still, if they had their own land, then they could set up their own governments and laws. Erin was hopeful that it could be done without bloodshed. She knew from past experience that humanity had a great capacity to band together in the face of a common threat or difficulty; the Black Tide had almost completely ended war on Earth, ushering in an age of unprecedented peace and cooperation.

It was probably the best solution. Erin certainly couldn't think of a better one, herself. It was definitely better than humanity stripping Equestria bare like a swarm of locusts or being devoured by the Tide.

"Thank you, Princess," she said sincerely. "I will pass along your generous offer."

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Several large war chariots, each drawn by four pegasi Royal Guards, descended slowly to the lifeless

earth. As soon as they touched down, their occupants, all Royal Guards themselves, exited quickly and efficiently.

The object of their attentions was a small cavern in the middle of a near-perfect ring of deadened plant life. The earth itself was barren and dusty, barely held down by the crumbling roots of the dead and dying trees and shrubs.

Celestia herself touched down lightly, regarding the area around her with cautious interest. It was like her guards had told her, a dead zone in the middle of the wilderness, all surrounding this cave. If she'd had a map, a line drawn between Sweet Apple Acres and the clearing where they'd recovered Erin would have led straight here. There was no doubt in her mind that this was the place. It had taken her guards slightly less than a day to find it and report back.

The cave was really nothing more than a small mound of rocks with a gap in the front, leading to deep darkness within. Celestia's skin tingled eerily as she approached it, and she knew immediately that the feeling wasn't natural.

"Be on your guard," she told the soldiers around her. "There is a spell here that saps life force. Be cautious where you step, and stay away from the cave mouth."

The guards all nodded. Their captain, a grizzled pegasus named Storm Front, set them in a perimeter around the cave, in two rings, one inside of the other. Earth ponies and unicorns alternated position. The pegasi arranged themselves overhead, forming a dome of soldiers over the cave itself.

Celestia approached the opening cautiously and noted the bleached bones in a heap near the cave entrance. The horned skull stared at her mournfully, and the Princess felt a surge of remorse, both for what had already happened, and for what she had to do next.

"Malachite," she called gently. "We need to talk."

The voice that responded sounded so very similar to the hated buzzing of the fae swarms that it made Celestia's skin crawl. But she recognized the echo of her student's voice from within the voice of the swarm.

"Hello, Celestia. It took you less time to find me than I'd hoped."

"I'm afraid it wasn't difficult. The course that you made Erin run led straight here."

"I know. And, for what it's worth, I truly am sorry for what I did to her."

"I believe you, Malachite," Celestia replied. "But I can't allow the fae swarms to rise again in Equestria."

"I know," Malachite said. "And, believe it or not, I have come to accept that. This cave... it has been my sanctuary for so long, the perfect fortress to protect me. The very life energy that fuels the shield keeps me fed and whole. And yet, I locked myself in. Did you see the bones?"

"Yes, I did."

"So foolish. So foolish. I was so certain that I could retain control of my body through the shield. When I activated it, I found that I could not. The poor dumb thing just stood there until it collapsed and died."

Malachite sighed, then, a bitter sound.

"I can't describe to you how it felt to watch my own body die and be able to do nothing about it, Celestia. It died of thirst. Of thirst! And it even rained on the second day I was here. With my mind removed from it, there was nothing to tell it to drink, even as it stood in a puddle of rainwater. And so, it died. It rotted. And now only the bones remain, a constant reminder of my failure and foolishness."

"I can release you from this prison," Celestia said, kindly. "You can see the sun again, feel the wind once more. Allow me to take you back to Canterlot. I shall have to imprison you again, but we can search for a way to fix this. Perhaps we can remove your mind from the swarm. Perhaps we can find some way to give you back a measure of the life you lost when you entered this unholy pact."

Malachite sighed heavily.

"Believe me, Princess, I have thought about this for centuries. The only way to part me from the swarm is to kill me. I don't want to die, Celestia. But I've come to a hard realization in the last few days. When I controlled Erin, that was the first time in over eight centuries that I'd actually felt *alive*."

"I can't stand this any longer. I simply can't. I've survived for too long like this. This body, this cave, this *prison*... and I can't even go properly insane! This form isn't suited for it, did you know that? For eight hundred years I've been stuck here, forced to remain stark, raving *sane*!"

There were a few seconds of silence, and then Malachite said, "Death would be a kindness to me now, Celestia. Far better to die than to live on like this. I will tell you... I will tell you how to deactivate the shield. And then I will ask for your mercy."

"Thank you, Malachite," Celestia replied, bowing her head.

Malachite called instructions through the entrance. The shield was unlocked by the careful tapping of selected stones with her hooves, in a specific order, with a certain rhythm. Celestia felt the stones drain a minuscule portion of her energy with each tap, to power the spell that would unlock the gate. After a few moments of instructions and tapping, there was a flickering over the mouth of the cave. The shield flared briefly, and then went dark.

Celestia backed away from the entrance. Behind her, the guards redoubled their vigilance, wary of a last-ditch escape attempt.

The shadows in the cavern moved, and Malachite himself stepped out. Or, perhaps, "flowed" out would be a better word. Shaped of darkness, formless and vague, Malachite pulled himself out into the afternoon sunlight. Thousands upon thousands of sickly greenish dots shifted through his form, looking like fireflies trapped in smoke. Those were the bodies of the fae swarm itself, bound together by the will of Malachite into a collective shape.

The shadows formed themselves into the rough approximation of the body of a large stallion. A pair of glowing jade-green eyes stared out from the head, which bowed in deference to Celestia.

"My Princess," Malachite said in the voice of the swarm. "It truly is a pleasure to see you once again with mine own eyes."

"Malachite. In spite of everything, I am glad to see you once again, and to be able to say 'farewell'."

"May I have just three final requests, Princess?"

Celestia tensed. She wasn't adverse to granting a last request, but Malachite's mind had been one of the sharpest she'd ever known, and now it had been warped not only by being fused to the swarm, but by eight centuries of isolation. She'd be a fool to not expect a trick.

"You may make your requests, Malachite. And I may or may not grant them," she told him warily.

"Peace, Princess. My first request is merely to stand in your sun once again. The light I received in the cave was... a poor substitute. If I may?"

"You may," Celestia said, standing aside.

Malachite moved slowly, stepping forward on limbs that were formed of dark smoke. He moved out into the clearing of death, looking around slowly. He saw the guards encircling him both on the ground and in the air and chuckled wryly.

"Taking no chances, are we, Celestia?" he asked.

"Of course not," Celestia said. "I have far too much respect for you to take you lightly."

Malachite hesitated, looking at her with apparent surprise.

"That... was unexpected. Thank you, Princess."

Malachite seemed content to just stand in the sun, feeling the wind against him. He sighed in apparent contentment.

"I can't tell you how much I've missed this, Princess. I really can't."

Malachite turned towards her, and for the first time, Celestia noticed a darker shape, solid and black, within his body.

"What is that?" Celestia asked.

"What, this?" Malachite asked, moving the shape out to where she could see it. She recognized one of the probes that Erin's people had sent over, though this one was badly damaged. "Simply a memento, nothing more. It doesn't even work properly. It was how my mind got out, you see. These devices all talked to one another, in a way that bypassed my rather ingenious shield. If it weren't for this one, I'd still be in that cave, probably requiring another few centuries before anypony found me."

"Please put it down, Malachite," Celestia said.

"Put it..? Oh, of course."

Malachite casually tossed the probe away, back towards the cave. Celestia watched it warily before returning her attention to the shadowy figure.

"It's barely functional, Celestia. I assure you, there is no way in which I could use that device to manufacture an escape."

"I prefer to take no chances. What was your second request?" Celestia asked, torn between wanting this finished and dreading what must be done.

"I ask that you deliver my sincerest apologies to miss Erin Sunflower, for so badly abusing her in such a fashion. I was desperate, yes. But what I did was still inexcusable. I almost wish she were here, so that I could beg her forgiveness in person, but I can't imagine she'd wish to be anywhere near me."

"I will grant that request, Malachite. And your third request?"

"Ah, yes. My third, and final request."

The shadowed figure of Malachite moved to face her directly.

"My final request is not for me, Celestia. It is for you."

"Me?" Celestia asked, surprised.

"Yes. I request... no, I *beg*, that you forgive yourself for this day. I know you, or at least I did. And I know how badly what's about to happen would have torn you up back then. I can't imagine it would be any easier for you, now. I ask that you forgive me as well, for putting you through this."

"Malachite, I... I thank you. And, I forgive you. And, for whatever you may think it's worth, I am sorry as well."

"Oh, my dear teacher," Malachite said, sadly. Then, grotesquely, the shadowy head split apart in a feral grin. "You'll have done nothing to be sorry *for*."

Sheathed in dark green smoke, dozens of probes swarmed out of the cavern mouth. Several of them impacted Celestia, knocking her momentarily sideways. The guards, startled, turned their attention to the new threat. Malachite moved shockingly fast, much faster than Celestia remembered the fae swarms moving.

"Stop him!" she commanded. Her guards attempted to rally while fending off attacks from the maddened machines. Several guards were down, victims of an unfortunate blow to the head.

Celestia launched herself into the air, horn glowing. Her magic reached out, attempting to snag the fleeing Malachite, but several of the probes struck her or flew towards her head, distracting her just long enough to lose her grip on her magic. She recovered herself barely in time to see Malachite slip into the still-living underbrush at the edge of the ring of death.

Only sheer force of will prevented Celestia from screaming in frustration. Her horn flared, and a bubble of golden light spread out, knocking the remaining probes out of the air.

"After him!" she shouted. "Find him! Move in pairs, to prevent him possessing any one of you."

Her guards spread out, searching frantically. Celestia joined in the search as well. It wasn't until hours later, when it was time for Celestia to set the sun, that she finally admitted it to herself.

Malachite had escaped into the wilds of the Everfree.

Chapter 21: Humans in Equestria

The Canterlot gardens had no idea what was about to hit them. The air nearly crackled with magical potential in the bright afternoon sun as a circle of a dozen unicorns, horns glowing, surrounded a bare patch of grass. In the center of the circle stood Princess Luna, her horn glowing and wings half-spread as she frowned in concentration. Twilight Sparkle, blinking furiously to keep the sweat out of her eyes, carefully matched her output to the other unicorns around her.

On one side of the circle her friends waited eagerly. Erin was having a conversation with her human friend Maggie. Her Ponyville friends were looking on with expressions ranging from fear (Fluttershy), to apprehension (Applejack and Rarity) and excitement (Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash).

"Increase power to twenty thaums and prepare to harmonize with Ponyville," Luna said, voice ringing out loud and clear. Twilight and the other unicorns raised their energy output to match Luna's command.
"Erin, ask your friend to send the signal that we are ready."

"Yes, Princess," Erin said. Twilight knew that one of the human-controlled probes was now bobbing up and down in the field just outside of Ponyville, where another group of unicorns, led by Celestia, were casting a similar spell.

Twilight was excited, honored, and completely terrified to be a part of this event. If they were successful, then many historical firsts would be accomplished today. The first time the Veil had been directly influenced by a spell like this, the first time that a fissure was opened using both magic and technology, the first time that magic had been used to select the location of that fissure, and the first time that visitors from another world would then use that fissure to open diplomatic relations with Equestria. If this all turned out, every pony here would have their names in the history books for what they'd accomplish this day.

She found herself eagerly wondering what the humans looked like. Erin had tried to describe them, but with no point of reference, Twilight was having a hard time imagining them. In her mind, she was picturing elongated monkeys of a sort, which seemed both disturbing and comical. Of course, once they were done, then she wouldn't have to wonder any more. She would see them for herself.

"Focus, Twilight Sparkle!" Luna commanded. "Bring yourself back into sync!"

"Yes Princess!" Twilight replied, inwardly cursing herself for her lack of concentration. This was no time to daydream! Everypony was counting on her to do her part!

The air hummed oddly, setting her teeth on edge. She was amazed to discover that she could actually *feel* the Veil shifting, though she wasn't sure exactly how she was feeling it. There was a sense of motion, and a rippling in the magical field. Princess Celestia had another dozen unicorns in Ponyville casting a very similar spell, and she could feel a hint of her teacher's familiar magic as the Veil moved.

"Almost," Luna said, scowling with her own efforts in shaping the field. "Increase output to twenty-three thaums, prepare for full synchronization!"

Twilight grunted with effort as she increased her output. Her horn now had an overglow, small sparks of raw magic popping off randomly. She hoped that she wasn't the only one here who was so taxed by this amount of effort. Celestia had asked her, personally, to be on this team, expressing her confidence that Twilight would be able to keep pace with the older and much more experienced members of the Arcanum. Twilight couldn't handle the thought of letting the Princess down. She focused her attention single-mindedly. If anypony was going to mess this spell up, it wasn't going to be *her*!

"Erin, alert your people that we are prepared!" Luna said. Erin nodded and said something, presumably to Maggie, that Twilight couldn't overhear.

A second tone clambered over the first, jarring and unsettling. The two different tones were out of harmony, almost at odds with one another. It was like chewing tin to Twilight, and she felt her skin crawling at the sensation. Desperately, she tried to block it out, refocusing on the spell, concentrating on keeping her stream of magic feeding steadily into the shared pool that Luna was shaping.

The two tones gradually shifted, coming more and more into tune with one another. Finally, they harmonized completely, and a section of the air shimmered as if in a heat-haze. The shimmering became more pronounced until, finally, a window resolved in the air, hanging perhaps two inches off of the ground.

"Halt!" Luna commanded. "The spell is complete!" Groaning, Twilight released her magic. She was somewhat relieved to see that she wasn't the only one feeling run down by the intense spell-casting

session. Several others were collapsed on the ground in apparent exhaustion. Attendants brought around drinks of water and were assisting several worn-out unicorns back to their hooves.

She waved away an attendant who was trying to give her water. Now wasn't the time to be refreshing herself, there was a window to another world hanging in the air in front of her!

Twilight stared into the window with acute interest. She was looking into another world! Granted, what she saw wasn't all that impressive, but that was beside the point! Various gadgets lined the walls, which were apparently made out of concrete and metal. There were a group of figures standing before the window. She stared, thrilled and fascinated, at her first glimpse of actual humans.

They didn't really fit her preconceptions. She was expecting bigger ears and lower brows, for some reason. Also, they were all wearing suits or skirts or various other articles of clothing, many with what seemed like an odd cut, at least to her eye. She'd spent enough time with Rarity to know that the fabrics looked very high quality, and the clothing, though somewhat odd-looking, was very well tailored.

She was surprised by how well she could read their emotions, considering she'd never seen one of them before. For the most part, they seemed to be caught somewhere between fascination and fear.

Their hair was mostly like Erin had said, sprouting out of the tops and sides of their heads in various styles and colors, though they seemed to be restricted to a range of blacks, browns and yellows. She wondered, idly, which ones were males and which were females. It seemed fairly safe to assume the ones with skirts were females, but she'd wait for confirmation before making any assumptions. Though, she did recall that ones with beards were going to be male. She made out a few of those standing in the crowd, and, judging by their general appearance, marked several of the non-bearded ones as likely males as well.

One of the humans, this one with a shortly-cropped grey mane and no facial hair, stepped forward boldly through the gateway. The other humans trailed after, somewhat nervously, as the first one bowed deeply at the waist to Luna and said in an oddly-accented masculine voice, "Princess Luna. It is my very great honor to meet you. I am Sir Arthur Douglas of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and a representative of the United Nations. On behalf of all nations on Earth, I extend to you our most sincere thanks for your welcome to your world, and for your invitation to speak with you on what is a matter of great urgency to us all."

The other humans bowed as well, but none of the others introduced themselves. Twilight gathered that 'Arthur Douglas' was the lead spokes-human for the group.

Luna smiled warmly, spreading her wings slightly as she stepped forward, her royal regalia glinting in the light.

"Welcome, humans, and Sir Arthur Douglas. Welcome to Equestria. On behalf of my sister, Princess Celestia, myself, and the government of Equestria, I extend to you the spirit of friendship and cooperation, and hope that we can negotiate well, to our mutual benefit. For now, however, I will turn you over to Chancellor Oats, who will see that you are settled comfortably. For the time being, I must consult with my sister. I hope you won't mind my absence. Fare you well."

With that, Luna spread her wings and sprung into the air. The apparently awestruck humans watched her go, mouths gaping open. Which is probably why they almost missed it when a rose-colored unicorn mare with a red mane and purple glasses stepped forward, bowing her head formally.

"Good afternoon. I am High Counselor Rosy Oats, head of the Royal Equestrian Ministry of Diplomatic Relations. I will gladly lead you to your rooms. Or, if you prefer, we could take a tour of the palace?"

Very quickly, it was agreed that several of the humans would take the tour, while the rest, possibly servants or aides, would move the baggage and equipment into their rooms. Eight of the humans walked off with Chancellor Oats, trailing a collection of ponies from both the guards and ambassadorial aide staff, while the remaining seven remained behind, bringing bags and boxes and strange, wheeled suitcases across into Equestria. The Canterlot porters materialized out of whatever mysterious space they inhabited when their services weren't required in order to help with the carrying.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Erin bouncing excitedly on her hooves, apparently trying to catch the attention of one of the humans in the garden. She wandered closer, curious, and heard her friend stage-whispering "Maggie! Maggie, over here!"

The human, a female, turned at that. When she saw Erin, a huge grin broke out on her face, and she crowed, "Erin! Girl, it's good to see you!"

The plump human rushed over to the excited pony and gave her a quick hug around the neck. Twilight stared in surprise. *This was Maggie?* She didn't look anything like Twilight had expected! She had expected... well, a more commanding figure, like Princess Celestia. This human was a bit shorter and somewhat rounder than the others, with streaks of grey in her brownish mane. However, Twilight decided

that she had a friendly and open smile.

"Allow me to introduce my friends," Erin said.

"I feel like I know them already!" Maggie said with a broad smile. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie looked openly curious, almost rudely so, while Applejack and Rarity seemed more reserved. Fluttershy, of course, was doing her best to be inconspicuous, hiding behind Applejack.

Erin quickly introduced her pony friends one by one. When she got to Fluttershy, Twilight watched in amazement as the human kneeled onto the grass. Slowly, she held out one of her hands, palm-up, smiling gently at the cowering pegasus.

"Hello, Fluttershy," Maggie said softly. "My name is Maggie. I know you get nervous around new people, but I just want to say that I would never hurt you, and I really hope that we can be friends."

Fluttershy looked out from behind Applejack nervously, staring wide-eyed at the human.

"h-Hello..." she said, then, ducked back behind AJ. Maggie sighed.

"Well, I guess that's as much as I could expect," she said, standing back up.

"Actually, that's more than I got out of her when I first met her," Twilight said, smiling as she trotted up. "It wasn't until she saw Spike that she opened up. If you really want to talk to Fluttershy, get a cute animal and show it to her."

"Ah! Twilight Sparkle, I'm very pleased to meet you!" Maggie said, smiling and extending her hand. Twilight extended her hoof, and Maggie shook it gently. Her hands were warmer than she'd expected. "You're a mare after my own heart, a scientist and a scholar!"

"This feels so odd," Twilight said, chuckling nervously. "You know so much about us, but today's the first day we've even seen any humans."

"Except Erin, of course," Maggie said with a wink.

"She doesn't count."

"Hey!" said Erin, full of mock-indignation. Maggie, as well as several of the ponies, laughed.

"Well," said Maggie, "Amongst a select few humans, you guys are pretty famous, after all."

Behind Applejack, Fluttershy let out a quiet squeak of distress at the word 'famous'.

"Really? Famous?" Rainbow Dash asked perking up. "You don't say? Hmm..." Her eyes drifted over to the humans toiling by the gateway. "I think I'll just... head over there and see if I can lend them a hoof."

Twilight rolled her eyes as her pegasus friend wandered oh-so-casually over to the working humans to ask if they needed any 'help'. She turned back to Maggie with a smile.

"Well, I'm looking forward to visiting your world. When can we stop over there?"

"Well..." Maggie said, looking uncertain. "At the moment, Equestria and Project Harmonics are still top secret from the general public. We didn't want to get folks' hopes up until we were certain that we could move here. There's going to be a general announcement soon, but I'm afraid just having ponies walking around on Earth would be a little bit of a giveaway. If you really wanted to, though, I *could* authorize you to walk around the Harmonics labs, at least the secure sections. Would you like that?"

"That would be interesting! Erin, care to show me around?"

"Sure, I think that would be kind of fun! Besides, I'd like to pick up some of my stuff from my old room, like my tablet. Anypony else want to come with us?"

"I'll admit to being curious," Applejack said.

"Thank you," Rarity said, "but I believe Fluttershy and I shall go and have some tea somewhere quiet instead."

Rarity smiled warmly at the obviously much-relieved Fluttershy, who quickly stopped hiding behind Applejack and instead started hiding behind the fashionista instead as they both walked off.

Twilight was about to ask Pinkie what her thoughts were, but hyperactive pony was nowhere to be seen. Looking around, Twilight finally saw her passing out what looked like party invitations to the humans left behind at the gate.

"Should we get going then?" she asked urgently, tingling with eagerness to explore as much of this new world as she'd be allowed to see.

"Sure thing, Twilight," Maggie said. She stood up, groaning and complaining about her knees, and then motioned the others to join them. As they approached the gateway, Twilight heard Pinkie talking rapidly to the reluctant and baffled-looking humans.

"I know there's an official reception tomorrow night, but that's going to be all official and booo-ring! Trust me, you guys are gonna want to come to my party, tonight! I'll have cake and cookies, and punch and party games and I even drew up a new poster for a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-human, but I forgot you guys don't have tails, but that's okay, because it's all just in good fun anyways, right?"

"Trust me on this one, fellas," Erin said as they got closer, "You do *not* want to miss a Pinkie Pie Party. I've never had more fun in my life than that!"

Pinkie beamed at the praise, and the humans at the gateway hesitantly took their invites from the hyperactive pony.

"We're going to go visit Earth," Twilight said to Pinkie and the nearby Rainbow Dash, who looked frustrated for some reason. "Did you two want to come with us?"

"You bet!" Pinkie said, bouncing happily. "I want to see an Earth pony!" She stopped bouncing briefly, thinking over her last statement. "I mean, not an earth pony, but a pony from Earth!"

"Well, we can probably show you some videos," Erin said, "But I guess we're not going to be leaving the Harmonics lab today."

"Awww," Pinkie said with a pout.

"Look, let's just get going, okay?" Twilight said, her eagerness overwhelming her patience.

She turned towards the gate, took a deep breath, and stepped quickly through before her nerves failed her. The sound of her hooves echoed oddly on the concrete floor as she stepped into the large area on the other side of the gateway. She exhaled her breath and looked around, mildly disappointed. She'd expected something more... odd, when she crossed over the barrier. Some sensation that denoted that she'd stepped from one world into another. Instead, it was just like walking into a room from outside.

Humans in long white coats scattered around the room straightened up, looking at her with some surprise. Most of them were sitting behind odd glowing rectangles on desks, others were carrying similar small rectangular devices around. All activity stopped, though, as they became aware of the ponies in the room.

She heard them whispering to each other excitedly as she walked slowly into the room. She heard a clattering behind her and turned to see that Erin, along with Pinkie and Maggie, had followed her into the room. Applejack and Rainbow Dash glanced at each other doubtfully for a moment before they stepped through at the same time.

"This is the first time most of them have seen a pony from your world in the flesh," Erin said, stepping up behind her. "I hope you don't mind that they're staring a little."

"Doesn't bother me," Twilight said, forcing a smile. The truth was, it was a little unnerving to be on the receiving end of this much attention from aliens. She was suddenly very glad that Rarity had made excuses for Fluttershy. The timid pegasus likely would have imploded with this many strange eyes on her.

She glanced back at the others. Only Pinkie seemed completely unfazed, rubbernecking with unabashed curiosity. Applejack and Rainbow huddled close together, both trying to look nonchalant, but failing miserably.

Twilight heard a small commotion from the room, and turned back to see a small group of scientists, mostly male from what she could tell, approaching nervously. One of them was holding a thick piece of square paper in front of his chest. Egged on by his colleagues, he approached the ponies hesitantly, walking slowly towards Rainbow Dash, who eyed him with no small amount of her own apprehension.

"Um, excuse me, Miss Dash, but... If it's not a problem..." He held out the paper, and Twilight could see that it was a remarkably vivid photograph of her pegasus friend, a fierce scowl on her face, standing on the back of a downed chimera in a field outside of Ponyville.

"I'm a big fan," the human said, also holding out a pen. "Could I have an autograph?"

Rainbow looked shocked for a moment, and then a look of sheer joy suffused her features.

"Aw, yeah!" her friend said.

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Erin barely managed to stop herself from sighing with frustration as the ponies were suddenly swamped by admiring and curious scientists. Rainbow and Pinkie were eating it up, but Applejack looked about ready to jump out of her skin, and Twilight seemed to be actively looking for places to hide.

Several more scientists had prints of the ponies and were waving them at them, trying to get autographs. Others were trying to ask questions, which quickly got loud as they had to shout over the din of everyone else's questions.

"Okay, that's enough!" she shouted over the noise, stomping a hoof. "These ponies are visitors to our world, remember. Give them some room to breathe! There's all the time in the world to talk to them later, now that we can visit whenever we want to."

"Erin's right," Maggie said sternly, arms crossed. I want you all back to your stations and monitoring this gateway for any distortions or anomalies, got it? The ponies may be stabilizing it, but that doesn't mean we get to slack!"

Some of the scientists muttered in protest, but they all moved back to their stations, while Erin tapped her hoof in annoyance.

"Sorry about that," Maggie said. "We all get to watch the footage of your adventures in Ponyville, and a small fandom has sprung up."

"It's okay," Twilight said, though she looked a little shell-shocked. "I'd probably be the same way, if things were the other way around."

The ponies settled down after a while, and Erin took on the role of tour guide, answering questions and pointing things out excitedly. It was more fun than she'd expected to have, showing her friends the aspects of Earth life that she considered routine and mundane, but that the ponies were fascinated by.

Unfortunately, the areas that they were allowed to tour weren't all that large. She did bring them to her old obstacle course, though, explaining that this was where she'd learned to be a pony. Of course, after that, nothing would do except for Applejack and Rainbow Dash to race each other through the course.

The rest of the group watched the two friends go through the obstacles. Erin was overcome with a sense of nostalgia as she turned to Maggie and said, "I know you could turn me back to a human, but I'm really not in any hurry. I'd like to stay as a pony for a while until things get settled."

"That's good," Maggie said, watching the ponies run the race. Pinkie had suddenly decided to run as well, catching up to the other two surprisingly quickly. "The Ascent labs are closed down right now, in any case."

"What do you mean?" Erin asked, alarmed.

"Well, once you were ponified and shipped off, we really didn't need Hermann and his crew here anymore, so we shipped them off to India to see if they could do anything to slow down the Tide at all. They're the international experts on nanotech, after all. We could get them back, but it would probably take weeks before they could get out here."

"Oh..."

Erin felt a little bloom of worry over that, and Maggie must have picked up on it.

"I thought you were okay with staying a pony for a while?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, I am. But there's a difference between being willing to stay like this and not having any choice in the matter."

"Oh. Yeah, I can see that. But don't worry! It shouldn't be any longer than a month or two before he can spare some time to come back."

"No rush, I guess..." she said, dissatisfied. She glanced up and saw Twilight giving her a look of sympathy, and smiled awkwardly back.

"Are you going to be okay, Erin?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, sure. It's not like I mind being a pony," Erin said, honestly. "And I was ready to stay this way for convenience sake anyways. I just... I kind of worry that things might go wrong, is all."

Twilight pressed her shoulder against her in the pony equivalent of a comforting hug, and Erin leaned back into it.

Shortly after that, their friends finished running the course. Surprisingly, Pinkie had finished well in the lead, and was bouncing excitedly on her hooves.

"Let's do that again!" she said, grinning.

"Let's not," Applejack replied, obviously winded, as she trotted up. "That took more outta me than I expected!"

"You're just getting out of shape, AJ," Rainbow taunted, though she looked pretty tired herself.

Erin looked at her friends, concerned. This obstacle course was more for developing basic pony skills, not for endurance. She knew from personal experience that the other two were more than athletic enough to breeze through this without breaking a sweat, and yet they were both sweating profusely.

She wasn't the only one that was concerned. Twilight was regarding her friends with a small frown.

"Applejack, would you mind if I lifted you up, briefly?" the unicorn asked. "I just want to check something."

"Um. Okay, I guess."

Twilight's horn glowed, and the earth pony lifted a foot off the ground. Twilight then moved her friend a few feet to the side before putting her back down.

"Is everything okay, Twilight?" Erin asked. Her unicorn friend was frowning and staring at the floor.

"Everything is okay, yes, but that wore me out more than it should have. It's very subtle, but I've been feeling something was off for the last few minutes. My guess is that the magical field of Equestria is radiating slightly into Earth from the open gateway, but the further we go from it, the less magic we have access to. Since Applejack and Rainbow Dash's magic is mostly physical, they noticed the effects of it first. However, we should be careful not to go *too* far away from the gateway. I don't know what would happen."

Erin noted that her friends looked a little sickly at the thought of not having any magic. She definitely sympathized. Having no magic would probably be like losing a limb, to them.

"Maybe we should go back?" Maggie suggested. "We've already seen most of the interesting things we can by now."

"That's probably a good idea," Twilight said, smiling gratefully.

"Actually, Maggie, could you take them back without me?" Erin asked. "I want to get a few things from my room, and maybe see Doctor Edwards really quick. I have to thank him for his help."

Erin also had a favor to ask him, but she felt stupid even thinking about it. She imagined that the irritable scientist would likely just bite her head off for daring to waste his precious time.

They said their goodbyes, and Maggie led the ponies back to the gateway. Erin took a moment to orient herself and then trotted off to find the room she'd stayed in as a pony. It was only a short trot there, and she smiled broadly at the familiar faces of the scientists and technicians she ran into in the hallways, all of whom greeted her with surprise.

Her room was as she remembered it. She went to her night stand and was going to grab her tablet and the charger when she realized that she'd left her saddlebags back in Equestria. Sighing, she took her pillow out of the case and shoved the tablet in there. She also stuffed in a book she'd been reading, an old-fashioned paperback. It was a Discworld book, and one she'd read before, but she hadn't quite had the time to finish it before heading to Equestria. Granted, reading a paperback as a pony might present a challenge, but it was something she was interested in trying.

Just for fun, she also grabbed some of her human clothing from the packed suitcase on the floor. Rarity might get a kick out of that. In addition, she grabbed some ribbons and hair clips she'd left behind, thinking in might be fun to fancy herself up a little, now that the humans had arrived. Then, with her laden pillowcase dangling from her mouth, she trotted off to find Doctor Edwards.

The doctor in question was just where she expected to find him, immersed in the cybernetics lab. One of his aides showed her in and led her to his office, where the man himself was scowling down at some paperwork on his desk. Erin swallowed her nervousness and tapped lightly at the door.

Doctor Edwards glanced up, the look of supreme irritation on his face vanishing into surprise as he saw who was knocking. He got up and walked around his desk, opening the glass door.

"Miss Olsen," he said, "I'm surprised to see you here. What do you want?"

"Well, first I wanted to thank you for uncovering what Velchiek was doing to me, and acting to stop it."

"I didn't do it for you," he said, frowning, "I did it because he was misusing my work. Still, you're welcome."

Erin smiled uncomfortably. Dr. Edwards was still being brusque, but he wasn't being as outright rude as she was expecting. Still, the favor she wanted to ask might set him off.

"I have a favor to ask, as well," she began, but the skinny scientist raised a hand to cut her off.

"Let me guess," he said. You want your implants deactivated, now that we have open communications with Equestria. Is that right?"

"Well, yes," Erin said, surprised.

"That seems reasonable. Did you want all of them shut off, or just the recording device?"

"Oh, um... I didn't know that would be an option."

"Of course it is. Each device is designed to work independently, in case one or more of them fails."

Erin considered it briefly, and then decided that she'd just like to have them all shut down. She still had the occasional nightmare with Malachite in them, especially after Celestia had informed her that he'd escaped from his prison. She wasn't sure what kind of mischief he could get up to without the override, but she decided that it would be better not to find out.

"If you don't mind, could you shut them all down?" she asked.

"Of course. Just to let you know, though, the sensory implants will have to maintain certain minimal functionality in order for you to continue using those senses. But I'll shut down all monitoring, broadcasting and receiving implants, as well as the recorder function. Anything else?"

"No," Erin said, honestly pleased that this conversation had gone so well. "Thank you again, Doctor Edwards."

"My pleasure. I'll have someone on my staff send the shutdown signals right away."

Doctor Edwards turned and walked back into his office, then hesitated. Turning back to her, he said, "I know I've been somewhat... insufferable this whole time. For that, I apologize. All of this," he said, gesturing at the lab around him, "had been thrown together more or less at the last moment, and they expected me to work miracles, without giving me the time I needed for bare functionality. It made me a little stressed out."

"I understand," Erin said, surprised. "And... apology accepted, if you accept mine for the tantrum I threw during your diagnostics test a while back."

"Agreed," he said, with the first smile Erin had ever seen on his face. Granted, it was a slight, anemic little thing, but it was still a smile. "You have a good day, Miss Olsen. And congratulations on your successful mission."

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With every step they took back through the odd hallways, Twilight felt a little of her magic returning. The draining of magic had been a gradual thing, and she'd been too distracted by all the strangeness around her to notice it at first. Now that she was looking for it, though, she could definitely tell the difference.

She discovered that she could actually *feel* where the gateway was, both the direction and by the strength of the magical field coursing through it. It was almost like feeling the sun on her coat. Applejack, Pinkie and Rainbow Dash were also perking up, recovering more strength as they got closer to the gateway.

When they finally crossed back over into Equestria, Twilight breathed a sigh of relief, which was mirrored by Rainbow and AJ. Maggie, stating that she had lots of work to do, said her goodbyes and left, but only after Pinkie had given her an invitation to her "Welcome to Equestria!" party.

"Well, that was... weird," Rainbow Dash said as Maggie left. "Kind of like I was really tired for no good reason. Like I had the feather flu or something."

"I'd sure like to see what the Earth is like, but I don't reckon I'll be spending too much time there, what with no magic. I guess I never really thought much about how much I need magic to keep my strength up."

"I know what you mean," Twilight said. "But something Erin told me about has gotten me thinking. Do you

remember her talking about 'batteries'? I have to wonder, maybe there's a way to store up a pool of magic in an inanimate object, or something. That way we could wander around the Earth without getting all worn out."

"Yeah, well, you go work on that, Twilight. I'm going to stretch my wings a bit. See ya later!"

And with that, Rainbow Dash shot off into the air. Applejack pushed her hat back on her head, saying, "Well, I reckon' I'll go find Rarity and Fluttershy. You want to come with me?"

"No, thank you. I wanted to talk to some of the unicorns from the Arcanum while I have a chance. Maybe they know of some way to store magical energy!"

"Well, then, I guess it's just me an'... Hey, where's Pinkie Pie?"

"I don't know, she was just here a second ago,"

They looked around, but there was no sign of the pink pony. Applejack sighed.

"For such a brightly colored pony, she sure can disappear when she wants to," she said.

"I'm sure she'll turn up soon enough," Twilight said. "She's probably just getting things set up for her party."

"Yer probably right. Well, I'll be off. See ya later, Twi!"

Twilight waved as Applejack wandered off, then looked around the grounds. Many of the Arcanum members who'd helped shift and stabilize the gateway were still around, talking amongst themselves and regarding their handiwork. Several younger and less experienced members of the Arcanum were also on-hoof to maintain the spell that kept the gate stable.

She glanced up as a quick motion caught her eye, smiling as she recognized the distant form of Princess Celestia returning to the castle. The Princess landed on her private balcony and quickly made her way inside. She was sure the Princesses were both busy, but maybe they could spare some time later on to talk about her idea for a portable magical reserve of some sort. But first she had to talk to some of the more experienced unicorns. If she was going to make a proposal to Celestia, she wanted to make certain that she already had as many details as possible already worked out.

She was still talking to an elderly unicorn stallion named Arcane Grace when she saw Erin step back through the gateway, carrying a flimsy white sack of some sort in her teeth. She excused herself to go and talk to her human-turned-pony friend.

"Twilight!" Erin said excitedly upon seeing her. "I was hoping I'd run into you. I have a great surprise! I have my tablet here!"

With that, she stuck her head in the sack and came out a moment later with a shiny black rectangle of some sort, with what looked like glass on one side.

"Hold on..." Erin said, sitting on her rump and holding the thing on the flat of one hoof while poking at it with the other. She pressed a button, and the glass lit up, followed shortly afterwards by the device making a soft "ding!" sound.

"Ooh!" Twilight said, transfixed.

"See? This is a tablet. I told you about these, right?"

"It's a personal data device, right?" Twilight asked, looking at the screen in fascination. It was so bright! "You said that it held books, and movies and games and things like that, right?"

"Right! It also connects to the internet, though I really don't think Equestria has access," Erin said, grinning impishly.

Twilight smiled back. It was obvious that her friend was extremely excited to show her this. Admittedly, she was nearly as excited to see it. Here was a piece of genuine human technology! She still wasn't sure what it meant that there were all these things 'inside' of it, but maybe it would make more sense once she saw it in action.

"Here, let me unlock it," Erin said, running her hoof across the screen. Nothing happened. Frowning, Erin ran her hoof across the screen, followed by still more absolutely nothing.

"Augh! I forgot that hooves don't work with this one!" she said, looking like she was going to cry.

"Why wouldn't hooves work?" Twilight asked, confused.

"It's a touch-screen, it needs fingers to work."

"I don't get it," Twilight said, shaking her head.

Erin sighed and stood up.

"Well, that was a complete bust," she said morosely.

"Why not have one of the humans do it for you?" Twilight asked.

Erin looked up, surprised.

"Of course!" she said, smacking herself in the forehead with a hoof. "Wait here!"

Twilight watched as Erin took the tablet in her mouth and ran to the nearest human. They had a brief discussion, and the human took the device gingerly, running his fingers over it as Erin instructed him to, tapping and tracing. It took a few minutes, but Erin soon came trotting back, grinning around the tablet in her mouth.

"I had him activate voice mode!" she said, proudly, holding the tablet up once again. "Okay, watch this! Tablet, open folder: Pictures. Open folder: Graduation. Display picture: Grad photo."

Twilight watched in awe as the device responded to her friend's commands. At the end, the device displayed a picture of a human wearing a black robe and an odd, flat hat with a tassel on it. The human was smiling joyfully out of the front of the tablet, holding a scroll tied with a ribbon.

"That's me!" Erin said, beaming.

"What?!" Twilight stared at the picture. Then she stared at the pony holding the tablet. Then back again at the picture. It was almost inconceivable that these two were the same creature.

The human in the picture looked... different. She had lighter green eyes, for one, and a light brown mane, rather than the auburn that Erin had as a pony. The smile was nearly the same, though. It was a smile that took up the whole face, with a spark of joy in her eyes that was almost infectious.

"That's when I graduated from High School," Erin said, still smiling giddily. "So, that's a few years old, but I didn't really look much different. My hair was a little shorter before I got changed, but otherwise I looked pretty much the same. Ignore the silly hat and robes, we humans only wear those for graduations."

"That's... wow." Twilight sat down, staring at the picture.

"Are you okay, Twilight?" Erin asked, the smile fading somewhat in concern.

"Yes. Yes. It's just... I knew you were a human before being a pony, but that was... Well, it's like I knew that mentally but not emotionally, you know? And now it's real, and it feels... weird."

"Oh." Erin said, angling the tablet away from her to look at it herself. "Does it bother you?"

Her voice sounded slightly forlorn, and Twilight smiled gently.

"It will take some getting used to, but don't worry. It was just a surprise, that's all. I'd recommend warning the others about it before you show them that picture, just so they have time to prepare for it."

"Okay," Erin said, happiness making a comeback on her features. "Well, let's close that, and I'll show you some other neat things, okay?"

"All right!"

~~*~~

"Come on, guys, loosen up!" Erin said, bumping a startled woman in the leg with her head. "Pinkie put a lot of effort into this party!"

For the most part, the humans were the aides of the ambassadorial staff, along with a large number of the off-duty Harmonics scientists. The camera crew was helping to keep things awkward by silently filming everyone while insisting that people 'pretend we're not here'.

The ponies included almost all of her friends from Ponyville, except for Fluttershy, who had a sudden onset of 'crippling social phobia' syndrome. Also included were several off-duty guards, a smattering of curious castle staff, and some of the lower ranking pony ambassadorial aides.

In addition, there were a couple of young griffons, though neither one was Gretta. They *were* a couple, though, judging by how they were basically hanging on each other all night.

Nopony very high up on either side had deigned to show up at this party, preferring the more formal and official reception the following night.

It wasn't as big of a success as the party that had been thrown for Erin back in Ponyville. Many of the Canterlot ponies seemed too concerned with their appearances, and most of the humans seemed dazed, standing around in small groups of other humans while holding glasses of punch.

Pinkie was doing her best to keep things going, but none of the humans or ponies really seemed interested in her party games. It was heartbreaking, seeing the look of desperation on her pink features as she tried to jolly people and ponies to interact.

Erin gave up trying to push people one at a time to join in, and sidled up to Twilight, who was watching the proceedings with a small frown on her face.

"This isn't going as well as I'd hoped," the unicorn said. "The Canterlot ponies are too snooty, and the humans just seem to be stunned by everything."

"Poor Pinkie. She looks so frantic for everypony to have fun," Erin said, watching as the party mare tried to get the different groups to mix.

"I ain't seen her this upset since she thought we didn't like her parties anymore," Applejack said.

"You don't think she's going to go all loopy again, do you?" Rainbow Dash asked, looking nervous.

"She may, the poor dear," Rarity said, looking sad.

Erin watched as yet another group of humans grinned awkwardly at Pinkie before waving off her efforts to get them to loosen up. Pinkie sat down with a sigh, and Erin could swear that she could see tears in her blue eyes.

Then the worst thing ever happened. Pinkie's lower lip began to tremble.

Erin set her drink down firmly and began walking towards a small, raised stage in the middle of the party room.

"What are you going to do?" Twilight called after her.

"Something that I'm sure I'll regret," Erin said over her shoulder. "Please don't think less of me for this!"

Quickly, she found Maggie chatting with some of her colleagues and talked her into coming with her. She needed fingers for her plan, thanks to her hooves not working on standard touch-screens. As she walked, she quickly explained her idea to the scientist, who chuckled with anticipation.

"This should be interesting, Erin," Maggie said, "but I don't know that your reputation will survive it."

It was the trembling lip that did it, she thought as she climbed up on the stage. Trembling lower lips were too much for anyone, human or pony, to bear. She stepped bravely in front of the microphone at the center of the stage and tapped it a couple of times with her hoof, hearing the echo of the tap from speakers all over the room.

"Hello everypony, every human, and every griffon!" she said cheerfully into the microphone. "Some of you know me, some of you don't. My name is Erin, and I'm a human who was turned into a pony!"

She had everyone's attention now. Even the pair of griffons had stopped making out long enough to pay attention to her.

"You know, Pinkie had asked me, when she was setting all of this up, what kinds of things humans do for fun at parties. And, well, I remembered that we had this old thing in the break room in the Harmonics facility."

She pointed to the screen that was set up on a rolling cart. Maggie was busily scrolling through the menus until she found what she was looking for, and then turned to give Erin a thumbs-up.

"Luckily, it didn't take much effort at all to get it plugged into the sound system. So, to get this party *really* started, how about we have a nice round of... karaoke!"

She nodded to Maggie, and the music started, an old Disco song from way before Erin's mother had even been born. She wasn't sure why it was, but every karaoke machine she'd ever seen had this song on it. And, at some point, someone always got drunk enough to try and sing it.

Erin wasn't drunk. And, though she liked singing, she rarely sang in public, because she'd been reliably informed that she had the musical aptitude of a slightly deafened goat. Ordinarily, when forced for

whatever reason to sing within earshot of anyone else, Erin made sure she kept herself quiet, and tried her best to stay on tune.

Tonight was different. Tonight, she was going to sing loudly. She would sing proudly, and without reservation. Tonight, she was going to sing Abba's classic hit, Waterloo. Taking a deep breath, she launched into her song, belting it out as if she were actually proud of her performance.

It was passionate. It was loud. It was only passingly familiar with the correct tune.

Erin had kept her eyes closed for most of the song, but curiosity eventually overwhelmed her enough to crack a lid open. Dozens of eyes, human and pony alike, were upon her, typically staring from above mouths gaping open in shock. Rainbow Dash and Applejack were trying hard not to laugh at her performance, but Pinkie Pie was under no such reservations, rolling on the floor in uninhibited glee. Normally, she would have wanted to sink in the floor in shame, but tonight was different. Tonight, these people had almost made Pinkie Pie cry. And for that, they were going to be punished. With music!

She continued singing ABBA at the top of her voice, unrelentingly. The song started to wrap up, and Erin sang the final verses with gusto.

The music stopped. Dead silence reigned for a few seconds, aside from Pinkie laughing her tail off, and then Erin said, "Yeah! Whoo! That was so much fun! Okay, who wants to go next? What, nobody? Really? Oh, look, they have more ABBA, maybe I should go again?"

"No!"

The cry was near-universal. Erin hid her grin as best she could.

"Well, if you don't want *me* to sing, then maybe somepony else should get their butts up here and take over! How about you guys?" she said, pointing to a random couple of humans. They shook their heads and tried to wave her off.

"Okay, no problem," Erin said, glancing over at the screen. The menu was still on the "disco" option. "Oh, look! They have Staying Alive! I love singing that song! Maggie, cue it up, okay?"

There was mass panic as the people she'd pointed to, a man and a woman, were railroaded by their friends up onto the stage. Erin hopped off, smiling in satisfaction.

They didn't play the Bee Gees. Instead, they played 'Summer Nights' from the similarly ancient Grease soundtrack.

After that, the ice was broken, and more people took their turns attempting to sing. After Erin's self-inflicted humiliation, no one seemed to mind a vastly lesser amount of embarrassment. Even some ponies got into it, though they didn't know any of the songs. Fortunately, it seemed that most ponies were gifted with a natural sense of pitch and decent singing voices, so they typically fared at least as well as the humans.

"I'm really glad that worked," Erin confided to Twilight Sparkle as an extremely confused Rainbow Dash and Applejack attempted a floundering and completely out-of-sync rendition of 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. "I'd hate to think I'd humiliated myself for nothing."

Twilight giggled.

"That really was the worst singing I've ever heard," she said. "It was really nice of you, singing so poorly on purpose just to get the party going!"

"Actually, that's how I really sing," Erin said, blushing and chuckling at the same time.

Twilight stared in amazement.

"I thought it was all an act!" she said, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry! I didn't realize..."

"Don't worry about it, Twilight!" Erin said, laughing. "I know how bad my singing is, really. It's okay! It was more important that this party go off well, I didn't want to see Pinkie upset after all the work she put into this!"

"You mean that awful singing... was for me?" Pinkie said, popping up unexpectedly behind her.

"Ah, yes... I guess so?"

Pinkie's eyes brimmed with tears as she smiled with joy.

"Why, that's the sweetest, bravest, most superifficly horrifying thing that anypony's ever done to try and

make a party of mine a success!" she said, hugging her tightly. "Thank you so much and please never do it again!"

Erin laughed, hugging the pink pony back.

"You got it, Pinkie!" she said.

The party continued late into the night. The karaoke was finally put away, once enough people and ponies had embarrassed themselves for one night. Random music was played over the sound system, alternating between recorded pony music and human music.

There was some dancing, there were conversations, and groups of ponies and humans mingled and talked. Party games were played, including the "pin the tail on the human" game that Pinkie had prepared. Basically, you could only win if you missed the human completely, since humans didn't have tails. Erin found that hilarious for some reason.

As the party wrapped up, Erin let herself outside to stare at the window hanging in the air in the middle of the Canterlot gardens. Electric light spilled eerily across the manicured lawn as human porters brought back the empty boxes and luggage, the contents of which had been unpacked into the rooms of the human ambassadors.

A tent was being set up right outside the gate, with cables running back into the Harmonics lab. Apparently, equipment was being set up inside that would act as a communications hub for all of the human equipment in the area. They were also setting up various monitors that would take over Erin's role as the surveyor of Equestria. She wondered briefly if they had a wireless connection to the internet. She'd like to check her email, if possible.

"Remind me never to let you sing again," Maggie said, coming up beside her.

Erin smiled wearily. She'd heard variations on that theme all night, and it was starting to wear thin. It had been worth it, but still...

"It's nice that the party worked out, though," Maggie continued. "That Pinkie Pie sure does throw a great bash, when the people that show up pull the sticks out of their butts."

"She's a great person," Erin said, smiling more genuinely. "Pretty much everypony I've met here has been nice."

"'Everypony'?" Maggie repeated, chuckling. "You've gone native, I see."

Erin laughed and nudged the scientist with her shoulder.

"You try eating pony food for a month straight and see if you don't go native," she said.

"Oh, speaking of which, you were right. The food here is just amazing. I don't know if it's magic, or whatever, but dang, those were the best cupcakes I've ever eaten!"

They talked for a short while longer, just casually. Erin had always liked Maggie, even before she'd come over to Equestria, and it was nice to be able to talk without having to worry about a window closing mid-conversation.

"I see what you mean about magic," Maggie said after a while, looking up into the glorious night sky, so like and at the same time unlike the Earth's. "There's so much here that's outside of our experience and understanding. It really baffles the mind, doesn't it?"

"You get used to it," Erin said, suddenly feeling absurdly happy.

They stood in silence for a few minutes longer, and then Maggie said, "Welp, I guess I should be getting back to go to bed. I've got back to back meetings all day tomorrow with various extremely important people who have nothing better to do than stick their noses into my business. 'Night, Erin!"

"Good night, Maggie. Thanks for coming, I know it meant a lot to Pinkie Pie."

"It was my pleasure, Erin. If tonight was any indication... I think I'll really like living in this world."

Erin watched her go as she crossed back through the gateway, waving at the unicorns standing guard as she did so. Erin wasn't sure why there were guards posted; they didn't seem to stop anyone from crossing.

Finally, her jaws cracking with a massive yawn, she decided to call it a night, herself, and left the party in search of her own bed.

Author's Notes:

Quick note: Fimfiction now has a rule against stories having copywrited lyrics in them. I've edited the lyrics for Waterloo out of this chapter.

Chapter 22: Settling in

Twilight sometimes thought that things were changing just a little *too* quickly. She could feel history being written around her, and, as exciting as that was, it could also be somewhat frightening.

There had been considerable hustle and bustle around the castle since the gate had opened. The tent that had been erected next to the gateway was now gone, and in its place was an awkwardly-located wooden building in the middle of the gardens. The building completely hid the gateway from view, and there was a small staff of ponies on the Equestrian side that would check the humans in and out.

That included a few guards by the gateway, standing stoically on either side of the gate, as well as at the outside of the building itself. Twilight had been concerned about that, thinking that maybe the humans would think that they weren't trusted. But, so far, none of them had raised a fuss about it. Having guards must just seem normal to them.

Still, there was a veritable flood of traffic through the gateway, though all of it was humans coming and going. Nopony wanted to visit Earth just to lose their magic. Twilight's 'battery' idea had made considerable progress, though, and the Arcanum was now putting the final touches on several devices that demonstrably stored magic and could be used to draw it out again. Testing that device out was on her to-do list in a few days, and Erin had promised to show her around the Earth a little bit, for which she was grateful.

Twilight was no longer included in any discussions with or about the humans, which on the one hoof was annoying, but on the other, it probably spared her a considerable amount of tedium in listening to overblown speeches and dull negotiations. Erin had also been asked by her own people to avoid talking to any ponies. She had stomped into the shared dining room in a foul mood after that, complaining that she'd been told that her services would no longer be needed, and that it would be appreciated if she kept her muzzle shut. Twilight wasn't sure if that's what the humans had actually said, or if it was Erin's embellishment, but she could sympathize with her frustrations.

"I may not be allowed to talk to the Ministers or Counselors anymore, but they can't order me to not talk to you guys," Erin had said at the time. "And, even if they did, I would ignore it. You're my friends."

Before the reception for the human delegation, Celestia had invited the press and released an official statement regarding the humans and their desire to come to this world. Excitement buzzed around Canterlot, and presumably also around the various cities and towns when the news reached them. The papers had flown off the shelves as excited ponies from all over Canterlot bought them. Pegasi photographers had even managed to infiltrate the grounds, and several shots of the humans had made their way into the papers the following morning.

The formal reception had been just as boring as Pinkie had said it would be. In addition to the ambassadorial staff, many humans had come through the gate, mostly including politicians and VIPs from various Earth nations, along with their entourages. They wore tuxedos and gowns, and were introduced to the nobility and the higher-ranking government officials of Equestria, as well as the foreign ambassadors of the Zebra, Minotaur and Griffon nations.

Still, as boring as it was, the Counselors and Ministers of the Equestrian government who'd loudly protested humanity's access to Equestria were finally able to meet the feared creatures for themselves. Heart's Bloom in particular had seemed almost disappointed when the human representatives had entirely failed to eat anypony.

After the reception, most of her friends had returned to Ponyville. Rarity and Applejack had businesses to run, and Rainbow Dash had to get back to the weather team so they could start ramping up for winter. Fluttershy, never one to be comfortable in an urban setting, had practically jumped at the chance to return home with them, in order to get back to her animal friends.

Pinkie Pie had decided to stick around, though. She was completely entranced by Erin's tablet, pestering the human to let her borrow it every chance she could. She'd found something called 'cartoons', and now spent most of her time watching them with fascination and howling with laughter.

The humans had brought many gifts to be given to the ambassadorial staff, members of the government and nobility, and, of course, to the Princesses themselves. The most impressive thing that they had given to the Princesses, at least in Twilight's opinion, were a pair of elegant, custom-made tablet computers. Twilight herself might have never known about them if Luna and Celestia hadn't each called on Erin at different times to help them figure out how to use their new gifts.

Unlike the tablets that Twilight had already seen, which were made of plastic in various colors with a clear screen on the front, these tablets were made with a shell of ornately carved wood. Golden

mahogany for Celestia's, and ebony for Luna's. On the back of them was a depiction of each Princess' cutie mark, a sun of gold for Celestia, and a crescent moon of silver for Luna. Each tablet also had a stylus that could be used with it, nicely sidestepping the issue that Erin had with her own touch-screen.

Twilight had tagged along as Erin showed each Princess the basics of how to use their new devices. To Twilight's chagrin, Luna had picked up on the use of hers far more quickly than Celestia had. She'd secretly hoped her mentor would be the better at adapting to the new technologies. Still, it had been interesting to see the Princess confused and at a loss, baffled by the complexities of her new toy.

The devices were incredible. Erin had noticed that they weren't connected to the "wireless internet" (which Twilight was *dying* to see!) that the humans had set up throughout the castle, but they did come with thousands of books of human history, mathematics, science, geology and the like already on them, as well as works of fiction and philosophy. Music as well, though Erin had laughed a little at the selection.

"It's all opera and classical," she'd said, rolling her eyes. "I guess they're trying to impress you with the with the fancy stuff."

To Twilight's fascination, the books included several complete sets of encyclopedias. She had asked to borrow Celestia's briefly, eagerly looking up the entries on "pony" and "horse", amazed at how quickly the device would find what you wanted.

Erin had been right. The ponies and horses of Earth looked and acted nothing like the ponies of Equestria. Their cows looked somewhat similar, but their eyes were dull compared to the cows she'd talked to in Ponyville. She felt a sense of relief at that. She hadn't *quite* managed to banish a small fear that the humans were enslaving and eating sapient creatures.

Celestia eventually had tapped her on the shoulder to get her tablet back, which Twilight had reluctantly returned with a sheepish grin. Oh, how she wanted one of her own! She'd even take a basic model like Erin's! But the humans had been fairly stingy with gifts of technology or information to those not in the government. She'd probably have to wait until things settled down a bit more.

On the plus side, Erin had promised to buy one for her, once she had the chance and had been "de-ponified". For now, she had to be content with the limited content that Erin's own internet-less tablet already had on it, which included many books (mostly fiction, and mostly having to do with very unrealistic depictions of magic), some movies, pictures (including many more of Erin and her human friends and family) and several of what she called "TV Shows".

Also, Erin had plenty of human music that hadn't been on Celestia's and Luna's tablet. For the most part, the songs were much shorter and much more energetic, though Twilight couldn't say that she enjoyed all of them. Some of it just sounded like random noises and crashes, making her lay her ears back in annoyance. In the future, she'd probably just stick to listening to the classical. It was much more familiar, even though it had a slightly odd sound to it compared to what she was used to.

Right now, though, Twilight was preoccupied with regretting the promise she'd made four days ago to eventually accompany Erin on her morning runs. At the moment, her legs felt like they were going to drop off. Or, possibly, burst into flame, she wasn't sure. Her chest heaved, and sweat ran thickly down her flanks, chest and face. She almost felt like she was drowning in it. Her hooves ached, her muscles burned, and she had a wicked stitch in her side that made breathing painful. And, to top it all off, the chill air was making her shiver.

"I don't... get it..." she panted to an apologetic-looking Erin. "You... do this... every... morning?"

"Pretty much," Erin replied. "Are you okay? I shouldn't have pushed so hard, I'm sorry!"

"No... m'fine..." Twilight lied breathlessly.

"Well... how about we walk for a little bit? Nice and slow, so you don't cramp up."

Twilight groaned, but pushed herself away from the bench she'd been leaning on. She could already feel her muscles tightening up, but the *last* thing she wanted to do was move around. Fortunately, the former human kept the pace nice and slow.

"I hope this doesn't put you off of running," Erin said. "Once you get used to it, it's really relaxing and fun."

"Fun?"

"Well, I think so, at least."

"...I'll take your word for it," Twilight said.

For now, she concentrated on just putting her hooves down in the right order and trying to get her breathing under control. Eventually, the cramp in her side subsided, and she was able to breathe deeply again. After a few minutes, she felt better. Wobbly and unsteady, sure, but somewhat better.

"Are you doing all right?" Erin asked, having been observing her closely.

"Yes, thanks," Twilight said with a wan smile.

"Let me know if you feel like running again," she said with a grin.

"You should really just go without me; I'm only slowing you down."

She felt pretty self-conscious about that. After she'd heard that Celestia had visited Erin during one of her morning runs, she'd suggested that maybe she could tag along. Today was the first day that she'd woken up in time to join her human friend, and now she was just slowing Erin down.

"Are you kidding?" Erin replied. "The whole point of running with a friend is exercise *and* companionship."

"Well, you're only getting one of those now," Twilight pointed out.

"True, but I'd only get one of them if I ran off without you, right? So, I'm really no worse off."

Erin grinned at her, confident in her logic, and Twilight laughed.

"Fine, fine. But maybe we can keep the pace down a little bit?"

"You got it, Twilight. I should have let you set the pace in the first place. Go as fast or as slow as you want to, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Erin."

They continued walking for a while in silence. Usually, the only time Twilight herself was ever up at this time was if she'd stayed up too late. But now, starting the day with the sun brightening the sky and the birds starting to sing in the crisp fall air, Twilight thought she could see what Erin enjoyed in these early morning runs.

As they continued walking, they started chatting idly. Mostly, they talked about how much their lives had changed recently. It was strange for both of them.

"This is the biggest thing to happen in human history, ever." Erin said. "For the first time ever, we've got humans walking on a world other than the one we'd been born on."

"I thought you said you'd landed on your moon?" Twilight asked. That had been an impressive thing to learn. That human technology could do that! And, once they moved here, if they shared it... soon, they could have ponies in space! How incredible would that be?

"You're right, that was an incredible accomplishment. I guess people my age tend to forget about it, since it happened way before we were born. My great-grandma was alive when we landed there, and she said it was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen."

Twilight led the way around the gardens, occasionally breaking into a trot for a short while before walking again. It was embarrassing how poorly she was performing. Just the previous year, she'd done fairly well in the Running of the Leaves, and now she could barely trot around the gardens.

"It's because you pushed yourself too hard," Erin said when Twilight had brought it up. "You exhausted yourself instead of pacing yourself."

It was true. She'd wanted to impress Erin and not slow her down, so she had tried to keep up with the human's usual pace.

"I still don't get what's supposed to be so great about making yourself run just for exercise. It seems pretty pointless," she groused.

"Well, it's partially for health, and so that you have more energy for the rest of the day," Erin said. "But for me, it's mainly because I enjoy it."

"Yes, but you have an artificially enhanced super-pony-body, remember? I'm just a poor little ordinary unicorn," she replied with an over-the-top pout, complete with fluttering eyelashes.

Erin laughed, then bumped her with a shoulder affectionately.

"A super-pony-body that can barely keep up with Rainbow Dash and Applejack, yeah," Erin replied, grinning. Twilight was going to point out how unfair it was to say that when comparing herself to the two best athletes she knew of when the human added, "Besides, I always enjoyed running, even as a human."

"Eh. I don't get it."

"Of course you don't. Right now, you're still at the point where your body doesn't like it. It's like... it's like studying."

"What? No it isn't!"

"Hold on, hold on," Erin said, "I'm crafting an analogy here."

"Fine, go ahead," Twilight said, adding with mock-sternness. "But it had better be a darned good one, if you're comparing it to studying!"

Erin laughed again, and then continued speaking.

"Take Rainbow Dash," she said. "There's a pegasus that hates to study, considers it to be 'for eggheads'. But if you asked her anything about the Wonderbolts, she'd be able to tell you in detail whatever you wanted to know. Birthdays, stats, favorite colors, all of their tricks, and so on. And that's not because she liked studying, it was because learning about the Wonderbolts was fun."

"Okay. I guess I see what you mean. Exercising isn't the fun part, the fun part is what comes with it."

"You got it!" Erin said, smiling.

Twilight sighed, realizing that she'd most likely not be able to come up with a convincing reason that the human would accept to not go on any more of these runs. She'd either have to just say no, or she'd have to avoid her every morning from now on.

Or, maybe she should just give it a chance. It *would* be kind of neat to finish higher up in the Running of the Leaves next year. Maybe she could even enter the Iron Pony competition herself. If nothing else, she'd have an advantage over Dash and AJ, who'd be laughing too hard to compete properly.

"Say, Twilight?" Erin said suddenly. "As long as we're out here, could we go see Discord's statue?"

Twilight suppressed a shudder at the thought.

