

Обкладинка

Про фанфік

After putting on the Element of Magic, Sunset Shimmer was shown just how much of a monster she really is. But that wasn't all the Elements did to her.

Sunset has now been forced to serve penance by answering any question truthfully and by doing anything asked of her, whether she wants to or not.

And she really doesn't want to.

Until all of the hatred in her heart is gone, Sunset is at the whim of her peers, unbeknownst to them of course. Can her new "friends" help her down the road to redemption?

[Від перекладача]

Хочу попередити, що цей міститиме в собі: лайку, багато адаптацій (які у деяких можуть викликати передозування фейспалмами).

Технічні і легальні деталі

«Long Road to Friendship»



<https://www.fimfiction.net/story/144198/long-road-to-friendship>

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<https://github.com/Vovkiv/LRtF-ukr>

Список моїх інших перекладів



https://github.com/Vovkiv/mlp_fics_that_i_plan_to_translate

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І. Коли я панувала світом — Крок 1: Покаяння

Сансет Шимер падала.

Вона не знала, як довго вона падала, і це її вже не бентежило. Вона вже загубилась у власних думках, щоб звертати на це увагу.

Чи зайшла вона занадто далеко? Вкрасти собаку... загіпнозувати студентів школи Кантерлот... спроба вбивства...

Частина її хотіла сказати — так, вона зайшла далеко з останнім. Вона не була вбивцею.

Вона також сказала, що вона не була монстром, але демон яким вона була кілька секунд тому доказували зворотне.

Чи відчувала вона покаяння за свої дії? Чому вона повинна відчувати? Корона належала їй. Вона повинна була панувати Еквестрією. Вона повинна була бути принцесою, не ця ідеальна Твайлайт Спаркл! До того ж, вона, Сансет Шимер, програла, чи не так? Чому вона повинна відчувати покаяння? Єдине за що вона могла каятися, так це за поразку.

Сансет хотіла кричати. Це було не чесно! Це просто було не чесно! Вона схопила Елемент Магії і тримала його величезну силу. Так, вона перетворилась у демона — щось, про що їй не подобається згадувати — але у неї була безмежна сила!

І вона все рівно втратила її. Програла Твайлайт Спаркл і її жалюгідним друзям, ще й в неї вистрілили Елементами Гармонії.

Тепер же вона падала крізь біле лімбо. Воно було яскравим і, на здивування, теплим; вона чула небесний гул, наче самий талановитий співак прогрівав голос без концертом. Почувши його, мала частинка покаяння поглинула її серце.

Чи була вона не права? Чи було щось варте за тією дружбою — якась величність, яку вона не могла побачити? Нісенітниця. Кому потрібні друзі, коли у тебе є стільки сили?

Сансет нарешті вдарилась об щось тверде, але вона нічого не бачила за яскравим світлом. Це було наче так, що саме світло стало твердою підлогою під нею.

— Привіт? — Покликала Сансет.

Луна роздалась довкола неї і Сансет стиснула свої кулаки від того, наскільки це мізерно прозвучало. Луна притихла і Сансет залишилась на самоті з зловісним гулом. Вона і гадки не мала, де вона була, але вона почала відчувати найгірше — що вона могла померти.

Чи можуть Елементи зробити це? Вони можуть вбити когось?

Подумала вона.

Як тільки гул став гучніше, спогади про жорстокі слова і дії почали дрейфувати крізь розум Сансет, через що серце Сансет почало сповнюватися важким почуттям покаяння. Серед гулу вона могла чути слабкі удари, схожі на барабан.

Зрозумівши, що шум наближався до неї, Сансет обернулась і майже закричала від того, що вона побачила.

Перед нею було чорне і мізерне серце; не таке серце, яке знаходився всередині її грудей і завдяки якому вона живе, але те, яке зазвичай використовуються у якості символу кохання. Воно так повільно билось, що Сансет здавалося, що воно може зупинитися в будь-який момент. Червоні тріщини були усіяні на поверхні, наче ріки магми на вкритому попелом полі. Це було найогидніше, що Сансет бачила у своєму житті.

І воно належить тобі.

Сказав голос, або радше кілька голосів. Вони оточили Сансет з усіх кутів і звучали наче небесний хор. Тепер Сансет знала, звідки лунав небесний гул.

— Що ви маєте на увазі під «І воно належить тобі»? — Спитала Сансет збентежено.

Сансет Шимер, ми бачили твоє серце, і воно твоє. Ти відхиляла дружбу так довго, і тепер же воно тримається на ненависті. Ти була жорстока, зарозумілою, егоїстичною і жадібною до влади. Ось чим стало твоє серце.

Сансет відступила назад від темного серця.

— І щ-що? — Вона прочистила горло, намагаючись триматися з своєю не справжню браваду. Але стоячи перед її «серцем», навіть і вона почала згасати. — Мені не потрібна дружба. Мені і самій добре.

Сансет Шимер, твоє відхилення дружби і жага до влади майже знищила баланс двох світів. Чи ти дійсно нічого не відчуваєш?

— Я... — Сансет склала руки і задерла ніс, ігноруючи сльози у кутках її очей. — Чому я повинна? Я програла, чи не так? Яка різниця, що я відчуваю? — Вона розклала руки і вказала у повітря. — І хто ви такі, щоб судити мене?

Ми є духами Елементів Гармонії. У нас є усі права судити тебе, Сансет Шимер. Саме ти зловживала Елемент Магії і ти ж погрожувала переворотом Еквестрії.

Сансет проковтнула клубок у горлі. Ось де вона була: якесь лімбо, де Елементи могли б судити її. Вона впилася нігтями в долоню, щоб не тремтіти.

— Добре, можливо я трошечки відступилась. І що ви збираєтесь зі мною зробити?

Твоє серце найтемніше, яке ми колись бачила і ти не продемонструвала майже одного покаяння за свої вчинки. Ще й продовжуєш відкидати дружбу.

— Навіщо мені друзі? — Прокричала Сансет. — Вони ніколи і нічого для мене не зробили! В них немає жодного сенсу! Єдине для чого вони хороші, так це коли мені потрібно щось від них!

Настав затягнутий момент тиші, перш ніж голоси знов заговорили.

Дуже добре, Сансет Шимер. Якщо це ось так ти почувашся, тоді нашим покарання буде...

Сансет скрикнула і схопилась за голову доки кожна згадка про її жорстокість заповнювала її. Кожного разу, коли вона використовувала когось, кожного разу коли вона зневажала когось, усі її жорстокі вчинки і зради промайнули всередині неї, поставивши її на коліна. Зображення демона, яким вона стала, промайнули між кожною спогадом, випалюючи

себе на її сітківках. Вона впала на невидиму підлогу і почала ридати; уся біль, яку вона вчинила багатьом, розпорошила її темне серце на пил.

Поміж спогадів та ридання, Сансет майже не чула, що казали духи.

Ти будеш жити з нашим покаранням до тих пір, доки остання часточка ненависті не покине твоє серце і ти не навчишся приймати дружбу без думок про власну вигоду. Доки ти не навчишся любити інших, ти будеш залежати від їхньої примхи та забаганок, допомагаючи їм з усім чого б вони не забажали, і казати тільки правду.

Ці слова звучали для Сансет здалеку, згасаючи, наче світло яке до цього оточувало її. Вона більше не знаходилась у лімбо Елементів; замість цього, вона лежала лицем у багнюці, її одяг подраний, а її тіло покрито подряпинами та синцями.

Піднявши голову, вона побачила, що опинилась у великому кратері. Твайлайт Спаркл стояла над нею на краю, виглядаючи радше розчарованою, ніж сердитою.

— Ти *ніколи* не будеш правити Еквестрією. Усі сили, які могли залишитися у тебе в цьому світі, їх більше немає. Цієї ночі ти показала усім, хто ти є насправді. Ти усім показала що у твоєму серці.

Сансет почала вилізати із діри, її шлунок протестував при різких рухах. Можливо, це ще один ефект після того як її вдарили Елементами Гармонії. Вона впала перед ногою Твайлайт, її бачення було затуманено сльозами. Вона ніколи не почувалась так погано за все її життя. Те, що її змусили пережити її дії у минулому, змусили Сансет відчувати те, що, як вона думала, вона ніколи не відчує.

Покаяння.

— М-мені шкода. — скрикнула вона. — Мені дійсно шкода. Я не знала, що є інший шлях!

— Магія дружби існує не тільки в Еквестрії. Вона усюди. Ти можеш відшукати її. — Твайлайт зітхнула і відвернулась. — Або можеш жити наодинці до кінця днів. Це твій вибір.

— Але... але все що я робила відтоді як опинилась тут, так це розділяла усіх. Я нічого не знаю про дружбу.

Твайлайт присіла на коліна та взяла руку Сансет, допомагаючи Сансет вилізти із діри та встати на ноги. Вона вказала на п'ятьох дівчат які стояли осторонь.

— Б'юся об заклад, що вони зможуть навчити тебе.

Еплджек, Реріті, Пінкі Пай, Флатершай і Рейнбоу Деш обдарували її усмішками різного розміру та теплоти. Усмішка Пінкі Пай була сама велика та тепла.

Реально? Вони хочуть бути моїми друзями після того, що я зробила?

У неї не було можливості спитати про це у Твайлайт. Усі зібрали дивитися за тим, як директорка Селестія повертає Елемент Магії Твайлайт перед тим як піти назад у спортзал щоб завершити танці, залишивши Сансет наодинці. Навіть Сніпс і Снейлс наче кудись зчезли.

Обходячи кратер, Сансет дійшла до зруйнованого входу школи. Частина її була вражена тим, що вона була здатна зробити це. Вона не могла чарувати так, відколи була поні.

Вона притулилась до каменю і зітхнула. І що тепер їй робити? Вона поглянула на статую яка ховала у собі портал у Еквестрію. Вона могла би втекти. Втекти додому і прожити життя у вигнанні там. Ні. Якщо вона повернеться назад, вона може зустрітись з гнівом Селестії. Сансет не послухалась її, коли застрибнула у дзеркало, не згадуючи про викрадення корони Твайлайт. Там для неї нічого не залишилося. Але й і тут для неї не багато залишилося.

Позаду неї, вона чула рівномірні ритми музики які Вайнал Скратч запалювала із своєї стерео системи. Вона чула як учні сміялися та розмовляли, насолоджуючись Осіннім Балом.

І я майже вкрала у них це, заради власних планів.

Сансет застогнала і притиснула голову до бетону. Тепер вона зрозуміла чому ніколи не відчувала покаєння до цього. Це було найгірше почуття у всьому світу!

Із одного коридору долинули кроки і скрип коліс. Сансет обернулась та побачила заступницю директорки Луну яка супроводила Сніпса і

Снейлса. Вони тягли перед собою тачку заповнену цеглинами, розчином та мітлами.

Луна зупинилась і вручила Сансет лопату

— Що ж, пані Шимер, схоже попереду у вас довга ніч.

Сансет витріщилась на неї.

— Ви ж це не серйозно? Ви ж не очікуєте, що я виправлю все це.

Луна помахала лопатою перед нею. Сансет схопила її і прогарчала. Її почуття покаяння почали повільно роз'їдатися почуттям роздратованості та гніву. Вона дивилась як Луна поверталась назад у школу, доки Сніпс і Снейлс почали підмітити сходинки від уламків.

Обмінявши лопату на третю мітлу, Сансет також почала підмітити, вирішивши спочатку виконати просту роботу. Вона попрацювала лише кілька хвилин, доки сміх не досягнув її. Твайлайт Спаркл та її п'ять подруг вийшли із спортзалу та попрямували до статуї. Вони зупинились біля неї, щоб обмінятися обіймами та попрощатися.

Це мій останній шанс.

Сансет поглянула на блідий місяць.

Я можу побігти за нею, або...

Коли вона озирнулась назад, Твайлайт та її собака вже застрибнули через гранітну поверхню статуї, повернувшись назад в Еквестрію. Пінкі побігла щоб наздогнати, але вона лише зустрілась з твердою поверхнею. Портал зачинився.

— Во облом — Насупилась Пінкі.

Сансет розділила частково розчарування Пінкі. Частина її хотіла повернутися додому. Тепер же, вона застрягла тут, як мінімум, на тридцять лун.

— Що ж, хочу сказати, що *це* було щось. — Сансет почула слова Реріті.

— Ага, я полагаю, що так може статися тіки одін раз за життя. — Сказала Еплджек.

— Думаєте ми колись зустрінемося з нею ще? — Спитала Флатершай.

Еплджек поклала руку на плече Флатершай.

— Не переймайся, цукорок, я думаю, що вона колись вернеться навести нас.

— Якщо ж ні, ми завжди можемо розшукати Твайлайт Спаркл із цього світу — Сказала Пінкі, стрибаючи на пальцях.

Реріті провела рукою по своїм фіолетовим, шикарним кучерям.

— Що ж... мабуть, це не дуже хороша ідея. Ми не можемо піти шукати її і очікувати що вона буде така ж. Це буде виглядати так, наче ми будемо намагатися замінити її.

Пінкі стала на місці і сказала засмученим голосом.

— Ой, точно, думаю, ти права. Це було б доволі грубо.

— Але, ей, якщо ми случайно зустрінемося з Твайлайт Спаркл, ми все ще зможемо спробувати подружитися з нею. — Заспокоїла Еплджек. — Нам треба дозволити їй зустріти нас самій. Єта должно статися саме по собі.

У повітрі повисла довга пауза, перш ніж Рейнбоу Деш сказала.

— Так... а що нам робити з Сансет Шимер?

— Шо ж... — Промовила Еплджек повільно, — нам далі обіцянку, що спробуєм помочь ей. І я не хочу відмовлятися від моїх обіцянок.

Реріті кивнула.

— І я теж, але ми не можемо прикидатися, що вона нічого не сталося із того, що вона зробила поганого нам. Мені потрібен час, щоб заспокоїтися, особливо після сьогоднішньої ночі.

— Реріті права. Я хочу спробувати стати її подругою, але... вона все ще лякає мене. — Прошепотіла Флатершай.

— Шо ж, думаю, що це хорошо что школа зачинена на наступний тиждень, бо їм треба відбувати частину її. Дасть нам трохи часу щоб заспокоїться. — Сказала Еплджек.

— Йуху! — Зраділа Рейнбоу. — Жодної школи на цілий тиждень! Хто хочу потусуватися?

— У-у-у, я! — Пінкі шалено махала руками перед обличчям Рейнбоу. — Ми можемо відтягнутися прямо як раніше! Буде дуже весело!

Сансет дивилась як вони йдуть геть, їх голоси ставали дедалі тихіше, доки вони геть не зникли у темноті. Вона сперлась на мітлу,

розмірковуючи. Невже вони дійсно спробують подружитися з нею? Сансет не була впевнена, чи вони гідні захоплення чи просто дурні.

Вона сильніше схопила мітлу. Коли її почуття покаяння нарешті вивітрились, її старі почуття зневаги та зверхності повернулись замість. Хто сказав, що вона хоче бути друзями з ними? Це була їхня вина, що вона опинилась в цій ситуації! Якщо б вони не втрутились, вона була би в Еквестрії зараз! І до того ж, вони не хотіли бути з нею друзями — вони просто дотримувались обіцянки Твайлайт Спаркл.

Твайлайт Спаркл...

Сансет стиснула мітлу так сильно, що її кулаки побіліли. Зрештою, все звелось до неї. Пані маленька ідеальна принцеска. Забрала корону, яка повинна була належати Сансет і залишила її гнити у цьому світі. Сансет ненавиділа її. Кожною фіброю свого існування, Сансет ненавиділа її. — Ей, Сансет! — Голос Сніпса вирвавши Сансет із її думок. — Може годі стояти на місці, і ти допоможеш нам? На це піде вся ніч.

Сансет збиралась зробити гостру репліку у відповідь, але вона відчула наче блискавка пробігла у неї по спині. Її руки, наче по власній молі, почали рухатися до мітли, продовжуючи змітати уламки.

Це було... дивно.

Сансет знизала плечима та продовжила роботу. Сніпс був правий — на це піде вся ніч.

Крок 2: Випадкова зустріч

Сансет Шимер була вдячна, що заступниця директорки Луна частково пожартувала про відновлення передньої стіни школи та про великий кратер у землі. Доки вона, Сніпс та Снейлс були змушені працювати доки танці не завершаться, Луна та Селестія стверджували, що потрібні професійні робочі, щоб виправити усе, і тоді трійця може піти додому.

Звісно ж, Сансет тепер повинна весь наступний тиждень допомагати робочим відновлювати стіну. Її покарання також включало в себе місяць групи продовженого дня та академічне стажування. Останнє не бентежило Сансет, оскільки вона отримувала 12 по всіх предметах. А ось Сніпс та Снейлс... що ж, вона сподівається, що вони знайомі з хорошим репетитором.

Тепер Сансет тяглась назад додому. Селестія запропонувала підвезти її, але Сансет відмовилась, оскільки вона хотіла поміркувати над її невдачами наодинці. А ще тому, що вона не могла дозволити Селестії дізнатися де вона дійсно живе.

Нічне повітря було прохолодним, осінній вітер пестив обличчя Сансет доки вона рухалась проти нього. Протяг викликав по шкірі Сансет мурашки, вона хотіла щоб на ній зараз були штани, а не спідниця.

Її ноги втомлені, як і всі інші частини її тіла через те що на неї чарували потоком чистої магії. Вона почала жалкувати що не погодилась на пропозицію підвезти. Оскільки її власний транспорт був у магазині, у неї немає інших способів подорожування. Вона змогла потрапити на танці тільки завдяки тому, що мама Снейлса підвезла їх.

Сансет зітхнула. Сніпс та Снейлс тримались від неї осторонь усю ніч. Вона подумала, що перетворення їх на демонів тільки для того, щоб через кілька хвилин перетворити їх назад на людей і що вони були покарані разом з нею — все це стало для них щось на кшталт останньою краплею. Вона втратила двох своїх маріонеток.

— Що ж, знайду собі інших. — Нахмурилась Сансет.

Ні, вона не могла, ніхто у здоровому глузді не стане з нею працювати після сьогоденної ночі. Вона не зможе накопати стільки бруду на когось із

школи у порівнянні з тією яка є на неї після того що вона зробила. І навіть якби вона могла, то з якою метою? За два дні, Твайлайт Спаркл власноруч об'єднала учнів і показала їм їхнього спільного ворога.

Сансет Шимер.

Її скинули з трону за менше ніж тиждень, її диктатура була повністю повалена і замінена «магією дружби». Нігті Сансет впились їй у долоню. Якби почуття Елементи Гармонії не змусили відчувати її — вони зникли, замінені на образи і гірке жало поразки. У неї було майже все, а тепер же у неї нічого не залишилось.

Щось вологе протекло у неї по лицю і вона витерла її тильною стороною долоні.

Не час для жалюгідної вечірки! Я вже зламалась перед обличчям цілої школи — чого я ніколи не зможу пережити — тому годі ридати! Час планувати! Повинен бути якийсь спосіб повернутися нагору.

Сансет зупинилась та притулилась до вуличного стовпу. Їй було холодно і вона була втомлена, і судячи з того де вона була, вона пройшла тільки половину шляху додому.

— Кого я намагаюсь обманути? І нічого не можу зробити тут. Єдине що я можу, так це дочекатися коли портал відкриється і повернутися назад в Еквестрію. Можливо там я зможу спробувати знайти щось, що допоможе мені повернутися до Твайлайт Спаркл.

Вона вирішила, що думка про помсту її смертельному ворогу підбадьорить її. Але замість цього, це лише залишило поганий присмак у її роті і шлунок запротестував. Вона відштовхнула себе від стовпу і продовжила йти.

— Мені потрібна ванна та відіспатися.

Вона оглянула її улюблену шкіряну куртку і застогнала. Вона була жахливо розідрана у декількох місцях. Вона зробила подумки нотатку, що треба купити нову.

Вона дістала телефон із кишені куртки і перевірила час, який показував трошки більше ніж опівніч. Прибравши його, вона сильніше придивилась до свого оточення. Вона вже пройшла хороші райони і багато сімейних

бізнесів, і наближалась до більш бідних районів міста Кантерлот. Старі, брудні магазини стояли рядами по вулиці, поруч із обурливою кількістю сміття та недопалків.

Обравши короткий шлях через покинуту дитячий майданчик, Сансет почула гучний крик який пролунав скрізь ніч. Вона зупинилась та придивилась у темряву, єдиним джерелом світла була лампа на вуличному стовбурі через вулицю. Дівчина швидко вбігла на світло, і час майже зупинився, доки Сансет витріщалась на неї з роззявленим ротом.

На ній була проста темно-синя сорочка та джинси, фіолетові черевики та піджак такого ж кольору. Знайомий зорепад був пришитий в кутку, зорепад який змусив око Сансет посмикуватися у люті.

Твайлайт Спаркл бігла по вулиці, на її обличчі вимальовувався жах, доки вона кричала.

— Допоможіть! Хто-небудь, будь-ласка, *допоможіть мені!*

Позаду, за нею бігли двоє затемнених чоловіків, від їх насвистування та обіцянок що вони зроблять з нею у Сансет мурашки по шкірі пробіглися.

Блискавка знову пробіглась у неї по спині, і Сансет почала бігти за ними трьома.

Що за... що я в біса роблю?

Вона спробувала зупинитися, але вона не могла керувати собою. Вона бігла за чоловіком, переслідуючи їх за поворотом і до широкої вулиці, де вони загнали Твайлайт у кут до задньої стіни.

— Не переймайся, кицю, ми обіцяєм, що будем по легше з тобою. — Хихикнув один з них.

Сансет підняла камінь та жбурнула в них, потрапив одному з них в голову.

— Ей, ви, жирдяї, чому б вам не обрати когось свого розміру?

Вони обернулись, у обох були засалене, чорне волосся та бліда шкіра. Пірсінг прикрашав їхні роти та брови. Один з них був доволі худим; він намагається сховати це під своєю товстою курткою. Інший виглядав так, наче у нього були м'язи.

— Ей, дівка, ти шо, хочеш з нами побитися? — спитав той що з м'язами.

— Бо виглядає так, наче ти вже програла одну бійку. — Обидва засміялися.

— А вона нічого так, мила — помітив худастий. — Як щодо того, щоб кожному по дівці?

Сансет стала в бойову стійку, виставивши руки перед нею. Вона все ще не була впевнена, чому вона це робить. Це було наче якась невідома сила захопила контроль над її діями і змусила її прийти на допомогу до Твайлайт. І все ж, якщо це означає, що вона може побити двох невдах і випустити трохи пари, то вона була тільки «за».

— Як щодо того, щоб ви забули про неї та спробували б мене? — Холодно сказала Сансет.

— Дівко, ти серйозно хочеш побитися з нами? — Спитав худий.

— Це за умови, що зможете зі мною тягатися. Я просто вас по землі размажу.

— Ну, що ж, сама напросилась!

Худий дістав ніж і побіг на Сансет, яка стрибнула у сторону і пригнулась, щоб ухилитися від його широкого розмаху. Тоді вона зі всієї сили вдарила вгору, прямо йому у щелепу. Перед тим як він міг отямитися від атаки, Сансет схопила його за руку та скрутила зап'ястя, змусивши його випустити ніж.

Вона розвернулась та скоротила дистанцію між ними, впираючись ногою до землі, після чого встала та перекинула худощавого через плече. Він болюче впав на цемент, стогнучи від болю та тримаючи свого скривавленого рота.

Сансет обернулась та вказала рукою на іншого ідіота, який на усе це дивився з роззявленим ротом. Він швидко розлютився на побіг на Сансет з голими кулаками. Сансет відстрибнула назад, ухилившись від першого розмаху і вхопивши інший долонею, відкинувши його. Вона продовжила ударом ноги у живіт, відкинувши його. Він зібрався до тям та знову побіг на неї наче скажений бик, цілячись кулаком у обличчя Сансет.

Сансет знову вперлась ногою до землі і схопила її обома руками. Доки ідіот встиг вдарити її іншим кулаком, Сансет різко обернулась, викликавши жахливий *тріск* у нього в руці, через що той заплакав. Вона відпустила його і перевернула своє тіло в сторону, склавши руки разом і притиснула лікті до його грудей.

Він захрипів та впав на коліна перед тим як пасти лицем у землю, стогнучи як його друг.

Витерши руки об спідницю, Сансет переступила його тіла та пішла назад по вулиці, лише швидко кинувши погляд на Твайлайт яка стояла притиснута до стіни. Сансет закотила очі і пішла за поворот, продовжуючи свій шлях по дорозі наче нічого не сталося.

Мех, це було весело, мабуть. Хоча б трохи пари випустила...

— Почекай! — Покликав її голос Твайлайт, через що настрій Сансет знову був зіпсований.

Сансет проігнорувала її і пришвидшила темп.