"Why would you want to go see *that*?" she asked, trying to sound casual. "It's not particularly pleasant to look at."

"I've just been curious. I've never seen a god of chaos, before."

She wrestled with herself for a little bit, and then gave in.

"Fine," she said reluctantly, "he's over this way. But remember, don't do anything chaotic!"

"You got it, Twi," Erin said with a chuckle. "I'll be as orderly as orderly can be!"

After his last escape, Discord's statue had been placed in a distant, secluded corner of the gardens, far away from any common paths. It was still a lovingly maintained area, but nopony ever came here outside of the gardening staff. They stared at his statue for a minute or two, mutely. Twilight wondered what was going through Erin's mind as she stared at the contorted mad god of chaos, locked in place by the Elements of Harmony.

"He doesn't look as dangerous as I thought he would," Erin said after a moment.

She actually sounded... disappointed? Twilight turned to her in shock.

"Why? What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Something... scarier, or more impressive, I guess. He just looks frightened. Honestly, I almost feel bad for him."

Twilight looked at her friend in surprise, and then felt a spark of annoyance.

"You only feel bad for him because you don't know what it was like to live through the things he did to us," she snapped, sounding more upset than she'd intended.

"You're right," Erin said, looking both surprised and guilty. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Twilight said, feeling slightly bad for yelling at her friend. "It's just... can we go? This thing

kind of creeps me out a little."

"Yeah. Okay, let's go."

They turned and trotted away, leaving the statue of the personification of chaos behind them. Unseen by them, a small bird landed on the statue's head, hopping back and forth for a moment. Then it flew off, but only after defecating on its nose.

If the entrapped spirit of Discord had any access to working lungs, it would have sighed.

I get absolutely no respect, he thought.

~~*~~

Erin sighed as she got off of the train. She'd been dreading this for days, now. But she'd come clean to all of her other friends, it was time to come clean to the ones she'd left behind in Ponyville, as well.

The town hadn't changed at all, which wasn't surprising. She was startled to realize she'd only been gone about two weeks. Honestly, it seemed like much longer.

One thing that *had* changed, though, was the excited conversations of the ponies walking around the streets and marketplaces. She caught the word 'humans' more than once, and idly found herself trying to overhear more. Then, shaking her head, she berated herself for trying to eavesdrop on private conversations.

No more of that, she told herself.

She contemplated where to go first. She had to tell her co-workers at Fet Ex, and she had to tell Meadowlark and little Marigold. Of the two, she thought it would be easier to tell her co-workers first. But, honestly, she'd rather get the hardest one out of the way as soon as possible. With a deep sigh, she trotted off towards the Ponyville Guest House.

She arrived at the door, unsure what to do. She hadn't paid in advance, so technically she wasn't a resident anymore. She hesitated, then pushed the doorbell and waited. It only took a minute before Meadowlark opened the door, her eyes widening in surprise when she saw who was there.

"Sunflower! Oh, my goodness! I'm so glad you're all right!"

She hugged Erin around the neck and ushered her inside.

"We heard that the Princesses themselves were working on healing you. What happened?"

"Well... Long story short, I guess, I had some weird, ancient evil creature from the Everfree forest come out and possess me, in order to try and free it from its cage."

Meadowlark nodded, looking unperturbed.

"I figured it was something like that," she said. Then, seeing Erin's expression, she said, "What's wrong?"

"Um. I guess I was expecting a more surprised reaction than that."

Meadowlark laughed and bumped Erin with a shoulder.

"I've lived in Ponyville too long to be phased by something like that. We seem to have ancient evils popping up on an alarmingly regular basis, these days."

"Yeah, I've heard about a few of them," Erin said, chuckling weakly.

"Well, at least the Elements got it, right?" Meadowlark said.

"Um... Yes, and no. The Elements pushed it out of me, but it got away. The Princesses are looking for it now."

"Oh, no..." Meadowlark said, eyes wide.

"I don't think you need to worry too much about it," Erin said. "It could only do what it did to me because of... well, some special circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, but first... well, I think I should pay you for the last couple of weeks. I'll be moving out and staying in the castle for a while."

"Oh," Meadowlark said, looking unhappily surprised. "I was hoping you'd move back to Ponyville, now that you're healed up. Marigold was, too."

"How is she?" Erin was unable to stop herself from asking.

"She's better. She had nightmares about what happened to you for a while, after the Iron Pony competition. But she's mostly over them, now."

"I'm glad. It must have been a pretty terrible thing for her to see. Um. Could we sit down? I have something important to talk to you about, and it won't be easy to hear."

Meadowlark looked concerned and wary at the same time.

"Of course," she said.

Meadowlark led the way, and Erin parked herself on the opposite side of the table from her. She'd rehearsed this in her head for days, but now that she was here she couldn't think of even how to start.

"So, what do you think of those humans?" Meadowlark asked after a while, breaking the silence.

"That's... um, that's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Meadowlark leaned forward, eyes bright with excitement. "I suppose you know more about them, since you just came from Canterlot!"

"Yes, see... Well, I know a lot about the humans. They're looking for a new place to live since their home is about to be destroyed, and this is the only place they've found so far."

"That's what the papers say. Is it true that they eat meat?"

"Um, sometimes. Not all the time. But I wanted to say that, the humans have actually known about this world for a few months, now."

"Really?"

"Yeah... And, they knew it was inhabited, but they didn't know if we could live here, or if the ponies would be friendly or not, so... Um. They used a special technique to turn one of them into a pony, so she could explore Equestria and find those things out."

Erin stopped talking and looked into Meadowlark's eyes. The mare looked confused for a moment, and then her eyes widened with shock.

"You..? Sunflower is it you?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Oh, sweet Celestia!" Meadowlark shouted, standing up quickly and backing away from the table.

"I'm sorry!" Erin repeated desperately. "I didn't want to lie, but that's no excuse. I'm really a human. My real name is Erin. You've been so kind to me... I wanted to let you know that I'll always value the time we spent together, and that I'll always consider you to be a friend."

"You... You're a... I let you watch my *daughter*!" she shouted. "And you're not even a pony?!"

Meadowlark looked way past upset, now. She looked furious. Her left hoof scraped at the floor as her head lowered. Erin, in shock, idly wondered if the mare were about to charge and attack her. She decided that she deserved it, if she did.

"I would never hurt Marigold, Meadowlark. You know that."

She said it as calmly as she could, to no effect. The mare was trembling with barely suppressed rage.

"No, I don't!" she said. "You lied about so much, how do I know you didn't lie about that too?"

"Because I love her, and because I care about both of you," Erin stated simply. Meadowlark blinked in surprise.

"Love? How can I trust that? How do I know you're not just saying that?"

"Why would I do that?" Erin asked. "If I were still trying to spy on you, I wouldn't have said anything. If I didn't care, I never would have come back, since the Princesses know what I am now. I would have just stayed in Canterlot and never come clean. It would have been easier to avoid talking to you, if I didn't care."

Some of the tension vanished from the mare.

"All right. Let's say that I accept that. That doesn't change the fact that, for weeks, I was letting an alien creature foalsit my daughter."

"An alien creature that would do anything in her power keep her safe," Erin said, honestly. "I'd jump into a fire for that filly."

"Why?" Meadowlark asked, clearly skeptical.

"Because... Because, believe it or not, ponies and humans aren't so different. We have children, too. And we love them as much as ponies love their foals. And because... after meeting Marigold, for the first time in my life I've seriously considered having children of my own. Also," Erin continued, smiling weakly at the still-upset mare, "it doesn't hurt that she's so completely adorable."

There was a long pause as Meadowlark visibly worked things over in her head. Erin wanted to say more, to defend herself, to explain herself further. But she knew that the best thing she could do now was to give the mare time to figure things out on her own.

"Okay," Meadowlark said finally. "Let's say I accept that, and I'm not saying I do. I still don't know if I can ever forgive you for deceiving me that way. And I don't think I'll ever trust you again. Certainly not with Marigold."

"I understand," Erin said quietly, looking at the suddenly-blurry table in front of her.

"Will you be in town for long?"

Erin glanced up. Meadowlark's voice had changed from angry to business-like. The change was unsettling.

"I was going to pack up my things, and then talk to my co-workers at Fet-Ex and tell them what I told you before going back to Canterlot. I suppose I could wait around longer?"

"Okay. Marigold is off playing with some friends. I'm going to go find her. You pack up your things and talk to your co-workers and then come back. It will do her some good to see that you're all right. Maybe clear up the last of those nightmares."

"Okay," Erin said, cautiously.

"I don't want you spending any time with her where I can't see you, do you understand? And you're not to mention any of this human stuff to her. I'll figure out how to tell her myself, later."

"Okay."

Meadowlark stood there for a long moment, just staring at her. Then she nodded and trotted briskly out the door without saying another word.

Erin sighed and lifted herself up off the floor. She made her way into the room and packed her saddlebags, both her nice new ones and her heavy old canvas ones. She slung both sets of bags over her back and tightened the straps, then took her coin purse out and dropped ten bits into the manager's box along with a note explaining that it was for the rent she owed.

She trotted to the Fet-Ex office and discovered that she was in luck, as both Mr. Parcel and Lucky were in the office when she arrived. They greeted her happily, immediately dropping what they were working on to come and greet her.

After the emotionally draining episode with Meadowlark, she was concerned about how these two would react. It turned out, though, that they were more upset by her resignation than by her hidden humanity.

"Seriously?!" Lucky said, staring at her with wide eyes. "Wow. I was going to ask you out, too!"

"You were?" Erin asked, surprised. He hadn't *seemed* to be showing any interest.

"Yeah! But... Well, I don't suppose... you don't like stallions at all, do you? Or is it only human stallions?"

He sounded so hopeful. Erin smiled at him and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Lucky. I'm going to get turned back into a human eventually. It wouldn't work out."

"Aww..."

"Now, now, don't get all upset, young fella!" Speedy Parcel said. "There's nothin' but single mares out

there as far as the eye can see. You'll find your special somepony soon!"

"I suppose," he said, pouting at the floor.

The door dinged as Carrot Top came in, carrying some wrapped packages. She took in the scene before her.

"Ah, this isn't a bad time, is it?"

Speedy Parcel laughed, assuring her that it was fine. Carrot Top smiled at them and walked up to place her packages on the counter.

"Well, business waits on nopony," Mr. Parcel said. "I'd better get back to it. You know, you're always welcome to come back whenever you like, Sunflower, even if you *are* secretly a human in disguise."

Erin flinched at the casual way he just threw that out there. Carrot Top blinked at him as if trying to figure out if he was joking or not.

"Um... Thanks, Mr. Parcel. I really did enjoy working here."

Carrot top was staring at her, wide-eyed and slack-jawed as Erin fled the store. She practically ran back to the Guest House, almost feeling the rumors starting up behind her.

Arriving back at the door, she rang the bell once again, and then let herself in. Immediately, she saw Marigold, the filly staring at her with almost disbelieving eyes.

"Sunflower?" she said, eying her doubtfully.

"Hi Marigold," Erin said, forcing a smile. "How are you, sweetie?"

"I'm fine. You were all smokey and weird, though."

"Yes, I was. Something bad happened to me, but the Princesses fixed me right up. I'm all better, now."

"You sure? You had a scary voice and stuff, too. I didn't like it."

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm sorry. I didn't like it, either."

The filly stood there for a moment, then broke into a big grin, rushing forward to hug her around the leg.

"I missed you!" she said, happily.

"I missed you too, Marigold!"

Erin hugged her back, smiling, until she heard Meadowlark clearing her throat. She looked up to see the mare frowning at her, and quickly began disengaging herself from the filly's embrace.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, but I have to get going. I have to go back to Canterlot. The Princesses need my help with something."

She nodded, looking sad.

"Mommy told me it's about the homums."

"Humans," Erin corrected. "And, yes it is."

"Will you come back to visit?"

"Oh, I..." she glanced up to see Meadowlark. She was still frowning, but after a few seconds she gave a shrug and looked away. Erin took that as a sign of encouragement, though not a very big one.

"If I can, I will," she said. "Once things aren't so busy, maybe. But it won't be for a while, okay?"

"Okay," Marigold said, sniffling.

"I have to get going, Marigold. One last hug, okay? And then I really have to go."

"Okay."

They hugged again, briefly, and then Marigold went back to her mother's side. Erin sighed, sad to think this might be the last time she ever saw the filly or her mother, who'd become a close friend during her time here in Ponyville. She met Meadowlark's eye one last time, seeing her struggling with something.

Finally, Meadowlark sighed and said, "If you could, Sunflower, I think we'd both like it if you came back to visit us some time."

"I'd like that," Erin said. "Thank you."

She made her way out of the Guest House for what would probably be the last time and took a moment to compose herself. Then, glancing at the clock in the center of town, she saw that she still had about sixty minutes before the next train to Canterlot departed.

She had a quick lunch at the Cafe, then wandered around town for a short while, looking at everything as if she was seeing it for the last time. She stopped into Sugarcube Corner and bought herself a fresh chocolate cupcake, making a point of telling the Cakes that Pinkie was doing just fine in Canterlot, which the married couple was very glad to hear.

She exited the bakery and began making her way towards the station. On the way, she became aware of a noise behind her, as of a large crowd muttering and whispering to each other. Turning her head, she looked behind her to see that it was, in fact, a large crowd muttering and whispering to each other, and they were also staring at her with various expressions of amazement, fear or fascination.

Erin turned back ahead, feeling uncomfortable. Surely, the rumors couldn't have spread *that* quickly. Could they? Carrot Top would have had to work awfully fast.

Now that she thought about it, she saw that the ponies she passed stopped what they were doing to stare at her. Definitely very creepy. Now slightly worried, she broke into a trot, reaching the train station a minute later.

The crowd stayed well back, eying her warily. Erin returned the favor, standing impatiently at the platform and wishing the train would hurry up and get here already.

One mare forced her way through the crowd and went over to buy a ticket at the counter. A short while later, the unicorn sidled up beside her. Erin glanced over to see her grinning and wide eyed and *well* within her personal space.

"So..." Lyra said. "You're heading to Canterlot?"

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The finished design was in the form of a torc made of rune-carved wood, the runes inlaid with silver wire and accented with gemstones at various key points. Twilight levitated it over her head and let it settle around her neck, then glanced at herself in a mirror.

Not bad, she thought. It was kind of like a classier, more feminine version of Big Mac's ever-present yoke. Rarity would approve.

"All set?" Erin asked her, looking excited.

"You bet!" Pinkie Pie said, wearing an identical torc of her own. "Let's get moving, already!"

"I'm ready as well," Twilight said.

"Um... Me too, I guess?" said Dewdrop, a pegasus from the ambassadorial staff who'd volunteered for the test but now seemed to be having second thoughts.

"Well, let's get going, then!" Erin said, walking towards the shimmering gateway. The unicorn guards on either side nodded as they went through. On the human side, the human soldiers standing similarly on the other side of the gateway gave them covert glances.

"Go on through," said a human stationed at the newly-installed desk by the gate. "We were told you'd be coming. You're clear to venture through the entire facility and the grounds outside, but please don't leave the compound."

"You got it," Erin said, leading the way.

Twilight followed her friend as she led them through the hallways. Pinkie bounced along happily, humming to herself, and Dewdrop stared at everything, eyes wide, as if she was afraid something would leap out and attack her.

"Let me know if you start feeling weak or in any way strange, all right?" Twilight said. "But try not to do anything too strenuous yet, we want to get out of range of the gateway before we really test these out."

"Okie dokie lokie!" Pinkie replied. "Hey, do you think we could try some human treats? Is there a cafeteria nearby? I think I smell pie! Oh, could we get some pie, Twilight? Pleeeease?"

"Ah, Pinkie, can I make a suggestion?" Erin said.

"You got it!"

"Make sure you check before you eat any human food that it's vegetarian or vegan, okay? I don't think you want to eat any animal parts by mistake."

"Oh, silly! You don't put animal parts in pies!"

They walked along in uncomfortable silence for a few seconds. Pinkie stopped bouncing and stared at Erin with her mouth hanging open.

"You don't put animal parts in pies, do you?!" she asked, looking horrified.

"Um. It depends on the pie, really. And who made it. Usually they use vegetable shortening, but sometimes... well, some people use lard for the crust."

"Oh. Icky." Pinkie said, making a face.

"Don't worry too much about it. Pretty much everywhere you go, there will be vegetarian options. It's kind of a big thing, these days."

Erin went on to explain the difference between 'vegetarian' and 'vegan' to the fascinated Pinkie Pie and the nauseous-looking Dewdrop. Twilight found it to be fairly interesting, herself, even though she'd heard Erin talk about it before. That there were humans who purposely avoided eating meat or animal products was definitely unexpected. Not even many ponies avoided eating eggs and butter on purpose.

During the lecture on human foods, Maggie came out of a side hallway and joined them for a bit. Erin and her human friend exchanged pleasantries, followed by introductions between Maggie and Dewdrop, the latter of whom stuttered and stammered, but finally managed to extend a hoof for the human to shake. Afterwards, the pegasus mare stared at her hoof as if wondering why it was still there.

"We were just heading outside to test these magic batteries," Erin said, once the introductions were complete.

"Actually, the Arcanum insisted on calling them a 'Thaumatic Transference Apparatus'," Twilight said, giggling. "Apparently, calling them 'magic batteries' wasn't mystical enough for them."

"Oh! That would explain why you have one of each kind of pony!" Maggie said. "You want to make sure it works for each of you?"

"That's right," Twilight said, nodding. "During our first visit, I could barely move anything, and both Rainbow Dash and Applejack ran out of stamina quickly. Rainbow said she also was barely able to fly at all, though I don't recall her trying."

They began walking towards the nearest exit once again, Maggie joining them as she and Erin started talking about how things had been going on Earth.

"They made the announcement a few days ago," Maggie said. "I should show you the press releases. 'A new land to call home!' and everything, along with some nice shots of various landscapes."

"How did people react?" Erin asked.

"They went nuts, of course," Maggie said, chuckling. "There are places where the parties are *still* going on in the streets."

Twilight frowned at Pinkie Pie, who had started grinning a very *disturbing* grin at that statement.

"Don't you dare wander off!" she whispered fiercely to her pink friend, who smiled back at her and winked.

"But that was *nothing* compared to how people reacted to the news that there are multiple non-human sapient life forms there," Maggie continued. "I think most people are excited, but then a lot of people are scared, or in denial. Some people are having a really hard time accepting that there is other intelligent life out there. There have been protests and everything!"

"Protests?" Erin asked, sounding amazed and slightly disgusted. "Protesting what? The existence of ponies on their own world?"

"Yes, though most of the protests right now are from the Earth-First people. They don't like any thought of abandoning the Earth. The ones who are protesting the news about sapient non-human life are just idiots that nobody really takes too seriously, especially since we've got video of ponies and griffons all

talking. Which reminds me, you should really see that documentary that was released! The most watched film of all time within five hours of its release."

"Wow," Erin said. "Any news on the Tide itself?"

"Thanks to Hermann and some other scientists, we've managed to slow the expansion still further. It's not much bigger than when you left, though it's still growing. It's maybe another fifty miles in diameter, and the scientists have adjusted the doomsday clock back about a year."

"Well, part of what we're going to do is see if Equestrian magic can further slow down or stop the growth, maybe even reverse it."

"That would be wonderful, but I'm not going to get my hopes up quite yet," Maggie said. "Oh, and by the way, you might want to call your parents. They've been calling pretty much every day this last week, trying to get a hold of you."

"Oh," Erin said, looking surprised. "Yeah, I can do that after the tests, I guess."

They walked for a while longer, chatting amiably. They quickly reached the exit, passing a few humans who stopped to stare at them. Each time that happened, Dewdrop shrank back on herself, as if trying to make herself too small to be seen.

Twilight sympathized. All the attention was making her coat itch. But she could understand the humans' fascination; after all, the humans visiting Canterlot were stared at quite regularly by palace staff.

Maggie opened the door for them, and bright daylight spilled inside, making Twilight flinch slightly after the relatively dull corridors. Blinking, she stepped forward, feeling the grass under her hooves and smelling the relative sweetness of the air. Her vision cleared, and she saw that they were in a very mountainous area, the land covered thickly with trees of all sorts. It looked very similar to Equestria, though wilder. She'd been expecting something more like the Everfree Forest, but this actually looked very pleasant.

Twilight turned to talk to Erin, but was surprised to see that there was a uniformed human guard standing on either side of the doorway, wearing uniforms consisting of a dark blue coat and pants, and a white hat on their heads. Each of them was holding what Twilight recognized from Erin's descriptions as a rifle.

Erin trotted past the guards, completely unconcerned. However, the Earth mare stopped suddenly in her tracks, staring at a large, grey stone wall in the distance.

"Whoah, that wall is new," Erin said. "When was that put in?"

"Well, remember the whole Earth-Firsters thing I mentioned?" Maggie asked. "We can't take any chances. Security has been upped to almost ridiculous levels since you left."

"They must have built it fast. I've only been gone... what? Five weeks? Six?"

"Almost six, yes. They actually started it before you got shipped to Equestria, but since you weren't allowed outside, I guess you didn't see it."

"Is everything okay?" Twilight asked. "We're not going to get attacked or anything, are we?"

Dewdrop cringed at the suggestion and Twilight tried very hard not to roll her eyes. She was really regretting that Rainbow Dash hadn't been able to make the trip back. Dewdrop was barely any better than Fluttershy!

"No, ma'am," a male voice said, and another man in a uniform came walking out behind them. "We control the land around here for miles and are constantly monitoring it. Nobody gets near here without our knowing it. The wall is just an additional precaution."

"Ladies, let me introduce Major Morris," Maggie said. "Major, this is Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie and... Dewdrop, was it?"

Dewdrop squeaked an affirmative.

"And, of course, you know Erin Olsen," Maggie finished.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," the Major said. "Don't mind me, I'm just here to observe. Please feel free to begin your tests whenever you feel ready."

"Right," Twilight said. She saw that there were several large stones arranged in the yard and she focused, lifting one up. The strain was no different from lifting the same amount of weight in Ponyville.

"So far, so good," she said. "Let's get going, shall we?"

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Erin felt a little bit like 'a fifth hoof', to use pony terminology, as the ponies tested out their new magic batteries, or whatever it was that the Arcanum had decided that they should be called. The ponies started on all their various tests that Twilight had planned out for them, and all she could do was watch.

Dewdrop was flying around, slowly and barely off the ground. That had been a precaution that Twilight had insisted on. She hadn't wanted the pegasus to be too far off the ground or moving too quickly if the battery should cut out.

Pinkie Pie was zipping all over the open yard, running and jumping, and occasionally stopping to roll in the grass. Erin wasn't sure if the earth pony was being supplemented by magic or by sugar.

Twilight herself was running through a checklist of various activities. Basic levitation was done, then extreme levitation, where she lifted several rocks all at once. Then, much to everyone's surprise, she teleported from one end of the field to the other. Erin heard one of the guards behind her gasp in shock, but they were both wearing poker faces when she turned to see which one it was.

"That was a brave thing you did," Major Morris said suddenly. Erin blinked and looked up at him, momentarily unsure if he was talking to her or someone else.

"Me?" she asked, and he nodded. "What did I do that was brave? You mean going to Equestria?"

"That too," he said with a chuckle. "I was referring to leveling with your friends, and staying honest after you'd promised to tell the truth. That's a hard thing to do."

Erin blushed at that. She didn't feel that just being honest deserved any kind of special praise.

"It didn't *feel* brave," she said. "I had to do it, to keep my friends. And... well, I wanted to do it because I was sick of lying."

"That's not what I meant," he said. "Plenty of people might have... well, glossed over certain things. You told them the absolute truth, not only about yourself, but humans in general. It made some folks in the ambassadorial staff pretty livid, but I think it was the right thing to do. The ponies have a right to know exactly what they're dealing with."

"Would you have done the same thing?" Erin asked.

"No," he said. "But then, I wouldn't have tried to make friends, either. Your approach brought us a lot more benefits than mine would have, regardless of what anyone says."

Erin stared at him for a moment, and then smiled.

"Thanks," she said. "That's nice to hear."

They stood in silence for a while, watching the ponies testing their magical collars.

"Granted, the part with the chimera was pretty awesome, too," he said suddenly. "Though, my personal favorite in that encounter was Rainbow Dash."

Erin laughed.

"Rainbow *was* pretty awesome, and she saved my life for sure. But I think it's pretty clear that Twilight saved the day, there. She's the one who got the fillies out of the way."

"Well," he replied with a mock frown, "We'll just have to agree to disagree, won't we?"

Erin laughed again, and after a moment Major Morris joined in as well.

"You know," Erin said, "If you wanted me to, I could probably get you her auto-"

"Yes, please!" he said eagerly. And then there was a flash of light, and a bushy mustache suddenly appeared on his face.

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There was a familiar humming sound, and the air split open before her as a second gateway to the Earth opened in the Canterlot gardens.

The first thing she noticed, before they even walked through, was the noise. It was completely beyond anything she'd experienced, a humming, hissing and crackling sound that seemed to emanate from

everywhere all at once. The second thing she noticed was that the air smelled... wrong. A little like the scent after a thunderstorm, only much more intense, and a smell that reminded her somewhat of burning coal, though not exactly. In addition to that was a melange of acrid chemical scents that assaulted her nostrils and stung her eyes.

She was suddenly less reluctant regarding the mask and goggles that the humans had provided for her, slipping them on quickly. They were uncomfortable, but they filtered out the harsh fumes. She heard some of the others grousing about putting on the protective gear, but the complaints stopped as soon as they saw that she was wearing her own..

Celestia stepped through the portal and saw the thing that was devouring the Earth. The Black Tide stretched away like a dull black sea. The rubbery mass of it rippled randomly, disturbingly. Surrounding what the humans called the "biomass", which was the main mass of the Tide, was the "nano-ring", a circle of pure jet black, perhaps a tenth of a mile in width, bubbling and churning as it devoured the rock surrounding the Tide itself, adding more and more material to the mass behind it.

Standing five miles back from the black ring, she got her first glimpse of the humans' efforts to stop the Tide from advancing. Various large towers belched liquid flames at the nanomachines that formed the outer ring of this threat. According to the humans, high temperatures were one of the only things found to actually destroy the devices. Certain acids also worked, but they weren't able to produce them in the large quantities needed. In addition, there were large, cylindrical devices pointing towards the Tide itself. Those were devices they called lasers that the humans were using to try and burn away the Tide, apparently using beams of focused light

Every hundred feet, another wheeled tower was releasing a stream of flame or acid, the towers being supplied by large trucks at their base, which also, according to the briefing she'd been given, served to pull the towers back as the Tide approached. Celestia turned her head first one way, then another. The line of towers matched the encroaching line of the tide for as far as her eyes could see, all the way to the horizon.

Suddenly, she was much less certain about their ability to defeat this enemy with magic. But she still was determined to try.

They walked forward, towards the trucks that had been provided to bring them closer to the Tide. They were to get no closer than the towers, but Celestia had refused to allow the gate to Equestria to open any closer to the line. Seeing it now, even the five mile gap was far closer to Equestria than she wanted this... thing to come.

A ramp was lowered from the rear of the truck, and the ponies all entered, standing awkwardly as the vehicles trundled slowly down the dirt road. She could have flown faster, but she wanted to conserve as much energy as she could in her torc, the carved wooden device temporarily replacing the regalia she normally wore.

Finally, the trucks stopped. The Royal Guard exited first, making sure the area was safe before giving the all-clear to Celestia. Ordinarily, she was more than capable of taking care of herself. But this thing on this alien world had her somewhat shaken. She was more than happy to have her soldiers here, looking out for her.

She stepped down, hooves clattering on the raised platform that the humans had erected to keep them off of the toxic mud at the base of the fire and acid spewing towers. She tried to remain calm as she regarded the bubbling and oozing mass of nanomachines perhaps half a mile before her. The Tide itself stretched across the visible horizon, an endless ocean of dull black. She extended her awareness, cautiously, trying to sense any sign of intelligence or life.

She sensed... something. She wasn't certain what it was, or even if it was aware, but the Tide was definitely, in some way, alive. She tried to communicate with it. Tried to ask it to stop, to not devour this world. Minutes rolled by as she stretched her mind to the task, trying to break through, to understand what it was, what it wanted. Trying to be understood in return.

Nothing. The Tide didn't respond.

She removed herself from her trance, looking at the concerned ponies around her. What she had done was dangerous, they knew, but it was something only she, herself, could do.

"I'm afraid that negotiating a peace is out of the question," she said, her words muffled somewhat by her mask. "It's alive, in some fashion, but I don't know that it's aware."

"I see. What next, then, Princess? Should we use the Elements?"

Twilight looked at her trustingly from underneath the tiara of the Element of Magic. Celestia glanced behind her at all of Twilight's friends, each wearing the necklace of their Element over their torcs.

"Yes, Twilight. But... do be careful. I do not trust this... thing."

"Yes, Princess. Girls? Are you ready?"

"Let's hit it with a Rainbow!" Pinkie said, scowling at the Tide.

"Indeed. This hideous thing simply *has* to go," Rarity agreed from behind her mask. Celestia was slightly amused to note that she had somehow managed to find the time to decorate hers slightly, sewing in some gemstones and somehow dying the entire thing a brilliant white to match her coat.

"I'm ready," Rainbow Dash said, adjusting her Wonderbolt-issue goggles.

"I don't like that thing," Fluttershy said, frowning. "It's not right. It's not *natural*. You can count on me."

"That's it, Twi. We're ready," Applejack said.

"All right, then. Girls... Formation!"

The humans, and even the Royal Guards, stared in wonder as the elements lit up, enveloping the six friends in a warm glow of bright light. As they lifted gently off the ground, Twilight's eyes snapped open, brilliant radiance spilling forth.

The light twisted, condensed, and formed itself into a scintillating rainbow, shooting towards the Tide almost faster than the eye could follow. Celestia felt a glow of pride in how well her student had mastered the Element of Magic, even surpassing Luna and herself.

The rainbow hit the nano-ring and washed over it, obscuring it from view. It expanded, shooting off both north and south, while also rolling with deceptive slowness over the biomass itself. The light from the friends increased in intensity, and the rainbow brightened as well. All mortals present covered their eyes to protect them.

Finally, the light dimmed. The mares descended back to earth. Celestia looked towards the Tide...

"But... But... We hit it with the rainbow, that's not fair!" Pinkie wailed.

There was no effect. None at all. The Elements had failed to even damage the Tide.

"Should... should we try it again, Princess?"

Celestia looked down at her student, who was panting from the effort she'd just put out.

"No, Twilight. If the Elements were going to work, they would have worked the first time."

"I'm sorry, Princess," her student said, eyes welling up with tears. "I failed you."

"Of course you didn't!" Celestia said, shocked. This filly... sometimes she took things far too personally. "Believe me, you wielded the Elements as well as it is possible to wield them. Better even than I. There was nothing more anypony could have done."

Twilight sniffled and smiled at her.

"No need to fear yet," Celestia assured her. "I have still to take my turn."

The Sun Princess turned to face the Tide, her power slowly welling within her. This thing was damaged by heat, they had told her. And hers was the power of the sun itself. She filled herself near to bursting, drawing not only on the power of her torc, but on the Equestrian sun itself, barely accessible through the distant gateway.

It took time, many minutes sweeping by as she accumulated her strength. But, finally, she was ready.

"Look away from me," she instructed, her voice reverberating with the power she contained. **"I would not have you damage your eyes."**

Ponies and humans alike backed away from her as the heat radiated from her coat. Her eyes blazed with the fury of an inferno. As the power reached its peak, Celestia unleashed it, an incandescent beam that could boil rock. The beam etched its way across the nano-ring, vaporizing whatever it touched almost instantly. Celestia swept her eyes across the ring, and the beam followed, destroying as it went. Soon, as far as she could see in both directions, the nano-ring had been obliterated, condensed down to a motionless, black slag.

She then turned her attention to the Black Tide itself, that hideously ripping monstrosity. The light lanced into it, sending up a tremendous plume of smoke as the oily mass shuddered and collapsed into a fine ash.

The Tide reacted, dragging itself backwards, thickening in the distance as it tried to pull itself away. For the first time since the impact, the Tide receded.

She was dimly aware of the humans cheering. She couldn't keep this up much longer, though. Her power was fading rapidly. She was too far from the gate, her grip was tenuous at best. Still, what power she had, she would use while she still could.

She drew a line of fire across the Tide, burning away a swath of it as if it had been cut with a knife. The mass bulged up on either side, trying to withdraw from this new threat. Idly curious as to what would happen, she drew a line of fire in a semi-circle across the mass, cutting off a smaller piece from the rest. The two masses fell away from each other, and the smaller one withered slightly before they joined back together.

She felt a sense of grim satisfaction. It would take time and effort, but she'd undone the growth of days in the matter of minutes. With both her and Luna working together, as well as ponies from the Arcanum, she was certain that the days of the Tide were numbered. It would take months, perhaps even years, to destroy it all. But humanity could be saved, without resorting to fleeing their home world.

"That's incredible, Celestia!" she heard an excited Twilight Sparkle say. She smiled, glad to hear her name from her prized pupil, for once without the honorifics. Her time was nearly up. The torc was spent, the power dwindling to nothing, and the energy she had pulled from Equestria was fading rapidly.

The counterattack came swiftly and with almost no warning. The presence she had felt earlier surged towards her, a massive wall of psychic force without any obvious intelligence behind it. She barely had time to pull the remnants of her power back into herself before it closed in on her, pressuring her mind from all sides, crushing her beneath its weight. Her vision narrowed to tunnel vision, and her body spasmed as her mind was relentlessly assaulted.

She heard Twilight calling her name frantically, and became aware of the fact that she, herself, was screaming in agony.

No, I mustn't do that, a small corner of her mind fretted, *Twilight will worry if I scream.*

A moment later, darkness surrounded her. She lost consciousness before she hit the ground.

Chapter 23: Lost and Found

The second gateway hovered a mere thirty feet away from the building that housed first one, creating an off-color window from the gardens of Canterlot Castle to a location a mere five miles away from the Black Tide on Earth. Erin stared at it impatiently, waiting for any news of her friends.

"Does it always smell like that?"

Erin jumped in surprise, turning to see a mint-green unicorn standing next to her. She sighed in exasperation. Of course Lyra had found her again.

"No," she answered, "it only smells like that because the gate is so close to where we're fighting the Tide."

"Oh. That's good," the mare said, wrinkling her nose while she stared at the hovering gateway. "I wanted to visit the Earth, but it wouldn't be fun if the whole place were that stinky."

"Well, it's not," she replied shortly.

Lyra seemed to get the hint that Erin wasn't in a talking mood. Either that, or she'd just decided to stare at the humans in fascination once again.

Erin wasn't at all happy about being left behind. The Royal Guards had gone through, along with Twilight and her other friends, as well as Celestia herself. However, she'd been told that she wasn't allowed to go along. It made sense, in that she wouldn't be able to help in any significant fashion, but it just bothered her that her friends were facing the premier threat to her own world and she couldn't even stand by them.

Erin glanced at a nearby sundial. It was hard to be exact, but if she had to guess, she'd say that the others had gone through almost an hour ago. She desperately wanted to get closer to the gate, but the guards gave a steely glare to anyone not walking on two legs. Any humans nearby were assumed to be actively working on the gate.

"How do you think it's going?" Lyra asked after a few minutes.

"I really couldn't say."

"Do you think they'll be okay?"

She flinched at the question. The truth was, even after years of study, the Tide still wasn't all that well understood. She honestly couldn't say if her friends would be all right or not. It was another reason she'd wanted to go through with them, rather than waiting behind. Knowing your friends could be in danger and you couldn't do anything to help was horrible. Not even being able to see if they were all right was so much worse.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," she eventually told Lyra. "They have the Princess with them, after all."

"Yeah. You're right."

Lyra stared at the gateway for another minute, and then said, "Say, what would I have to do to be able to see a human without any clothes on?"

"What?!"

"Well, I mean... I kind of want to study them, but they're always so covered up. How do I get them out of their clothes?"

"A couple of drinks would help," Erin muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said. "Look, um... Humans tend to have taboos around public nudity. Asking a human to let you see them naked, well... that probably won't go over too well. But once things settle down, I guarantee you I can help you find plenty of pictures of naked humans."

Once I get my internet access back, she thought.

"Well, I don't want to just see them without clothes," Lyra said. "I also want to find out more about their culture."

"That's going to be tricky. We don't just have one culture, we have hundreds. Or maybe thousands."

Lyra stared at her, wide-eyed. She was about to ask another question when there was a sudden commotion at the gate.

"Make way!" a pegasus in captain's armor bellowed, shoving through the gateway from the Earth side. Royal Guards came to attention as the human technicians scattered out of the way. A moment later, several more pegasi guards came though, bearing a large white form on their back.

"Oh no," Lyra gasped. Erin stared at Princess Celestia's limp form in disbelief.

"Make way, I said!" the first pegasus said, slamming another Royal Guardsman the the side. "Bring the Princess to her chambers," he instructed the guards carrying Celestia. Then he pointed a hoof at the guard he had shoved. "You. Go and tell Princess Luna that her sister requires her immediate attention, and will be in her quarters."

The other guard saluted, shooting off quickly. The pegasi carrying Celestia moved gently but swiftly, her weight distributed between them as they flew a foot off the ground.

Erin watched them go, wide eyed. She was vaguely aware of the buzz of conversation starting up behind her, confused and speculative from the humans, horrified and worried from the ponies. Next to her, Lyra was crying softly.

Erin turned back to the gate, trotting forward in anxiety. She hadn't seen Twilight and the others come through yet, and her only thought was seeing if they were all right. The few remaining Royal Guards were too distracted to stop her before she had jumped through the gateway, startling the human soldiers on the other side. The human soldiers eyed her warily but didn't try to interfere with her as she looked around for her friends.

She stopped in stunned disbelief when she saw the Tide. It was familiar, in a way. She'd seen it many times on the news. But being in the presence of it... it was so *huge*. She shook her head. She had more important things to worry about now. She started trotting down the slight hill, looking for her friends.

She didn't have to look for long. Several trucks came roaring up the road, towards the gateway. She stepped off the road as they passed her, kicking up a cloud of dust. She could make out the forms of several ponies in the back, so she turned and ran after them. More dust was kicked up in her face as the trucks pulled farther and farther ahead of her.

The trucks stopped, and the ponies all jumped out, the unicorn and earth pony guards first, and then her friends. The guards quickly ran through to Equestria. She had just reached her friends as they approached the gateway.

"Are you all okay?" she asked, relieved to see that they all looked unharmed. "What happened?"

"Somethin' powerful hit Celestia," Applejack said shortly, talking as she trotted quickly towards the gate. "We don't know what, but it knocked her clean out."

"She came through a couple minutes ago," Erin said. "They took her to her chambers, and they're getting Luna to come and see her."

The ponies seemed extremely upset, and there was a grimness to most of them that was surprising, especially from Pinkie Pie. The exception was Fluttershy, who was wracked with sobs as Rainbow Dash helped her get through the gate.

Erin trotted up next to them, not sure of what to say, but wanting to do *something* to help comfort her friends.

She got next to Twilight and glanced over. Her friend was scowling ahead of her, staring fixedly on the gateway a short distance ahead. Erin could see that she'd been crying, but right now the unicorn just looked furious.

"Twilight," Erin said, "I just wanted-"

"Don't even talk to me," Twilight cut her off coldly.

Erin stopped, staring at her in shock. Twilight stepped through the gateway as her friends did, then turned to look at Erin on the Earth side of the gateway.

"If you humans hadn't come here," she said, low and angry, "then none of this would have happened. Celestia would be fine right now, instead of... instead of..."

Twilight glanced away, choking back a sob. Her horn started glowing, a purple nimbus surrounding it.

She looked back up at Erin, cold fury in her eyes.

"I wish you'd never come here," she said grimly. Then, wrapped in a purple glow, the emitters on either side of the gateway suddenly tore themselves out of their housing, sparking and crackling.

The gateway blipped out of existence.

Erin stood there, staring forward for a few minutes, mind reeling and feeling like she'd been punched in the gut. After a while, she realized that she'd been crying and hadn't even noticed. She shook herself, physically and emotionally, and noticed the baffled soldiers standing next to the ruined Harmonics emitters.

She realized that was stranded on Earth, in India, a few miles away from the Black Tide.

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"What did you just do?"

"Not now, Applejack," Twilight said, marching stiffly towards the palace.

"What do you mean, 'not now'? We gotta talk about-"

"Not *now*, I said!"

Twilight's horn flared, and there was a brief moment of disorientation as she teleported herself to the hallways outside of Celestia's chambers. The unicorn guards reacted swiftly, horns glowing as they braced themselves against an expected assault, only to relax slightly when they saw her.

"What news is there on the Princess?" she asked them.

"We can't comment on that. Sorry, Miss Sparkle," one of the guards said.

She snorted in irritation, marching forward determinedly.

"I'm going to check on her," she said, only to stop as a set of crossed spears suddenly blocked her path.

"Princess Luna ordered no admittance," the guard on the left said. "I'm sorry, Miss Sparkle, but there were no exceptions made."

"But..!"

"You can wait in the hall if you like," the guard continued, sympathetically. "But we can't allow you in, by order of Princess Luna."

Twilight wanted to argue, but she sensed that the guards wouldn't be any more sympathetic, no matter how she begged, argued or shouted. Fuming, she slumped to her haunches in the hallway.

Now that she'd stopped moving, her emotions caught up with her, churning in her gut and making her feel sick. The images kept flashing through her memory. The horrifying view of the Black Tide, the hope when Celestia's power had flashed a large section of the Tide to ashes... and then the dimming of Celestia's light as she screamed from the Tide's counter-attack before dropping to the wooden platform.

She couldn't stop herself from replaying the events over and over in her head, wondering if there had been something she could have done, some action that would have protected the Princess. She should have offered to attack the Tide first. She should have taken the risk before she allowed the Princess to. Granted, she never could have done a similar amount of damage to it, but still...

Unbidden, a new memory surfaced. The memory of a pair of green eyes wide with shock and pain just before the second gateway had shut.

Twilight's imagination flinched away from the memory and she groaned. She tried telling herself that nothing she'd said had been untrue. Perhaps it was unfair that she took it all out on Erin, but it was justified... wasn't it? If the humans hadn't come here, Celestia wouldn't be hurt, and Twilight wouldn't have had to *see* her get hurt.

She sighed, angry with herself now as well. She needed time to figure this out, but she didn't feel like she could even get a handle on it until she found out if Celestia was going to be all right or not. Frustrated, she tried to push all the other thoughts out of her head, resigning herself to just staring at the opposite wall.

Time passed with agonizing slowness until she heard hoofsteps approaching. She shot up just as Celestia's door opened, Luna stepping out into the hallway. The Princess of the Night looked startled to

see her there, but turned first to the guards as she gently shut the door with her magic.

"She is to rest, undisturbed by anypony," Luna said. "If anypony should ask as to her condition, simply state that she will be well with some rest, and that she is not to be disturbed for any reason. You may tell anypony who threatens to disturb my sister's rest that they shall be arrested if they don't move on."

"Yes, Princess," the guards replied, saluting.

Luna turned to regard Twilight with an unreadable expression.

"Will she really be okay, Princess?" Twilight asked, her heart aching to know.

"Twilight Sparkle, I am glad to see you," Luna replied. "Walk with me."

The Princess turned to walk down the corridor, and Twilight hurried to keep up. Unlike Celestia, who usually matched her pace to the shorter-limbed ponies, Luna walked at her normal pace down the hall. Twilight had to trot at her side to keep up. Something about Luna's demeanor told Twilight that she should remain silent until the Princess indicated that it was all right to talk again.

Quickly, they reached Luna's private chambers. The guards outside her doorway saluted as they entered, and Twilight felt a vague curiosity rekindle as they walked inside. She'd never been in Luna's private rooms before. She was surprised to see that the decor was much brighter than she'd expected, with the high ceiling painted a sky blue. Across the ceiling, on tracks so cunningly devised that they were nearly hidden, false clouds skittered by, and a large, golden sun tracked a path across the sky.

"Clockwork," Luna said, seeing Twilight gazing in wonder at the display. "Devised centuries ago by a rather cunning earth pony machinist during our... banishment. I knew I wanted these rooms as soon as I saw it."

"I... expected your rooms to be more night-themed, Princess."

"Why?" Luna asked, looking puzzled. "I see the night sky every night. This... reminds me of Celestia. Which is why I moved into this suite."

Luna gestured towards a sky-blue sofa, indicating that she should sit down. Twilight sat did so, feeling like an intruder in spite of the invitation. Luna walked towards a small counter on the wall, her horn glowing. A tea kettle levitated up and over to a tap, which began filling the kettle.

"Yes," Luna said as she filled the kettle. "She will be fine. Her magic, body and mind are exhausted, but she shall recover given time. But as she is currently unable to tell me what happened on Earth, I must now ask you. Tell me, in as much detail as you can, what transpired when you went against the Black Tide."

Twilight let out a pent-up sigh of relief. She felt a great deal of her stress and worry melt away at the news that Celestia would recover. What had happened was still horrible, but not unrecoverable.

Luna didn't bother putting the kettle on a stove. Instead, she simply heated the water with magic. Within seconds, the kettle began whistling, and Luna took a silver tea service and several types of biscuits from the counter and brought them to the low table near the sofa Twilight was sitting uncomfortably on.

She cringed as Luna began pouring her tea for her. It wasn't right for the Princess to serve *her* tea, it should be the other way around! But Twilight was too uncomfortable to say anything, so she awkwardly took the cup that Luna gave her, using her own magic to float a couple of sugar cubes into her tea.

She took a sip while organizing her thoughts, flinching at the scalding heat. Luna looked anxious.

"Is it not to your liking?" she asked, and Twilight shook her head.

"It's not that, it's just too hot right now." Luna looked relieved, and Twilight put the cup and saucer back on the table for the moment. Then, gathering herself, she related the day's events to Luna.

The Night Princess listened intently, occasionally interrupting with questions, or asking that Twilight skip certain parts that she wasn't interested in. She didn't care about the human's anti-Tide efforts, she only wanted to hear what the ponies had done, and what had happened to her sister.

When Twilight finished, she tried her tea again. Still hot, but not scalding anymore. It was actually a very nice chamomile tea, very soothing and relaxing. Twilight sampled a cookie while Luna gazed into the distance, her teal eyes focused on nothing in particular.

"And you felt nothing, yourself?" she asked after a moment.

"No, Princess," Twilight responded. That had actually been the most terrible part of the whole ordeal,

knowing that Celestia was being attacked, but not from where or how, and not knowing how to help her mentor.

"Well, we shall have to discontinue any efforts to directly combat the Tide," Luna said resolutely.

"I'm glad," Twilight said, honestly. She was sure she'd be having nightmares about that thing for weeks, at least. She could still smell the chemicals from the toxic mud in her coat, and suddenly longed for a shower.

"'Tis a pity, though," Luna said with a sigh. "It sounds like we may have made some definite progress against it, before this counter-assault."

"Yes, Princess Celestia managed to destroy a large portion of it before... whatever happened, happened."

"How large?"

"Well, of the nano-ring, I think she destroyed about a mile or two in either direction, at least. For the Tide itself, perhaps a semi-circle of about a mile radius. Barely anything compared to the entirety of the thing, but better than the humans have done so far."

"A pity," Luna said sincerely. Then she looked at Twilight curiously. "I am wondering, is something else on your mind?"

Twilight blinked in surprise. She hadn't thought she was that transparent.

"Well, Princess, I think I may have done something... bad."

"Please, explain."

"I.. I was upset. Erin came through the gate, and I told her... Well, I told her that it was the humans' fault for coming here, and that I wished she'd never come to Equestria. And then I pulled the emitters apart, causing the gateway to disappear."

Luna looked disturbed by the admission.

"Surprising," she said, and then frowned. "And disappointing, as well."

Twilight flinched at the statement, and Luna sighed.

"You are not my student, Twilight Sparkle, but in this, I ask that you allow me to instruct you. Celestia neither asked for nor required permission from Erin in order to undertake this action. She knew that there would be dangers, and she chose to take the risk in any case. The consequences of her actions are hers alone, and it is not for you, nor anypony else, to ascribe the responsibility for those actions or the results thereof to anypony else."

"Doing so suggests that Celestia isn't wise enough to make her own decisions, or strong enough to bear the outcome of her own actions. You belittle her by behaving in such a fashion."

"I know that," Twilight said miserably, though she hadn't thought about it exactly that way before. "I was just so... angry and upset."

"Even more disappointing, then," Luna said with disapproval. "You are an extremely potent magician, Twilight Sparkle. You are also the Element of Magic. And one such as you can *not* allow emotion to sway your judgement in such a fashion."

"I am not telling you that you are not allowed to feel emotion, of course, as suppression can be even worse than expression. However, it is vital that ponies such as ourselves, who have power above the average pony, exercise restraint in our actions commensurate with the extent of our powers."

Luna sighed, and then added, "Not doing so can only lead to tragedy, as Equestria discovered a thousand years ago. Believe me, Twilight Sparkle, I know what I am speaking of."

"Y-yes, Princess Luna," Twilight said, sniffling. She felt shame down to her hoof-tips.

Luna sighed again, and lifted herself off of her couch, levitating the cups and kettle behind her.

"I need to make some arrangements," she said. "Celestia's absence will complicate things for a while. You, on the other hoof, should go see your friends. Tell them, and anypony who asks, that Celestia shall make a full recovery shortly."

Once again, Twilight found herself cringing, this time in anticipation for the tongue-lashing she was sure to get when she met up with her friends.

"Yes, Princess," she said. She stood up off of the couch, walking morosely towards the door and letting herself out.

Nothing for it but to get this over with, she decided, and set off to find the others.

Twilight found her friends in their shared dining area, though they weren't eating. She interrupted a conversation as she opened the door, all of them looking at her as she walked in, head down. She noted that they all seemed to have showered recently, and decided that they probably wouldn't give her a chance to do so herself before either Applejack or Rainbow Dash started grilling her.

It turns out that she was almost right. Applejack opened her mouth as soon as she walked in the door, but Rarity got there first.

"Before anypony asks you whatever it was that you could have *possibly* been thinking when you said those dreadful things to Erin before stranding her on Earth, I believe we would all like to know if Princess Celestia will recover fully or not."

"Oh, um. Yes. She'll be fine, she just needs rest, according to Luna."

"Why, that's wonderful news!" Rarity said, beaming. Then the expression vanished from her face.
"Applejack, you're up."

"Just what in the *hay* were you thinking, girl?" Applejack said, jumping to her hooves and stalking towards her. "Do you have any idea what it is you've done?"

"I'm sorry!" Twilight shouted, "I was upset, okay? I wasn't thinking clearly!"

"You weren't thinkin' clearly?" Applejack snorted. "You weren't thinkin' clearly, when you told Erin that you wished she'd never come here? When you left a good friend of ours right next to the *horrible monstrosity* that just managed to knock *Princess Celestia* for a loop? Is that what you're sayin'? That all happened because you just weren't thinkin' clearly?"

Applejack was nose-to-nose with her right now. In spite of her guilt, Twilight started feeling angry. It didn't help that she had, somehow, forgotten about Erin's proximity to the Tide when she'd destroyed the gateway. The extra guilt helped to fuel her anger.

"That's right! I made a mistake!" she snapped back. "I was so mad that the Princess got hurt, that I couldn't do anything to stop it, that I lashed out at Erin!"

She wiped a hoof across her eyes, clearing away the tears.

"I know it was wrong, okay?" she continued. "I've had a lot of time to think about it, and I know how horrible it was that I did that, and I want to make it up to her as soon as I can."

"Do ya, now?" Applejack asked, eyes narrowed. "Well, it's good I don't have to try an' buck any sense into that thick head of yours."

"Maybe you still should, Applejack," Rainbow said, scowling. "She may be due for a good buck to the head, anyway."

Her other friends either weren't looking at her, or seemed to share AJ's and Rainbow's opinions. Twilight was crying now, both angry and ashamed. She opened her mouth to retaliate... and then remembered what Luna had said.

She took several deep breaths, until she felt in control of her voice.

"I know what I did was wrong," she said, shakily. "And, I'm sorry for what I did. And I'll tell Erin that, too, once I see her again. For now... I think I'd better go try and talk to Maggie, and let her know what I did. And to see what we can do to get Erin back."

She turned to walk out of the door again, thinking regretfully of the shower she had to delay still further. But she knew this was the right course of action to take, and the only one that would allow her to start trying to make things right.

Applejack's hoof on her shoulder stopped her. She looked back at the farm mare, annoyed, and also a little scared that AJ might try to deck her, but she saw her friend smiling at her instead.

"Now, that's the right thing ta do," Applejack said. "And, if you like, I'll come along, too."

"Me too," Rainbow Dash said.

"Me three!" Pinkie said, bouncing to her hooves.

"Um, I'll be there in spirit," Fluttershy said.

"And, I'll stay with Fluttershy, again," Rarity said. "Honestly, darling, the humans won't hurt you, and I'd like to see the Earth one day."

"I'll be okay here, Rarity," Fluttershy replied.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely," the pegasus replied with a confident smile.

"Very well, then, I am coming too."

The five friends (six, if you count Fluttershy's spirit) set off to the gateway to the Harmonics lab.

"By the way, Twilight," Pinkie said in a loud whisper. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you're really stinky right now."

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Maggie watched the five ponies walk away, sighing to herself. It hadn't been a good day. Twilight's shame-faced admission to destroying the Harmonics Emitters hadn't been needed, as she'd already received reports about it from her technicians. What she *hadn't* known was that Erin was stuck on the other side when the gate went down.

She'd received orders from on high that everyone was supposed to act as if Erin was an Equestrian native who'd gotten stuck on the wrong side of a malfunctioning gateway. They weren't quite ready to announce to the world yet that the Ascent program could resculpt a person's body.

She'd made the call to the local commander of the base near where Erin was stranded, letting him know that a pony had ended up on Earth, and to please see to her comfort. She'd been assured by her superiors that the wheels were already in motion to get Erin back to Colorado.

The ambassadorial staff was in a tizzy, trying to head off what they were sure was going to be a major international incident, with Celestia's injury. They'd offered the best medical doctors that the Earth had to offer. They were thanked kindly, but their offers were universally declined. The ponies assured them that their Princess would recover fully, given time.

Maggie sure hoped so. She'd seen the footage, and it had been damned impressive. If that's what the Princesses were capable of at half-power, working with stored magic in a torc, then she was intensely curious what they would be like on their home turf. Probably like nothing they'd ever seen before.

She hoped that Erin would be all right. Being stranded as a pony on Earth had to be an uncomfortable experience.

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"You... are okay, pony?" The guard had asked her in rough but understandable English.

Erin had nodded, and the soldier radioed in to the nearby base, talking rapidly in Hindi, and then again in English. Fairly quickly, a truck had returned and brought her back to the nearby base, where she was shown into the tent of the C.O. He'd welcomed her to Earth, on behalf of the human race, and offered to try and find some hay for her if she was hungry. Erin declined politely.

The emitters, she'd found out an hour later, were completely beyond any repair whatsoever. The scientists, all from the Harmonics lab, had known who she was. But orders called in from on high told everyone to keep their mouths shut. As far as anyone on Earth was to know, Erin was actually a pony from Equestria who'd accidentally gotten stranded on Earth.

She had no idea why that was, but she was glad now that she hadn't corrected the C.O.'s misunderstanding. The story was that she was going to be sent "home" via the other, still functional gateway in Colorado, half a world away. In the meanwhile, it was tricky dealing with all the eager soldiers and support staff, some of whom barely spoke English or didn't speak it at all, who wanted to come up and ask her questions or simply gawk at her.

She was assigned a tent. She didn't leave it unless absolutely necessary, until the transport arrived to bring her to the airstrip on the second day.

The first plane was an army transport, full of curious troops on their way back from the front lines. They asked her questions, snapped pictures with their phones, and were, all in all, very excited to see her. Erin, naturally, found the attention to be uncomfortable, but reminded herself that she was the first "Equestrian" representative that these people had seen, and did her best to smile and be pleasant.

The first transport took her to another base, where she spent the night. Then another transport, this one empty of everything but some broken machinery, took her to a third base, where she was immediately shuffled onto a twin-engine Cessna, with a modified couch hastily bolted down in place of one of the passenger seats.

The pilot of the Cessna was an independent contractor named Jacques, who peppered her with questions about Equestria, and how the ponies viewed humanity. Erin once again found herself in the odd position of representing pony-kind to humanity, answering the questions as best she could.

At the end of that flight, she found herself in an independent airport some distance away from Paris, France. There, she found a Learjet waiting for her. Once on board, she found another modified couch, this time with an actual seat-belt, bolted to the floor by one of the windows.

To her surprise, she wasn't going to be the only passenger on this flight to New York. Several people in suits got on, both male and female, and Erin was discovered they were security agents from the International Committee on Human Survival, assigned to see her safely through the rest of her trip. They peppered her with questions for nearly an hour before Erin, feigning yawns, pretended to nod off.

After a short while, she was no longer feigning sleep, snoring gently in her couch. She would have been mortified to know that the general consensus from the humans looking at her went along the lines of "awww...."

She was groggy and disoriented when they finally landed in a backwater airport in the state of New York. Unfortunately, that made her not pay the attention she should have, and she veered off of the pre-set path designated to keep her out of the public eye, and instead ventured out into the public area of the airport.

On the one hand, it was a good thing that it was such a remote airport, as there weren't many people around. On the other, everyone who *was* there immediately swarmed her with their phones out, taking pictures and videos, shouting questions at her at the tops of their lungs.

"My name is Sunflower," Erin said, maintaining the ruse that she was a misplaced Equestrian pony as she trotted quickly through the throng, the poor security staff designated to protect her doing their best to keep the crowd back but failing miserably.

"I lived in Ponyville for a while, but I recently moved to Canterlot," she said in response to another question.

"It's not a butt-tattoo, it's a cutie mark!" she snapped in response to yet another question. She reigned in her irritation, answering more calmly, "And, no, we're not all named after them."

All the time in the air, unable to stretch her legs or go for a walk, was really starting to get to her. She could feel her nerves fraying, and desperately hoped she could keep it together until they got back onto the next plane. One of the agents, perhaps sensing her distress, said loudly, "Ma'am, we advise you to stop answering questions."

She gratefully took the agent's advice and shut her muzzle.

She was finally ushered through an employee-only door, one of the guards standing in the doorway to block the path of the inquisitive people on the other side, while the others quickly escorted Erin to her next plane. It was another Cessna that would take them to Illinois, where they'd switch to yet another plane heading to Colorado.

She was pretty much done with flying by the time they reached Illinois, and begged for a chance to stretch her legs. The security agents sighed but finally relented. The airport they were in was yet another small, independent airport, with a large field on the other side of a high security fence. She was allowed to run around for a good half an hour before they called her back in.

Erin's smile of satisfaction faltered a little as she saw the crowd of onlookers that had gathered by the gateway, phones out and presumably recording. It was when the news van arrived that the security folks seriously got worried, bundling her quickly back to the plane. Erin smiled uncomfortably at the cameras, but politely declined answering any more questions.

Collapsing into her couch with a sigh, she closed her eyes, just wishing they'd hurry up and get her back to Equestria already.

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A middle-aged married couple in Cottage Grove, Minnesota sat in matching recliners in front of their wall-mounted flat-screen. The woman knitted, making a hat for her first grandson. The husband nursed a beer that his neighbor had brewed up, a stout he called Nasty Munchkin. It was decent, but he'd told the neighbor that it was fantastic, and so he'd ended up with a twelve-pack of them.

The news streamed on the television, displaying stories about Equestria, showing clips from the documentaries that had been released so far, and various reactions from around the world. Suddenly, an announcer popped up to declare that footage of an actual Equestrian pony on Earth had just shown up in the newsroom.

Both husband and wife had their attention riveted to the screen as the badly-focused and shaky footage displayed a small, light brown pony with an auburn mane being escorted by several security people. The pony was surrounded by people with cameras, all of whom seemed to be shouting questions at her. She answered a few questions, including giving her name as Sunflower. Then the footage abruptly ended as the pony got escorted through a doorway.

"That's odd," the wife said.

"What is?"

"That pony sounded just like Erin."

~~*~~

Maggie led a pair of technicians through the hallways to the Ascent labs. She'd been asked to get the lab warmed up and ready for Hermann and his team's arrival next week, and that meant bringing up a separate mainframe, making sure all the terminals worked, and to start the process to warm up what the Ascent crew called "the goo baths", where humans went in, and ponies came out.

Or, once the team arrived, Erin the pony would go in, and Erin the human would come back out. Erin herself was due back in the compound tomorrow, having skipped from plane to plane in an attempt to get back to the States.

Maggie punched in her code, and the door slid quietly open.

"Here we go," she told the techs. "Go ahead and... start... things... what the heck?"

The lights were already on, and the terminals were all glowing. She felt a brief surge of annoyance. This whole lab was supposed to be mothballed when Hermann and his team had left! No wonder the power supply to the rest of the compound had been so erratic, if this lab had been running the whole time!

"Well, I guess that makes our job easier," she said sardonically. "It will take a lot less time to start things up now, right?"

"Um... ma'am?" One of the techs said, and Maggie sighed. She'd told everyone to use her first name, but they kept forgetting.

"What is it?"

"Is this supposed to be like this?"

She shook her head in annoyance.

"Be a little more vague," she said, walking over to where he was. "I almost understood that."

She climbed up next to him, looking down into the tub full of nanomachines. There was a dark green haze floating over the top of it. Maggie wasn't certain what she was looking at, at first, but then it suddenly hit her.

"Get out," she said in a strangled voice, stumbling for the exit herself. "Get out of the lab!"

The second tech tried to bolt, only to have the door slam shut in his face. He stumbled backwards in shock.

"Open it!" Maggie said, running to the door and hitting the button. Nothing happened, so she hit it again. And again.

She heard a yelp of surprise behind her, and saw that the first tech had stumbled backwards from the tub and landed on his backside. Currently, he was crab-walking backwards as fast as he could, until he hit a desk behind him.

Maggie returned her attention to the tub itself, watching in horrified fascination as a dark shape began standing up, sheeting the grey nanomaterial off of it as it stood.

A horn of emerald protruded from the top of the equine head, glowing green eyes flashing from its face. The coat of it was a similar dark green in color, and the shadows that had hovered over the tub now made up the creature's mane and tail, billowing and flowing in an obscene parody of the Equestrian Princesses.

In the near-black mane, sickly green lights blinked and faded in and out, shifting constantly.