— Куди це ти йдеш? — Крикнула їй Твайлайт коли нарешті вийшла з вулиці.

— Додому. — Автоматично промовила Сансет.

— Почекай, будь ласка, повернись!

Сансет одразу зупинилась і обернулась, її ноги зрадили її бажанню піти геть.

Що за хуйня?

Вона пішла назад і зупинилась перед Твайлайт яка, Сансет помітила, на кілька сантиметрів була нижче за іншу Твайлайт

— Що? — гаркнула Сансет.

— Ну, ем... Я просто... — Твайлайт заламала руки, виглядаючи зніяковілою. — Чому ти врятувала мене? — нарешті спитала вона.

Сансет знизала плечима.

— Не знаю.

— А... — Твайлайт сховала руки за спиною. — Що ж, це було доволі круте видовище.

— Я *тааак* рада що тобі сподобалося.

Після цього, Сансет нарешті змогла відтягнути себе від фіолетоволосої неприємності і продовжила свій шлях додому.

— Почекай. — Твайлайт пришвидшилась щоб наздогнати швидкий темп Сансет. — Можеш хоча б мені назвати своє ім'я, будь ласка?

— Сансет Шимер. — Сансет відповіла ще до того, як вона могла подумати над цим.

Чому я сказала їй своє ім'я? А, пофіг, не так вже це і важливо.

— Що ж, Сансет Шимер, мені здається, що ти врятувала моє життя.

— Ну, буває. — Сказала Сансет покрутивши пальцем у повітрі.

Твайлайт похитала головою.

— Схоже, що ти не дуже цьому рада.

— Ой йой, ні, повір мені, я вся у захваті від цього.

Твайлайт зітхнула.

— В будь якому випадку, я просто хотіла сказати...

Сансет обернулась й тицьнула у неї пальцем.

— Слухай, Твайлайт, мені поф...

— Звідки ти знаєш моє ім'я?

— Тому що, я вже знаю хто ти така. — Сансет хлопнула себе по роту, її очі збільшились до стану п'яти копійок.

Геніально, Сансет.

— Ти... знаєш хто я?

Рука Сансет відпустила її рот.

— Ну, технічно, я знаю іншу тебе яка прийшла із дзеркала, тому я знаю твого клона. — Цього разу, вона хлопнула рот обома руками.

Щось не так. Щось дуже, дуже не так.

Твайлайт виглядала спантеличеною.

— Дзеркало? Про що ти таке говориш?

Сансет намагалась не відповідати на це, просто щоб утримувати тишу і продовжувати йти, але та ж сила, що змусила її побігти за Твайлайт, змусила її говорити те, щоб вона зазвичай не стала б казати.

— Дзеркало яке веде у Еквестрію, і воно відкривається лише кожні тридцять лун. — випалила вона, перш ніж знову прикрити рота.

Твайлайт, яка тепер виглядає стурбованою, відійшла на кілька кроків назад.

— З тобою все добре?

— Ні, *не* добре! — Крикнула Сансет.

— Гарзд. — Твайлайт підняла руки вгору. — Будь ласка, глибоко вдихни.

У Сансет не було вибору, тому її легені та рот оперували по своїй волі. Вона повільно зробила довгий, глибокий вдих та видих.

— Почуваєшся краще?

— Ні!

Із усього, Сансет стала почуватися тільки ще більш знервованою. Всі ці дії, відповіді — вона робила все це не за своєю волею.

Як тільки Твайлайт знову відчинила рот, Сансет підійшла до неї та прикрила його.

— Припини! Більше жодних питань! Просто припини розмовляти! Послухай мене, це не має значення звідки я знаю тебе, добре? Так, я врятувала твоє життя, але це не значить нічого! Просто повертайся до себе додому і зроби вигляд, що нічого із цього не ніколи не сталося, і ніколи, *ніколи* не розмовляй зі мною знову!

Не чекаючи на відповідь, Сансет почала бігти від Твайлайт так швидко, які тільки вона може. На щастя, Твайлайт не окликала її цього разу.

Що за хуйня це була? Чому я розказую їй про все це? Чому я роблю все це для неї? Добре, гарзд, можливо я би зупинила цих мудаків без... того, що змусило мене це зробити. Навіть Твайлайт Спаркл не заслуговує... на те що вони збирались зробити. Якого вона взагалі ошивається тут?

Сансет не припиняли бігти доки вона не опинилась майже вдома. Її легені горіли, а ноги жахливо боліли. Вона зупинилася й схилилася, важко дихаючи.

— Бляха... ця дурна дівка... таке відчуття, наче всесвіт катує мене нею!

Випрямившись, вона глибоко вдихнула і пройшла останню частину її подорожі. Зараз вона була на краю індустріального району східної частини Кантерлоту. Більшість з них були занедбаними будівлями, позначеними на знесення, але влада міста так і не зробила цього.

Сансет прослизнула крізь вузьку вулицю і зупинилась перед синіми дверми вбудовані в сторону одного із покинутих заводів. Вона повернула ручку і штовхнула двері плечем, відкриваючи собі прохід далі.

Вона потяглася за вимикачем світла, який знаходиться на стіні напроти неї, і кілька тьмяних лампочок повернулись до життя, висвітлюючи біло-чорний коридор. Закривши двері позаду себе, Сансет пішла по коридору, загорнувши до перших сходів наліво від неї. Зверху були двері з надряпаним написом «*Тільки працівники*» і за нею була кімната Сансет, або те що колись було кабінетом бригадира. Вона зайшла всередину і клацнула на ще один перемикач, що пробудило єдину, голу лампочку яка висіла посередні стелі кімнати.

Кімната була облаштована на щось, що нагадувало спальню. Стара шафа стояла у куті кімнати який був близько до дверей і тріснуте дзеркало розміром з людину яке притулене до стіни напроти. Її ліжко, або скоріше просто матрац, був заправлений у протилежний куток.

Стіна прямо навпроти неї була майже повністю скляною і виглядала на виробничий цех, яке вже давно пустує. Сансет залишила собі стіл бригадира, який стояв перед склом. Маленьке, вікно яке розташоване на прилеглій стіні, було достатньо великим, щоб скрізь нього проливалось сонячне світло зранку.

Сансет не потурбувалась щоб облаштувати її кімнату ще чимось. Єдине чим ця кімната була персоналізована це корони які вона перемогла на минулих танцях. Вони стояли у неї на столі, обережно впорядковані. Корону за «Весняний Кидок» вона виграла коли була на першому курсі,

коли вона прикинулась, що була учнем по обміну на другому семестрі, продовжуючи коронами за другий та треті курси. За ними йшли дві корони за «Зимній М'яч» і дві за «Осінній Бал», залишаючи місце для корони яку вона повинна була виграти сьогодні.

Виснажена, Сансет впала на ліжко, надто втомлена, щоб думати про коли або їхню відсутність. Вона хотіла зрозуміти, навіщо вона так втрутилась до Твайлайт. Це було так, наче вона не мала контролю на своїм тілом і виконувала чийсь забаганки.

Мабуть, це магія.

Вона голосно позіхнула, її очі поважніли.

Але, який вид магії може робити щось таке?

Її очі заплющилися, коли її почав охоплювати сон. Перед тим як він зміг повністю захопити її, її очі відкрились і вона піднялась у сидяче положення; слабкий, гармонічний голос почав відтворюватися у неї в голові.

Доки ти не навчишся любити інших, ти будеш залежати від їхньої примхи та забаганок, допомагаючи їм з усім чого б вони не забажали, і казати тільки правду.

Очі Сансет розширювалися до п'яток копійок доки ці слова відтворювались у неї в голові. Грудка холодного страху осіла, як камінь, у її животі.

— О ні.

Крок 3: Самотність — це мій вибір

Сансет була здивована тим, скільки вона проспала минулої ночі. Діставши телефон із викинутої куртки, вона перевірила час, було трохи пізніше полудня. Вона протерла залишки сну із очей і встала у сидяче положення, помітив що вона заснула у вчорашньому одязі, окрім шкіряної куртки як лежала поруч з ліжком.

Вона сиділа у темряві свої кімнати, світло слабко проливалось через вікно над нею. Єдиним іншим джерелом світла були вікна у цеху, але як і вікна у кімнаті Сансет, вони були маленькі і крізь них проливалось мало світла.

Зітхнувши, Сансет впала назад на подушку, розкинув руки в сторони. Вчорашні події відтворювались у неї в голові наче кіно. Дуже погане кіно; як мінімум, з її точки зору.

Сансет перегорнулась на її сторону, натягаючи ковдру ближче до шиї. Вона думала, що не буду спати всю ніч, переймаючись за те, що Елементи зробили з нею. Але замість цього, вона майже одразу заснула. Їй здалося, що втомленість перемогла її страхи.

Оскільки вона вже прокинулась, у неї було багато часу щоб бентежитись про її нове скрутне становище. З голосним стогоном, Сансет змусила себе встати з ліжка, опираючись об стіну напроти доки у неї все кружляло у очах. Коли всі клаптики стали на свої місця, вона дотяглась до шафи і відкрила її, узяла нижньої білизни і пару піжам.

Сьогодні була субота, а це значить, що у Сансет немає якихось зобов'язань.

З змінним одягом у руці, Сансет пішла вниз по сходам і дали по шаховому коридору. На щастя, завод який вона обрала собі домівкою включав у себе приміщення для робочих з кухнею та душовими кабінками. На жаль для неї, вода завжди була холодною.

Заступивши у маленьку душову, Сансет ввімкнула воду, розпочинаючи потік холодної води. Вона поклала змінний одяг на стіл поруч до раковини і роздяглась, викидаючи старий одяг безцеремонно на підлогу.

Після глибокого видиху, Сансет заскочила у душову, відчуючи поколювання її шкіри від холодної води. Вона одразу почала тремтіти і інстинктивно обійняла себе за груди, намагаючись утримати трохи тепла у себе в тілі.

— Холодно-холодно-холодно! — сказала вона крізь цокіт зубів.

Коли почуття мурашок покрило всю її шкіру, вона вирішила пришвидшитися. Вона схопила мило із мильниці і почала люто шкрябати бруд який покривав її, сповільнюючись біля синців що вона отримала.

Коли вона завершила, вона схопила пляшку шампуню та видавила велику кулю рідини, швидко впоравшись з миттям волосся. Коли вся піна зникла у зливі, Сансет вимкнула душ та вистрибнула на підстілку і схопила рушник із вішалки й обернула його навколо свого тіла. Вона все ще тремтіла, але пухнастий рушник допоміг відновити тепло її тілу.

Коли останній раз я приймала гарячий душ?

Вона не могла згадати. Можливо, останній раз це було коли вона останній раз була в Еквестрії. Вона нахмурилась, сподіваючись що це не було настільки давно.

Закріплюючи рушник навколо себе, Сансет підійшла до раковини і відкрила шафу за дзеркалом, діставши звідти зубну пасту та щітку. Її тіло перейшло в режим автопілоту доки вона виконувати буденну задачу по чистці зубів.

Прекрасно. Що тепер?

Питання з останньої ночі постало перед нею. Що вона могла зробити зараз? Вона була замкнена у чужому світі, змушена йти в школу в якій вона усіх ненавиділа. А тепер, ці почуття були взаємні.

Простіше кажучи, вона була у вигнанні.

Ах, але це не все! Я ще й проклята!

Вона сплюнула у раковину і поглянула на своє відображення у дзеркалі, яке дивилось на неї.

— Виходить, що єдина причина чому я допомогла Твайлайт — це тому що вона попрохала мене допомогти їй. І через це я сказала усе що я сказала

їй. Тому, якщо я все зрозуміла правильно, якщо в будь-який час, будь-хто спитає мене про щось — я повинна буду виконати це. І якщо цей хтось запитає у мене щось — я мушу відповісти на це.

Вона продовжила чистити зуби з шаленою швидкістю, ігноруючи біль яку вона викликала цим.

Це просто чудесно! Фан-та-бля-стично! І це і є моє «покаяння»? Вау, дуже гармонічно від вас, Елементи! Змусити мене допомагати комусь коли вони попрохають мене про це!

Вона знову сплюнула, скривившись, перш ніж усмішка прорізалась на її обличчі.

— Почекайте, хто у здоровому глузді буде прохати мене про щось? Я навіть нікому не подобаюсь у школі! Ха!

Після полоскання роту, Сансет повністю висохла і одягла свою теплу піжаму. Виходячи із душової, вона пішла по коридору в кухню, щоб наповнити протестуючий шлунок.

— З іншого боку, — вона відчинила холодильник і схопила пляшку молока, — Мені, можливо, доведеться жити із цим до кінця мого життя. Або доки я «буду любити інших більше ніж себе» або щось типу того. — Вона знову нахмурилась, більше не почуваячись такою впевненою.

Схопивши коробку пластівців і миску із шафи, Сансет всілась за простим сніданком.

— Хм... мені скоро знадобиться більше їжі... і новий одяг.

Оскільки її улюблений одяг був зіпсований, у Сансет залишилась лише одна пара одягу.

Але покупки потребують грошей — того, що у неї залишилося не багато. У неї більше не було Флеша Сентрі який міг би купити їй речі, і її запаси грошей, які вона забирала у младшокласників теж підходили до кінця.

Дивлячись на стан речей, Сансет буде змушена знайти... з важкістю, вона вимовила наступне слово.

— Роботу.

Вона розчаровано застогнала. Вона не могла і подумати, що все піди так погано так швидко.

Завершивши з пластівцями і відправивши миску у раковину, вона подумки зробила нотатку помити гору посуду пізніше. Вона потопала назад у кімнату, грюкнув дверима щоб випустити трохи пари. Повинно ж бути якесь просте рішення яке виправить всі її проблеми, але якщо у цьому світі раптово не з'явиться магія, то іншого рішення Сансет не бачила.

Вона сіла за свій стіл і притиснула очі долонями.

— Ну, давай же, Сансет, придумай щось! У тебе завжди є план!

Вона сиділа годинами, розмірковуючи над ідеями та теоріями, кожна наступна була ще більш сміховинна ніж попередня. З кожною відбракованою ідеєю, вона ставала дедалі більш розчарованою, кричачи і стукаючи по дерев'яному столу кулаком.

Вона почувалась себе дикою твариною яка потрапила у пастку мисливця і не може врятуватися. Вона сказала духам, що знаходяться у Елементах Гармонії, що вона вже програла. Вона просто не знала наскільки серйозна була її поразка до цього моменту.

— Можливо, мені варто залишитися тут до кінця життя.

Вона поклала руки на стіл і поклала голову на них, почуваячись розгубленою та безнадійною. І навіть цей план був не ідеальний. Якщо вона не буде з'являтися у школі, люди почнуть задавати питання, і якщо вони спитають — то вони почнуть шукати відповідь.

І якщо вони почнуть шукати відповіді, то вони можуть дізнатися, що у Сансет проблеми з законами цього світу.

Не дивлячись на почуття обурення, вона була рада, що Селестія вирішила не відправляти Сансет до поліції за те, що сталося останньої ночі. Їй було цікаво, як школа буде пояснювати події, коли папараці прийдуть.

Заплющив очі, Сансет сфокусувалась на корні проблем: її покаянні. У неї не було жодних шансів прожити життя без того, щоб люди не питали щось у неї. Її зустріч з Твайлайт була тому доказом.

— Щось про... «доки я не знайду друзів і не буду спілкуватися більше про інших ніж я» — Бурмотіла Сансет собі в руку.

Вони дійсно зібралися змушувати її грати в цю гру, змусити знайти друзів.

Вона впилася нігтями в рукави піжами.

— Хто сказав, що я хочу друзів? Я і без них прекрасно впораюсь! Мені не потрібні друзі, мені не потрібна сім'я! Мені потрібна лише я!

Неділю Сансет зустріла за столом, яка дулась там доки не заснула. Вона застогнала сіла та розтягла шию. Її настрій не покращився, але вона знала, що не може ховатися у її кімнаті назавжди. Чому вона повинна ховатися від світу? Вона була Сансет Шимер, колишня учениця принцеси Селестії! Вона не дозволить дурним чарам зупиняти від її усвідомлення її крутості. Вона знайде спосіб одурити або позбутися прокляття, і вона це зробить без сторонньої допомоги.

З її новознайденою впевненістю, Сансет піднялась і обрала повсякденний одяг із її гардеробу. Вона вирішила, що сьогодні непоганий день для шопінгу. Після повторення вчорашнього ритуалу приймання душі та одягання, Сансет схопила свій гаманець і всунула його у кишеню куртки. Підібрати заміну її куртці — було її головним пріоритетом.

Узявши яблуко з кухні, Сансет направилась до дверей, хлопнув ними за собою. Вона прикрила очі від раптового сонячного світа яке зустріло його коли вона вийшла із вузької вулички. Після того як вона пристосувалась, Сансет пішла до найближчої автобусної зупинки через вулицю. Хоч вона і ненавиділа громадський транспорт, це все ще краще ніж йти пішки до іншої частини міста.

— Не можу дочекатися коли відремонтують мій мотоцикл. — Сказала Сансет собі під ніс.

Вона доїла яблуко і кинула його на сусідні двір.

Воно згниє. Колись.

Біль зупинки був лише один чоловік коли Сансет дійшла. Він був одягнений в хороший костюм і тримав в одній руці чемодан. Сансет захихотіла собі під ніс, жаліючи тих дурнів, яким треба працювати по неділям.

— Пробачте, пані? — Чоловік звернувся до Сансет коли та підійшла. — Не підкажете час?

Сансет хотіла сказати йому інвестувати у годинник, але замість цього вона полізла у кишеню за телефоном.

— Зараз дванадцять двадцять три. — Вона намагалась утримуватися, щоб не нагрубити.

— А чи знаєте ви, як часто тут проїжджає автобус?

— Десь кожні тридцять хвилин.

Чоловік посміхнувся.

— Дякую, ви дуже допомогли мені.

Сансет пробурмотала та відвернулась. Пройшло лише два дні, а вона вже була роздратована через прокляття.

Ой, та годі тобі. Він просто хотів дізнатися час.

Сансет закотила очі у відповідь.

— Чудесний сьогодні день, чи не так? — Продовжив чоловік.

Сансет поглянула у чисте, синє небо. Слабкий вітер тріпав її волосся.

— Так, дійсно чудовий. — Сказала вона спокійно.

Сансет відчула полегшення коли автобус нарешті прибув через хвилину після. Вона заплатила за проїзд і обрала сидіння ззаду, якомога далі від чоловіка та інших пасажирів.

На її щастя, поїздка пройшла без оказій. Через тридцять хвилин, вона була у хорошій частині Кантерлоту, висадившись перед Кантерлотським торговим центром. Він був великим, колосальним, його передня частина була зроблена переважно із полірованого скла, за що він і отримав назву ТЦ «Кришталь». Хоч він був висотою з два поверхи, у нього можна вмістити два футбольних поля.

Вона пройшла крізь великі автоматичні двері і дістала список покупок, де «шкіряна куртка» була зверху. Оскільки Сансет вже була тут кілька разів, вона вже знала де купити нову. Вона ступила по блискучій кахельній підлозі, направляючись до найближчого ескалатору. Не дивлячись на усі недоліки цього світу, Сансет була дуже вражена технологіями тут. Вона була вражена ідеєю сходів що рухаються, коли побачила їх вперше. Чому в Еквестрії не винайшли щось таке? Або шкіряні курточки?

Підлітки та сім'ї рухалися групами по торговому центру, насолоджуючись вихідними, і наповнювали це місце розмовами там сміхом. Для Сансет це було майже наче отрута.

Майже.

Вона знайшла магазин який шукала кілька хвилин і зайшла всередину з широкою усмішкою на обличчі.

— Доброго дня! — Весело сказала продавчиня магазину, доки вона не побачила хто зайшов у двері.

Її обличчя миттєво опустилося.

— А, це ти, Сансет.

Сансет зупинилась і подивилась на блідо-синю дівчину за прилавком. Яскраво-рожевий бант сидів на її волоссі морського кольору. На це пішло кілька секунд доки не згадала як звуть цю дівчину.

— Доброго дня, Фліттер. — сказала вона холодно, підходячи до прилавку з самовдоволеною усмішкою. — Не знала, що ти працюєш тут.

— Так, на відмінну від деяких, мені треба працювати щоб заробляти на те, що я хочу.

— Ой-ой-ой, життя *таааке* складне та нечесне. — Сансет не могла утриматися від того, щоб не кепкувати з неї. Від старих звичок позбавитися не так вже і просто. — До твого відома, я *працювала* за те, що я хотіла.

Фліттер звузила очі.

— Ні, не працювала. Ти брехала, обманювала і шантажувала.

— І це не робота?

Фліттер пробурчала кілька не дуже хороших слів собі під ніс, після чого перенаправила стільки презирства, скільки вона могла на Сансет.

— Що ти хочеш?

— Шкіряну куртку. — Сансет не була впевнена, чи це вона сказала чи Елементи змусили її.

Фліттер вказала на темний куток де була маленька стійка з чорними та коричневими куртками.

— Будь ласка, дайте мені знати, якщо вам знадобиться моя допомога ще з чимось. — Сказала вона важким від сарказму голосом.

Сансет усміхнулась і пішла до стійки. Вона обрала велику коричневу і почала прикидатися, що оглядає її.

— Мм, ні.

Вона кинула її на підлогу і обрала іншу.

— Мм, теж ні. — Сказала вона, кидаючи її на попередню.

Краєм ока вона побачила, як Фліттер скрипить зубами.

Сансет продовжувала свої «пустощі» доки вона не дістала ту куртку, яка їй дійсно не сподобалась. Вона виглядала так само як і стара як вона носить, з тією різницею, що вона мала довшу окантовку та срібні шипи вздовж манжетів.

— Оооо, ось! Ти будеш ідеальною заміною.

Вона оглянула куртку та поклала її на стійку перед Фліттер, яка глибоко зітхнула.

— Це все, пані?

— Так.

Фліттер натиснула кілька кнопок на касовому апараті перед тим як відсканувала бирку на куртці. Її обличчя проясніло, і коли вона заговорила, до неї повернулася бадьорість.

— Це буде 2647 дві тисячі шістсот сорок сім гривень, будь-ласка.

Сансет майже не подавилась.

— Щ-що? Та ти знущаєшся! Вона не коштувала так багато останнього разу!

— Що ж... — Почала пояснювати Фліттер з великою усмішкою. — Так вийшло, що шкіряна курточка зараз у сезоні, і ця конкретна курточка імпортна. — Вона нахилилась до Сансет і радісно пошепки додала. — Із Франції.

Настала черга Сансет скрипіти зубами.

— У мене немає двох тисяч.

Фліттер знизили плечима, взяла куртку та пішла у сторону того бардаку, що Сансет влаштувала.

— Жаль. Немає грошей — немає і куртки. Можливо, тобі варто приєднатися до нас, пролетарію, в робочому світі і... і, не знаю, *заробити* на неї?

Сансет відкрила рота, але Фліттер випередила її.

— А, і ось що — будеш погрожувати мені і тоді я *викличу* охорону.

Стукнув ногою та стиснув кулаки, Сансет попрямувала із магазину, лаючись на шляху.

— Грьобана Фліттер... дві тисячі гривень... просто куртка... дуже хороша куртка. Де, бляха, я повинна знайти таку суму щоб заплатити за неї?

Опустивши голову і бурмочучи собі під ніс, Сансет не дивилась куди вона йде, через що нашттовхнулась в іншу людину, через що ті впали на підлогу.

Сансет поглянула вниз на неї.

— Дивись куди преш... Ааа! Твайлайт Спаркл!

Твайлайт підвелася й змахнула пил з себе, дивлячись на Сансет із зацікавленістю.

— Сансет Шимер? Що ти робиш тут? І чому ти нашттовхнулась на мене?

Замість уїдливої репліки, Сансет сказала.

— Я тут намагалась купити собі нову куртку, і ще кілька інших речей, але виявилось, що те що я хотіло дуже дороге і розізлилась і тому я не дивилась куди йду.

Вона вдарила себе по обличчю.

— О, зрозуміло. Що ж, мені шкода за куртку. — Щиро сказала Твайлайт.

— Можливо ти можеш попросити нову на Різдво?

— Мені нема нікого кого можна було б про щось попросити на Різдво. — Сансет схрестила руки й відвела погляд.

— Ні... Ні у кого?

— Ні, ні у кого і мені подобається так. — Сансет повернула голову назад до Твайлайт і підняла руки вгору. — Почекай. Чи ти не пам'ятаєш що я тобі сказала два дні тому?

Твайлайт потерла рукою потилицю, її вираз був між винуватим і сумним.

— Не розмовляти з тобою?

— Так. І що саме ти зараз робиш?

— Ну, технічно, ти сама наштовхнулась на мене і розпочала розмову... — Вона притихла коли поглянула на вираз Сансет.

Сансет насолоджувалась домінуванням над Твайлайт. Їй би тільки хотілося, щоб це було так само просто з іншою.

— Я повторю ще раз: залиш мене у спокої! — Вона розвернулася на каблуках і почала тікати геть.

— Чи можу я тобі хоча б подякувати?

Сансет зупинилась і поглянула через плече.

— За що?

Твайлайт зчепила руки за спиною і нервово вдарила ногою об підлогу. Рух, який нагадав Сансет про Флатершай.

— За порятунок мого життя. Мені так і не вдалося тобі подякувати.

— Ага, ну... — Сансет не змогла придумати хорошу відповідь, тому замість просто сказала — Будь ласка.

Вона обернулась щоб знову піти геть, але голос Твайлайт зупинив її.

— Про що ти говорила тоді у ніч п'ятниці? Щось про дзеркало в... Еквестрію, так? І щось про іншу мене?

— Це не твоя справа! — Зірвалась Сансет.

Ха, технічно це правда! Нічого із цього це не її справа!

Твайлайт поклала руки на стегна й спохмурніла.

— Чому це? Ти ж сказала, що там була інша Твайлайт Спаркл!

Сансет була змушена обернутися і відповісти.

— Так, *інша* Твайлайт Спаркл, але ти її ніколи не зустрічала, тому це не має значення!

Розчаровано гарчачи, Сансет кинулася втікати, проштовхнувшись повз інших відвідувачів торгового центру, намагаючись втекти.

— Почекай, повернись сюди! Ти винна мені пояснення!

— Я нічого тобі не винна!

Ігноруючи погляди інших, Сансет продовжувала бігти доки не впевнилась, що Твайлайт не переслідує її. Вона зупинилась перевести подих біля фонтану і попити води, витерши рота рукавом.

Почекайте.

Сансет поглянула назад звідки вони прибігла.

Твайлайт попрохала мене пояснень, але я не була змушена їх її надати.

Сансет нахилилась до стіни, притиснув рукою до голови.

Ну, ні. Вона вимагала. Схоже, що вимагання це не те ж саме, що й прохання.

Вона поскрипіла зубами та вдарила кулаком по стіні.

— Дурна дівка. Дурне прокляття І це ось так я повинна прожити залишок життя? Втікаючи від запитань?

Ні. Це лише Твайлайт Спаркл яку їй треба уникати. Вона є єдиною проблемою.

Вона завжди була проблемою.

Крок 4: Кантерлотська п'ятірка

Сансет йшла додому із школи Кантерлот, її руки і ноги боліли від ще одного дня ручної праці. Ще ніколи вона так сильно не бажала, щоб до неї повернулись її магічні сили.

— Укласти цемент та цегли... це робота земних поні. — Буркнула вона

Її руки були брудні й покриті кіркою від засохлого цементу, як і її одяг. Вона поглянула вниз на сіру пляму яку Снейлс «випадково» розлив їй на спідницю, але Сансет відчуває, що це була не випадковість. На жаль, довкола були свідки, тому Сансет не могла погрожувати побити його. Все рівно вона була занадто втомлена для цього.

Останні чотири дні, Сансет рано вставала і тяглась до школи, щоб допомагати відновлювати пошкодження які вона наробила. Вона розмірковувала над тим, щоб просто пропустити її покарання і дозволити професійним робочим зробити всю роботу. Але вона вирішила, що вона і так мала забагато проблем. До того ж, якщо вона не буде робити цього, Селестія може «попрохати» її робити щось ще більш неприємне. І тоді у неї не буде вибору.

Під час роботи, Сансет знайшла час, щоб більше поміркувати над природою її «покаяння» і зо змушувало його активуватися. Коли вона вперше наштотхнулась на Твайлайт із цього світу, вона була практично у пастці через постійні атаки питаннями. Але коли Сансет зустріла її у торговому центрі, вона змогла втекти, не дивлячись на те, що Твайлайт вимагала відповідь.

Вона зібрала усі випадки до купи, додаючи випадки з робочими які прохали її про щось, і зробила висновок, що її прокляття активувалось, в основному, від прохань. Якщо хтось *прохав* її про щось, вона повинна підкоритися, але якщо це був *наказ*, то вона не була зобов'язана відповідати «так».

Також, судячи з усього, слово «*будь ласка*», також активувало його.

Сансет стало трохи легше від знання того, що її не можуть наказувати через з технічних причин, але виконання прохань інших все рівно стало ложкою дьогтю.

— Ще один день, Сансет, ще один день...

Завтра усі ремонтні роботи будуть завершені і навчання продовжиться вже наступного понеділка. І тоді Сансет залишиться турбуватися про місяць групи подовженого дня. Вона роздратовалась. Не те, що б їй було зайнятись чимось кращім.

Її шлунок тихо бурчав, і Сансет бажала чогось солодкого. У неї все ще залишилось трошки грошей після походу за продуктами цього тижня, тому вона вирішила завітати в кондитерську «Цукровий куточок». Вона зупинилась і застібнула курточку яка ховала огидні плями на її сорочці. Люди і так же думали, що вона монстр; вона не хотіла, щоб вони думали що вона ще й брудна волоцюга.

Вона знайшла магазин, вірний своїй назві, у кутку вулиці «Цукрова». Коли вона штовхнула двері та зайшла всередину, усі розмови припинились. Сансет впізнала майже усіх покупців — вони були учнями із школи. Вони усі дивились на неї з подивом, інтересом і страхом. Або це була лють, Сансет не була впевнена в цьому, та й їй було байдуже.

Сансет швидко почала хвилюватися цією мовчазною паузою.

— На що ви всі витріщились? — Потребувала вона, стукнув чоботом по підлозі.

Учні ще кілька секунд дивились на неї доки не повернулись до своїх розмов, хіба що на пів-тони тихіше.

Вона стиснула кулаки і попрямувала до прилавку, але це не була звичайна гордовита та напориста хода. Це була хода сорому, яка обтягувалась через судження поглядами її одноліток.

— Як я можу допомогти тобі? — Спитала Пані Кейк доволі прохолодно.

Сансет була впевнена, що не дуже добре ладнає з Кейками.

— Мені полуничний кекс та булочка. — Сансет зітхнула.

Пані Кейк дістала два предмети з відповідних лотків і поклала їх у сумку. Сансет заплатила і як тільки вона повернулась, вона очима пробігла по п'яти дуже знайомим обличчям біля виходу.

Не звертай на них уваги, Сансет. Просто продовжуй йти.

Вона пришвидшила ходу до дверей.

— Егегей, Сансет. — Покликала Еплджек. — Не підойдеш к нам на хвилиночку?

Дідько.

Сансет відчула як блискавка пробігла у неї по спині і її ноги самі по собі довели її до п'яти дівчат.

— Що? — Коротко спитала вона.

Еплджек вказала на порожній стілець поруч.

— Прісядь з нами.

Сансет не дуже хотіла цього, але оскільки вони, скоріше за все, запитали б її ще раз, вона позбавила себе від проблеми і сіла на місце.

— Добре, що вам треба?

— Ну, ем... — Еплджек покашляла в руку, оглядаючись на друзів.

Оскільки ніхто не сказав нічого, вона продовжила. — Ми просто хотіли узнати як у тя справи йдуть.

— Дійсно?

Сансет схрестила руки. Оглядаючи кожну з них по черзі, вона виміряла свою зневагу до них усіх.

Еплджек і її набридливий суржик і дурний капелюх.

Рейнбоу Деш поглянула на неї доки та сьорбала смузі. Як би Сансет ненавиділа її, вона мусила признати, що захоплюється сміливістю Рейнбоу коли та ставала проти неї.

Флатершай нервово виправляла волосся.

Безхребетна боягузка.

Пінкі стрибала на своєму місці, вона єдина виглядала так, наче їй дійсно хочеться бути тут. Її незмінна оптимістична манера поведінки та веселе ставлення викликали у Сансет бажання рвати на собі волосся.

Як одна людина може бути такою набридливою?

І далі йде Реріті. Примадонна, хоче бути чірлідеркою на яку б дивилась вся школа. Сансет би ненавиділа її більше, якби вони не були схожими у цьому.

— Да, дійсно. — Наполягала Еплджек. — Послухай, я знаю що у нас були розбіжності в прошлом, но я думаю что буде хорошою ідеєю забути про них і почати з чистого листа.

— З чистого листа. — Сансет чесно не могла повірити, що це відбувається. — Ви, дівчата, дійсно хочете бути моїми друзями? — Спитала вони сміючись.

Пінкі Пай палко кивнула головою.

— Ага! Можливо якби у тебе були друзі, то ти б не була такою злюкою. Давай! Друзів забагато не буває!

Сансет насупила лоб.

Ці дівки думають, що я взагалі тупа.

— Добре, тоді ось що я вас спитаю: чи ви *дійсно* хочете бути моїми друзями? Чи ви просто виконуєте обіцянку Твайлайт Спаркл?

Троє з п'яти облич змінились з привітливих до винуватих. Пінкі Пай, все ще посміхаючись до вух, сказала.

— І те, і те!

Флатершай опустилась на стільці, щоб виглядати якмога менше.

— Це не те щоб... ну... частково це так... але ми *дійсно* хочемо бути твоїми друзями... просто... мм... — Вона притихла та сховалась за своїм рожевим волоссям.

Еплджек потерла потилицю.

— Добре, да, ми дали обещаніє Твайлайт. Але, чесно хочу помочь тебе, Сансет.

Сансет підвела брову від щирого погляду її очей. Це... це були не ті відповіді на які вона розраховувала. Вона обернулась та поглянула на Рейнбоу Деш, обличчя якої залишилося незворушним, як і тоді коли Сансет вперше до наблизилась до них.

Рейнбоу ухопила її погляд і сказала.

— Я роблю це через обіцянку. Ти мені все ще не подобаєшся, і якби не вони, я би не погодилась на це. Дай я тобі нагадаю, що за останні три роки ти: розірвала дружбу, знущалась над усіма хто був слабкіше за тебе, принизила майже кожного в школі хоча б один раз... — По мірі того як вона говорила, її голос ставав дедалі гучніше, і вона підвелась; її обличчя було червоним от люті. — Ах, так, майже забула найкращу частину: ти перетворилась на демона і *спробувала вбити нас!*

У магазині знову стало тихо, усі дивились на Рейнбоу доки вона стояла на стільці, дихаючи так, наче вона пробігла марафон. Вона всілась назад, схрестив руки, і повернулась дивитися у вікно.

— Тому, пробач мені, якщо я не дуже бажаю обійматися і сюсюкатися з тобою.

Це була відповідь на яку Сансет очікувала, хоча вона не дуже хотіла признавати, що вона вразила її сильніше, ніж вона очікувала.

— І як щодо тебе, Реріті?

Сансет повернулась до останньої, хто не висловив своєї думки.

Шум у магазині знов підвищився до рівня шепоту, доки Реріті сиділа у тиші і розмірковувала. Її очі були заплющені і вона тримала голову рукою.

— Що ж, Сансет, Рейнбоу права. Після того як ти з'явилась на першому курсі, від тебе були лише одні непереливки, що з часом вплигло в набагато гірше — Вона розплющила очі і поглянула на Сансет з виразом, який не був ні осудливим, ні розлюченим, але у той же час виражав і те і те.

Вона продовжила.

— Ти брехала, шантажувала, обманювала, крала, погрожувала і ображала усіх довкола себе. Ти нічого не зробила заради когось, окрім себе, і минулої п'ятниці, ти показала ким ти дійсно є.

Сансет присіла на стілець. Слова Рейнбоу вразили її, але те як Реріті виклала їх, ранило її. Вона не прокричала їх; вона просто виклала їх як ясний день. Це було так, наче вона знову слухала духів Елементів.

— Але. — Погляд Реріті пом'якшав. — Ти також продемонструвала ознаки покаяння цієї ночі. Так, я дала обіцянку другу, але ми не можемо змусити тебе нічого робити проти твоєї волі...

— Чому ні? — Втрутилась Рейнбоу. — Вона змушувала усіх робити те, чого вони не хочуть.

Еплджек вдарила її своїм капелюхом.

— Циц, Рейнбоу, і дай Реріті звершити.

Реріті прокашлялась.

— Як я казала... Якщо ти не хочеш бути нашим другом, тоді добре, це твоє рішення. Але якщо тобі дійсно жаль і ти не знала іншого шляху... Тоді я бажаю допомогти показати наскільки це чудо дружити, замість того щоб роз'єднувати.

Сансет мовчала, буря думок і почуттів прокотились по ній. Більшість з них дійсно хотіли бути її другом, не дивлячись на те, що вона зробила їм у минулому. Особливо Реріті, навіть після того що сталося на «Весняному Кидку».

Чи я дійсно мала це на увазі, що мені жаль? Жаль, що я провалилась, так. Але інше... це була я чи розмовляли Елементи?

Сансет абсолютно точно відчула щось коли Реріті пригадала про всі її вчинки їй в лице. Можливо, вона дійсно відчувала покаяння.

Сансет скривила обличчя. Це суперечило всьому, у що вона вірила! Їй не потрібні друзі і вона ненавиділа усіх за цим столом!

І все ж...

До цього моменту, вони єдині хто хоча б розглядали можливість стати друзями з нею. Усі інші б просто розсміялись їй в обличчя... і тоді б Сансет довелося б вибити їм зуби. Вони були єдині, хто міг би допомогти позбавитися прокляття. Як сильно б вона не хотіла цього признавати, але вона потребувалась в них.

Тільки до того моменту, доки прокляття не спаде, а потім я повернусь до самотності!

Вона підняла голову і поглянула на їх очікуючи обличчя. Глибоко зітхнув, вона сказала.

— Добре. Я думаю... Що я б хотіла... — Вона стиснула зуби і сказала напруженим голосом. — Я б хотіла стати з вами... друзями.

Пінкі кинулась через стіл схопила Сансет у міцні обійми, майже не поваливши її на підлогу.

— Обожецькі! Це буде таааааааак неймовірно! Ти можеш приходити і тусуватися з нами, і ми можемо влаштовувати ночівлі та вечірки, і ходити в кіно та магазини разом! Буде так весело, я не можу дочекатися! Ми можемо стати Кантерлотською п'ятіркою! Ой, почекайте, нас вже шість. Хм... я придумала! Ми можемо бути Мейн Шестіркою! Ну, знаєте, бо англійською Мейн (Mane) це грива! А ми ж Вондеркольти! А кольт (Colt) це конь! Круто же ж, скажіть?! Я просто у захваті!..

— Пінкі, відпусти мене, або я буду змушена зробити тобі боляче.

Пінкі відпустила Сансет і перекотилась назад, виглядаючи сумною.

Реріті дісталась до неї та погладила по плечу.

— Маленькі кроки, дороженька, маленькі кроки. — Вона посміхнулась Сансет. — І все ж, я рада що ти прийняла нашу пропозицію.

— Ага, не то, щоб у мене був вибір. — Пробубніла Сансет, струшуючи пил з себе. — Перше правило: не торкатися мене. — Це було направлено, в основному, на Пінкі і її любов до обіймів.

Пінкі впала в крісло.

— Уууу...

Сансет знову схрестила руки.

— То, що тепер?

— Ну... — Заговорила Флатершай, піднявшись назад на сидіння. Вона нервово стиснула кінчики пальців. — Оскільки ми тепер друзі, чому б тобі не розказати щось про себе?

— Я чарівна єдиноріжка із іншого виміру, і колись була найкращою ученицею принцеси Селестії. — Автоматично сказала Сансет.

— Погодь, ти що теж із того іншого місця? — Спитала Еплджек.

— Так, невже Твайлайт вам не розповідала?

Вони усі похитали головою.

Рейнбоу Деш нахилилася вперед.

— І ти сказала, що була ученицею *Селестії*? Я думала, що Твайлайт була принцесою?

Сансет зітхнула. Вона вже почала шкодувати про всю цю дружбу.

— Так, я була ученицею Селестії. Вона принцеса у тому світі. Дуже могутня. Але так, Твайлайт теж принцесою. Обряд вознесіння треба заслужити. І я думаю, що вона заслужила. — Гірко додала Сансет.

— Ти знала про Твайлайт коли була там? — Спитала Пінкі.

— Ні, не знала. Я дізналась про неї до того, як одного разу не почала оглядати портал. Коли місяць повний, якщо ти дуже сильно сконцентруєшся, то ти можеш побачити у ньому Еквестрію. Я бачили як вона і Селестія разом навчали у тронній залі.

Щось сумне йокнуло у серці Сансет, і вона швидко встала щоб піти геть.

— Друге правило: не питати у мене більше про Еквестрію або Твайлайт Спаркл. — Вона повернулася на каблуках та почали йти геть, доки Пінкі не покликала її.

— Почекай, Сансет, ми збираємося на ярмарок цієї суботи! Хочеш піти з нами?

— Ні.

— Ааа, ну пішли, будь ласка? Це те, чим друзі займаються!

— Добре... Я піду.

Дідько!

Пінкі зраділа і Сансет закотила очі, направляючись до передньої двері. Вона пройшла половину шляху, доки не зрозуміла, що забула щось. Вона обернулася і крокувала назад до столу, ударив по руці Пінкі доки та намагалась дотягнутися до солодоців які Сансет майже забула.

— Третє правило: хто торкнеться до моїх речей — той постраждає.

Пінкі знову сумно посміхнулася.

Крок 5: Заходь — не бійся, виходь — не плач

Роздався стук коли Сансет скинула останнє відро з фарбою у кузов машини. Вона витерла пальці об свої штани, розмазавши залишки фарби, через що її обличчя скрутилося у огиді.

Вона обернулася від бордюру і окинула оком недільну працю якою стала нова стіна школи. Вона виглядала більш менш такою ж як і попередня. Директорка Селестія сказала, що шкільний бюджет не дає змогу зробити щось гарніше. І, все ж, Сансет відчула певне задоволення від того, що вона власним потом і кров'ю допомогла відбудувати стіну.

І вона поклялася *ніколи* більше не робити цього знов.

Їй майже вдалося непомітно піти доки вони стояли біля входу, але один з робочих ввічливо «*попрохав*» залишитися і прибрати усе. І Сансет не могла відмовитися.

Прибирання забрало ще одну годину часу Сансет. Не те, щоб їй було чим зайняти себе, але, все ж це було краще ніж працювати більше ніж вона повинна була.

Сонце почало спускатися за горизонт коли робітники нарешті пішли геть, залишивши Сніпса, Снейлса і Сансет на самоті перед школою. Хлопці розмовляли між собою, доки Сансет вперлась до статуї. Її руки були втомлені після цілого дня праці.

Як тільки хлопці почали йти геть, Сансет покликала їх. У неї було щось, що вона хотіла сказати, і їй знадобилося кілька днів, щоб нарешті зібратися для цього.

— Сніпс, Снейлс! — Гаркнула вона.

Воно не повинно було так прозвучати. Вона просто звикла звертатися до них як до слуг.

Вони обидва здригнулися перед тим як повільно обернутися наче дві дитини які були піймані на викраданні солодоців на кухні. Їхні великі, як у малих цуценят, очі змусили Сансет прикусити свої губи та схрестити руки на грудях із звички. У них були ці вираз облич зазвичай коли вони збиралися розказати про якісь погані новини.

І вона *ненавиділа* погані новини.

Сніпс потер свою потилицю намагаючись уникати погляду Сансет.

— Послухай, Сансет, ми не можемо... ну, ми не *хочемо* тусуватися з тобою більше.

— Т-т-так! — Продовжив Снейлс, зробивши крок назад. — Моя мама сказала, що ти погано на нас впливаєш. І нам більше не треба проблем.

Обидва присіли та прикрили свої обличчя в очікуванні люті Сансет. Вона дивилась на них так десь зо хвилину, розмірковуючи, чи варто вдарити в останнє їх чи ні.

Так і не дочекавшись люті, Снейлс підвівся і поглянув на Сансет з ще більш дурним виразом обличчя ніж зазвичай.

— Амм... ти не збираєшся бити нас?

— Ні. Ви хочете щоб я побила вас?

Сніпс прикрив рукою рот Снейлса.

— Ні, не треба! — Сказав він швидко.

— Тоді добре.

Сансет поглянула на них, намагаючись підібрати потрібні слова. Вона ніколи до цього не вибачалась ні за що. Ну, як мінімум, з власного бажання.

Вона обернула голову назад і поглянула на рожеве небо та зітхнула.

— Слухайте, ви двоє, я просто хотіла сказати... — пробурмотіла вона щось, що загубилося на лагідному вітрі.

— Що? — Сніпс і Снейлс спитали одночасно.

— Я кажу, що пробачте мені, добре? — Вона перенесла свій погляд назад на них. Мабуть, це було доволі лячно для них, бо вони знову одночасно здригнулися. — Мені шкода, що я потягла вас з собою. Ви двоє просто виконували мої накази. Нічого із цього не є вашою виною. Тому... пробачте.

Сансет боролась з тим, щоб не зблювати. Сам акт прохання про пробачення викликав у неї нудоту. Але якась мала частинка її —*доволі дратівлива частинка про яку вона все більше почала здогадуватися*—

почувалась так, наче їй треба хоча б вибачитися перед цими двома, з якими вона поводила себе наче з мавпами-прислугами останній рік.

Обидва витріщились на неї у нерозумінні. Вони поглянули один на одного, потім на Сансет, і знову один на одного.

— Сансет, ти... — Сансет обірвала Сніпса помахавши рукою.

— Жодних питань! Просто... просто знайти що мені шкода, добре? Вам не обов'язково прийняти це, але ось.

Вона почала йти дорогою геть, повз Сніпса і Снейлса, які знову здригнули. Вона дійшла за поворот, коли Сніпс покликав її.

— Сансет... амм, дякую, мабуть. Не все було настільки вже й погано.

Снейлс кивнув.

— Ага, перетворитися на монстрів було доволі круто. Пряма як у Хеллоуїн.

Сансет просто помотала головою і продовжила йти.

— Ідіоти. — Пробурмотіла вона.

І все ж, вона була рада, що вони не ненавиділи її. У інших обставинах, Сансет могла би легко зманіпулювати їх знову почати працювати на неї.. Але тепер... її серце не бажало цього.

Вона хотіла бути жорстокою. Вона хотіла бути злобною. Вона хотіла звинувачувати усіх довкола неї і виміщати злобу. Але з кожним наступним днем, Сансет було все важче і важче заперечувати, що вона була не права. Це була її провина.

Ну, майже її.

Вона все ще знаходила трохи розради у тому, щоб звинувачувати принцесу Твайлайт Спаркл і її друзів. Але, на жаль, ця розрада швидко перетворилась у роздратування, коли вона згадала, що їй тепер треба бути друзями з ними. Це була одна поразка за іншою. Побита, проклята, а тепер ще й змушена дружити з людьми, через яких вона опинилась у цій ситуації.

Доки я не зможу одурити Елементи, щоб вони зняли з мене прокляття. Після же цього, я поміщуся і втечу від них якомога далі!

Вона знала, що легше сказати, ніж зробити. Завтра буде її перший текст — цілий день на вуличному ярмарку. Від цієї думки вона мимоволі здригнулася. Була тисяча і одна справа, якою б вона могла зайнятися замість того, щоб витратити цілий день з тією п'ятіркою.

Цікаво... що як я просто зв'яжу себе, щоб я не могла втекти...

Сансет зблідла.

— Такс... зараз я просто несу якусь пургу.

Сансет прокинулась від будильнику який дзижчав у неї в вухах. Вона взяла подушку у накрила нею свою голову, щоб не чути шуму. Зрештою, здоровий глузд переміг її і вона дотягнулась до будильнику і вимкнула його.

І знову тиша повернулась до кімнати. Сансет заплющила очі у спокою, прагнучи повернутися до сну.

Технічно, Пінкі не сказала коли мені треба прийти...

Сансет тепер була схильна вірити, що всесвіт ненавидить її, бо в ту саму мить вона почула, як дзвонить її телефон у кишені куртки.

Не відповідай. Нічого не роби. Ти все ще можеш технічно вибратися з цього.

Телефон продовжив вивергати високо-частотний шум, який наполягав, щоб на нього відповіли. Сансет зрівняла свою впертість з його наполегливістю, відмовляючись рухатися із її зручного ліжка.

Поки телефон все дзвонив та дзвонив, у голову Сансет закралося питання, як і хто з них взагалі отримав її номер телефону. Вона зробила собі ментальну нотатку, щоб спитати в них коли вони зустрінуться наступного разу.

Після години цього, Сансет була готова викинути телефон у вікно. Вона виповзла із ліжка і засунула руку у куртку, діставши телефон і перевіривши екран.

*157 Пропущених дзвінків. 156—*Дзинь*—157 Голосових повідомлень.*

Усі вони прийшли від одного номеру. Телефон вібрував у руці Сансет, благаючи, щоб йому відповіли.