Fae sprites, Maggie realized, *Its mane is made of fae sprites*.

The gigantic beast stepped out of the tub, flaring the enormous wings at its sides. It shook itself slightly, and the rest of the grey nanomaterial fell away from it.

"Ah," a deeply masculine voice said, echoing around the chamber. "What a magnificent machine that is, and what a fine job it did for me, once I gave it the proper instruction."

The green alicorn turned to look at her, giving her a smile.

"I apologize for the doorway. I couldn't have you folks running around all willy-nilly and raising a fuss, now, could I?"

He stepped forward, flexing his wings and looking back at his body in frank admiration.

"Do you know," he said, "that you humans have perfected a means of immortality that put my own to shame? I am *very* impressed. Quite honestly. And not just because I now inhabit perhaps the most powerful form ever seen. Ah, which reminds me..."

The creature's horn glowed briefly. All around the room, terminals exploded in a shower of sparks. Maggie heard a thud and turned to see the mainframe, which controlled the nanomachines themselves, pouring smoke out of every vent.

"That should prevent anyone from copying or surpassing me, at least for a while," he said with smug satisfaction.

"What do you want from us?" Maggie managed to ask through her fear. She'd seen the tapes, she knew what this creature was. Or, rather, what it *had* been, when it had possessed a terrified Erin, running her almost to death through the forests of Equestria.

"Nothing you won't willingly provide for me," Malachite said, in what may have been intended to be a soothing voice. "First, though, I shall require some sustenance. I am terribly hungry."

Maggie felt the cold grip of terror as she remembered what the fae sprites ate. Malachite saw the look on her face and laughed.

"Have no fear, I don't mean to eat *you*," he said. "This body is designed to keep the fae sprites happily fed, but it still needs food of its own. I could simply *murder* a bowl of pasta and a glass of wine right now."

Then he stepped forward again, looking down at Maggie. She realized that Malachite was now perhaps a foot taller than Celestia, who she'd had the brief pleasure of meeting when she'd gone through the gateway a few days ago.

"But then, it will be down to business. I wish to speak to your Robert Thomson, the one who's in charge of leading the resistance against the Black Tide. I have a proposal for him that he might find... interesting."

Malachite smiled at her benevolently.

"My dear," he said, "You're in luck. I have a plan to take care of this pesky Black Tide problem for you."

Side Story: Death is not for me

The weather for that day had been completely wrong. Had I been faced with that same weather the year previous, I would have been playing outside under the stern eye of my governess, a long-faced mule of a mare with a sour-apple frown and a penchant for mercilessly crushing anything resembling joy under her roughly-trimmed hooves. But still, a day outside was much to be preferred to the days spent indoors, in our musty manor hall, endlessly repeating lessons by rote and learning all the various ways in which to behave as a fine gentlecolt.

And, so, the weather was wrong. It should have been raining, instead. A steady and mournful wind with an overcast sky, and miserable, drizzling rain. Weather this perfect was so inappropriate, it was nearly an offense against the dignity of the day's events.

I resented the daylight. I despised the birds singing in the trees, and the wind in the branches. I loathed the clouds in the sky and the green and growing grass. But mostly, I hated the other ponies, all of whom went on as if life hadn't changed drastically over the last several months.

As if life were, somehow, still normal.

The unicorns by the graveside gently lowered his coffin into the earth, laying him to rest next to my mother, who had died when I was born. My relatives stood around the grave somberly. Cousins, aunts and uncles, all dressed in black, but that was the only concession they'd made to the day. There was no mourning, no tears. Not so much as a sad face. They were expressionless, stone-like.

I felt then and I still feel now that the funeral was nothing more than an unwelcome distraction from their daily routine.

I tried to emulate their lack of expression, their emotional distance. I tried to keep my face still, and my eyes dry. To do so, I reminded myself that my father had been distant, authoritarian. We'd never talked simply as father to son, never played games, never laughed, and certainly never joked. And, most definitely, we never talked about my mother. I received nearly all of the information I had regarding her from my aunt Emerald, who preceded my father to the grave by less than a year.

I tried to control my emotions. I failed miserably, and the added humiliation of my loss of control only made the tears run faster, hotter. I sobbed like a foal, grief and loss and anger and shame mixing behind my eyes and running down my cheeks in a flood. And even that wasn't enough to shift the stoic features of my relatives. Not one jot. And oh, how I hated them, for that more than anything.

Things did not improve after the funeral. What are we to do with him? my aunts all asked. Where should we place him, who should care for him? It wouldn't do, obviously, for a member of our esteemed family to be left out on the street at such a young age, think of the scandal! And yet, taking him in would be such a bother! Think of how his personal tragedy could reflect poorly on us!

Every time I thought I couldn't hate them more, I found I was wrong. I held on to that hatred, I nurtured it in my breast like a baby bird, feeding it with their words and my resentment. It gave me something to feel other than grief, something to dwell on other than loss and fear of the unknown.

It was my uncle Corundum that came up with the solution: Celestia's Academy. It was a boarding school, prestigious and well-respected. Nopony could say that I was being neglected if they sent me there. I would be well cared for and given the best education possible.

The relief on their faces was palpable. Nopony would have to worry about taking me in, making room for the sad little orphan unicorn colt. And, more to the point, my father's estate would pay the cost of tuition for me, leaving their own accounts unmolested.

Indeed, it was a perfect solution for everypony. They could put me safely aside and forget about me, and I'd see the backs of them for all eternity. I was scared, naturally. Going away to a school? Being cared for by ponies I'd never met? It was frightening. But my anger carried me through.

They asked me (condescending, patronizing) if that sounded like something I would want to do. They asked me as if I were a foal, speaking down to me as if I had no understanding. They spoke of all the friends I would make, all the wonderful things I would learn.

It didn't matter, none of it did. I simply wanted away from them. I wanted away from this life. I told them that I would love to go to the Academy.

The arrangements were made, and I was enrolled and at the school in a matter of days. Money can open many doors, and my uncle had spent a considerable amount of my father's in order to get me in as quickly as possible.

I was shown to my room, which I would share with five other colts, the beds separated by nothing more than a little distance. I had my own night stand, a chest at the foot of the bed, and a small wardrobe, nothing more. The room had a long table we to be used for studying, and a bookshelf, but those were shared accommodations.

It wasn't what I was used to, for certain. There were no servants to care for me, no private bath for me to luxuriate in. Food was prepared for the masses of students, not catered to my specific tastes. These things I considered hardships at the time, though I now know that doing so was spoiled and foalish.

I was placed in classes that were beyond my understanding, and I spent most of my first few weeks there studying furiously in order to catch up to my fellows. I failed many tests, and I was in constant danger of being held back for that term.

However, my work paid off, as by my second term I was in the top twenty percent of my year. Third term, I was in the top ten percent, which was where I stayed for quite some time.

It was in my second year that I first saw the one for whom the school was named. I remember it all very clearly, the moment etched in my mind as if it were engraved in steel. I was in a hallway on the second floor, moving from one class to another. Fall was in the air, the scent of dying leaves on the crisp wind.

I just happened to glance out a window and I saw her by the entrance, speaking with the Headmaster. Celestia herself, standing in the sun, her mane flowing on a breeze nobody else could feel.

I was struck dumb by the sight of her, stopping in my tracks to stare in awe. She was the most beautiful, most magnificent creature I had ever seen, and for the first time that I could remember, my heart was moved by a pure joy and simple wonder.

Other students jostled me out of my place, trying to get a glimpse of the Princess for themselves. My anger, a constant companion in those days, flared. I shoved back, regaining my place from larger students than myself by the exercise of hoof and horn. I bruised a few students that day, and received more demerits than I'd ever received before. It was well worth it.

When my father was dying, I had seen the ugliest things that life had to offer. I saw pain, I saw degeneration, and I saw humiliation. I saw a noble stallion, sharp-minded and proud, reduced to a mewling, confused wreck who never knew what day it was, and who had to be cared for by a staff of nurses; a pathetic thing who couldn't even wash or feed himself unassisted.

Seeing Celestia for the first time, I saw the exact opposite of what my father had become. I saw strength, vitality and dignity. I saw never-ending health and power. Celestia would never become ill, never be seriously injured, never age and never die.

How could I not want that for myself? I'd seen Death. I had seen it every day for half a year while it stalked my father through the dusty halls of our manor; dark, impersonal and relentless. And now I saw Life, shining in all its glory, banishing the shadows and warming the soul.

How could I not reject the one for the other? Death, I decided, was not for me. I would spend however much time it took to be certain that I would never go the way of my father and mother before me. And, for that, I would need to study like I'd never studied before.

And that I did. I threw myself into studies with a single-minded devotion that impressed and sometimes even intimidated my teachers. Often, they would tell me that I needed to be more well-rounded, trying to jolly me into sports, or outdoor activities. I resented the interruptions, but one did not refuse a teacher in those days.

It was quite fortunate, in the long run, that they did. There is only so much that can be learned from books. I was introduced to nature, and the incredible harmony with which it worked. The complex interplay of life, each form of life competing with every other form, while simultaneously building a shared existence.

I began to study the natural world, taking great joy in uncovering the secrets of everything from common flatworms to the more biologically complicated mammals. I discovered their secrets as best I could, though I was limited in my studies by the ethical guidelines of the school.

An unintended side-effect of my new devotion to study was that I was no longer merely in the top ten percent of my class. I was now one of the top five students in the entire school, including students far older than I.

I remember quite clearly the day that I had gotten into an argument with a teacher named Willowbark over an obscure point of biology. He was applectic as I pointed out his error, and even more so that I calmly refused to retract my statement. Even though I was proven right, I was given fifty demerits by the outraged teacher, and told to leave his classroom.

I did so, gladly, and resolved that I would never again suffer to be taught by fools. I would learn and grow, and I would be the master of my own course and destiny. As I made that determination, I was shocked to find that I had earned my flank mark, a pair of golden serpents twined around a silver winged rod, the ancient medical symbol that predated the very founding of Equestria.

I never did return to that classroom. Willowbark remained bitterly opposed to me for the rest of my career at that school, though I didn't deign to return the attention. He simply was not worth my time.

Well before I graduated from Celestia's school, I had learned everything I had an interest in learning. I had even branched out, exhausting avenues such as mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and history. Quite simply, that school had nothing more to teach me, but the rules didn't allow me to leave and pursue more advanced learning until I reached the correct age.

Therefore, I took it upon myself to learn all I could, boldly traveling to the library of the Arcanum itself in my free time, that school of advanced learning that I would be attending upon my graduation from the Academy. The students there resented my presence, but the professors seemed fascinated by me, encouraging my growth in a way that the teachers of my old school never had.

By the time I graduated the Academy, solidly at the top of my class, I had already managed to cover much of the first year of Arcanum studies, and was well into the second. The rules there were more flexible, and I was immediately placed into second year courses.

Finally! I was being challenged in a way I never had before, and I felt my intellect rise to meet that challenge. The work was more difficult, more advanced in every way. I thrived under the pressure, opening like a rare flower to bloom.

At that time, my quest for immortality was still focused on making the body impervious to aging. I studied the mechanism by which our cells broke down, and though it didn't bear the fruit I wished, it did allow me to develop several spells: magic that could reverse cellular damage, repair injuries and dispel illness.

Such spells already existed, of course; I was no pioneer when it came to the desire to heal illness or injury. However, my spells were much more thorough, leading to less time convalescing and a stronger eventual recovery. I was lauded for it, and I was glad to be able to assist, even though my true goal of immortality was unmet.

It was due to those efforts, as well, that I finally met her for myself. Princess Celestia, goddess of the dawn and ruler of all Equestria. She sought me out after I, still a student at the Arcanum, had developed an effective treatment for a particularly nasty virus from the rainforests of the Zebracan Empire.

I was not expecting her, and I simply stammered and gawped like a fool. I was unprepared! And yet, my Princess showed nothing but kindness fit to make my heart ache, taking pains to draw me out and calm me down.

We quickly came to conversing, and I mentioned to her how the passing of my parents had led to my overriding passion to eliminate disease and death from pony life. I remember her sad smile, and her statement that "Immortality is not the prize most ponies believe it to be."

For the first time in my life, I found myself slightly shaken from the comfort of my own self-pity. I had thought that the beautiful, wise, and powerful Celestia had everything that I ever wanted in life. But I saw now that there was tragedy there as well, one that, perhaps, easily surpassed my own.

The thought stayed with me for days after the meeting. Why would immortality be less than a desirable goal? What was I missing? It was critical that I found out, before I applied immortality to myself.

And then I realized, in a single and shocking epiphany: Princess Celestia was alone. She was one of a kind, now that her sister had been banished. We must seem like mayflies to her, living and then dying in the single blink of her immortal eye.

I had a dual purpose, now. I still wished to cheat Death of the prize of my soul, but now I realized that I could be the first to stay with Celestia through the ages. She had become so much more to me than just the Princess. She was the beacon of hope and light, she was what ponies should be, rather than what we were.

And I loved her for that. I would have done anything for her.

It was shortly after that conversation that I received an invitation to study directly under Celestia herself. She had a small number of personal students; ones that she believed would benefit the most from her personal attention, and the limited amount of time that she had to give.

Of course I said yes. How could I not? Most of her personal students graduated to become her personal advisers. I would be a fool to turn down such a chance.

The other students were a collection of the finest young minds of Equestria. There were four others when I joined, male and female. I'm ashamed to admit now that I was astonished to find that not all of them were unicorns.

The first I met was Aurora, whose research into the motion of the stars and moon had pushed our understanding of astronomy forward by a hundred years, as well as giving us our first functional theories into the workings of gravity.

He worked closely with Zephyr, an athletic grey pegasus mare, who invented entire fields of mathematics for Aurora to work with. The two of them eventually married, and their foals became architects of Equestria's future.

Starlight Symphony, or just Star as she liked to be called, was a magical prodigy. She was almost the opposite of me in every way conceivable. I had a difficult time taking her seriously when I first met her. She was quite small, and though she was a year older than me, I believed at first that she was far younger than I. She was... silly. Playful. Always chattering away about anything little that crossed her mind.

I admit, I found her to be quite irritating. Though, when she wasn't present, I would find myself, quite oddly, missing the sound of her voice.

There was also Granite Heart, the gentle giant. He was the most misnamed pony I had ever had the good fortune to meet, tender and kind, and generous to a fault. He was a mechanical genius the likes of which I'd never seen before or since. How such a large, brute-looking earth pony could craft such delicate devices was hard to imagine. He crafted each of us a pocket watch, a princely gift, just for being his friends. They were precise enough that they barely lost so much as a minute over the course of a year, and they kept themselves wound at all times, merely by the motion provided while you carried it with you. It was fascinating to me, like magic without magic.

Granite was an intriguing pony, and he was my first indication that my ingrained prejudices against the "lesser" pony races might have been unfounded. My focus was on the minutiae of biological life, and his was on the intricacies of the gear and spring. Though it would seem as if we'd have nothing in common, the truth is that we were the most similar in our mindsets out of all of Celestia's students.

It was Granite's influence that made me realize the flaw in my approach to immortality. All this time, I had labored under the assumption that I must make the body immortal to support the mind. But what if this wasn't the case?

He built automatons the likes of which I could scarcely imagine. Could something of that sort be built to house the mind and soul of a pony? Would that even be possible? Immortality would no longer be an issue of maintaining a disintegrating biological form, as parts could easily be replaced as they became worn or damaged.

Well after we graduated, I told him of my plans for immortality. And, though he considered it to be a fanciful notion, it was also a notion that would allow him to play and experiment to his heart's content. It became a pet project of ours, over the years, to build an automaton that perfectly mimicked the functions of a pony's body. I provided the working knowledge of a pony's anatomy and capabilities, and he provided the technical expertise needed to make a working facsimile of the same.

These were, quite simply, the happiest years of my life. I never laughed more, and was never more comfortable. I had found a place where I was accepted, cared for. These ponies became my family in a way that my actual family had never managed.

New ponies would join our group of students from time to time, and it was our job to welcome them and make them feel at home. And, occasionally, one of the older ponies of the group would leave as he or she graduated.

I stayed close to them all, my first friends, even after we graduated. When we could, we would visit and update each other on our scientific or magical progress. When we couldn't, we would write. As the years stretched into decades, the painful memories of my past began to fade into insignificance.

I even took a professorship at the Arcanum, and it was my joy to teach students my hard-earned knowledge. I was pleased with my reputation as a hard but fair instructor, with a class that would test the capabilities of even the most knowledgeable of students.

Decades passed this way. I had reached a point in my life where I was content and, for the most part, I was happy. My research into immortality began to dwindle somewhat, as I focused more on my day to day life. I may have eventually given it up completely, if it hadn't been for the tragedy that fell upon our happy little group when Granite Heart passed away.

It was such a pity that he died so young, at barely fifty years old. It was a tragic accident, a fire that raged out of control. Granite kept returning to the workshop time after time to fetch more of his students. The

last time he entered, he never returned. He died a hero, for which I was so very proud of him. But still, he died. And a part of me hated my old friend for that.

We'd made astonishing progress on our automaton, and the Princess and nobility were quite taken with our "clockwork pony", even though none knew that the eventual goal was to provide a mechanical replacement for the organic form. It would work well enough, if I could ever find a way for a disembodied mind to actually control a mechanical body, and if we could find some way to power the thing.

Unfortunately, I was at a loss with the solution to the first problem, and Granite Heart's untimely death rendered the second quite likely unsolvable.

I returned, instead, to finding new ways of making ponies healthier, stronger, and longer-lived. I became obsessed, locking myself away in my lab or venturing far out into the wilderness, looking for answers. I saw my friends less and less often, though I still managed to write the occasional letter.

I was nearly eighty-five when the fae sprites first made their appearance in Equestria. Where they came from, nopony knows. My own theory is that they came across a fissure from another world. They were too dissimilar from any life in Equestria, bearing no resemblance to any creature I'd ever seen or even read about.

I was completely fascinated by them. They were parasites of a magical nature, eating the very life essences of the creatures they possessed. Some few of them had been collected, typically dead or dying after having been separated from their swarm. I became obsessed, studying them at every spare moment.

They were both real and non-physical. They existed as creatures of shadow and magic, whose bodies existed slightly out of phase with our reality. As such, they were damned hard to kill or contain. Only magic seemed to impact them in any way.

When encountering a creature, the fae sprite would sink into it, taking over its mind and acting as a puppeteer. Individually, the drones themselves weren't intelligent, or even self-aware. I later discovered that they took on the properties of their host's mind. A sprite controlling a badger would have the awareness and intelligence of a badger. However, as we tragically discovered later, a sprite possessing a pony would be capable of both speech and deadly reasoning. In addition, with or without a host, their queens were viciously cunning, though not nearly as intelligent as the average pony.

All over the Everfree forest, groups of creatures were gathering together, possessed by the fae sprites. Badgers, squirrels, birds, rabbits, and so forth. The sprites used them to build nests and warrens, as well as to bring new "prey" to the swarm.

A fae sprite taken too far from the queen's influence would quickly weaken and die. However, within a host a sprite could survive for hours away from the queen, allowing it to range for miles in search of prey. The only outward sign of possession was a magical, dark-greenish aura resembling smoke, which would emanate from the host's body.

It was Star, dear, lovely Starlight Symphony, who pointed the way. The Princess herself had asked us to look into ways to contain the threat involved posed by the fae sprites. Her own discovery was a magic capable of destroying the queen itself. Quite by accident, I have to say. She was attempting, instead, to capture the queen, to render her helpless so as to bring her swarm in for further study.

Instead, the queen died. And, within an hour, the entire swarm died out as well. Star was heartbroken; she'd never intended to kill a living creature, no matter how vile. Celestia, however, was wise enough to study the spell used, in case it was needed.

Much later, I received my own, captive swarm contained within a rune-carved wooden cage with a Life Barrier spell, also designed by Starlight Symphony. The golden shield of the spell prevented any life force from passing in either direction. Any contact with the shield siphoned a small portion of the prisoner's own energy to keep the barrier active. It was quite the effective shield, requiring nearly no magic to maintain once it had begun. Had I mentioned that Star was a prodigy?

That didn't stop the queen from trying to escape, however, as she sacrificed drones by the hundreds in her attempt to find a way through the shield.

And then, seven years after the arrival of the swarms, came the tragedy of Heartstone Ridge. The queen of a particularly large swarm had decided that it would be an excellent idea to move into the village in the dead of night. The next morning, there were no ponies there. None at all. Heartstone Ridge had become a ghost town.

I had never seen Celestia so frantic. She flew into a frenzy, ordering a search for the citizens of Heartstone Ridge and the swarm that took them. She joined in the search personally, taking wing and flying over the Everfree forest, looking for any sign of her missing ponies.

It took us over two weeks to find them. Fae sprites typically finish off their hosts within one.

We found the villagers, their corpses abandoned to the wilds for the scavengers and insects to devour. The image of Celestia, tears streaming and body wracked with sobs as she knelt before the body of an earth pony filly, burned itself into my mind. I had never seen her weakened, before. I had never seen her hurt, never seen her cry. I hadn't known it was possible.

I was determined that it would never, ever happen again.

It was then that Celestia, in her grief and fury, ordered the destruction of the swarms, wherever they may be. Her Royal Guard went to it with a will, finding nest after nest and eliminating them. They had specialized spells that would locate swarms, guiding them to them like a needle on a compass. The swarms responded to this destruction by retreating further and further into the wilds, drawing out the inevitable.

It was late at night, some time after the purge had started, that I found myself in the hallway where the automaton pony was displayed. I cursed myself for not working harder on completing this project. If the ponies of Heartstone Ridge had mechanical bodies, the fae sprites would have been unable to possess them.

And then I stopped as my mind latched on to that thought. Possession. Perhaps that was the key? The fae sprites could control the bodies of others. It was an ability I could not yet perfectly duplicate with magic. Perhaps the fae sprites held the key!

In my excitement, I forgot Celestia's sorrow and anger. I went to her, full of tales of immortal ponies, ones who could never die, who could simply replace old bodies with new. Celestia listened, at first confused and then interested. Until I mentioned that I believed it was the fae sprites who would provide the key.

"No" was all she said in response. Simple. Definite. Unarguable.

When I protested, she grew angry. I told her that we would be the ones controlling the swarms. The queens never aged, that we could tell. They would remain alive as long as nothing killed them. If our minds, our spirits, took their place, then it wold be us who would live forever, only needing the occasional body in replacement for old ones as they died.

"And where will these bodies come from?" she asked me, disappointed and angry. "Fae sprites can't possess an automaton, Malachite. Even if they could, similar things have been tried in the past, to tragic consequences. A living mind needs a living body, else it will go insane. Would you then feed off of other ponies? Cause the deaths of others to fuel your own immortality? How, then, are you any different from the fae swarm itself?"

I tried to argue my case, but to no avail. The Princess wouldn't hear of it. It was her grief, I reasoned. Grief, and hatred of the fae swarms had made her irrational, though I was loathe to attribute such a flaw to my immortal Princess. But I would prove my case, I would prove it well. I bowed my head, vowing to wait out the tide of emotions, and present my case once again when she was calmer.

As I was leaving, however, it was as if Celestia had read my mind. Before I reached the door, she informed me sternly that my studies into the fae swarm were no longer needed, as the swarms were now nearly extinct, and likely the last would be completely destroyed by the end of that year. I was to end the life of the queen in my laboratory immediately upon my return.

I saw my promised immortality slipping through my hooves at her statement, though I believe I managed to keep the emotions from my face as I assured her that I would do so, at my first opportunity.

I returned to the laboratory, frantic with indecision. What to do? Follow the orders of an emotionally turbulent Princess and perhaps doom myself, not to mention all of ponykind, to nothing more than a mortal life? Disobey, and have the Princess simply order somepony else to do the deed in my place? There were simply no good options.

I surveyed the cages full of animals, as well as the tiny clockwork rodents on my desk, gifts from the late Granite Heart. So far, my spells to bond a living mind to a non-living body had met with very limited success. The only times I had succeeded, the animal had been unable to control the body, and the soul had then dissipated shortly thereafter.

I was convinced that the properties of the fae sprite's possession capabilities held the key. Somehow, they were able to inhabit and drain the life of any living creature, even plants, though they obviously preferred animals. And now, I had one of the last swarms left alive in my possession.

I made my decision. Celestia was distraught, and not thinking clearly. I would *not* destroy this swarm. I would simply wait until she was thinking rationally once again, and propose the idea once more.

I sent a letter to Celestia stating that the queen was dead. Of course, she was not. Instead, I hid her in the basement of my laboratory in case anypony stopped by. Fortunately, the spell that located the swarms

could not penetrate the Life Barrier spell, or my ruse would be up the moment a guard cast it within a few miles.

But there was a problem that I hadn't been aware of at first. After a week, I noted that the captive swarm was growing continuously smaller. The queen had long since stopped sacrificing drones for nothing, but now the swarm was starving. As it starved, the drones cannibalized each other. The swarm now was half the size it had been a week ago. I couldn't wait much longer, and I couldn't release the swarm to feed.

I decided that an expedition was in order. I rented a cart and loaded a few supplies for a journey into the wilderness. I explained to Celestia that I was going to research how the wildlife of the Everfree was recovering from the aftermath of the fae sprites, and she smiled warmly at me and gave me her blessing.

"Be well, my precious student," she said, folding a wing around me in a brief embrace. It was the last thing Celestia said to me before I left.

There was a cave in the Everfree that I was familiar with, miles away from anything even remotely resembling civilization. I took the cart there, and I spent the next week crafting a very modified version of the Life Barrier spell, carving the runes into the very rock itself.

This spell was modified from the original, my own addition. In addition to absorbing the energy from anything that came in contact with it in order to strengthen the shield, it would also slowly drain life from the plants and animals around it, feeding any excess energy into the inhabitant inside the barrier, which would keep me alive and healthy.

It would only be several months, I decided, before I could come out and present myself to Celestia in my newly immortal form. With that in mind, I prepared myself mentally, running through the sequence of events in my mind over and over again, until I was completely certain that I had it correct and had considered all possible variations.

And then, bracing myself, I released the starving queen and her vastly reduced swarm from the smaller Life Barrier spell.

As expected, the entire swarm descended upon me in a frenzy. They stopped the moment I cast my second spell, killing the queen in flight. She perished with a scream of rage and pain, and the swarm itself stopped, milling about in an uncertain cloud.

Time was of the essence, now. If I hesitated, if I made any mistake, I would lose my chance and, quite probably, my life. Not to mention, now that the swarm was no longer shielded, the Royal Guards could easily detect it. By the time my third spell was complete, the swarm had already begun to dissipate.

My mind separated from my body suddenly, and I felt myself thrust into the center of the swarm. They reacted with confusion, uncertainty, and finally... acceptance. I was now, for lack of a better word, their queen. My awareness expanded as I became aware of each of the sprites in my swarm, as I saw through their eyes. They were few, now, but feeding would take care of that. They would multiply as they absorbed life energy, which I would receive inside the barrier.

I used their eyes and saw my body standing dumbly before me. The flesh I had inhabited for so many years was now separate from me, a fact I found quite fascinating. Commanding my swarm, I had one of the sprites possess my former body, moving it just inside the cave entrance. Then I moved the rest of the swarm into the cave itself.

I commanded the sprite possessing my body and it responded, tapping the sequence of stones that finally activated the spell. A golden shield shimmered into place, myself and the swarm on one side, my mute body on the other, radiating a dark green smoke as it waited further commands.

I had done it. Success, at last! I will live forever, undying! I was undetectable and unassailable behind my shield, and now all I had to do was wait. My joy was greater than I had ever felt before in my life. Celestia had been afraid of this? She didn't understand!

For hours, I played with my new body, controlling the swarm, forming "limbs" of them. I hadn't realized how much time I had spent until I noticed the dimming of the light outside. The sun was setting.

I reached for the sprite controlling my body, intending to tell it to go get food and water. I found... nothing. At first, I was simply confused. What had happened? I ran through each step of the process, examining what I had done. I had made no errors, the spell was perfect. I could control other sprites without any problems. Why, then, could my mind not reach my body?

Hours went by, and my body simply stood there, staring blankly into the cave. I studied the spell minutely, time and again, but I couldn't see the error. My modified version of the spell was *supposed* to let my mind out. I should be able to communicate with the sprite in my body as long as it was alive!

As long as it was alive... I looked up, and saw that my body was quite free of the haze of possession.

If I had been in possession of intestines, they would have felt as if they were full of ice water. I had forgotten something simple, something critical. My mind may be able to reach beyond the golden shield, but the magical influence of the swarm itself could not. I had isolated my life force, and the life force of the swarm itself, from the sprite that inhabited my body. And that sprite had, eventually, died.

I railed against the situation. I cursed myself for a fool. I screamed at my body, standing there blankly. I raged at it to eat, to drink, to let me out. It did none of those things, though it did occasionally blink dully.

And, days later, it collapsed to the ground. I watched, horrified, as my body grew weaker, as the breaths became more labored. Longer and longer intervals occurred between breaths, and each one, I was afraid, would be the last. Suddenly, I was a colt again, standing in a musty bedroom with the smell of sickness thick in my nostrils. It was like watching my father die, all over again.

And, finally, with a deep sigh of expelled breath, it simply stopped breathing.

I mourned. What else could I do? I babbled to myself, inconsolable in my loss. I hadn't realized how attached I was to that old body until I had seen it die through dozens of sets of eyes.

I wondered, with creeping horror, how long I would remain in this cave until somepony found me. Weeks? Months? Surely not years, I hoped. I cursed myself again for my supposed cleverness in choosing such a remote location. I simply didn't know how long it would be before anypony found me.

But, eventually, I calmed myself. I realized that I had achieved my goal, after all. I could wait. Eventually, I would be free again. Not even rock could last forever, but I would. Eventually, I would show Celestia what I had become, and how I would never die. She would welcome me back with open wings and a smile on her face. And, until then, I would simply live on.

I settled in to wait, however long it would take.

Chapter 24: Reunions

"After him!" Celestia shouted. "Find him! Move in pairs, to prevent him possessing any one of you."

He fled through the underbrush, Celestia's voice ringing behind him. He was glad for the lack of a heart, as the panic he felt now would likely cause it to explode. Malachite knew Celestia of old, and he knew that she would never stop the search for him.

It would be impossible to outrun the pursuit behind him. If the earth ponies didn't catch him, the pegasi would. He'd surprised them and gotten a head start, but that wouldn't last him long. He had no choice but to hide. Fortunately, there was one thing he was very nearly certain that all ponies today had forgotten: fae sprites didn't need to breathe. He spent that first night hiding in a hollow log, half-buried in the silt of a riverbed.

When the sun rose on his first morning of freedom, he eased himself cautiously out of his hiding place. There were no signs of pursuit, but he wasn't foolish enough to be less than cautious. Moving as quickly as he dared, he kept to the shadowy underbrush as much as possible.

He had a plan, devised during his last few days in the cave. It was foolish, and beyond risky, but it was his best hope for a permanent escape. The humans were opening a portal to Equestria soon, a permanent one, and that would give him a whole world to hide in. A world with the fantastic devices that had so awed him. If he could, somehow, make his way through the gateway they were creating, he would be safe. Or, rather, safer than he could ever be in Equestria.

By the third day, the fae sprites were starving. Malachite forced them to resort to cannibalism in order to survive. Slowly, the well-fed and, above all, obvious bulk of his swarm began to dwindle. It wasn't by much, but every little bit he could do to make himself less conspicuous would help.

On the evening of his third day of freedom, Malachite reached Canterlot itself. He waited until full nightfall before slipping quickly into a nearby storm drain. It was almost disappointingly easy to enter the city itself.

The city had changed greatly from the last time he had seen it. The only real buildings at the time were the palace itself and a small inner city surrounded by a wall. Now, as he flowed under the streets in the dead of night, he saw that the city was immense, covering many times the ground than it had when he had lived here.

The inner wall was gone, and the architecture looked strange and wrong to him, the more militaristic look of the original towers and turrets replaced by delicate spires and domes. His own family's manor house, where he'd spent the formative years of his life, was still there, though nearly unrecognizable with a cheery new façade.

He lingered outside his childhood home for a few minutes, wondering who lived there now, amused to think that they might be distantly related. Then he moved on, not caring to investigate any further. That manor held no happy memories for him.

He kept beneath the streets when he could, using the sewers to travel. When daylight came, he used rats to spy for him while he stayed hidden in the depths of the sewers. Very quickly, he found out where the gateway would be opened: In the gardens of Canterlot castle itself.

He released his spies, moving up into the garden. Hiding was easier than he'd hoped, the thick hedges of the maze providing plenty of cover. Still, he couldn't help but worry that he'd be discovered at any moment.

After some time, a large group of ponies came out and stood in the grass, not too far from his hiding spot. There were unicorns aplenty, most looking old and feeble, but Malachite paid them almost no mind. Celestia was with them, and he regarded his former teacher with a feeling of melancholy and loss. Then he noticed another, smaller alicorn standing next to the Princess, one who seemed oddly familiar.

He was stunned to recognize the second alicorn as Luna, the younger sister of Celestia. Emotions churned within him as he watched the sisters chatting. Talking as if nothing were wrong, as if it were completely normal and accepted that the creature who'd become Nightmare Moon was walking about in broad daylight. He stared at her, marking her face and features, taking her measure as best he could, viewing her jealously from beneath the hedges in the maze.

Eventually, carriages arrived. The unicorns and the Princess herself boarded, and were carted away by strong-winged pegasi. Luna watched them go, then walked back into the palace.

Time passed once again. After several hours, another group of unicorns walked into the gardens, forming

a circle. Excitement bubbled in him; this was it, it had to be! Malachite watched hungrily as the unicorns, led by Luna, cast their spell. From his hiding place, he watched in awe as the gateway shimmered into existence, and the first of the humans walked through.

Ugly creatures, *Malachite noted. Still, it hardly mattered what they looked like. What mattered was the gateway.*

He watched as brief pleasantries were exchanged, followed by Luna flying off. Many of the humans walked away, guided by various self-important government ponies. Several humans remained behind, bringing boxes and bags and chests through the gate, no doubt the belongings of the human ambassadors.

When they began bringing back the empty luggage, he knew his chance had arrived. He flowed through the gardens, hiding in the hedges and bushes, moving only when nopony or human was looking. The empty luggage was stacked, temporarily, outside of the gateway, and Malachite took his chance.

The humans themselves brought him into their world, as he hid in an empty case that had once held some human's belongings.

After much jostling and rolling along hallways, there was a long period of silence. When he judged it safe, he removed himself from the luggage and examined his surroundings, which seemed to be a bedroom. There was a vent on one wall, blowing warm air into the room. He quickly moved himself into it, glad to have found a perfect hiding place.

From there, he once again found that magnificent machine that he'd oh-so-briefly inhabited before. Moving into it, he started sifting, gently, through the information he found, though much of it made very little sense to him.

And then he found mention of a project called Sunflower. He examined that quite thoroughly.

Bubbling with excitement, he made his way to the Ascent labs, discovering them abandoned. Moving cautiously, and ready to flee at any time, he began instructing the computers to power on everything in the lab. The computers were a joy to work with, performing complex tasks with only minimal instruction from himself. He invaded and controlled the Ascent mainframe, searching until finding the specifications of Sunflower's body.

Fascinating. They'd made her stronger, faster, and more resilient than anypony should be, at least without magic. However, they'd made several mistakes along the way, making assumptions that made the Sunflower body only superficially resemble that a typical earth pony.

Drawing on his knowledge of pony biology, Malachite began making his own template. The humans had no idea how magic worked, of course, thus they made their spy an earth pony. However, he knew quite well how unicorns, pegasi and earth ponies utilized magic.

He created the template from scratch, building and revising it over and over again, until it was perfect. The whole while he was doing that, he was also perusing the compound's computer network, learning all he could about the humans and their world, and tapping into the security system to make sure he was unnoticed, and to nullify the alarms that would have alerted the humans to his presence.

Before the template was done, something amazing happened. Several ponies, two of whom Malachite recognized from the Everfree, and one of whom was Erin herself, came through the compound to test devices that, according to them, would store magical energy for them to use while on Earth.

Now that was something to incorporate into his design! He studied them through the security cameras, quickly working out how the devices functioned. After several hours of work, he devised a way to replicate that function in a custom-made organ.

Of course, there was no need for just one of them. The body he was designing had room for several. With the new additions, he finally instructed the machine to begin building his new body.

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The cafeteria had been cleared, except for some of the kitchen staff who were waiting in the back in case their "guest" had any other requests. Maggie had called Robert Thomson directly, and she'd been told to keep Malachite comfortable, concede to any reasonable demands, and to keep him under close observation. And, under no circumstances was he to leave the compound, thus the presence of a dozen heavily armed US Marines.

Malachite was making a considerable mess on the table in the cafeteria. When Maggie had instructed that he was to be fed, the kitchens had brought him a huge salad in a punchbowl, pasta dishes, raw fruits and vegetables, crackers, various desserts, and assorted other foods. The dark green alicorn mowed

through them as though he was starving.

"This body," he said to her, mouth slightly full and a strand of shredded carrot dangling from his lower lip, "was essentially created from nothing other than some raw organic material. It's not surprising that I'm famished."

He indicated his flowing tail with a gesture of his wing, adding, "Not to mention that I need to keep my little pets here fed and healthy."

"I understand," Maggie said, feeling as uneasy as the marines surrounding the winged pony looked. Malachite grinned, then levitated the bottle of wine to his muzzle, drinking from it directly.

"Aaah," he said, smacking his lips in pleasure. "I have missed this! The simple pleasures of organic life. I think I understand, now, what Celestia meant about a living brain needing a living body. I do believe I would go mad if I had to give up these sensations once again."

"That presupposes that you are not mad already," a voice said smoothly from the doorway. Maggie turned to see Princess Luna, flanked by a half dozen Royal Guards, walking into the cafeteria. "Malachite, I presume?" she said, staring at Maggie's 'guest'.

Maggie stifled a groan. She definitely felt a headache coming on. The *last* thing she needed was for a conflict to arise. Who knew what would happen if two alicorns started fighting in the middle of the Harmonics compound?

Malachite swiveled at the table, regarding the Princess with a surprised look that quickly drained away to a look of cool contempt.

"Ah," he said, disdain heavy in his voice. "The wayward Princess Luna, I see. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"And I, you," Luna replied.

"And to what do I owe the *pleasure* of your company?" he asked. Maggie wryly noted that Malachite felt no qualms about showing a complete lack of respect to the Princess before him.

"We require that you return to Equestria with us."

"Hmm..." Malachite said, tapping his hoof under his chin with an exaggerated imitation of consideration. "I'm afraid I have to decline your wondrously generous invitation, as I am having *far* too much fun here."

"T'was not an invitation," Luna said sternly, her voice raising. "You *will* return with us, to answer for your crimes!"

"Crimes? And what crimes would those be?" Malachite said, the dangerous tone of his voice giving lie to the grin on his face.

"You must ask?" Luna asked, sounding honestly surprised. "Very well. You assaulted many ponies, including Royal Guards and my sister Celestia, which is crime enough in itself, with the drones that you controlled. You kidnapped young Erin in your quest to free yourself. Going back even further, you disregarded a Royal Command to halt your research into the fae sprites, instead merging yourself with them to become the monstrosity that you now are!"

Malachite shot to his hooves, knocking over the table and sending food flying in all directions. Maggie shrunk back, getting as far away from the two equines as she could without actually leaving the cafeteria. The marines backed away as well. Though, judging by their expressions, it was to give them more room to use their rifles, if needed. The Royal Guards lowered their heads menacingly, pointing their glowing horns at the alicorn stallion. Luna merely regarded him calmly.

"*You dare to call me* a monster?" Malachite growled fiercely. "You, who tore Equestria apart and plunged us back into a dark age? You, who became darkness incarnate in order to bring eternal night? *You dare to call me* a monster after what you did?"

"It's not for you to judge me, Malachite," Luna said icily. "I am a Princess of Equestria, regardless of how you feel about the sins of my past. I'll have you understand-"

"Oh, I *understand*," Malachite said, snorting with disdain. "I understand so much better than these foals who follow you today. Lest you forget, Luna, I was born a mere century after you became Nightmare Moon. I saw the scars of what you did to the heart of Equestria. And more, I saw what you did to Celestia herself, and the burden that you placed upon her soul, and the pain it caused her every single day! There is no penance for that, no absolution. I accept no judgement or authority from you!"

The air hummed with tension as the two alicorns faced each other. Maggie was alarmed to note that

Luna's formerly placid exterior had cracked slightly, her mouth turned down at the corners, grief and fury both plainly visible in her eyes. It only lasted a moment before the Princess regained her calm.

"Will you return with us?" Luna asked finally.

"No," Malachite said, waving a wing dismissively.

"And if we force the issue?" Luna asked.

"Then I'll fight you, Princess. And, believe me when I tell you: On Earth, you will lose."

Luna regarded his form in an appraising fashion.

"That remains to be seen," she replied. "I can see that you are not a true alicorn."

"No, of course I'm not. But I was a master biologist and a physician without peer in my day, and I knew enough to combine all the best traits of the three pony races into my current form. Not to mention, I have... other advantages."

His dark green mane and tail spread out slightly, and several of the glowing lights detached themselves from the haze, blinking like toxic fireflies. The fae sprites spread out slightly, drawing uneasy glances from the humans and ponies in the cafeteria.

"I doubt that Celestia has taught you the spells to destroy a fae sprite, Princess," Malachite stated calmly. "Without it, you will be hard pressed to avoid having every sentient being in this room turned against you. Even if you destroyed this body, that would only be a slight inconvenience. I can easily live without it."

Luna looked briefly uncertain, glancing at her guards out of the corner of her eyes. Then she looked back to Malachite, her expression inscrutable. Maggie felt the tense seconds tick by, and then finally Luna spoke again, this time addressing her guards.

"Stand down," she ordered. The unicorns looked startled, but relaxed their poses, allowing the glow on their horns to dim.

"There will be no confrontation here, Malachite," Luna said, "It would be unseemly to bring hostilities to a foreign nation, after all."

Maggie let out a sigh of relief at that, and the marines relaxed slightly as well, though they remained alert. Luna turned and started walking away, her guards staring warily at the green alicorn in the cafeteria before they began following her.

"Luna." Malachite said, stiffly. The Princess stopped, then looked back over her shoulder at him. Malachite continued, grudgingly, obviously not eager to talk to her. "How is she?"

"Celestia?" Luna asked, blinking in surprise. Malachite nodded. "I admit, I am surprised that you asked."

"She was my teacher, my mentor and my friend for most of my life, before I merged with the swarm," he pointed out. "Regardless of what you may think of me, I care about her deeply."

"She will be well," Luna said, her expression softening somewhat. "She's regained consciousness once or twice today, though briefly. Her recovery is going quite well, and she should be back on her hooves in a few days."

"Do you know what caused it?" Malachite asked. "I saw the images, but there's no indication of what the Tide did to her."

"A very powerful psychic attack," Luna said. "She could have better fended it off, but she had exhausted almost all of her power in attacking the thing in the first place. Defending her mind took the remains of her energy."

"I see," Malachite said, nodding. Then, with clear reluctance, he added, "Thank you."

"You are... welcome," Luna said. She hesitated, then said, "When she recovers, I shall tell her you are here. Perhaps she would like to send a message to you."

"I... Thank you, Princess," Malachite said, slightly less stiff than before. "I would like that. We have much to discuss."

Luna looked at him for a while longer, her expression unreadable. Then she nodded, turned, and looked at Maggie.

"It was a pleasure to see you again, Maggie Henson," Luna said, glancing at Malachite. "Take care of

yourself."

Maggie nodded, catching the undertone of Luna's statement. *Be cautious around him*, she was saying.

"I intend to, Princess", she replied.

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"How do we know we can trust you?" the human asked.

"Because I have no reason to lie," Malachite replied. Maggie Henson, standing in the room behind him, snorted derisively, which he ignored.

Human technology was simply fascinating. The elderly male on the screen scowled at him, and Malachite was awed to think that this person was sitting hundreds of miles away, looking at a similar image of his own face. Scrying spells had done things like this back in his day, but they required a fairly skilled unicorn to pull it off, and it wasn't something done casually.

"Pardon me, Malachite," Robert Thomson said dryly, "but so far, your actions haven't exactly inspired confidence."

"Fair enough," Malachite replied, nodding, "but it's in my own self-interest that I help you."

"What do you mean?"

"Because I don't dare to return to Equestria," Malachite said, with complete honesty. "At least, not at this time. Here on Earth, I can match, or even defeat the Princesses. I designed my body with that in mind. As long as they can't draw directly on the magic of Equestria, I can stave them off. However, on Equestrian soil, I wouldn't stand a chance. And, simply, I don't trust them not to immediately imprison me, or perhaps execute me."

"They don't seem like the type to summarily execute ponies," Robert Thomson said doubtfully.

"You don't understand how badly Celestia hates fae sprites," Malachite said, grimacing. "As long as I am bound to these things, I don't have much of a choice but to stay on Earth. And, for that, I need to help you destroy the Black Tide. Surely you can see that my own vested interests make this a mutually beneficial arrangement?"

"Perhaps," the human replied, "or, perhaps you intend to somehow take the Tide over and use it to feed your lust for power."

Malachite stared at the screen for a moment, then barked out a quick laugh.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Believe me, this body is all I ever really wanted. I won't get sick, I won't age, and I'll never die, provided I am *somewhat* careful to avoid injury. In return, all I ask is that your world grants me both asylum, and access to the Ascent project whenever I feel the need to enhance, repair or rejuvenate my physical form."

The human stared at him through the video screen, and Malachite waited patiently.

"Fine," Robert Thomson said finally, rubbing the side of his head with his fingers. "I'll take this to the Committee, and we'll have our answer to you in a day or two. What is it you're planning on doing?"

"It should be fairly obvious," Malachite said. "I'm going to simply possess the thing and turn its own nanomachines against it, making it devour itself from the inside, turning it into.. oh, let's say rock. Do you have a preferred type of mineral? If not, I'm fairly partial to malachite."

He grinned at the human, who stared back at him with frank disbelief.

"And, you're sure this is going to work?"

"No," Malachite replied. "But I truly hope it will. If nothing else... well, if I do my best to save this world, then perhaps Celestia will accept me back in Equestria when all of this is done."

"All right. You'll have our decision soon. In the meanwhile, you can consider yourself under Maggie's jurisdiction. She'll keep you fed, safe and cared for, and you'll do what she says in the meanwhile."

Malachite bridled a bit at that, and something of his irritation must have shown on his face, because the human frowned and said, "That's non-negotiable, Malachite. You'll have to *earn* our trust if you want us to trust you. Oh, and it should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: If you possess any humans or ponies with those sprites of yours, the deal is off, and we'll do everything we can to help the Equestrians get you into custody. Is that understood?"

Malachite calmed himself with an effort of will.

"It's understood, yes. I'll behave myself," he said.

"That's good," Robert Thomson said. "Oh, and stay out of our computer systems from now on, too. Maggie?"

"Yes sir?" Maggie Henson said.

"Do what you think is best with him. You have my full confidence and support."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, and the screen went dark.

"Well," Malachite said after a moment, standing up, "That went well, I think. I believe I'll go outside for a while and give my wings a stretch."

"No," Maggie said.

Malachite turned to frown at her.

"I assure you, I'm not planning on—"

"I'm not going to have you flying around where anyone with a camera could spot you, and I'm also not letting you out of my sight," she interrupted. "You'll stay indoors for now, until I get word that you can be trusted outside. In fact, you can stay right here, in this room, until I say otherwise. Hit the intercom if you need anything, and we'll have it brought to you."

Malachite was unhappy with that, but he reminded himself that it would just be for a short while. Soon, he'd be free, as well as immortal.

"Very well," he said.

"There will be guards at the door," Maggie said, as she walked through them. Then she turned back to him, looking him in the eye.

"One last thing," she said. "Erin will be back in the compound tomorrow. You are not to approach her or attempt to contact her. In fact, we're going to do everything we can to make sure she never even has to see you. If you *do* try to approach her, I'm going to assume you have hostile intent, and I'm going to do everything I can to end you. I won't let you near that girl, do you understand me?"

The completely even way that she delivered that threat, without obvious anger, but with more than a hint of steel, made Malachite blink. He didn't doubt that Maggie Henson would do exactly as she promised. Though he didn't know of any way for the humans to destroy his fae form, there was much that he didn't know about their technology. Perhaps they had a way?

"I understand," he said. "I will do as you say."

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She watched as Luna gently closed the door, then turned to walk as quietly as possible into her room, her eyes focused on the bed in the corner. As she approached, she obviously noticed the bed was empty.

"Over here, Luna," Celestia called from her cushions on the floor.

"Celestia!" her sister said, obviously overjoyed. "You're awake! How are you feeling?"

"Feeble, old, and foolish," Celestia replied wryly, "but whole and otherwise well. I feel about as weak as a newborn, though."

"Ah, well. That will pass, especially now that you're awake." Luna settled herself down in the cushions nearby, smiling warmly at her. "It's good to have you back, Celestia. I missed you."

"It's good to be back, even though I'll be somewhat sad to end my first actual vacation in fifteen hundred years," Celestia said with a laugh. She levitated her teacup up to her mouth and took a sip, grimacing at the taste.

"Do you not like your tea?" Luna asked, noting her expression.

"Not particularly," Celestia said. "It's a restorative brew, of zebra origins. I find it's a wonderful way to regain strength and focus, though I don't use it very often. It smells divine, but tastes rather like a camel's backside."

Luna snorted with surprise at her sister's statement.

"I'm surprised you'd know what that tastes like, Celestia," she said teasingly.

"I've experienced many strange things over the centuries," Celestia said enigmatically. Luna's eyes widened in shock, and Celestia started laughing. "I'm joking, of course!"

"Of course," Luna said, her relief evident. "Sister... I have some disturbing news."

"Oh, dear," Celestia said with a sigh, placing her teacup down on the floor next to her. It seemed there was never any time to rest. "Nothing too serious, I hope?"

"There is no easy way to put this," Luna said, seriously. "Malachite is back, in the human world."

Celestia felt a chill. She knew what fae sprites were capable of, and the humans didn't even have any magic to stop them. He could very well run rampant until she managed to corner him, and with his ability to control human machinery... This could be very bad, indeed.

"There's more," Luna said. "He has used the device that transformed Erin into a pony, and has somehow crafted himself a new body. Essentially, he has made himself into a creature resembling an unicorn."

Now *that* was a surprise. She would have expected him to go to ground, hiding as far away as he could.

"Interesting," Celestia said, absorbing the information.

"I went to Earth to try to bring him back, but the confrontation... did not go as well as I expected."

"What happened?"

Luna briefly explained, describing the confrontation and its outcome. Celestia frowned, considering.

"Do you think he really would have possessed the humans, if pressed?" she asked, finally.

"Most likely," Luna said. "I believe I could have brought him down, but the damage would have been severe, and it would have been an international debacle if we'd fought there. Not to mention, if we destroyed the facility, we might have removed humanity's only hope to escape the Earth. It was a foolish thing for me to do, and I opted not to compound the error by escalating to violence."

"That was the right decision," Celestia said. "Did he say why he was there in the first place?"

"Not to me, but I heard from the humans that he has some plan to stop the Tide."

"Really?" Celestia asked, surprised. "Did the humans mention what his plans were?"

"No, they had no idea when I talked to them. However, he was aware of your defeat, so I can't imagine that he would assault it directly. I imagine he will use the power of the fae sprites to possess and dominate it."

"I don't think that will work," Celestia said, doubtfully.

"Oh?"

"I simply can't see a fae sprite dominating something so... vast. But Malachite really was the expert on those creatures. If he believes it can be done, then... maybe it can."

There was a lull in the conversation while Celestia considered what Luna had told her. Luna broke the silence after a minute.

"He asked how you were. He was concerned for your well-being," she said.

Celestia frowned.

"I would like to believe he really does care, but... I can't afford to assume the pony I once knew is still in there. Not anymore, not after this much time. I'll have to be wary of him."

"That seems wise, sister."

"Well!" Celestia said, shaking her head slightly. "Enough of dusty old Malachite. Tell me, any other news since I've been incapacitated?"

Luna smiled, and started talking. First about affairs of state, migrating slowly to life in general. In the end, the royal sisters ended up enjoying the rare chance to simply talk to one another, simply enjoying being in one another's company. To Celestia, that was far more restorative than the terrible tea, which she dumped out the very first chance she got.

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The car stopped in the parking lot, and Erin smiled with relief. They were finally here! It seemed to take forever, but they were here.

One of the agents, a blond, balding man in his forties named Brian, opened the door for her. Erin gratefully stepped out of the back of the limo, stretching each leg in turn before rising up on her hooftips to stretch all four legs at once. Her leg muscles were a little twitchy, and she definitely felt a need to walk around a little. The last few days of travel had left her restless and anxious.

The agents walked her in to the reception area, where Erin was beyond pleased to see Maggie waiting for her by the large front desk, a big smile on her face.

"Maggie!" she exclaimed, running up and standing on her hind legs to hug her around the waist with her forelimbs. "I've missed you!"

"Erin, it's good to see you! You look like a mess, haven't you been brushing your mane?"

"No," Erin said with a snort. "I've been going from plane to plane for the last few days. I haven't even had the chance to shower or anything!"

"Yeah, I can kind of tell," Maggie said, grimacing slightly.

"Oh! Sorry!" Erin said, springing back self-consciously and blushing. "Was it really that bad?"

"Just a little... well, horse-sweaty, I guess."

"You get used to it," Brian said, smiling as he approached, and Erin's blush deepened. "Anyway, she's all yours. I have to check in with my superiors."

Erin and Maggie both thanked him, and Erin waved as he and the other agents walked off into the administrative wing of the facility. Maggie turned and led Erin back into the more restricted scientific area.

"I think the first order of business is to get you back to your rooms," Maggie said. "You need a shower, and you need to run a brush through that rat's nest of a mane."

"I'd appreciate that," Erin said, quite eager to clean herself up. "How is Celestia? Is there any news?"

"Oh, you hadn't heard? Well, according to Luna, she's awake and will recover fully, given time."

Erin breathed a sigh of relief.

"You have no idea how glad I am to hear you say that," she said. "Celestia... well, she *is* Equestria, in a way. I can't imagine what they'd do without her."

"Hmm. Yes," Maggie said. "Your little friend Twilight Sparkle said pretty much the same thing."

Erin flinched at her friend's name, which Maggie noticed.

"She came to apologize later that day, you know," Maggie continued. "She felt horrible about what she'd done."

"She wasn't really wrong, though," Erin pointed out, sadly. "If humans hadn't come to Equestria, Celestia would have never been hurt." Then she said "ow!" after Maggie slapped her lightly on the back of the head.

Then the older woman grimaced and wiped her hand on her coat, causing Erin to blush again over the state of her mane.

"Celestia's a big girl," Maggie said, " and she can take care of herself. You need to worry about you. And you need your friends."

"You think they want me back?" Erin asked wistfully.

"Well, you can ask them yourself when you see them. In fact, I think it would be a good idea for you to stay in Equestria for a while. You should go there as soon as you get out of the shower."

"Huh? But... I thought we were turning me back into a human?"

Maggie sighed.

"I'll explain in a little while," she said. "For now, why don't you just head in and freshen up? Your friends

will be a lot more likely to take you back if you don't smell like four-day-old sweat."

"Fine, fine," Erin said, laughing to hide her concern. Maggie was obviously avoiding telling her something pretty important, but she trusted the older woman.

In short order, they reached Erin's room. She was surprised to see the guards outside her door, but Maggie refused to elaborate. She was even more surprised when Maggie insisted in coming in and waiting while she showered. Something was definitely up.

A month and a half as a pony had eliminated pretty much any sense of modesty she might have had about showering in front of the other woman, so she jumped in as soon as she had the water at an acceptable temperature, grabbing the long-handled brush in her teeth and pumping a specialized shampoo all over herself, both mane and coat. A fairly short time later, she emerged from the shower dripping wet, but feeling clean for the first time in days.

Maggie helped her towel off and comb her mane and tail, still staying mum on what was going on. Once she was dried off, she had her sit down on her rump on the floor, while Maggie herself sat on the edge of Erin's bed. Maggie cleared her throat, obviously trying to figure out how to say what she was going to say. Finally she shook her head and just stated it bluntly.

"Erin, Malachite is back." she said, simply. "He's here on Earth. In fact, he's in this facility, though he's under guard at the moment."

Erin's world greyed out briefly while she swayed on her front hooves. She understood, now, why Maggie had had her sit down.

"He's... here?" she asked, hating the timid sound of her voice. "Why?"

"He's not after you," Maggie said, quickly. "He came here to get away from the Princesses. And... well, because of the Ascent project. He built himself a new body, a big unicorn with wings."

Erin shook her head. None of that had really registered. "What?" she asked, and Maggie repeated it.

"He made himself an alicorn body," Erin repeated slowly, absorbing the concept. That was both terrifying and comforting. Terrifying, because now he was much more powerful, and comforting because... well, if he had a body of his own, he wouldn't come after her... right?

"Sadly," Maggie continued, "when his new body got out of the vat, he basically fried all the equipment in there, including the mainframe. Hermann and his team are coming back next week, and they'll start putting things back together. But for now... well, you're stuck as a pony. Plus, we're not going to stick you in the vat yourself until Malachite is far, far away from here. I don't trust him, especially not where you're involved."

"Oh," Erin said. Then a thought occurred to her, and she looked up at Maggie with alarm. "Maggie, the data for my body? My human one, I mean... was that on the mainframe?"

"Yes?" Maggie asked, confused. Then a look of understanding crossed her face. "Don't worry, Erin. We have backups. One on-site backup of all our data, and three off-site. Trust me, once we got down to being Harmonics being humanity's last chance, we stopped taking any risks with the data. It's safe."

"Oh, good," Erin said, so relieved that she felt weak. "And, he's the reason you want me to go to Equestria?"

"Yeah," Maggie said, nodding. "I don't *think* he's going to try anything, even if you stay on Earth. But I know he's still afraid of the Princesses, so it would be a good idea for you to stay in Canterlot for now. Maybe even Ponyville."

"Good idea," Erin said, standing. "Can we go? Like, right now? I was going to grab something to eat, but I'd rather eat in Canterlot, now."

"Yes, let's get going," Maggie said with a smile.

She walked with Erin all the way to the gateway, the two guards falling in behind them as they walked. Even with the guards, though, Erin was slightly on edge, glancing over her shoulder from time to time, and staring down branching hallways.

Quickly enough, they reached the gateway. Before she walked through, Maggie handed her a slip of paper.

"That will get you back on the WiFi, once you get your tablet back," she said. "They didn't want you online, because they were afraid of what you'd show the ponies, but... eh, what's the worst that could happen?"

"Gah! Maggie, never *ever* say anything like that, especially so close to Equestria!" Erin said, slightly panicked. "I swear, there's something in the magic there that turns every statement like that completely ironic!"

Maggie blinked in surprise and chuckled uncomfortably.

"Got it," she said.

They hugged again, briefly, and Erin trotted into the Canterlot gardens, the slip of paper tucked into a string-purse around her neck.

The Canterlot guards eyed her with surprise, but smiled and welcomed her back as she trotted through the gateway. She smiled and waved back, recognizing at least one of them as a guard that had been assigned to protect her door from marauding Counsel members. She trotted quickly through the castle, trying to decide if she should look for her friends, or just go to her rooms.

Even though she was fairly sure that Maggie was right, and that Twilight felt bad about what she'd done, it had still hurt. It didn't help that she knew what Twilight had said was basically true. Her arrival *had* disrupted life in Equestria to an incredible degree. The only thing that alleviated the guilt at all was knowing that, even if she hadn't come here, humans would have arrived anyway, and that her arriving had at least given both the humans and the ponies enough information to allow a peaceful first contact.

In the end, though, she knew she couldn't just leave things as they were. She wasn't sure where her friends were, but she could guess. They were most likely in their shared apartments, probably eating a meal together. Since she was pretty hungry, that was probably a great place to start.

It didn't take her long to get there. She opened the door and walked inside, finding her friends in the midst of an apparently deadly serious discussion. All of them were lined up with their backs to the door, staring at her tablet, which was propped up on the table.

"It don't make no sense, Pinkie Pie," Applejack was saying. "Why in tarnation would a rabbit even *wear* a dress? Besides, rabbits can't talk, everypony knows that."

"It's just for fun, AJ!" Pinkie said, sounding slightly frustrated. Erin got the impression that this conversation had been going on for a while. "The humans made up these... funny animal stories, drew them up, and made them do silly things!"

"That's crazy," Rainbow Dash said. "If they're drawings, how do they move and stuff?"

"They show oodles and oodles of them, one right after another! It only *looks* like they're moving!"

"Meh," Dash said, "Sounds like it would be easier just figuring out how to teach a rabbit to talk."

"I'm sorry, but the name 'Bugs' is simply revolting," was Rarity's input.

"Bugs are... nice," Fluttershy added.

"Bugs are icky," Rarity countered in a reasonable voice, and Fluttershy sank behind the table rather than disagree with her friend.

"I thought Erin said that guns were powerful dangerous," Applejack put in, staring with fascination at the tablet set up on the table. "But that duck keeps getting it blown up in his face, and nothin' really happens to him."

"His beak got blown off that one time," Rainbow Dash reminded her. "That was hilarious!"

Fluttershy 'eep'ed and hid even more behind the table.

"You have to wonder why all the talking animals are so smart, and all the humans are so dumb," Twilight said.

"We like to root for the little guy," Erin said, grinning. "And we have a little bit of an inferiority complex, sometimes."

Her friends all turned to gape at her, the tablet completely forgotten for the moment. The next thing Erin knew she was being tackled by a pink blur.

"Sunflower!" Pinkie said. "You made it back! I'm so happy!"

"Hey, Pinkie," Erin said, laughing. "Breathing would be nice. And it's Erin, remember?"

"Oh, yeah! But I decided that I like Sunflower better. It's more 'you'!"

Pinkie relented and got up, allowing her other friends to come up and hug her, telling her how glad they were to see her back, and safe. Everyone except for Twilight, who hung back, looking anxious and guilty.

Everypony seemed to sense the mood, moving back and allowing Erin to approach Twilight, who didn't meet her eyes.

"Twilight?" Erin asked, hopefully. She'd worked out what she wanted to say to her friend over the last several days of flying halfway around the world, but that all fell away as Twilight looked up, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Erin... I'm... I'm sorry I said those things," Twilight said. "I was upset. I was upset, and I was angry that Celestia got hurt, and I took it out on you. You didn't deserve it, and I'm so, so sorry..."