Просто викинь його, Сансет! Дістань акумулятор, ігноруй його! Заради святої Селестії, не відповідай!

Палець Сансет перегорнув телефон і підніс до її вуха.

— Ало?

Та йопта, Сансет, ну чому?

— Обожечкі, Сансет, я почала думати, що ти *ніколи* не відповіси! — Пронизливий голос Пінкі пронизав мозок Сансет. — Ти спала? Б'юся об заклад, ти спала, типу, сьогодні ж субота! Я люблю спати по суботам, але тусуватися з друзями я люблю більше! І вже одинадцять годин ранку, і як моя бабуля Пай завжди казала мені *«Рання пташка ловить хробака»*. Доволі дивна приказка, бо ми не птиці, і ми точно не їмо хробаків. Ой, доки не забула, ми збираємося зустрітися в кутку Третинної та Ложкової вулиць в полудень, щоб почати веселитися разом! Я забула сказати тобі про це у четвер, я не хочу щоб ти загубилась.

— ...Так, Пінкі, я спала. — Сансет нарешті змогла відповісти.

— Упсі, пробач, що розбудила. Але все рівно настав час підійматися та сяти! *Доброго ранку, доброго ранку! Сьогодні такий хороший день! Доброго ранку, доброго ранку...*

Сансет грюкнула телефоном, утримуючись від того, щоб не кинути його об стіну. Тепер це вирішено — вона ненавиділа Пінкі Пай більше за всіх.

Голосно застогнав, вона піднялась та поглянула на себе у дзеркалі, помітив її погану зачіску і мішки під очима.

— Мабуть, мені варто підготуватися перед тим як виходити.

Вона збрала одяг на день і пішла у душу. Вода відчувалась особливо холодною цього ранку. Після того як вона одяглась та нанесла макіяж, Сансет пішла у кухню і поклала чебурек у мікрохвильовку. Як тільки вона дзинькнула, Сансет відчула блискавку у спині, і її ноги почали рухатися самі по собі.

— Ні, почекайте! Я вже йду, дайте мені ще секундочку!

Вона потяглась за телефоном і перевірила час. Був рівно полудень.

Сансет схопилась за дверний прохід, намагаючись затягнути себе у кухню, щоб хоча б схопити сніданок. Але решта тіла не давало зробити цього. Голосно лаючись, Сансет здалась і крокувала до входних дверей, особливо гучно грюкнув ними.

— Офіційно — це саме жорстоке і незвичайне покарання.

— Ти спізнилась.

Сансет поглянула на Рейнбоу Деш як та підходила до п'ятьох дівчат які сиділи у маленькому кафе на вулиці Третинній. Вони тепло усміхнулись їй, окрім Рейнбоу яка звинувачувально вказувала на неї пальцем.

— Пробачте мені, *ваша високість*. Я не була проінформована про час зустрічі до останнього моменту.

— Не треба мені це розповідати. — Відрізала Рейнбоу. — Пінкі сказала нам, що вона намагалась додзвонитися до тебе цілу годину.

Пінкі кивнула головою.

— Ага, але схоже через мене у тебе сів акумулятор, бо з'єднання зникло коли я розмовляла.

— Тааак... акумулятор сів... саме так. — Сансет не робила зорового контакту. — У будь-якому випадку, давайте вже скоріше покінчимо з цим.

Рейнбоу фиркнула.

— Не треба звучати такою захопленою. Можеш піти звідки коли захочеш.

Повір мені, якби я могла, то я б вже пішла.

Флатершай поклала руку на плече Рейнбоу.

— Будьте ласкаві, обидві. Ми тут щоб веселитися, пам'ятаєте?

Сансет оглянула вулицю, де було багато розставлено багато будок та столів. Карнавальні ігри було розміщені поміж стендів і Сансет навіть могла побачити контактний зоопарк в самому кінці блоку. Нічого з цього не виглядало дуже цікавим.

— Тааакс, я не впевнена, що щось із чого можна вважати «веселим». — Сказала Сансет із скептицизмом у голосі.

Вона відчула, як рука обійняла її шию як Пінкі почала притягувати Сансет ближче до себе.

— Ой, не будь такою занудою, Сансет! Тут є багато чого весело!

— Пінкі, ти порушуєш правило номер один. — Роздратовано сказала Сансет.

Пінкі прибрала руку, але усмішка не покинула її обличчя.

— Я хочу потім піти на магічне шоу!

Флатершай вказала на кінець вулиці.

— Я б хотіла піти у контактний зоопарк. Звісно, якщо це не проблема...

— Я та Рейнбоу ставім ставки. — Сказала Еплджек. — Та, у кого буде менше прізів з ігор, прийде у школу вдягнена у найдівчачішу сукню, яку тока Реріті зможе зробити.

Реріті відірвала погляд від свого смузі.

— Чому мені ніхто про це не сказав?

— Ми сказали тобі про це прямо зараз, чи не так? — Посміхнулась Рейнбоу.

— Хм. — Реріті піднялась зі столу і вкинула свою чашку у сміттєвий бак.

— Дуже добре. Я зроблю це, але тільки тому, що це буде варте того, щоб побачити Еплджек у сукні.

— Ее, чого ти думаєш, що я проіграю?

— Не знаю, але чи може дівчина дозволити собі помріяти про таке?

Сансет масажувала собі скроні, лаючись собі під ніс.

— Слухайте, ми збираємося сидіти тут і балакати, чи може таки ми вже підемо і зробимо щось? Бо якщо мені хотілося б нічого не робити, то я могла би залишитися вдома.

Посмішка Рейнбоу перетворилась на похмурий вираз обличчя.

— Чого ж тоді не підеш додому?

Сансет спробувала обернутися і піти геть, але вона не змогла поворухнути ногою. Вона поглянула назад на Рейнбоу і прогарчала.

— Я не можу.

— Чому?

Сансет чекала доки її голосові зв'язки не почнуть говорити самі по собі. Її шлунок звузився у жаху, і вона відчула, як її серце почало битися ще швидше.

Дідько, вони дізнаються про прокляття! Мені гаплик!

Їй було все рівно, якщо вони мають хороші наміри. Якщо вони дізнаються, вони зможуть змушувати їх робити будь-що просто попрохавши. Її життя буде зруйновано. Воно і так було поганим коли вони несвідомо прохають її. Якщо вони це будуть робити свідомо...

Але, жодного слова так і не було промовлено. Ніяка сила не тиснула на її горло, як зазвичай це буває коли у неї питають щось. Сансет повільно кліпнула доки до неї зійшло.

Мені не треба розповідати їм про прокляття! Я можу про це брехати!

Схоже, що Елементи були у певній мірі милосердні. Сансет почала би танцювати прямо там, якби не розгублені погляди п'ятірки. Вона все ще не відповіла на запитання Рейнбоу.

— Амм... тому що я дуже рада, що зможу провести день разом з вами усіма!

Чуваче, це так приємно знову брехати!

— Бачите? Я ж казала, що вона буде тепліше до нас відноситися! — Зраділа Пінкі.

Рейнбоу поглянула з недовірою на Сансет і Пінкі, перед тим як знизати плечима і піти далі по вулиці.

Сансет посміхнулась позаду неї.

Не переймайся, Деші, наші почуття взаємні.

Щоб не виглядати дивно, група вирушила з кафе, вирішуючи оглянути усі будки з розвагами перед тим як узяти перерву перед магічною виставою і після цього піти у контактний зоопарк.

У будках, у яких вони зупинялися, були різні дрібнички і помпони, але нічого з цього не цікавило Сансет. Кожного разу, коли продавець збирався спитати, чи зацікавлена вона в чомусь, Сансет коротко та холодно відповідала — Ні. Але вона б скоріше за все робила би так навіть без прокляття.

Вони витратили півгодини біля невеличкого стенду з прикрасами в очікуванні на Реріті, коли та вирішить, чи хоче щось купити чи ні.

Вона примірила пару дорогих сережок, любуючись собою у дзеркалі.

— Що ти думаєш, Сансет? Чи пасують вони мені?

Сансет притулилась до прилавку, її обличчя було втіленням нудьги. Навіщо Реріті спитала її думку, вона так ніколи і не дізнається.

— Я думаю, що ти виглядаєш як хвой...

— Оооууу, це що, рубінове намисто? — Реріті перекинулась на інший столик.

Сансет зітхнула з полегшенням. Було б доволі не зручно, якби Реріті почула закінчення цього речення.

Нарешті, Реріті вирішила, що вона не може дозволити собі купити будь-яку прикрасу на стенді.

— Вони усі виглядають чудово, але мені варте зберегти грошей для канікул.

— Шо ж, ось і пропали в нікуди півгодини життя які я ніколи не поверну назад. — Пробурмотіла Сансет сама собі.

Вона поглянула краєм ока на Реріті, яка продовжила йти, наче нічого не почула.

Вони зупинились біля будки з іграми, дивлячись на те, як Еплджек і Рейнбоу Деш змагалися за найбільшу кількість призів. Еплджек перемогла у стрільбі з водного пістолета, а Рейнбоу вийшла вперед одержав перемогу у вільному киданні. Наступна будка була класичною грою збий-пляшки-за-допомогою-бейсбойльного-м'яча.

Еплджек і Рейнбоу по черзі робили ідеальні кидки, доки Рейнбоу не лажанула і одна пляшка залишилася на місці.

Після отримання призу у вигляді великого плюшевого ведмеда, Еплджек підняла бейсбольний м'яч і протягнула його до Сансет.

— Давай, дівко, годі вже бить такої занудной і спробуй повеселитися?

Сансет подумала, що це повинно було бути прохання, оскільки її рука зреагувала і взяла м'яч. Вона знизала плечима, вирішив, що одна гра не зашкодить. Після кількох кидків вгору-вниз щоб відчутти вагу м'яча,

Сансет прицілилась на купу складених срібних пляшок. Якщо вона збиралася зробити це, то вона зробить це правильно.

Вона закинула руку назад, і зі всієї сили жбурнула м'яч, дивлячись за тим, як м'яч прориває собою повітря... мимо пляшок крізь ткану стіну будки.

Рейнбоу неконтрольовано зареготала зі сльозами.

— О боже мій, це було жахливо!

— Вау. — Еплджек потерла шию. — Це було... неочікувано.

Сансет витріщалась роззявив рота від діри, яку вона зробила. Як вона взагалі могла так промахнутися? Вона відчула як її очі почали тіпатися, коли Рейнбоу впала на землю від сміху над невдачею Сансет.

Оператор стенду поглянув з Сансет на стіну і назад.

— Амм... не бажаєте спробувати ще раз?

— Так, я хочу спробувати ще раз.

Він поклав інший м'яч на стійку і відійшов в сторону на кілька кроків. Сансет схопила м'яч і ще раз прицілилась, намагаючись ігнорувати хихикання Рейнбоу. У неї було бажання націлитися на голову Рейнбоу, але вона знала, що вона навряд отримає додаткових очок дружби за це.

Вона випустила м'яч із руки у політ, дивлячись як він знову прорізає повітря, цього разу прямо на шляху до пляшок. Почувся *дзиньк* і падіння, коли пляшки упали на землю, і Сансет покрутила і штовхнула пальцем у Рейнбоу.

— Ха! У твоє обличчя!

Все ще посміхаючись, Сансет підвелась.

— Ооо, так, ти прям показала мені. Нарешті збила їх.

Сансет хотіла колко відповісти, але її відволік оператор стійки.

— Пані, ось ваш приз. — Він тримав маленьку, рожеву єдиноріжку.

Як іронічно.

Подумала Сансет, беручі іграшку у руки.

— Аааааввввв. — Пінкі матеріалізувалась за плечем Сансет. — Вона така мила! Як ти цю іграшку назвеш?

— Ніяк. Навіщо мені давати ім'я не живим предметам?

— Тому що це весело, дурненька!

Сансет закотила очі і всунула іграшку у руки Пінкі.

— Ну от і забирай собі. Я впевнена, що ви будете щасливі разом.

Пінкі похитала головою і відштовхнула її назад.

— Я не можу взяти її у тебе, це твій приз! До того ж, я впевнена, що вона буде *значно* щасливіша з тобою! Ви маєте так багато спільного!

— Вона? — Сансет поглянула на єдиноріжку.

Схоже, що вона має більше жіночних якостей.

Ну звісно ж, у цьому світі узагальнено, що єдинороги це жіночі створіння. Хм, добре, я залишу тебе собі.

Зловісна усмішка намалювалась на обличчі Сансет.

Я назву тебе Твайлайт Спаркл, і тоді коли ми доберемося додому, я покажу тобі твій новий замок. Який прямо на моїй печі!

— Хехехехехе.

— Бачиш? Я знала, що ви зможете поладнати! — Осяйнула Пінкі.

— «*Приходьте, щоб побачити Величного та й Містичного Артеміса Луламуну*» — Прочитала Рейнбоу на знаку перед імпровізованою сценою якою вони збудували.

— Луламун... Луламун... почекайте, чи це не прізвище Тріксі часом?

Реріті кивнула.

— Мабуть, родич. Підозрюю, що батько.

— Ммм, Пінкі, ти точно хочеш піти сюди?

Пінкі кивнула та сказала.

— Ага! Я чула, що він прям чудовий. І не так як Тріксі, яка просто непогана, а прям чудово! Він був на розігріві у Лас-Вегасі!

— Що ж, ми вже погодилися на це, тому чому б не зайняти місця — Рейнбоу зітхнула.

Вперше, Сансет погодилася з нею. Це точно буде ще одна бездарна трата часу. В кращому випадку, Тріксі була так собі. Її батько не може бути набагато краще, якщо він же її і навчав.

Вони зайняли місця біля майже переднього ряду, Пінкі стрибала на місці від хвилювання. Оглянувшись довкола, Сансет побачила як збирається доволі великий натовп людей.

Нещасні невдахи. Хоча б за це нікому не треба було платити.

Сцену наклав шлейф фіолетового диму, і із нього з'явився чоловік. Він був високий, з срібляним волоссям і добре підстриженою козячою борідкою, і носив дуже дорогий на вигляд синій костюм з білими черевиками і фіолетовим плащем.

— Пані та панове, хлопці та дівчата! — Почав він з типічним тоном шоумена. — Вітаю усіх на сьогоднішній виставі... *Величного та й Містичного Артеміса Луламуну!* — Сцена засіяла у блискітках та вогнях, і натовп почав аплодувати та радіти.

— Це не була магія, народ це лише піротехніка. — Посміхнувся Артеміс.

У натовпі прокотилася хвиля сміху. Сансет же просто здула пасмо волосся з обличчя.

— Ахх, я вже точно можу сказати, що ви чудесна аудиторія!

Від поліз у рукав і дістав звідти великий букет квітів і кинув його у натовп. Як тільки якісь дівчата із натовпу змогли дотягнутися до нього, квіти луснули у потік бульбашок які унесло вітром.

І хоча дівчата були розчаровані, всі інші у натовпі аплодували у здивуванні.

— Пффф, подумаєш якісь фокуси-покуси. — Пробурмотіла Сансет доки Рейнбоу не фиркнула на неї щоб та замовкла.

— Що ж, настав час для *справжньої* магії! — Оголосив Артемів, дістаючи паличку із іншого рукаву. — А тепер, за допомогою моїх чарівних слів, я збираюсь зробити... — Він оглянув натовп доки його очі не зупинились на Пінкі Пай. — Он та молода дівчина, левітуй до мене на сцену!

Пінкі задихнулась, її обличчя формувало усмішку яка —*Як думала Сансет*— не могла вміститися на її обличчі.

Артемів змахнув паличкою.

— Раз, два, три, *Луламун!*

Стілець Пінкі одразу почав підійматися у повітря і полетів у сторону сцени.

Усі почали шепотіти у здивуванні. Навіть Сансет довелося признати, що вона була здивована. Такі чари не повинні бути можливі у цьому вимірі.

Пінкі приземлилась на сцену і почала плескати у долоні.

— Це було *НЕЙМОВІРНО!*

— Рад, що тобі сподобалося, але я ще не завершив! Тепер я дістану кролика із твого волосся! Він встромив руку у гніздо, яке було зачіскою Пінкі, длубаючись там кілька секунд доки його обличчя не нахмурилося.

— Що ж, оце поворот. — Він витягнув руку, не з білим кроликом, але з малою, зеленою рептилією. — Це дитинча крокодила?

— Не-а. — Посміхнулась Пінкі беручи лускате створіння у Артеміса. — Це мій улюбленець алігатор, Гаммі! Не переймайтеся, у нього немає зубів, бачите? — Пінкі розкрила його рот, демонструючи, що там дійсно немає зубів.

Артемів посвербив голову.

— Що ж, це щось магічне з чимось. — Він усміхнувся доки натовп хихикав з його та Пінкі витівок. — Але як би то не було, *Луламун!*

Стілець знову здійнявся у повітря, повертаючи його на своє місце поміж Сансет і Рейнбоу.

Сансет витріщалась на Пінкі і Гаммі.

— Чому у тебе дитинча алігатора у волоссі?

— Тому, що рибки вже занадто мейнстримні.

— А тепер — Продовжив Артемів. — Чи можу я отримати добровольця допомогти мені на сцені?

Сансет відчула як її рука піднялась у повітря і вона сказала.

— Я буду!

Якого дідька? Це навіть не було адресовано мені! І він сказав ДОБОВОЛЕЦЬ!

Але вже нічого не поробиш, коли Артемів вказав на неї і окликнув на сцену.

— Давай Сансет, йуху! — Зраділа Пінкі.

— Я здивована що она вообщє захотіла добровольно піти. — Прошепотіла Еплджек до Реріті, та кивнула у згоді.

Сансет заступила на сцені з сердитим виразом.

— Добре, що мені треба робити?

— Ну, по-перше, посміхайся частіше. Було б дуже сумно, якби таке гарне обличчя застрягло з таким виразом. — Пожартував Артемів.

— Нє.

— Та ти прямо сяєш від ентузіазму, чи не так? — У цей момент, світлова куля з'явилась над головою Сансет, і натовп ще більше захихотів.

— Хоча б скажи нам своє ім'я.

— Сансет Шимер.

— Що ж, Санні, для наступного трюку мені треба розпилити тебе на дві частини!

Напів порожній погляд Сансет швидко змінився на вираз жаху.

— Шо?!

— Ой, та ну тобі, буде весело! — Він вказав паличкою на завісу позаду нього, яка відкрилась і показала довгу горизонтальну коробку. — Ти пролізеш всередину, я розріжу тебе на дві частини і розділю їх, щоб аудиторія могла побачити. І тоді я піду за молочним шейком і повернуся щоб зібрати тебе до купи.

— Не смішно. — Прогарчала Сансет.

Артемів постукав її по носу.

— Тоді тоді, подруго, треба краще почуття гумору. — Випрямився він. — До того ж, ти вже пішла добровольцем, тому пролізай у коробку!

Неохоче, Сансет підійшла до коробки і пролізла всередину. Артемів закрив обидві секції, залишаючи тільки її голову та ноги відкритими. Він дістав пилу із того, що виглядало як ціле нічого, і тримав її посередині коробки.

Якщо я помру тут, то моїм найбільшим досягненням буде те, що я майже підкорила Еквестрію. Це доволі сумно.

Сансет чула про такого роду трюки, їх багато разів виконували, але вона завжди думала, що добровольці знали завчасно, що у другій секції просто знаходиться муляж. А тепер коли вона лежала там, Сансет зрозуміла, що її зараз можуть розпилити навпіл.

— А тепер, діти, я попрошу вас не виконувати цей трюк вдома! Ти готова, Сансет?

— Ні, і я думаю, що ви з'їхали з глузду!

Артемів знизав плечима.

— Про мене і не таке казали. Луламун!

Промовивши, він підніс пилу нижче, розпилюючи по лінії маркеру який відділяв коробку на дві частини. Сансет заплющила очі в очікуванні коли зубці пили почнуть її пиляти.

Я сподіваюся, що ви задоволені, Елементи! Я зараз помру і все це через вас!

Через кілька хвилин, Сансет розплющила очі, не розуміючи, чому вона все ще не відчуває пекельний біль. Артемів витріщався на неї з збентеженим виразом.

— Мені було цікаво, як довго ти збиралась ось так лежати. — Він поклав руку на кожну частину коробки і гукнув. — *Луламун!*

З поштовхом, він роз'єднав дві частини, через що Сансет відчула найдивніше поколювання у її житті.

— Якого... — Вона спробувала потрусити ногою і вона бачила як вона ворухнеться у іншій коробці. — Це... дивно.

Публіка вибухнула оплесками і Артемів почав театральню кланятися.

— Дякую, дякую, це було просто.

— Ей, не бажаєте мене зібрати до купи тепер?

Артемів посміявся.

— Ну звісно ж, тільки якщо ти скажеш чарівні слова.

Сансет закотила очі і щось пробурмотіла.

— Пробач, не можу розчути тебе дороженька.

— Луламун. — Сказала Сансет достатньо гучно, щоб почути.

Вона відчула як дві коробки з'єдналися назад, і почуття поколювання зникло. Вона піднялась з коробки і перевірила себе на наявність шрамів.

— Я не розумію. — Сказала вона у захваті. — Як ви це зробили?

— Дурненька Санні, фокусник ніколи не розкриває секретів.

Сансет схрестила руки.

— Це щось, що аматор би сказав, коли відповідь очевидна, але дуже добре схована.

— Аматор, кажеш?

Артемів плеснув у долоні, після чого його накрило фіолетовим димом. Коли він розсіявся, на його місці був кролик і жував моркву.

— Я тільки що перетворив себе на кролика. — Рот кролика рухався ідеально синхронно з словами які Сансет чула, але вона відмовлялась вірити, що це казав кролик.

— Чи можеш *ти* перетворитися на кролика? Я так не думаю.

— Ні, але я можу перетворитися на демона і з'їсти вас в один уку́с.

На момент у повітрі повисла пауза, після чого кролик почав сміятися. Він поглянув на неї і сказав.

— Ти мені подобаєшся, вмієш жартувати.

Знову з'явився клуб диму, і людська версія Артеміса повернулась з поклоном.

— Будь ласка, поаплодуйте моїй гарній асистентці.

Він вказав на Сансет, його власні руки вистрибнули із рукавів і почали самі по собі плескати. Аудиторія теж почала гучно плескати, але ніхто не зміг обійти в цьому Пінкі. Сансет відчула як її щоки почали червоніти і вона спробувала це сховати за нахмуреним виразом.

Артеміс погладив її по голові і прошепотів у її вухо.

— Знаєш, тобі дійсно треба спробувати частіше посміхатися. Я зрозумів, що ти можеш досягнути у житті значно більше, коли посміхаєшся.

Сансет фиркнула.

Він хоча б не сказав «будь-ласка».

— Дякую за пораду, візьму до уваги.

— Чудово. Що ж, пані і та панове, це все на сьогодні! Приходьте завтра, щоб побачити ще більше приголомшливих трюків! А тепер, дасвіданія!

З останньою хмарою диму, Артеміс зник, залишивши за собою феєрверк який полетів у повітря і вибухнув душем із вогників.

Як тільки Сансет злізла зі сцени, Пінкі підбігла до неї.

— Ваучікі, Сансет, це було таааак круто! Із тебе непогана асистентка виходить! Як ти себе почувалась коли тебе розпилили на дві частини?

— Дивно.

Сансет несвідомо потерла живіт.

Я не хочу цього признавати, але це було доволі вражаючи... для магічної вистави.

Після вистави, дівчата зупинилися, щоб узяти чогось поїсти. Як би Сансет не намагалась, вона не могла знайти чогось, що не було або пересмаженим або жирним. Врешті, вона зупинилась на хот-догу.

Сидячи за невеличким столом, Сансет слухала, як Реріті розмовляла про цьогорічний осінній фешн, доки Рейнбоу і Еплджек рахували у кого більше за всіх призів. Рейнбоу перемогла, бо у неї було на одне павуче кільце більше.

Еплджек застогнала і поклати лице на стіл.

— Я ненавіжу сукні.

Реріті постукала їй по плечу.

— Не переймайся, дороженька, я зроблю цю сукню настільки сліпучою, що усі хлопці будуть відвертати від тебе голови, коли ти будеш йти по коридору.

— Жах...

Сансет посміхнулась. Їй треба признати, що вона хотіла б побачити ці.

Вони пішли далі, у напрямку останньої зупинки: контактний зоопарк. Флатершай почала схвильовано розмовляти про усіх милих тваринок напоказ, перераховуючи факти про них, які, схоже за все, тільки Пінкі були цікаві.

У загоні для тварин пахло старим сіном і послідом, що змусило Сансет зморщити носа. Не дивлячись на те, що вона сама колись була поні, Сансет ніколи не була прихильницею тварин. Принаймні, не таких дурних, як у цьому світі.