Erin hugged her friend, who by this point was crying.

"Oh, Twilight," she said, crying a little, herself, "you've forgiven me for doing *much* worse things than that." Erin tried to continue, but choked up a little before managing to say, "Of course I forgive you!"

A few seconds later, she was in the center of yet another mass pony-hug. Erin realized that she'd been the recipient of more group hugs as a pony than she'd ever had as a human. The thought made her laugh a little.

The hug eventually broke up, and Erin spent some time just talking with her friends and catching up. She called down to the kitchens, and was finally able to eat, though it felt a little awkward being the only one in the room with food. Pinkie soon remedied that situation by stealing her dessert.

Finally, before the night was over, Erin managed to pry her tablet back from Pinkie's hooves, in spite of her pink friend's protests. Pulling out the authentication information that Maggie had given her, she spent the rest of the night showing her pony friends some of the more interesting places on the internet.

Fluttershy was in heaven, due to the large number of adorable cat pictures that Erin couldn't help but save. Rainbow Dash was riveted by some videos of stunt flyers, Rarity enjoyed looking at human fashion shows, and seemed to alternate between finding the fashions ridiculous or inspired. Apparently, she had several new ideas just by watching a single runway show.

All of the ponies were glued to the screen when Erin pulled up some videos of horses, zebras, and other hooved animals, though she was very careful not to pull up anything that would be violent or disturbing. The ponies chattered animatedly about the difference between the animals of Earth and the ones they knew in Equestria.

Finally, the night wrapped up with Erin promising to show her friends more interesting things with her tablet, but opting to keep it for herself, now that it was connected to the internet. She wasn't sure she trusted Pinkie Pie on the net without supervision.

Yawning, she got to her hooves and walked to the door, exchanging good nights with her friends. She turned to close the door, and was surprised to see Twilight there, looking pensive.

"So, are we okay, Erin?" she asked her.

Erin smiled, and hugged her friend. The things said could never be unsaid, that was true. But what is important is what comes from the heart, and not something said rashly, in the heat of anger.

"We were always okay, Twilight," she said. "Sleep well, okay?"

"You too, Erin," Twilight Sparkle said.

With that, Erin finally began the walk back to her room in the castle, feeling more than ready for a nice long sleep.

Chapter 25: Hope

The hallways of Canterlot Castle echoed with the clattering sound of hoofbeats as Twilight moved at a pace just shy of a trot, her friends trailing along behind her. She could practically feel the impatience bursting through her coat as she hurried towards Celestia's chambers. Though she would have preferred a private audience with the Princess, this would be the first chance she'd had to see her teacher since the disastrous attempt to quell the Tide.

The guards let her pass this time, and Twilight's horn flared as she impatiently pushed the doors open. She burst into the room, looking eagerly for around for the familiar sight of the Princess, nearly desperate to reassure herself that she was actually all right.

"Princess Celestia!" she said, spotting her lying on some cushions on the floor. Her heart swelled with joy and relief to see the Princess awake and looking more or less normal. She trotted forward happily, her friends trailing behind her. "I'm so glad you..."

She broke off, staring at Celestia in confusion. Rarity gasped at the sight of the Princess, and Twilight heard Rainbow Dash start snickering behind her. She snapped her tail at the pegasus, who protested with a grumble but at least stopped laughing.

"Yes, Twilight?" Celestia asked, serenely. "Is there something wrong?"

"Um, no. I've just... Well, I've never seen you wear a robe, before."

The robe in question was an unflattering pink thing, faded to near-beige. It was somewhat tattered and frayed around the edges and made, apparently, of terrycloth. A square of slightly-darker pink on one side indicated the place where a pocket had once been, its current location a mystery. The entire thing had obviously suffered several rips and tears over the years, which had been stitched back together with no attempt towards making the repair unobtrusive.

Twilight could hear Rarity having a very subdued nervous breakdown behind her.

"This old thing?" Celestia said, smiling fondly at it. "I've had it for years. It's quite possibly the most comfortable article of clothing I've ever owned. The original was created by a tailor named Kind Stitch some five hundred years ago. I commissioned fifty of them and keep them in a preservation spell, since they do wear out from time to time. This is... oh, I believe it's my fifteenth one."

"Princess," Rarity said in a strained voice, "you simply *must* allow me to..."

"Thank you, but no," Celestia said, kindly but firmly. "I like these robes as they are. In any case, we're not here to discuss my bathrobe, are we?"

"No, Princess," Twilight said promptly.

Celestia sipped some tea and grimaced at the taste, then set the cup firmly aside.

"You've heard the news that Malachite is back?" she asked them.

"Yes, Princess. Erin told us when she came back."

"Erin, how are you taking the news?"

Erin shuffled her hooves uncomfortably for a moment, then said, "As long as he stays far away from me, I think I'll be okay, Princess. But I really hope you don't trust him."

"Not any further than I can throw him, I assure you," Celestia said with a smile. "Which, at the moment, isn't very far at all. In any case, he has stated that he has a plan to stop the Black Tide."

Twilight blinked in surprise while her friends muttered behind her.

"How does he plan to do that?" Erin asked, confused. Twilight flinched at the her friend's lack of honorifics while addressing the Princess, but Celestia didn't so much as bat an eye.

"We, that is Luna and I, believe he simply plans on possessing it."

Now *that* was a thought worthy of concern. The Black Tide had possessed enough power to knock Celestia down, and Malachite was an ancient genius pony-turned-monster who had crafted his own alicorn body. Who knew what he'd get up to, if he was able to possess it?

"Are you going to let him, Princess?" Twilight asked doubtfully. "It doesn't seem like a very safe thing, no

matter how it turns out."

Celestia nodded, saying, "I do have a plan. Twilight, why do you think the Elements didn't work on the Tide?"

"I don't know," she replied, her frustration showing through. "They should have! Obviously, the Black Tide isn't in harmony with the Earth, so the Elements should have done *something*!"

"I believe I know why," Celestia said, smiling enigmatically. "I'm hoping that you can figure it out."

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"So, then, we're agreed?" Rosy Oats asked the assembly. There was general, though sometimes grudging, affirmation from the ponies in the room.

The agreement to allow humanity to evacuate to their world was surprisingly simple, at least the base of it. The agreement, pending the Princesses' approval, would allow the humans to begin planning for the enormous task of moving their population over. However, there were still many provisional items that had to be ironed out.

The number and type of weapons humanity could bring over still had to be agreed upon. In addition, there was the matter of how humanity would compensate the Equestrian government and people for the land that was traded for Zanibra, as well as the labor of the earth ponies and pegasi that would help to turn that land into a more hospitable environment.

These were things that could take years to fully iron out, and the Princesses had dictated that the evacuation shouldn't be delayed for details. They preferred to take it on faith that the humans would do what they could to repay the Equestrians' generosity.

The humans had already agreed that full disclosure of all scientific learning was something that would be shared, in partial compensation for Equestrian generosity. Also, full access to currently-available Earth history, arts, and so on. But how many human teachers would go out into Equestria, teaching foals and adults alike, still needed to be worked out.

Another thing that was agreed on was that pony kind would have equal access both to the Ascent technology, and to any worlds found by humanity via Project Harmonics. Granted, if a new home-world was found for the humans, they'd be given the first chance at it. But pony kind would be allowed to make their own colonies and outposts on those worlds as well. How much land would be given to the ponies was something that yet another sub-committee was currently working on.

Still, with the basics in place, humanity could finally start moving forward. Apparently, they'd already begun to plan the first city in Zanibra, a port city on the eastern ocean, tentatively named New Hope. Human surveyors and engineers had been brought out there, via linked gates through Equestria, and had already begun planning and designing the new capital city of humanity.

A gateway, or more likely several, would be opened in various places in Zanibra directly from Earth, in order to allow humanity to bring over supplies, machinery, and personnel. The unicorns of the Arcanum were getting worried about the number of gateways being opened and the effects that would have on the Veil, so the Zanibra gates would only be kept open for short bursts of time, meaning that the humans would have to hurry in order to get large quantities of supplies through.

All in all, it was an agreement that nopony or human was fully happy with, but which both accepted. Which meant, as far as Rosy Oats was concerned, that it was a very successful agreement, indeed.

"In that case, the treaty is passed, pending the Princesses' approval, and we are adjourned for the day. Thank you, everypony, and have a good afternoon."

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There was frost on the ground that morning as Erin began her run around the Canterlot gardens. Twilight joined her once again, and Erin let the unicorn set the pace, only occasionally giving her an encouraging push when she thought that her companion's exhaustion was more mental than physical. They ended up covering a lot more ground in the hour-long run than they had previous days, much to the unicorn's obvious satisfaction.

"I can't believe I did so well!" Twilight said happily as they walked back to the castle. Erin smiled at her and nudged her gently with a shoulder.

"It's like I told you," she said. "All you need is to get going, and you'll be great. You'll really wow them next year at the Running of the Leaves!"

"So, do you think I could win?" Twilight asked hopefully.

Erin considered that realistically as they walked back across the garden, hoof-steps crunching in the frozen grass.

"I'm not going to say that there's *no* chance," she said finally. "But it would take an awful lot of hard work to beat out the likes of Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Still, you shouldn't focus on winning. You should focus on trying to do better every day."

"Yeah," Twilight replied, looking momentarily dejected. Then she perked up. "Still, if I came in third... or even fourth, I suppose... They'd have to respect that, wouldn't they?"

"You bet they would!" Erin said. "Heck, running any kind of a race and actually finishing it takes guts. They should respect you for that alone. It's not easy!"

They walked quietly towards the castle for a while, and then Erin broke the silence by asking, "Did you figure out Celestia's riddle?"

Twilight groaned and her head slumped.

"No!" she groused. "As much as I love Celestia, I've always hated it when she's done this to me. It's her favorite method of teaching! She likes to hold back an answer, then say, 'An answer just out of reach will make you stretch and grow to claim it'. I just wish she'd tell me, because whenever I *can't* figure it out, it feels like I've let her down, somehow."

Erin smiled sympathetically at her friend. What she knew of Twilight's personality told her that the unicorn probably treated every such situation as a pass/fail scenario.

"Well, do you have any ideas what it might be?" she asked, as they made their way around some hedges.

"No, not really. I mean, I had one idea, but... well, I'm not sure the Elements work that way."

"How do you mean?" Erin asked. How the Elements worked were a complete mystery to her.

"Well... okay, the Elements respond to disharmony by introducing some sort of harmony back into the equation," Twilight said, and Erin recognized that 'lecture mode' was in the process of activating. "The effect varies depending on the nature of the disharmony, and the strength and nature of the wielders. For example, with Nightmare Moon, when Celestia wielded them, she was only able to banish her to the moon. Which doesn't mean Celestia is weak!" Twilight added quickly, looking up at Erin as if daring her to disagree.

"Of course she's not," Erin affirmed. "I saw what she did to the Tide, and that wasn't even on Equestrian soil!"

"Right," Twilight said, nodding. "But the Elements work best with the harmony of friendship backing them up. When she wielded them alone, well, it's hard to harmonize with yourself. That's why my friends and I use them much more strongly than Celestia alone, and why we were able to *cleanse* Nightmare Moon, rather than locking her up. And, with Discord, they took the very embodiment of Chaos, imprisoning him in inflexible stone."

"Okay, I think I get that part. The Elements respond to the disharmony by restoring harmony in the most thorough way they can, based on the strength of the wielder."

"Right," Twilight said, nodding. "Which is why I couldn't understand why they didn't work against the Tide. It's clear that the Tide is not in harmony with the Earth."

"So, why didn't they?"

"Like I said, I'm not sure this is right..."

"It's got to be better than no idea at all," Erin pointed out.

"Well.. okay," Twilight said. She hesitated a little before saying, "What if the Elements are attuned to Equestria? They can't recognize what is or is not harmony on Earth, because the Earth is unfamiliar, and *nothing* seems to be in harmony?"

Erin gaped at her for a moment, then grinned.

"That makes perfect sense!" she said, excited.

"It does?"

"Yes! Granted, I know almost nothing about magic or the Elements, but... well, maybe the Elements are like a virus scanner, and the Earth just has an incompatible OS."

"A what? And a what?"

"Never mind, I was just thinking out loud," Erin said. "What I meant is, make the assumption that Earth and Equestria operate under a different rule-set. The difference is very slight, but it's enough to confuse matters. Maybe it's the lack of a magical field on Earth, maybe it's something completely different, but still... If they're designed to recognize and restore harmony to Equestria, then it makes a lot of sense that they wouldn't work anywhere else!"

"Oh..." Twilight said, considering that. "Well, if you think that may be it..."

Erin smiled, saying, "I think you should really consider that as being the most likely possibility."

Twilight nodded, and then gazed off into the distance, obviously lost in thought. Erin was content to walk alongside her friend while she considered the possibilities.

It was a nice morning, in spite of the frost and the chill in the air. The brisk air cooled them after their runs and Erin was barely even sweaty, which made for a nice change. The sky itself was crystal clear, and the cold air lent the sunrise additional beauty and splendor. Erin smiled, thinking how easily she could get used to this.

"Oh, great. *These* guys again," Twilight said, breaking into Erin's reverie.

"Who...?" Erin looked up and saw the human film crew coming their way, led by a lean young man with thick glasses and shaggy brown hair. "Oh, yeah."

"They've been bugging me for an interview for a week," Twilight said. "And, every time I say 'no', they ask if I can get them an interview with one or both of the Princesses."

"Hmm. I can talk to Maggie, see about reigning them in," she said. It bothered her that these guys were harassing her friends like that. She knew they had a job to do, but still, they didn't have to be so pushy.

"Hi, hi," the man in the lead said, holding a microphone. Though, why he had a handheld mic when there was a sound guy with a boom mike behind him, Erin couldn't even guess. She was surprised to see that he was dressed in a blue T-shirt and jeans. Erin would have thought that he'd be dressed nicer, if he was going to be on camera. "Could I just trouble you for a minute?"

"Look, I'm very flattered," Twilight began, "but as I told you last time..."

"Sorry, I didn't mean you," the man said, turning towards a startled Erin with a gleam in his brown eyes. "You're the one they call Sunflower, right?"

"Um. Yes?" Erin said, startled. This was the first time the documentary crew had approached her. She eyed the camera warily.

"See, the thing is, and this is going to sound weird, but... Some of the ponies around here say that you're really a human. Any comment on that?"

Erin felt the bottom drop out of her stomach.

"Ummm...." she said, backing away and trying desperately to think of something, *anything* to say.

"They say your real name is Erin. We did a little digging, and we found out that there are three Erin's that work for Project Harmonics. One is a receptionist, nice lady, we talked to her a couple days ago. The other is an engineer. We *didn't* talk to her, but we talked to someone who saw her just yesterday. That leaves Erin Olsen unaccounted for. Any thoughts on that?"

"Um. Ah... No comment!" Erin said, then tried to walk away, cursing herself for not coming up with a better answer than that. The camera crew wasn't giving up that easily, though.

"We've also seen you going through the Harmonics gateway quite often. More often than almost any human or pony. Care to comment on that?"

"Nope," Erin said, picking up her pace, her heart pounding in her chest. She had to talk to Maggie as soon as possible!

"Leave her alone!" Twilight said.

"We're not hurting her, we're just asking her some questions," the man with the microphone said. "How about your little jaunt through the Earth by air? We saw some footage of you in New York and Illinois.

What were you doing on Earth?"

Erin pressed her lips together and just concentrated on trotting away. The crew had to jog alongside of her to keep up.

"I said to leave her alone!" Twilight said, and there was a buildup of light, then a flash. Erin staggered, surprised and disoriented.

"What happened?" she asked, groggily, looking around in shock. "How did we end up here?"

They were in the hallway outside of the Ponyville group's private suite of apartments. Twilight shook herself, then smiled sheepishly at Erin.

"Sorry, I panicked. They were scaring me, and I teleported us back to our rooms."

"Teleported." Erin said, flatly. "You just teleported me?"

"...Yes?" Twilight said sounding nervous and a little guilty.

"That... is..." Erin struggled to try to think of what to say. "That is so awesome!"

Twilight giggled with relief.

"Can we do it again?" Erin asked, grinning.

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Robert Thomson was certainly showing his age these days, Maggie thought. The man who was heading up the International Committee on Human Survival looked older every time she saw him. When Maggie first met him, he was in his late sixties, but still a vital and active man. Now, he looked very old, very tired and completely overwhelmed.

She really hated putting any more of a burden on him, but this was above her pay grade and outside her area of expertise.

"She said what, again?" he asked, rubbing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

"I believe it was 'no comment,'" Maggie said. "That's what Twilight Sparkle said. Erin herself has been afraid to step outside of her room in Canterlot, for fear of running into them again."

"Not the worst thing she could have said, I suppose," he said with a weary sigh. "I knew it was a bad idea to outsource a film crew. Okay. I'll get our guys to tell them to back off. If they bother her again, she's to refer any questions to my office, the Media Relations division. They should have the number. That's the group who pays them, after all."

"Yes, sir." she said. She wrestled with herself briefly, trying to decide whether or not to ask him a question that had been bothering her for a while, now. She finally decided to just go for it. "Sir? Why don't we just go public with Ascent?"

The old man smiled wryly.

"Go public with what, exactly?" he asked. "We currently have a grand total of one Ascent lab, in need of some *extremely* expensive repairs. And we have five others being built, with nobody trained to staff them yet. What's the point of dangling something like that in front of people, just to tell them they can't have it?"

"Well, sir, it would give people hope. We're already facing the loss of everything we know. Tell people that, when we get to Equestria, we can start working on making disease obsolete and crippling injuries a minor and temporary inconvenience. It might make the pill a little easier to swallow."

"That's true. And, believe me, there's been plenty of discussion on this. The decision was that we'd hold off on any announcements until we had at least three of the five satellite Ascent offices up and running, and the support staff trained. Since Dr. Fischer and his team are our only qualified trainers, that's going to take some time. Not to mention that the Canterlot Treaty states that we have to make building an Ascent lab in one of their larger cities a priority as well."

"I understand, sir."

"Any problems with Malachite?" the chairman asked.

"No, sir. He agreed to what basically amounts to house arrest. We've got him guarded, and his quarters under video surveillance. Major Morris received the experimental weaponry earlier today, I hope we don't

have to try them out."

"We will if we have to," Mr. Thomson said grimly.

"No, I mean, we don't even know if any of these will work. I don't much like the idea of finding out if he's vulnerable to microwaves or something while he's busy sucking the life out of some poor guy."

"Good point," Robert said, frowning. "Well, there's all sorts of them. Maybe the sonic cannon will work, if the microwave doesn't. And there's always the damned lasers, I suppose. He's got to be vulnerable to something!"

"Apparently, Celestia knows the spell that will wipe out those fae sprites. Want me to ask if she can train up and lend us a couple unicorns to keep an eye on him?"

"Good idea, but let's have the ambassadorial staff work on a proposal."

"Sooner is better than later, in case he goes rogue," Maggie pointed out. "How about I have Erin ask Twilight to ask the Princess? It breaks diplomatic protocol, but I know the Princesses are just as concerned about him as we are."

The retired senator frowned.

"You're right," he said. "Do it, the next chance you get. Can you get a hold of Erin?"

"She's on the WiFi we have set up in Canterlot now, I can send her an email."

"When did that happen? Sir Douglas specified no internet access for ponies."

"I decided Erin deserved to be able to use her own tablet to check her email and the like."

Maggie braced herself. She knew she'd overstepped her authority, there. There was a pretty good chance she'd be locked in a room next to Paul Velchiek in a few minutes.

Instead, Robert shrugged and said, "Well, she's technically not a pony, so I guess it doesn't apply. Just let her know that all the things she's already shown her pony friends is very strictly frowned upon, and to not get caught doing it, okay? I really don't want the embassy jumping on me over this."

"You got it, sir!" Maggie said cheerfully. Robert Thompson smiled thinly at her, then signed off. Maggie took out her own tablet and started tapping out a quick email for Erin.

~~*~~

Celestia set aside the initial agreement for humanity's immigration as Twilight walked in. As her student flinched once again at the sight of her bathrobe, the Princess allowed herself a quiet chuckle, reflecting that the robe would be worth wearing just for that reaction even if it weren't so incredibly comfortable.

"Twilight! Welcome. It's always good to see you, my dear student."

"Thank you, Princess," the unicorn said, smiling happily. "I... ah, I think I figured out why the Elements didn't work on Earth. Was it because they didn't know what Harmony was supposed to look like, outside of our world?"

"Very good!" she said, and the unicorn beamed with joy. "That's exactly it. Or, rather, I believe that's why."

"I don't understand, though, Princess. How does that help us? If the Elements can't be used on Earth..." Twilight trailed off, confused.

"They can't be used against the Tide, no. However, I believe that they can still be used against Malachite, should he choose to betray us."

"Oh!" Twilight said, eyes lighting up.

"I would like to have you and your friends there, when Malachite makes his attempt. I have to warn you, though, that there is a very good chance that he will recognize why you are there, and take action against you."

"I... I understand, Princess," Twilight said, hiding her fear behind her determination.

"Have no fear, Twilight. I will be there as well, to protect you."

Twilight looked doubtful, and Celestia felt a twinge of annoyance that she had to stop herself from voicing. She knew her student was just concerned about her welfare, even if Celestia was tired of everypony treating her as if she were made of crystal.

"I assure you, I will be fine. I've nearly recovered my full strength, after all," she said instead, and Twilight relaxed slightly.

"I'm glad to hear it," the unicorn said, sounding relieved.

"One moment, if you please," Celestia said, then lifted a quill and signed the top page of the documents before her, writing her name elegantly next to her sister's more utilitarian script. She called in an attendant, instructing her to bring the signed documents back to Rosy Oats. Through it all, Twilight Sparkle waited patiently, not interrupting or questioning.

"That was the final approval needed for the initial agreement to begin allowing the humans to move to Zanibra," she said, by way of explanation. "There are quite a few details to be worked out, but it was decided that it was better to not delay the migration."

"Oh, of course," Twilight said, nodding.

Celestia regarded her student briefly, then came to a decision. There were mounds of paperwork awaiting her attention, and nobleponies who had been waiting to see her for over a week. Suddenly, all of that seemed to be completely unimportant.

"Twilight?"

"Yes, Princess?"

"Would you do me the favor of staying here and having tea with me? It's been so very long since we've had a chance to catch up. I would like to take some time, just to talk to you."

Twilight's face was radiantly happy as she said, "Of course, Princess!"

Paperwork, meetings, and humans temporarily forgotten, Celestia and Twilight lost themselves in the simple joy of warm conversation, wiling away the afternoon.

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"What is this thing?" Applejack asked as Erin lugged the cardboard box into the common dining area shared by their apartments.

"This," Erin said, placing the box down, gently, "is basically a giant version of my tablet. This way, we don't have to keep wrestling over the little one."

"Oh, my goodness!" Pinkie said, bouncing up excitedly. "How do we use it, huh? How how how how ho-"

Rainbow Dash snuck up behind her pink friend and clamped a hoof over her mouth.

"Can we watch sports and stuff on that?" she asked. "Like, racing and stuff? I'm kind of curious about human sports."

"Sure. We'll get all the internet channels once we get set up, though we won't get any cable-only channels."

"What?" Applejack looked lost.

"That is... um. Nevermind. Basically, we won't get everything we *could* get if this were hooked up on Earth, but we can get most everything."

"Never mind all that," Pinkie said impatiently, finally breaking free of Rainbow's hoof. "Will we get more cartoons?"

"Sure. I've got some subscriptions to a few different streaming sites. I'll set all that up, and between them, you should be able to watch pretty much whatever you want. Just a word of warning, though."

"What's that?" Pinkie asked, wide-eyed.

"This thing can get pretty addictive. It might not be a bad idea to limit your viewing to a couple hours a day, tops. Or, you might end up sitting here doing nothing but watching show after show."

"Pffff, you worry too much!" Pinkie said dismissively.

"Fine, fine," Erin said, stripping the cardboard carefully away from the screen inside. "I just don't want to be the one that everypony points to in five years, saying 'That's her! She's the one who destroyed pony society with that blasted idiot box!'"

"Wait, wait," Twilight said, backing away as Erin carefully lifted the screen onto the base. "Idiot box?"

"That's what my dad always called it," Erin said, frowning at the booklet of setup instructions. "Said too much television makes you stupid. Which isn't exactly true, but close enough, I guess. Unless you watch a lot of educational programs."

Erin didn't bother mentioning that her dad spent almost all of his free time in front of the TV at home. He was addicted to news stories about the Tide, which wasn't too uncommon these days.

"Educational programs?" Twilight said, perking up. "How fast can you get this going?"

"I'd much rather see a fashion show," Rarity put in.

"What's this about it makin' ya stupid?" Applejack asked, eying the screen warily.

Fluttershy quietly whispered something that sounded like it might have been "Cute animals?"

Erin sighed as the ponies behind her started bickering. This had seemed like such a great idea yesterday, when she'd given Maggie some money to pick this up in Boulder. Maggie had been more than happy to help, for no nobler of a reason than to tweak the noses of everyone in charge. But, at the moment, it was becoming more obvious that just having *one* TV screen was too little of a good thing.

She plugged in the power converter that the engineers in the Harmonic's lab had produced, to enable human electronics to work off of Canterlot's somewhat-sketchy power grid, then plugged the television into that and powered it on.

After a few seconds, a setup screen appeared. Erin picked up the over-sized remote she'd had Maggie buy and started tapping it with a pencil she was holding in her teeth. Maybe she could have the engineers whip up a remote that would be easier for hooves to use, while she was at it.

"Okay, everypony, that's enough!" Twilight said finally, interrupting a three-way argument between Rarity, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. "We're not going to fight over this gift, are we? We can draw up a schedule, and each pony can pick what they want to watch at different times. Does that sound fair?"

"I reckon' it does, but I ain't sure I want to watch anything that could make a pony dumb," Applejack said.

"It doesn't actually do that, Applejack," Erin said, trying to sound comforting. "But it's the same as everything else. If you do too much of it, you can get obsessed and neglect other things in your life. That's why I was talking about moderation, earlier."

"Oh, that makes sense," AJ replied, sounding relieved.

"Anyway," Erin said, finally finishing with connecting the television to the Canterlot WiFi, "I've already decided what we're watching tonight."

"Oh? What would that be?" Twilight asked.

Erin tapped again on the remote, entering the password for one of her media streaming accounts.

"Girls, Studio Ghibli's been making movies for over fifty years, and I have *every single thing* they've ever made." Erin turned to her friends, smiling widely. "Make yourselves comfortable, ladies, and break out the popcorn. It's time for some *Earth*-style magic!"

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Luna reacted to her announcement more or less exactly like Celestia had thought she would.

"Celestia, no!" Luna said, aggrieved. "You can't do this!"

They were in Luna's private sitting room, the one that had Granite Heart's magnificent clockwork sky. Celestia had all but forgotten it existed until Luna had discovered the room and made it her own. The master artificer had matched the clockwork sun to the real one, intending that the room could be used as both a receiving area and as a timepiece.

The clockwork sun was now in the 12:15 position, and Celestia idly wondered if it were running a few minutes fast, or if she herself was currently running too slow.

"I've made my decision, Luna. I'll meet Malachite on the other side of the gate, and observe while he attempts to subdue the Tide."

Luna remained stubborn, shaking her head and lashing once with her tail.

"You are still weakened. If one of us must go, it should be me!"

"Malachite was *my* student, Luna. I need to see this through. And, besides, I am further recovered than you may think."

"Then I shall go with you," Luna replied.

"You can't," Celestia said, sadly. Luna looked about to protest, but Celestia shook her head and continued. "Should the worst happen, Equestria will need you. You need to stay. We can't both be risked."

"Nonsense," Luna said, snorting and pawing at the floor with her front hoof. "Equestria can survive without either of us. It has before, and eventually it will again. However, *I* need *you*, Celestia. If you think that I will allow you to face danger again without me..."

Luna trailed off and looked away, and Celestia felt her heart go out to her.

"Is this about what happened last time?" she asked.

"In part. But mostly, I believe it is a foolish risk. You are too close to Malachite to judge him properly, or to act accordingly should he need to be stopped."

Celestia reared her head back, stung by the comment.

"He is *my* student!" She said, anger rising in her voice. "He is *my* responsibility! I will do what needs to be done!"

"You are emotionally compromised," Luna pointed out, cutting her off. "You know this as well as I do, sister."

Celestia flinched as the comment struck accurately, but she refused to give any ground.

"Nevertheless, it is my responsibility to see this through. I have to be there. For Malachite..."

"And for Twilight Sparkle?" Luna asked.

Celestia hesitated before answering, and then bowed her head, nodding.

"I'm putting her, and her friends, in terrible danger. If Malachite can possess the Tide, and turns against us, or if the Tide itself should counter-attack... I have to protect her, and her friends!"

"Even though it's unwise?" Luna asked harshly, flaring her wings slightly.

"Yes."

"Even though you put yourself at risk, when Equestria needs you now more than ever?"

"Yes!"

"Even though you *know* the correct course of action is to allow Twilight Sparkle and her friends to take this risk alone, and to stay behind to defend the realm if she falls? Are you really that selfish?"

Luna was shouting, now. Celestia shouted her own answer back.

"*Yes!* I will *not* allow her to put herself in danger, not if I can shield her! I refuse! And, if that is a selfish thing to do, then I don't care!"

Luna stared at her for a long, tense moment, and then folded her wings against her sides.

"Good," she said, sounding satisfied.

"Good?" Celestia repeated, confused.

"Yes. This whole 'infallible, noble princess' routine of yours has had me worried ever since my return."

"I'm hardly infallible, Luna," Celestia pointed out, wryly. "I believe I've proven that."

"True, but you expect too much of yourself sometimes. You're allowed *some* flaws, Celestia. And that includes selfishness, at least when it comes to the safety of somepony dear to you. You just need to be honest about your motivations, so that you can prepare for the full cost of your actions."

Luna smiled brightly and added, "And, besides, I can use that same justification to go with you. I will not lose you, Celestia. Not now, not ever."

Celestia blinked in surprise, and then sighed and nuzzled her sister.

"Ah, Luna. When did you get so skilled at manipulating me this way?"

"Ah, Celestia," Luna replied teasingly, nuzzling her in return. "I learned from the best."

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"So, what was that y'all were sayin' about 'moderation'?" Applejack asked dryly, as the latest movie wrapped up and everypony stood up to stretch.

Well, *almost* everypony. Fluttershy was sleeping with her head resting on the table, and Pinkie Pie was lying on her back, snoring slightly as her legs twitched from whatever dream she was having.

"Um. Yeah, I suppose five movies in one night is enough," Erin replied, her jaw cracking as she yawned.

"I've got some questions about that one," Twilight said, prompting a few groans from the others.

"You've had questions about all of them!" Rainbow Dash protested.

"Well, that's because it's all fascinating!" Twilight said, defensively. "I mean, humans don't have magic, but they obviously have the *concept* of magic, even though it's mostly really wrong."

"That *was* a rather strange looking dragon," Rarity added. "How did he fly with no wings?"

"Magic," Erin replied glibly. She grinned as Twilight flinched. This wasn't the first time Twilight had questioned humanity's version of magic that night.

"You can't *do* that!" Twilight said, frustrated. "You can't just say 'it's magic' as if that explains anything! Magic doesn't work that way. Trust me, I know! Anyway, that's not what I was going to ask about."

"Oh, okay," Erin said, shutting down the TV. "What did you want to know?"

"Well, that spirit realm that the little girl went into. Do humans really have something like that?"

"Not really, no," Erin said. "But... well, it's like this. We had no magic, and we had to discover science. So, whenever we ran into things we didn't understand, we came up with stories to explain them until we could figure them out for real."

"Like spirits?" Twilight asked.

"Exactly. Or, that thunder was because the god Zeus was throwing lightning bolts around, earthquakes were because of restless giants, that kind of thing. Even though we know better now, we keep the stories around, because they're fun."

"Even though they make no sense, huh?" Rainbow Dash asked, helping Rarity and Applejack as they cleaned the leftover snacks up off of the table. They cleaned around Fluttershy, who was still sleeping soundly, and avoided stepping on the gently snoring Pinkie Pie next to her. Erin smiled, realizing that the pink pony would be terribly disappointed that she'd missed the ending.

"Especially when it makes no sense," Erin replied, smiling. "The more 'out there' the stories are, the more fun they are!"

"So, there is no 'spirit realm', like in this movie." Twilight said, looking disappointed.

"Nope," Erin said, then reconsidered. "Well, *probably* not."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... it just occurred to me that, if ripples could show up in Equestria from time to time, they probably did on Earth, too. So, it's entirely possible that some people wandered into places where really odd things happened. Maybe there is a kind of 'spirit realm' out there, somewhere."

"Hmm..." Twilight seemed deep in thought as she helped the others clean off the table.

Once the table was clean, Applejack nudged Pinkie Pie in order to help her back to bed.

"Dun wanna turn into a pig..." the pink pony mumbled, then looked around with bleary blue eyes. "I fell asleep?" she asked, sounding disappointed.

"About halfway through the movie," Erin answered. "Don't worry, if you want to see the rest, we can watch it later on."

"Oh. 'kay, thanks," she said, yawning and stumbling up onto her hooves. "Goin' t'bed now. 'Night."

"Oh, you should have woken me to help clean up the table," Fluttershy protested, as Rainbow Dash helped her up.

"Don't worry, we'll make you and Pinkie clean it up by yourselves next time," Rainbow said, grinning.

The remaining ponies all wished each other a good night, stumbling off to their respective bedrooms. Except for Twilight, who stopped Erin briefly.

"I'd like to learn more about your myths and legends," she said. "I'm curious if any of them are similar to ours. If we have similarities, then that might indicate that either our worlds intersected before, or we both encountered the same other realms at different times."

"That sounds like it would be fun," Erin said, smiling. "And, I can tell you one already: the chimera. We have legends about those, but they don't actually exist on earth. And griffons, dragons and minotaurs as well."

"Really?" Twilight said, eyes bright. "That means it's very possible that our worlds have come into contact before!"

"It's definitely possible, yeah," Erin agreed, then yawned hugely. "But we're not going to talk about it at two in the morning."

"Oh," Twilight said, her smile fading slightly. "I suppose you're right."

The two said their good nights, with more than a little yawning between them, and Erin made her way back to her rooms. She'd have to remember to download some books on ancient mythology, in order to share them with her friend.

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There was a knock before the door opened, and Malachite looked up from the book he was reading to see a uniformed human standing in the doorway. Recognizing Major Morris, he put his book aside and got up off of the floor where he had been lying.

He stretched both his legs and his wings before acknowledging the major, taking his time doing so, though the human rather spoiled his fun by not showing any signs of irritation at the delay. Finally, he deigned to look towards the door, and the rather impressive retinue of guards behind it. Including, he was slightly concerned to note, a pair of grim-eyed unicorns of the Equestrian Royal Guard.

"Well?" he asked Major Morris, as if the human were the one at fault for the delay. It was petty of him, but he was irritated at having been locked in these rooms for most of the last five days.

"The Committee has agreed to let you try," Major Morris said. "We're arranging air transport for you now, and it should be ready in the next two days. Unless you've changed your mind about traveling via gateway through Equestria?"

"Of course not. I don't doubt that Celestia would detain me the moment I set foot back in Canterlot."

One of the unicorn guards snorted at that, and Malachite pretended to notice him for the first time.

"You employ unicorns, now?" he asked Major Morris.

"They're here on loan from the Equestrian government," the Major replied casually. "They're here to help make sure you stay in line."

"We've been taught the spell that destroys fae sprites," one of the unicorns said, a hint of challenge in his voice.

Malachite *almost* responded by saying that he should make sure to possess them first, in that case. He bit back the reply, and instead said, "I assure you, you won't need to use it."

He then took a look at his human guards, noticing something odd about a few of them. Only two of the guards had the now-expected rifles. The other three were equipped with various... devices. Each had several slung about their person. One long and thin, one round and flat, one cone shaped, and a few other shapes besides. *These* were weapons he'd never seen or heard of before.

Obviously, the humans were also ready for any action by the fae sprites. Malachite maintained his poise, though it was difficult. He'd been counting on being in a world where no one could effectively counter his fae sprites or his immaterial self. To think that he was now vulnerable again, that he could possibly be killed... well. that gave him pause. He would have to be *very* careful from here on out.

"Very well, my most generous host," Malachite said, inclining his head graciously. "In two days, we will leave, to go and face the Tide. In two days, we begin the journey that will end with me saving your world. I can only hope, at that time, that you will trust me enough not to guard me at every waking moment by, quite frankly, an excessive number of soldiers. How long will this air travel take us?"

"The details are still being worked out. But we should have you in front of the Tide within a week," Major Morris replied.

"Hmm. Major Morris?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be so kind as to go to the cafeteria and fetch a cake? And also, a bottle of your finest wine."

There was a long, awkward pause, followed by the Major saying, "Excuse me?"

Malachite smiled.

"In one week's time, the Tide will no longer threaten your world. I believe that calls for a celebration, don't you?"

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"*Ponies.*" the woman on the news said. "*They're all over the news, and they're all over the 'net. But what do we really know about them?*"

The image on the TV screen changed, showing a light brown pony with a sunflower mark on her hip, looking scared and slightly overwhelmed in a small airport in New York.

"*And, why did this one travel so extensively through our world?*" the newswoman asked. "*So far, officials aren't saying anything other than an accident with a second Harmonics site near the Tide's border stranded her here briefly. All we really know is that her name is Sunflower.*"

The shaky camera-phone video played as the owner chased the pony through the airport, along with a crowd of people also with their phones out.

"*I'm sure you've seen the documentaries,*" the newswoman continued, as the screen switched to a picture of a fairy-tale castle, all white spires and domes. Various colorful ponies all walked around in the background.

"It's kind of freaky," the man said, then sipped his beer. On the television, the newswoman continued talking, unheeded. He'd seen this one already, and he was more interested in watching the ponies than listening to her talk, anyway.

"What is?" his wife asked. The newswoman babbled on in the background, unheeded.

"Thinking that there's other intelligent life out there, and it's *ponies.*" he replied. "I also don't like all the secrecy. I mean, I understand, national security and all, but we haven't been able to talk to our own daughter for months, now."

The wife, Lynne, frowned and nodded. It was something that had been weighing on her mind as well.

"I think we should just go out there," she said. "Bang on some doors, demand to see Erin."

"We'd probably get arrested," her husband John replied, scratching at his greying beard. "Or shot."

"Oh, they won't shoot us," Lynne said, mercilessly quashing the tiny but insistent thought that her husband might be right. "And how much trouble can we really get into? I'm not talking about breaking in, I'm talking about raising a fuss."

John finished his beer, then looked back at the screen.

"...by all accounts, incredibly warm and friendly. They insisted on helping us as soon as we told them how badly we needed their assistance..."

"It seems to me," he said, slowly, "that if these ponies are so willing to help us, there really isn't much of a need for national security. And, I think you're right. It would be worth getting arrested just to know that Erin is okay."

Lynne smiled and got out of her chair, pulling her light-brown hair back into a ponytail.

"I'll make some sandwiches and snacks, if you want to get the cooler out of the garage and clean it," she

said. "We can be packed and on the road in less than two hours."

They'd have to drive, she knew. Commercial flights had largely been suspended over the last few years, in order to provide enough aircraft to carry people out of Asia. What few flights were left were sporadic, and incredibly expensive. Of course, there was always the railway, which was experiencing a renaissance with the new difficulties of air travel, but she knew that John preferred driving over trains any day.

Her husband grinned, then launched himself out of his own recliner suddenly. She shrieked in surprise as he swooped her up into a bear hug, whirling her around like he had ever since they'd started dating.

"That's my girl!" he said as he came to a stop. She giggled, pecking him lightly on the cheek as he put her down. Decision made, husband and wife split up, each preparing in their own way for the long drive out to Colorado.

Chapter 26: Travels

The sun was bright enough to make him blink his eyes rapidly in order to protect them, which was not surprising after having been locked up for several days straight. He breathed in the scent of the outdoor air, an intoxicating mix of the natural grasses and trees nearby and the unnatural smell of the black tar the humans used to pave the area.

"Well, this is it," Major Morris said, waving at the van. "Sorry for the delay. The brass wanted to make sure you'd be both comfortable and safe."

Malachite looked into the back of the vehicle. It would be a little cramped getting in, but he'd manage. The glassy eye of a camera stared back at him, and he quickly glanced around the interior of the vehicle, spotting several more inside the back of the van.

"It is acceptable, though not exactly private," he said.

Major Morris shrugged.

"We still don't trust you," he said, simply, "and we're not going to leave any soldiers in there with you without backup or an escape route."

Malachite snorted at that, stepping carefully into the back of the van. It sank alarmingly under his bulk, but he managed to suppress his surprise, moving gingerly over to the couch provided and lying down.

"I could just fly, you know," he pointed out for perhaps the tenth time.

"We're not quite ready to have the general public exposed to magical flying alicorns quite yet," Major Morris said dryly. "Especially ones with hair made up of mystical life-sucking parasites."

Malachite chuckled, and the Major turned away to supervise the rest of the vehicles in the convoy. Once he was reasonably sure no one was looking directly at him he sent a sprite through the side of the van, just to be sure he could. The sprite passed through with only minimal resistance.

He recalled it, satisfied. If he had to, he could always abandon this physical form, escaping through the walls of the vehicle with relative ease.

He glanced outside, curious about the organization. The soldiers were all loaded into several different vehicles, all of them a glossy black, and all of them much lower to the ground than the one he was in.

Only the pair of unicorns from Canterlot rated a vehicle as large as his, and each of them were placed into a different one. Malachite wondered about that, briefly. Surely the unicorns were small enough that they could both fit into one such van comfortably?

Then he realized that they were being split up intentionally, just in case something happened to one of the vehicles. Clever thinking on the part of these humans, he acknowledged. He'd have to be careful around them. They seemed a much more cautious lot than the typical pony.

The last of the soldiers and their gear were loaded, and Major Morris came back to see him off.

"This is it," he said. "The trip to the airfield will take about half an hour. Anything I can get you before you go? Are you comfortable?"

"I am fine," Malachite replied, stiffly formal. "Thank you for your concern."

"Look, Malachite," the major said after a brief pause, "for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"I beg your pardon?"

"For the suspicion. We have to be careful. You're a completely unknown quantity, and the Princesses are concerned about you. Plus, being able to possess people? Pretty damned scary, I admit."

"I understand," Malachite said, slightly less stiff.

"And, thank you. For trying, I mean. If you can save the Earth, you'll be a hero to us forever."

"I will certainly do my best," Malachite said with a smile he was surprised to find was more or less genuine.

The major smiled back, then shut the door with a solid "clunk" sound. Shortly after that, the van made a rumbling noise, jerking slightly as it started moving. Malachite's smile slowly faded to a frown. Then he sighed, leaning into the couch and trying to make himself more comfortable for the trip.

~~*~~

The newly-dubbed 'TV-Room' now contained a large red sofa, a chaise lounge, a beanbag that Rainbow Dash had more or less claimed as her own, and a couple of big, fluffy chairs all situated in front of the screen.

Twilight, trotting into the room slightly before noon, was surprised to see four brown hoof-tips poking up over the back of the sofa. She trotted around to see Erin, lying on her back and kicking her back legs lazily back and forth. She was watching the TV from the awkward position of having her head dangling upside down off of the sofa.

"Ah, isn't that uncomfortable?" Twilight asked her, and Erin's leg stiffened slightly in surprise.

"Oh, Twilight. Hi. Yeah, a little."

"Well, why are you doing it, then?"

"I dunno," Erin said, starting to sit up. "I guess I was just bored."

"Hmm..." Twilight said, moving to sit down next to her friend. Erin scooted her backside over a bit to make room for the unicorn to curl up on the couch.

"So, what are you watching?"

"Just the news," Erin replied. "Before I came to Equestria, it was all about the Black Tide. Now, it's all about ponies, Equestria and Project Harmonics."

Twilight detected an odd note in Erin's voice and turned to look at her.

"Erin, is everything okay?"

"Well, yeah. I just... I guess I don't know what to do, now. It feels like my mission is over. I can't do anything more to help, and I can't turn back into a human, thanks to Malachite's little tantrum. I'm kind of in limbo, here."

Erin sighed, tucking her hooves underneath her body. Twilight didn't say anything, recognizing that Erin just needed someone to listen to her talk for a while.

"At first, it was all exciting," Erin continued. "I was exploring a new world, meeting a whole new non-human civilization. I was the first human to do that! And, then, suddenly it's done. Humans made official contact, the Princesses agreed that humans could stay here, and there's really nothing left for me to do."

Erin frowned, and flicked at the cushion seam with a hoof.

"I didn't even really do all that much," she continued. "This was *my* mission, and it's like it almost happened without me. Or, in spite of me, even. The human embassy hasn't been shy about letting me know how lucky I am that I didn't mess things up a whole lot worse than I did."

"That's nonsense," Twilight said in a stern voice. Erin blinked at her in surprise.

"First of all," Twilight continued, "by meeting you and getting to know you, we've learned that humans aren't all that different than us. At least, not where it counts. Your honesty and compassion has helped us to realize that *we* could live alongside *you*. Not to mention that the Princesses both think very highly of you. Telling them everything was exactly the right move to make. They don't like being deceived or lied to. Or, at least Celestia doesn't, and I assume Luna doesn't either."

"That's what Maggie has been telling me," Erin said, with a ghost of a smile. "And, well, I've never had closer friends than you guys. Which seems weird, when I think about it. There are girls back home that I used to hang out with all the time. Then I got this internship at Project Harmonics, and I could barely find the time to talk to them. After a couple of months, it was just like, 'oh, well,' and then I got on with my life. But I can't imagine never seeing you guys again. Or Meadowlark, or little Marigold. It would break my heart."

"Well, the magic of friendship is actually a real thing, here," Twilight pointed out, smiling. "I never knew how strong it could be, either. Not until I met the rest of the girls."

"Hmm..." Erin said. Her gaze turned back towards the television, but Twilight got the feeling that she was looking *through* it, rather than at it.

She turned to watch the television herself, finally starting to pay attention to what the humans on the screen were saying.

"The 'net exploded with activity last night, when it was announced that several ponies would be traveling to Earth for various speaking engagements. Amongst these are several high-ranking members of the Equestrian nobility, including Prince Blueblood, reportedly a nephew of the Princesses themselves."

Twilight snorted as a picture of the admittedly handsome but overly fussy prince was shown on the screen.

"You know him?" Erin asked.

"Only by reputation. Ask Rarity about him, she'll give you an earful."

"Sounds like a fun story," Erin said, grinning.

"You have *no* idea."

Erin's tablet, resting on a low table beside her, made a little "ding" noise. Twilight glanced over curiously as Erin picked up the tablet with her hooves and started tapping at it with a special stylus that was attached to a strap that wrapped around the top of her hoof.

"Where did you get that?" She asked, nodding at the hoof-band.

"I had one of the engineers at Harmonics whip it up for me," Erin said, smiling. "It's got a little flip-down pen, and a stylus for my tablet, and it can even hold a fork for when I want to eat."

"That's kind of neat."

"Thanks," Erin said, distractedly. "I just got an urgent email from Maggie."

That made Twilight even more curious. Email was fascinating to her, a technological messaging system far in advance of anything in Equestria, short of dragon-fire messaging. Erin had been obviously amused by her excitement, since email had been around for longer than she'd been alive.

"Oh? What's it about?"

"Don't know yet," Erin said, tapping again. "The subject just says 'READ THIS NOW', in all-caps."

Then the color drained out of Erin's face and her eyes widened.

"Oh my god," she said, in a strangled voice.

"What?" Twilight asked, dread settling in her stomach. Something terrible must have happened! "What is it?"

"My mom and dad are here," she replied, the panic clear in her eyes.

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Earlier that day

"What else could possibly go wrong?" Robert Thomson asked over the video screen, rubbing at his temples.

"Sorry, sir," Maggie said, honestly. "I didn't know what else to tell them."

"No, you did all right. Where are they now?"

"In a guest room. They'd had a very long drive, and seemed pretty tired."

Lynne and John Olsen had arrived early in the morning. Apparently, they'd driven pretty much non-stop, only pulling over for the occasional bathroom-break and leg stretching opportunities, switching drivers whenever one of them got too tired to continue.

They had made a very polite but determined fuss at the front gate. The guards, not really knowing what else to do short of arresting the couple, had passed it up the chain of command until it ended up in Maggie's lap. After a brief, initial panic, she'd calmed down and thought about what she'd want to hear if she were Erin's mom and had driven for hours straight just to see her daughter.

She opened by leading the couple to a comfortable guest room in the less-secure administration wing of the complex, then telling them that Erin was in good health, was actually working in Equestria (which had excited both parents considerably), but that the nature of her work was highly classified.

That hadn't been good enough for either John or Lynne, and Maggie had found herself in the unusual situation of having her will completely overpowered, though in an extremely polite fashion. The couple simply wouldn't take no for an answer, though they never once raised their voices or showed any agitation.

Finally, Maggie had decided to pass the buck. It was the only way she could see getting out of the room, aside from just leaving and having the Olsens put under guard to prevent them following her. That wouldn't have won her any points with Erin, that was for sure.

So, she said that she needed to talk to her boss, dropped Robert Thomson's name for the added effect it would have, and left hurriedly.

"Sounds like you handled it pretty well. What do you think the odds are that they can be persuaded to leave?"

"Probably nil, sir. They're *very* determined to see their daughter. They offered to sign non-disclosures, and everything. Even said that they'd happily stay locked up here for as long as needed, if they could only see her."

"Naturally, they have no idea she's a pony," Robert said.

"Naturally."

Mr. Thomson stared off into space for a while, then sighed.

"This is what we're going to do," he said. "We're going to leave this up to Erin. I'm not going to lock these folks up, and I'm sure not going to force them out of the complex without letting them see their daughter. I've got children of my own, and I can't even think about doing that to them. If she doesn't want to see them as a pony, then we'll have to set up an audio-only call to bluff them until we get the Ascent lab up and running."

"And... if she does want to see them?" Maggie asked.

"Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it?" Robert said, wryly. "If she thinks her parents can be trusted, and wouldn't mind remaining 'guests' of ours until the Ascent secret is out, then she can meet them. Otherwise, they'll just have to be happy with a phone call."

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"Oh, man. Oh, geeze! What am I going to do?" Erin said, pacing rapidly.

"What do you *want* to do?" Twilight asked her, confused as to why this was such a big deal.

"I don't know!" Erin wailed. "I never planned for this! And now, they're at the Harmonics compound, and they're refusing to leave until they see me!"

"Well, Maggie said you could probably just do a... phone call, was it?"

"My mom would never accept that," Erin said, waving a hoof dismissively. "She'd probably try to break through the security on the gate and try to track me down!"

"Well... Why not just go talk to them?" Twilight asked.

Erin stopped and stared at her as if she'd grown a second head.

"Are you *kidding*?" she asked, aghast. "They can't see me like *this*!"

"Why not, Sunflower?" Pinkie asked, popping up from behind a couch. "I think you look nice! Mane could use a brushing, though."

The two of them just stared at the pink pony for a while, completely surprised by her sudden presence.

"You're one to talk, Pinkie," Twilight pointed out finally. Pinkie stuck her tongue out at her.

Erin just stared at them both, wide-eyed.

"Guys, this isn't helping me," she said.

"Neither is panicking, which you seem to be really close to doing," Twilight told her. "You don't have to make a decision right now, right? Maggie said they're comfortable and resting. You can just relax, breathe, and try to think about it calmly."

Erin stopped pacing and looked at her, then let out a ragged breath.

"You're right, Twilight. You're right. I'm just going to sit on the couch and try to think about it rationally."

Erin clambered up on the sofa, tucking her legs underneath her once again. She inhaled deeply, held it for a moment, then exhaled. She then managed to remain calm and collected for all of about ten seconds, after which she exploded off of the couch once again.

"Aaargh!" she growled. "Why did stupid Malachite have to blow up the stupid Ascent machines? I could have been human again by now!"

"Really?" Pinkie asked, amazed.

"Well.. okay, maybe in a couple of days from now," Erin admitted. "But I'd be unconscious, and it would be Maggie's problem to deal with it, not mine!"

Twilight exchanged looks with Pinkie Pie.

"I think you should just tell them," she said. "Your mom and dad love you, right? No matter what you look like?"

"Well, yeah," Erin replied grudgingly. "But... you don't understand. My mom *grounded* me when I was fourteen, because I got a haircut

she didn't like! I have no idea what she'd do if she found out I got turned into a pony!"

"What's 'grounded'?" Pinkie asked, looking confused.

"It's when you're not allowed to leave the house or have any fun," Twilight said. At Pinkie's horrified reaction, she added, "Well, it's supposed to be a punishment!"

"Yeah, but for cutting your hair?" Pinkie said, aghast.

"Short hair was in that year," Erin muttered. "All the girls had it cut super-short. My mom was upset, because we were supposed to get family pictures done and she said I looked ridiculous."

"And she grounded you for that?" Pinkie asked, frowning.

"Well... okay, that *and* I took money I was supposed to be saving for a school trip."

"You stole money?!"

"No, Pinkie, it was *my* money! It just... was supposed to be for a school trip, not a haircut."

"We're getting off-topic, here," Twilight pointed out. "Your mom will still love you, and she can't exactly punish you if you're an adult, right?"

"That's true," Erin admitted, "but I don't know if I could handle the epic amounts of parental disapproval and guilt-tripping she'd throw my way for not telling her that I was going to do this before I actually did it."

Erin sighed, then continued.

"I suppose I should at least *try* to bluff my parents with a phone call," she said. "It may work, depending on my mom and dad's mood."

"You're going to lie to them," Pinkie said, flatly.

"No! Well... not really. Just not tell the whole truth. Trust me, it would just upset them."

"Well, it's not like it's dangerous, right?" Pinkie asked, brightly. "I mean, you're going to do it again, to turn back, so it must be safe!"

"It's a major change," Erin said, frowning at the floor. "Any number of things could have gone wrong."

"What, like you'd end up a funny color?" Pinkie asked.

"That, or I could have ended up with a body that didn't work right. Or I could have just died. I guess they had some problems with the cybernetics..."

"You could have *died*!?" Pinkie seemed beyond horrified, now.

"Well, yeah. It was unlikely, but..."

"Sunflower, you're not allowed to go back in that machine, ever!"

"Pinkie, I have to turn back to human eventually."

"Not until it's safe!"

For a moment, Erin looked like she was going to argue again. Instead, she just shook her head.

"It doesn't matter right now, anyway. The machine is broken, thanks to Malachite. Besides, turning me back is supposed to be a lot safer. We know how humans work, after all. And they have all the details of my original body saved."

"Oh. But it's still risky, right?" Pinkie asked.

"Well... a little bit, I guess. So, yeah."

"Then you *have* to tell them, before you do it. Your parents have a right to know."

"It's *my* life, Pinkie," Erin said, sounding annoyed.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Pinkie," Twilight said. "If there's a risk, well... Don't you think your parents deserve to know, before you subject yourself to that kind of risk again?"

Erin looked uncomfortably back and forth between the two of them.

"But... I can't..."

"What if it was your little brother, going through something like this?" Twilight said. "What if he kept this from you, and then something terrible happened and you could never see him again?"

Erin's mouth hung open for a while, and then she heaved a deep sigh.

"*Fine*," she said. "And here I thought my mom was good at guilt trips. She's got nothing on you guys!"

Erin picked up her tablet and started tapping out a reply.

"You guys are coming with me, though," she said.

"Sure, I wouldn't mind meeting your parents," Pinkie said, grinning.

"I'm not bringing you to *meet* them," Erin replied. "I'm bringing you to stop my mom from *killing* me when she finds out I went and turned myself into a pony."

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Maggie glanced back over her shoulder towards Erin and her friends before knocking, and Erin gave her a grim nod. The middle-aged woman turned back to the door and rapped on it three times. There was a delay of a few seconds, during which Erin's heart made a valiant effort to crawl up out of her throat, and then the door opened, revealing her father's bearded face.

"Ah, Doctor Henson! Come on in! Is this about Erin?"

"Yes. And, I hope you don't mind that I brought some guests," she said, gesturing behind her.

"Oh, wow. Are those ponies?" her dad asked.

"Who is it?" Lynne called from behind the door.

"It's Doctor Henson! She's here with some Equestrian ponies!"

"What?"

There was a brief commotion behind the door before John was suddenly shoved aside, revealing a wide-eyed Lynne Olsen, staring in amazement at the equine guests out in the hallway.

"Oh, wow," she said, in a small voice. "I never expected... come in! Please, all of you, come in and make yourselves at home!"

Lynne ushered them all in, then suddenly seemed to realize that she wasn't actually in her own house. Erin smiled slightly at the flustered look on her mother's face, knowing how uncomfortable having unexpected guests would make her, and how out of sorts she'd be in this situation.

The room they were shown into was a cozy sitting room, with a couple of well-padded chairs, a small couch, a writing desk, and a screen even larger than the one Erin had brought to Canterlot. Several tasteful but not extraordinary landscape paintings decorated the walls. In the back was a small dining area, on the far side of which was a large, open kitchen.

Two doors led off of this room, one of which obviously led to the bathroom, judging by the sink, and the other of which apparently led to the rest of the apartment. Once inside, they all stood awkwardly in the room, looking at each other and wondering what to do next.

"Well, um..." Lynne said, blushing and quite obviously trying not to stare. "Can I get anyone something to drink? We have... well, water, I guess. Not much in the fridge. Ah... can ponies use glasses? Wait, was that rude? I hope that wasn't rude, I didn't mean anything by it!"

"It's okay," Twilight said, as Pinkie tried to stifle her giggles. "My name is Twilight Sparkle. These are my friends Pinkie Pie and Sunflower. Please ignore Pinkie, she suffers from an overabundance of good humor."

Twilight smiled fondly at her pink friend to take the sting out of the comment. Pinkie replied by crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue. Erin just rolled her eyes, doing her level best to fade into the carpeting.

Lynne and John just stared in rapt fascination for a while before John cleared his throat and said, "Well, to what do we owe this visit? As nice as it is to meet actual Equestrian ponies, we're here to see Erin."

"These ponies are friends of hers," Maggie said. "Erin has been working with the ponies for... what, has it been two months already?"

"Almost," Erin said, her voice no more than a whisper. Lynne looked at her curiously.

"Yes, Erin's really been instrumental in introducing humanity to Equestria," Twilight said. "If it hadn't been for her, well... we might not have wanted to let you settle there."

"Oh, wow, really?" John said, beaming hugely.

Lynne clutched at her husband's arm, grinning up at him.

"Our daughter is going to be famous!" She had obviously intended to whisper, but her excitement had made the statement loud enough to carry through the room. John grinned at her briefly before turning back to Maggie.

"Well, that still doesn't explain why we can't see her," John said. "And why it's been more than *three* months since we've had any contact with her."

"It's... complicated," Maggie said. "Why don't the two of you sit down? I'll try to explain things."

The married couple glanced at each other, small frowns appearing on their faces. They sat down on the large sofa, Lynne holding one of John's hands while her husband wrapped his other arm across her shoulders.

Maggie took a deep breath as she lowered herself into a chair opposite the couch and said, "First, I have to tell you that everything I'm about to tell you is strictly classified. If I tell you this, you'll be restricted to this compound until this information has been declassified, which could be more than a month. We'll also have to move you to the less-comfortable scientific wing, since some of the staff on this side of the compound aren't privy to what I'm about to tell you. Take a moment to think it over and let me know if that's acceptable."

"No need," John said. "We've already discussed this. Whatever we need to do to see our daughter, we'll do. Especially after all this secrecy stuff. We can't just let it go, now."

"Understood," Maggie said. "Well, first, I have to tell you about Project Ascent. And, folks, *this* is the big secret that I was telling you about."

Maggie started explaining, in a somewhat roundabout way. Erin didn't envy her. They'd discussed various approaches before they'd come here, and, in Erin's mind, this was the easiest way to break it to her folks gently.

Still, Maggie was dragging herself right in the middle of what was soon to be some serious family drama, and she could tell Maggie knew it. Not only was it obvious from the way the older woman stumbled over the occasional word, but also by how she fiddled with the sleeve of her sweater and had difficulty making eye contact with her increasingly worried parents.

Maggie started by describing the first time the window to Equestria had been opened, and the excitement it had caused. They had sent probes in by the dozens, whenever they could get a window open, and data started pouring in. It seemed very Earth-like, more than close enough to humanity's own world to support life.

But then there was the discovery that this world was inhabited by an intelligent race of ponies. Discussions were held, and the decision was made to send in scouts to interact with the locals, gather information on whether or not the ponies would be friendly or not, and if they would be accommodating to the billions of humans that had to migrate over if another world couldn't be found.

"And Erin volunteered?" Lynne asked, eyes wide with concern. Maggie hesitated before answering.

"I'm getting to that," she said. "There's a lot more to explain."

She continued by explaining how the Committee, who ran the project, had decided to ask for volunteers from the Harmonics teams, to

keep the operation as private as possible. But then the discussion turned to how the contact would be handled. And that's when an idea was hatched.

Maggie then started explaining, in layman's terms, how Ascent worked. How the tiny little nanomachines could re-arrange any object on a molecular or cellular level, and which had been developed in an unsuccessful bid to try and counteract the Tide on its own terms. As Maggie explained how the Committee made the decision that initial contact should be covert, in order to avoid scaring the ponies or provoking hostilities, Erin watched as her mother's eyes widened in sudden realization.

Lynne grasped her husband's arm in a vice-like grip, and John turned to her, confused but concerned. Her mother's eyes sought her out, staring directly at her, her voice squeaking ineffectively as she tried to convey her what she suddenly knew to her husband.

Erin smiled nervously and nodded.

"Hi, mom," she said.

Her mother promptly fainted.

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Celestia set the computer tablet aside, focusing her attention on the elderly unicorn stallion before her.

"You're certain there is nothing I can do to change your mind?"

"I'm sorry, Princess, but I've made up my mind," Heart's Bloom replied. "I've already set my affairs in order. Whomever you appoint to my place will find things neat and orderly. I've left copious notes regarding the duties of my office. The transition should go smoothly."

"Your family has served the court excellently for generations, Heart's Bloom. You, yourself, have provided excellent advice and leadership for well over half a century."

"But when you most needed to heed my advice, Princess, you disregarded it instead," Heart's Bloom replied. "These humans will cause untold damage to our way of life. I see you have one of their infernal devices, yourself. The infection will spread, I assure you, carried by their toys and... and... *gadgets*, to all corners of Equestria. I'm moving my family to Starfall Isle."

"Many nobles are moving there, I've noticed," Celestia said, sighing wistfully.

"It's where we can keep ourselves free of the taint of these creatures, and the damage they will do to our society. We'll keep ourselves pure. We'll maintain our traditions."

Traditions. It took some willpower for Celestia to avoid shaking her head ruefully. She'd been around since before many of those traditions had existed. Most of them didn't seem all that old to her. Or that valuable. Still, it was their decision to make.

"I believe you've misjudged them, my dear friend," Celestia said. "Nevertheless, I will respect your decision, and I wish you well."

"I dearly hope you're right, Princess," he replied. "But I'm afraid that it's you who has misjudged them. I've read some of the materials provided. Enough to know that the worst monsters in human history have one thing in common: they are all human."

"This is true," Celestia replied, "but so are their greatest heroes. Humans who gave their lives to bring those monsters down, to make their world a better place for their children. Those who gave generously to those who had too little. Those who care for the sick, or the injured, or the dispossessed, and ask nothing in return. And, my dear Heart's Bloom, those humans outnumber the monsters by a significant number."

Heart's Bloom simply looked at her, an inscrutable expression on his face. Finally, he sighed, and shook his head.

"I hope you're right, Princess. I really do. However, if you're wrong about them, then you can count on the ponies of Starfall Isle to keep to the old ways. We'll keep the core of Ponydom safe, for future generations." He turned to go, stopping at the door to say over his shoulder, "Fare you well, Princess."

"And you as well, Heart's Bloom. I sincerely hope you write, to let me know how everypony is settling in."

The old stallion hesitated, looking surprised. Then he smiled.

"I'll be sure to do that, Princess."

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Things had gotten exciting for a little while. There was some confused yelling, most of it from her father, and also a fair amount of denial from both John and Lynne, when she woke up again. The despair and panic in her parent's faces was almost heartbreakingly for Erin to see.

Not for the first time, she considered that it would have been kinder to just keep them in the dark until she had a chance to turn back. Or, maybe have Maggie explain things, and then let it sink in before she showed up. Now they had no choice but to face her, as a pony.

"But why?" her father asked, seeming to accept it finally.

"Because I had to, and nobody else volunteered," she said.

"Why did you have to?" her mother asked. "Why did... A pony?"

"I can be turned back," Erin pointed out for the third time. "This isn't permanent."

"Oh, sure," Lynne said, laughing a little shrilly. "And here I was worried you'd come home with a tattoo, or something. Not hooves!"

"Mom, you have three tattoos yourself," Erin pointed out.

"That's not the point!" her mother shot back in a near-shriek.

"I still don't get *why*," John said. He'd gotten up off the couch and was now pacing, glancing over towards his daughter occasionally, and flinching slightly whenever he did so.

"We were going to go to Equestria, one way or another," Erin said. "You should have seen the initial videos, dad. All these happy ponies, playing and talking... If we just opened a gateway and started pouring through, we would have completely destroyed their society. I couldn't allow that. I had to find a way, if possible, to make the transition easy, to minimize the damage."

"There are quite a few ponies on the Royal Council that opposed humanity's coming over," Twilight said simply. "And, since the

Princesses had discovered a way to fortify the Veil, we could have stopped you all from coming over. Celestia and Luna having met Erin is a big part of why you're being treated as potential friends, rather than invaders from another world."

"You've met the Princesses?" Lynne asked, as John stopped pacing to stare at her.

"Yes," Erin said. "They're... amazing. Really."

"What did we get you for your twelfth birthday?" John asked, suddenly.

"What?" Erin blinked, confused.

"I want to make sure it's really you, and not some weird trick."

"We've got no reason to trick you, Mister Olsen," Maggie pointed out.

"Well, forgive me for wanting to be sure," John replied.

"A Barbie doll," Erin said. "And my first streaming account of my own, with five movies I could pick, PG-13 or lower."

"You didn't like the Barbie doll," Lynne said, wistfully. Her voice sounded almost like she couldn't believe she wasn't dreaming.

"I was getting kind of old for them," Erin pointed out. "And dressing up plastic women with impossible proportions never appealed much to me, even when I was younger."

"I know, I was just hoping that we could get you out of that tomboy phase you were in."

"Grandma got me a BMX bike," Erin said, grinning. "You were so mad!"

"Because you broke your arm almost instantly, trying to jump over a ditch." Lynne replied shakily. "And then Billy Johnson stole it."

"He what?" John said, seeming lost.

"He told me I had to kiss him to get it back," Erin said. "I think that's why he took it in the first place."

"That little punk!" John said, slightly glassy-eyed. Erin figured he was probably running on fatherly-outrage autopilot.

"You never told me that!" Lynne said, patting her husband's arm in a placating fashion. "You just said you went over to get it back from him."

"Well, that's what I did. Got it back, I mean. I didn't kiss him, he was gross. I *did* kick him in the shin and popped him in the eye before I grabbed my bike back, though."

"See?" Lynne said, laughing shakily. "Too much of a tomboy! You should have just told us about it, we could have handled it without you punching anyone!"

"God, it really *is* her," John said, sitting down heavily next to his wife. He slumped forward with his head in his hands, while Lynne wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"Yes, dad. It's really me."

"And they can change you back?" he asked, weakly, and Erin was dismayed to hear her father's voice breaking.

"Yes!" she said, hurriedly. "Yes, dad, I promise! They can change me back, just as soon as they fix the lab."

"What happened to the lab?" Lynne asked.

"Sabotage," Maggie replied. "The... disruptive element has been removed, and we're repairing the lab now. It should be ready in a couple of weeks, tops."

"I think I'm in shock," her father announced, standing up again. "How could you do this without telling us?"

"I couldn't tell anyone!" Erin protested. "It was all secret!"

"Then you shouldn't have done it!" John said, trembling visibly. "You had no idea what you were in for. I'm sure these ponies are nice, but you didn't know that going in. You could have died, for all you knew!"

"Equestria is perfectly safe!" Erin protested.

"Well, except for chimeras, manticores, big fire-breathing dragons, grumpy griffons, gigantic hydmmph!" Pinkie's list of potentially fatal creatures was cut off by Twilight's hoof over her muzzle.

"Dragons?" John said, shocked.

"Dragon's aren't really all that dangerous," Twilight rapidly assured him. "My assistant, Spike, is a dragon. A baby one, but he wouldn't hurt anypony."

"Dragons..." John said, slumping back down on the couch.

"I wasn't dropped off in the middle of nowhere. I was just a few miles away from Ponyville, perfectly safe. And, if anything odd had happened, I was ready for it."

"Ready, how?" her mother asked, cutting off another angry tirade from her father.

"When they made this body, they didn't mess around. They made me stronger, faster, more agile than any pony has a right to be. If nothing else, I could have run and hid until the Harmonics team could get me out. They were monitoring me all the way through my first contact with the ponies."

Her dad wasn't looking at her, just shaking his head in denial.

"This procedure to turn you back," her mother said, "is it safe?"

"Well..." Erin desperately wanted to lie. "It's like going into surgery, I guess. There's always a risk of complications."

"Oh, god..." John said.

"I think we need to talk about this, just your father and I," Lynne said. "Would you mind leaving for a while, Erin?"

"What? But... um. Okay. Sure, mom. I'll... I'll probably be staying in Canterlot, for the time being. Maggie can reach me, if you want to talk to me."

Her father had his head buried in his hands again, and her mother, though she still looked completely shocked, was rubbing his back in a comforting fashion. She made no attempt to make eye contact with her daughter.

"Um. I don't suppose the two of you would want to see Canterlot?" Erin offered feebly over the lump growing in her throat. "It's... really neat. I could..."

"Thank you, but no," Lynne said. Her father just laughed, a bitter sound. "I think we've had enough strangeness for now."

Erin retreated after a quick and awkward goodbye. It was all she could do to not actually run out the door. Twilight, Maggie and Pinkie all joined her, and they all collected their respective composes while standing in the hallway.

"That went well," Pinkie said after a minute.

Erin looked at her suspiciously, wondering if her friend was joking or not.

"It definitely could have gone better, Pinkie."

"I suppose," she said. "But it could have gone worse, too. It's not like they said they never wanted to talk to you again, just that they wanted time to think things over."

Erin considered that as they walked down the hallway back towards the gate to Canterlot. It was true, it could have gone much worse.

But she knew she'd have a hard time getting her parent's shocked and dismayed faces out of her mind for a while.

~~*~~

Malachite glanced idly out the window as the clouds rushed by, his own wings twitching in response to the visual stimuli. He levitated a wineglass to his mouth and sipped it, savoring the taste. Say what you will about humans, they certainly knew their wines.

Flying had been a rare treat. These machines the humans had made were simply magnificent. They were flying far faster than most pegasi were capable of, and certainly for much longer and in greater comfort. Being able to recline and eat whilst traveling was an incredible luxury.

Granted, they would have to land several times along the way, but that was hardly a burden. More, it was a chance for him to step outside and stretch his legs and wings, and see more of this world along the way. Their first landing was somewhere called "Alaska", where they would refuel and check the aircraft before crossing the ocean to someplace called "China".

The humans he had dealt with so far had ranged from wary but polite, to downright suspicious. Two human guards and one unicorn eyed him suspiciously from the back of the airplane while he feigned not to notice them. The rest of the guards were taking a second plane, possibly to prevent him from being able to take out all of his keepers all at once.

He couldn't say he blamed them for being nervous, as he now stood quite a bit taller than the average human, with far more bulk. And that didn't even take into account his ability to perform magic and his control of the fae swarm. Still, it *did* get grating, dealing with their petty suspicions.

Malachite amused himself, quite briefly, with the thought of attempting to interface with the control system of the airplane, but finally opted not to. He didn't quite fancy sending the whole thing spinning down to a fiery crash. Doing so would require him to build an entirely new body.

Grinning, he turned back to his "guards", noting the sudden wariness sparking in their demeanor.

"You should try the wine," he told them. "It's quite nice. And you never know when you'll find you've run out of chances to have more."

Laughing at the ensuing display of discomfort, Malachite took another sip out of his glass looked back out at the clouds. Perhaps he could have some fun on this trip, after all.

~~*~~

It had been a few hours since the confrontation with her parents, and Erin still felt sick. She wandered morosely into the TV room, glancing over to see that Rainbow Dash, slouched against her beanbag, had co-opted the screen and was watching and loudly criticizing a rebroadcast of the Kentucky Derby. Not, as Erin might have expected, because humans were riding the horses, but because she apparently thought the horses should be able to run faster. Fluttershy sat quietly on a couch next to her, watching the Earth horses with wide-eyed fascination.

"There ya are," Applejack said. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" Erin asked, then remembered. "Oh! Right! The demonstration."

"Yup," AJ said. "You okay, sugarcube? You look pretty upset."

"Twilight and Pinkie didn't tell you?" Erin asked, and Applejack shook her head. "Well, I ran into my parents today. They didn't take my changing into a pony very well."

"Ah, shucks, I'm sorry to hear that," AJ said, patting her on the shoulder sympathetically. "You want to talk about it?"

"Um. Actually, no," Erin said, coming to a decision. "I've been beating myself up for this for hours, now. I think I want to get my mind off of it. Besides, I *really* wanted to see this."

"Well, I'm always available if you need to talk," Applejack said, then smiled, "and I'm also here to help take your mind off of it, if you need me to. Come on, then."

Erin left the room with the earth pony, leaving the entranced Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy behind. Applejack led her to a small conservatory out back, in the gardens.

"It's too cold out now to do this demonstration out doors," she said. "I don't want to hurt nothin', even if it's 'just' grass."

"I understand, Applejack," Erin replied, starting to get excited in spite of how the rest of the day had gone.

The conservatory was much warmer than even the interior of the castle, the humid air almost overwhelmingly scented by the flowers within. The elegantly arranged gardens were a riot of colors, all carefully arranged and beautifully kept. Erin felt a smile grow, unbidden, on her face, and actually started to feel happy for the first time since she'd gotten Maggie's email earlier that day.

"Now, what I'm gonna show you ain't gonna be all that impressive," Applejack said, stepping up to a flower bed and turning to face her. "Especially compared to what Twilight Sparkle an' Rainbow Dash can do. Part of that is what I'm workin' with, and the rest is because... well, it's not right to rush some things."

"I understand," Erin said eagerly.

"All righty. Watch close, now."

With that, Applejack gently pushed an orange hoof into the soft soil of the flower bed, only a fraction of an inch and no more. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a rustle, the plants in the garden grew a slight but very obvious amount taller, and richer in color.

"Oh... wow..." Erin said, staring around in wonder.

"Ayup. I could probably do more, but it ain't healthy for the plants. Grow 'em too fast, and they suck the nutrients and water out of the soil. Plus, they get damaged on a cellular level. That's why earth pony magic is so subtle. We go too far, and we could kill what we're tryin' to make healthy."

"Applejack, that... How can you say that's not impressive?" Erin asked, wide eyed. "That was amazing!"

"Ah, shucks... you don't gotta say that," she replied, blushing. "Those of us with a knack for farmin' don't usually just make stuff grow, though. It's almost always better to let stuff grow on its own."

"Because of the water and nutrients?"

"Because it's the natural way," Applejack said. "Most of us earth ponies who farm get a sense for what the plants need, though. What kind of fertilizer, and how much. How much water. That kind of thing. That's most of what we do. Forcin' things to grow... well, it's okay to do every once in a while, but it ain't right to do it all the time."

By some unspoken signal, the two of them started walking through the conservatory, just enjoying the gardens. Erin felt herself unwinding considerably just by being there.

"I see. So there are earth ponies that don't farm?" Erin asked as they walked.

"Oh, tons!" Applejack replied, chuckling. "Earth pony magic is a lot more spread out than any other type o' pony, even unicorns. It just ain't as flashy."

"How do you mean?" Erin asked.

"I consider myself a fair hoof at wood carving, but a pony who has that as a special talent will make things that make mine look like a blindfolded unicorn tried to make it," Applejack said. "An' that's just one example. Earth ponies get a feel for whatever they're workin' on, dependin' on their special talents."

Erin shook her head, chuckling.

"What's funny?" Applejack asked her.

"I'm just starting to realize how much I need to learn, if I'm going to study magic," Erin replied. "I was planning on sticking around to study it, you know."

"You mentioned, yeah. You ain't gonna get too far, though, hon."

"What do you mean?"

"Can't rightly study something you can't even sense on your own, sugarcube. Maybe you should use that fancy machine of yours to turn yourself into an earth pony for real."

Erin blinked at her, shocked.

"Applejack, I can't. I need to go back to being a human. I *like* being a human."

"I know. But it ain't like it's permanent, is it? And bein' a pony ain't so bad, is it?"

"No, it's not bad. Not at all," Erin said in a small voice. Applejack had just given her a lot to think about.

As if reading her mind, the farmpony patted her on the back gently and said, "You ain't gotta rush the decision, and you can still study magic as a human. Ah reckon'. Just something to keep in mind."

Erin slumped down onto the path, staring at a patch of pink and white lilies while her mind whirled. Applejack, sensing her friend needed some time to think, wandered a short distance away to study some plants with delicate, cascading purple flowers. She was far enough away to give Erin some room, but close enough to let her know she wasn't alone, if she wanted to talk.

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The air was brisk and surprisingly cold after the warmth of the aircraft. Malachite spread his wings and stretched his legs after getting off of the ramp, then gave his guards a moment of panic by trotting sharply away from them. It amused him how they all scrambled after him, the humans shouting for him to stop, and the unicorns charging up a spell, no doubt in case he tried to fly off or suddenly possess everyone in sight.

Even more amusing was the sudden commotion as he suddenly stopped.

"Is that it?" he asked, pointing with a wing.

"What, sir?" one of the humans asked, obviously confused.

"The sea we'll be crossing."

"Yes, sir. The Bering sea," the human said.

"And after that, China?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will all of you be accompanying me?" he asked, staring out over the rough waters.

"Yes, sir, until we can turn you over to the Chinese forces."

"Turn me over," he repeated, snorting. "You make me sound like a criminal."

The human opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again, apparently reconsidering. Probably a wise choice.

Malachite had watched out of the window as they'd flown. His admittedly brief exposure to humanity had convinced him that most of the land would be covered in sprawling cities and roads, only occasionally broken up by wilderness. It turns out that, at least in this area, that impression was wholly incorrect.

The private airfield they'd landed in was surrounded by a forest of evergreen pines, the distinctive scent of them perfuming the air around him. Contrasting that was the smell of the fuel being pumped into the aircraft, and the smells of metals and oils from surrounding machinery. There was something oddly nostalgic about the combination of the two, but it wasn't something he could put his hoof on.

With a shake of his head, he let the feeling fade, staring instead across the tumultuous sea. Somewhere, across that water, was his opponent, his opportunity. The Black Tide was waiting for him.

And he was eager to meet it.

Author's Notes:

Some more art for this chapter from the talented [Lightfalls](#). Here's a picture of a bored Erin, upside down on a couch while she watches TV:



Chapter 27: Getting Reacquainted

The office had changed considerably since Paul Velchiek had been removed as head of Project Harmonics. Where previously it had been sterile and functional, with a minimum of ornamentation, Maggie had added her own personal touches everywhere she could find a level space.

Pictures of her family adorned the walls, along with a framed poster for the latest Broadway performance of Phantom of the Opera, which she only had because her eldest son was in it in the role of the choir-master. A crocheted blue teddy bear sat on a small shelf, which her eldest daughter had made for her a couple of years ago. Various other bits of bric-a-brac were scattered around: souvenirs from various trips, old mementos from her long-past college days, carved animals, small kinetic desk sculptures, and a nearly-completed state spoon set, all of which helped Maggie feel at home.

The unicorn in the room was staring with wide-eyed fascination at the various nicknacks and sundry, completely distracted. Maggie cleared her throat, and the young mare jumped slightly and looked back at her.

"You've read all the documentation we've given you?" she asked, and the unicorn grinned and nodded.

"All right, then. All we need now are a few last signatures, starting right here," she said, pointing to the paperwork. A pen lifted itself off of the desk, wrapped in a pale green light, and ineffectively scratched at the paper. The unicorn shook it with her telekinesis, frowning at it.

"You need to click it," Maggie said, smiling. Taking the pen gently out of the field, she demonstrated by pushing the end of the pen with her thumb. The mare's eyes widened with what Maggie thought was probably far too much amazement for such a simple thing.

"Neat!" Lyra said, taking the pen back and signing her name in big flowing script across the bottom of the page. A few signatures later, and Maggie collected the papers and bound them together in a folder.

"So... that's everything?" Lyra asked, grinning and bouncing on her hooves.

"That's everything," Maggie said, grinning back at her. "Welcome to the team!"

Lyra laughed, shaking Maggie's outstretched hand with a hoof.

"Yes! When can I start?"

"Well, technically not until next payroll cycle, which is Monday. I can show you around, if you want, but you're not allowed to do any actual work until the paperwork is processed. Mainly because it's a little on the illegal side to have you work if I don't pay you."

"Aww... okay."

"Come on, I'll show you to your quarters," Maggie said, leading the unicorn away from her office in the Emitter room.

After the mint-green unicorn had somehow managed to get past both the Equestrian and human guards on no less than three occasions, Maggie had opted to just authorize her to come over whenever she wanted. Lyra's demonstration of overwhelming joy at the news had really warmed her heart.

After a few days, though, Maggie had a thought that it might be prudent to give her an actual reason to be hanging around in the Harmonics lab. She discussed it with her team, and they came to the conclusion that it would be a wonderful thing to have an actual Equestrian on staff, as well as it being a terrific PR move.

The position of "Senior Magical Analyzer" was invented out of whole cloth, and helpfully also implied the tantalizing possibility of *Junior* Magical Analyzers at some point in the future. Maggie had presented it to her superiors as a way to potentially check new worlds found by Harmonics for a magical field similar to Equestria's.

She'd sent the requisition off with no real expectation that it would be approved. She'd received confirmation within hours on the same day, along with an enthusiastic note of approval from Robert Thomson himself.

Lack of an H-1B visa, normally a stumbling block for foreign professionals wanting to work in the US, had been dealt with smoothly and efficiently by her superiors without Maggie having to do so much as submit a form. Maggie had finally been able to extend the offer to Lyra just yesterday. Though the unicorn had said a resounding "Yes!" almost before she had finished relating the offer, Maggie had insisted that she at

least sleep on it to be sure.

"Over here is the cafeteria," Maggie said as they walked. "You'll go down that hallway, and take the first right. Make sure you specify that you want either vegan or vegetarian."

"Oh, right," Lyra said, nodding. "I keep forgetting you guys eat meat."

"That's right, and I wouldn't want you making any mistakes that you, or your digestive system, would regret," Maggie said. "Also, Erin mentioned that the food here on Earth tastes a little blander than on Equestria. Probably a difference in how you grow it, or something."

"Oh, okay," Lyra replied, glancing curiously down the hallway. "If it's *too* bad, I'll probably just eat at the castle or something."

They continued walking, passing a couple more hallways, with Maggie pointing out various features such as the lounge, the game room, the on-site library, the gym and the swimming pool.

"We just ask that you shower before entering the pool. Also... how do ponies react to chlorination?"

"Um. With confusion?"

Maggie stared blankly at the response, then chuckled.

"Chlorine is a chemical we use to keep microorganisms down in the pool. It has a side effect of bleaching the color out of hair, if you spend a lot of time in there or don't rinse off right away when you're done. Since you've got a lot more hair than the average human, I thought I should mention it."

"Oh. Okay. I'll probably stay out, then. I don't want to bleach my coat. Not after how it turned out the last time."

Finally, they reached the small, single unit that would be Lyra's room. Maggie opened the door, then handed the key to the excited unicorn, who levitated it into her bag.

"This is it," she said. "You can decorate it however you want, but if you want to paint the walls we ask that you check with us first. Also, quiet time is from ten at night until nine in the morning. Try to avoid making loud noises during those times, or your neighbors may get cranky and I'll have to have a word with you."

"Gotcha," Lyra replied, looking around the small room. It resembled an efficiency, with largish room that had a single bed, a kitchenette, a small table with two chairs, and not much else. There was a large closet along one side of the room, and a door leading to the bathroom.

"It's small, I know," Maggie said, but Lyra waved her hoof in an unconcerned manner.

"You only say that because humans are giants," she replied. "Besides, that just means it's less to keep clean."

"Good attitude." Maggie couldn't help but smile. "Remember, orientation is on Monday morning, eight o'clock sharp, which means that you have the rest of this week to settle in. You can bring any belongings you want from Equestria, but no pets, and no fruits or vegetables. If you need any money before your first payday, I can arrange an advance for you."

"I think I might want that," Lyra said. "Could I do some shopping if I had money?"

"I don't see why not."

"Can you get me that advance now, and then have someone bring me to the nearest town to go buy things?"

If Lyra's grin were any bigger, it would extend past the sides of her head. Maggie stared at her for a moment, then laughed ruefully. She really had walked into that.

"Well, I meant shopping *online*, but all right. I guess we can do that. I'll get you a credit card and a couple of people to escort you to town. It's going to take a while to get everything cleared, though. Don't expect to go today."

"That sounds good. Thanks, Maggie!"

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Motes of dust danced in the sunlight that streamed into Celestia's private study, where the Princess of the Sun was going over some of the recent reports detailing the supplies requested for shipment to Zanibra. A familiar, almost inaudible sound outside of her study door brought a glimmer of a smile to her face.

Long experience had familiarized her with the sound of somepony shuffling their hooves while trying to summon the courage to knock upon her door.

"You may enter," she called, and afforded herself a brief moment of amusement at the startled silence outside. The door cracked open and Erin walked in, looking like a student who'd been sent to see the headmistress without knowing why.

"Princess," Erin said, bowing a little clumsily. Honestly, Celestia would prefer it if everypony would just stop with the bowing, at least in private, but there didn't seem to be much that she could do about it.

She put the paperwork aside, and regarded the human-turned-pony with a smile.

"Hello, Erin. I imagine you're wondering why I asked you to come here?"

"Um. Yes. Yes, Princess," Erin said, her fore-hoof pawing nervously on the floor. It was a mannerism that Celestia found mildly surprising, as one thing that Erin's pony disguise had lacked in the past were the instinctive and subconscious reactions of natural-born ponies. She imagined that spending almost all of her time around her pony friends had caused her to start mimicking some of their behaviors.

"I understand you met with your parents yesterday. They did not take your change well, I understand?"

"No, Princess," Erin said, heaving a sigh. "They... well, they freaked out, honestly. I'm waiting for them to contact me, but so far..."

She trailed off pensively, and Celestia smiled comfortingly at her.

"Erin, I am thousands of years old. So when I tell you that I know your parents will come around, I want you to trust that I know exactly what I am talking about. No parents who are capable of raising a daughter such as yourself would turn their backs on her over something like this."

Erin smiled gratefully at the Princess, and bowed her head slightly.

"Thank you, Princess. I'm sure they will, it's just... well, it's a pretty big shock for them."

Celestia nodded, glad to have been able to comfort Erin somewhat. It made her feel slightly less guilty about the real reason she'd brought her here.

"I'm sure it is. And once they calm down, they'll remember they love you, regardless of your appearance. However, that is not why I asked you here today." Celestia said, her smile fading.

Erin fidgeted nervously for a few seconds while Celestia gathered her thoughts.

"As you know," the Princess said, "Malachite will be confronting the Black Tide soon. I will be there, as will Luna, to observe his efforts. And, if necessary, to act against him should the situation require it. I've also asked Twilight Sparkle and her friends to join us, in case the Elements of Harmony will be of use."

Erin nodded. She'd known all of this already. When the Princess spoke next, though, she could see Erin's heart breaking

"Erin, I know this will be difficult for you. But, when Malachite confronts the Tide I would like to ask you to stay behind."

"What?" Erin asked, the anguish plain in her voice. "Princess, no! Please, let me go with you! I know I can't do anything useful, but I want to at least be there!"

"You would be face to face with Malachite once again," Celestia pointed out, and she saw Erin shudder involuntarily. "More than that, he will be in a new, powerful body. One who's power may even outstrip my own, at least when I'm on the Earth. I would spare you that."

"I know," Erin said quietly. "But I'd rather face him, now, than to be afraid of him for the rest of my life. And I can't let my friends go into danger without me, not again. I simply can't. Please don't ask me to stay behind, Princess. I'd hate to get into trouble for disobeying you."

Celestia looked at the girl. Erin was frightened, that much was obvious. She was terrified both of Malachite and of whatever punishment she was dreaming up that she feared would be visited upon her for speaking back to a Princess. Even still, she was remaining defiant.

Celestia smiled, somewhat sadly. She had suspected that would be Erin's answer, but she had wanted to give her at least the option of staying behind with a clear conscience. What she was going to ask for next was going to be even more difficult.

"You are not my subject, Erin. I technically can't forbid you to go," Celestia said, and Erin visibly relaxed.

"But, if you *are* going, then I would like to ask you to promise me something."

"What is it, Princess?" Erin asked warily.

"I would like you to promise that if things go bad, and if there seems to be no hope of recovery, that you will get Twilight and her friends back through the gateway. Use whatever means you have to, in order to keep them safe. Even if doing so means leaving me behind."

Erin stared at her in shock as she realized what the Princess was asking her, and what it meant.

"Twilight would hate me forever if I forced her to abandon you, Princess," she said in a small voice.

"Yes, I know. But she would be *alive* to do so."

Celestia waited patiently while the human worked it over in her mind.

"I... I understand, Princess. I'll keep them safe as best I can, I promise."

"That's all I can ask," Celestia replied. She felt some of the tension she'd been feeling dissipate. "Thank you, my dear."

"In return, though, I'd like to ask a favor from you," Erin said.

"Oh?"

"I'd like you to promise that you'll do everything you can to make sure that I don't *have* to keep my promise. I... I don't want to see you hurt again, Princess."

Celestia was surprised, and honestly quite touched, by the sincerity in the human mare's voice. She smiled again, more fully this time.

"I swear to you, I will do my best," she said.

"That's all I can ask, Princess," Erin replied with a grin.

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Winter was definitely in the air, the faded green grass crunching beneath her hooves as Erin, shivering, trotted quickly through the gardens on her way back to the Harmonics gateway. If it hadn't been for Celestia's summons, she'd still be in her room, waiting to see if her parents were ready to contact her yet.

She opened the door to the small structure that housed the gate, smiling at the unicorn guards who nodded politely back to her as she walked through to the Earth side of the gate.

"Erin!" Maggie said, coming out from her office and waving. "Hold on, I have a favor to ask you!"

Maggie, lab-coat rustling as she hustled down the short flight of steps from her elevated office, came rushing up to her, smiling widely all the way.

"Guess what?" she asked.

Erin suppressed a sigh, not really being in the mood for games.

"Um... I don't know, what?"

"You're no longer the only pony that works for Project Harmonics!"

"What?"

"You know your friend Lyra? She joined up!"

"Really?" Erin asked, intrigued in spite of herself. She didn't bother correcting Maggie by saying that Lyra was more of an acquaintance than a friend. "Doing what?"

"Magical detection and research on any new habitable worlds we find."

"Oh... really? Wow!"

"Here's the favor I was going to ask you, though," Maggie said. "Lyra's going to get one of the project credit cards, with about two thousand dollars on it as an advance on her wages. She wants to go shopping, and I thought it might be nice to have someone familiar to go along with her."

"Oh..." Erin said. "Well... I don't know..."

"It would also be better, I think, if there were two ponies instead of one. You know, so not all the focus is just on poor Lyra. She'd be overwhelmed."

"I was kind of hoping..."

"And it would be nice for her to have a friendly face around, especially one who's already familiar with human culture. And, you know, how to use credit cards and stuff like that."

"But I..."

"It would be a huge favor to me," Maggie said.

Erin sighed.

"I was kind of hoping to stay around here, in case my parents wanted to talk," she said.

"Oh!" Maggie rocked back on her heels in surprise. "I didn't mean *today*. We still have to get everything arranged. Probably tomorrow, or the day after."

"Oh. Well, Malachite is going to try and stop the Tide in a day or two," Erin said. "I plan to be there, but if the shopping trip is after I talk to my parents and not at a time when Malachite is going to make his attempt, then I'll go. If you're sure this is a good idea, that is."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Maggie asked. "Humans will have to get used to interacting with ponies eventually. Consider this the extension of your mission, if you like. Pony ambassador to the humans!"

Erin laughed. "No, that's okay. I've had the *human* ambassadors upset with me enough, I don't want to tick off the ponies as well. But I don't mind helping Lyra out."

They talked for a short while longer, then Erin trotted off to find her quarters in a much better mood. It helped that she realized that Maggie was right, that she still had a role she could play in events rather than just allowing things to happen from this point on.

Erin rounded the corner and stopped in shock, surprised to see her father about to knock on her door. Her mother was standing next to him, holding his free hand and looking nervous but determined.

"Mom? Dad?" she said, and they jumped in surprise. "Um. Hi."

"Hey, kiddo," her father said, and her mother smiled at her. "Ah, can we come in? We wanted to talk."

"And to apologize," her mother added. "It was just a huge shock. It was upsetting. We're both very sorry."

Her mother gave her a hopeful smile, and Erin, heart swelling with joy, returned it. She trotted up to the two of them, still smiling, saying, "Of course I forgive you. Can you forgive me for doing all of this behind your backs?"

"We're still upset, of course," her mom said. "But... you're our daughter. We love you. We always will."

"Well, then," Erin said, opening the door. "Come on in."

~~*~~

The room was quiet, and extremely dark. The Chinese military base where he was spending the night was starker and much more severe than the quarters he'd had in Colorado. Still, they would do for now. He wasn't planning on staying long.

Malachite lay on the large mattress that had been wedged into the corner of a room that was much too small for it to fit into comfortably, regulating his breathing. Unlike the Americans, the Chinese had neglected several key aspects of security required to keep him in place, possibly due to lack of time to prepare. There were no cameras in the room that he could see, as one example.

That suited him just fine. He'd been under observation for more than long enough. It was time for him to do some exploration on his own.

The walls were too thick and dense for him to manage to pass through, even in his fae form. Fortunately, unlike his quarters in Colorado, this one came with a small air vent. It didn't take him long to separate himself from his body, leaving just a single sprite behind to send the alarm should anyone attempt to enter the room. It would take them a while, as he'd barricaded the door with the completely superfluous dresser and nightstand they had also attempted to wedge into the room.

He flowed through the vents, carefully but quickly, avoiding any openings with humans on the other side. He exited through the roof of the building, quickly getting his bearings and marking exactly where he'd

come out in his mind, so as to find his way back to his body when needed.

For a long while he simply enjoyed the night air, basking in the moonlight and enjoying the serenity of the moment. The Earth's moon, so similar to Equestria's but with very different markings, hung full and heavy in the night sky, lighting things well enough that he had to be careful not to be seen.

The humans had his building surrounded, but they neglected to look up as Malachite flowed from roof to roof, staying well out of sight until he reached the chain-link fence surrounding the compound. Passing through it, he quickly made his way into the underbrush of the nearby forest, feeling truly free for the first time since he'd come to Earth.

Moving at a rapid pace and no longer concerned with being spotted through the thick underbrush, he covered several miles in mere minutes. Then, resting, he sent his fae sprites out in all directions, willing them to bring him samples of the local wildlife, anything they could find.

Within less than a minute, creatures began flowing in. First, simple insects, starting with the flyers, then the crawlers. Small mammals as well, and birds that had no doubt been woken from sleep. He examined them minutely, taking great joy in noting both the similarities and differences between their Equestrian counterparts.

He was in the midst of a detailed examination of a small dog, which was obviously someone's pet or property judging by the collar on its neck, when he heard a commotion coming towards him. Something large was coming, accompanied by the excited babble of what he recognized as a human voice.

He froze in alarm. Could they have discovered him missing? He sent a quick pulse to the sprite he left behind in his body, receiving back an impression of his body still lying, undisturbed, on the mattress that had been provided for him. No, the humans had not discovered his absence.

His questions were answered when a glassy-eyed male human, bald head gleaming in the moonlight and with a dark haze surrounding his body, stepped into the clearing. A human female, the source of the distressed voice, was pulling on the sleeve of the garment he was wearing, obviously a garment intended for sleeping. The human was barefoot, and Malachite could see his feet were bleeding from his journey into the woods.

He snarled in irritation, and the human female stopped her entreaties to the male, glancing fearfully around the underbrush. Quickly, he sent a sprite to possess her as well.

It was his own fault, he knew. He shouldn't have sent his minions out blindly like that. However, knowing that made it no less exasperating, and no less dangerous for him.

He considered his options. What would be the wisest course of action? If he let them go, they would undoubtedly talk about it. A human with a dark green haze surrounding him, acting as if possessed? Humans were many things, but they were no fools. They would piece it together very quickly.

Would they accept that it was an accident? And, would he want them to know that it was? He didn't wish to appear less than competent. Would any explanation even be sufficient to sway them?

He regarded the humans, who stared back at him with fae-possessed eyes.

There was always the option to kill them, he realized. It was... far more tempting than he was comfortable with, he admitted to himself. Still... no, that option was out as well. If the female wasn't the only witness to the inadvertent abduction, then he would still be found out. And if he killed them, then he'd lose whatever chance he'd had to convince the humans to trust him.

He sent out a brief mental command, and the humans slumped unconscious to the ground as their fae sprites returned to him. He then recalled his sprites, all of them except the one in his own body. It took several minutes for the furthest ones out to return to him.

Moving even more rapidly than before, he returned to the camp. It was hours past midnight now, and the formerly peaceful night seemed menacing, as if a trap waiting to be sprung hid in every shadow. The darkness that had concealed him now seemed to close in around him as he hurried back to the base.

His former euphoria at freedom was gone, replaced by a desperate need to return to his cell before he was found out. Once again, he flowed between buildings until he found the one that housed his body. Then, up to the roof and back through the vents he went.

He returned to his room, at first relieved to see his body, then surprised to find it breathing somewhat heavily, as if it had been exercising in his absence. Glancing at the door, he saw that his barricade was still in place as he remembered it. His body hadn't moved, then. He pulled out the fae sprite he'd left behind, regarding it with disgust.

The sprite had swollen immensely during his absence, now several times larger than the average sprite. Obviously, it had taken advantage of Malachite's distance to gorge itself on the life essence of the body he'd left behind. A black carapace was beginning to form over the soft green glow of its body as part of its transformation.

Malachite sighed, wondering what else could go wrong tonight. Without a second thought he crushed the engorged sprite mercilessly. The other sprites in his swarm grumbled at that, but he ignored them. They were always restless when he destroyed a new, larval fae queen.

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After entering Erin's room, there was the requisite moment of awkwardness typical of Erin's family after everyone got back together following an emotional confrontation. Her father broke the silence and embarrassed foot-shuffling that ensued.

"This is a really tiny room," he said. "Is this really all they gave you?"

"Yeah. You get used to it. At least I'm not sharing a bathroom with a bunch of other girls, like in college," Erin replied.

The awkward silence, momentarily driven back by that brief foray into conversation, started to make a daring comeback.

"Oh, to heck with this," her mother said, kneeling down and hugging the startled Erin around the neck. "I've missed you, sweetie."

"I've missed you too, Mom," Erin replied, putting a foreleg around her mother's shoulders and squeezing.

Her mother broke the hug first, leaning back and smiling through her tears. She reached out and ran her fingers through Erin's mane.

"It's softer than I expected," she said with a little laugh.

"Ponies on Earth don't tend to shower every day," Erin said, smiling in return. "And they definitely wouldn't use shampoo and conditioner if they did."

"Can I get one of those hugs, too?"

"Of course, Dad."

Erin held out her forelegs, and her father knelt to hug her. His embrace was extremely careful, as if he expected her to break or explode. Erin, completely certain her father wouldn't spontaneously combust or shatter, hugged him back fiercely.

"It's good to see you again, kiddo."

"Likewise," she replied, smiling.

After the hugging, Erin invited her parents to sit down on the only furniture she had in the small room, which was her bed. Her mother plopped down, looking dazed but happy, and her father lowered himself gingerly, staring at her fluffy bedspread as if expecting it to leap up and smother him.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked.

"What do you have?" her mother asked.

Erin rattled off the drink options, reminding herself of her brief foray into food service as a waitress while in college. Lynne opted for an orange juice, and John asked for a Dr. Pepper. She walked over to the kitchenette and popped open the fridge, removing the carton of OJ and the 2-liter of soda with her mouth and setting them on the counter. As she closed the fridge door and went over to the cupboard for glasses, she noticed that her parents were watching her with apparent fascination.

The close observation made her more self-conscious about manipulating things as a pony than she had felt in weeks, and she nearly fumbled a glass as she pulled it off of the shelf. Lynne started to get off of the bed, but Erin held up a hoof to forestall her.

"I got it, Mom. I do this all the time, really."

The glasses went on a tray without any further mishap, and the freezer was successfully navigated for some ice cubes for her father's soda, clinking into the glass one at a time. She glanced back at her parents, smiling triumphantly, only to see her father frowning and looking slightly put off.

"With your *mouth*?"

"Um. Yeah. No thumbs," she said, waggling her hooves at him. "Is that okay? I kind of got used to it as a pony. Everyone who's not a unicorn uses their mouths for stuff like this."

"It's..." he trailed off, speaking again only after Lynne elbowed him in the ribcage. "It's fine. Really."

Erin flashed a smile at him, then poured the drinks by holding the containers in her hooves. She put the containers away in the refrigerator, then clamped down on the tray with her teeth and walked carefully back to her parents, offering them their drinks. After they took them, she placed the tray on a nightstand, then sat on the floor in front of them and looked at them expectantly.

"You did that very well," her mother said, surprised.

"You get lots of practice," Erin said, laughing. "It took a while for me to get used to the mouth thing, too."

Her father, after looking at the ice in his drink with some unease, shrugged and took a sip.

"Do you get used to being naked, too?"

"Well, it's..." she managed before her father sprayed soda all over her. "DAD!" she yelled, wiping Dr. Pepper off of her face with her foreleg. "What the heck?!"

Her father was sputtering and coughing up a storm. Lynne patted him sharply on the back.

"Uh, you going to be okay, there, Dad?" she said after a minute, as the coughing wore on.

"I didn't *hack!* even *gasp*... Naked?!" her father managed, and Erin blushed.

"I'm a *pony*," she said defensively, though deeply embarrassed. "Yeah, it bothered me at first, but... come on, I'm not even human! You can't even really consider me naked, honestly!"

Her father kept coughing, refusing to look at her. Grumbling, Erin went over to the closet and pulled out the simple sundress that Rarity had made for her all that time ago. It only took her a few seconds to slip it on, by which time John had finally stopped coughing.

"Oh, that's lovely, dear!"

"Thanks, Mom. My friend Rarity made it for me. She's a dressmaker in Ponyville."

"They actually call it Ponyville?" John asked, voice still sounding rough from aspirating a carbonated beverage.

"Yeah. It seemed odd to me at first, too. It would almost be like calling a place 'Humanville'."

"So..." her mother said. "Tell us about it, Erin?"

Nodding, she began talking. She talked about her first few months with Harmonics, the initial excitement being ground down into dull boredom after weeks of carefully calibrating sensors. She talked about the presentation with Dr. Velchiek, hiding the flash of anger she felt mentioning the man's name, where she first saw the ponies.

She continued on, summarizing her reasons for going, and what the initial process was like. Waking up delirious and semi-sedated. Her difficulties walking and eating, and the intensive training that followed.

Her parents, who'd been listening and nodding politely as she spoke, really perked up when Erin went to Equestria. She talked about meeting Applejack and Rainbow Dash, about going to Ponyville for the first time, getting a room, and looking for work.

Her second day in Equestria had her mother in stitches, especially when she related her experiences as a house-painter.

"I'm glad that *you* find it funny, Mom," Erin grumbled. "It was humiliating! There was paint *everywhere*. Dad, stop it!"

Her father jerked his hand away from her ear.

"Sorry, it's just so... freaky!"

"I know, but please stop. My ears are kind of ticklish, now," she said.

"Oh?" he said archly, grinning and reaching slowly back out. Erin cringed away.

"Mom! Make him stop!"

"John, don't mess with your daughter's pony ears," Lynne said, still giggling slightly. "What happened after that, sweetheart?"

"Well, then I found this old flyer for a company called Fet-Ex, looking for-

"Called what, now?" her father asked, surprised.

"Fet-Ex. Short for Fetlock Express," she said. Her father stared at her with mild disbelief.

"Weird," was all he had to say about it. Erin nodded and continued.

"So, anyway, I went there, met Mr. Parcel, a sweet old guy, and he hired me on the spot! Even gave me an advance, so I could get something to eat."

"What was the job?" Lynne asked, grabbing a brush off of the nightstand and using it to gesture at her daughter's mane with a questioning look in her eyes.

Erin rolled her eyes and nodded grudgingly, and her mother started happily brushing her mane.

"Package delivery. The logo even looked the same as FedEx, it was weird. Ouch."

"Sorry, found a tangle," her mother said, tugging on the brush.

"Anyway, it was a nice job. I met lots of ponies, learned a lot about Ponyville and jeeze, Mom, pull a little harder, why don't you?"

"It's really stuck!" Lynne replied, yanking on the brush.

"Well, pulling on it won't make it any less stuck!"

"Oh, I should leave it in there, then?"

"Try untangling it," Erin said, mildly annoyed.

"Can I see a hoof?"

"What?" Erin asked, looking with exasperation at her father.

"Well, your mom gets to play with your hair," he said defensively. "I was kind of curious about seeing a hoof."

"Fine," she said, holding out a foreleg. Her father picked up her hoof and examined it with interest.

Erin went back to her story, getting to her first encounter with Twilight Sparkle, while her mother tried to untangle her brush and her father flicked a finger against her hoof's wall.

"Neat," he said, then flicked it again. "Honey, feel that. It's all smooth, but it's hard as a rock."

Her mother abandoned the brush and reached over, tapping the hoof wall with her fingernail.

"Oooh," she said. "Cool!"

"I have hoof polish on," Erin said, tugging at her leg. Her father refused to let it go.

"Hold on, I'm still looking at this."

"Fine," Erin grumbled. "So, anyway, Twilight knew something was up right away, because she saw that I wasn't a part of Equestria's magical field-"

"Magic?" John said, snorting. "Right."

Erin pulled her hoof away sharply, glaring at her father.

"Yes, magic," she said, stomping her hoof down on the floor. "Or energy. Or force. Call it whatever you want. Its real, and I've seen it in action."

Her father shrugged, looking apologetic.

"Stop moving so much, I'm trying to braid your hair."

"Mom, come on!. Are you guys even listening to my story? I only went to a whole different universe and met actual alien ponies!"

"We're listening, sweetie. I just think your mane would look nicer with a braid in it."

Erin sighed with what was *mostly* mock exasperation, allowing a small smile to appear on her face. Her parents really hadn't changed at all, she was happy to see. And, it was nice being treated as just their daughter, even though she had hooves and a tail, now.

Content with her lot in life at the moment, Erin continued her story, much to her parent's satisfaction.

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"Are you sure we shouldn't just wait for Erin?" Fluttershy asked as Twilight scowled at the remote control.

"I'm sure I can figure it out," she said, shaking it vigorously with her magic.

"That's not how you use it, silly!" Pinkie said. "You need to push the buttons! Here," and Pinkie deftly snagged the remote from Twilight, ignoring her protests.

Pinkie stabbed a hoof at the remote and the television turned on. Twilight returned to the couch, sitting down in a huff.

"Awesome, it's movie time again!" Rainbow Dash said from her customary beanbag, a large bowl of popcorn resting on her belly.

The screen logged in, and the now-familiar menu of Erin's streaming media account popped up.

"What will we watch this time?" Pinkie asked. "I want to watch something funny!"

"I don't care, but it's got to have action," Rainbow replied. "I didn't want to say anything to Erin, but a couple of those movies she showed us last time were kind of boring."

"How can you say that?" Rarity asked, aghast. "I thought they were lovely!"

"The one with the talking cat and the girl with the broom was nice," Fluttershy agreed from one of the chairs. "Also, I liked the one with... Totoro?"

"I want action. Adventure! Scary stuff!" Rainbow said, spilling a little of her popcorn by accident as she waved her hooves around.

"No scary stuff, please," Fluttershy whispered.

"I'll watch anything," Applejack said. "I just enjoy the company, an' all."

"Well, there's more Ghibli movies," Pinkie said. "Grave of the Fireflies?"

"Oh, I bet that's a spooky one! Play it!"

"No, Rainbow Dash, I don't think so," Rarity said, patting a shivering Fluttershy consolingly.

"Poor fireflies," the yellow pegasus whispered.

"How about Princess Mononoke?" Pinkie asked, and both Twilight and Rarity perked up.

"A story about *human* princesses? That would be very interesting!" was Twilight's opinion, while Rarity said, "I wonder what kind of gowns human princesses wear?"

"Pfft, pass."

"I agree with Rainbow, I don't wanna watch a frilly frou-frou princess story," Applejack said.

"Fine. Maybe we should look outside of these options?" Twilight suggested.

Pinkie poked at the remote, opening a wider variety of movies, though still animated.

"It looks like these are all of Erin's favorite animated movies," Pinkie said. "Iron Giant? I wonder what that's about?"

"Bunnies!" Fluttershy said suddenly, startling everypony. "Can we watch the one with bunnies?"

"Watership Down? Well, animated rabbits are usually pretty funny, from what I've seen," Pinkie Pie said.

"No comedies! Action!" Rainbow said, putting her hoof down.

"Aww..." Pinkie and Fluttershy said at the same time.

"Hey, there's one here called 'How to Train Your Dragon'. Y'all wanna watch that?"

"That may come in useful for me," Twilight said, giggling.

"Does it have action?" Rainbow Dash asked doubtfully.

"It has dragons, and those are usually pretty exciting," Pinkie Pie said.

"It sounds like a documentary, and those are *boring*."

"I don't think so," Twilight said. "Erin said Earth doesn't have any dragons."

"Fine," Rainbow Dash said grudgingly. "But if this is some boring documentary, I reserve the right to turn it off and pick something else."

Twilight, sensing that this was as close to a unanimous agreement as they were going to get, nodded her head. Even Fluttershy was looking more interested than frightened.

"Dragon training, it is. I kind of wish Spike were here to watch it with us, I'm sure he'd have something to say about it," she said, with another giggle.

Pinkie plopped herself down on the sofa between the two unicorns, grabbing another bowl of popcorn for herself. On the screen, various logos and music played briefly, and then came a voice:

"This... is Berk."

Five minutes later, Rainbow Dash was calling it the best movie ever, Fluttershy was hiding behind the couch, and Twilight was busily jotting down notes on the anatomical inaccuracies of the dragons in the film.

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"You still haven't explained why you were in India." Lynne pointed out.

"There was... an accident. After Princess Celestia got hurt, they evacuated all the ponies back through to Equestria. But the gate got broken before I could get back through it, so they had to bring me back the long way."

Erin didn't see any reason to explain that Twilight Sparkle, her best friend in Equestria, had broken the gateway in a fit of rage. They'd long since made up, and that was all water under the bridge, as far as Erin was concerned.

"I don't like that one bit," John said, pacing off his agitation. "Why were you even there?"

"I told you, Dad. Most of my pony friends make up a group that uses something called The Elements of Harmony. It's their best defense, and they wanted to try it on the Tide. I wanted to be with my friends."

Erin hid her twinge of guilt over glossing over the truth by taking a bite out of the apple she'd pulled out of the fridge. She then sighed with disappointment.

"Not nearly as good as Sweet Apple Acres," she said mournfully. "I wish they'd let us bring fruit over, you have to try Equestrian food!"

"We could go now, if you wanted," her father said. "I mean, if it's allowed."

"Um. I could check with Maggie, I suppose." Erin said.

"I don't want to be a bother," Lynne said. "We can just eat at the cafeteria."

"Oh. Well, I hope you don't mind if I don't go with you."

"Why not?" John asked.

"Well... It's just that meat smells really gross to me, now."

"Because you're a pony?"

"No, because I haven't smelled it in weeks. No meat in Equestria, except for what griffons and the like eat."

"Griffons," her father said, dreamily. "I can't believe... I really want to see this place, now."

"I'd be happy to show you around. And it's no bother, Mom. Come on, let's at least just ask, okay?"

Faced with puppy-dog stares from both her husband and daughter, Lynne acquiesced. Erin led them out of the room, still wearing the sundress for her father's sake. A pony in a dress caused more than a few startled stares from the passing humans as they made their way to the Emitter room.

As a group, they went to the door to Maggie's office, who opened her door with a brief smile that seemed a little forced.

"Made up with the folks, I see?" she said, nodding at the married couple. "That's a cute braid, by the way. You look nice like that."

"Thanks!" Erin replied with a happy smile. "I was hoping I could get permission to show them around Equestria?"

"Sure, might as well," Maggie said. "It's up to the ponies to approve your entrance to the castle, though. I've got no say in that."

"Thanks, Maggie!" Erin said, starting to walk away.

"Hold on, Erin. Can I talk to you for a second? In private?"

"Oh. Uh, sure. Mom, Dad? Wait for me over by the gate, okay?"

Her parents nodded, staring in rapt fascination at the shimmering gateway hanging in the air. Erin turned back to Maggie, who gestured that she should join her in her office.

"What's going on?" she asked, closing the door behind her.

"Things are moving faster than expected," Maggie said, sounding uncharacteristically grim. Malachite will be at the Tide tomorrow, early in the morning for China, but around eight in the evening, our time."

"Oh," Erin said, feeling a sinking sensation in her gut. "Well, the sooner the better, I suppose."

Maggie opened her mouth as if to tell her more, then closed it again, shaking her head.

"Was there something else, Maggie?" Erin asked, tilting her head to the side.

"No. You go have fun with your parents. Show them around, introduce them to the Princesses if you can. Maybe get Rainbow Dash to do one of those amazing Rainbooms of hers," she said, giving her a big, and extremely fake smile.

Erin looked at her quizzically. Maggie was hiding something, she was sure. Her impatience to rejoin her parents warred with her curiosity, and her curiosity lost.

If it was really important, Maggie would tell her, she knew.

"Okay, Maggie. Tell me about it when I get back, okay?"

"I never really was all that good at hiding things," Maggie said with a chuckle. "Don't worry, it will keep. Go have fun."

"All right. See you later tonight, okay?"

"Later, Erin."

Erin left Maggie's office, trotting to join her parents at the gate.

"Come on," she said gleefully. "I have so many things to show you!"

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Maggie opened the file on her tablet and read it again, as if the words could possibly have changed since the last time she'd read it. According to the report, a pair of people had gone missing the previous day, disappearing from their home not too far from where Malachite had been at the time.

According to the report, a distraught son had raised the alarm in the afternoon, after finding his elderly parents gone when he'd stopped by to visit. A search party had been formed, quickly finding the mother wandering in the woods a half-mile from their home.

The woman, suffering mild hypothermia, had lapsed into and out of consciousness during the trip to the hospital, babbling nearly incoherently about demons and her husband being possessed. The husband, found as if asleep in a clearing, hadn't been so lucky, having been in poor health to begin with. He'd been

dead for hours by the time the rescuers had found him.

The Chinese escorting Malachite were completely certain that he hadn't managed to get past their guards, who'd been stationed on the doors to the room Malachite had been kept in for the entire night, as well as surrounding the entire building. They were certain it was just a coincidence. Maggie wasn't so sure, herself.

Still, it was no more than suspicion on her part, and nothing worth worrying Erin about while she was still repairing her relationship with her parents. The news would keep.

At least, Maggie prayed that it would.

Chapter 28: The calm before the storm

Erin smiled proudly at her parents as they stepped through the gateway after only the briefest of hesitations, eyes wide as they looked around the gateway building on the Equestrian side of things. Her father looked warily at the pair of matching, armored unicorns on either side of the gate, who gazed back at him with implacable expressions.

"Hi," Erin said, trotting up to the reception desk. The unicorn stallion behind the desk looked up and smiled at her.

"Good afternoon, Erin. Bringing some guests over?"

"Yup. These are my parents, actually!"

"Oh, indeed!" The stallion got up and trotted around the desk, looking with interest at the couple, who were clinging to each other and smiling nervously. "It's a very great pleasure to meet you. My name is Evening Star, and I'm part of the Royal Equestrian Ambassadorial staff."

He held out a hoof, which her father stared at with mild confusion. Erin, gesturing frantically from behind the unicorn's back, managed to convey to him that he should shake it, which he did. Lynne, giggling faintly, shook the hoof as well when it was presented to her.

"Ordinarily, we don't allow civilians to come through without approval from either our ambassadorial staff or yours, but since you know Erin, I'll let you straight through."

Evening Star smiled gently at the nervous humans before turning back to his desk. A few seconds later, two stamped pass-books were floated back to the humans, whose eyes were nearly bugging out of their heads to see actual telekinesis in action.

"Go on, guys. Take them," Erin said. "It's just simple levitation. Unicorns do it all the time, here."

John reached out, putting his hand on the glowing object almost as if he expected to be burned. When no harm came to him, Lynne reached out with more confidence and took her own. Erin managed to not roll her eyes at the display; she hadn't been much better about magic when *she'd* first come here, so she really couldn't blame them for their wariness.

Erin thanked the receptionist before leading her parents out into the gardens.

"Oh, it's so cold!" Lynne said.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, I forgot we'd have to go outside. I should have had you bring your jackets!"

"It's not a problem," John said. "We're Minnesotans, it's no big deal."

"Right, Dad," Erin replied with an accompanying eye-roll. "Anyway, let's get inside the castle; it's much warmer in there."

They moved quickly, though her parents still managed a considerable amount of rubbernecking while making their way to the nearest door. The stallions on guard let them pass through without a comment.

"Oh, that's much better!" Lynne said happily, rubbing her hands together.

"Wow, so this is an actual castle."

"Yeah, Dad. This is Canterlot Castle, the seat of the government and where the Princesses live."

"Do you suppose we could meet the Princesses?" Lynne asked hopefully.

"I don't know, Mom," Erin answered uncertainly. "It's pretty much up to them, if they want to come and meet you. They're really busy right now, and I hate to impose on their time."

"I understand," her mother said, hiding her disappointment very poorly.

"Well, if nothing else, I can introduce you to most of my pony friends, who are staying here in the castle right now."

"We already met Pinkie Pie and Twilight... Twinkle?" John said uncertainly.

"Sparkle."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay, Dad. Just call her Twilight, everypony does."

"Every... pony?"

"Yup!"

With that, Erin started her brief tour of the castle, which also helped to underscore for her how much about the castle she, herself, didn't know. They looked at statuary and tapestries, art galleries and indoor fountains.

The castle staff completely ignored the humans in their midst, having long since gotten used to wandering bipeds. The same couldn't be said of the humans, though, as they stared after every pony that wandered by, some times to the extent that Erin would have to remind them to not be rude.

They were walking down a hallway, looking at some beautiful stained-glass windows, when Lynne's stomach growled loudly enough to echo slightly. Her mother blushed a bright red, and Erin stuffed a hoof in her muzzle to stop the giggles.

"Er... I must be really hungry," John said, trying to take the fall for his blushing bride.

"Uh. Sure, Dad. Let's head to the Dining Hall, see if they have room for us."

The Canterlot Dining Hall was a separate affair from the standard cafeteria where the staff and workers ate. The Dining Hall was more for the upper crust of Canterlot society and foreign dignitaries. Erin was really hoping that they'd be allowed in, though she was mentally preparing for being told that there was currently no room.

The maître d' looked them over with a critical eye, sniffed, and instructed a waiter to bring them to a table. Erin joined her parents in looking around with wonder. While Erin had eaten here once before in the company of Rarity and Twilight Sparkle, it was still just as impressive and overwhelming as ever.

The Dining Hall seemed to be almost a cathedral in appearance, a large circular room with a high vaulted ceiling, from which dangled several large and fancy candelabras. Delicately carved columns etched with gold and silver were spaced around the edge of the room and supported a second floor balcony, which circled the entire room.

Flights of stairs spaced evenly around the circumference of the circle led to the balcony level, which was much more secluded and intimate, where the elite of the elite would eat. And, one level higher and on opposite ends of the room were the Princesses' private dining areas, where the royals would entertain their personal guests away from the prying eyes and ears of the upwardly-inclined Canterlot socialites.

Judging by the stiff attitude of the waiter, Erin and her parents just barely rated a not-at-all secluded table towards the middle of the main room, somewhat near the kitchens. Still, Erin wasn't going to complain, considering that she wasn't at all sure she'd be able to get in in the first place. It was worth it, as her parents were completely overwhelmed.

The ponies had adapted to humans eating with ponies. The table that they were brought to featured both normal chairs for humans to sit in and a high bench for Erin to park herself on, allowing her to sit at the table comfortably. Though, the arrangement still left the top of her head well below her parents' eye levels. It almost made her feel like a little kid again.

"It's... very nice," Lynne said, exercising her fine gift for understatement.

Erin smiled, enjoying the look of childlike wonder on her parents' faces.

Menus were brought out, and much dithering over choices was made. Her father, always a man of simple tastes, grumbled slightly about the lack of cheeseburgers on the menu, but in the end settled on a pasta dish. Lynne opted for a main course of cream soup with vegetables, along with eggplant Parmesan. Erin opted for a salad.

They made conversation while waiting for the food, and that's when Erin decided to drop the first bomb. She braced herself for the fireworks she was sure would happen when she made her confession.

"Mom, Dad, there's a couple of things I need to talk to you about, okay?"

Noting the serious tone in her voice, her parents gave her their undivided attention.

"Okay. What's up, kiddo?"

"Well, the first is this, and this is highly confidential. But the ponies are going to try and stop the Black

Tide again tomorrow evening, and I'm going to be there."

There was a dangerous moment of silence before John drew every glance in the room with a loud "What?!"

"*Dad!*" Erin whispered fiercely, glancing around at the disapproving stares of the Canterlot elite.

"Why?" Lynne asked fiercely. "Why would you go anywhere near that *thing*?"

"Because my friends will be there," she said simply. "They're the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, remember?"

"But why *you*?" her father asked.

Erin considered what she was going to say for a moment, and then answered carefully.

"The first time the ponies tried this, Celestia attacked it directly and actually made some good progress before the Tide counterattacked. This time, somepony else is going to try a more... indirect attack, I guess. My friends are going because the Elements might be needed to save the day. *I'm* going because I can't allow my friends to go into danger for my sake and *not* be there."

"Okay, I get that," John said. "But-"

"It's going to be safer this time, we expect," Erin said, cutting him off. "First, only one certain pony will be approaching the Tide. My friends and I will be back by the gate, ready to retreat to Equestria if things go *really* bad. We'll have both Princesses there, determined to keep us all safe. Honestly, Mom, Dad, I will be fine."

The married couple looked at each other for a long while, holding each other's hands.

"If you're going, then we're going," John said, stoutly.

"Wha... no, Dad, there's no point to you being there."

"We have all the same reasons you do," he pointed out firmly. "If you're going into danger, then we're going too."

"Look, Dad..." Erin trailed off, and then sighed. "Okay, look. Do you both promise to keep this next part a complete secret?"

Her parents glanced at her warily, but gave their promise.

"Princess Celestia has a mission for me. If things go wrong, not that anyone expects that it will, then it's my job to get Twilight Sparkle and her friends back through the gateway using any means I can, even if it's against their will. Celestia made me promise. If you go... Well, that will just be two more people I need to protect."

She looked up at them, hoping they would understand.

"I need you to trust me on this. We're doing everything we can to be safe, even going so far as to take almost ridiculous precautions. I'll be fine, but I need you to stay in the Harmonics compound. Maggie will have the whole thing on video, so you can see what's going on, and if I need your help, I'll just be a quick jog across the garden to the second gateway."

Her parents turned to each other and began whispering an animated discussion that Erin pretended that she couldn't easily overhear. After a few minutes, her father turned to her with somewhat bad grace and said, "Fine. But at the first sign of trouble, we're going through the gateway and coming for you, and heaven help any pony or human guard that gets in my way."

"Thanks, Dad," Erin said, honestly relieved.

She took a bread roll out of the basket on the table and placed it on the plate in front of her, fiddling with it nervously.

"There's something else, but keep in mind that this is just something I'm thinking about. I haven't made up my mind on this, yet."

"What's that, sweetie?" Lynne asked, sounding slightly weary.