Але Флатершай любила їх як бджоли мед. Вона підбігла до найближчої вівці і почала гладити її шерсть, воркувати.

— Оооо, хто тут у нас *самий* м'якенький!

— Бееее. — Видала щасливо вівця.

Сансет ходила довкола, обережно, намагаючись не вступити у щось, що хоч віддалено нагадувало звіриний послід. Доки вона уникала контакту з будь-якою з тварин, усім іншим було весело.

— Гей, поглянь, Сансет. — Пінкі вказала на коричневу поні. — Це один з твоїх родичів!

— Ха-ха. Дуже смішно. — Відповіла Сансет саркастично.

Вона відчула, що щось схопило її позаду за куртку і почало тягнути. Вона поглянула вниз і побачила козу, яка їла її шкіряну куртку.

— Якого! Пусти! Знайди собі свою власну куртку! — Сансет почала смикати, намагаючись висвободити свою куртку, але коза тільки бекнула у відповідь і продовжила жувати.

— Фу! Фу! — Вона почала бити по козі.

Флатершай поглянула на них від загону з свинею яку вона годувала.

— Ох божечкі. Ммм, Сансет, будь ласка, будь обережна з нею.

— Пусти мою куртку, ти, дурна коза, або клянуся, я—

Сансет спіткнулася назад і впала на сіно, яке встило підлогу, доки коза продовжила жувати чорний шмат тканини.

Флатершай підбігла і протягнула руку Сансет.

— О божечкі, ти у порядку?

— Ні, я *не* у порядку!

Сансет вдарила Флатершай по руці і підвелась, демонструючи велику діру у і без того дірявій куртці.

— Ця дурна коза просто сжерла частину мого одягу! Як вона вбіса взагалі це зробила?

Флатершай зробила кілька кроків назад.

— Ох, ну, я впевнена, що їй соромно за це.

— Це дурна тварина! І жодні вибачення не виправлять цього! — Вона штрикнула Флатершай у плече пальцем. — От тобі *хотілося* із усіх можливих місць прийти у цей дурний зоопарк! Це все *твоя* вина!

Рейнбоу налетіла і штовхнула Сансет назад у сіно.

— Відвали, Шимер! Це не її вина! Все що ти сьогодні робила, так це скаржилась! Якщо ти так не хочеш бути тут, то чому б тобі не зробити послугу, і не підеш геть! — Прокричала Рейнбоу.

— Із задоволенням!

З знайомим поштовхом у спині, Сансет підвелась та пішла геть від плачущої Флатершай і розлюченої Рейнбоу Деш.

— Сансет, зачекай...

Сансет закрила вуха руками, не бажаючи чути, що збиралась сказати Пінкі. Вона нарешті була звільнена від її «послуги». Нізащо вона не збирається повертатися.

Я знала, що це була тупа ідея!

Крок 6: І довкола покружляй¹

Сансет споглядала на красу сонця, що заходило, стоячи на дерев'яному містку і популярному парку Кантерлоту. З мосту відкривався вид на струмок який осяювався останніми проміннями сонця. Їй завжди подобався час дня який був созвучний з її іменем².

Вона поклала руки на дерев'яні перила і голову поверх них. Сьогоднішній день був провалом. Все йшло доволі чудово, доки не стався інцидент у зоопарку.

Чому я так зациклилась на цьому? Я повинна радіти, що здихалась їх.

Вона зітхнула, здуваючи пучок волосся який бовтався у неї перед обличчям.

А, точно, я зробила все значено важче, щоб стати друзями з ними. Ага, це доволі великий мінус.

Сансет застогнала, всунувши руки у кишені, тільки щоб відчути щось м'яке всередині. Вона витягла рожеву єдиноріжку яку вона отримала на ярмарку і насупилась.

— Твайлайт Спаркл.

Єдиноріжка дивилась на неї своїми очима-гудзиками.

— Ти ж в курсі, що це твоя вина, так? Ти повернулась додому і стала принцесою, доки я застрягла тут, практично мучу себе! Я б втопила тебе у річці, якби не збиралась спалити тебе!

Єдиноріжка просто витріщалась на неї.

— Я розмовляю з лялькою. Я досягла нове дно.

Вона поклала її на перила поруч з собою і продовжила дивитися у воду де було її спотворене відображення.

1 В оригіналі «'Cause it's gonna make a sound» — слова із пісні «Helping Twilight Win The Crown» яка звучала в першому фільмі по Еквестрія Герлз. В офіційному дабі (дуже якісному, як і переклад цього фанфіку) цей відривок перетворився на «Розімкнено вузьке коло», що б це не значило... тому замість цього відривку, я вибрав інший який звучить у пісні за секунд 5 до.

2 Sunset (Сансет) — Захід сонця.

— Чому ці обидва виміри так зациклені на дружбі? Все що я пробувала, так це прожити це життя без покладання на когось іншого. Невже це на стільки неправильно?

— Ти також спробувала захопити владу промивши мізки учням і вбивши принцесу.

Сансет притулилась до перил.

— Добре, можливо я зайшла трошки далеко... але у мене на те була хороша причина...

Сансет нахмурилась. У неї була хороша причина, чи не так? Вона була впевнена, що була, хоча вона не може згадати яка саме.

— БУУ!

Сансет тихенько скрикнула від здивування, перш ніж вона розвернулася.

— АААА! — Знову закричала вона.

Твайлайт Спаркл перед нею, прикрив рота, щоб приглушити хихикання.

— Пробач-пробач! Я просто завжди хотіла так зробити.

Сансет витріщалась на неї кілька моментів, доки мозок не почав знову працювати. Вона стиснула кулаки й гаркнула.

— Що ти робиш тут?

— Я гуляла з моїм собакою, Спайком. Привітайся, Спайку!

Поглянувши вниз, Сансет побачила знайомо собаку що приносився до її чобіт. Спайк поглянув на неї і кілька разів щасливо гавкнув, розмахуючи хвостом.

Сансет підняла руки, щоб помасажувати чоло.

У них навіть однакові собаки. Вони обидві не можуть залишити мене у спокої.

Твайлайт зітхнула, уся радість зникла з її обличчя.

— Послухай, я знаю, що не подобаюсь тобі...

— Хто тобі *таке* сказав?

— ...І саме тому я ще більше спантеличена, чому ти врятувала мене тоді. Якщо я не подобаюсь тобі, тоді чому ти це зробила?

Сансет опустила плечі і відвела погляд, відмовляючись зустрітись з рішучим поглядом Твайлайт.

— Що? Ти не знаєш, чому врятувала мене?

— Ні, не знаю. — Збрехала Сансет.

Твайлайт схрестила руки.

— Тоді мені здається, що ти не ненавидиш мене так сильно, як ти про це говориш.

Сансет повернулась назад до Твайлайт, з вогнем у очах.

— Ні, Твайлайт. Я ненавиджу тебе. — Сказала вона повільним, спокійним голосом. — Я ненавиджу тебе настільки сильно, що мені іноді стає боляче. Тільки від однієї думки про тебе у мене починається свербіж. Ти наче нічний кошмар із якого я не можу прокинутися.

Твайлайт відійшла назад на кілька кроків, на її очах був помітний біль.

— Чому? Що я тобі зробила?

До горла Сансет повернулась напруга.

— Це не те, що *ти* зробила. Це те, що інша Твайлайт Спаркл зробила!

Твайлайт стукнула ногою, через що Спайк почав гавкати на двох дівчат які почали підвищувати голоси.

— І ось ти знову про цю «іншу Твайлайт Спаркл»! Про це ти взагалі говориш? Не існує іншої мене!

— Так, існує! Існує інша ти, яка живе в іншому вимірі і вона зруйнувала моє життя!

— Пф. — Твайлайт закотила очі. — Ти же не сподіваєшся, що я повірю у це, чи не так?

— Ні, не сподіваюсь.

— Тоді чому ти розповідаєш мені усе це замість того, щоб сказати правду?

— Тому що, це і є *правда*! — Сансет поглянула вниз на Спайка, який все ще гавкав. — Та замовкни вже!

Спайк склав вуха і забіг за ногу Твайлайт. Твайлайт похмуро глянула на Сансет і вказала пальцем.

— По-перше, не кричи на мого собаку. І по-друге, ти з глузду з'їхала? Ти думаєш, що існує інший вимір з іншою мною?

Сансет відставила руку Твайлайт.

— Ні, я не з'їхала з глузду. І я не *думаю* що існує інший вимір, я *знаю* що існує інший вимір.

Сансет відвернулась та почала йти по мосту геть перед тим як зупинитися.

Здається, я знаю як мені нарешті здихатися від неї.

Вона обернулась.

— Твайлайт, ти дійсно хочеш знати правду? Бо вона може зруйнувати фундамент усього того у що ти віриш. Я можу зруйнувати твій погляд на світ прямо зараз. Чи ти дійсно хочеш цього?

Твайлайт відкрила рота, але завагалась і закусила губу. Вона мовчала кілька моментів, очі металися із сторони в сторону по парку, доки вона міркувала.

— Що ти можеш знати такого, що могло б змінити мій погляд на світ? — Запитала вона тремтячим голосом.

Сансет підійшла до неї і поглянула прямо у очі.

— Магія існує, Твайлайт Спаркл. І не та магія, як у Лас-Вегасі, фокуси-покуси ці. *Справжня магія*. З чарами, зіллями і... прокляттями. І там існує паралельний всесвіт, де є магія якою можна робити те, що тобі навіть *не снилося*.

Твайлайт зробила кілька кроків назад, з розкритим ротом у зневірі. Вона витріщалась, загіпнотизована інтенсивним поглядом Сансет.

— Ти... ти брешеш... — Сансет могла чути вагання у її голосі. — Ти або брешеш або божевільна! Магія не існує!

Сансет усміхнулась.

— Так, вона існує, Твайлайт. Вона дуже слабка тут, наче її і немає. Але у тому вимірі, який пов'язаний з цим, вона настільки потужна, що у них є міста створені із *хмар*. Їхня правителька може *рухати сонце*, Твайлайт.

Твайлайт зробила ще один крок назад, мало не спіткнувшись об Спайка.

— Я-я не... це не... це не може бути...

Задоволена, Сансет зібралась йти геть.

— Як я і думала. Ти не хочеш чути всю правду, Твайлайт. Ти не готова для неї. Йди додому, забудь про мене, і забудь, що я сказала. Легше спати стане по ночам.

Сансет пішла геть по мосту, утримуючи посмішку на обличчі. Вона навіть не озирнулась на Твайлайт. Вона знала, що на її обличчі буде безнадійно розгублений або наляканий вираз.

Готово. Не думаю, що вона буде мені докучати ще довгий час.

Реріті сіла з її друзями назад у кафе, де розпочався їх день. Вони нарешті змогли переконати плакати Флатершай і тепер намагалися насолодитися чашками гарячого какао які вони замовили. Реріті помішувала свою ложкую, руйнуючи топінг у вигляді збитих вершків і змішуючи це з солодким, темним напоєм, перед тим як обережно сьорбнути.

— Все йшло так чудово. Ну... може не прям усе, але це був початок. Якби ми зробили щось, щоб Сансет дійсно подобалося, то можливо все й вийшло би.

Вона була вирвана із думок, коли Рейнбоу грюкнула своєю чашкою по столу.

— Це тупо! Навіг ми взагалі витрачаємо час на неї? Вона очевидно не хоче бути з нами друзями, то навіщо нам намагатися стати з нею?

Пінкі лизнула великий шмат крему зі свого носу.

— Тому що, Деші, усі потрібні друзі, *особливо* Сансет. Якщо ми не будемо намагатися подружитися з нею, вона може знову стати злюкою до усіх! — Ахнула Пінкі. — Або гірше! Вона може знову перетворитися знову на демона і почати жбурлятися вогняними кулями в усіх!

Рейнбоу поклала руку на стіл, а потім і голову на її руку.

— Ага, щось я сумніваюся, що це може статися *знову*.

— У будь-якому випадку. — Заговорила Реріті. — Ми дали обіцянку, що спробуємо допомогти їй, і ми цю обіцянку виконаємо. І хоча мені не подобається ідея того, щоб будувати дружбу на обіцянках, припускаю, що треба почати якось.

— Та ти ж не серйозно, Реріті! Вона практично накричала на Флатершай і після цього ти все ще хочеш дружби з нею?

Реріті підняла руку.

— Я не кажу, що їй не треба вибачитися, але нам треба взяти до уваги, що вона майже провела майже три роки або сама, або керуючи кимось. Ми не можемо очікувати на те, що вона зміниться за ніч.

Еплджек кивнула.

— Реріті права. Може нам треба спочатку спробувати поговорити з нею спочатку. Дізнатися більше про неї. Ми можемо спробувати уникати таких ситуацій, якщо будемо почнемо робити те, що їй подобається.

Рейнбоу розчаровано гаркнула.

— Флатершай! Ти ж зі мною у цьому, так? Ти ж не серйозно хочеш все ще бути друзями з Сансет Шимер?

Флатершай просто дивилась у своє какао.

— Ну, амм... коза *дійсно* їла її куртку...

Рейнбоу розкинула руками.

— Та що з вами не так? Слухайте, я знаю, що ви хочете виконати обіцянку Твайлайт, але це безнадійно! Сансет не зміниться!

— А це вже не чесно, Рейнбоу. Ти не можеш судити її ось так за сьогоднішній день. — Сказала Еплджек.

— А я і не за сьогодні. Я осуджую її за все, що вона натворила з першого курсу!

Еплджек суворо поглянула на неї.

— А тепер послухай, Деш. Вона ізвінілась за це... більш-менш. І це все в минулому. Нас усім треба вже забути про це і допомогти їй стати кращою людиною.

Рейнбоу впустила свою голову на стіл.

— Народ, ви безнадійні. — Вона знову підняла її, оглядаючи усіх. — Добре, я забуду про це цього разу. Але клянусь, якщо вона перетне межу ще хоч один раз... — Рейнбоу підвела кулак у відкриту руку. — Я зроблю їй «подарунок» на випускний!

Будильник Твайлайт задзвенів вчасно (як і завжди), і вона натиснула кнопку «відкласти», у сподіванні, що їй вдасться подрімати ще кілька хвилин. Щось вологе почало щипати її обличчя, і вона почала хихотіти.

— Спайк, припини. Хехехе, Спайк! Добре-добре, встаю!

Вона підвелась з ліжка, тримаючи Спайка у руках і чухаючи його за вухом.

— Перший день у новій школі, друже. — Сказала Твайлайт з тугою у голосі.

Вона оглянула кімнату — все чудово та організовано дуже специфічним образом. Твайлайт намагалась відтворити інтер'єр її старої кімнати настільки, наскільки це було можливо.

Твайлайт зітхнула. Вона дуже не хотіла переїжджати, але її батько отримав підвищення на роботі, яке потребувало усю сім'ю переїхати просто задля зручності. Вона була рада за батька; він дуже хотів цю роботу. Але Твайлайт була вимушена змінити її приватну школу.

Її батьки думали, що це було і краще. У Твайлайт не було багато друзів. Можливо вона зможе знайти кілька у загальноосвітній школі.

Поклавши Спайка на підлогу, Твайлайт підвелась і почала одягатися, вмиватися у ванній кімнаті та розчісувати волосся.

Вона надягла найкращу свою кофту і довгу фіолетову спідницю, у бажанні викликати хороше перше враження про неї. Оглянувши себе у дзеркалі, вона сказала.

— Мама права, мені треба завести трохи друзів цього року.

Вона нахмурилась. Але що, як усі будуть уникати її, або залякані від її знать про... ну, про майже все? Саме це і сталося останнього разу. Останні три роки у неї був лише один друг, але вони були як дві краплі води.

— Що ж... — Твайлайт рішуче поглянула на себе. — Я знайду собі нових друзів. Це те, що вона хоче, щоб я зробила. — Але спочатку, їй треба отримати пару відповідей від Шимер.

Твайлайт схопила свій рюкзак, погладила Спайка по голові останній раз, доки не попрямувала сходами вниз. Вона витратила усю неділю міркуючи про те, що сказала Сансет. Що був інший вимір... наповнений *магією*. І ще щось про іншу її. Коли Твайлайт поглянула у очі Сансет, вона намагалася знайти ознаки, що Сансет брехала: нервові посмикування або щось ще. Але коли вона не змогла знайти, Твайлайт шукала ознаки психічних відхилень.

Але схоже, що Сансет була впевнена у тому, що казала. Твайлайт прогортала кожну медичну книгу, яка у неї була, щоб знайти щось, що можна було використати як виправдання будь-які манеризми Сансет або манеру мовлення як у божевільного.

І коли вона нічого не знайшла, у Твайлайт залишалося лише дві варіанти: Сансет була найкращою брехухою в історії...

Або вона казала правду.

Твайлайт була впевнена, що Сансет навчалась у школі Кантерлот, школа, у яку вона сама поступила. Твайлайт планувала встати перед нею в останній раз, щоб витягнути усю правду з неї. Їй було байдуже, якщо це перегорне її світосприйняття догори дригом. Твайлайт *потрібно* було дізнатися.

Коли вона розповість мені усе, я зможу почати логічно все аналізувати та спростувати. Вона каже мені тільки те, що вона вважає правдою... сподіваюся.

Сніданок був самотнім. Шайнінг Армор був на ранньому патрулі і її мама, мабуть, все ще спала після останньої нічної зміни у шпиталі. К тому моменту, коли батько спустився, вона вже доїла свої пластівці та яблуко.

— Доброго ранку, люба донько. — Сказав Найт Лайт, поцілувавши Твайлайт у лоба.

Він був одягнутий в гарний сірий костюм з великим коричневим пальто. Він тепер виглядає як професор астрономії в університеті Кантерлот.

— Великий день попереду, так?

Твайлайт поворушилась на стільці.

— Ага, щось типу того.

Найт Лайт схопив свої ключі зі стійки.

— Що ж, тоді пішли. Не хотілося би запізнитися у перший же день.

Твайлайт схопила портфель зі стільця та попрямувала до машини, намагаючись виглядати ентузіастко.

Перші кілька хвилин поїздки були до болю мовчазними. Твайлайт намагалась тримати себе в руках дивлячись у вікно, дивлячись на учнів що йшли до школи.

Найт Лайт повільно зітхнув.

— Нервуєшся? — Спитав він.

Твайлайт просто кивнула головою.

— Якщо чесно... Я теж нервуюсь. Особливо після останнього тижня.

Твайлайт стиснула руки сильніше. Це була найстрашніша ніч її життя. Вона прийшла додому ошелешеною від того, наскільки швидко все вийшло із-під контролю, і несподівана поява її спасительки, Сансет Шимер. На це знадобилось кілька днів, але Твайлайт таки розповіла про все родині.

Вона ніколи не бачила Шайнінга таким засмученим.

— Не переймайся тату, це школа. Тут я буду у безпеці.

Твайлайт заспокійливо йому усміхнулась, але це не досягло її очей. Як би вона не намагалась перейматися про це, але у неї не дуже виходило.

— Знаю-знаю. Школа це мабуть найбезпечніше місце після дому. Я просто не можу не хвилюватися...

— Все буде добре, обіцяю.

Найт Лайт поглянув на неї краєм ока і посміхнувся.

— Я знаю. Ти сильна дівчинка, прямо як твоя мама. Просто пообіцяй, що все буде добре.

— Обіцяю. — Відповіла вона.

— І спробуй завести собі кілька друзів цього року. Школа веселіше — і безпечніше — коли у тебе є кілька хороших друзів.

Твайлайт обурилась.

— Це не те, що у мене *не* було друзів, тато.

— Твайлайт, у тебе був *один* друг.

— Все ще рахується.

Машина зупинилась перед передом школи Кантерлот, де учні довкола збирались, дружньо спілкувались між собою. Твайлайт вже відчувала приємну атмосферу школи.

Вона відстебнулась і нахилилась поцілувати батька в щоку.

— Хорошого дня на роботі.

— І тобі хорошого дня у школі. — Найт Лайт поцілував її у відповідь. — Я буду тут щоб забрати тебе як тільки закінчатся заняття.

Твайлайт кивнула і вискочила з машини, махаючи доки та уїжджала. Вона обернулась та оглянула двоповерхову будівлю перед собою. Прапори та банери гордо демонстрували емблему школи, доки велика, мармурова статуя, яка зображала талісмана школи, стояла у подвір'ї.

Вона б почала навчання у школі Кантерлот ще тиждень тому, але школа була зачинена весь тиждень через «реновації». Твайлайт засумнівалась у цілісній структурі школи, коли вона почула про це. Якщо школі довелося закриватися на незапланований ремонт, то вона схоже не у дуже доброму стані.

І тому вона була приємно здивована, коли вона зайшла у будівлю і побачила, що усе блищало наче воно все було нове.

— Вау. — Здивувалась вона, обертаючись на місці щоб усе побачити.

Вона врізалась у щось і майже не впала на підлогу.

— Упс. — Вона поглянула вгору і побачила, що врізалась у щось, що нагадувало одного із спортсменів. — Ой, вибачаюсь, я не дивилась куди прямую.

— Та без проблем, Твайлайт.

Він посміхнувся і помахав рукою перед тим як піти геть.

Твайлайт витріщилась йому у слід.

Звідки він знає моє ім'я?

Як тільки вона пішла по одному з багатьох коридорів, вона дізналась, що багато людей, судячи з усього вже знали хто вона така.

— Гей, Твайлайт!

— Що як, Твайлайт?

— Твай, ті крута!

Твайлайт хотілося сказати, що їй це лестило, але вона більше була розгублена... і також трохи знервована. Вона ніколи не була тут, і вона ніколи не знала звідси. Але, схоже, усі знали хто вона така і відносились до неї як до найкращого друга.

Такс, а тепер мені дійсно треба знайти Сансет Шимер.

Вона вирішила, що краще за все спитати у когось, якщо вона взагалі навчається в цій школі. Твайлайт не дуже хотіла б почати пошуки, щоб потім зрозуміти, що вона навчається в іншій школі.

Вона підійшла до першої же дівчини яку побачила, яка мала величезне рожеве гніздо із волосся на голові і від неї віяло бадьорістю, яку Твайлайт відчувала за кілька метрів. Вирішивши, що до неї можна підійти, Твайлат поплескала її по плечу.

— Пробач, а ти не знаєш...

Дівчина обернулась на місці і кліпнула на неї перед тим як підстрибнути у повітря, і побігла по коридору крича.

— *Дддддїїїївввчччаааатттттааааа!*

Твайлайт поглянула на це з відкритим ротом від спантеличеності.

— Що ж, це було... цікаво.

— Дддддііііввввччааааттттаааа! — Пінкі кричала доки бігла по коридору, її ноги ледве дотикалися до підлоги. — Дівчата-дівчата-дівчата!

Пінкі не була впевнена, чи їй треба бути щасливою чи наляканою, що інша Твайлайт Спаркл тільки що зайшла у школу. Але вона знала, що усім іншим треба про це знати, і їй треба розказати про це швидко!

Вона помітила Реріті яка розмовляла з якимись стилягами, і схопила її за руку.

— ...І тоді я сказала їй... Ге́й! Пі́нкі! — Рука Пі́нкі захопила руку Рері́ті і вона потягла її від розмови.

— Що ти робиш?

— Нема є часу! У нас трапилась ситуація... Я думаю... Можливо... Ось і Еплджек!

Еплджек стояла біля своєї шафки, намагаючись влаштуватися зручніше у білій сукні, яку Реріті зробила для неї, доки не помітила Пінкі яка бігла на неї.

— Гей, дівчата, як ся... ауч!

Пінкі схопила її за руку і потягла за собою.

— Пішли! Мені треба вам розказати щось! Важливе! *Дуже важливе!*

— Реріті, що вона мелить?

Реріті тільки знизили плечима у відповідь.

— Швидко. — Вказала Пінкі язиком, бо обидві руки наразі були зайняті.

— Хапай Флатершай, Еплджек.

Флатершай тільки вийшла з-за коридору, коли Еплджек схопила її за зап'ястя і потягла за собою на поїздку Пінкі. Флатершай спіткнулась і її потягло по підлозі із плитки на момент, перед тим як вона отямилась і почала рухати ногами, щоб встигнути за ними.

— Що відбувається? — Спитала вона панічним голосом.

— Вибачай, я без понятія, цукорок. — Відповіла Еплджек.

Пінкі повела їх через задні двері до стадіону, де Рейнбоу займалась на футбольному полі відбиваючи м'яч головою.

— Дев'яносто сім, дев'яносто вісім, дев'яносто дев'ять...

— Рейнбоу Деш! — Прокричала Пінкі у той момент, коли настрибнула на неї, поваливши усіх п'ять дівчат на траву.

М'яч упав поряд з Рейнбоу яка застогнала.