"Well, I feel bad about not telling you about becoming a pony in the first place-"

"We've forgiven you for that, Erin," her mother reminded her.

"I know, I know. But that's why I wanted to come out and just say this right away, so I'm not doing it behind your backs again."

The married couple looked at each other warily, and then back to Erin.

"Okay," John said. "Let's hear it."

Erin cleared her throat and focused briefly on the bread roll she was nervously batting back and forth between her hooves.

"Okay, well... I haven't totally made up my mind yet, but... A while ago, I decided that I wanted to stay in Ponyville and study magic. I wanted to figure out what it was, and how it worked. That means that I'll be getting a house there, and probably getting a job there, too, to support myself while I work on my studies."

"Well," her father said, sounding relieved. "I think we can get behind that. We're *all* moving to this world, after all, and I'm sure we can visit..."

"That's not all, Dad," Erin said, bracing herself for the harder part to come. "Studying magic is going to be really tricky if I can't actually *do* magic myself. I mean, sure, there's a lot I can learn just through testing and observation, but... if I *really* want to study magic, I'm going to... I'll probably have to stay a pony."

Her parents stared at her blankly for a moment.

"But... you said... you were changing back!" Lynne protested. "You said you would!"

"I know, and I still will, once the Ascent labs are fixed," Erin said. "Just... well, I'll eventually need to change into an actual Equestrian pony so I can use whatever the energy is that they call 'magic'. Then I want to study it."

"You can't use this magic now?" John asked.

"No... I'm not really a pony. Or, not really an Equestrian pony, at least. I just look like one. Some of the things they can do, dad... Unicorns can levitate things and teleport, earth ponies can make things grow, faster healthier and stronger than naturally possible, and pegasi can *fly* Dad. They can *fly*!"

Her mother was crying, Erin was upset to see. Not bawling, just sniffling and with a few tears. Erin mentally kicked herself for bringing this up here, in public. She really should have waited until she could tell them in a more private area.

"I haven't even gotten used to you being a pony in the first place, and now you're saying that you're going to *stay* like that?" Lynne asked. John looked grim, staring at the table cloth and swirling the water around in his glass.

"I'm going to change back for a while, first," Erin offered. "Honestly, I miss being human, I've almost forgotten what it's like. So, I'll spend a while as a human, and then come back to Ponyville as... I don't know. One of the kinds of ponies, I guess, whichever one I want to study, first."

There was more awkward silence around the table, which Erin broke by saying, "Look, I haven't completely made up my mind, yet. I may change it again, before all is said and done. I *really* want to change back, the first chance I get. And we'll probably have evacuated the Earth before I have a chance to change again, assuming they even let me. So, it could be months or even years before I can change from a human back into a pony."

She looked up into her parents' faces, smiling weakly. "Besides, I may end up changing my mind and deciding to either do something else with my life, or to study magic by observation, rather than through first-hand experience."

"You can't study magic first-hand," John pointed out seriously. "Ponies have hoofses."

"Uh..." Erin said, bewildered. Her father stared back at her, completely expressionless, and then suddenly grinned, eyes twinkling.

Erin snorted with unexpected laughter, clapping her hooves over her muzzle, keenly aware of the disapproving glances at the nearby tables. Lynne had her hand up to her mouth in a gesture startlingly similar to her daughter's, trying to keep her own giggles at bay.

"Dad, 'hoofses'?" Erin said, wagging her hooves at him.

That did it. The tension broke as the table erupted with *very* uncouth laughter, ceasing only when a ring of disapproving waiters materialized from nowhere and simply frowned the giggles into extinction before

moving off again.

"Stuck up bunch, aren't they?" John noted.

"Well, we're in the snootiest of snooty places," Erin said. "I probably should have brought you to the cafeteria, instead. It's much more casual."

"We'll behave," Lynne said, struggling to keep a straight face.

A minute or so passed as everyone mulled things over.

"So, you're really planning on staying human for at least a little while?" Lynne asked.

"Yup," Erin nodded. "I kind of miss having fingers, to be honest."

"Thumbs are nice, too," her dad said, giving her a thumbs-up.

"And, if you *do* turn into a pony, you absolutely *promise* you'll turn back to human, eventually?"

"That's the plan, Mom," Erin said. "I like being a pony, but... well, I'm a human. I'll always consider myself to be human."

"That's good," Lynne said. "Because I want some grandbabies out of you, and they'd better not have hoofs!"

The previously-banished giggles almost made a comeback before they were able to clamp down on them. Nobody wanted a repeat appearance of the omnipresent disapproving wait-staff.

"Well, I don't know," Erin said teasingly, trying not to laugh. "There was a nice stallion back in Ponyville named Lucky who said he wanted to ask me out."

Lynne groaned and shuddered with mock-horror.

"Lucky was his name, or lucky was what he was expecting to get?" her dad asked. Erin gaped at him in pure shock.

"Dad! *Ew!*"

"John!" Lynne said, scandalized. "That is your *daughter*!"

John chuckled as he unsuccessfully tried to dodge a hoof-hurled bread roll. Not even the ring of scowling waiters was able to dull the laughter at table 27 that time. The maître d' looked over at them, rolling his eyes.

"Tourists," he snorted with contempt.

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The credits started up, and the ponies slumped back to their seats, emotionally exhausted. The animation in this last movie wasn't as softly animated as the Ghibli ones, but it was much more real and had a definite charm of its own.

Fluttershy was behind the couch, crying gently, though not with fear. The end of the movie had been slightly sad but even more hopeful, and the sensitive pegasus had been honestly quite touched.

Twilight herself was feeling emotionally drained, just a little. Her notepad was on the small table next to her, completely forgotten about as the film had gone on, though she *had* managed to write down several pages of notes before her attention was inexorably linked to the movie.

"Wait a minute," Rainbow Dash said, breaking everypony's mood. "Did he just say some places have *ponies* as *pets*?"

"Uh, I just figure they mean ponies from Earth," Applejack said. "They ain't too bright, according to what Erin said."

"Yeah, but-"

"Girls, please! I'm trying to read the credits!" Twilight broke in.

Grumbling ensued from Dash's beanbag, lapsing into a silence that lasted almost half a minute.

"Man, that was epic, though! They took down that *huge* dragon, just by being faster!"

Rainbow Dash stood up, flexing her wings.

"It's like I always said, speed is the most important factor in flying!"

"Toothless was also pretty agile," Applejack pointed out. "The only time I ever saw him run into anythin' was when Hiccup steered him wrong, or when his tail was messed up. Unlike a certain pegasus I ain't gonna name, who knocked off half the shingles on the south side of my roof."

"That was an *accident!* Gah, how many times do I have to say it? It was a freak downdraft out of nowhere!"

Twilight sighed and gave up reading the credits as the two friends bickered.

"Are you okay, Fluttershy? It got a little scary near the end, there."

"Oh, um. Yes. Thank you, Twilight. It was scary, but it was also... very exciting. I think it helped knowing that none of it was actually real."

Twilight was about to answer her when the door to their shared common area opened up and Erin walked in, wearing an unexpected dress and sporting a braid, with two familiar humans trailing behind her. Fluttershy "eep"-ed slightly, and maneuvered to put the couch between her and them.

"Erin!" Twilight said happily, getting up off of the couch. "You've made up with your parents!"

"Hi Twilight! Yeah, we had a long talk about it earlier today. Everyone? I'd like you to meet my parents, John and Lynne Olsen. Mom and Dad, these are my friends. You've already met Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie, but there's also Applejack..."

"Howdy folks. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance!"

"Nice to meet you too!" John said, giving her hoof a vigorous shake. "Erin tells me that you were her first friend in Equestria?"

"Gosh, I never thought of it that way. But, I reckon' it's true!"

"Thanks for being so nice to her. It sounds like you really made things a lot easier for her," Lynne said.

"Aw, shucks. 'Tweren't nothing I wouldn't do for anypony who seemed a little lost." Applejack said, blushing.

"And here's Rainbow Dash, the second pony I met in Equestria."

"Nice to meet you Rainbow Dash!" John said, shaking her hoof as well.

"Your mane is amazing!" Lynne added.

"It's nice meeting you guys too, and thanks! It *is* pretty awesome."

"This is Rarity, who made my dress. She owns a shop in Ponyville called Carousel Boutique."

"Absolutely charmed to meet you!" Rarity said, holding out her hoof daintily. John took the hint and only shook it gently, compared to the more vigorous hoof-shakes from AJ and Rainbow Dash.

"Same here! You did a wonderful job on that dress!" Lynne said happily. "And *your* mane is simply gorgeous! How do you get it to stay so... bouncy?"

"Oh, it's a little bit of work," Rarity said modestly, "and I have several specialized hair products I import from Manehattan, but I think the result is worth it."

"And Fluttershy is..." Erin glanced around, smiling as she spotted a tuft of mane over the top of the sofa. "Fluttershy is apparently hiding behind the couch. She's a little bit shy, but she's wonderful with animals. I've never seen anything like it."

"Um. It's a pleasure to meet you, Fluttershy," John said, addressing the couch, which squeaked at him.

"Me too," Lynne said. "I like animals, too. I always wanted to be a veterinarian when I was younger, but I didn't have the stomach for it."

A pair of teal eyes peeked over the arm of the couch, and a quiet voice said, "What does your stomach have to do with taking care of animals?"

"I only meant that... well, the thought of animals being hurt or sick made me so sad, I couldn't bear it. It's the same reason I couldn't be a doctor," Lynne explained.

"Oh. I thought you meant that you ate injured animals."

Everyone stared at Fluttershy for a minute, and then Lynne burst out laughing.

"Oh, no. No, I love little animals. I volunteer at the Humane Society sometimes, just to help them take care of them."

"Humane Society?" Fluttershy asked.

"It's a place that takes in lost, abandoned, or mistreated pets," Erin explained. "They put them up for adoption to loving homes. All of the pets we've ever had were adopted from them."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Fluttershy said, her head appearing fully over the edge of the couch. "Humans have places like that?"

"Oh, yes," Lynne said. "And it's so nice to be able to go there and help take care of all the puppies and kittens and rabbits and the like."

Fluttershy's eyes grew wide at that, and she smiled widely, walking slowly around the side of the couch so that the humans could see her.

"So, what were you guys watching?" Erin asked.

"How to Train Your Dragon," Twilight said, levitating her notes over. "If I could, I would like to get these notes to the makers of that film. I think they'd benefit greatly from my suggestions regarding the anatomical inaccuracies of the dragons in the film."

Rainbow Dash groaned, and Erin just looked at her in amazement before giggling.

"Well, if you want me to, I can try to send them your notes. That movie is older than my dad, though..."

"Hey!" John protested.

"...so I'm pretty sure anyone who animated it are long since retired."

"Let me get this straight," Lynne said, frowning. "You have all these wonderful pony friends in a magical land with *real* dragons and magic, and you're showing them your old collection of classic animation?"

"Um. Yes?" Erin said, smiling at her mom sheepishly.

"Ugh, you never change. You and your father are the biggest animation geeks ever!"

"Hey, that's why I'm going to be the cool aunt when my nieces and nephew get old enough!"

Twilight smiled as the family bickered. This was a side of Erin she'd never seen before, and she reflected on how interesting it was to see your friends in the light of their relationship with their parents.

The pony friends invited Erin's parent's to sit and talk with them for dinner, though it turned out that they'd already eaten. Still, they were happy to sit around the table with them while Twilight and her friends ate. John even helped himself to some of the room service that was brought up for the others.

"The food was incredible," he said, "but the portion sizes were tiny."

"You can't be all stuffy if you're stuffed," Rainbow Dash snickered.

Twilight noted that John seemed to be hitting it off pretty well with Rainbow Dash and Applejack, with the pegasus filling him in on some of their adventures, while Lynne spent a lot of time talking to Fluttershy and Rarity. Amazingly enough, the human woman had also somehow managed to convince *Fluttershy*, of all ponies, to let her braid her mane.

Fluttershy, blushing furiously as her mane was fashioned into a French braid, talked animatedly about the animals she cared for. Rarity interjected the occasional question about human fashions and style trends. Somehow, Lynne managed to juggle both of these conversations without shorting either pony for attention.

Pinkie Pie bounced from group to group, adding the occasional non sequitur or asking the occasional random question.

"It's good to see them all getting along," Erin said, coming up beside her.

Twilight smiled at her and nudged her with a shoulder.

"I bet you're glad to be able to talk to them again," she said. Erin nodded.

"Yeah. You guys were right. It's an incredible load off my mind to have them know."

"Are you going to tell your brothers, too?" Lynne asked, overhearing their conversation.

"Not a good idea right now, mom. They'd both be in the same boat as you, and they have little kids to think of."

"I suppose," Lynne said, sounding slightly sad. "I was just hoping we could get the whole family together for Thanksgiving. It might be our last one on Earth."

"I didn't think of that. Sorry, Mom."

"Well, as long as we can all watch the game, I'll be happy."

"What's 'Thanksgiving'?" Twilight asked.

"What game?" Rainbow Dash asked, perking up.

"Football!" John said, grinning. "The Vikings are playing, I *have* to see it."

"Whoah! Vikings are real?" Rainbow Dash said, and Fluttershy's eyes widened in alarm. "I thought they were just made up in that movie!"

"What? No, vikings were real," John said. "Heck, I'm a viking!"

"Cooool!" Rainbow Dash said, wide-eyed. Fluttershy, eying the bearded man warily, edged away from him as far as she could with Lynne still braiding her hair.

"Dad, you're not a viking," Erin said, rolling her eyes. She then turned to address Fluttershy in a soothing voice. "Vikings haven't really existed for centuries. They came from Norway, and that's where my family came from originally, too. There's lots of Norwegians in Minnesota, so we call our football team the Vikings, to remember them by."

"O-okay," Fluttershy said, smiling nervously. Lynne patted her comfortingly on the head and then tied off the braid with a red ribbon that Rarity provided her.

"How about you, Applejack?" Lynne said eagerly. "You'd look simply lovely with a braid."

"Uh, well.. Thank ya kindly, but..."

"Oh, go on Applejack," Rarity said with a smirk. "You wouldn't want to be rude to our guests, would you?"

"Well... Fine, I reckon it'll be okay," Applejack said, glaring at the self-satisfied unicorn. "I reckon y'all will be lettin' her do the same to your mane when it's your turn, then?"

Rarity gasped slightly and started to make excuses, but the look on Lynne's face apparently convinced her to give in and agree with poorly concealed reluctance.

"Totally worth it," Applejack said smugly.

"My mom loves playing with hair," Erin said. "It always bugged her that I preferred my hair shorter. The fact that you guys are ponies doesn't hurt, either."

"Oh, do mine next!" Pinkie Pie said eagerly. "I'd love to have you braid my mane!"

"Um. I'll give it a shot, dear," Lynne said doubtfully, eying the pink mane doubtfully. "Do you have a brush or a comb?"

"I'll go get one!" she said, darting off.

Twilight leaned over to whisper into Erin's ear. "What are the odds of me getting through the night without my mane in a braid?"

"Practically zero, I'm afraid," Erin said, smiling.

Twilight sighed.

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

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Maggie looked up as Erin came back through the gateway with her parents. She watched as they talked for a short while, and then Erin hugged first her mother, then her father. The couple waved at Erin, who

waved back before turning and coming directly towards her office, rather like Maggie had expected she would. She put a smile on her face and went to open the door for her.

"Hey, Maggie!" Erin said as she walked into the office. "Working late tonight, I see."

"Hey Erin. Yeah, it's been busy arranging security for the shopping trip tomorrow morning. You still willing to go?"

"Um..." Erin looked distinctly uncomfortable for a moment, and Maggie was momentarily afraid she'd back out of it. "Sure, I can go."

"Great! How did Canterlot go with the folks?"

"Oh, it was wonderful! They loved the food, we'll probably never be allowed back in the Dining Hall without one of the Princesses vouching for us, and they met the rest of my friends there. My mom braided everyone's manes except for Rainbow Dash. She even managed Pinkie's, somehow."

"Wow, I'd like to see that!" Maggie said, chuckling.

"Mom invited everyone to an impromptu vegetarian Thanksgiving dinner over here next week, though I don't think she really thought it through. I'm not sure where everypony is going to fit! And my dad asked Rainbow Dash and Applejack to watch the game with them."

"The game?" Maggie asked, and then remembered. "Oh. Football, right?"

"Yeah. One thing came up, though..." Erin said, trailing off uncomfortably.

"What's that?"

"Um," she said, shuffling her hoof on the floor. "I *may* have let slip that Lyra was working for Project Harmonics now."

"Okay..." Maggie said warily.

"And I *may* have just happened to mention a certain shopping trip in front of several ponies that really, *really* want to see the Earth, and were hoping I could clear it with you."

Maggie sighed.

"Well, I can't clear that myself. I'll have to talk to the bosses. We'll need a lot more security, if we don't want it to turn into a circus. Heck, it will probably turn into a circus anyway. All of them want to go shopping with you guys?"

"Well... not Fluttershy. *She* wants to go see the Humane Society. Rarity said she'd go with her."

Maggie groaned inwardly, but outwardly she smiled thinly, knowing she'd have a few more calls to make before she managed to get to bed.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "Maybe we can put the trip off until a later day?"

"Well, it's either go shopping, or sit in my room all day brooding about what may or may not happen in China tomorrow evening," Erin said, yawning mightily. "Oh, whew. What a night. I'd better get to bed. 'Night, Maggie!"

Maggie hesitated, caught between telling Erin what was in the report and letting it set for one more night. She made a decision.

"You have a good night, and sleep well," she said finally. "Big day tomorrow."

Erin waved, and wandered down the hallway to her bedroom. Maggie sighed, rubbing at her temples wearily. She rationalized her decision to not tell Erin her suspicions about Malachite as a way to let the poor girl get some much-needed rest before the very busy day tomorrow. But she knew it for the lie of omission that it was.

When it came right down to it, Erin already had more than enough reason to be afraid of the alien monster. Maggie desperately wanted to avoid giving her any more reason to worry.

With another deep sigh, Maggie picked up the phone to call the head of Harmonics security, to inform him of the change in plans.

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Rockwell was a small town about thirty miles from Boulder, a nice place for people to stop on their way to

more scenic locations. It sported several antique stores, a couple of strip malls, a small movie complex and a florist. If you drove a mile outside of town to the north, you'd find a Wal-mart. To the south, you'd find a Target store.

On the main drag of town, a road cleverly called Main Street, there could be found a very tiny book store called The Dust Jacket. It sold both new and used books, though the latter greatly outnumbered the former. The only person in the store was the clerk, who also happened to be the owner of the store.

He was the owner by default rather than by choice, as it hadn't been his idea to open the store. It had been his father's idea, back when print media was still a pretty big deal. These days, the only places that successfully sold print books were either online, or in the large brick-and-mortar stores in major cities, preferably with a university nearby.

The clerk/owner, a middle-aged man whose name was James, leaned against the counter dispiritedly. Not a single customer had come in so far today. Granted, he'd only been open for about two hours, but it was a disturbingly common trend. He'd had maybe ten customers the entire week so far, who'd made him a grand total of eighty dollars in sales.

That eighty dollars was just about enough to buy his groceries. It was not, however, enough to pay for any of the utilities it took to run the store, and wasn't even a patch on this month's taxes. Luckily, the building was in his name, so he didn't have to worry about being evicted.

James helped himself to some of the free coffee he kept out for his "customers", of which there was currently a distressing lack. He sipped his coffee as he returned to the counter, thinking that this was it. He was really going to finally just sell the building. He'd sell what books he could at a massive discount, donate as much as he could for a tax write-off, and then just have himself a big old bonfire with the rest.

It wasn't the first time he'd had the thought, but this time he truly felt like he might be able to go through with it. As was his routine, he made a game of it. He decided that, if not a single customer came through the door in the next hour, and then that was it. He'd sell and donate everything he could, and burn the rest.

Five minutes later, he jumped up as the bell dinged at the front door. A man in a very conservative black suit walked in, glancing around intently.

"Welcome to the Dust Jacket, can I-"

His excited greeting was cut short as the man held up a finger to indicate he wanted silence. James felt both confused and mildly offended. Money pit or not, this was still *his* store. Who did this guy think he was?

The guy in question turned and stepped back outside, where James heard him say something to someone behind the door. What happened next earned him free drinks at the bar for the next several nights as he related the story to the eager crowds wanting to lend him an ear.

With a jaunty *clop-clop-clop* sound, a tiny purple horse with a horn on its head came trotting into his store, followed quickly by another, a brown one without a horn. Then a green one, with a horn again. Next came a hornless bright pink one, followed by an orange one with what looked like a cowboy hat on its head, and finally a rainbow-maned one with a pair of wings.

Ponies, his brain informed him, finally catching up with today's current events.

"Greetings, sir," the purple unicorn said cheerfully in a feminine voice. James gaped at her dumbly. "My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I am in the market for some Earth books. Do you have anything on history, or perhaps science?"

"History and science are both over that way," he said, pointing. The unicorn thanked him and trotted off happily, chatting with the brown pony that had followed her in. Most of the other ponies split up and wandered the store randomly, except for the last two who had come in and who loitered by the front desk.

"Oh, *man*", the rainbow-haired pony said. "Why do we have to come to a *book* store? They're *boring!*"

Welcome to my life, little pony, James' beleaguered brain managed.

"Sorry, ma'am," said the man in the suit, who'd followed the ponies in along with several other similarly-dressed people. "We have to keep you together."

"Come on, now, Rainbow," the orange one with the cowboy hat said. "Maybe you should give it a try. You liked Daring Do, didn't you?"

"I seriously doubt they're going to have anything like Daring Do in a place like *this*," the other replied,

looking around with obvious disdain.

Stunned by the presence of Equestrian ponies or not, that stung James right in the professional pride.

"Hey, now," he said, flinching slightly as the two ponies turned to look at him. "Give it a shot, why don't you? I have *tons* of books here. What kind do you like?"

The rainbow maned pony snorted derisively, saying, "Oh, I don't know. You got anything with an adventurous pegasus who explores ancient tombs in search of lost treasures while battling the forces of evil?"

"No," he replied, "but we *do* have a pretty wide variety of action books. Come on."

He started leading the two away towards a shelf of paperbacks.

"Whatever," the one called Rainbow said as she followed, hooves dragging.

"She just started readin' for fun not too long ago, an' she gets bored easy," Cowboy Hat said.

"Oh?" James said, stopping. "Then I think I have just the thing for her."

He turned and walked to a different part of the store, gesturing grandly with his arms.

"Adventure galore!" he said proudly.

"What?" Rainbow said, looking at the display. She rolled her eyes. "Are these *comic books*? Those are for little kids!"

"*Comics* may be for little kids," James said, the blasphemy falling easily from his tongue. "But these... are *graphic novels*! Give them a try, come on."

"Fine," she said, pulling out a Spider-Man book completely at random. The orange one pulled out a Batman and began reading as well.

Ten minutes later, they were arguing over who the better hero was. James returned to the register, grinning happily thanks to a job well done.

Half an hour later, he made more sales to the six ponies than he had in the entire previous three months combined. Several credit cards were produced, and several large bags were filled. The purple one in particular, Twilight something-or-other, had purchased an impressive number of books on physics, chemistry, engineering, math and geology.

"Come on!" the green one said as they were leaving. "We only have a few hours here, and we still have a lot of stores to visit!"

"I get to pick the next one!" the pink one said. The others groaned.

James watched them leave, still slightly stunned. The last one out was the man in the suit who had been the first one to enter. He nodded and waved jauntily at James as he left, the door jingling behind him as it closed.

James pulled out his cell phone, kicking himself for not thinking of taking any pictures while the ponies were in here, but glad that his security cameras at least had caught some footage. At least, he hoped they had. He quickly dialed a number.

"Hey," he said when the person on the other end of the call answered. "Yeah, it's me. You will not believe what just happened here!"

~~*~~

Several miles away, the local branch of the Humane Society of Colorado was playing host to a pair of ponies of their own: a timid yellow pegasus who was trying her best to hide behind her pink mane, and a white unicorn with a purple mane who was glancing warily at a nearby sleeping Persian.

The clerk, more than a little intimidated both by the ponies and their human guards, looked at the pink-maned pony before her and said, "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Can I..." the small pony repeated, only slightly louder. "Can I hug *all* the cats?"

~~*~~

The normally-sleepy town of Rockwell was coming alive in a big way. The locals had gotten there first, cameras out, milling around for any glimpse of the ponies. News vans came shortly after, and both

competed with the locals and occasionally interviewed them.

The local police had been informed that VIPs would be coming that morning, but were completely overwhelmed by the influx of civilians. They gave counter-intuitive orders to try and restore what they considered peace, barking orders at cross purposes, sometimes sending a group of civilians one way only to have another officer brusquely order them back where they had come from.

Surrounded by a bubble of dark-suited human security agents, the ponies were only vaguely aware of the chaos their presence was causing. They were currently in the town's only music store, which had been Lyra's pick for where to shop next.

"Oh, Er- I mean, Sunflower, come and look at this!" Lyra said, pointing to an old guitar that was locked inside a glass case.

Erin shook her head at the unicorn's near-flub. Using her "human" name was a strict no-no during this trip. She trotted over and looked at the guitar, and gave a low whistle of appreciation.

It was, according to the name inscribed on it, a Gibson Les Paul, and the tag on it mentioned it had been made about seventy years earlier. The wood glowed warmly under the mild display lights, and even Erin could tell that it was a high-quality instrument.

"Wow," she said, "that looks really nice!"

"Do you think I should get it?" Lyra asked, looking at the instrument with more than a little hunger in her eyes.

"Um..." Erin looked at the price tag, blanching in shock. "No, I think you need to save up for that one. It's more than you have right now."

"Oh?" Lyra asked, disappointed. "I thought two thousand dollars was a lot of money?"

"It's a fair amount, but this guitar is old, and old things can cost a lot of money," she replied. "Anyway, it's an electric, and you'd need to buy... um... a speaker-thingy for it."

"Speaker thingy?" Lyra repeated skeptically. "That's the official name?"

"Amplifier," the store owner said helpfully. "We happen to have a few in stock."

"Thanks, but I think we should continue looking for now," Erin said, dragging the still-fascinated Lyra away from the case. "Come on, there are other instruments here."

"But that one looked so *pretty*!" she said plaintively.

"Do you even know how to play a guitar?" Erin asked her.

"I can play a lyre. Honestly, how different can it be?"

"Um. Pretty different, I think," Erin said. "Why don't you try on a less *expensive* guitar?"

She indicated a five hundred dollar acoustic guitar, which Lyra levitated down to herself with a melodramatic sigh. The unicorn tried making music for a few minutes, frowning with concentration while her horn glowed and her magic plucked at the strings. She then looked back up at Erin with frustration in her eyes.

"I thought it would be easier than this! Why isn't it easier than this?"

"I don't know!" Erin said desperately. "Why not try a different instrument?"

"I think this one is defective," Lyra said, regarding the offending instrument darkly.

"I'll check it," an employee said, taking it. He played a few chords, then switched to a bluegrass song that Erin recognized but couldn't name, followed by some quick picking. All of which sounded simply fantastic, echoing from the thin wood of the guitar in warm, living tones. Lyra was staring at the guitar as he played, her mouth gaping open.

"Seems okay to me," the employee said with a grin. Lyra took the instrument back in her hooves, looking at it with an appraising eye. Then she looked back at the clerk and said, "Teach me?"

Erin left her to her lesson and wandered off, finding a giggling Twilight Sparkle playing an electric keyboard.

"Listen! Sunflower, listen!" Twilight's horn glowed and a key depressed, producing a sound like a dog's

bark. Twilight giggled again. "You can make all sorts of sounds with it!"

She smiled at her friend as Twilight tried out sample after sample on the keyboard, wondering if this would make a decent Christmas present for her. It probably all depended on whether or not Twilight's interest survived once they left the store.

"Drum solo!" a voice shouted behind her, and Erin spun in place to see Rainbow Dash seated before a large drum set. The pegasus raised her forelegs, and Erin was alarmed to see that she had a pair of drum sticks affixed to her hooves with thick rubber bands.

"No!" she shouted, rushing forward just as the pegasus began thrashing wildly at the drums, creating a cacophony that not even the most severely rhythm-impaired could consider music.

When Dash noticed that she was the center of attention, she kicked it up a notch, flailing even more wildly in spite of Erin's entreaties to settle down. Customers, human and equine alike, gaped at the rainbow-maned musical disaster in shock. Rainbow Dash's musical journey ended abruptly when she accidentally knocked over both of the cymbals simultaneously.

"Oops," she said. "My bad."

Erin sighed as the owner walked up frowning.

"Those are damaged," he said, pointing at the now dinged cymbals on the floor. "She'll have to pay for them."

"Oh, I don't have any money," said Rainbow "Disaster" Dash casually.

"I guess I'll pay for it," Erin said moodily.

"Can I get this banjo, too?" Applejack asked, holding up the instrument in question. "I'll pay ya back, just as soon as I get some money. Unless y'all take bits?"

The owner shook his head, thus displaying a fine lack of understanding regarding how much money he would probably get for real Equestrian bits if he sold them on eBay.

Erin sighed, reaching for the wallet that was hanging on a lanyard around her neck. Today was going to be a *long* day. Suddenly, she felt a chill run up her spine as she realized that something was very wrong. Something was missing. She looked around frantically.

"Where the heck is Pinkie Pie?" she shouted, alarmed.

~~*~~

"Can I get, let's see... One banana split, no meat, one hot fudge Sundae, hold the meat, three of those cookie ice cream sandwich things you have there, without any meat, two of your ice cream cakes, provided that they have no meat in them, and... Do you have any cupcakes with an ice-cream filling?"

"No, only what you see on the menu."

"Okay, then, I'll just add on a root beer float. For now."

"Did you want meat in the root beer float?" the cashier asked weakly, completely stunned and confused by the pink apparition before her.

"I'd prefer not."

"Um. Okay. That will be forty-six dollars and eighty seven cents."

The pink creature in front of her slowly lost its grin.

"Oh, *shoot*, I forgot about money!" it said, stomping a hoof. "Well, cancel that order, I guess. Thanks anyway!"

The pink thing turned away and trotted quickly out the door, leaving stunned clientele and employees staring after it.

"Thanks, come again soon," the cashier said before collapsing to the floor in a dead faint.

~~*~~

The ponies walked out of AJ's pick for stores to visit, a humble hardware store, to find themselves surrounded by eager throngs of people, many of them parts of news crews, being held back by a protective ring of dark-suited security agents.

Questions were shouted at them, but they'd been strictly instructed not to interact with the press, so the ponies kept to themselves, only smiling at the cameras. The exceptions were Lyra and Pinkie, both of whom waved and said "hi!" enthusiastically to as many people as they could.

They were finally shuffled back into the Harmonics van that had brought them into town, finding their packages already loaded inside. The agents got into their own vehicles, and the local police cleared a path for them through the crowds, which incidentally also helped stop the news vans from following them as they rocketed out of town.

Erin sighed with relief, slumping deeper into the small padded couch that had been bolted down into the back of the van. She'd been hoping today would be distracting, and she'd definitely gotten her wish. The hours had passed by with a nerve-wrangling speed that she was sure she'd be revisiting in her nightmares soon enough.

Around her, the ponies chattered animatedly about the day's events, and the many interesting things they'd seen. Twilight already had out one of the books she'd bought and was reading it, grumbling every time the van bounced over some irregularity in the road.

Lyra had her new guitar out, frowning with concentration while reading the beginner's guide that she'd bought along with it. Applejack's only purchase, besides the banjo, had been some tools and what several boxes of what she called "The straightest nails I ever did see!"

Rainbow Dash had a bag full of graphic novels she was currently pretending didn't exist. Pinkie was currently playing with a set of dolls that she'd picked up at a toy store, and her manic curls were compressed under a baseball cap on which was stitched: "*You don't have to be crazy to be me, but it helps!*"

Erin shifted slightly, glad to be off of her aching hooves and desperately hoping that they'd have plenty of time to eat back at the Harmonics compound, before heading to China. Hopefully, things were going well with Fluttershy and Rarity.

~~*~~

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but we have to go."

"No!"

"Please, ma'am. We have a half-hour drive ahead of us, and we're supposed to be back in twenty-five minutes. I can get in serious trouble for this!"

"You can go, but I'm not leaving!"

"Darling, please," Rarity said, brushing her friend's mane with a hoof in a consoling fashion.

"Um, you can come back to visit any time," the clerk said. "Really."

Fluttershy frowned and shook her head, hugging her forelegs tighter to her body.

"Ma'am, *please*," the security agent begged her. "For the love of God, put down the bunny rabbit and let's go!"

~~*~~

Erin hugged her parents one last time, smiling and making more promises that she'd be okay. Her dad, holding her tightly, promised her that he'd come running if he thought she needed help. She hugged him back fiercely and told him, "Yes, I know. I'm counting on it."

She trotted through the gateway into Equestria, turning back to wave at those she left behind. Several of the staff waved back, along with her parents and Maggie. Lyra nodded somberly at her from the Earth side of the gateway.

She turned away from them, brushing a tear quickly away from her eye, and left the gateway building behind. Outside, in the chill air of the gardens, her friends all waited for her, each already wearing the specific piece of jewelry representing their Element.

"Are we ready?" Celestia asked them. Everypony there confirmed that they were, and the Princess gave the signal to proceed. Two dozen Royal Guards, an even mix of each of the three pony types, marched through the gate to China first, shortly after which the grizzled pegasus captain confirmed that things were safe on the far end.

Princess Luna took the lead from Celestia, marching determinedly through the gateway, several magic-storing torcs of various sizes around her neck. Celestia, also sporting a wide array of torcs, entered next.

"Well, this is it," Twilight said. "Hopefully, things go a little better this time."

"We've got each other, that's what matters," Rainbow Dash said confidently.

All together, the friends stepped through the gate to confront the Tide beyond.

Chapter 29: Malachite and the Tide

Erin stepped through the gateway with the others, her breath fogging in the chill of China's morning air. The horizon was just glowing with the rising sun, which seemed a little surreal to her, considering it was evening back in Colorado. She shook her head, thinking that humans weren't really meant to be able to traverse the globe *quite* so quickly.

Once again, they were on a small hill overlooking the Tide in the distance. Celestia and Luna, standing side by side, were regarding the Tide with matching somber expressions. Erin glanced sidelong at Celestia, wondering how the Princess felt coming back to face the thing that had once hurt her so badly. She reflected with a fluttering anxiety that she'd have a chance to find out how that felt for herself, once Malachite showed up.

"There is... something strange," Luna said. "A song... no, not a song. A series of rapid tones, continuously repeating, coming from the Tide. It is quite... eerie."

"Do you have any idea what it may be?" Celestia asked her, and Luna shook her head.

"Nay, sister. It is simply there. I am surprised that you can't hear it, it is very... annoying."

"I did listen, but I didn't hear anything" Celestia admitted, turning to face the Tide once again.

"It must be some sort of a signal," Erin offered. When Twilight nudged her she quickly added, "Princesses."

"Maybe, but what is its purpose?" Celestia asked.

"At a guess, Princess, I'd say it's probably the method the Tide uses to disrupt our scanning equipment. Or... maybe it controls the nanomachines!" Erin said excitedly. "If there's some way to disrupt or change that signal... maybe we can stop the Tide that way!"

"The humans have never noticed this signal?" Luna asked.

"We don't have a lot of information on the Tide, Princess," Erin explained. "It's that interference I mentioned before. Most of our equipment is useless when we get too close to it."

"Ah, I see," Luna replied, gazing back out at the Tide.

Another small group of guards trotted through the gateway from Equestria, and Erin heard Twilight suck in her breath in surprise as she saw the stallion in the lead.

"Shining Armor! You're here!"

"Of course," the stallion smiled back somberly. "I'm just sorry I wasn't here during your first attempt. Things might have gone differently."

"I had determined that escorting the Griffon High Consul to Equestria was more important, at that time" Celestia said in response, stepping forward. "But I'm glad you're here. We can put that shield of yours to some use."

"Yes, Princess!" the stallion replied, snapping a salute. "Should I fire it up now?"

Celestia shook her head. "No, save your strength for now. I'll let you know."

"Yes, Princess," he said, saluting again.

Celestia moved back to talk with her sister, allowing Twilight unfettered access to her brother once again, which she made full use of. Erin smiled, and decided to stay well back to allow her friend all the time she needed to bond with him again. That was, until Twilight walked over with her brother, stating, "This is her. Shining. The human I was telling you about."

Erin smiled weakly at the stallion as he gave her a discerning look, as if measuring the likelihood and severity of the harm that Twilight might come to in her company.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said, finally, though Erin doubted his sincerity.

"I've... uh, I've heard a lot about you," Erin replied lamely. "Twilight talks about you all the time."

Which wasn't *entirely* true. Erin wouldn't have even known her friend had a brother if it weren't for an off-hand comment she'd made a week or so ago about her 'BBBFF'. Since then, though, Erin and Twilight

had talked quite a bit about their respective brothers; comparing notes and sharing stories, and exchanging viewpoints as to what it was like to be the older sister versus being the younger.

"She hasn't talked about you much at all," Shining said flatly, then grimaced when Twilight elbowed him sharply in the ribs. "I mean, we haven't had a chance to talk much, since she's met you," he corrected. "Twily? I have to get back on duty, in case the Princesses need me. You be careful, and get back through that gate if things go wrong, okay?"

"I'll be fine," Twilight said, rolling her eyes. "Go and do your guard thing. We'll get together after it's all over, okay?"

Shining Armor nodded. "That sounds like a plan. It was nice to meet you, Erin," he said, then trotted off to stand near the Princesses.

"Sorry about that," Twilight said once her brother was out of earshot.

"He doesn't seem to like me."

"It's not that, he just tends to get a little overprotective, sometimes. It's in his nature."

"Well, if he's concerned that our friendship has put you in danger, he's not really wrong, is he?" Erin dug at the ground with a hoof when she said that, only to grunt in surprise when Twilight employed that same elbow she'd previously used on Shining Armor on *her* ribs.

"None of that, now," the unicorn said. "The risks I take are *my* decisions. Nopony is forcing me to be out here, you know. This is my choice. The others feel the same way."

Erin nodded, but kept her thoughts to herself. The two of them lapsed into silence while waiting, and the minutes dragged on.

The tension steadily mounted as the morning wore on. Erin could feel her heart beating heavily in her chest as she shifted from hoof to hoof in the cold air, the anxiety and anticipation making her feel nauseous and restless at the same time. She really didn't want to be here. If it weren't for her friends, she'd never willingly come within a thousand miles of Malachite. Or the Tide, for that matter.

Luna and Celestia were talking to each other quietly, making last minute plans in case things went wrong. Twilight and her other friends simply stood around, occasionally talking briefly, but mostly just remaining quiet. Not even Pinkie Pie could find much to say.

"I imagine we'll find out soon," Celestia said in reply to something Luna had said. "He's here."

Erin's heart jumped into her throat as she saw a truck pull up about forty feet away. The initial surges of panic raced through her as the large, intimidating green alicorn stepped out from the back, the entire bed of the truck raising dramatically once relieved of his weight. He flexed his wings, looking around with apparent curiosity. Then he looked towards their group.

Erin's breath caught as his gaze touched her briefly. She felt cold, as if ice water had been poured down her back, and she started shivering. His eyes moved on, resting on Celestia, and he began walking towards the group.

Erin was trembling now, shaking like a leaf. At that moment, the only thing that kept her from running back through the gate and abandoning her friends was her absolute terror of Malachite, her inability to turn her back on him. She shrank down as he approached, instinctively making herself as small as possible. As ashamed as she was of her cowardice, it was all that kept her hooves rooted firmly to the ground.

And then something lightly, delicately, brushed across her back. Erin gave a strangled squeak of surprise and turned to see Fluttershy on her left, smiling softly at her, her delicate yellow wing placed gently across her withers. To her right, Applejack moved in and stood close by, shoulder touching shoulder. Twilight Sparkle moved to stand in front of her, and Rarity stepped over to stand next to her fellow unicorn. Rainbow Dash hovered protectively overhead, while Pinkie Pie stood next to Fluttershy, giving Erin an encouraging nod of support.

Her friends wore matching expressions of determination and defiance as they stared at the approaching Malachite, and Erin felt a rising determination of her own. She wasn't any less terrified, but her friends supporting her strengthened her resolve. She took a bracing breath, and stood to face her nightmare.

~~*~~

Malachite stepped out of the aircraft, stretching his wings and legs. Too long cramped into a tiny cabin had worn off any appreciation he'd had for these machines, and he was all too eager to finish his part in

this.

The truck he was led to had slightly more room for him than the aircraft, though it was not as nicely appointed. He knelt down in the back, sighing with annoyance every time the clumsy vehicle bounced over the uneven, unpaved road. They were bringing him from the nearest airfield to the site where the gate to Equestria had been opened up.

It had been one of the conditions the humans had placed upon him, yet another sign of their distrust. They wanted Celestia nearby, and the Princess had acquiesced, which meant that he would have to face his former teacher once again. Malachite wasn't certain how he felt about that; both eagerness and anxiety mixed in his heart as he thought of seeing Celestia for the first time since his escape from the cavern.

Finally, the accursed vehicle stopped, and he stepped out to stretch once again. He glanced around, spotting the Equestrians on a nearby hill. There was quite a large group, though it seemed to mostly consist of Royal Guards and a few humans. He didn't care about the others, though. He only had eyes for one of them, the glorious figure of Princess Celestia, her multi-hued mane tumbling gently on an ethereal wind.

He forced down his fears and held on to his confidence. Reminding himself that he had nothing to fear, not *really*, he wrapped himself in a cloak of his own dignity and walked resolutely towards the hillside.

"Malachite," she said as he approached, inclining her head in greeting.

"My Princess," he replied, utilizing the court stallion's bow that he hadn't used for centuries, neck arched and forehead pressed down to a bent knee.

"Am I, still?" Celestia asked, sounding surprisingly wistful.

"Always," he replied, smiling up at her. The smile froze as he saw Luna peering at him quietly from behind her elder sister's shoulder. He hadn't even noticed the Night Princess standing there. Luna quirked an eyebrow at him, and he realized that he'd been staring at her for a very long moment.

"Celestia insisted on coming. She still has some sympathy for her former student," Luna said in response to his unasked question. "And, frankly, I do not trust you to not take advantage of that fact."

He bit back the first reply that came to mind, unwilling to spit bile at Celestia's sister when the Sun Princess was standing right in front of him.

"A wise precaution," he said, instead. "Though, I hope that I will demonstrate my loyalty after today."

"If you manage to stop the Tide, I will judge all of your crimes that I currently know of in *Equestria* to be forgiven," Celestia said, and Malachite wondered at the odd emphasis. "You will be welcomed back home. Provided, of course, that the humans don't want you for any crimes here."

A human stepped forward, a black-haired male that Malachite vaguely remembered as one of the first humans to come through the gateway all those weeks ago in the Canterlot Gardens.

"Princess, if he stops the Tide, we'll give him his own island as just the first of many thank-you gifts," the human said in an accented voice.

"Well, with a private island on the line, how can I allow myself to fail?" Malachite said with a dry smile.

"We will have to discuss the means of... *containing* those fae sprites, though," Celestia said, regarding his mane with obvious distaste.

His fae-swarm mane and tail retraced almost completely into his body before he realized that he was instinctively trying to hide them from Celestia's disapproving glare. He forced himself to relax.

"Once I'm through with this... *Tide*, I won't need them anymore," Malachite assured her. "The same spell that I used to sever my mind from my original body will remove me from the swarm, and seal me into this body instead. That was my plan, at any rate."

Celestia and Luna both looked surprised at that, though Luna's face was tempered with suspicion. Malachite then looked away, finally taking a real look at the other ponies who had gathered on this side of the gate, stopping when he recognized the determined-looking faces of a specific six mares.

"The Elements of Harmony?" he asked Celestia, feeling amused, uneasy and saddened at the same time. "Luna alone isn't enough insurance?"

He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice when he said that.

"Don't mistake my intentions, Malachite," Celestia said with more than just a little steel. "I don't entirely trust you. Any hint of betrayal, and I'll unleash the Elements."

Then her tone softened, and she continued on by saying, "But they aren't here for you, alone. I'm hoping that, if you fail, the Elements may still be able to work after all."

Malachite blinked, taken by surprise. Celestia wasn't one to try a failed tactic twice. She had to know that he'd seen the security footage of her attempt to stop the Tide; he'd told Luna as much, after all.

What is she planning? he wondered.

Malachite regarded the ponies near the gate. In addition to the Element Bearers, he saw another familiar face, scowling at him from amongst the mares. Initially, Erin Sunflower flinched away from his scrutiny, but then she turned back to face him. He could see the fear in her eyes, and the loathing, but he also saw the bright hot iron of her anger.

He hesitated, remembering Maggie Henson's admonition not to approach her. But as he was already here, it was too late for him to avoid her. He dropped his own gaze, and then performed the same bow to her that he had for Celestia.

"Erin Sunflower. What I did to you was unforgivable. I know you may not ever accept my apologies, but I offer them sincerely, and with the whole of my heart."

He maintained the bow while Erin struggled to find a reply. Finally, she spoke to him, in a low voice that he might not have caught if it weren't for his enhanced hearing.

"I still have nightmares about it," she said, quietly.

He flinched, and looked up. The fear was gone from her eyes, now, but the hatred and anger were stronger than ever.

"I will never forget what you did, Malachite," she said, louder than before. "No matter how you apologize, no matter what you say, what you did to me will never be all right."

He sighed and began straightening up from his bow when Erin started speaking again.

"But, if you save my world... Then I'll thank you. I might even try to forgive you, a little. But I'll never like you, I'll never trust you, and I'll *never* forget."

"Of course not," he said, bowing again. He doubted that she understood the significance of this act, a noble stallion bowing to one who was, essentially, a commoner. It didn't matter. It was her due, and he was deeply in her debt.

After a long moment he stood, nodding briefly to Celestia once again.

"My Princess, I must go. I don't know how long this will take, but I hope to be back before the day's end. Wish me well?"

He hated the note of pleading in his voice, but he hadn't been able to stop it. Celestia nodded, and Malachite turned to walk away.

"Wait," Celestia called, and Malachite glanced back in surprise. The Princess had a brief argument with her sister and a unicorn guard, presumably about him. She cut them off with a sharp unfolding of her wings, after which she descended down the hillside alone to join him, leaving Luna and the unicorn captain both staring grimly at him.

"Walk with me, please," she said. Malachite nodded, trying to hide his shock at this turn of events.

He couldn't help but notice that he was taller than she was, now. The observation both thrilled and worried him. He wondered what Celestia thought of that. Would she resent him for making himself larger, or would she be impressed by his larger stature? He was no true alicorn, he knew, just a reasonably close facsimile. Would she consider him some sort of parody of herself, meant in ridicule, or perhaps see him some sort of a monster, a non-pony to be despised? Or did she secretly admire his new-found strength? Did she, with her vast age and wisdom, consider him a child simply pretending to be a grown-up? Her face and demeanor gave him no clues.

"Luna detected some sort of tone, or signal, from the Tide. I was not able to detect it myself," Celestia said, "but perhaps that information will be useful to you."

"Thank you, Princess," Malachite said. He'd been expecting that, or something of the sort. In fact, his plan hinged on it.

Once they'd gotten well out of earshot of the others, Celestia stopped. Malachite regarded her warily, and the Princess looked back at him soberly.

"The human died," she said, finally.

"The... I'm sorry?" Malachite said, confused.

"An old man was found dead in the woods after he and his wife had vanished from their homes in the dead of night."

Malachite had no idea what she was talking about at first, and then his expression froze as he remembered his night-time excursion. The two humans, the female pleading with the male to return home. His mind reeled with disbelief and denial. The human had died? No. It couldn't be his fault. He'd left them alive! They should have been fine.

Celestia was simply regarding him with a sad look, and Malachite struggled with the urge to deny it, to feign ignorance. But he knew his silence had gone on too long, more than long enough to damn him.

"How?" he asked finally.

"Exposure and hypothermia. His wife will recover, though of course she's lost her husband."

Guilt wracked him, but he also felt a surge of anger. Were humans really so delicate that they would die simply from being left outside for a few hours? How was he supposed to know that? It wasn't his fault!

He shook his head, with his thoughts still chasing each other around in circles. Hypothermia. The night hadn't seemed cold to him at all, but his senses were badly dulled when he was out of his body. He felt the chill of the morning *now*, but it wouldn't feel like much of anything if he simply left his physical body behind.

A stupid mistake. His anger turned towards himself. How could he have forgotten how dead his senses were when he was in his sprite form? The old human had died... and it *was* his fault. He couldn't deny it.

"What do you intend to do, Princess?" he asked, fearing the answer.

"The humans believe, or at least they *want* to believe, that it was a coincidence," Celestia replied solemnly. The disappointment in her eyes crushed him. "They still want you to attempt what you can to save their world. I will bow to their wishes. I can only hope that you make it worth it, my former student."

His anger and defensiveness faded, leaving only the guilt and shame behind. He'd killed before, animals who'd been the subjects of his experiments, but never a sapient creature. Aside from the fae queen who's swarm he'd stolen, of course, but that hardly counted. And now he was responsible for the death of a human, who had a life and a history of his own.

"Low frequencies, Princess," he said. Celestia looked puzzled, and he explained, "The fae sprites. I... investigated the weapons the humans produced to counter my sprites. The others may work as well, I don't know, I'm not familiar with all of their technologies. But the only one that I know for certain would work is the sonic cannon, if set to ultra-low frequencies. I'm... not certain exactly what frequency would work best, the humans will have to figure that out, but it will drive the sprites back, hurt and confuse them."

"Thank you," Celestia said, surprised. "I will share that information with the humans."

"Please do," Malachite whispered. Celestia nodded to him, then flew off without another word, returning to the group of ponies and humans on the hillside.

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The large screen that had been placed in the Emitter room was being watched with undivided attention by several scientists and two very concerned parents. The screen itself was sectioned into several views, one of which showed the Equestrians and Erin as they regarded the Tide.

"Those Princesses are impressive," Lynne said, with a brittle casualness intended to hide her anxiety. "I wish we could have met them in person."

"Me too," her husband replied.

The married couple stared at the screen for a while longer, until Lynne broke the silence once again.

"She seems scared," she observed, squeezing John's hand. She could feel the tension in him, the desire to run off to stand by his child. She shared it, after all. But they had promised.

"I would be, too," John replied, knowing that "she" was in reference to Erin.

Tense silence reined again, until a large truck pulled up. Maggie clasped her hands together anxiously as Malachite stepped out of the back.

"Who's that guy?" John asked. "That *is* a guy-pony, isn't it?"

"Yes," Maggie replied. "He's called Malachite, and he's a very... *different* kind of pony."

The humans watched as the large green alicorn approached and then started talking to the group from Equestria.

"At least he seems polite," Lynne said as the stallion bowed before the Princesses.

"Erin looks terrified of him," John noted with concern. He turned to Maggie and asked sharply, "Why?"

Maggie hesitated. It wasn't her place to tell Erin's parents how she was victimized by that creature, but in her opinion it wasn't healthy for Erin to keep it from them, either. She had tried suggesting a couple of times to the girl that she should talk to her folks about what had happened, only to be told by Erin that she didn't want to burden them with it. Maggie suspected that Erin was just trying to repress it, not wanting to deal with it, as if pretending could make it not have happened.

She was torn between her motherly desire to tell a fellow parent what happened to their child, and respect for Erin's privacy and right to tell her parents on her own. She opted for a middle ground.

"Most ponies that we've encountered are kind, friendly and polite. Malachite is not exactly a pony. He's more of an eldritch abomination from Equestria's distant past. Erin is right to be afraid of him."

"We're having one abomination fight another? That sounds like a brilliant idea," John said with a heavy dose of sarcasm while Lynne looked at her questioningly. "Is Erin in any danger from that guy?"

"Not with the Princesses there, no," Maggie replied, pretending to be absorbed in examining her tablet. She glanced up to see Lynne still staring at her. .

Lynne was giving her an extremely *knowing* look that was making her uncomfortable. Maggie glanced away again, and Lynne leaned over and whispered into her ear, too quietly for her husband to overhear.

"We'll talk about what that *thing* did to my daughter once she's out of danger," Erin's mother said in a voice that brooked no argument.

Maggie's throat locked up, and she could only nod.

~~*~~

The smell was atrocious, the chemicals burning his eyes and lungs. Though, from what he understood, that was from the humans' efforts to stem the Tide on their own, and not the Tide itself. He could smell... something, from the Tide. A scent slightly reminiscent of damp soil, surprisingly mild when considering how enormous the Tide was.

Major Morris had met him near the edge of the Tide, providing him with the gift of human technology. A simple headset which would allow him to record his findings for future study.

"Just in case the worst happens, and you can't get back to us" the Major said. "It's also got a tracking device, in case we need to find you. It probably won't work, considering the interference from the Tide, but having it won't hurt you."

"Thank you," Malachite said, dryly. "It's good to know you have a backup plan in case of my demise."

"It's nothing personal," the Major said, looking slightly uncomfortable. "We haven't really had a good chance to get information on this thing. No matter what else happens, we can't lose this opportunity."

"I understand," Malachite said.

Malachite levitated the device up to his head where it fit surprisingly comfortably. The major explained that it would record everything he said, and everything he saw, at least while in his alicorn body. Malachite nodded, and he was surprised when Major Morris saluted him and wished him luck before he departed.

Malachite extended his senses, listening for the tone that Celestia had mentioned. He found it, eventually, and listened in surprise. It reminded him somewhat of the signal the humans used to control their drones in Equestria. It had the same feel, though obviously very different in strength and substance.

He cast around with his senses, trying to determine the source of the noise. As he suspected, it was coming from the same direction as the center, where the initial impact had occurred.

"Beginning recording of experimentation with entity known as 'The Black Tide'," Malachite dictated for the sake of the recording device. "First, an analysis of the destructive properties of the Tide."

Then he concentrated, pulling a feeble thread of magic from the distant gateway, rather than depleting his own reserves, and used that to lift a nearby rock. Carefully, he lowered the rock into the nanoring, the dark edge of the Tide that was busily devouring the planet Earth. Almost immediately, it began to liquify. Malachite lifted the remains out of the ring, lifting it higher and higher. The rock continued to dissolve, covered in the black tar of nanomachines that comprised the ring.

Eventually, nothing was left beyond a seething ball of black, which he dropped back into the ring. The entire experiment had lasted mere seconds.

"Destruction of non-Tide material in nanoring happens alarmingly quickly," he dictated. "Now to find out how that compares to the surface of the Tide itself."

Experiment number two required a rock of similar size to the first one, which he then tossed past the nanoring. His enhanced vision tracked it as it landed on the Tide proper, bouncing slightly after it hit. This rock began to dissolve as well, though much more slowly than the first. The nanomachines existed throughout the Tide, he knew. The humans had determined that already. But they were either much less numerous past the ring, or they were less active.

It took nearly three minutes for the rock to dissolve completely. Malachite nodded in satisfaction, and hefted a small boulder, much larger than the first rock. Grunting a bit with the strain, he hurled it out to the same location where he'd tested the rock.

Ten minutes later, with the boulder only slightly reduced, he felt satisfied. Larger objects broke down much more slowly when placed in direct contact with the Tide itself.

He experimented a little more, dictating all the while as he sent a fae sprite into the nanoring. The sprite descended, but was unable to possess any of the tiny machines present. Malachite frowned. Perhaps the nanomachines were simply too small. It wasn't often that he'd tried to have the sprites possess something smaller than they were. Or perhaps they weren't "alive" enough. In any case, possessing a group of nanomachines and turning them against their fellows wouldn't work.

That had been a fallback plan, in any case. Destroying the Tide in that way would take far too long, and require far too much of his attention. Assuming it would even work, of course. Still, it was disappointing that it wasn't an option.

He recalled the sprite, glad to see it was no worse for wear for its descent into the deadly goo of the nanoring. Next, he pushed it into the body of the Tide itself.

A small patch of dark green haze appeared on the Tide, but his connection to the sprite didn't tell him much of anything. That the Tide was alive in some fashion was a given already, though the sprite confirmed it. In fact, it was positively brimming with life-force, a fact that the sprite took full advantage of, feasting eagerly like a thirsty mouse sipping at the ocean.

He left his body and, with great caution, lowered his own mind into the Tide itself. And he was amazed.

A seething sea of energy surrounded him, immeasurable and incomprehensible. He could sense no intelligence from it, but the size of the thing was beyond his understanding.

The signal that he only vaguely sensed while in his body was much stronger here. Obviously, it was being broadcast through the body of the Tide itself. It took Malachite a few seconds to acclimatize himself to the noise it created.

He spread his fae sprites around him, possessing as large of an area as he could. The sprites drank happily from the vast reservoir before them, but still obeyed his commands to investigate.

The body of the Tide was consistent throughout, with no variations that he could detect. No musculature, no vascular system, no nervous system. It was all very puzzling to him, and he wished that it were possible to get a sample of this thing underneath a microscope.

Sending his sprites away, he sensed no variation in the Tide's tissue. It simply existed, though obviously it had some method of motion, as it would ripple and bulge occasionally.

The overall area he possessed was insufficient to do much of anything. His mind, and all of his sprites together, were nowhere near strong enough to take over the entirety of the Tide. Another backup plan gone. He was grateful, indeed, for the presence of the signal. If it hadn't been there, he would have felt

terribly silly facing the others after all of his bragging.

Malachite pulled himself and his sprites back into his body, then took a moment to relate his findings for the sake the recording device on his head. Then he backed away from the Tide and launched himself clumsily into the air. He had possessed birds before, and he'd thought that flying would be easy, a thought that was rapidly dispelled as he tilted alarmingly towards the nanoring before he managed to correct himself.

He let out a shuddering breath of relief as he pulled away and gained altitude. He'd put a lot of work into this body. It would be a pity if it ended up as just so much black sludge.

He evened out soon enough, pointed himself to the west, and began flying. Once he was certain he was on the correct course, Malachite concentrated, bringing his magic to bear.

Teleportation is a rare skill amongst unicorns. Before his transformation, Malachite had been unable to do it at all. It had simply been beyond his strength. However, he'd greatly expanded his magical capacity while building his new form, and he knew the rudiments of the spell required.

A moment of concentration and a quick burst of magic later, and he was a good twenty miles further in. The momentary dizziness caused a loss of height until he managed to shake it off, and he climbed for more altitude before he made his next jump. No need to risk plummeting into the Tide after a teleport, after all.

He flew on, letting his magic-storage organs recharge somewhat before making another jump. This time, he wasn't certain how far he'd managed, as the area around him all looked the same: the featureless dull black of the Tide. He flew on, trying to determine if the signal was any stronger.

He decided that it was, and coasted on the thermals that the Tide produced while waiting for his magic to recharge once again.

He continued on that way for hours. Glide, teleport, glide, teleport. Finally, he reached the center. The signal here was so strong it almost overpowering, giving him his first real headache in eight centuries. Somewhere below him was the original impact site. Somewhere below him, the source of the signal, and his means of controlling the Tide itself.

He left a single sprite controlling his body, instructing it to simply circle the area, and took the rest to descend and search. He pushed the swarm through the body of the Tide, casting them out further and further, trying to find out the source of the signal. He could feel the swarm expanding as it drank from the Tide's life essence, growing larger and stronger.

Malachite clamped his control down, forcing the swarm to remain at a manageable size. He'd been in control of this swarm for centuries, and they obeyed him, though reluctantly. There was easily enough energy here to spawn a hundred million queens or more, each with its own sizable swarm.

Finally, the swarm found the source of the signal, a twisted mass of cells easily three times the size of his alicorn body. The pulse that guided the nanomachines came from here. He quelled his excitement and proceeded carefully, sinking several of his sprites into it, analyzing the signal and the organic device that generated it.

He couldn't understand it, it was too far beyond him. However, he could stop the signal, and he did so. A quick mental command, and the nanomachines stopped, the omnipresent crackling sounds of the Earth being reformed into the Tide stopping all at once.

Perfect. He had contained the Tide! Even if he managed no more than this, he was certain that Celestia would allow him back into Equestria.

Still... his curiosity demanded more answers, and his pride wouldn't allow him to simply halt the expansion. He thought of Celestia's reaction if he managed to actually destroy this menace, and decided to press on.

The swarm spread out, trying to determine the nature of this creature, seeking for answers. There were none. Malachite quickly grew frustrated, pouring more and more of his awareness into the center of the Tide, leaving just the smallest tether back to his body.

Nothing. There was nothing beyond what he'd already seen and sensed. He began to withdraw his mind back into his own body when, with a shock, he found that he could not.

Something was holding him fast, pinning his mind. It had enveloped him without him even noticing. He expanded his gaze, trying to sense where the force holding him was coming from. What he found filled him with a cold terror the likes of which he'd never felt before.

The mind of the Tide pressed in all around him. He hadn't noticed it for the same reason that a fish didn't notice the water: it was simply the environment in which he moved, and it was too enormous to take in all at once. The Tide had a mind and presence that stretched across the horizon, so enormous that he had less than the presence of a gnat before it.

And, now, the Tide was aware of him. It was as if the land itself, stretching from horizon to horizon, had suddenly reared up, alive and aware, and opened an eye ten leagues wide to look at him.

Terror gripped him and he tried to flee, to pull his mind back into his alicorn body, but the mind of the Tide held him firmly. He felt his consciousness being examined, not with curiosity, but with a systematic and clinical detachment.

No! he screamed silently, struggling furiously, desperate to get away. He sent a command to the fae sprites he'd left in the signal's source, trying to activate the inverse of the signal from before, hoping that doing so would instruct the nanomachines to work their way inwards rather than out.

The Tide stopped the sprites, studying them with the same passionless attention with which it had examined him. At the same time, Malachite felt his memories of the sprites, their capabilities and weaknesses, being examined by the entity that held him.

Then, with no apparent effort, the Tide stripped the swarm away from him, absorbing them all, taking the willing swarm into itself. The signal started again, and the nanomachies once again began to devour the Earth. His alicorn body, stripped of the sprite controlling it, fell on top of the Tide and immediately began slowly dissolving.

The pain he felt at the swarm being pulled away from him was nothing compared to what happened when the Tide returned its attention to him, calmly stripping off a part of his mind, his identity. Malachite screamed in horror as he felt an intimate part of himself stripped away by this... *thing*.

It examined what it had taken from him, a part of his awareness, his memory, without curiosity. And then the Tide swallowed it whole before resuming its examination of his very being. In short order, another piece of his consciousness was stripped away, absorbed into the Tide itself.