— Та ну блін, Пінкі! Я йшла на рекорд!

Пінкі скочила на ноги.

— Мені дуже прикро! Але у нас проблема, або, типу ситуація, або мабуть скрутне становище... Хм, мабуть це називається...

— Пінкі, ближче до суті. — Відрізала Рейнбоу.

— Твайлайт тут! — Сказала Пінкі махаючи руками над головою.

— Шо? — Прокричали вони усі одночасно.

Реріті зупинилась від спроб змахнути плями від трави з сукні Еплджек.

— Ти маєш на увазі, що вона повернулась?

— Ні-ні-ні-ні, не *ця* Твайлайт! *Наша* Твайлайт, почекай, я маю на увазі та, яка з *цього* виміру, не магічного!

— Звідки ти знаєш, Пінкі? — Спитала Еплджек.

— Бо вона тільки що підійшла до мене і заговорила у коридорі!

— Вау, яка вірогідність того, що Твайлайт із цього виміру прийшла до школи Кантерлот одразу після того, як інша пішла? — Замислилась Флатершай.

Пінкі постукала пальцем по підборіддю.

— Доволі висока, мабуть. — Похитала вона головою. — Але ви, дівчата, не бачите проблему тут?

Рейнбоу знизили плечима.

— Не дуже.

Реріті схопила її за плечі і сказала драматично.

— Рейнбоу, подумай про це! Це школа і учні *спілкуються*. Як ти думаєш, про що усі зараз думають?

Очі Рейнбоу збільшились до п'яти копійок.

— Оооууу, тепер я розумію про що ти.

Реріті кивнула.

— Якщо про те, що сталося на танцях, дізнається Твайлайт, то вона безнадійно буде розгублена. Вона подумає, що усі навколо навіжені або дуже жорстоко приколюються з неї!

— О боже, буде ще гірше, якщо вона настигне Флеша Сентрі або Сансет... — Флатершай поглянула з наляканим виразом, який усі інші мали.

Вони усі побігли назад у школу на максимальній швидкості, з Пінкі у якості супроводу, знову.

— А ну постойте-ка! — Сказала Еплджек між видихами, намагаючись не спіткнутися об сукню. — Може ми просто накручуємо себе цим. Сансет же не стане робити боляче їй, так?

Рейнбоу окинула на неї гострий погляд.

— Я просто намагаюсь бути оптимістичною.

Коли вони завернули за коридор, Пінкі заковзнула, щоб зупинитися, поки решта дівчат впала позаду неї. Далі по коридору перед нею, Пінкі побачила Твайлайт як йшла до Сансет, яка збирала речі у рюкзак із своєї шафки.

— *Нннннннннн!* — Закричала Пінкі, доки Твайлайт поплескала по плечу Сансет.

Сансет обернулась та витріщилась на Твайлайт.

А тоді кричала.

Крок 7: Наукова фантастика

Сансет поплескала себе по роту, щоб зупинити свій крик. Вона витріщилась на Твайлайт, отримуючи певне задоволення від того, що її крик принаймні налякав дівчину. Сансет спробувала кілька разів глибоко вдихнути щоб заспокоїтися, але її серце все ще билося швидко.

Вона прибрала її руку і прийняла агресивну позу.

— Якого дідька ти тут робиш? — Прокричала вона шепотім.

— Я тепер тут вчуся. — Просто сказала Твайлайт.

Око Сансет засмикалося; вона почала помічати, що це почалося відбуватися значно частіше останніми днями.

Ну звісно! Ну звісно з усіх місць вона прийшла саме сюди! Свята Селестія, що я зробила такого за це все?

— І чому з усіх людей ти вирішила набридати саме мені? — Тихо гаркнула Сансет.

— Тому що... — Твайлайт зробила глибокий подих. — Тому що, я хочу знати правду.

— Правду? — Недовірливо спитала Сансет. — *Тепер* ти хочеш знати правду? Ти не зможеш прийняти правду!

Твайлайт поглянула назад на неї з впевненим поглядом, який Сансет одразу почала ненавидіти.

— Це вже мені вирішувати, чи не так? Усі у цій школі схоже вже знають моє ім'я, один з них навіть назвав мене *принцесою*, я хочу знати чому.

— Так, схоже, твоя правда. — Пробурмотіла Сансет.

Вона оглянулася довкола на учнів, яки почали збиратися довкола і витріщатися на двох дівчат, які виглядали так, наче зараз розпочнуть битися.

Вказав пальцем на Твайлайт, Сансет сказала.

— Обід. У їдальні. Столик у кутку. — Вона поглянула на Пінкі і чотирьох дівчат які виглядали із-за плеча. — Ви, п'ятеро. будьте там.

Із цим, Сансет обернулась на своїх каблуках і пішла геть, шиплячи на будь-кого, хто стояв у неї на шляху.

— До речі. — Твайлайт окликала її. — Ти в курсі, що у тебе діра в куртці?

— *Так, я в курсі, що у мене діра в куртці!*

Перший день повернення у школу пройшов до болю нудно для Сансет. Зайняття тягнулися, здавалося, цілу вічність, також не допомагало те, що вона не могла чути, що каже вчителька через її однокласників, які перешіптувались між собою про те, що вони пам'ятали з танців або що вони робили минулий тиждень.

Сансет відчула полегшення, коли задзвенів дзвоник на перерву. Їй не терпілося нарешті покінчити з цим і позбутися Твайлайт Спаркл.

Реріті наздогнала Сансет, на її обличчі було збентежений вираз.

— Сансет, що саме ти плануєш розказати Твайлайт?

— Правду.

— Ахх, як я і гадала. — Реріті прикусила губу. — Ну... хоча я і вважаю, що правда понад усе, ти впевнена, що це хороша ідея?

Сансет зупинилась перед дверима в їдальню.

— У тебе є краща ідея?

— Мм... ні, не дуже.

— Тоді замовкни і йди за мною. — Сансет штовхнула двері і зайшла всередину.

Реріті поклала свої руки на губи.

— Ну, не обов'язково грубити.

Сансет схопила тацю з їжею з огидою на обличчі. На звичайний день, вона би «переконала» обмінятися когось, у кого би був хороший обід з собою. Тепер же, вона була змушена їсти... Поглядаючи у миску з зеленою масою, Сансет не була впевнена, що вона хотіла знати, що це.

Вона сіла за стіл у найвіддаленішому кутку їдальні, Реріті зайняла місце поруч з нею. Твайлайт швидко з'явилась та зайняла місце навпроти Сансет. Після цього, з'явилась Пінкі, впавши поряд з Сансет, доки Рейнбоу, Еплджек та Флатершай усі вмістилися біля Твайлайт.

— Такс, чому вони усі тут? — Спитала Твайлайт.

— Тому що вони типу важливі... нажаль. — Додала Сансет собі під ніс.

— Привіт! — Потяглась Пінкі через стіл і схопила руку Твайлайт, і почала енергійно її потискати. — Я Пінкі Пай! *Тааааак* приємно знову зустрітись з тобою!

— Знову? — Твайлайт поглянула на Сансет, якій було нудно.

— Ми зараз все пояснено, дорогенька. — Усміхнулась Реріті. Вона потиснула руку Твайлайт коли Пінкі нарешті її відпустила. — Можеш звати мене Реріті.

— Рейнбоу Деш. — Посміхнулась Рейнбоу.

Еплджек схилила капелюха.

— Мене звуть Еплджек. І якщо тобі цікава, то ні, я обично не ношу сукні в школі.

— Я Флатершай. — Сказала Флатершай на здивування чітким голосом.

— Уря-уря-уря, ми тепер усі друзі! — Сказала Сансет саркастично.

Вона побарабанила пальцями по столу.

— А тепер, звідки мені почати?

— З початку, дурненька. — Запропонувала Пінкі.

Сансет проігнорувала її.

— Добре, пам'ятаєш про що я казала тобі про інший вимір у суботу?

Твайлайт кивнула головою.

— Чекай, суботу? — Вдерлась Рейнбоу. — Коли ти зустріла її?

— Десь коли я пішла геть від вас з ярмарку. А тепер, не перебивайте мене.

Рейнбоу замовкла, але після того, як холодно поглянула на Сансет.

— Як я казала, іншій вимір повний магії і він зветься «Еквестрія». Найбільш домінувальними видами є три найпоширеніші типи поні...

— Почекай. — Твайлайт засміялась. — Ти дійсно збираєшся мені розповісти про вимір повний розумних, чарівних поні?

— Так. І що я тільки що сказала про те, щоб не перебивати мене?

Твайлайт прокашлялась, ховаючи хихикання.

— Будь ласка, продовжуй.

— Коротше, перед тим як мене знову грубо перебили, там у Еквестрії є три головні види поні: земні поні, вони майже як поні тут, але вони живуть довше і мають трошки вищий рівень інтелекту, пегаси і єдинороги. А також, там є алікорни, які є могутніми істотами і поєднують у собі всі три види.

— Принцеса Твайлайт Спаркл, інша ти у тому вимірі була алікорном. Вона мала корону, яка була джерелом неймовірних сил. — Сансет окинула погляд вниз на свою тацю з не смачною їжею. — Я бажала її, і всі її сили, собі.

— Статуя перед школою слугує порталом між нашими двома вимірами. Але, він відкривається на три дні кожні тридцять лун. Коли він відчинився минулого тижня, я прокралась туди і викрала корону. На жаль, я не була такою непомітною, як мені треба було. Сталася проблемка, і корона опинилась у... — Вона кинула на Флатершай похмурий погляд. — «Не в тих руках».

Флатершай сховалась за своїм волоссям і пригнулась на сидінні.

— Корона тоді повинна була стати призом за перемогу принцеси у Осінньому Балі. Я не дуже про це переймалась тоді. Я була впевнена, що я зможу перемогти як і усі попередні роки.

Сансет схопилась за стіл і стиснула зуби.

— І тоді, *вона* послідувала за мною сюди. Вона була дуже рішуча, щоб повернути цю дурну корону собі. Вона ввірвалась сюди і просто... зруйнувала *все*!

Рейнбоу жорстоко всміхнулась.

— Ти маєш на увазі, допомагала нам знову стати друзями і об'єднати всю школу проти тебе, що впевнитися, що ти нарешті програєш?

Сансет грюкнула руками по столу та підвелась, Рейнбоу скопіювала її рухи, з викликом у очах. Обидві дівчини витріщались одна на одну, доки всі інші у їдальні споглядали у тиші.

— Так. — Сказала Сансет агресивним шепотім. — Зробивши *це*.

Реріті, дуже повільно, поклала руку на руку Сансет і притягнула її на своє місце, доки Еплджек зробила теж саме з Рейнбоу.

— Будь ласка, давайте не починати знову, дівчата. — Сказала Реріті.

Сансет оцінила лють у очах Рейнбоу. Вони суворо попереджали, що якщо Сансет захоче щось витворити, то будуть непереливки.

Хоча це було спокусливо, Сансет не була у настрій для бійок. Вона нарешті відвела погляд назад до стіни та продовжила історію.

— Як Рейнбоу вже *гарно* пояснила, інша Твайлайт Спаркл обернула всю школи проти мене. Вона перемогла корону, але я не збиралась здаватися без бою.

— І ось тут починається найцікавіше! — Прошепотіла Пінкі майже для самої себе.

— Після кількох... трюків у рукавах, я нарешті схопила корону. Коли я надягла її, я... Я отримала усі сили, які тільки хотіла, але...

Сансет зупинилась, бо не могла підібрати слів, щоб пояснити те, що сталося далі. Вона перетворилась на монстра, досвід який все ще був для неї незбагнений і навіть лякав її. Це не було частиною її плану.

Те, що вона відчувала під час того, як була демоном, усі думки і емоції, які пробігали крізь неї... Сансет зрозуміла, що не була готова розмовляти про це. Вона *не могла* розмовляти про це. Але на щастя для неї, Пінкі втрутилась.

— Ну, коротше, Сансет перетворилась на дууужеее страшного монстра з крилами як у кажана і гострими кігтями, і тоді вона зламала школу і зазомбувала всіх учнів, перед тим, як сказати «Твайлайт продовжує стояти у мене на шляху, і тепер я збираюсь знищити її, ГРРР!». Тому вона зробила вогняну кулю і кинула її у нас, але ми були друзями принцеси Твайлайт Спаркл, бо вона допомогла нам усім знову стати друзями коли Сансет роз'єднала нас, і ми не збиралися кидати Твайлайт наодинці! І ми всі зібралися у групові обійми, що активувало *ще більше* крутої магії! І ми всі здійнялися у повітря і вистрілили неймовірно гарною веселкою у Сансет, і вона повернулась у норму! Потім ми всі танцювали і Твайлайт повернулась додому. Кінець!

Сансет вказала на Пінкі.

— Це... ну, в принципі так і було.

Твайлайт поклала руки разом на стіл, і зверху на них підборіддя.

— То, давайте перевіримо, чи все я зрозуміла правильно: існує інша Твайлайт Спаркл, яка є чарівною поні-принцесою у іншому вимірі, і ти викрала у неї корону, щоб отримати магічні сили. Але вона пішла за тобою у цей вимір і зібрала всю школу разом, щоб проголосувати за неї, а не тебе, за титул принцеси танців, але ти все рівно викрала корону і перетворилась на монстра. Але, інша Твайлайт і ці дівчата встали проти тебе і вистрілили чарівною веселкою, яка перетворила тебе назад?

— Ага. — Сансет кивнула.

Твайлайт мовчала кілька моментів. А потім почала істерично реготати, тримаючись за боки.

— Це *найдурніше*, що я колись чула! Ха-ха-ха, ти мене налякала в якийсь момент. Ти виглядала такою серйозною там на мосту, я дійсно повірила тобі! Ха-ха! І те, що тобі вдалося усіх підговорити підіграти тобі — Вау, оце відданість! Добре-добре, я зрозуміла, розіграти новеньку. Навіть мені варто признати, що це вийшло прикольо.

Сміх Твайлайт закінчився як вона витерла сльози з очей. Вона оглянула обличчя які дивились на неї. Тільки Пінкі посміхалась, як завжди. Власна посмішка Твайлайт спала з її обличчя.

— Добре, я розкусила план. Чому ви не смієтеся зі мною?

— Тому що, цукорок... ми не жартуємо. — Сказала Еплджек.

— Але це *точно* якийсь жарт. — Твайлайт слабо посміялась. — Ви ж не реально вважаєте, що існує інший вимір повний поні, і що *вона* перетворилась на демона. — Твайлайт вказала на Сансет, яка тепер мала спокійний вираз.

Еплджек кивнула.

— Я вважаю, бо я була там, когда все це сталося. Я знаю, що в це складно повірити, але це правда.

— Ні, це не так. — Сказала Твайлайт розлючено. — Послухайте себе, ви розказуєте про щось, що можливо тільки в... в науково-фантастичних, або дитячих книжках! Міжпланетні подорожі все ще відстають на

десятиліття, як мінімум, і ви розказуєте мені що існує інший *вимір* який з'єднаний з цим? Та ви всі збожеволіли!

Реріті погляну на Пінкі.

— Покажи їй фотографії.

Пінкі потягнулась у своє волосся, і дістала звідки фотографію, яку передала Твайлайт.

Твайлайт поглянула і її очі стали по п'ять копійок.

— Це... я. Але... як? І чому у мене крила?

— Магія. — Сказала Сансет.

— Магія... — Твайлайт замовкла, і тоді насупила брови. — Або Фотошоп.

Сансет не могла не посміхнутися.

Вона реально намагається не вірити в це.

— Пінкі. — Сансет клацнула на неї пальцями. — Покажи їй відео.

— Діівчино, не треба на мене тут пальцями клацати. — Сказала Пінкі обертаючи шию.

Сансет грюкнула руками по столу, витріщаючись на неї.

— Точно, відео, в процесі.

Пінкі нагнулась вниз за рюкзаком і дістала дуже рожевий ноутбук звідти. Вона знайшла наклепницьке відео яке Сансет зробила проти Твайлайт, і перегорнула ноутбук на місці.

— Нууу, таакк, воно трохи всрате.

Твайлайт нахилилась і почала дивитися відео. Сансет чула її власне озвучання, про те наскільки чудово вона володіє навичками обробки відео. Вона спостерігала, як Твайлайт хмуриться все більше й більше, поки відео продовжувалося, і тоді грюкнула кришкою, закриваючи ноутбук, коло воно скінчилося.

— Тооо. — Сансет злобно посміхнулась. — Де тепер твоя наукова фантастика?

Твайлайт поклатала голову у руки.

— У цього всього повинно бути пояснення. Це все просто затягнутий прикол, так? — Вона вже майже благала.

Сансет розчаровано гаркнула.

— Ні, ми не приколюємося. Коротше, Твайлайт, ти хотіла правду, то, ну, ось вона! — Вона нахилилась на свій стілець і склала руки. — Я ж казала, що ти не зможеш її прийняти.

— Ні, я не про це! Я просто... Я думала... Я сподівалась...

— Що я не права?

Твайлайт узяла свій обід; вона виглядає дуже втомленою.

— Мені потрібно побути наодинці. — Вона пішла геть то не зайнятого столика, впала на стілець.

— Ох, вона виглядає доволі збентеженою. — Сказала Флатершай.

— Ага... — Кивнула Сансет. Її обличчя одразу засяяло. — Що ж, це було весело!

Рейнбоу роззявила рота, без сумнівів, вона збиралась вербально накинутися на Сансет, але Еплджек випередила її.

— Сансет, поч ти ненавидиш її так сильно?

— Я не ненавиджу її.

Ні?

— Я ненавиджу іншу Твайлайт Спаркл.

А ось це вже має сенс.

— Я просто... не дуже сильно люблю її, бо у них однакове обличчя.

Реріті штрикала свій салат.

— Що ж, думаю можна з певністю казати, що ми налякали її до кінця життя.

Вони усі поглянули назад на Твайлайт, як раз вчасно, коли Флеш Сентрі підходив до неї.

Охоохо, це буде весело.

Чим довше Флеш розмовляв з Твайлайт, ти більше він виглядав спантеличеним. З рештою, вона похитала головою і продовжила їсти,

намагаючись ігнорувати світ довкола неї. Флеш виглядав розгубленим перед тим як ровернувся і пішов у напрямок столу Сансет.

— Такс, хтось може мені пояснити якого коїться? — Це було загальне питання до усіх, але його очі направлені на Сансет. — Чому Твайлайт веде себе так, наче не пам'ятає... ну, нічого?

— Все доволі просто. — Усміхнулась Сансет, додаючи токсичності у свою відповідь. — Це не та Твайлайт Спаркл у яку ти закохався.

Обличчя Флеша почервоніло.

— Ну, я-я не знаю, чи я... стривай, що ти маєш на увазі, що це не та ж Твайлайт Спаркл? Вона виглядає однаково.

— Я маю на увазі, твоя дівчина прийшла сюди з іншого виміру, і тепер — вона пропала, і, скоріше за все, ти ніколи не побачиш її знову. Ось ця Твайлайт живе тут. Я б розказала більше, але ти вже пропустив час розповідей, і мені влом повторюватися.

Флеш витріщився на неї, перед тим як оглянути інших дівчат.

— Чи може хтось мені допомогти?

Еплджек знизала.

— Пробач, Флеш, але все було так, як сказала Сансет. Ця Твайлайт Спаркл і Твайлайт Спаркл яка була тут тиждень тому — це дві різні Твайлайт Спаркл.

— Добре. — Флеш зітхнув і потер потилицю. — Єдина причина чому я повірю в це, так це тому, що я бачив на танцях. Так що, схоже щось ще більш дивніше сталося.

Він всунув руки у кишені і пішов геть, все ще виглядаючи засмученим, залишаючи Сансет у ще кращому настрої ніж до цього.

Я тільки що зруйнувала чиюсь віру у науку, і не напряду розбила серце моєму колишньому. Який чудовий день.

Твайлайт залізла вгору по сходам і зайшла у кімнату, втомлена від довгого дня. Це було нудно брехати її батькам який «цікавий» день у неї був, і як багато «кольорових» людей вона зустріла за обідом.

І хто доставив ці життє-змінючі новини!

Вона впала на ліжку, заплющуючи очі і навіть ігноруючи собачі поцілунки Спайка. Вона не була впевнена, що більше за все її бентежило: те, що магія існує чи те, що вона була поні-принцесою у іншому вимірі яка протистояла демону. Вона потяглась за подушкою та закричала у неї.

Чому я так переймаюся через це? Ну і що з того, що існує інша я яка має магичні сили... і вона поні... і це не має значення! Не те, щоб ми колись зустрілись чи тупо того! Це нічого не змінює, взагалі! Те, що магія існує, нічого не спростовує, воно просто... деформує деякі правила. То ж, існують інші виміри. Це доказує теорію багатовимірності! Бачиш, Твайлайт? Нема про що перейматися.

Твайлайт підняла голову і нарешті помітила Спайка, пестячи його голову. Схоже, його присутність завжди заспокоювало її коли вона була не в настрій. Вона перегорнулась на спину, дозволяючи Спайку вмотитися на її животі.

Добре. То ж, альтернативна реальність пояснює деякі речі, як те, звідки усі у школі знали моє ім'я. І якщо вся ця історія правдива, тоді це пояснює чому школа була зачинена на тиждень.

Як би то не було дивно, Твайлайт ставало легше повірити у те, що її інша копія була поні. Те, у що вона не могла повірити...

Сансет Шимер... була монстром?

Звісно, вона виглядає доволі жорсткою ззовні; холодною, злою і, мабуть, трохи злісною. Але монстром? Справжнім, крилатим звіром?

Твайлайт похитала головою. Вона замислилась про парк, і як Сансет протистояла тим двом. Як вона легка уклала їх грубим, і водночас, елегантним бойовим стилем. Чи вчинив би так монстр? Так, Сансет справляла враження, що вона ненавиділа Твайлайт, але є щось більше ніж це.

Сансет Шимер врятувала життя Твайлайт.

I Твайлайт не може забути про це.

Крок 8: Зламана система

Сансет відчинила кабінку і подивилась на маленький список який був приклеєний зсередини. Вона дістала ручку із рюкзака і почала читати його.

1: Здихатися Твайлайт Спаркл.

Є.

2: Помститися Флешу Сентрі.

Вона знизала. Більш-менш. Є.

3: Стати друзями з п'ятіркою самих набридливих дівчат у школі.

Сансет скривилась, закидаючи ручку назад. Це потребує більше зусиль.

Хоча більшість з них, схоже, пробачили її за інцидент у контактному зоопарку, вона все ще не бажала бути з ними друзями. Сансет знала, що їй треба знайти друзів, якщо вона хотіла, щоб її життя... знову стало типу нормальним, але було складно коли вона все ще на усіх огризалась.

А тепер є інша проблема.

Три дні тому, Сансет сказала Твайлайт про інший вимір, і про її близнючку-принцесу. І хоча, схоже, це відлякало Твайлайт достатньо, щоб у неї з'явився простір (хоча вона все ще намагається посміхатися і махати їй у коридорах), Кантерлотській П'ятірці (як Пінки наполягає називати їх) були нетерплячі стати друзями з Твайлайт.

Відтоді, Сансет намагалась тримати дистанцію від шести з них. І хоча вона була готова змушувати себе бути друзями з п'ятіркою, бути друзями з дзеркальним відображенням дівчини, яка зруйнувала її життя... що ж... Сансет не була впевнена.

Вона схопила нотатник, за яким вона спочатку і приходила, і поклала його у рюкзак, перед тим як грюкнути дверима кабінки. Це було не чесно. Вона відчайдушно хотіла ненавидіти Твайлайт усім своїм серцем, і вона ненавиділа... але не цю Твайлайт. Ця Твайлайт не зробила нічого такого для неї, тільки як причіплялась про правду. Це був конфлікт який повісив почуття провини на серце Сансет.

Останнім часом, Сансет почала все частіше відчувати провину, і це почало дуже дратувати її. Вона почала справді відчувати себе винною за те, що вона зробила школі та учням, винною за те, що ненавиділа їх, навіть якщо майже ніхто не зробив нічого їй поганого.

Тепер же, це було провина яку вона відчувала коли думала про Твайлайт Спаркл і всілякі погані речі які б вона могла вчинити, щоб зруйнувати її життя. Це було не чесно, мститися комусь, хто ще тиждень тому був не в курсі. Це було не чесно, ненавидіти її за щось, чого вона не вчинила.

Але, ця ідея тільки змусила Сансет ненавидіти Твайлайт за те, що вона не могла правильно ненавидіти її, хоча це була більше порожня ненависть, і провина завжди слідувала за нею. Це її дратувало і виснажувало.

Але, у школі була одна людина, яку Сансет могла ненавидіти без почуття провини.

Рейнбоу Деш.