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It had been hours since Malachite had flown down to the edge of the Tide, and there were still no changes. Celestia didn't fidget like the others, but she *did* worry.

Malachite's departure had at least dispelled some of the tension from earlier in the morning. The ponies had passed the time chatting amiably, keeping the conversation light and avoiding the subject of the Tide and whether or not Malachite would betray them, though the Princess was certain it was on everypony's mind. Erin had brought out her tablet and was showing her friends various videos and games found on the internet. Celestia was glad for the distraction, watching a few of the videos herself.

Quite suddenly, so suddenly that it was startling, the noise of the nanomachines stopped. The unexpected silence was surreal. The ponies looked at each other warily. Had Malachite done it? Had he managed to shut down the Tide?

Minutes stretched by. Only centuries of self-imposed training kept Celestia from shifting nervously from hoof to hoof, like many of the others were.

"Princess, look!" Twilight said, pointing. The signature dark green haze of Malachite's possession had suddenly started forming above the Tide, spreading quickly across the surface.

Celestia braced herself. If Malachite was to betray them, it would likely be soon. Shining Armor apparently agreed, as the fuchsia dome of his shield spell enveloped the hillside and the surrounding area, covering as many of the human workers nearby as the Captain was able to reach.

"Be careful, girls. Be ready to use the Elements."

All pretense of casualness was gone as the Bearers of the Elements took up position near the Princess. Minutes passed with nothing happening. And then, as unexpectedly as the nanomachines had stopped, they started again, once again filling the air with the crackling sounds of the Earth being consumed.

Celestia frowned. Had Malachite failed? Or, had he betrayed them? She thought she knew the answer once the familiar green lights of the fae sprites rose above the Tide. Millions upon millions of them, blinking ominously, with more appearing every second. And then the sprites rushed outwards, towards the humans and ponies around the border of the Tide.

People and ponies screamed in horror as the sprites drew near, and Celestia cursed in a language that had been dead for centuries. She'd been a fool to trust him!

"Sister!" Luna cried in warning, as the Tide's psychic attack slammed down upon them. Shining Armor grunted and fell to his knees as his shield buckled, then shattered. The mind that had attacked was familiar to her, and Celestia was struck with the realization that it wasn't Malachite who was attacking them. The Tide was still very much in control of itself. Perhaps it somehow controlled the sprites, as well?

The Captain staggered upwards and began casting his spell once again, just in time to catch a second assault as it happened. The shield broke again, and this time Shining Armor shouted in pain as he fell, his sister's cries of concern echoing across the hillside.

The unicorns amongst her Royal Guards were repeatedly casting the spell to destroy the sprites, but it was a losing battle. There were simply too many to be stopped. The entire field below them was blanketed with sprites swarming towards them, and the open gateway behind her.

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"What the hell is *that*?" John Olsen shouted in alarm at the video coming through the screen. The entirety of the Black Tide was blanketed in a dark haze, with lights like sickly fireflies blinking and shifting through the shadows.

"Fae sprites," Maggie said, horrified. There were so many... so many. Even with the news of how to repel them, there were more than enough to doom humanity.

"Prepare to close the gate to China!" she shouted to her crew. "Wait for my order!"

"What?" Lynne shrieked. "Our daughter is over there!" John was already running towards the gate to Equestria, making good on his promise to save his daughter.

"Those things can't be allowed through the gateway," Maggie answered grimly. "It's bad enough that they're on Earth, but if they infest Equestria, too, there will be nowhere we can run to."

"What do they do?" Lynne asked in a horrified whisper.

"They possess creatures. People, animals, whatever. They possess them and suck out their energy."

"You can't leave Erin there!" Lynne said, grabbing Maggie by the lab coat.

"I won't!" Maggie promised. "Not unless there's no other way to stop them gaining access to Equestria!"

Lynne stared at her, furious, before running after her husband.

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Jim Dunning was a contractor for Arclight Industries, one of the key contractors enlisted to fight the Tide in India. He gaped in blank incomprehension as a massive number of green lights rose up out of the Tide.

"Jim, what *is* that?" one of his coworkers asked.

"I don't know, man. I don't like it," he replied. The lights just kept on appearing as the minutes rolled by, while the men muttered uncomfortably to each other. A few started making their way hastily away from the Tide, and Jim decided that wasn't at all a bad idea.

He arrived at his decision far too late. The lights moved towards him at an alarming speed, and the men around him screamed in startled terror. James was vaguely aware that he was screaming as well as he tried desperately to scramble away from the blinking green cloud swarming him. He flailed his arms instinctively, ineffectively. There were just too many! All he could do was run.

He slammed into a friend of his, Charlie McKenzie, who was standing ramrod straight and ignoring the green lights around him.

"Charlie! Move, man! What the hell is..." Jimmy broke off as what looked like black smoke erupted from the man before him. He stumbled back in shocked horror from the apparently burning man, who stood there as if oblivious to what was happening to him. And then, one of the green lights sank into Jim's own skull.

He stopped struggling, his mind dulling instantly. A small part of him was still aware, still watching what was going on. He sensed an awareness scrutinizing him, and he felt himself examined, pinned down by the alien mind like an amoeba under a microscope

There wasn't a voice, so much as an awareness of intent. Jimmy's mind translated it into words that he could understand:

Classification: Human. Identity: James Walter Dunning. Age: 12411 days. Cataloging data.

What part of his mind was still aware of what was happening to him screamed in utter revulsion at what happened next, as his entire life began playing out before him. He was aware of that awareness watching, with a cold and calculating eye, as it recorded everything as if it had some *right* to his innermost thoughts.

He couldn't fight it. There was no way to even begin. And then, just before he gave up hope, the world exploded with a brilliant white light.

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"Girls! The Elements of Harmony, now!"

The six friends nodded, and focused. A moment later, a light appeared over the field, and the Rainbow of Harmony struck the Tide, washing over it once again. Celestia felt her heart clench, certain that Malachite was either dead or dying. If the Tide hadn't killed him, there was a good chance that the Elements would do so.

As before, the rainbow spread out, following the Tide across the horizon. More and more energy poured from Twilight and her friends, considerably more than Celestia had ever seen the Elements produce before. Fear gripped her as she realized that the Elements would quickly consume the magic that Twilight and her friends had stored, leaving the job unfinished, even with the gateway to Equestria directly behind them and feeding them energy.

"Luna!" she said, "Gather your strength, and deliver it to the Bearers!"

Her sister nodded, focusing her power. Celestia did the same, and the Rainbow of Harmony increased in intensity and speed as it spread across the surface of the Tide.

Later on, the humans would show her the satellite images of what they'd accomplished. In the video, a small speck of light started from their location, bright and shining like a star against the darkness of the Tide. Then it spread, slowly at first but with increasing speed. Within minutes, the entirety of the Black Tide was enveloped prismatic aurora of shifting lights, which danced and played over the surface of the Earth. It was an eerie and oddly beautiful sight.

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The fae swarm expanded rapidly, consuming the life force of the Tide greedily, and yet not even making a dent in the overall energy present there. Every few seconds, their numbers would double, as the sprites drank as quickly as they could manage from the life-force before them.

When Malachite had controlled the swarm, his greater intellect and will had allowed him to control a swarm that had been several times larger than even the strongest of the fae queens. The swarm that the Tide could produce would be enormous, enough to blanket the Earth and Equestria combined.

Malachite wasn't concerned with that. Not because it was unimportant, but because there was precious little of him left, the butchered remains of his mind floating in the Tide like a grain of rice in the ocean. The Tide had taken nearly everything from him; his memories, his intellect, nearly all of his understanding. All that remained was a spark, the very center of his soul.

He was only dimly aware of the power of the Elements racing across the surface and infusing itself into the organism beneath it. And he was only aware of that because of the confusion that the Tide experienced. What remained of his ravaged consciousness felt a grim satisfaction as the mental presence of the Tide receded under the rainbow wave of light.

The Tide released its grip on him, and some vestige of instinct caused him to move his mind back into the ravaged body of the green unicorn slowly dissolving on top of the Tide. He nestled in his former body for whatever comfort it could give him.

The Tide was trying to analyze the situation. It knew it was under assault, but it didn't understand the origin or the cause. All it knew was that something strange and powerful was streaking along its surface it, changing it as it went. Almost at the last moment, the Tide sundered itself from the fae swarm it had just consumed, somehow understanding that it was the swarm that made it vulnerable. The sprites, bereft of any controlling mind, shriveled and died under the rainbow light of Harmony.

Malachite felt the light of the Elements wash over him, as well. Unlike his last experience, the light was warm, rather than burning. Comforting, rather than harsh.

He gave himself up to it with a sense of relief. It almost felt like he was coming home, at last.

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Exhausted, Celestia fell to her knees, and was aware of her sister and the Bearers doing the same. The only one on their hooves were her guards, busily buzzing around her and Luna, and Erin, who was checking on her friends. Erin's father, much to Celestia's surprise, was hovering behind his daughter, apparently trying to urge her back through the gateway, but Erin was waving him off, insisting on staying with her friends.

Dimly, she became aware of the cheering from the humans. Those who remained conscious, at least. She regarded the immobile stone that had once been the Tide with a feeling far beyond loathing. It was likely that Malachite hadn't betrayed them, after all. But if Malachite had still been alive before the Elements were used, then it was likely that this *thing* had just forced her to destroy her former student.

She staggered to her hooves, the proximity of the gateway to Equestria helping to restore her power. Luna was already standing, and moved to stand by her side.

"Is it over?" Luna asked. "Is it done?"

"I can't be certain," Celestia replied. "It seems that it might be."

"Princess?" Erin said, her voice sounding shaken. Celestia looked at her and saw fear in her eyes. "Twilight and the others, they aren't waking up."

Celestia and Luna both moved quickly to check on them, and Celestia breathed a sigh of relief when she determined the cause of their unconsciousness.

"They will be fine," she assured the near-frantic human. "The Elements demanded a lot out of them, and they simply need lots of rest to recover."

Celestia noticed that Shining Armor was groggily staggering up to his hooves. She turned to the captain of her pegasus guards and said, "Captain Storm Front, please go through the gateway and tell the medical staff that we have ponies here who need bed rest, lots of peace and quiet, and plenty of fluids and food when they wake up. Make sure that they know that Captain Shining Armor is included in those orders."

The guard nodded and trotted quickly away, ignoring his fellow captain's protests that he was fine and didn't need any rest.

Celestia flipped her wings open and flew down to the edge of the Tide. She cast out her mind as strongly as she was able to, which wasn't very strongly at all, at the moment. She could detect nothing. No Tide. No Malachite.

She knelt down to the ground, completely exhausted. Mentally, emotionally and magically, she had nothing left. Perhaps her former student had lived, perhaps he hadn't. As much as she wished to go searching, she knew that she couldn't. There simply wasn't the strength left in her, after the Elements had taken their due.

Luna landed softly beside her, kneeling down and folding an ebony wing across her back and pulling her in close. Celestia let the tears flow as she leaned into Luna's embrace, accepting the comfort her sister had to offer her. Minutes passed before she felt strong enough to stand again. Luna stood with her, not asking questions, simply being there for her. It was enough, for now.

Celestia walked to the border of the Tide, now featureless grey stone. The nanoring itself was a smoothly frozen black mass, fossilized by the power of the Elements. She reared up, then flashed down with both her hooves, striking the edge of what had been the Tide.

Cracks appeared, radiating out from where she'd struck. She reared again, and once again struck down with all the force she could muster. Again and again, Celestia hit the petrified remains of the Tide, taking out her rage and frustration on an enemy that could no longer feel it.

Finally she stopped, panting for breath. She felt embarrassed, almost ashamed at her display. But she did feel better and more in control of herself than she had before. She looked back to her sister, standing behind her, and saw no judgement, only sympathy and concern. Celestia straightened up and walked wearily back to the gateway.

"My student, Malachite, is out there somewhere," she told Major Morris, who was still standing by the gateway to Equestria, coordinating efforts of the human medical staff who were pouring through the gateway to attend to the humans who'd been victimized by the sprites. "Obviously, those in need of medical attention come first. But, please, when you can, see if you can find him. Or his... his remains, if there are any."

"Yes, ma'am," the major replied, saluting. Celestia nodded, and made her way to the gate.

For now, she was content to leave it for the humans to determine if the threat was over or not. At the moment, she simply wanted to return to Equestria. She felt every single year of her extremely long life pressing down on her, every ache and pain that she'd ever felt seeming to come back and haunt her. She stepped back through the gateway, glad to be home.

Chapter 30: Aftershocks

When she finally had an idle moment, Erin reflected that her sense of time was now completely off-kilter. This day seemed to have lasted for far longer than it possibly could have. It had felt like a long day even before she'd gone through the gate hours earlier to find the sun just rising in China. And now it was just after midnight, and it felt like days had passed since she'd last slept.

Medical staff from Canterlot had been on-call on the Equestria side of the gate, rushing through once they were given the all-clear. It had taken Erin some time to convince her father that the danger was past and that he could stop trying to pull Erin back through the gate. At Erin's suggestion, he had been put to use helping her get friends back through to Equestria, picking up the unconscious ponies and placing them on the gurneys for transfer to the castle infirmary.

Shining Armor himself had to be ordered to get some rest. The doctor had to insist, pulling rank on the obviously exhausted unicorn who'd been hovering over his unconscious sister. Erin had timidly offered to watch over Twilight for him, and had been surprised by the captain's obvious gratitude.

Erin had stayed in the infirmary with her friends, anxious and jittery, until a frustrated nurse had kindly but firmly ejected her, promising that news would be brought to the Harmonics compound should anypony's conditions change. She'd gone to tell Shining that her sister was stable and sleeping, only to find out that he, himself, was deep in a well-deserved state of sleep.

Erin had then dragged her hooves all the way back to the Harmonics gateway, reluctantly deciding that she should at least *try* to get some sleep herself, even though the day's events had left her head and heart whirling.

The atmosphere of cautious joy on the Earth side of the gate prompted a small smile on Erin's features. She stopped to listen as the scientists and engineers reported the latest news loudly across the room to one another. A reverent hush fell across the room as satellite images were brought in and thrown up on one of the larger screens on the wall, with people crowding around to look at the patch of grey that had replaced the dull black of the Tide.

After a few minutes they began whispering to each other excitedly, keeping their voices low, as if afraid to disturb this moment with too much exuberance, or to tempt fate by suggesting that the Tide might truly be finished.

Erin looked dully at the screen, feeling numb. It was an ugly sight, she decided. Not as ugly as the Tide was, but the roughly circular grey mark on the Earth's surface wasn't pretty in the least, surrounded as it was by the greens and browns of the living earth, and the blue of the sea. She wondered idly if that part of the world would ever recover, or if it would always be scarred that way.

She wandered away, jaw cracking as she yawned, realizing that she didn't know what had happened to her parents. The last she could recall seeing of them was in the Canterlot infirmary, but she now realized that she hadn't actually seen them for an hour, at least. She decided to forgive herself for not paying attention, since she'd been a little preoccupied by the fact that her friends weren't waking up. That, and other things that she preferred not to think about.

Erin stumbled her way back to her room, deciding that she was both hungry and too tired to bother eating anything before bed. She felt like she should be happier than she was, but her mind felt muffled and indistinct, and the possibility of the Tide's destruction seemed too unreal to accept right now. She was more than half-certain they'd find out that the rock they saw was just a thin shell, that the Tide was still growing underneath, as deadly and implacable as ever.

The possibility of the Tide being gone was a concept that was so incredibly huge that the impact on her life wasn't something that she could even begin to wrap her head around at the moment. That her friends had so completely exhausted and endangered themselves for her planet's sake made her feel both proud of them and incredibly guilty that they had taken such a huge risk.

And as for Malachite...

She shook her head, deciding that she was too tired to think about that now. Sleep first, worry in the morning.

She was nearing the corner to her room in the Harmonics compound when a pair of familiar voices stopped her in her tracks. Her parents were outside her room once again, sitting on the floor by the doorway. Erin smiled and trotted around the corner.

"Mom, Dad, hi!" she said, glad to see them, even though all she wanted to do was sleep. "It seems like the

Tide might be gone, isn't that amazing?"

"Hi, sweetie," her mother said, standing up. Erin froze as her parents shared a look. Something was up, and she wasn't sure if she had the energy to deal with it right at that moment.

"Can we come in?" her father asked, gesturing at the door.

"Well... I was thinking of getting some sleep..." Erin trailed off, seeing that her parents wouldn't be deterred. "Sure," she said with a sigh, walking up and opening her door. "Come on in."

Everyone entered her main room, and Erin immediately picked up on the awkward atmosphere. A small ember of annoyance started to flare up. She was burned out, at the moment. After going through the chaos of the shopping trip, the encounter with Malachite, her friends being unconscious and everything that had happened with the Tide, she felt tapped out, running on empty. She decided to simply get to the point.

"So, what's going on?" she asked bluntly.

"Ah. Well, first of all, are you all right?" Lynne asked hesitantly. "We saw those glowing... sprite things. They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No," Erin replied with a wan smile. "My friends were able to take them out before they got close enough to threaten me."

"Those sprites," her father said slowly. "They were from that *thing* called Malachite, right?"

"Uh..." Erin trailed off. They knew something, she could see it in their faces. Erin's eyes narrowed, and she almost screamed with frustration.

"What did Maggie tell you?" she asked, far more harshly than she'd intended.

"Maggie didn't tell us anything," Lynne replied calmly. "She told us what those sprites were and what they could do. She refused to tell us anything else, but we were able to draw some conclusions when we saw how terrified you were of him."

"I wasn't scared of him," Erin lied.

"We saw the video, honey," John said, shaking his head. "You were more frightened than I've ever seen you before."

Erin looked away, glaring at the corner of her bed. Her eyes felt hot, and she wondered angrily why her parents couldn't just leave well enough alone, let her get the sleep she needed. She pressed her lips together in a frown and didn't say a thing.

"Look..." Lynne put a hand on her shoulder, and Erin nearly jerked away from her. "Erin, you don't have to talk about it right now, if you don't want to."

"Nothing to talk about," Erin replied.

"We don't believe that," Lynne said, stroking her daughter's mane. "Look, I know you're tired. We don't have to talk about it tonight, okay? We just want you to know that we'll always love you, and that, whatever happened, it won't change that. You can rest now, and we can talk about it later, all right?"

"Why?" Erin asked loudly, stomping her hoof. "Why can't you just let it be? Now is *not* the time, Twilight and the others—"

"Will be fine," Lynne said. "You know that as well as I do."

"Nothing happened to me," Erin repeated the lie. "Nothing..."

Burning pain in her limbs. Her skin torn and bleeding. Aching hooves cracked and bleeding as well, rocks and debris wedged tightly into them, causing a jolt of agony up her leg every time a hoof hit the forest floor. A voice in her ear that she couldn't shut out. And the absolute terror of not being able to control her own body.

Erin slumped to the floor, holding on to her emotions through an effort of will.

"Why are you making me remember this again?" she whispered.

Her mother rushed to her side, hugging her around the neck, and that was the key that unlocked the floodgates. Erin cried like a baby in her mother's arms, and the stricken look on her father's face made her cry even harder, thinking of how her pain had now hurt him, as well. It took half an hour for her to

calm down enough for her to finally be able to tell her parents everything.

It hurt, at first. It hurt to remember again, and it hurt even more to tell them, to see their reactions to what had happened to her. But the more she talked, the faster the details came, until she was spilling them out one after the other. She told them about Malachite, and running through the Everfree. She told them about Paul Velchiek's betrayal, his manipulation with mood altering drugs and a remote-control he'd snuck into the design of her body.

Through it all, her parents urged her to go on, to continue, comforting her all the while. She could see the horror on their faces at times, the anger and sadness. She'd try to stop only to have them give her nudge after nudge, until everything came out. It felt like she was draining an infection, and it hurt, but it also lightened her burdens.

"And now, Malachite is probably dead," Erin said eventually, getting to the root of what had been bothering her the most this night, what she'd been trying her hardest not to think about. According to the rumors she'd heard from the medical staff in the infirmary, that's what Celestia now believed.

"So many times I wished something would happen to him," Erin continued shakily. "He would get caught by the Princesses and locked away, or he'd get crippled in a fight with the guards, or something. I was hoping the Tide would hurt him, when he left to go fight it," she admitted with shame, then looked up at her parents, almost expecting to see revulsion in their eyes and mildly surprised to see only sympathy instead.

"He went to try and save our world, and now he's dead, and I hated him *so much*." Erin was crying again, though not as hysterically as before. These were tears of guilt and regret as she lay on her bed with her mother sitting next to her and stroking her mane. Her father sat on her other side, rubbing her back and trying to be comforting. "I should have told him that I accepted his apology, that he was forgiven..."

"Was he?" John asked. "Did you forgive him?"

"No..." she admitted reluctantly.

"Then you did the right thing," he said firmly. "Even if it turned out this way, you did the right thing."

Erin nodded mutely. Intellectually, she knew her father was right. But there was still that guilt, sitting like a cold lump of iron in her chest. It didn't change the fact that she still hated and feared Malachite even though he was likely gone.

"It's not like I didn't tell anyone about what he did, or how I felt," Erin said a few minutes later, yawning widely and starting to regain her calm. "I told Twilight and the others. They know. They've been helping me through this."

"I'm glad," Lynne said, still stroking her hair. "No one should have to go through something like that alone."

The three of them kept talking, and eventually the subject changed to more peaceful topics. Friends, family, and plans for the future. Erin talked, yawning more and more frequently as time went on, until she finally drifted off with her head in her mother's lap at slightly after three in the morning.

Her parents moved extremely carefully, using the skills they'd honed raising three children and helping with four grandchildren, gently rearranging her on the bed without waking her. Quietly, they left her room, leaving their daughter to sleep and recover.

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In spite of the previous days' momentous events, a perfectly ordinary Canterlot sun rose just as it had for centuries, barring the occasional disruption by Discord or Nightmare Moon. It rose on its stately course through the sky, and was a few minutes before the noon position when the sober and dignified air of the halls and corridors of Canterlot Castle were disrupted by the sound of pounding hooves.

Erin ran, earning herself plenty of disapproving glares from the guards and palace staff. She didn't care, she simply ran on, moving at her best speed and occasionally sliding out of control on the polished floors to crash into the walls before recovering and moving off again. The guards outside of Celestia's quarters forced her to wait impatiently for minutes that seemed like hours while they checked to see if the Princess would receive her.

Finally, she was allowed in. Celestia was in her sitting room, a cup of tea and a stack of scrolls beside her as she rested on some cushions spread along the floor. Erin trotted in, frantic with the news she was carrying.

"Erin," Celestia began, concern showing on her face as she picked up on Erin's urgency. "What's—"

"They found him!" she blurted.

Celestia blinked in surprise.

"Him? Malachite?"

Erin nodded. "Yes! Or, I should say that they found the body he'd made, and it's still alive."

Erin had been eating ravenously in the Harmonics cafeteria when Maggie had found her to tell her the news. No doubt she had intended it as a warning, to let her know from a friendly face that Malachite was still alive, but Erin had almost immediately jumped up and ran off to tell Celestia.

She wasn't sure why the news that Malachite had survived had made her want to tell the Princess so urgently. She hoped it was only because she knew Celestia would want to know as soon as possible, and not because a living Malachite would ease the burden of her guilt, but she just wasn't sure.

"Is he... How is he?" Celestia asked.

"I... I'm not sure, Princess," Erin replied, ashamed at her oversight. "I didn't ask, I'm sorry."

"Where is he?" she asked, setting aside her teacup.

"The center of the Tide, the initial impact site," Erin said. "That's not all, Princess. The Tide is still alive."

That little tidbit she'd heard in the cafeteria before Maggie had found her with the news of Malachite's survival. It was all anyone was talking about, but the initial atmosphere of despair had washed away quickly once news arrived about how little of it was apparently left.

"What?" Celestia's head snapped up, eyes narrowed, and Erin took an instinctive step back.

"Just barely, though, as far as we can tell," she assured the Princess quickly. "There's just a small bit of it left that they've found, in the center, under the stone. It's growing again, but it's only about... oh, I'd say maybe about the size of the Counsel chambers, from what they've told me."

"Come with me," Celestia said, getting to her hooves and walking quickly to the door. On the way, she pulled off her chest-piece and dropped it with a clang to the floor of her chambers.

"Um, you don't have to worry about the Tide, Princess," Erin said, trotting along to keep up with her.

"Now that it's this small, we can take care of the rest of it ourselves."

"This *thing* may have cost me my student and friend, Erin. I will finish this myself."

"Yes, Princess," Erin said, intimidated. She'd never seen Celestia so severe, before. Not even when she'd confronted what she'd thought were fae sprites in the Everfree forest all those weeks ago. It was more than a little frightening.

She followed along beside the Princess, who was now trailing several guards who had quietly fallen in behind her as she stalked through the halls of Canterlot Castle. Celestia's intensity excluded any chance for conversation, so Erin decided to just stay silent.

The door to the building that housed the gate to Colorado was flung open just as Celestia reached it, and the startled ponies inside barely had time to acknowledge their Princess' presence before she lifted the various magic-storing torcs from their racks on the wall. There were eight in all, and Celestia turned to the unicorn who was attending the desk.

"These are fully charged?" she asked him, and the stunned unicorn nodded mutely. "Thank you, my little pony," Celestia said, lowering one of the torcs around her neck where her regalia had been minutes before. The rest she simply carried beside her with her magic.

The gateway to China was still up and running, the Equestrians allowing the various human scientists and engineers to use the two gateways in Equestria as a shortcut between the two locations on Earth. Celestia walked straight through, ignoring the startled guards on either side. Erin trotted along at her side, soon finding herself once again in China, the sky dark, the sun on this part of Earth having long since set.

Erin squawked in surprise as Celestia's magic lifted her onto her back, between the broad white wings. Then she let out a shocked squeal as the Princess launched herself into the air, leaving her despairing unicorn and earth pony guards behind.

"Hold on," Celestia instructed, and Erin buried her face in the odd, flowing mane, hugging the Princess around the neck. There was a bright flash and a moment of disorientation, then another, and another, and now even the pegasi guards were left far behind.

"Towards the center, you said?" Celestia asked, regarding the stars thoughtfully.

Erin nodded woozily, then realized that Celestia couldn't see her. "Yes, Princess."

They teleported another six times, and Celestia burned through two of the torcs, dropping them without ceremony and fitting another one around her neck each time. Erin looked ahead as much as she could, though her eyes were watering from the wind and she was shivering with the cold. Up ahead, she could just barely make out a tiny point of light in the pitch-black.

"There, Princess!" she said. "Just ahead, and to your left!"

Celestia turned slightly and angled downward. As the light got closer, Erin could make out the large portable floodlights that they had placed there, in a rough circle perhaps sixty feet in diameter. Next to that circle was a crude, prefabricated shack that no doubt housed the scientists, engineers, and whatever equipment they didn't want exposed to the elements.

Several large generators had been set up, and there were trucks, helicopters, and even a few smaller cars parked haphazardly around. Erin could also see a large number of headlights in the distance, coming from both east and west and converging on this site. Humanity had learned its lesson, she'd guessed, and was racing here in force to kill off what was left of the Tide before it had a chance to recover.

Celestia's landing caused a brief panic amongst those humans outside, many of whom were either setting up generators or assembling other equipment. They all stared in amazement as the Princess stood, radiant and strong in the darkness. A cameraman was filming everything, possibly for a documentary. He turned the camera towards them, and Erin tried unsuccessfully to hide behind Celestia's mane.

"He is here?" Celestia asked Erin, lifting her off of her back and setting her down on the grey stone.

"That's what I'd heard, Princess. You may want to check the building over there."

Celestia marched in, ignoring the startled guard. Erin smiled apologetically at him.

"She's royalty, and she's got a lot on her mind," she said, by way of explanation.

The guard looked confused and said something in, presumably, Chinese. Erin blinked at him, not understanding, then shrugged and walked in behind the Princess.

The interior of the building was more or less as she'd expected it to be. The prefabricated plywood walls held hastily-assembled metal shelves, on which rested a variety of tools and equipment. Several cots lined the walls, a few of them occupied. A large table was set up, and the group of men and women seated around it were staring at Celestia in surprise.

And then, she saw Malachite. Erin gasped in shock when she saw what was left of the psuedo-alicorn. Malachite's body lay in a heap on some cushions on the floor, reduced to a mere sad shadow of his former self. He was lying on his right side, and his left side was badly scarred. His legs on that side were mostly gone, and the wing was missing entirely.

His right legs had fared only slightly better, ending in stumps below the knee. The billowing fae sprite mane and tail were gone, and in their place was a short growth of stubby black hair, looking sad and pathetically out of place on the once-majestic frame.

But worst of all were his eyes, completely devoid of any understanding or intellect, blinking and rolling around randomly. What remained of its limbs were also moving, in aimless fits and starts that reminded Erin of how an infant would sometimes move while it was learning fine motor control.

Celestia was already kneeling at Malachite's side, horn glowing, the golden light cascading down his scarred hide. His eyes locked onto her for a while, and then rolled away again. After a few minutes, the Princess sighed.

"There is very little left of him," Celestia said calmly, head bowed. "The Elements did what they could to heal him, and the core of his mind is... intact, after a fashion. But his memories, thoughts, and sense of self are all gone. The Malachite we knew is dead."

Erin moved closer, looking down at Malachite, the emotional turmoil in her heart leaving her uncertain how she felt about this development.

"As much as he wanted to be immortal, he may have preferred death over this," Celestia said as she reached out with a hoof, stroking his neck as the green alicorn stared blankly at her. "I've just noticed," she added with a brittle casualness that didn't fool Erin for a second. "He doesn't have a cutie mark. I wonder if that was a conscious choice on his part, or a simple oversight? I guess I'll never know, now."

Erin saw the pain in her eyes, and her heart went out to the Princess. She bore no love for Malachite. In

fact, the pity she felt for him now was only just starting to replace her former fear and hatred. But she understood pain and loss when she saw it, and the Prince was obviously suffering.

Erin didn't know what to say, so instead she knelt by her side, pressing her shoulder against Celestia's folded white leg in a gesture that she hoped would prove comforting. Celestia looked down at her, startled, and then smiled through her tears, hugging Erin to her side with a wing.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, while the humans in the building shuffled uncomfortably around behind them. Finally, the Princess stood and folded her wing back against her side.

"I shall take him back to Canterlot with me," she said, her regal bearing back in place. "Please, keep him as comfortable as you can. This stallion helped to save your world, after all."

The humans nearby, the ones who understood her, nodded and assured her that he would be well cared for until she returned.

"Good," Celestia said, then added with voice like molten iron, "Now, take me to what's left of the Black Tide."

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There was a small area outside, marked by flood lights and flags drilled into the stone that had once formed the Tide itself. Celestia stared into the center of the circle, frowning with concentration. It was a circle perhaps fifty feet in diameter, and she could sense the same presence as before from under that stone.

"Yes. It is still here, though vastly reduced. A pity that the Elements didn't finish it off. Though, the fact that it still lives gives me the chance to do so, myself."

She launched herself into the air, gathering power from the six remaining torcs she had brought with her. Once again, Celestia blazed like a sun, lighting up the night as she hovered over the edge of the remains of the Tide.

She poured her power into the center of it, and the stone shell glowed red before it cracked and melted. Inside, the Tide itself flinched back in a truly revolting fashion, squirming and rolling in the stone that now imprisoned it. She poured more and more of her energy into it, stopping only when she hit the rock behind it.

As before, it tried to stop her with a psychic assault. This time, however, it was far too weak, and she brushed off the counterattack with contempt. She burned it fiercely, drilling with her magic into the rock surrounding the Tide, continuing to pour her rage and grief into her assault long past the point where the last remnant of it had been reduced to ashes.

Minutes later, all that remained was a glowing bowl of semi-molten rock, sixty feet in diameter at the ridge. Celestia cast out with her mind once again and detected nothing. The Tide was now well and truly dead.

She landed, discarding the now-exhausted magic-storing torcs. She turned to smile at the crowd of stunned humans behind her.

"I seem to have exhausted my magic, and it's quite a long way back to Equestria. Could I trouble you for some transportation?"

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"And then what happened?" Twilight asked, sitting up in her bed. The six friends were all in the same room, each restricted to their beds by stern, no-nonsense nurses. Applejack and Dash had learned the hard way that they were still far too weak to simply get past their white-garbed guardians.

"We came back," Erin said. "It seems a little anti-climactic, but that's all there was to it. We were loaded into a truck with Malachite, and they drove us back to the gateway. It took hours."

"What about Malachite?" Pinkie Pie asked, in between sips of the chocolate malt that she'd somehow managed to get into the room.

Erin shook her head. "I don't know what happened to Malachite after that. Celestia took him somewhere, and I didn't think it was any of my business to ask her what her plans were."

Erin didn't know what to think of Malachite. Her fading feelings of hate, anger and fear were twisted up with the guilt, pity and shame she'd felt seeing what had happened to him. That she'd wished him harm, and then he'd been so badly hurt defending the Earth wasn't something she felt she'd be able to shake any time soon, if ever.

He'd abused her greatly, but he faced the Tide in an attempt to save the world and suffered much worse than she had in doing so. He'd been arrogant, condescending and cruel to her, but now there was none of that left, his mind an empty shell. And, in the end, his sacrifice had saved the Earth, though his arrogance had almost doomed it at the same time.

Her feelings couldn't settle down, swirling around in a big mess in her chest. She pushed the thoughts aside, deciding to concentrate on her friends, instead.

"So, when do you guys think you'll be getting out of here?" She asked, forcing a smile. "We've got less than a week before my mom forces Thanksgiving on you guys. You're still all planning on coming, right?"

"Sure!" Pinkie said, putting the empty malt glass aside. "I'd never miss my first human party!"

"Well, it's not really a *party*, so much as a holiday gathering," Erin clarified. "It's a time to get together with friends and family, to talk and eat and think about all the things you're grateful for."

"Sounds lovely," Rarity said. "I'd love to come."

The others quickly reaffirmed their desire to go.

"It's too bad the rest of my family can't come, too. I think my nieces would love to meet you guys," Erin said with a more genuine smile, imagining the little girls' reactions to the ponies.

"You should ask Maggie if she can bring 'em!" Applejack said. "Nothin' more important than family."

"What about friends?" Dash asked jokingly.

"That's family," AJ asserted.

Erin let her friends bicker for a little while, feeling better just by being near them.

"I have an announcement, guys," she said, eventually. All eyes turned to her, and she shuffled her hooves uncomfortably before she spoke. "The Ascent labs will be done with their repairs in the next couple of days. And... um, after Thanksgiving, I'm going to turn back into a human."

She glanced around, surprised to see only acceptance on her friends' faces. Except for Pinkie Pie, who was pouting slightly.

"I'm still going to call you 'Sunflower', " Pinkie said, crossing her forelegs across her chest.

"That's fine," Erin said, laughing. "I was afraid you'd be upset."

"Why would we be upset?" Twilight asked, obviously confused. "You make a good pony, but you're still a human. It makes sense you'd want to change back."

The others agreed, and Erin felt some relief.

"I've already talked it over with Maggie and Doctor Fischer," she said. "The Ascent lab here can only be used for what they call 'official business', which counts me turning back to human. But, I told them I also want to study magic, so... Well, after a while, they'll let me turn back into a pony again. A *real* pony this time, instead of a fake one."

"How're they gonna do that?" Applejack asked. "I thought you didn't know how Equestrian ponies worked?"

"Well... Malachite left a bunch of data behind, before he blew stuff up. We know a lot about pony anatomy now. The only thing to decide is, what kind of pony should I be first?"

"First?" Twilight repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I want to study each type of pony magic," Erin clarified. "So, that means I have to spend time as each kind. So, should I be an earth pony, unicorn, or pegasus first?"

"Pegasus," Rainbow Dash said immediately. "We're the coolest."

"Why?" Twilight asked.

"Well, we can *fly*, first of all," Rainbow started, and Twilight laughed, holding up a hoof.

"We'll take pegasi coolness superiority as a given," she said. "I meant why choose? You could make yourself a combination of all three, like Malachite did."

"Oh," Erin said, rocking back on her hooves. "I honestly hadn't thought of that. That's a good idea, I

guess, but..."

"But', what?" Twilight asked.

"I don't know how comfortable I am being that similar to Malachite," Erin admitted.

"I guess I didn't think about that," Twilight said, shaking her head. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. It's a good suggestion."

"That's not important," Pinkie said seriously, then grinned. "Now that the Tide is gone, we need to have a party!"

Erin laughed.

"Humanity is *way* ahead of you, there, Pinkie Pie."

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"Say what you will," John said, "They have nice televisions here."

Lynne made a wordless noise of agreement, watching the screen in their room.

"As you can see, I'm here in Trafalgar square, where the celebration shows no sign of slowing down, let alone stopping," a pretty young reporter in a yellow jacket and skirt said. A group of rambunctious people wandered behind her, some of them wearing fake unicorn horns on their heads, some wearing fake pegasus wings on their jackets, and a few brave souls wearing both. *"The cold isn't keeping people indoors, not these days. Nothing seems to be able to dull anyone's enthusiasm!"*

"It's hard to believe it's all over," Lynne said as the reporter continued talking.

"They haven't confirmed it's over yet," John said, and Lynne slapped him lightly on the arm.

"Why can't you ever be optimistic?" she said.

"I like being a pessimist. It's more fun being wrong as a pessimist than if you're wrong as an optimist."

He grinned at her, and she rolled her eyes at him.

The video of Celestia blasting what was left of the Tide had been rebroadcast on every channel, alternating with footage of the light of the Elements crawling across the Tide. Several reports had been cobbled together, with speculation on what had happened.

Official word was that the fae sprites were part of the Equestrian's plan to destroy the Tide, some odd magical spell that they'd created so that the Elements would actually work this time. Reaction to that was mostly positive, though the occasional kook was interviewed who loudly proclaimed that this proved that the Equestrians were evil or satanic, or had been in league with the Tide from the beginning.

"I wish they'd stop interviewing those people," John said as the latest one declared their conspiracy theories to the camera.

"Anyone who's not an idiot knows better than to listen to them," Lynne replied.

"There's a surprising number of idiots in the world," John replied.

"Said the pessimist."

"Granted."

They watched the celebrations on the television for a while longer, until John broke the silence again.

"I should have bought stock in a fireworks company," he said.

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Maggie was more tired than she'd ever been in her life, excluding after her children were born. The two days since the Elements of Harmony had been used the Tide had seen massive numbers of scientists come through, all on their way to China to try and study the remains of what had been Earth's greatest threat.

The now-destroyed central core of the Tide wasn't the only remaining pocket of the creature that had been left intact by the Elements of Harmony. Surveys were finding more and more of it, from tiny little drops of it to large pools, all encapsulated in the stone and, without the signal that the Princesses had

told them about, completely inert. It would take decades to dig it all out and destroy it, if they could even find it all.

That was bad news number one, and one that was being kept quiet for now. No need to ruin everyone's celebrations quite yet, after all. Bad news number two was much more personal.

Maggie rubbed at her temples, wondering how she was going to break this particular bit of bad news to a couple of people she'd really enjoyed getting to know. The married couple sitting across the table from her watched her expectantly and warily.

Maggie decided to just be blunt about it. There was too much going on to attempt to be overly tactful.

"You can go home, now, if you want," she told John and Lynne Olsen.

"What do you mean?" John asked. "I mean, don't get me wrong, we're not complaining, but..."

"News of Ascent has leaked. That damned film crew somehow managed to get some video files past security, including Erin stating that she was 'a human turned into a pony' during a party shortly after humanity arrived in Equestria." Maggie remembered that statement vaguely, though Erin's terrible karaoke shortly after that had nearly driven it from her memory. "And someone who works for us and who should have known better has started talking to reporters. The news is all over the place, now. I'm afraid your daughter is going to be a little bit of a star for the foreseeable future."

"Oh, god," Lynne said. "They know her name?!"

"Here, let me show you," Maggie said, then clicked the remote. The large screen in the conference room turned on to a newscast that she'd recorded earlier. A handsome older man in a blue suit was sitting behind a desk, looking calmly into the camera.

The latest shocking news from Project Harmonics is this video, and the accompanying information obtained by sources on the inside. We've confirmed with various anonymous sources inside the Harmonics compound that there was another project in the works, one called Ascent, the purpose of which was to use experimental nanotechnology to turn one young woman into a pony in order to gather information from Equestria, prior to diplomatic relations being opened. That young woman's name? According to our sources, it's Erin Olsen.

The video switched to an older picture of Erin, a few years out of date but still quite obviously her. Lynne let out a gasp of dismay.

You may know her better as 'Sunflower', the reporter continued. *That's right. According to our sources, the pony who traveled from India to Colorado, and later showed up in the small town of Rockwell with a bunch of other ponies, was apparently once a human. Officials at the Harmonics lab, as well as the International Committee for Human Survival, have all declined to comment, but we have pretty compelling evidence that this is the case.*"

"Does Erin know?" John asked, and Maggie paused the broadcast.

"I told her this morning. She... didn't take it well," Maggie said.

That was stating it mildly, as Erin first reacted by laughing hysterically, then stomping and cursing in anger, and finally going off to sulk in a nice hot bath for a while. That wasn't even counting the hoof she'd kicked through the sheet rock in her bedroom.

"Here are your phones and tablets," she said. "No need to keep you cut off any more. I'd advise a strict 'no comment' reply to any questions by reporters, though."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere until we sort this out, and make sure Erin's okay and human again," John said resolutely. Lynne nodded, and then her eyes widened.

"We need to call the boys! They'll be worried sick!"

"Oh god, you're right. Oh, and check this out: two hundred and seventeen missed calls on my phone, three hundred and fifty seven new emails."

Lynne checked her own phone, blanching with shock at what she saw waiting for her.

"I'm guessing the reporters figured out who we are," he said.

"Most likely," Maggie said, nodding. "We've moved your sons and their families to safe houses, for the time being, to keep them away from the swarms of reporters."

"Oh, thank god for that," Lynne said, then started dialing. "Hi, sweetie? It's mom. Yes. Yes. Slow down..."

"Hold on, I'm... Yes, I know, I saw."

John shook his head as his wife was peppered with questions. "That would be Allen. He's the one who always demanded answers."

"Todd, actually," Lynne said, then said into the phone, "No, I was talking to your father. Yes, he's here, that's why I was talking to him."

"When is Erin scheduled to be turned back?" John asked, ignoring his phone as it started to vibrate its way across the table.

"The lab will be up and running in two days. Another day to test and shake things down, and then Erin can go in whenever she's ready."

"Ah, good," John said. "How long will it take to turn her back?"

"About a week, maybe ten days," Maggie replied.

"Hold on, dear, I've got to talk to someone," Lynne said into her phone before turning to Maggie. "That's not acceptable, she'll miss Thanksgiving."

"Hon," John started, but Lynne shook her head.

"No, John. We can have Thanksgiving together this year, as a family. I don't care if Erin is a pony or a human, I want us all together. Maggie, can you arrange to have our sons and their families brought here?"

"Uh... Sure, I guess," Maggie said. "Assuming they'll *want* to come."

"I'll take care of that, trust me," Lynne said, then put the phone back up to her ear. "So, Todd, here's what's going to happen..."

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Robert Thomson cleared his throat as he stepped up to the podium. He held up his hand, and the restless reporters settled down immediately.

"Ladies, gentlemen, I thank you for coming. I have a statement that I'd like to make, and then I'll take a few questions. I ask that you hold your questions until the end. Thank you."

He took a sip of water, pulled out his notes, and then launched into his statement.

"In the early days of fighting the Tide, we realized that it was using nanotechnology to convert terrestrial matter into more of itself. You all know that. What you don't know is that one of the early projects we started up was to use and enhance our own existing Earth nanotechnology, in order to try and fight the Tide on equal footing. It proved... less than successful, but it yielded other results that, if it weren't for the Tide, would have made life on Earth much more interesting. We called it Project Ascent, and that's what I'm here to tell you about tonight."

"Doctor Hermann Fischer and his team are the leads on this. Dr. Fischer is, quite frankly, the most incredible genius I've ever met. The entire thing was his baby, start to finish. He created the nanomachines, he created the mainframe and the remote communications array that controlled them, and he came up with the routines that allowed us to convert matter from one form to another."

"His team didn't stop there, however. He theorized that he could use Ascent to change an organism's biology to do things as mundane as healing paper-cuts, to as extreme as modifying humanity to survive under harsher conditions. That was one of our fallbacks in regards to Project Harmonics. If we found a world that was *almost* habitable to humanity, then perhaps we could modify ourselves to be able to better survive in that environment."

Robert kept to himself the fact that the Ascent nanomachines that Doctor Fischer used were heavily influenced by damaged and inactive Black Tide nanomachines. Anything that touched even remotely on the Tide caused unease and fear in the general population, and he didn't want to start a panic. What he'd told these reporters already had more than a few of them on edge.

"Then we found Equestria," Robert continued. "This wonderful world that fitted all of our needs, except that it was occupied by ponies, or Pony Sapiens as you folks have been calling them on the news. And, as we later found out, also occupied by several other sapient species as well. We asked Doctor Fischer if we could turn volunteers into ponies, in order to meet and assess the locals, to determine the best approach to opening diplomatic ties with Equestria. We had one shot to make a good impression, and we wanted as much data as we could before we took that shot."

"In order to keep things at least somewhat quiet, it was decided that only Project Harmonics staff would be asked to volunteer. In the end, only one woman, a brave young lady named Erin Olsen, volunteered to undergo the long and somewhat risky procedure to change herself into a pony. Coupled with that was the further risk of exploring a completely new world, full of new risks, and... Well, Erin proved to be quite a treasure, I can tell you. She faced all of that without even blinking.

"In the end, the information she retrieved, and the good relations she established with the Equestrian government, led directly to the Equestrians helping us to defeat the Tide and save our world. Quite simply, we would still be planning an evacuation of the planet if it weren't for Erin. And that's why I am asking all of you to have the common courtesy to leave her alone and not bombard her or her family with questions, requests for interviews, or things like that. She wants to lead a quiet, normal life, and I think she deserves our respect, and she deserves to be treated fairly.

"Now, are there any questions?"

Hands shot up in the air, and voices were raised, shouting questions in English flavored with dozens of different accents. Robert pointed to one person at random.

"Yes, you. What's your question?"

"Mr. Thomson, is the change permanent?"

"Absolutely not. Erin will be starting the process to turn her back into a human in a couple of weeks, now that all the excitement is dying down. You, the lady in the purple sweater. You have a question?"

"Yes, sir. Why a couple of weeks? Why the delay?"

"Due to a classified request by the Equestrian government. They had... well, a little something they wanted us to do for them. Considering all they've done for us, naturally we said yes

"It sounds like Ascent can cure disease and injuries on an unprecedented scale. Will people from all walks of life be given a fair chance at it, or is this going to be reserved for the rich and the well-connected?"

"Good question. Yes, Ascent can, potentially, cure pretty much any disease and repair any injury, including old age. At the moment, we only have one working facility, which is a prototype facility and not open to general public use, though we have several more opening up soon around the world. The cost is immense, but we're using what's left of the International Emergency Fund to finance it. Once it's all up and running, we'll start running folks through, starting with terminally ill children and working our way up to terminally ill adults.

There was a brief explosion of questions that Robert silenced by holding up his hands.

"Sorry, that was the decision. Children first, terminal illnesses first. As much as I'd like to give back sight to every blind person and so on, we have to take the most critical cases first, and children are obviously the most urgent of those cases. We won't be able to save everyone, not until we get a lot more centers open and a lot more staff trained, but we'll do the best we can."

"If you're wondering if Ascent will be available for things like making people young again, the answer is: Eventually, yes. Once we no longer have younger people with terminal illnesses. That may seem unfair to older folks, but the thought is that the children deserve a chance to live as long as the older folks do. Sorry if that seems unfair, but that's the way it's going to be. At least on the official side."

"We'll also be licensing out the technology to businesses, in order to increase the number of facilities as rapidly as possible, and to increase innovation. Unfortunately, while we will definitely set guidelines for those businesses and how they're to operate, we won't be able to stop them from charging for their services, which may set the cost of using Ascent-based technology out of range for many people. That's regrettable, but it was determined that this was the best way to get the technology out there, and to rapidly get the cost down."

"Next question. You, with the yellow tie."

"Is it true that you intended that all humans migrating to Equestria would be turned into ponies, perhaps against their will, in collusion with the Equestrian government?"

Dead silence reigned for a few seconds.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Robert asked, incredulous. "Are you insane? Where in the world did you get *that* idea? Even if we wanted to, we don't have the resources to turn seven billion humans into ponies. You, in the grey suit, you're up."

"Thank you, sir. If we manage to open enough Ascent centers that we can actually keep people eternally

young, doesn't that mean we'll have a population boom? What are the plans to deal with that excess population?"

"Good question. We're still going ahead with the plans to settle in Zanibra, though we've offered to buy the land directly from the Zebras ourselves, relieving the Equestrians of the necessity of trading their own land for it. We're still in negotiations on a final price. The Equestrians are still offering assistance in getting the land more habitable for us, and now we can afford to take our time and really plan things out well.

"In addition, Project Harmonics is still running. We're sure to find other worlds out there, habitable ones. The UN is setting up a special group that will handle requests for people to migrate, perhaps even to create new nations on these worlds. We're looking at the dawn of an age of unprecedented human growth and achievement, folks. It's going to be exciting! Next question, you in the front, here."

"Speaking of Harmonics, now that we no longer need the Equestrians, are we cancelling the agreements to allow them access to the new worlds that we find? Are we still building them Ascent labs?"

"We're not changing the agreements," Robert said. "Next-"

"How can you justify that, though?" the same man interrupted. "We have people here who are sick, or who have lost their homes, and you want to waste resources on ponies?"

"This is the last non-Ascent question I'll take, because this needs to be addressed," Robert Thomson said, scowling at the man. "We made this agreement with them, when they had everything to lose and we had everything to gain. Now that we're in better shape, you think we should just cancel the agreement?

"Forget for just a moment that the *only* reason that breaking the treaty is even an option is because of the bravery and sacrifice of the Equestrians. Forget how much we owe them for saving our world. Forget all of that and consider this, instead.

"These new species that we've met, this is their first impression of us. They're just getting to know humanity. Are you seriously suggesting that the first thing we do is break a signed treaty with them when the ink is barely dry? Have you so little shame? No. We're not going to do that. We are *better* than that. Now, I'm going to the next question, and if you continue disrupting this conference you will be escorted out."

The press conference went on for another half an hour after that, until Robert finally had enough and called an end to the questions. He went off stage and back into a small room, collapsing into a sofa with a sigh as his assistant came up and gave him a glass of water.

"Thanks, Becky," he said. "Do me a favor, would you? Call Maggie Henson and see if Erin would be willing to hold a press conference or do an interview of her own, soon. It might help to dispel some of the interest if someone can ask her some questions directly."

"Will do, boss," Becky said, and left the room.

Robert rubbed his temples as he lay back on the small couch. In just a few days, everything had changed. For the better, of course, he wasn't complaining. Things like Ascent getting leaked before they were ready was really small potatoes compared to the fact that the Tide was no longer a threat.

Still, it looked like he'd have to keep putting off that vacation he'd promised his wife over three years ago. She was *not* going to be happy.

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"I really don't want to do this," Erin groused as the pony make-up specialist eyed her critically.

"I know, Erin," Robert Thomson said sympathetically. "I only asked because, if they get some answers, maybe they'll be satisfied and start to leave you alone."

"And how likely do you think that is?" Erin asked.

"Not very," he admitted. "Still, it's worth a shot, don't you think?"

Erin sighed, and then grunted as another pony pulled the sash tight on her dress, an emerald green number that had been put together at the last minute by a human designer. It looked nice, but it was extremely uncomfortable. She longed for one of the dresses that Rarity had made for her, but this had all come together at the last minute, and she hadn't thought of grabbing a wardrobe before she left.

Being a pony has sure made me lazy in packing, she thought ruefully.

There was a knock on the door and a young man poked his head in.

"Whenever you're ready, Ms. Olsen," he said.

Erin's mouth went dry as she walked towards the door.

"Break a leg!" Robert said. Erin smiled weakly, and then followed the aide through the back of the stage.

Susan Chang was a popular, middle-aged talk-show host, one that her mother loved. It had been agreed on that she would do the interview with Erin, on her usual set, but without the live audience. Only the camera crew, director, and other required personnel were there.

Erin walked out on stage without any kind of pomp or circumstance and smiled nervously at Susan Chang as the human woman knelt down on the stage and extended her hand. Erin put out her hoof, and they shook.

"You look nervous," her interviewer said.

"I am," Erin admitted, and the woman laughed.

"That's hard to believe, after all you've been through. Still, I get it. Don't worry, this isn't going out live. We can cut anything out that you don't like. Does that make you feel better?"

"It does," Erin said with relief.

"Good," Ms. Chang said, standing back up. "Why don't you sit here, on this couch? I'll take the chair, and we can get started."

Erin climbed into the sofa, then lay down on her belly with her legs tucked up. She smiled again at the woman seated across from her, who patted her comfortingly and turned to the camera.

"We're recording?" she asked.

"Yes, Sue," the director called out from his booth. "Whenever you're ready.

"Okay. Erin, we're going to get started now, all right?"

"Sounds good," she replied with false confidence.

Susan cleared her throat and faced one of the cameras on the set.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special show, and a very special guest for you this morning. This is the one and only time I'm going to do a pre-recorded show, rather than a live one, but I think you'll agree that my guest today is worth it.

"You may know her as Sunflower, the pony who crossed the world, or you may know her as Erin Olsen, the brave young woman who explored a new world, and ended up finding the allies we needed to save our own. She's here today, and she's willing to tell us a little bit about what happened. Erin? Why don't you start."

"Where would you like me to start?" she asked, a little panicked.

"Why not at the beginning, right before you became a pony?" Susan suggested.

"All right," Erin said, then marshaled her thoughts. She turned to the camera as well, and said, "Hi. My name is Erin Olsen, also known as Sunflower. And the first thing you need to know is, before I became a pony, my job was *incredibly* boring."

Chapter 31: Harmony

Thanksgiving day

"Welcome!" Lynne said as she met the pegasus at the door. "Oh, you brought something, thank you! You didn't have to do that!"

"Oh, um... Was I not supposed to?" Fluttershy asked meekly as Lynne took the casserole dish off of the pegasus' back. "I'm sorry!"

"Oh, no, of course not, dear," Lynne said, smiling awkwardly. "I just wanted to say that I really appreciate that you did. I look forward to trying your cooking!"

Erin stifled a chuckle as her mother's Minnesota-style manners clashed with Fluttershy's inherent meekness.

The timid pegasus was ushered into the large room, which had been re-purposed from its typical role of presentations or large meetings. Erin's mother had co-opted the room in order to provide for the first inter-dimensional Thanksgiving dinner ever.

Lynne had gone all out with decorating, and had also cooked a wide variety of foods. Maggie, who was rapidly becoming a good friend of hers, had eagerly helped. The room had been decorated with fall themes, and the tables had been pushed together to form a large rectangle. Both chairs for the humans as well as padded benches for the ponies had been provided.

Reds, browns and golds dominated the color scheme, with gold-trimmed white tablecloths and red ceramic dishware that Lynne had picked up in town. Each table had a large centerpiece that Lynne had made herself, wandering in the woods outside the compound to gather the oak and maple leaves in a stunning variety of reds, orange and yellows, as well as the pine cones needed for each display. The occasional bundle of store-bought calico corn on the tables or walls simply added to the atmosphere.

Lynne's preparation hadn't stopped there. She had even gone so far as to talk to some of the pony chefs in Canterlot regarding what types of foods ponies liked, taking detailed notes on their preparation, and deciding which would probably work with the human palette as well. She then tried her best to make those dishes using as many ingredients from Equestria as she could get through the gateway.

The result was a surprisingly wide selection of vegetarian dishes, including pastas, breads, soups, salads and vegetables cooked in a variety of interesting ways. One laden table contained a huge array of desserts, which no doubt Pinkie would end up devastating those at some point during the night. What wasn't there was any kind of meat item, as Lynne had been extremely scrupulous about checking the ingredients on everything she'd made to make sure everything was completely vegetarian.

Erin had her doubts on how well that would go over with her brothers. Todd was a turkey fiend, and the kids might not be so fond of vegetarian dishes. But, she hoped, the presence of real, Equestrian ponies would help to make that easier to bear.

Fluttershy, relieved of her casserole, fled to one of the corners of the large room, where she found safety in the familiar faces of Erin, Applejack and Rainbow Dash, who were standing together and talking quietly.

In light of the special nature of the event, all four of the ponies were wearing dresses. Erin was in her burgundy evening dress, Applejack in a simple white blouse and tan skirt, Fluttershy in a light green gauzy thing, and Rainbow Dash in what could best be described as a toga. Also, each of the Equestrian ponies was wearing one of the magic-storing torcs that were typically kept by the gateway for visitors from Equestria to wear on Earth.

"Um, hello," Fluttershy said as she approached. "I like the decorations. They're very nice."

"I'm a big fan of fall colors, myself," Erin said with a smile. "It's typical for Thanksgiving, even though we're usually a foot deep in snow by this point in Minnesota."

"That's where you're from, right?" Twilight asked as she joined them. She was wearing a light blue dress with a silver trim, simply cut and very modest. Erin had noted with amusement that the unicorn had brought her own dish to share as well, much to her mother's politely hidden dismay. It went on an already-laden table with Applejack's selection of apple pies and cobblers.

"Yup," Erin said. "Hopefully things calm down soon, and I can bring you guys out there and show you around my home town."

"I'm not really sure if I want to go out there in the winter, though," Twilight said. "According to your father, winter gets pretty bad, there."

"It can, but we Minnesotans are only happy if we can complain about the weather," Erin said with a laugh.

A fashionably late Rarity, wearing an elegant red dress and carrying a vintage bottle of wine, arrived along with Pinkie Pie in a polka-dotted skirt. Pinkie had brought food as well, an elaborate cake that had 'Happy Turkey Day!' written on it, with a depiction of a smiling turkey made out of frosting. Erin flinched slightly, not sure if Pinkie knew why the humans called Thanksgiving 'turkey day' or not.

Humans began arriving as well. In addition to her father, who was running in and out of the room on various errands for his wife, there was also Maggie, who was helping with the final touches with decorating. Several other scientists showed up, including Doctor Fischer and an uncharacteristically mellow Doctor Edwards.

"Call me Tom," Doctor Edwards told everyone while sporting a broad smile, and Erin nearly fainted in shock.

"Have you met Rarity?" Twilight asked him with a mischievous grin. The other ponies snickered slightly while Rarity cleared her throat loudly and narrowed her eyes at her friend. Confused, Dr. Edwards and Erin both looked on blankly.

It wasn't long after that happened that Erin's youngest brother Allen arrived, in the company of his wife Katie and their two children, little Sara at age three, and their six-month-old son in a stroller. Unlike the scientists, they hadn't had a chance to see Equestrian ponies in person yet. and they stopped in the doorway to stare in shock.

"You did tell them that ponies would be here?" Erin asked her mother as she buzzed past to attend to some small detail.

"Yes, and that you'd be here as a pony," Lynne replied, then hustled her over to see her brother and his wife, hugged her granddaughter, cooed at her grandson, who burbled back at her, and then ran back to start setting up more dishes. Erin excused herself from her friends and trotted over.

"Hi, Allen," she said with a smile. "It's me, Erin."

"Uh... hi," Allen said, while Katie and the Sara stared at her in disbelief. Allen was doing a fair amount of staring, himself. "This... Are you... You can't *really* be Erin, can you?"

"Well, how's this," Erin replied with a smirk. "You remember what happened on your seventh birthday in the treehouse? When I caught you with-"

"Okay!" Allen yelped, his blue eyes wide and panicked. "I believe you, okay?"

"It really is me, I swear," Erin said, then, "Hi, sweetie!" to her niece, who snatched her hand away from Erin's mane as if she was going to get into trouble.

"Don't touch the ponies, Sara," Katie scolded.

"It's okay if she asks first," Erin said, smiling, and Katie looked relieved.

"We don't want to offend anyone," her sister-in-law said.

"Don't worry about it," Erin said with a laugh. "They're just as interested in meeting you as you are in meeting them. Allen, will you quit that?" she asked, finally fed up with her brother poking at her ear.

Her brother snatched his hand away in a move that was comically similar to his daughter's. "Sorry, it's just hard to get used to, you know?"

"You think? Oh, and is that little Eric?" She asked, moving over to the stroller. "Oh, he's gotten so big! Hi, little guy! I'm you're auntie Erin!"

The baby stared back at her with wide, amazed eyes and reached out towards her. Erin, having had experience with her nieces, wisely stepped back. That left a space in front of a baby, which was quickly filled by somepony else.

"Oh! My goodness, is that a human baby?" Fluttershy asked, eagerly barging in front of Erin, who blinked in surprise at the uncharacteristically bold display from the pegasus. "Oh, he's so cute! May I see him?"

Katie, with a dazed and disbelieving look on her face, gave her permission, and Fluttershy moved in to get a closer look.

The pegasus leaned towards the baby, smiling gently and cooing with delight.

"Uh, Fluttershy?" Erin said. "You may want to watch out for-"

"Ouch!"

"-his grabby little hands," Erin finished far too late.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Let me help you," Katie said in a near-panic. Fluttershy showed amazing levels of calm, for her, as the woman knelt down to try and disengage the baby's tightly clenched fists from her pink mane.

"Oh, it's quite -ouch- all right, I don't want to be a -ah!- bother," Fluttershy said, wincing.

The two of them began apologizing profusely to each other while Eric did his best to detach Fluttershy's mane from her scalp, utilizing the amazing grip that infants were occasionally known for. Finally, Fluttershy was able to escape with the majority of her mane intact, and Eric had managed to hold on to several strands of long, pink hair, so everyone was happy.

"So, how's Equestria?" Allen asked finally, once the baby-mane drama was over and Fluttershy had retreated back to a safe distance, checking her mane for bald spots.

"It's nice" Erin said with a smile. "I think you'd like it there."

They chatted for a little while longer, just catching up, until Todd and his wife Jenny showed up with their two daughters in tow. It was nearly a repeat of a few minutes ago, with the two adult humans staring in awe at Erin, while the two little girls, Becky and Emmy, stared at every pony in sight in wonderment.

"Is that really-" Todd started saying, only for Allen to cut him off.