Вона навіть не намагалась сховати свою зневагу до Сансет, і ці почуття були взаємні. Але Сансет цим насолоджувалась. Доки всі інші у школи просто ігнорували її, Рейнбоу ненавиділа її, що давало Сансет змогу відповідати взаємністю, без провини.

Доки вона йшла по коридору, скрипучи черевиками по полірованій підлозі, Сансет замислилась.

Чому життя не може бути простим? Усі ненавидять мене — я ненавиджу їх, і ми всі просто продовжуємо свій день далі.

Але замість цього, вона була змушена припинити ненависть і знайти друзів, руйнуючи ідеальну систему.

Доки прокляття не буде знято. Після цього я зможу повернутися до ненависті всіх.

Сансет зупинилась. Це все виглядало таким... доволі сумним. Але перед тим як вона могла замислитися над цим, продзвенів дзвоник на урок, і учні почали розбігатися по класам, щоб встигнути вчасно.

Сансет пробивалась крізь натовп доки не дійшла до свого класу. Реріті вже зайняла місце на першому ряді. Вона вказала Сансет сісти поруч з нею. Сансет закотила очі, але все рівно зайняла місце.

— Привіт, Сансет. Як ти сьогодні? — Спитала Реріті м'яким тоном.

— Нормально, мабуть. — Відповіла Сансет мляво.

У Реріті увійшло до звички завжди питати у Сансет як у неї справи, хоча відповіді Сансет рідко мінялись. До того ж, навіть якби їй було чим поділитися, вона сумнівалась, що вона поділилась би цим з Реріті.

Хоча знову ж таки, вона вважала, що це щось, що друзі роблять. Діляться почуттями і іншими дурницями.

— Чим ти збираєшся зайнятися після школи сьогодні?

Сансет впустила голову на руки.

— Збираюсь. У мене група продовженого дня.

Знову.

Реріті клацнула пальцями.

— Дідько, я забула про це... кхм, покарання. Скільки воно ще буде тривати?

— Місяць. — Сказала Сансет сумно.

— Ну... — Реріті покрутила пальцем у своїх фіолетових кучерях. — Думаю, що це краще ніж вигнання. Пані Селестія доволі легко простила тебе, чи не так?

— Ага.

Я просто рада, що вона не спитала про зустріч з батьками, чи щось таке.

Останній з учнів зайшов у клас, коли дзвоник продзвенів вдруге, сигналізуючи про початок уроку. Сансет дістала свої нотатники і почала бездумно записувати, доки пан Нотворз розказував про нудну історію.

Уроки історії були єдиними, задля яких Сансет докладала зусиль, щоб отримати ідеальну оцінку. Їй ніколи не було цікаво запам'ятовувати дати, і хто кого вбив з якої причини, чому почалась якась війна.

Схоже, що людям подобається вбивати одне одного.

Це все, що Сансет зрозуміла за три роки вивчення людської історії. Не зважаючи на атаки монстрів, Сансет не розуміла, яким раєм була

Еквестрія, доки вона не потрапила сюди. Звісно, у них були свої війни, але не такого рівня як у людей.

Роздуми про Еквестрію викликали почуття туги за домом у Сансет. Останнього разу, коли вона була вдома, вона була там, щоб вкрасти. Це було дуже давно, коли вона бачила луги Юнікорн Рейндж чи блискучі будівлі Кантерлоту. Так давно коли вона востаннє бачила матір або батька... або Селестію.

Її рукопис сповільнився як вона задумалась. Вона знала, що плин часу різний у двох вимірів, і задумалась, чи хтось все ще пам'ятає її. Чи згадають її батьки? Чи вони все ще живі? Чи пробачила її Селестія? Вони розійшлись не на дуже високій ноті, і хоча Сансет для неї все ще була розчаруванням, вона все ще хотіла почути прощення Селестії.

— *Сансет!*

Сансет відірвалась від нотатника і поглянула на Реріті, яка шепотіла її ім'я. Вона вказувала на насупленого пана Нотворза.

— Пані Шимер, я поставив тобі питання. Чи ти взагалі звертаєш увагу до уроку?

— Ні, не дуже. — Сансет стиснулась.

У часи, як цей, Сансет так не вистачало можливості брехати. Але, схоже, усім іншим у класі стало весло від її зневажливого зауваження.

Пан Нотворз насупився ще сильніше і сказав.

— Що ж, тоді мені доведеться поговорити з директоркою про додавання ще одного дня до твоєї групи. Можливо це стане тобі уроком.

Ігноруючи хихикання позаду себе, Сансет впала на свій стілець.

— Чудово.

Lunch had started as a tepid affair, with Sunset poking at her meal alone and in peace. She looked over to the table where the Canterlot Five were sitting, along with Twilight.

Digging into her salad, Sunset couldn't help but notice Twilight's happy expression seemed almost forced. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, which occasionally wandered around the cafeteria in a frantic, searching manner.

Sunset looked down at her food, smirking to herself.

Що таке, Спаркл? Проблеми у райському саді дружби?

Underneath her feeling of glee, Sunset couldn't help but wonder what Twilight was looking so nervous about. She lifted her eyes back to the opposing table. Come to think of it, Twilight often wore that expression whenever she was around any of those girls.

Почекай...

Sunset counted the heads at the table. Someone was missing.

Де Пінкі?

— Хей-яяя, Сансет!

— ААААА! — Сансет майже впала від того, як Пінкі неочікувано матеріалізувалась. — ПІНКИ! — Sunset fumed. — Не роби так! У мене майже не стався серцевий напад!

Пінкі всілась на стілець поруч до неї і посміхнулась винувато.

— Пробач, я просто побачила, що ти тут сидиш одна і подумала, що тобі не завадить компанія. Я не хотіла тебе налякати. — Вона потерла руки у зловісній манері. — Але знову ж таки, вже *скоро* Хеллоуїн, і це означає, що мені вже пора починати усіх лякати! Муахахахахаха!

Sunset watched with dispassion as Pinkie cackled like a cheesy villain, throwing her hands in the air.

— У тебе проблеми.

Пінкі зупинилась сміятися і знизала.

— Моя мама каже, що я їм забагато солодощів. — Вона полізла у свої кучері і дістала звідки льодяник. — Але я можу припинити у будь-який момент.

— Ммм-ага. Чи є якась конкретна причина, чому ти дратуєш мене, чи ти просто хочеш бути особливо дратуючою сьогодні?

Pinkie stuck the sucker into her mouth and frowned.

— Ох йойчик, хтось сьогодні прокинувся з лимоном у роті, бо у тебе така кисла міна на обличчі. Я просто хотіла дізнатися, чому ти тут одна.

Сансет продовжила їсти салат.

— Так сталося, що я люблю їсти наодинці.

— Чому? — Спитала Пінкі невинно.

— Тому що, мені не подобається проводити час з іншими людьми.

— Сому?

— Тому що, мені не подобаються інші люди.

— Чому?

— Тому що люди дратують! І якщо ти ще раз скажеш «чому», я вирву тобі язика і згодую його тобі ж!

Пінкі кліпнула, продовжуючи облизувати льодяник.

— Чи тобі хтось казав, що у тебе проблеми з гнівом?

Сансет глибоко вдихнула.

— Мені про це казали.

Pinkie leaned in and wrapped an arm around her.

— “That’s okay! I used to be sad a lot when I was younger, but then, I met friends who taught me to always see the bright side of things! You just need to stop being such a sourpuss mcgrumpypants and make friends! And smile more, definitely smile more!”

— Ти друга люди яка каже мені про це. — Sunset looked at Pinkie’s arm, then gave her warning glance. — І ти забула про правило номер один?

— Не розмовляти про бійцівський клуб?

Sunset was caught between the urge to slam her face against the table or choke Pinkie until she was blue.

— Ти абсолютно безнадійна.

— Хей, ти друга людина яка каже це *мені*! Дивно, чи не так?

Pinkie took the stem of the devoured lollipop and twisted it into a pretzel shape before sticking it between two fingers. She took aim, sticking her tongue out the side of her mouth, and flicked the pretzel across the room, where it bumped into the back of Rainbow's head.

Rainbow turned around and glared at both Pinkie and Sunset. Sunset locked eyes with her for a moment before turning to see Pinkie pointing back at her, while looking the other way, whistling innocently.

— “That's strike two!” — Rainbow called.

— “Strike two?” — Sunset held up her hands in confusion. — “What was strike one?”

— “Probably yelling at Fluttershy,” — Pinkie answered.

— “Right,” — Sunset said, clicking her tongue.

The bell ending lunch rang, sending everyone flocking out of the cafeteria and to their next class. Sunset followed the procession, discarding her tray and half eaten lunch before pushing into the throng of outgoing students.

— “Hey, Sunset, wait!” — Pinkie caught up to her, nimbly weaving through the crowd. — “You should come to Sugarcube Corner with us after school!”

— “Can't, I have detention.”

— “Aww, bummer. What about tomorrow?”

Sunset looked back at her.

— “Pinkie, I have detention for the rest of the month and then some.”

— “Geez, Louise! Well, in that case, we'll just have to have a detention party sometime!” — Pinkie cheered. — “Nothing cheers up detention like spending it with some good friends!” — She turned off into another hallway, waving fervently. — “Bye, Sunset! Have fun in detention!”

Sunset kept walking, pushed by the ever moving crowd. A party in detention? She couldn't help but smirk. As annoying as Pinkie was, Sunset had to admit she wouldn't mind seeing that happen.

Решта дня пройшли без інцидентів, і хоча дзвінок позначив кінець шкільного дня і свободу для багатьох, для Сансет же це означало ще дві години бездумних завдань.

Сьогодні їй доручили протирати підлоги в усіх коридорах, що змусило її замислитися, навіщо тоді прибиральник.

Вона вирішила приступити до роботи без метушні для Селестії. Чим швидше вона закінчить, тим швидше вона піде додому робити... ціле нічого.

— Ну, нічого все ще краще, ніж це. — she grumbled, dragging the wet mop across the floor.

Хоча їй здалося, що це краще ніж те що робили Сніпс та Снейлс: вони мили посуд після обіду.

Вона швидко впоралась з центральним коридором, перед тим як попрямувала по східному, насолоджуючись тишею. Усі хотіли піти додому, єдині хто залишився це діти з спортивних команд.

At least, that's what she had assumed until a faint noise brushed against her ears. It was quiet and muffled, but Sunset could tell it belonged to a human, and it almost sounded like crying.

Curious, she halted her mopping and followed the noise, leading her to the girl's bathroom. She paused at the door, weighing her options. Part of her wanted to just walk away and let whoever was in misery work out their own problems. On the other hand, someone was crying, and Sunset had to admit, it would be great to make them feel worse! Just for old times' sake.

Grinning savagely, Sunset pushed the door open, stepping into black and white checkered bathroom. Upon her entry, the crying quickly turned into suppressed whimpers and the occasional hiccup. Her grin faded when she looked down at the bottom of the stalls and saw a familiar pair of boots.

З усіх людей, це повинна бути вона!

Сансет притулилась до однієї з раковин і схрестила руки.

— Годі, Твайлайт, можеш виходити. — she said tersely.

There was a gasp, followed by the sound of an unlocking bolt before Twilight stuck her head out of the stall, her face streaked with tear marks.

— З-звідки ти знаєш, що це я?

— Я побачила твоє дурнувате взуття. Що ти тут робив взагалі? Чи не повинен твій батько забрати тебе?

Twilight fully emerged from her hiding place, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

— Йому потрібно було залишитися на роботі, тому мені треба йти пішки додому...

Сансет підвела брови.

— Чому тоді ти не підеш додому з дівчатами?

She must have found the root of the problem, because at the mention of the five, Twilight bit her lip and avoided Sunset's eyes.

A grin began to creep back across Sunset's face.

— Що, вони вже теж тебе зводять з розуму? Це нормально, я теж майже не витримую їх.

Twilight broke into a fresh wave of tears, instantly wiping Sunset's smile away.

— Ц-це не те! В-вони не хочуть бути друзями зі мною!

— Шо?

Shaking her head, Twilight cried.

— Те, як вони д-дивляться на мене! Вони думають, що я вона! В-вони хочуть дружити з *принцесою* Твайлайт Спаркл, не зі мною! Я... я просто заміна для неї, тому що у нас однакове ім'я і зовнішність! Вони не хочуть бути зі мною друзями...

Sunset slumped her shoulders, watching Twilight weep into her hands. It was pretty sad to be thought of as just a stand in for someone else. And while Sunset loved the idea of kicking someone while they were down, something inside her told her now wasn't the best of times.

Я пожалкую про це потім, я знаю про це.

— Твайлайт, подивись на мене.

Twilight lifted her head, staring at Sunset with bloodshot eyes.

Обличчя Сансет скрутилося. Вона дотягнулась до паперового рушника.

— Добре, по-перше, припини рюмсати і змий обличчя; ти виглядаєш жалюгідно.

She handed the towels to Twilight, allowing her to wipe up her tears and clean her nose.

— А тепер. — Голос Сансет пом'якшав, — Слухай мене, коли я кажу, що ці дівчата хочуть бути з *тобою* друзями. Вони хочуть знати про *тебе*. Те, що вони хочуть замінити тобою іншу Твайлайт — це все у тебе в голові.

— Але...

— Не перебивай мене! — Попредила Сансет. — Це все у тебе в голові, Спаркл. Як би мені не хотілося цього признавати, але вони, мабуть, найприємніші і найщиріші дівчата яких ти тільки зустрінеш тут. Останнє чого вони хочуть, так це скривдити тебе або прикидатися, що ти заміна комусь.

Twilight wiped her eyes again.

— Ти це насправді?

Сансет кивнула.

— Так. Вони знали Твайлайт лише три дні. У тебе є час до кінця року, щоб справити враження.

— Думаю, що ти права. — Twilight sniffled. — Мені просто здається... коли вони дивляться на мене, вони шукають принцесу...

— Так, але, вона не така як вони про неї думають. — Сансет знову схрестила руки. — До того ж, це був одиничний випадок. Через кілька тижнів ніхто і не згадає про це. Обсяг уваги підлітків не дуже то і великий.

Twilight let out a weak chuckle.

— “You’re right. Rarity and Pinkie and all of them, they all seem like really nice girls. I guess I was just overreacting. If I just be myself, then they’ll just come to expect that from me.”

— “If you want to simplify it to an after-school special, sure,” — Sunset said with a shrug.

Tossing the napkins away, Twilight grabbed her backpack and slung it over her back.

— Дякую, що поговорила зі мною, Сансет. Мені дійсно стало краще.

— Ага.

Sunset turned away, waiting for Twilight to take her leave. When she continued to stand there, Sunset asked.

— Ти щось ще хочеш? Печива та попестити по голові тебе?

— Ні, я просто... — A slight blush appeared on Twilight's cheeks. — Я просто думала, чи не захочеш ти провести мене додому?

Sunset gave her a lidded stare.

— Ні. До того ж, у мене група подовженого дня.

— Ох. — Sunset couldn't believe how disappointed Twilight looked. — Що ж, тоді, думаю, зустрінемося завтра.

Твайлайт відкрила двері і пішла по коридору.

Хм, почекай. Залишитися тут на півгодини, або провести задрота додому і насолодитись рештою дня...

Sunset emerged from the bathroom shouting.

— Гей, Спаркл, зачекай! — She walked briskly, catching up to Twilight who had her hand on the entrance door.

— Що таке?

— Я передумала. Я проведу тебе додому. Тільки цього разу.

Twilight regarded her with suspicion.

— Але ти щось казала про групу?

— Ага, і саме тому я збираюсь це зробити. Прогулянка краще ніж мити підлогу.

Але, це все ще було покаранням саме по собі.

— Чи не призведе це до більших проблем?

— Можливо. I'll cross that bridge when I get there.”

Twilight took a turn in crossing her arms.

— “I don’t know how I feel about someone ditching detention.”

Sunset groaned.

— “Listen, dork, do you want my company or not?”

Twilight pretended to mull it over a minute before smiling brightly at her.

— “Of course!” — She pushed open the door, stepping into the fading light of day. — “I just hope you don’t get into too much trouble.”

— “Pshh, they’ll just give me another day of detention. Gives Pinkie more time to plan her detention party.”

— “Detention party?”

With a shake of her head, Sunset said.

— “That girl will make a party out of anything.”

They passed the marble statue, gleaming in the light of the sun. Sunset saw Twilight eyeing it.

— “Don’t even think about it. Portal’s closed for another two and a half years.”

— “Two and a half years? Seems a little specific,” — Twilight mused.

— “I’m pretty sure it’s based on the lunar cycle of both worlds. Our moon and their moon have to align while in their fullest phase, something that only happens two and a half years, I guess.”

— “I see. You know, you seem to know a lot about that place. Where’d you get all of this information from?”

— “From living there half my life,” — Sunset said matter-of-factly.

Twilight stopped walking, staring at Sunset with wide eyes.

— “You mean... you’re from Equin... Equa...”

Sunset stopped and looked back.

— “Equestria?”

— “Yes! You’re from Equestria?”

— “Yes.”

— “You’re a pony?”

— “Technically, yeah. I didn’t bring that up three days ago?”

— “No, not really!” — Twilight exasperated.

— “Huh, I thought it would have at least been implied,” — Sunset said nonchalantly.

— “How could you leave something like that out? That’s kind of important information!” — Twilight shouted.

— “Because it wasn’t that important at the time. And why are you getting so worked up about this?”

— “Well...” — Twilight quickly went from angry to embarrassed. — “Uh, no reason I guess... heh. I just feel like that’s something important you should tell to your friends.”

Sunset rubbed her temples.

— “What exactly makes you think we’re friends?”

— “Well, you saved my life, told me the truth about princess pony me instead of holding it over my head, and you just comforted me while I was feeling really down.” — Twilight counted off on her fingers. — “I’m pretty sure those are things friends do for each other.”

Twilight strode past Sunset, looking pleased with her response, while Sunset just stood there, gaping after her.

— “I didn’t... that’s not... you... you... you...”

Dammit!

Sunset pulled at her hair.

Quick, think of something to get her to change her mind!

— “Oh yeah.” — Twilight turned around. — “I never really said thanks for that, did I? Thank you for being honest with me.” — She walked up to the confused looking Sunset and hugged her tight. — “And thanks again for cheering me up. I knew you couldn’t really be a monster.”

Sunset stood there, stunned by Twilight's embrace, her mind jumping into overdrive.

Why is she thanking me? Why is she hugging me? Is she crazy? Why in the world does she want to be friends with me?

Out loud she asked the foremost question on her mind.

— “What are you talking about?”

Twilight took a step back, releasing Sunset from her hug.

— “Well, it’s not that I don’t believe the story you told me, but, Pinkie must have been exaggerating when she said you turned into a monster, right?”

Sunset felt her stomach drop. She put her hands in her pockets and walked past Twilight.

— “No, she wasn’t,” — she said, her voice now hoarse. — “I really did turn into a monster.”

— “But... but why?” — Twilight ran to catch up with her. — “Sure, you’re a little mean, but... you aren’t evil...”

— “The Element of Magic was never meant to be worn by someone unworthy, someone who just wanted to use it for power. It’s an artifact that is only meant to unite the virtues of friendship and channel them into pure magic. When I put it on... it just channeled all of the dark things that were in my heart, and turned me into a reflection of them.”

Sunset reached up and wiped her face. She clenched her teeth and said sternly.

— “And no, I’m not going to talk any more about it. The less said, the better.”

Twilight looked at her with sad eyes.

— “Alright then... but, I still don’t think you’re evil. Not anymore at least.”

There was a moment of silence between them before Sunset asked.

— “What were you doing out so late that night anyway?”

— “Oh, well...” — Twilight gave a nervous laugh, rubbing the back of her neck. — “I had gone to the library to do some studying and I kinda lost track of time. It wasn’t until the librarian kicked me out that I realized how late it was. I started walking home and I ran into those two guys and... well, you know the rest of the story.”

— “You spent all day studying in the library?” — Sunset laughed. — “Geez, you *are* a nerd.”

— “Hey!” — Twilight looked indignant. — “What about you? Aren’t you the smartest girl in school?”

— “Yeah, but I don’t have to study, it all just comes naturally. Except for history.”

Twilight snorted.

— “You have a hard time in history?”

— “Yes, but it isn’t my fault. It’s boring, and there’s too many dates to remember! And all you humans do is kill each other!”

— “We do more than that,” — Twilight argued. — “Sure, we have our flaws, but we’ve accomplished so much by working together. I mean, we’ve put a man on the moon and sent a rover to Mars! Has the pony world ever done that?”

— “No,” — Sunset admitted. — “But we did lock a mare *inside* the moon.”

— “You... locked someone inside the moon?”

— “Yeah, long story.” — Sunset waved it off.

Twilight laughed again.

— “Well, if you’re really having trouble, maybe I could tutor you sometime,” she offered.

Sunset rolled her eyes.

— “Please, I don’t need tutoring.”

The neighborhood they had entered into was a collection of perfectly ordered houses, each with a well-manicured lawn and perfectly trimmed hedges. It looked like the textbook definition of ‘suburbia.’ In fact, Sunset thought it would have been creepy if the houses hadn’t at least been painted different colors. Aside from the paint patterns, personal ornaments, and various cars in each driveway, all the houses looked the same.

Twilight stopped in front of a light blue one with a small fountain in front of the porch. She beamed at Sunset, blushing slightly.

— “Thanks again for walking me home.”

— “Meh.”

— Is that all you say whenever someone thanks you?”

— “More or less.” — Sunset shrugged.

Twilight shook her head in disbelief.

— “Oh!” — She lit up and reached into her backpack. — “I can’t believe I almost forgot again. I’ve been meaning to give this back to you.” — She pulled out a small, pink unicorn and held it up to Sunset. — “You left this on the bridge. I, um, thought you might want it back.”

Sunset took the unicorn into her hands, staring at it before looking back at Twilight.

— “Uhh, thanks, I guess.”

— “You’re welcome. See? That’s how you respond when someone says thank you.”

With another roll of her eyes, Sunset turned and started her long walk home.

— “Bye, Sunset! See you tomorrow!” — Twilight called enthusiastically.

— “Whatever.”

Sunset held up the unicorn, scrutinizing it as she thought.

Perfect, I accidentally made Twilight Sparkle my friend. I hate irony.

— “Almost as much as I hate you,” — she said to the unicorn named Twilight Sparkle.

— “Yes,” — she made the unicorn answer in a squeaky voice. — “But now, you hate me as a friend!”

— “That doesn’t make any sense.”

— “Neither does friendship!”

Sunset turned her head and saw a curious bystander staring at her.

— “Mind your own business!” she snapped, scaring him off.

— “That wasn’t very nice,” — the unicorn said.

— “...Yeah, I’m so setting you on fire when I get home.”

II. Some Nights — Крок 9: Послуга для Флатершай

Sunset turned the corner and rested against the wall, taking deep, heavy breaths as she tried to recover from the sprint she had just taken.

It was close by; she could still feel it, and it was only a matter of time before it found her again. Sunset wasn't sure how much longer she could keep running. Her lungs burned, and her throat felt drier than the San Palomino Desert back in Equestria.

Still, she couldn't stay put for long. She couldn't let herself be caught. With a deep breath, Sunset bolted down the hallway once more, leaping out of the way as one of the lockers opened up, and a pair of shadowy hands tried to snatch at her.

The deformed, endless corridors that made up this haunting facsimile of Canterlot High twisted on into the darkness, and Sunset could feel herself nearly tripping on the unseen holes in the floor beneath her.

Turning onto a staircase that stretched on into infinity, Sunset could hear the flapping of wings growing ever closer as she ran.

— “Come out, come out, little sun. I thought you wanted friends?”

That's arguable, Sunset thought as she began taking the steps three at a time. Just as she finally reached the top, something grabbed her by the leg, pulling her back down several steps. She dreaded what she would find when she turned around and decided to just blindly kick at her target. Her boot collided with something, and it let out a slow moan as it released her. When Sunset had safely reached the second floor again, she chanced a look back and saw that she had kicked Applejack in the face.

Only, Applejack looked like she had barely registered the kick as painful. In fact, her expression was completely vacant, and when she opened her eyes, Sunset was horrified to see them glossed over with a familiar teal coloring.

Applejack moaned again, and began climbing after Sunset, who tore into a run, wanting to distance herself from the zombie as quickly as she could. Unfortunately, as she ran, more and more zombified students began to crop up,

coming out from within the lockers and pouring out of the classrooms, lumbering after her.

The entire school was filled with their bone-chilling groans, making Sunset hold her palms over her ears. Yet the noise persisted. And above the moaning, she could still hear the wing beats of her true predator.

She turned down another hallway, and was devastated to see it was a dead end. There was only one other door, and it opened up to reveal one more zombie.

Flash Sentry.

He trudged forward, mouth agape, forcing Sunset back until she remembered the pubescent army marching towards her, locking her in.