"It really is her, man. Don't ask her to prove it. She remembers everything, remember?"

"Only the really embarrassing stuff," Erin said with a laugh, then turned to her nieces. "Becky, Emmy, hi. Did your mommy and daddy tell you who I am?"

"You're auntie Erin?" the four year old Becky asked doubtfully.

"I am!" Erin replied. "I got changed so I could go meet the ponies. Do you like the ponies?"

Becky nodded gravely, and her little sister mimicked the action.

"Did you want to touch my mane? You can, if you want to," Erin offered. Fluttershy, standing nearby, squeaked in panic and took a step back, but Becky only patted her aunt gently on the side of her head. Emmy wasn't quite as restrained, slapping her excitedly on the leg. "No hitting, sweetie," Erin admonished.

They all chatted for a bit longer, and then Erin took her brothers and their wives around to meet her friends, as well as the scientists who showed up for the feast. Much to Erin's surprise, Shining Armor also showed up, with his wife Cadence, very obviously pregnant and the third unicorn that Erin had ever seen. The fourth, if she counted Malachite.

She wondered how many unicorns there were in Equestria, and made a mental note to ask Twilight later. Cadence didn't have the same bearing or ethereal mane as Luna and Celestia, but she was introduced as a Princess. That had many of the humans bowing awkwardly, until Cadence managed to convince them that it wasn't necessary.

Erin wandered around, joining and leaving groups almost randomly, chatting for a while and moving on, just trying to help the ponies and humans mingle. All the while, she was glad to have so many of her friends and family around. Though things started out awkwardly, the ponies and humans finally started to mingle without Erin's direct involvement.

Soon enough, Lynne deemed the food ready, and everyone seated themselves. Several wines were opened, including Rarity's Equestrian vintage, as well as fruit juices and the like for the children and those who didn't want to drink. John stood up to give a short Thanksgiving speech.

"Today marks the first Thanksgiving with our new Equestrian friends," he said, slightly nervously. "A year ago, it felt like had very little to be thankful for. But today, the world seems full of blessings. Our world is safe again. We have this amazing new technology that lets us travel to other worlds and, most important of all, we have our new pony friends, who saved our world."

He held up his glass, and the ponies and humans around the room did the same.

"I offer a toast: To family. To friendship. To the bonds that keep us close, and to the Harmony that encompasses us all. We are, all of us, truly blessed."

He drank, and the others around the table did as well. Except for the children, who were already sneaking bits of food off of their plates while the adults were occupied.

Everyone started eating after that, passing around the dishes and generally complimenting Lynne or the ponies who'd brought dishes. Erin tried Fluttershy's dish and found it delicious, a creamy potato casserole loaded with vegetables. Around the table, various conversations started up, and Erin found herself overhearing some of them.

"Of course, even though the Tide is gone, the people who lived where it grew can't move back. It's barren rock," Allen was telling Cadence and Shining Armor. "We're finding homes for them all over the Earth, but I have a feeling a lot of them will be settling in Zanibra, once we get it ready for colonization."

"We can probably help with that," Cadence said. "Some teams of earth ponies might be able to help break up that rock and make the area liveable again."

"Well, apparently we first need to extract any bits of the Tide that are still left alive in it," Allen said with a nervous chuckle. The news that there were pockets of the Tide left alive had caused near-panic worldwide before the word also circulated that it was completely inert, without the Tide's signal.

In another part of the table, Todd and Jenny were talking to Pinkie Pie about their daughter's upcoming fifth birthday, and the party pony was already planning a huge blowout.

"You'll have to come to Sugarcube Corner, of course," she said, practically vibrating in place with the sheer joy of planning a party for a human child. "There will be cake, and ice cream, and streamers, and games... what do humans play? You don't have tails, so it doesn't make sense to play pin the tail on the human."

"Er... we play pin the tail on the donkey, actually," Jenny said, eyes slightly glazed over as the hyperactive pony planned out an extravagant party for her daughter.

"Really? Wow. Well, I guess we could play pin the tail on the pony and just say it's a donkey!"

As was traditional, everyone ate until their bellies were stuffed full, and much lounging around and talking happened after that. Even Pinkie Pie was barely picking at the three slices of pie she had on a plate in front of her. The seating arrangement shuffled around, as ponies and humans got up to wander around, this time mingling without any help from Erin.

"So, kiddo," John asked. "I suppose you're turning back after this? Back into a human?"

"Yup, though not right away," Erin said, smothering an unladylike burp behind her hoof.

"What do you mean?" her father asked, and Erin considered what to say to him.

"Well, I can't really say, I promised to keep it a secret," she said. "It's just a favor for the Princesses."

Her father shrugged and left it at that. While the children played games that seemed to involve mostly running around and screaming until their parents shushed them, the adults all talked about various subjects, including the future of relations between Earth and Equestria, as well as the potential benefits to combining magic and technology. Erin mentioned her intention to stay in Ponyville to study magic, and her family generally reacted with various degrees of support and envy.

At one point, little Becky came forward with the two younger girls and informed her aunt that "the babies want to know if we can have pony rides, and I said I'd go first to make sure it's safe."

Laughing, Erin decided to allow it, with the one strict rule that anyone who got on had to be careful not to damage her dress. It was expensive, after all. She saw Rarity watching apprehensively from a distance as Becky was picked up by her father and lowered gently onto her back.

After Becky grabbed her mane and clenched her legs around her ribcage, Erin began a slow circuit of the room. The little girl laughed and giggled the whole time, waving at the adults in the room as they walked by.

Eventually, the other girls got to try as well, and Erin added a new rule for Emmy. "No kicking! This is as fast as I'm going, sweetie."

Hours of good conversation and laughter later, well after the last of the "just one last slice of pie" moments had passed, the adults were finally feeling able to move again and the night started wrapping up. The parents had to get their kids into bed, in spite of their yawning protests that they weren't tired, really, not at all. Erin hugged her brothers, her sisters-in-law and nieces goodbye, and promised to visit

them more often, now that all the secrecy was over with.

Eventually, all that was left was the cleanup. Lynne had shooed everyone else out, including an overly conscientious Fluttershy who'd initially insisted on helping only to be met with a firm statement that guests don't help clean. Erin, however, wasn't so lucky, though she did strip off her evening gown before beginning, much to her father's discomfort.

"I'm not going to wreck the dress, dad," she said, rolling her eyes. "You don't like it, get the bussing cart and take these dishes to the kitchen and start cleaning them."

Her father was only too happy to comply, practically running out of the room amidst the clattering of flatware. Erin, Lynne and Maggie all finished up with storing all the leftovers, taking down the decorations, cleaning the spilled food and drink off of the tables and floor, and bundling up the tablecloths for the laundry.

Once the room was restored to meeting-ready status, Erin made her way, yawning and occasionally stumbling in a happy food-induced stupor, back to her room in Canterlot. Even though her room in the Harmonics compound was much closer, her room in the palace just felt so much more comfortable to her.

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The Ascent labs were finally open and ready for her, and Erin had cleared out her room in the palace and returned to Colorado. She was having one last lunch with her friends in Canterlot, as today was the day that her friends would return home, picking up where they'd left off with their lives. Today was the day that Erin was going back into Ascent to start the process of becoming human, again.

Pinkie wasn't happy.

"You should stay a pony, Sunflower," she said firmly. "I think you make a great pony."

"Thank you, Pinkie," Erin said, smiling. "But I want you guys to get to know the real me, too."

"We *know* the real you," Pinkie said. "We've met her. She's you. And we *like* her. It doesn't matter what you look like."

"Well, if it doesn't matter what I look like, then why does it matter if I'm a human or a pony?" Erin said with a brief laugh.

"Hmm. Good point. Hey, you gonna finish that cupcake?"

"Yes!"

The others laughed as Erin made an absurd display of protecting her cupcake, hunching over it with her forelegs on either side, and a mock-scowl on her face.

"My cupcake!"

"Aww..."

"Get your own cupcake, Pinkie!"

"Ooh! Good idea!"

Pinkie summoned the waiter while the others shared a laugh.

"It's gonna be mighty strange to see ya on two legs, Erin," Applejack said. "It's hard to imagine what you'll look like as a human."

"It's still going to be me, though," Erin pointed out.

"Yes, darling," Rarity said. "But I won't be able to make you any further ensembles!"

"You can't just measure me and make something?" Erin asked, surprised.

"I *could*, I suppose." Rarity said, waving a hoof. "And, eventually, I might even figure out how to make something that drapes correctly, doesn't chafe and feels comfortable. I design works for *ponies*, my dear. Hominids are quite different."

"Oh. Makes sense."

"You'll be safe, won't you?" Fluttershy asked her.

"Of course she will," Pinkie Pie said, taking a huge bite out of her new cupcake.

"I'll be fine. I've done it once already, after all." Erin patted the pegasus with a hoof to comfort her.

"Are you any faster as a human?" Rainbow Dash asked her, focusing on the conversation once again. She'd been staring out the window for the last ten minutes. Specifically, she'd been staring at the sky and unconsciously flexing her wings. If Erin had to guess, her friend was getting bored of the conversation and was aching for some action.

"Maybe if I strap a rocket booster to me," Erin said with a snort. "No, I'm *much* faster as a pony than I am as a human."

"Why change, then?" Dash asked. "I have to agree with Pinkie. Seems like you're giving up a lot just to change how you look."

"I'm getting hands back, though," Erin pointed out.

"What's the big deal with hands?"

"Everything is easier with hands."

"Not flying. Go and come back as a pegasus. I'll teach you some cool moves."

"She should come back as an earth pony!" Pinkie said.

"No, a pegasus!"

"A unicorn!"

"No, a..." Rainbow Dash trailed off, confused. "Why a unicorn, Pinkie?"

"Because then she'd be all pointy!"

"It's for my sake, too," Erin said, trying to change the subject while Dash struggled with that last statement. "It's been so long, I just feel a need to reconnect with my humanity. It probably sounds silly, but..."

She trailed off, and Rarity nodded understandingly.

"It can be quite difficult to remember your roots if you're cut off from them completely," she said, and Erin flashed her a grateful smile.

"Anyway, I have to go home for a while after I change. My parents have offered to open up their home to some refugees, and the family moving in have two little girls who will be staying in my old room. I have to go clear it out."

"Speaking of returning home, I've heard a rumor that the Princesses are going to request that the gateways remain closed, only to be opened occasionally," Rarity mentioned.

"Yes," Twilight said. "Once a month for a three-day stretch. They're worried about damaging the Veil of Equestria permanently, if the gate is kept open for too long."

"So, it may be over a month before we see you again?" Pinkie asked sadly.

"Yes, Pinkie," Erin said somberly. "But look at it this way: That just gives you more time to plan my welcome back party!"

Pinkie just stared at her for a moment. "You know, why does everyone just *assume* that I'll throw a party for them? Isn't that kind of rude?"

"Uh..." Erin blushed, not sure what to say.

"Maybe it's because I love throwing parties," she said thoughtfully, then grinned. "You know, I bet that's it!"

Erin realized that Pinkie was winding her up when her friend winked at her. She let out a relieved sigh, and then said formally, "Pinkie, when I return to Ponyville, I would greatly appreciate having a welcoming party. And, as you throw the best parties of all time, I was hoping that you would be the one to throw that party for me. Would you be so kind as to do me that honor?"

"My dear Sunflower," Pinkie replied, just as seriously, while holding Erin's hoof in hers. "It would be my pleasure."

The friends all laughed, and the conversation ranged from point to point after that. One thing that was brought up was what they would do with the TV screen Erin had bought for them.

"We could set it up in the library," Twilight suggested. "That would give all of Ponyville access to it, and the movies on it."

"There's a problem with that," Erin mentioned. "Ponyville doesn't have an internet connection yet, does it?"

"Oh... I forgot about that," Twilight said with a frown. That particular technology was still extremely new to the ponies.

"I didn't," Erin said with a broad smile. "I've already sent a Fet-Ex package to the library with a media center I bought. Those can be hooked up to the internet, but can also be used to store and play back movies. I've loaded a bunch of my favorites onto it, and I've included instructions on installation."

"Oh, how nice!" Rarity said, happily.

"Neat! I say we make one night a week 'Designated Movie Night' and get together to watch at least one of them!" Pinkie said.

"Works for me," Rainbow replied. "I've been wanting to watch some more of those action ones."

The friends all talked a bit longer, but then it was finally time for the last train back to Ponyville. Erin walked them to the station, feeling sad. Things were changing, and a part of her was scared that those changes may cause a divide between her and her friends.

They said their goodbyes on the train platform, with hugs and tears enough to go around. The ponies got on the train, and Erin waved as it pulled out of the station. She stood there, in the cold, for a few minutes, watching until it was out of sight. Then, with a sigh, she turned and walked away.

The streets of Canterlot were nearly empty, most of the ponies in town preferring their cozy homes to the chill of the night, especially since a somewhat wicked wind had cropped up. Erin made her lonely way to the castle, deep in thought the whole time. She traced through the familiar corridors of the castle and out into the garden, shivering at the re-introduced cold, then made her way through the gate and back to Colorado.

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Three weeks after the Tide

It was the single most expensively decorated nursery in the entirety of Equestria, with an antique carved-oak crib, magnificent tapestries and paintings depicting, for the most part, bunnies and other woodland creatures playing in the grass, and toys made so long ago that an archeologist would sit up and take notes.

Many of them had teeth marks and drool stains on them by this point.

Celestia smiled indulgently at the colt as he stumbled and fell backwards. She had expected him to start crying. Instead, he giggled, and started getting back up onto his hooves.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" Luna asked, and Celestia's smile faded.

"Yes, I do," she replied sadly. "What else could I do? He had the intellect of an infant. It made sense that his body should match."

The little colt shook his black mane out of his eyes and smiled up at her, flexing his wings briefly as he tried to walk towards her. Her smile returned, though touched with melancholy.

"And, perhaps this way he could have the childhood he had missed out on, growing up," Celestia continued. "He had a terrible childhood, did I ever mention that?"

"Oh, I didn't mean *that*," Luna said dismissively. "I meant assuming the role of his mother. I can't see that ending in anything other than complete disaster."

Celestia stared at her smirking younger sister, then grinned back.

"Oh, like *you* know anything about raising foals," she said, teasingly.

"I know just as much as you do," Luna reminded her. Celestia's smile faded.

"There just never seemed time before, for one of my own," she said. "And a lack of appropriate suitors may have had something to do with it as well. But now... I find myself feeling oddly complete."

"Perhaps motherhood suits you," Luna replied archly. "You definitely have the hips for it."

Celestia flared a wing out, catching Luna sharply on the back of the head. Her sister chuckled.

"I apologize, sister," the Night Princess said. "You have the figure of a mare half your age."

Celestia scowled at her sister in mock anger. Then she sighed, and turned back to smile warmly the colt.

"I appreciate the attempts at distraction," Celestia said, sincerely. Luna nodded somberly.

She watched the alicorn colt playing for a while longer, then said, softly, "I know it's not him, not really. Everything he'd learned, everything he became, is gone. His mind was destroyed, and I wasn't sure that even the two of us together could repair it well enough to make a functioning whole."

She looked at Luna and smiled sadly.

"I know this is not what he would have wanted," she said. "But I can't help but think that some part of him would be happy to know that, in a small way, he would live on."

Luna nodded.

"And for a name?" she asked. "Calling him Malachite might bring some unwanted questions."

"Questions I will have to answer, when he's old enough," Celestia said sadly.

"No, Celestia. Questions that *I* will answer when he's old enough."

Celestia looked at Luna, confused and slightly annoyed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know you. You will wish to spare him until well past the time he's old enough to learn the truth. And," she continued, overriding Celestia's protests, "and, he deserves to know the whole truth. The unvarnished truth, so that he can see the whole of the grain, including the flaws."

"Luna," Celestia began, a warning in her voice, but the Night Princess wouldn't be deterred.

"No. This is for me to do. I will be the one that tells him the terrible truth before he finds it out himself. The one that he hates for upsetting his life, for telling him things he'd rather never know. And *you* will be the one who helps him to make sense of it all, and who helps him put the pieces back together. I am quite firm on this, Celestia. You *know* it is for the best."

Celestia stared at her younger sister for a long while, finally nodding her agreement.

"Regarding a name," Celestia said eventually, "Malachite is gone, effectively dead. This colt deserves a new name to go with his new life. He was named after stone, before, but his passion was always the study of life. I believe his new name should reflect that. How do you feel about having a nephew named Prince Verdant?"

"Verdant," Luna said, looking thoughtfully at the colt. "Why, yes. I believe that would suit him admirably." Then she looked startled. "Wait, 'nephew'?"

"But of course, Auntie Luna," Celestia said, chuckling, as the newly-named Prince Verdant collapsed on top of a pile of antique wooden blocks.

This time, he *did* start wailing. Celestia clucked with concern and rushed to his side to comfort him.

"'Auntie Luna'," Luna replied, a little dreamily. "Yes. I think I would like that very much."

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Three months after the Tide

The second emitter lab, built back when the portal to Equestria was open constantly, was small and cramped compared to the main lab, and had an unpleasant smell slightly reminiscent of a locker room. Maggie despised coming here, but whenever there was a possible hit from the scanning team, it was her job to check them out. She preferred not to leave that task in anyone else's hands.

"Are we opening it soon?" a voice piped up from about the height of Maggie's elbow. She smiled warmly down at the mint-green unicorn who'd moved into the Harmonic's lab and become their unofficial mascot.

"We sure are," Maggie confirmed. "I'm actually kind of surprised that you're still so excited to see these, Lyra."

"Are you kidding?" Lyra asked, wide-eyed. "You're opening doors to whole new *worlds*! That's *easily* the most exciting thing I've ever heard of!"

"Yeah, but most of the time, we end up looking out into empty space, or an airless hunk of rock," Maggie noted, making some adjustments to the panel before her.

"True, but that doesn't really change how exciting it is," Lyra said, bouncing slightly on her hooves.

The emitters started to hum, and the unicorn squealed with delighted anticipation. A couple of the techs out on the floor chuckled warmly at the sound. Lyra was really adored by the whole team, and considered by many to be good luck for the project.

"Maybe it's still that way for you," Maggie said. "But I've attended hundreds of these. If I got that excited every time... "

The window blipped into existence, and Maggie stopped, looking towards it.

"Um. Maggie?" Lyra said after a while. "Isn't that plant life?"

Maggie just stared at the window. For the first time since Equestria, she saw another world that was obviously capable of supporting life. Even though the window wasn't completely open, all tests were conducted behind an air-tight sterilized plexiglass and steel chamber, designed to prevent any Earth contaminants entering new worlds and vice-versa. And, clearly visible through the clear chamber walls, was a very normal-looking tree standing on a hill, surrounded by a meadow full of strange purple flowers.

The technicians on the floor had started babbling excitedly at this new discovery. Maggie snapped herself out of her stupor and began issuing orders.

"Increase emitter output and open a full gateway!" she barked, and the hum of the emitters increased. The image shimmered, changing from a mere visual into an actual opening into the foreign world.

"Launch the drones, get the base set up! Now! Go! Before that gateway closes out!"

Several dozen drones, stationed in the room on standby, zipped off onto the new world. A robot on treads detached itself from the wall and trundled its way through the newly formed gate. The fusion-powered robot, a new addition since they'd found Equestria, would act as a base station, collecting the data from the drones and greatly extending their range as it moved itself through the land.

In addition, several powerful vacuum pumps started up, pumping the air from the foreign environment into sterile tanks for analysis. Dust, spores, and pollen could all be analyzed, along with the chemical makeup of the air itself.

"You're launching drones?" Lyra asked. Maggie, still transfixed on the sight before her, just nodded. "Well, try not to wake up any ancient evil creatures this time, okay?"

Maggie chuckled, though her attention was primarily focused on the screen in front of her.

"Atmosphere looks good!" one of the techs said excitedly. "Oxygen at twenty-two percent, nitrogen at seventy-seven. About forty-eight percent humidity. Seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit, or about twenty-four Celsius. Seems like a nice day!"

"Gravity is about the same as ours," another tech said. "give or take a hundredth of a percent."

Maggie felt like bounding around the room in pure joy.

"Any signs of civilization yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," still another tech said. "No signs of radio broadcasts, at least, and no signs of development or structures. Far too early to call it yet, though," he pointed out.

"Of course," Maggie said.

"Maggie?" Lyra said.

"Yes, Lyra?"

"You know that job you wanted me to do? The one that you probably thought I'd never have to worry about?"

"Um..?" Maggie said, still distracted by the sight in front of her. Had she asked Lyra to do something? "Oh, you mean checking for magic?"

"Yes." Lyra said. "There's a magical field there."

Maggie stopped and blinked at her.

"Magic?"

"Yes. Though it feels... odd. Compared to Equestria, I mean."

Maggie took a moment to process that.

"How is it odd?" she asked finally.

"I don't know. Like... Wild, or something. A little scary. It's really hard to say without setting a hoof in there."

"Well, we can't have you do that, yet. We need to investigate the place a little bit, first."

Lyra nodded, frowning at the gateway.

"Something wrong?" Maggie asked, and the unicorn shook her head.

"Not really. Just, not what I'm used to. The magical field of Equestria seems... well, *smooth* compared to that. It's a little rough over there."

"Do you think it's dangerous?" Maggie asked, concerned. It would figure that the one thing wrong with this new world so far would be the one thing humanity had almost no experience with.

"No... Or, at least, I don't know for sure. I'll let you know when I can actually go there and try to use it."

"Use it?" Maggie asked, concerned. "Would *that* be dangerous?"

"Maybe," the unicorn said with a grin. "But that's what I'm paid the big bits for, right?"

"Don't do anything right now," Maggie said. "I want other unicorns here to back you up, in case something goes wrong."

"Okay," Lyra said, looking both disappointed and slightly relieved.

They gathered as much data as they could on the new world before the fields shifted enough that they lost the window. The gateway blipped out of existence as quickly as it had appeared.

"Do you think this is it?" one of the techs asked. "A new world for people?"

"Way too early to tell," Maggie replied. Then she laughed, saying, "It seems pretty likely, though, if only because we no longer desperately need it. Irony is a fine thing!"

She pulled up a video screen at her station and started dialing up the office of Robert Thomson. It would be nice to give the old man some *good* news for a change.

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Four months after the Tide

Erin stepped off of the train from Canterlot, feeling once again awkward and uncertain around the ponies of Ponyville. She wasn't sure if she was actually being stared at, or if she was just self conscious about her recent change, but she nevertheless trotted quickly through the streets in the cool air of an Equestrian spring evening.

She'd come through the Canterlot gate just a few hours ago, meeting with both of the Princesses before catching the train. Both Celestia and Luna had given her new body amused glances before asking her if she'd like to have some tea. Which, of course, was special Princess-code for "this is an excuse for us to sit you down and interrogate you for a while, won't that be nice?"

Still, the tea had been delicious, as well as the cookies. In spite of being pumped for information, she'd had a wonderful time.

That is, up until they were interrupted by a small, rambunctious dark green colt with a messy black mane, who insisted on clambering up on Celestia's back and tugging on her hair. Celestia excused herself, and left to put the colt to bed.

"Was that...?" Erin stared after the retreating Princess, in mild shock. The Princesses had told her, months ago, what their plan was. But to see the results of it for herself had beyond unexpected.

"Prince Verdant," Luna said. "And no, he's not Malachite. It would be more appropriate to say that... Verdant is his son, after a fashion. The child knows nothing of his previous life."

"How were you able to do that?" Erin asked, amazed.

"It was difficult. His mind was in pieces, what was left of it. The Elements had done what they could, but healed him incompletely. Ascent reformed his body, and we did the rest. If we had left him as he was, he never would have grown past what you had seen when Celestia finished the Tide. We made his mind an infant's, so that he could grow again, learn again."

"I see..."

"This troubles you?" Luna asked.

Erin considered that for a moment.

"It did, I admit. But, now that I've seen him, he seems to be a perfectly normal child. I can't hold Malachite's actions against him."

Still, Erin thought that it was downright spooky what the Princesses could do, sometimes.

She'd left shortly after that to catch the train to Ponyville. Her friends had long since returned to their lives, and she hadn't seen them in a month. She was really looking forward to seeing them again, though she was really worried about how they'd react when they saw her.

She was now in Equestria by special invitation of the Princesses, and here to study magic at the request of her own government, who had offered to pay her expenses. The last time she'd been here, she'd actually gotten a lucky break on a small cottage, and had put down a deposit and paid several months rent up front, much to her landlady's happy surprise.

She walked quickly through the familiar town, ignoring the questioning stares from the ponies passing by until she got to the library. Reaching up, she knocked with a hoof, then waited until Spike opened the door. The little dragon took one look at her and his eyes bugged out.

"Holy guacamole! Twilight, come quick!"

Erin heard a discussion in the background get interrupted as Twilight excused herself and trotted up to the door.

"What is it, Spike? Oh! Erin! You're a pony again!"

"Um. Yes, I am," she replied.

"And... you're a unicorn," Twilight noted, looking at the horn on her head with a confused look.

"Yup, that too. There's also this," she said, and spread her wings.

There was a long, strained silence while Twilight just gaped at her, and then the unicorn shouted, "What the heck did you *do*!?"

"Well," Erin said, blushing. "I decided you were right. It's silly to keep going back to Ascent every few months to change into a different type of pony."

Twilight was still gawping at her, and Erin started feeling really uncomfortable.

"And, Malachite was a long time ago, so I feel less weird about it now," Erin continued, but Twilight was still just staring.

As the silence dragged on, she started to fidget, scraping at the floor with a hoof.

"Are... are you okay, Twilight?"

"I'm not sure," she replied, shaking her head. "I wasn't expecting this. Why didn't you say anything last month?"

"I hadn't made up my mind, then," Erin replied. "Plus, I was having too much fun being stared at by every pony within blocks," she added dryly.

Erin's previous visit to Ponyville, when the gateway to Earth was last open, had been as a human. News of the humans had spread pretty far, and they weren't an uncommon sight in Canterlot. But Ponyville was far enough off the beaten path that they still hadn't seen many at that time, outside of the occasional documentary crew. Her existence had been the cause of a lot of stares and whispers, though no one seemed to connect the visiting human with the mare named Sunflower at that time.

"I'm completely speechless," Twilight said, still staring at her. Then she grinned. "You know, a pony with wings *and* a horn is usually a Princess, right?"

"Oh. Well, that would explain why everypony on the train was staring at me like that. And why Celestia and Luna looked like they were trying not to laugh. Um. Are ponies going to get upset by this?"

"Well... probably not. It's just... wow. Even though it was my suggestion, I can't believe you actually did this!"

Twilight started laughing, and Erin felt embarrassed.

"It's too much, isn't it?" she asked, blushing. "I should probably go back and just have them make me a unicorn, or something."

"No, no," Twilight said, forcing her face straight. "No, it's totally fine.. *Princess Sunflower*."

Erin frowned at the unicorn in front of her, and Twilight's lips started quivering. Then she lost it, laughing so hard she collapsed to the ground.

"I never should have let you talk me into this," Erin grumbled.

Twilight eventually calmed down enough to invite her in, and Erin hesitantly went into the library, to find the rest of her friends waiting for her. This dinner had been planned weeks ago, the last time Erin had been in Ponyville. She'd told her friends then that she was planning on moving here, to continue her studies into the nature of magic.

That's when Pinkie had decided to plan a party, but Erin had quickly vetoed her. She told them that she'd much rather just have a quiet dinner with friends, so they could catch up on each other's lives. And then they could have a party the next day, to celebrate her first full day as an official citizen of Ponyville.

Pinkie had wholeheartedly agreed to that, happy as could be, as long as she got to throw a party at some time. Erin had been really looking forward to it, but now she was concerned that she'd just be a laughingstock.

After Twilight's reaction, her friends' laughter and teasing wasn't unexpected. To her surprise, though, as soon as the laughter died down, Rainbow Dash immediately offered to teach her how to use her new wings. Erin had eagerly accepted, as flying was one of the things she was most excited to learn.

"I suppose, as an alicorn, you're gonna have some pretty fantastic speed, huh?" Rainbow said, a challenging glint in her eye.

"I doubt it," Erin admitted. "Malachite didn't know how to make an alicorn like the Princesses, so he just kinda... mashed the three pony types together into one body. Hermann and the Ascent team had tried to modify Malachite's design, but... well, he was a genius when it came to pony biology, and it's not nearly as well known to human scientists. They did the best they could, but I really doubt that I'll be anything above average."

She went on to explain that this current body wasn't their first attempt. At first, they'd tried making a humanoid pony that resembled her own original body, but with pony organs. But something got lost in the translation, and Lyra had confirmed that Erin had absolutely zero magical ability.

Hermann had offered to try again, but Erin had said no. She'd been eager to get started, and told them that someone else could be the pony-human hybrid test subject. As soon as she'd woken up in her pseudo-alicorn form, she hadn't needed Lyra's confirmation of magical ability: she'd been able to sense the unicorn's magic-storing torc as soon as she'd walked into Erin's room.

She was glad that she'd insisted on having the normal-sized pony stature, though, rather than being enormous like Celestia and Luna. She'd felt, apparently correctly, that she'd have a hard enough time fitting in without also towering over everypony else.

The friends chatted for a short while, catching up on the business of the town. Erin was pleased to find out that Meadowlark and Starburst had gotten married, finally, and were currently on their honeymoon, with Marigold staying with her grandparents. It still hurt that Meadowlark hadn't wanted to renew their friendship, but she couldn't exactly blame the mare.

Then the topic turned to how things were going on Earth.

"It's exciting times, and not always in a good way," Erin admitted. "Lots of people are really, really upset about Ascent."

"Why is that?" Twilight asked, honestly puzzled. "I'd think having the ability to cure any disease or illness would be universally approved of."

"Near-universally, yes. There are a few people who think it's unclean, or against the will of God, or some such thing. Most people seem to accept it just fine, though, and that's the problem. There's no way that

there are enough Ascent offices open right now to meet the demand for everyone who wants it."

Erin went on to explain the enormous cost and difficulty involved in setting up Ascent offices around the world, though the cost had already come down considerably over the last few months. As it was, each office could handle anywhere from ten to twenty clients in a week, with each office having waiting lists in the thousands, or tens of thousands.

"We're building them as fast as we can, but the cost is another sticking point," Erin explained. "The Ascent Committee owns ones that are just used for the terminally ill, and those are free to use, but there are still more sick than there are offices to treat them. The rest, the ones who license the Ascent technology, charge outrageously. And people who can afford it are more than happy to pay. Those that don't have the money, though..."

"Oh, dear," Rarity said. "Is there any way that I can help?"

Erin smiled at the white unicorn. It wasn't an idle question; Rarity had launched a human-based style and accessory line on Earth, run by human proxies but with all design choices approved by the fashionista herself. Rarity, Inc. could indeed help, as the company was now highly profitable.

But Erin simply smiled and shook her head.

"You're doing enough, Rarity. Your company is already giving almost all of its profit to charity."

"If you say so," Rarity said. "Still, I think I'll send a quick note to Amy about it. Maybe there's still something we can do."

Rarity had assigned the CEO position in her company to a human woman named Amy Marlis, who'd managed to impress the unicorn with her business savvy and fashion sense. The mare preferred the more personal touch of her Carousel Boutique to running a large design company. She sent over new design ideas every month, and received reports, updates and feedback on new fashion trends each time the gateway to Earth was opened.

Erin sighed. "Sadly, this isn't something that can be fixed right away. It isn't even an issue with money, really. There just aren't enough trained technicians or facilities yet. They're building and training as fast as they can, but it's still going to be a while before Ascent technology is readily available and inexpensive enough for everyone."

"That's terrible," Fluttershy said. "And people are angry?"

"Many are, yes. There are lots of people pushing to make terminally ill people the top priority, and there's a huge amount of support for that. But the companies say that they *need* the huge fees from the rich to continue to expand, and that this is the fastest way to get Ascent for everyone. I don't know, it's just a mess."

"When is that office going to open over here?" Applejack asked. "There are lots of ponies that could use it, includin' my granny."

"Well, they have a group of pony technicians in training, and they're planning on opening the first office in Manhattan by the end of the year," Erin said.

"Wait, wait," Pinkie Pie said. "If it's so super hard to get into an Ascent lab, then how did you get your new pony body?"

Erin sighed. This was actually something she felt horribly guilty about, even though it wasn't her doing at all.

"The original lab, the one in the Harmonics facility, is for official use only. Because of that, it's almost never used. When I think about how many lives could be saved every month with just that one, even though it's older and slower than the new ones, it turns my stomach a little. But that's how I was able to get changed like this. Because the government asked me to study magic, and it would help to be able to use magic to study it."

"That makes sense, I guess," Twilight said, frowning. "But it's a pity they don't use that one for the sick children."

Erin agreed, but then decided that she'd had enough of this topic for now. It was something that had been twisting her up for a while, now, and she wanted to enjoy this first evening back with her friends.

"That reminds me," she said, in a bid to change the subject, "one of the major concerns about Ascent is what we're going to do with the resulting population boom. If nobody ever has to die of illness or old age, well... there's seven billion of us already, and we've lost a *lot* of farmlands to the Tide."

"That sounds like an ugly problem," Applejack said. "Maybe we could send some earth ponies over, to help with farmin'?"

"Well, that would be nice, but hopefully unnecessary. They never stopped looking for new worlds with Project Harmonics, looking for new worlds we can expand to, or even just get resources from. And, believe it or not... we've already found one!"

"Whoah, really?" Rainbow Dash said. "That's awesome!"

"Yeah! And, what's more, Lyra says that it has some sort of magic field of its own, just a little different from Equestria."

"Whoah!" Pinkie said, bouncing on her hooves. "What are the people like, there? Are they nice?"

"We don't think it's inhabited. At least, not by intelligent life. We haven't seen any signs of habitation or anything, so far."

"What are you planning on doing with it?" Twilight asked. "Humans, I mean. Not you, personally."

"Well, the plan is to make absolutely sure that there are no intelligent life forms, and then it will be open for colonization by both ponies and humans."

The others seemed surprised by that, and Erin reminded them, "It's in the agreement, remember? We signed an agreement that ponies would get access to both Ascent technology and any habitable worlds we find. It's a nice place, so far, from what I've heard. Very much like Earth and Equestria, having similar plants and animals with a few differences. The official name of that world is Harmony. Maggie and Lyra picked it together."

"You're not planning on going exploring on *another* new world, are you, Erin?" Twilight asked her, smiling.

"No, no," Erin replied, laughing. "I've had enough of that for now. Somepony else can go face the great unknown. I'm perfectly happy spending the next few years of my life here, studying magic."

"Won't you miss your family?" Fluttershy asked.

"Well, yeah. Of course. But I can visit them once a month. Or even more often, if Celestia and Luna decide it's okay to open the gateways more frequently. They were talking about changing it to twice a month, or maybe even one day a week."

"That would be awesome!" Rainbow Dash said. "You still owe me a visit to that Blue Angels thing you promised before."

"I haven't forgotten!" Erin said, laughing. "There's a whole lot on Earth that I want to show you guys."

They continued to talk well into the night, happy in each other's company. Eventually, just after midnight, the group started wrapping up. Applejack, as was usual, was the first to go, citing early morning farm work as why she needed to get home. The others all left shortly after, leaving Erin in the library with Twilight and the already-sleeping Spike.

Erin spent the night in Twilight's guest bed, and in the morning she found her new home, a small cottage on the outskirts of Ponyville. All of the equipment she'd ordered was there already, including the solar panels, which she would have to have installed in place of the thatched roof.

She spent an hour or so unpacking some of her things, and then decided not to rush it. She'd be here for a while, after all. Instead, she went outside, just standing in her new back yard with her eyes closed, breathing the clean air and enjoying the serene near-quiet of a Ponyville morning.

"Oh, hey there," a voice said, and Erin opened her eyes to see a familiar grey pegasus just exiting the house next to hers. "You must be our new neighbor! Nice to meet you!"

"Oh, hi! Yes, I am. Say, don't you work for the Royal Mail service?"

"Yup! And you work for Fet-Ex, right? Or, at least you used to. Are you going to work for them again, now that you're back?"

"I... don't know," Erin said. The truth was, she didn't *need* to get a job this time. Technically, her job was to research magic. But working for Fet-Ex had been fun, and it was a good way to meet and interact with a lot of ponies. She had fond memories of working there.

Well, except for the uniform. But maybe Rarity could help with that.

"You know what? I think I might," she said, smiling.

"Oh, that's good," the pegasus said, one of her eyes drifting lazily to the side. "They could use the help! The worker they hired after you didn't work out, and ended up just quitting one day."

"Oh, that's too bad," Erin replied, not sure what else to say about that.

"Anyway, I gotta fly. Work starts soon! Oh, and nice wings and horn. Those are new, right?"

Erin grinned, and affirmed that they were, in fact, brand new. The pegasus smiled and waved as she flew away, and Erin waved back, kicking herself when she realized that she'd never asked for her new neighbor's name.

She went back into the little cottage, taking a mental inventory of all the things she'd need to buy. It was a cute house, but it definitely needed some touches, and maybe some new furniture. Well, at least she knew where she could buy a new sofa, as well as any quills she might need.

And still, she had a party to look forward to, tonight. One that, she hoped, would be just one of many more to come. Equestria held many secrets, and not just magic. There were chimeras, and hydras, and all sorts of other things. And, apparently, zebras had their own magic as well, completely unrelated to pony magic.

As Erin began cleaning her little cottage, she reflected that there were few fates more pleasant than having a lot to keep her occupied, but with no rush to get it done, and the prospect of good times spent with good friends to help pass the time.

And so, she began her first full day as an official citizen of Ponyville, pleased with her place in the world. A place that included a most fascinating field of study: The magic of friendship.

Author's Notes

If you've stuck with me this far on this story, then I have one thing I would very much like to say to you: Thank you!

This has been an incredible experience for me. So many people have been incredibly supportive, in private messages and in the comments.

Once again, I would like to thank Easteu for the incredible cover art for this. I'm not kidding when I say that getting that picture was one of the most wonderful things I'd ever received. I have that up on my PC as my desktop wallpaper right now, as I write this!

So, here is where I will try to answer some questions, and go into details on the process that brought Sunflower to life.

Just a word of warning, there's a lot of "behind the scenes" stuff here. Hopefully, it won't alter your perspective on the story itself, but some of my early ideas were terrible, comical or just very different than the final version.

Project: Sunflower, how it began:

After my unexpected success with Interview with a Princess, I wanted to write a new story with some actual *substance*. Interview, as fun as that was, was more or less a fluff piece that I knocked out in about two weeks, all told.

So, I sat down and thought about what kinds of stories I liked. And I realized that I really liked stories that had humans interacting with ponies.

A few things came together all at once at about this time. I was going through my old stories that I had started writing when I was a teenager, and found the first appearance of what would later become the Black Tide. I also saw my first summary of The Conversion Bureau on EQD, though I didn't read it at that time. The thought of "ponification" seemed compelling to me, and I realized that I wanted to write a story where a human had a valid reason to become a pony.

The third thing that happened, and that made everything start to gel, was GeneralZoi's pony creator. I was playing around with it, making OC's, and I happened to make one with a light brown coat and auburn mane. She was a blank flank, though, and I thought about what would look good for a cutie mark. I did some internet searching, stumbled across a sunflower... and Sunflower the OC was born.

That's where everything kind of went "click". I took my old idea of a world-ending threat, the idea of ponification which I'd blatantly stolen from the TCB setting (though I did change it a little) and then I co-opted another old idea I'd had of making portals to various worlds.

Then came the planning stages. You would not *believe* some of the stuff that ended up on the cutting room floor. Most of this was during the initial planning stages, before I put down even one word of story.

One thing I wanted to mention, I've seen some comments about my knock against TCB stories in one of the later chapters. I really hope I didn't offend anyone. I'm a fan of the TCB setting (I really like the idea of an actual reason to 'ponify'), though some of those stories are disturbingly misanthropic. I just couldn't resist a quick dig, given the similarities between that setting and mine.

What's next? Sunflower: Side Projects and sequel

There will be a full-blown sequel to Project: Sunflower some time in the future. I want to write on some other projects, for a while, to clear away some of these ideas I've had kicking around in my head, plus I have a couple of other big projects I've been aching to get started on.

To keep my hand in, and keep this particular world fresh, I'll be writing Sunflower: Side Projects, which is intended to be a collection of one-shot side stories, based on this setting. Side Projects will fill in some of the gaps in this story, as well as bridging the gaps between Project: Sunflower and the still-untitled sequel.

Also, one of my thoughts on writing this was that this could be a somewhat open setting for other authors. Between Harmonics and Ascent, we have multiple possible worlds, as well as the ability to change into ponies, or whatever other form you wish.

So, I'll leave the setting completely open. My only request is that nobody else writes Erin as a character. Refer to her in your stories, yes, but please don't have her as a character in your actual story. It would feel really weird to have Erin running around in someone else's work.

Other OC's are fine, and don't worry too much about keeping 'canon'. Just have fun with the setting. And, if you *do* write a story based on this setting, consider adding it to the Project Harmonics group, to keep them collected.

Equestria-side antagonist

One of the things I realized right away was, as big of a threat that the Black Tide was in the story, the Tide itself was... boring. I needed an antagonist in Equestria to spice things up, make things interesting. Otherwise, it would have been chapter after chapter of "oh, no! The Earth is being destroyed and we can't stop it!" style angst.

Malachite wasn't my original antagonist on the Equestrian side. During my early planning stages, it was going to be the Fae Queen, an analogue of the old faerie legends, and *not* the nice Disney ones. Think the Brothers Grimm. This was going to be a serious threat, deadly and vicious.

The Fae Queen and her subjects had been locked away ages ago by Luna and Celestia, into a small pocket dimension. Humanity's continuing forays into Equestria would have weakened the dimensional walls of the prison, and allowed her to escape.

I decided that I didn't like that. I think the main reason I didn't like it was because Terry Pratchett had already done a much better job with that story in *Lords and Ladies*. Once I realized that the Fae Queen was essentially the same villain on hooves, I decided to ditch the concept.

A while later, Queen Chrysalis of the changelings showed up in the show, and I was *really* glad I had changed it! Far too similar for my tastes.

My next idea was a creature called Hive. It wasn't much, simply an eldritch abomination type critter sealed into a cave ages ago by Celestia. I didn't like the idea much, because it was a very two-dimensional character. It was evil for the sake of being evil, which I've always disliked. Why did Celestia seal it in a cave? How come it couldn't get out? How could I make it interesting?

There was only *one* thing about my concept of the Hive that I liked, and that was its ability to possess technology. I toyed with the idea of that being why Equestria's technology was so lagging: Anything that Hive could possess was forbidden tech. Contact with the Earth turned our world into a candyland for the Hive.

Hive lasted for about two days, with me sketching up ideas and discarding them, completely unsatisfied. I simply couldn't make it interesting! So, I abandoned the concept of an Equestrian antagonist with reluctance.

Malachite appeared in a flash of inspiration at about that time. So many things just came together all of a sudden. The concept of otherworldly faeries and a hivelike creature all came together, and I realized that it was a pony, a former student of Celestia, who was going to be the antagonist of the Equestrian side of things. I didn't plan it. Malachite sprung into my mind, almost completely formed, just needing a few details fleshed out.

As soon as I had his bio done, so many parts of the story just fell into place. That bio was later fleshed out to be the side-story "Death is not for me".

I'd like to take credit for creating him, but honestly, there was no planning involved. He just showed up one day and introduced himself.

Wait, wait... No Malachite? Then what was the original ending?

Well... before humanity's time ran out, and before the mass exodus begun, Harmony was discovered. A new, uninhabited planet that humans could move into en masse, without displacing any ponies. And, what's more, it had magic so ponies could live there too. And there was Ascent, so humans could become ponies, and ponies could become human. For absolutely no reason, really.

I'm really glad I didn't go with it, though I kept the concept of Harmony (which will feature largely in the sequel). Going with that ending would have just been like, "Oh, all those struggles you went through? Yeah, those were pointless. Here, have a pristine new world just handed to you."

As soon as I thought of Malachite, I knew how this story would end. As did many of you. I have to confess, the urge to alter my ending (changing it specifically to something that wasn't mentioned in the comments) was very high. In the end, though, I kept the ending that was originally in my mind, once I discovered Malachite.

It just felt right. And the other ideas I had were... kind of silly.

What are some other things that didn't make it into the story?

Romantic sub plots, and the sleeziest pony you know:

Erin was going to be in the middle of an unwanted love triangle between Big Mac and Lucky. Actually, she wasn't even going to be *aware* that she was in a love triangle, until Quick Sale (remember him?) got a little bit too pushy, and Big Mac and Lucky stepped in to put him in his place.

I pulled the part with Quick Sale, because I realized that I hated the "big guys step in to save the little girl from the bad guy" thing. It wasn't fair to Erin, who could take care of herself and hardly needed rescuing.

Then I realized the romantic sub-plot was dragging the story down, so I axed the whole thing. This was one of the few things I changed while actually writing. There were some pretty sweet scenes with a shy Big Mac trying to talk with Erin, and failing miserably. I honestly felt bad for what I was going to do to the poor guy!

Oh, well. That's what Side Projects is for, right?

Erin the hero:

I knew I wanted Erin to be a hero to Ponyville at one point. My first thought was that she rescued the Cutie Mark Crusaders from the Everfree, where they had gotten lost. But, nah, that was too boring, and pretty cliche.

Before I even started writing, I briefly considered an arc where the CMC got kidnapped by Paul Velchiek, because he was frustrated about not knowing how magic worked and they presented one of each type of pony as a research subject. Erin would have rescued them and brought them back to Equestria, simultaneously outing herself and becoming a hero.

That was on my mind for about half a day, which is honestly a lot longer than it deserved. It crossed the line between "this guy did a bad thing" and straight into "people are bastards" territory, because I realized that Paul couldn't have done this on his own. He would have needed the help of quite a few people. And it changed him from a guy who thought he was doing good things to save the Earth, and straight into cartoon villainy territory.

Honestly, I might as well have given him a white cat to pet while he laughed sinisterly at the Erin's attempts to thwart his plans.

I decided on the scene with the chimera, which I really like, and was *very* excited to finally write. Because Erin does some good things there, some brave things, but she doesn't save the day by herself. No, she needs the help of her friends, which reinforces the whole point of the show. And, also, it showed that the ponies, while being colorful, soft, and friendly, could also kick major butt when needed.

The Many Lives of Major Morris.

Major Morris was originally going to be a lot more interesting. He was originally going to be Erin's backup in "Ponyworld", having been ponified himself, and ready to rush in if she needed a rescue. he was also going to be a potential romantic interest, before I decided that, nope, he was married with kids.

That was axed because I wanted to focus on Erin's interactions with the ponies, and having a second human there would have been a distraction. Also, what does it mean that he'd be her backup? What, he'd just hang around outside Ponyville for weeks?

Major Morris's very existence was an attempt on my part to counter the idea that crops up a lot in fiction I've read that military people are these thuggish neanderthals who blindly follow orders without a conscience. His final backstory has him with dual masters degrees, married, and a father of two.

His working against Paul Velchiek when his ethical violations were discovered is the result of that. I can't imagine many people, military or not, being cool with remote-injecting mood altering drugs into unsuspecting volunteers. I imagine the very thought of it enraged him and made him feel physically ill.

Q&A time! And I'll start with the big one, first.

What the heck was the Black Tide?!

This goes way back, for me. A long, long time ago, I was trying to write a sci-fi story, where the Earth was being consumed by this thing called the Black Tide. Humanity was going to escape the planet using Ark ships, gigantic self-sustaining ships that went off into space and... Well, I have no idea what was going to happen then. I stopped writing it there because I had no plan and I'm no good at sci-fi.

Keep in mind, there's a chance that I may change the origin of the Black Tide. Everything you see here

was the back-story for my untitled and abandoned pony-less sci-fi story I was writing in High School. I may decide later on to change it, and that will be the new 'canon' for this story.

In my original back-story for the Tide, it was basically this:

There was once an alien race, now long since extinct, that had a peculiar way of making uninhabitable planets habitable. They would drop this biomass, along with programmed biological control nodules, onto a planet, and then just leave.

The nanomachines would then go out and reform the planet, first by creating an artificial organic "computer" layer, and then forming a crust on top for the aliens to live on. Then the nanomachines would turn themselves off, keeping themselves in reserve for when the computer layer needed a repair.

The planet-wide computer would then be used by the aliens to help control the weather, share information, etc.

The problem was, the aliens died off, and left some of their computer worlds running. At one point, one of these worlds was damaged, possibly due to an asteroid strike, and a "repair nodule" went zipping off into space and crashed on Earth.

The repair nodule by itself was kind of dumb. It knew that there was supposed to be a layer of biological computer material where it was, so it instructed its tiny little nanobots to go out and make the computer out of whatever they could find. The result was the Black Tide, essentially a vast, unprogrammed, alien biological computer with no off switch, that simply devoured everything that it came into contact with.

It's not really spelled out explicitly in Project: Sunflower, but the Black Tide was slowly learning, programming itself from information around it. If it had been the aliens who had put it here, it would have been created with programming already in place, but the Tide had to learn on its own.

Unfortunately, it had no compassion for life, and simply sought to expand its own existence, as per the instructions from the repair nodule (the "twisted mass of cells" that Malachite found).

That's what happened to Malachite. The Tide found his consciousness floating within its own, and decided to integrate his information with its own. Unfortunately, that had the side effect of basically killing poor Malachite.

Questions and Answers:

Question from Celestia's Paladin: "I think the question is not what the Black Tide is, but more of where did it come from, who made it, and what is its relation to the Fae Sprite."

Originally, there was no connection between the sprites and the Tide. The Tide, by examining Malachite's mind and his memories, discovered that the sprites could be used to possess people, wasn't limited to the space that the Tide currently was located in, and could be used to catalog all sorts of data, straight out of people's minds.

So, it simply took them. And the sprites, tired of being held back by Malachite and enticed by the much greater mental presence of the Tide, went willingly to their new master. If the Elements hadn't been used when they had been, things would have been very bad

Question from Gluestick: "In actual questions, He's def gonna be making appearances again, yessss?"

Sort of. Prince Verdant, in a way, could be considered Malachite's son. But, as Celestia considers herself his *mother*... Best not to suggest that around her!

Also, I'm playing with the thought of expanding on "Death is not for me", and making that a longer and more detailed stand-alone story.

Question from notMurphy: "When in the MLP timeline does Project: Sunflower start?"

Good question. After Discord, definitely. When I started writing, I had no idea about The Royal Wedding, Shining Armor and Cadence. Which is why I opted not to include them, when I first heard of them. Then I started realizing how silly that was. I'd need to get them into the story eventually!

But, "officially", this story starts several months after the wedding. I'll need to go back to earlier chapters and see if I need to do any revisions or alterations on the story to keep in line with that.

Question from Pen Brush: "why is machite a green alicorn why not a different color"

In his original life, he was born a green pony. His family, who had a mineral-theme going on with their names, named him Malachite. When he created his new body, he stuck with the green, because that was

his original color.

Questions from Dogman15:

"what are Queen Chrysalis and her Changelings doing right now, since they have to exist somewhere?"

Plotting. Planning. Paying *very* close attention to this whole new non-magical world, and mildly frustrated at the thought that their changeling magic may not work there.

Please, nobody mention the magic-storing torcs to Chrysalis. That would not end well.

"Will you re-submit this story to Equestria Daily?"

Absolutely. I've got a re-write of the first four chapters that I'm working on, to smooth out some of the complaints from the EqD pre-readers. Then I want to comb through the comments and make sure I took care of any grammar errors or typos that had been pointed out. Once I'm satisfied that I've got that reasonably cleaned up, I'll send it off for another try.

Question from Serifina: "Just how thorough can the Ascent transformations be? Can it change anything in the mind?"

Currently, Ascent works down to a cellular level. Can they alter things in the mind? Potentially, but they need to be *very* careful, or it could go very wrong.

If you're asking if this can be used to alter or recreate memories, the answer is also 'potentially'. But the scientists would need to know exactly how to create those memories in the brain in order to do so. If they just tried to make memories, they'd likely end up with just a horrific mish-mash of nonsense. It would be easier to copy memories from someone else's brain.

Questions from Gluestick: "Was I correct when I first came across Malachite and got a glimpse of his powers to assume that he was going to be required to save them all? Or, better put, was he always intended to redeem himself, even when everyone thought he wasn't to be trusted?"

When I first met Malachite, I knew that he was a very intelligent, very driven individual. He had his honor, but he would sometimes lose track of his ethics in pursuit of his goals.

He never intended to sacrifice himself. If given a choice between the entire Earth and himself, he would have chosen himself. He was always too afraid of death to even consider making that kind of sacrifice intentionally.

However, he knew there was a *risk*, and still took it. He believed he could handle it, but he still deliberately put himself in danger. More to regain Celestia's good will than anything, else, but still, it was a brave thing to do. He loved her, because she was beautiful, wise and noble and because she treated him with respect and compassion, but he also loved her because she never aged and wouldn't die; everything Malachite wanted for himself.

My intention was always to have him redeem himself this way. His sacrifice, though unintentional, saved lives and made him a very legitimate hero in the eyes of humanity. Prince Verdant is his legacy. We'll see how Malachite's "son" grows up, without the fear of death.

"A few other questions are How much insanity will Earth be thrown into from all this? What do you figure the social and political ramifications of this whole thing will be? How many crazy people anti pony cults are there going to be?"

Griffons?

How much of that will be touched in the future installments?"

The side stories, and the later sequel, will touch on a lot of the craziness to come. There will be a LOT of adjustments to be made. As always, there will be intolerance and bigotry on *both* sides of the portal. But that will be overshadowed by the extreme gratitude that most of humanity feels for the Equestrian's work in saving our world, which will in turn make most Equestrians feel very appreciated and welcomed by humanity. For the most part, good will will abound. But not always.

As for cults... both pro and anti pony cults and organizations seem likely, as well as pro and anti human cults and organizations on the other side of the gate.

Griffons, you say? Hmm. I believe I can do something with that!

Questions by Shire Folk:

"Will Doctor Velchiek be criminally tried and convicted for his crimes against Erin?"

Will Erin/Sunflower return to Ponyville and work at Fet Ex while she goes about getting her own place, or will Erin/Sunflower just return to Ponyville and have her own place provided for her thanks to the Princesses pulling strings for her...again? I understand favours here and there, but the girl would probably like to do something like getting her own place via her own power.

Will Meadowlark and Erin/Sunflower be able to patch things up while Erin/Sunflower studies pony magic in Ponyville? Related question, will Erin/Sunflower be able to foalsit Marigold again?

Will Erin/Sunflower go on a date with Lucky? 🦄 I mean, the threat's gone; daily life can resume and Erin could, theoretically, fall for a pony even after she told her dad what she told him. Heck, if she becomes a real and true Equestrian pony this time it's distinctly possible that she could just go fully native."

These are all great questions, but I can't answer most of these, because of spoilers. These issues will be explored in Side Projects, I promise. Erin will definitely be heading back to Ponyville, though. That's where all of her friends live!

I'm planning on having a couple of "movie night" side stories, too. Indiana Jones? Absolutely.

Question from Yeoman: "My question is what happened to... Andrew I think from back at the beginning? You introduced him as a possible love interest then never mentioned him again."

This is another one that will be addressed in Side Projects, so I can't answer this one here without spoilers.

To wrap up:

This has been a fantastic experience for me. This is, by far, the longest story I've ever written, and I think I've learned a lot as a writer.

I want to thank you, once again, from the bottom of my heart. That people would take the time to read my story is very humbling, and it means the world to me.

Most sincerely, and with eternal gratitude,

~Hoopy McGee

Bonus chapter: Project: Parody. Sunflower on a budget.

"So, that's it," Doctor Velchiek said, leaning back and smiling at her.

"That's it?" Erin asked, amazed. "Seriously?"

"Yup! That's all there is to it."

"You want me to disguise myself as a horse--"

"Pony."

"Pony, right. Disguise myself as a pony and infiltrate this new world to gather information?"

"Yes, that's right!"

"Sounds freaky weird. I'm in."

"All right, come with me, and I'll take you to the costume department."

"Costume?" Erin asked, confused. "How could there possibly be a *costume* that would make me fit in over in Ponyworld?"

"We spared no expenses," Dr. Velchiek said. "Well, that's not true. We're on a pretty severe budget, after all. We had to cut *some* corners. Still, I have no doubt you'll be surprised by what we have for you!"

Erin was surprised, all right, when she finally saw her 'disguise'.

"This is it?" she said, with some annoyance. The costume looked about right for a kid's birthday party, but she couldn't see fooling anyone with it, let alone a real pony. Her legs would fit into the costume's front legs, and the immobile back legs would just be dragged along stiffly as she walked. She'd have to use her hands inside the enormously oversized head to operate the eyes and mouth, like a giant puppet.

"No, we're also sending surveillance equipment with you," Doctor Velchiek replied. "Here's a digital voice recorder and a video camera. Try and record as much as possible! Also, here's a high-tech inter-dimensional communication device!"

He handed her a cheap, plastic walkie-talkie.

"Um..."

"Try it on, my dear! Try it on!"

Feeling like an idiot, Erin tried on the costume. The enormous head actually had room for her to move around a bit, and she could see out of the mouth, which gaped open like an idiot's. There was even room on the inside for a small water bottle, attached to the top of the headpiece like in a gerbil's cage.

"Cozy," Erin said, but unfortunately Dr. Velchiek didn't pick up on the sarcasm.

"Glad you like it! Now get through that gate!"

"What, now?"

"Yup!" he said, and shoved her.

Erin stumbled into Ponyworld and almost smacked into a tree.

"What in the hay are you?" a local pony asked.

Erin, only able to see the pony's orange hooves through the mouth-slot of her costume, replied, "Oh, I'm just an average pony. Honest."

"Ya don't say," the pony said doubtfully. "Well, Ah'm Applejack. What's your name?"

"I'm Erin," Erin said. "Wait, no, don't call me that. Um. I'm... Sunflower. Yes, that's it. Sunflower. Pleased to meet you!"

"Pleased to meet you too, 'Sunflower'," Applejack said flatly, and held out a hoof. Erin stuck her foot out, and AJ shook it.

"Y'all want an apple?" the pony asked.

"That's okay," Erin said. "I'm not hungry. Hey, is there a town near here?"

"Sure, Ponyville," Applejack said, and Erin stifled a snort of laughter at the name. "Just head thataway."

"Thanks!" Erin said, wandering off and occasionally tripping due to her poor field of vision.

Rainbow Dash landed next to Applejack as she watched the poorly-disguised human wander off.

"What the heck was that?"

"Ah don't know. Ah reckon' it's some sort of spy in a pony costume. We should tell Twilight."

Meanwhile, back on the road...

"Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie!" a voice suddenly said, and Erin screamed a little in shock.

"Hi, I'm Erin. I mean, I'm Sunflower. Nice to meet you," Erin said, then took a couple of pictures of the pink hooves she could see outside of her mouth-hole.

"You're one weird pony, Sunflower. But I've seen weirder! I'll throw you a party when you least expect it. Bye for now!"

Erin kept walking until she reached Ponyville, and then decided to ask if there was a library. Several of the ponies she asked either fainted or ran away screaming, but one, a grey pegasus with strange eyes, pointed her towards a large tree.

"Thanks, pony!" Erin said as she walked away.

"You're welcome, alien!" Derpy said, waving at Erin's retreating figure.

Erin finally reached the weird-looking library. She contemplated how she was going to knock for a minute, and then just decided to bump her head on it repeatedly. Or, rather, the costume's head. She didn't notice that, in doing so, one of the badly-attached eyes fell off.

The door opened, and a little purple dragon looked up at her.

"Whoah, what the heck are you?" Spike asked her.

"I'm a pony," Erin lied. "What are you?"

"A dragon."

"I don't believe you," Erin said.

"Neither do I."

They were at a standstill for a bit, and then Spike said, "Twilight? There's some weird creature in a bad pony costume here to see you!"

"What?" came the distant voice, and then a purple unicorn trotted into view, freezing when she saw Erin.

"Okay, right," Twilight said evenly. "Apparently *this* is how my night is going to go. What are you supposed to be?"

"A perfectly normal talking pony person," Erin said, feeling a little frantic. "Hahahah!"

"No, you're not," Twilight said.

"Yes," Erin insisted, "I am."

"No. You. Are. Not."

Erin scrambled around inside the costume's massive head until she found the walkie-talkie.

"Doctor Velchiek!" she hissed into the cheap plastic toy. "I think my cover's been blown!"

There was a long pause, and then Doctor Velchiek said, "Don't forget to say 'over' when you're done talking, Erin."

"Oh, for goodness... Look, I think they're on to me. I should tell them I'm not a pony!" She waited a few seconds, then rolled her eyes and said, "Over!"

"Absolutely not! We have to go ahead with the mission!"

"I really think-"

"I didn't say 'over', yet!"

While this was going on, Twilight was watching this strange, poorly-disguised creature apparently having a heated argument with itself inside of its obviously false head.

"Say, Erin, are you *really* dead set on telling them you're a human? Over."

"I think I should. They aren't buying this crappy disguise. Oh, um. Over."

"Do you see a small metal box in the head piece with you, over."

"Yes, I got it, over," Erin said, grabbing the box.

"Please open it up and take one of the pills inside, over."

"Why?" Erin asked, suspiciously. "What does it do? Over."

"Oh, nothing. It will just help you obey my orders without question, over."

"No deal! Over!"

"Then you force me to activate the override!"

The back half of the costume whirred to life as a small taser set on a telescoping mechanical arm snaked out and zapped Erin lightly in the back.

"Argh! What the hell?!"

"Now, do what I say or I zap you again!" Doctor Velchiek said. "Over!"

"Oh, forget this!" Erin snapped, pulling herself out of the costume as quickly as she could and kicking the blasted thing out the door.

She turned to face the unicorn, smiled weakly and said, "Surprise! I'm not actually a pony."

"I never would have guessed," Twilight said dryly. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely, thanks," Erin said.

They became friends, defeated the Smooze Black Tide, and everything was all happiness and rainbows forever!

~*~

Deep in a cave on the far side of the Everfree forest, an ancient and trapped creature sighed. One of these days, it would break out of its prison. But, until then, it just had to continue on like it always had.

"One million, three hundred and fifty thousand, four hundred twelve bottles of cider on the wall," it sang, "One million, three hundred and fifty thousand, four hundred twelve bottles of cider! You take one down and pass it around, and there's one million, three hundred and fifty thousand, four hundred eleven bottles of cider on the wall!"