— **“You know,” — Flash groaned, — “they always asked me why I was dating you. I said I thought I might be able to make you a better person. I guess I was wrong.”**

Clenching her fists, Sunset charged forward, knocking him aside and finding sanctuary in the small classroom beyond. She shut the door and dragged the teacher’s desk over to barricade it, just as the moans and fists of her stalkers pressed against the other side.

Sunset leaned against the desk, panting. This can’t be happening, it just can’t.
— **“Oh, it’s happening alright,” — a demonic voice whispered into her ear.**

A pair of claws grabbed her by the shoulders and flipped her around, bringing Sunset face to face with her monstrous other half. Her red skin seemed to glow against the nearly pitch black background and was complemented by her fiery hair and tail. The demon lifted Sunset up into the air, flapping her wings as they rose higher and higher, revealing her sharp fangs as she grinned viciously.

— **“Hiya, sweetheart. Miss me? You know you can’t just run away from yourself.”**

Sunset gazed into her maniacal blue eyes, too terrified to speak.

The demon just laughed, then opened her mouth wider, the inside of her throat glowing intensely. Sunset's eyes widened in horror as she realized what was about to happen.

Just as the fire erupted, Sunset was able to scream.

Sunset shot up from her mattress, drenched in a cold sweat, struggling to choke down a gasp of air. Her entire body shook, both from fear and from the chill wind that swept through the factory. She hugged herself to try and retain some warmth and to stop her violent shivering.

Another nightmare.

Sunset had been having them on and off ever since the night of the dance, and they were always one of two scenarios. Either Sunset was being chased by the demon and the zombified students of her school, or she was the demon, killing off students with psychotic glee.

As much as Sunset wanted to blame the Elements and pass it off as some side effect of her curse, she knew this was probably more psychological than anything. She reasoned that it stemmed from her guilty conscience, giving her more reason to hate it.

When her shivering finally stopped, Sunset relaxed her arms, bringing them to her sides and leaning back in a casual manner. Her hand brushed against something soft, and she pulled up the pink unicorn that she had left on her bed hours earlier.

— “Right, you.” — Sunset had every intention to burn it when she had gotten home. She had sat down with a lighter and was fully prepared to watch it go up in smoke.

Instead, she just sat there, staring at for an hour before deciding to do it later. She wasn’t sure what was stopping her, but she knew whatever it was, she would get over it eventually and burn the stupid toy.

Sunset stared at it for a while longer before hurling it against the far wall. It smacked against it and tumbled to the floor without so much as a peep. Sunset fell back against her pillow, staring up at the ceiling, while she rested her hands beneath her head.

— “Maybe you’ll feel better if you talk about your problems.— In a squeaky voice, she said.

She climbed back into a sitting position and glared at the plushie, barely visible in the darkness.

— “Nobody asked you!”

— “But I just want to help. I like helping people, even if it’s none of my business.”

— “Yeah, that’s a really annoying trait you have, *Princess*.” — Sunset put a hand to her head and glanced at her alarm clock. “Four thirty-two in the morning and I’m talking to a stuffed animal. I may have finally reached rock bottom.”

— “On the bright side, you can only go up from here!”

— “Yep, I’ve lost it.”

At seven o'clock, Sunset dragged herself out of bed, having gotten only another hour of sleep after tossing and turning the rest of the night, fighting the urge to project her thoughts onto the Twilight Sparkle toy.

After a cold shower and a mediocre breakfast (she was starting to run low on food again) she headed out the door, backpack over her shoulder, and eyes bloodshot.

It was another cold, crisp autumn morning, and the small tears in Sunset's jacket allowed the cool air to snake through and nip at her skin. She could feel goosebumps rise on her arms, and was now grateful she had chosen to wear jeans today.

The sun rose over the neighborhood Sunset journeyed through, bathing everything in its fresh light. Gold rays streamed through the red and orange leaves that fell from the trees, coating the ground in a colorful camouflage.

Sunset let out a yawn, trying to admire the beautiful sight, but was too marred by a lack of sleep to fully appreciate it, though she did enjoy the melodic crunch of the dying leaves under her boots.

Drawing close to the school, she could hear the mindless babble of her congregating peers as they gathered together at the front entrance, greeting each other and making plans for the weekend.

It was with a frown that Sunset realized she was about to endure another weekend without anything to do. Well, other than burn Twilight Sparkle to a crisp.

Walking onto campus, Sunset heard a small, hesitant voice that forced her to stop.

— "Please, won't you volunteer at the local animal shelter? Help those who can't help themselves. Oh, excuse me, would you like to... no? Oh, that's okay then..."

Crap!

Sunset inwardly screamed.

She had completely forgotten about Fluttershy's weekly (and pathetic) attempts to garner attention for the animal shelter. This was normally the time Sunset would walk up to her, mock her for being so fragile and quiet, then go about her merry day. Instead, Sunset stomped over for an entirely different reason.

Approaching Fluttershy, Sunset choked out.

— "I'd... like to... volunteer."

Fluttershy took a small step back, looking both startled and confused.

— "You... you would? But, I thought you didn't like animals?"

Sunset tightened her jaw.

— "Yes, I would, and no, I don't"

— "Then... why are you volunteering?"

— "Because you asked."

Fluttershy kept the stack of papers she was holding close to her chest with one hand, while she used her other to play with her hair.

— "Well... um, if... if you really want to." — Fluttershy gave Sunset a look of sad innocence. — "This isn't some mean joke, is it?"

Despite all of the mean things she could potentially do to Fluttershy at the shelter, Sunset knew she wouldn't stoop that low. She may dislike animals, but she wasn't going to abuse any. She *had* technically been one.

— "No, it isn't, I promise."

Fluttershy instantly brightened up to levels Sunset had rarely seen.

— "Okay then!" — she practically squealed. She handed Sunset a flier. — "Here are the directions. Do you think you could come by tomorrow, maybe around eight?"

Sunset sighed.

— "Yeah, sure."

— "Oh, thank you, thank you, so much! You're going to have fun, I promise! Just wait until you see all the cute baby puppies and stray kittens and..."

Sunset tuned her out as she walked away, stuffing the flier in her coat pocket.

Well, at least I have plans for the weekend now.

The day had progressed in a relatively smooth fashion, with Sunset fortunate enough not to run into anyone undesirable, at least, until she was on her way to lunch.

She stowed her bag in her locker and followed the crowd into the cafeteria when Miss Celestia appeared in the corner of her eye. She quickly tried to avert her attention somewhere else and blend in with students, but the damage had been done.

— “Miss Shimmer, may I see you for a minute?”

Damn.

Sunset slumped her shoulders and skulked over to Celestia, who was waiting with her arms crossed.

— “Care to explain where you disappeared to yesterday?”

— “I was walking Twilight Sparkle home after I helped her to stop crying her eyes out.”

Celestia gave her a skeptical look.

— “Really? That seems... uncharacteristically nice of you.”

— “Yes, really,” — Sunset said moodily, — “and trust me, it was a one-time thing.”

There was a tapping noise that came from Celestia’s foot as she continued to regard Sunset.

— “Well... I suppose I can let it go this time since you did help a fellow student. But no more ditching detention. Understand, young lady?”

— “Yes,” — Sunset answered, rolling her eyes ever so slightly.

— “Good.” — Celestia’s face and voice softened. — “Now, are you alright, Sunset? Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

Sunset looked up into her face, taken aback by the sudden personal inquiry. In that moment, Sunset could see her mentor, smiling down at her and making sure everything was alright in her tiny, little world. Sunset was almost compelled to break right there and tell Celestia everything; apologize for things the principal knew nothing about. Apologize for things that happened in

Equestria, hoping that, somehow, her old teacher would feel the apology as well.

Sunset was *almost* compelled.

Instead, she shook her head and said.

— “No, to both questions.”

— “Are you sure?” — Celestia asked.

— “Not really.” — Sunset pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed in frustration. — “Forget it, just forget it. Just... I don’t want to talk about anything.”

Before Celestia could ask another question, Sunset broke into a fast walk, making her way to lunch.

After grabbing a tray of food and seating herself at her lonely corner table, Sunset closed her eyes and took a moment to gather her thoughts. What was with everyone suddenly wanting to know her personal life? It wasn’t like it was any of their business anyway.

Taking up her fork, Sunset absentmindedly picked at her salad, her appetite now gone.

People really need to keep their noses out of my affairs.

Twilight dropped down into the seat next to her.

— “Hey, I heard you were going to help Fluttershy tomorrow at the animal shelter! That’s really nice of you!”

Sunset looked up at the ceiling.

Seriously?

Looking back at Twilight, she asked coolly.

— “First of all, what makes you think you can just sit here? And second, what’s with your obsession of whether or not I’m nice?”

Twilight smirked.

— “It’s a free school, I can sit wherever I want,” — she said, playfully matching Sunset’s snark. — “And I am *not* obsessed, I just said that was a really nice thing of you to do.”

Sunset made a violent stab at a piece of lettuce.

— “Yeah, don’t remind me.”

— “Okay, I’m not obsessed, but I *am* confused. Why do you act like every nice thing you do is somehow a bad thing? Or that you don’t want to do it?”

— “Because I *don’t* want to do it.”

Twilight scrunched her face, looking thoroughly perplexed.

— “Then, why do you do them?”

Feeling no pressure on her throat, Sunset grinned, mostly to herself.

— “Let’s just say... I’m clearing my conscience.”

— “Well... okay...” — Twilight said, sounding more confused than before.

— “Hey, Sparkle, wanna do me a favor?”

— “Sure!” — Twilight smiled brightly.

Sunset turned and looked into her shining, violet eyes.

— “Go. Away.”

Twilight pouted in an unamused fashion, but stood up, taking her tray with her.

— “Fine. But, uh, I’d watch out for Rainbow Dash. She doesn’t seem too happy with you.” — With a nod of farewell, Twilight returned to the other table where, sure enough, Rainbow was staring Sunset down with fervent intensity.

— “Gee, I can’t imagine why,” — Sunset muttered to herself, returning to her salad.

As the school day came to an end, Sunset found herself mopping floors once more, ordered to finish the job she should have done yesterday.

The students had fled from the school faster today than the previous, no doubt because of the welcoming weekend and all of the promises it held. For Sunset, it just promised a day of helping the spineless chicken pick up after other mindless animals.

— “Fun, fun,” — Sunset said, her voice oozing with false enthusiasm. She brought the mop back in forth across the hallway, backing up as she cleaned. It was horribly dull work.

— “Hey!” — A voice cracked through the calming quiet.

Sunset turned around and found Rainbow Dash standing at the end of the hall, arms folded and looking like someone had spit in her sports drink.

— “Caution, wet floors,” — Sunset said in a bored tone.

Unfolding her arms, Rainbow marched down the hall, her fists now balled at her sides. She didn’t stop until she was inches away from Sunset, who could now smell her disgusting sweat.

— “What are you planning?” — Rainbow growled through her teeth.

— “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” — Sunset answered calmly. — “And I suggest you back up out of my face.”

Instead, Rainbow grabbed Sunset by the arms and pinned her against the lockers, making them rattle with enough noise to wake the dead.

— “Quit lying to my face!” — Rainbow snarled. — “I know you’re planning something for tomorrow! Why else would you offer to help Fluttershy?”

— “Maybe I’m just trying to be a nice person.” — Sunset couldn’t help but grin in a nefarious manner.

— “Bullshit.”

— “Such language, Dash. Not very appropriate for a school setting.”

Rainbow brought her up and slammed her against the lockers again, wiping off Sunset’s smile.

She glared darkly at Rainbow.

— “Alright, I’m done being nice. You have three seconds to let go of me, or I *will* get violent. One...”

Their eyes locked once again, each one daring the other to continue with their gambit. Rainbow’s grip didn’t slacken, and the fire in her eyes never died.

— “Two...”

Sunset would have loved to kick Rainbow’s butt all across the campus, but she wasn’t in the mood to get expelled. Had they been anywhere else, Rainbow would be on the ground already. Still, if she didn’t let go, Sunset wasn’t afraid to use aggression.

Just as Sunset was about to reach three, Rainbow released her arms and took a step back, looking angrier than ever.

— “Smart move, Dash.” — Sunset rolled her shoulders.

Pointing a finger, Rainbow said.

— “The only reason I’m letting you go is because everyone else has some stupid idea about giving you the benefit of the doubt, and I’d look bad if I beat your face in before tomorrow.” — She took a step forward. — “But I’m warning you, if you hurt Fluttershy, if you hurt *any* of them, well... let’s just say, I won’t be going to graduation because I’ll be doing time. *You* won’t be going *at all*.”

Before Sunset could come up with a retort, Rainbow turned on her heel and stomped away, looking back only to show Sunset she meant business.

— “Impressive threat, Dash,” — Sunset whispered, leaning against the locker. She frowned. — “But why?” — Three weeks ago, Rainbow hadn’t been on speaking terms with most of them, now she was willing to fight tooth and nail for them? That made about as much sense as Princess Twilight deciding to defend this world instead of Equestria.

Sunset picked up the fallen mop, returning to her task.

That doll was right, friendship doesn’t make any sense.

*Крок 10: Мачо-пси (іноді) потрапляють до раю - Alpha Dogs
(Might) Go to Heaven*

Sunset awoke early on Saturday, her eyes lined with sleep dust and her hair a wild mess. She groaned as she sat up in her bed, rolling out the stiffness in her neck and shoulders. Maybe it was just her, but her mattress felt like it was getting more uncomfortable every night.

Her clock read seven, giving Sunset exactly an hour to get ready before she would be forced to the animal shelter to help Fluttershy. She shuddered, thinking about all of the smelly animals she would have to pretend to care about.

Rising from her mattress, Sunset stretched herself out before starting her morning routine of bathing and getting dressed. She would hate to be dragged down to the shelter looking like a frizzy haired troll.

By the time she had finished her cereal, it was seven forty-five. As she put her bowl in the sink, Sunset wondered what would happen if she headed for the shelter on her own accord. Would she still feel the jolt down her spine and lose basic control of her functions until she arrived at her destination?

She walked back upstairs to grab her jacket, also curious as to how anyone there would respond to her wearing leather. On her way out, Twilight Sparkle squeaked.

— “Have a good time!”

Sunset paused in the doorway and beat her palm against her forehead.

— “Stop it, stop it, stop it! You are not doing yourself any mental favors!” — She looked back at the plushie sitting on her desk. — “You’re ash when I come home.”

Biting down on her tongue was the only way Sunset made it downstairs without having Twilight Sparkle comment back.

It was another cool day, with the wind whistling through the alley outside Sunset’s factory home. She shut the door tight behind her and started down the road, pulling out the flier Fluttershy had handed her. The shelter wasn’t too far

from where Sunset was, so she decided she'd just walk the distance instead of paying for the bus fare.

Kicking an empty soda can as she walked, Sunset felt like it was another day of school, only the street was completely devoid of any other students. She envied them and their good fortune in being able to sleep in on a Saturday morning.

An odd tingle crawled down Sunset's spine. Not like the sudden jolt she would normally receive, but like someone was trying to tickle her. Curious, she stopped walking, trying to test the limits of her enchantment. Finding that she wasn't being forced to continue, Sunset tried to turn around and walk back home.

Unfortunately, that's when the jolt returned, and Sunset was, once again, being dragged down the road, robbed of her will.

— “Okay, so if I do something preemptively, I can stay in control, but if I try to get out of it, then I'm forced into it. Hmm, I should probably write this stuff down...”

The animal shelter was a square, nondescript building thrown in between two other stores. In fact, if it weren't for her curse, Sunset might have walked right past it. The only thing that identified it were the words ‘Canterlot Animal Shelter and Rescue Center’ printed in the window.

Sunset stepped into a rather bland looking waiting room, decorated with only a coffee table and a few chairs. From the back, however, she could hear the cries of several animals, most notably dogs.

She approached the counter and tapped the bell, wondering if anyone could even hear the chime over the dissonance in the back room. Evidently, they could as Fluttershy appeared from the back door, wearing a white overcoat that gave her a very professional look.

— “Sunset!” — Fluttershy said with surprise. — “You actually came!”

— “You thought I wasn't going to show?”

— “Umm, well... not really...” — Fluttershy grew quiet, looking down at her shoes.

Sunset couldn't entirely blame her; she would never have considered ever doing this in the past. She shrugged it off and said.

— “Well, I'm here now. What do you want me to do?”

Fluttershy perked up, smiling from ear to ear.

— “Oh, it's really quite easy. We just need to take care of the animals that are here today. Feed them, play with them, bathe them and make sure they're given some love.”

Yeah, easy.

Sunset rolled her eyes.

— “Well then, let's get this over with.” — She made a move to advance, but Fluttershy stepped in her path.

— “Umm... are you sure you want to do this? I-I mean, it's great that you're here, but... umm... if you don't want to be here—”

— “Fluttershy, I said I was going to help, so I'm going to help.”

Besides, I'm not sure if I can leave anyway.

Brightening up again, Fluttershy took Sunset by the arm.

— “Then let's go! First, you'll need an overcoat. Oh, and I should introduce you to my supervisor.”

Fluttershy dragged Sunset through another door leading to a small office, overcrowded with filing cabinets and a small desk, where an older woman sat, doing paperwork. She had a navy blue skin tone, and sea green hair pulled into a tight bun. On her face was a pair of reading glasses, giving her an appearance of a typical librarian. She looked up at Sunset and narrowed her eyes.

— “Ms. Tenderheart, this is Sunset Shimmer,” — Fluttershy said, missing the cold glare Sunset was receiving.

— “Oh, so *this* is the girl who sends Fluttershy to me almost every day in tears,” — she said in a steely voice, rising from her chair.

Sunset forced a nervous laugh and put on a fake smile. She was now aware of her breakfast churning in her stomach like a raging sea.

— “Um, well... about that...”

Ms. Tenderheart was advancing on her, wagging her finger in a scolding manner that Sunset normally would have found ridiculous, but the anger in the woman's eyes seemed to make it threatening.

— “Do you know what you’ve put her through? I can’t believe you would show your face around here!”

— “Ms. Tenderheart,” — Fluttershy squeaked.

— “And wearing *leather* of all things! This is some kind of joke to you, isn’t it? Well, there is no way I’m letting you anywhere near any of these poor animals!”

Sunset was backed against the door, feeling incredibly small against Ms. Tenderheart’s intimidating demeanor. Her tongue was glued to the inside of her mouth, preventing her from saying anything in her defense. Not that Sunset could come up with anything anyway.

Fluttershy threw herself in between the two before Ms. Tenderheart could yell anymore.

— “Please, Ms. Tenderheart, Sunset said she was sorry. She’s trying to be a better person now, and really wants to help.”

Ms. Tenderheart scoffed and gave both girls a lidded stare.

— “I’ll believe that when I see it.” — She refocused her fiery glare back on Sunset, emitting a small growl before speaking again. — “I’ve got my eye on her. If she puts one toe out of line...” — She left the threat hanging in the air, returning to her desk.

Well, you're not the only one.

Sunset thought bitterly, Ms. Tenderheart's dagger glare thoroughly reminding her of Rainbow Dash.

Fluttershy grabbed a coat from the nearby rack and quickly ushered Sunset out of the door. She handed Sunset the white lab coat, her cheeks flushed with the same pink tone as her hair.

— “I’m so sorry about that, I... um I didn’t know she would react like that.”

Sunset tried to shrug it off but found something about Ms. Tenderheart's words unnerved her.

Before Fluttershy could open the back door, Sunset asked.

— "Did I really make you come here in tears every day?"

Fluttershy hesitated, her back to Sunset.

— "Oh, no, not every day... Just... well... most days."

There was a pregnant pause in which Sunset felt the seconds drag into years. Had she really caused Fluttershy so much pain that she came crying to her volunteer work almost every day for the last three years? Had Sunset truly been that detached from the well-being of those around her?

Well, yeah, it's not like anyone else matters in this world. Whatever happens to them is their own problem.

Sunset ran a hand through her hair. No wonder Rainbow hated her.

She was compelled to say something to Fluttershy, but when she came back to reality, Sunset found she had already gone into the next room.

Sunset followed suit and was greeted to a cacophony of dogs barking with a few cat cries mixed in. The room was really just a long hallway with large kennels lining both sides of the walls. Each kennel was filled with a food and water bowl, a few pet toys, a bed and an animal pressing its face against the bars.

Fluttershy giggled as she stopped at each cage, unlocking the doors and leading the animals out like the pied piper. They jumped and nipped at her heels, begging for her love and attention, completely ignoring Sunset, not that she had much of a problem with that.

— "So, what exactly is the plan here?" — Sunset asked, marveling at the crowd amassed around Fluttershy. It was then she noticed some of the animals were adorned with cuts and bruises. There was a dog with its paw bandaged up, and a cat that was missing half of its fur.

Looking up from the German Shepherd she was petting, Fluttershy said.

— "Well, I'm going to take them all to the back so they can stretch and exercise. While I'm back there, could you clean the cages and refill their food and water bowls?"

— "Yeah, sure." — Of the two, Sunset thought she was probably getting the easier job.

— "Fiery-headed demon!"

Sunset glared at Fluttershy, who had turned back to her furry fan club.

— "What did you call me?"

— "What? Oh!" — Fluttershy clasped her hands over her mouth, blushing furiously again. — "That wasn't me, it was..."

— "Sunset's evil, Raaawrk!"

There was a fluttering of wings, and Sunset felt something slap her face as it flew by, perching itself on Fluttershy's shoulder. It was bright green with a yellow belly and a large, curved beak.

— "Sunset's evil, she's evil!"

Fluttershy stroked the parrot under the chin.

— "Umm, Sunset, this is Peter, Ms. Tenderheart's parrot."

— "Of course he is," — Sunset deadpanned.

Fluttershy fidgeted, doing her usual nervous tell of hiding her face in her long hair.

— "He... may sometimes pick up some words Ms. Tenderheart... and I say. I'm sorry," — she added quietly.

— "Just show me where the food and stuff are," — Sunset snapped, not in any mood to hear why even a parrot was bad mouthing her.

After Fluttershy showed her to the supply cabinet, Sunset took the broom and dust pan, watching Fluttershy lead the rest of the stray animals through another door. As she exited, Peter turned his head to look back.

— "Evil demon, Raaaawrk!"

Sunset clenched her jaw until her teeth hurt. She severely hoped that the bird hadn't heard that from Fluttershy initially, for her sake.

Once more, Sunset found herself sweeping up floors and doing other menial chores.

How has my life deteriorated to this?

She thought as she swept dog poop out of one of the lower cages.

She wanted to think that it could be worse, but she was hard pressed to think of a more depressing situation she could be in.

How can Fluttershy do this day in and day out?

Trading the broom for the bag of food, Sunset's thoughts turned dark as she reflected on what Ms. Tenderheart and Fluttershy had said. She imagined Fluttershy filling up the food bowls of these filthy pets, silently sobbing over the cruel things Sunset had done to her.

Out of everyone at Canterlot High, Sunset had been especially vicious and obscene towards her. It wasn't out of spite or hatred or anything of the like. Fluttershy just made it so *easy*. Though hardly anyone ever stood up to Sunset, Fluttershy practically rolled over when she had claimed dominion over the school. With their friendship broken up, no one ever came to Fluttershy's defense, and she did nothing but mewl in terror whenever Sunset confronted her. Perhaps it was her lack of a spine that drew Sunset towards her.

Sunset cringed as she thought of every underhanded trick and bullying act she had committed against Fluttershy. Verbal abuse, borderline physical abuse, lying, blackmail, damaging her personal belongings, crumpling her homework, stealing things from her locker, even threatening to report her animals to Principal Celestia if she didn't follow orders. Sunset's only saving grace was that she had never threatened to physically hurt them.

Still, that didn't make up for anything else she had done. Out of everyone, Fluttershy had the most right to not forgive and forget. And yet, she had, just like the others barring Rainbow. Fluttershy had forgiven Sunset of her transgressions and welcomed her with open—if not hesitant—arms. Though, Sunset supposed she had every reason to be a bit wary.

Looking down, Sunset realized she was pouring too much food into one of the silver dishes, creating a mountain of doggy kibbles. She sighed and started scooping some back into the bag with her hand.

Kindness. That was the element Twilight Sparkle had called out when she addressed Fluttershy. Is that what this is, then? Is she just fulfilling her role as the Bearer of Kindness? No, she was always nice, even before that princess

showed up. She isn't defined by her element, she defines her element. She's just naturally kind and forgiving, which makes her so easy to walk over.

A long time ago, Sunset had affirmed not to do any favors for anyone unless it helped her as well. When she had come to Canterlot High and saw Fluttershy, she doubled her conviction. Being nice to everyone would get you nowhere. However, being cold and callous had proven to only get you so far. And the fall from the top of that hill had been much harder.

As Sunset continued to ponder over Fluttershy's disposition and her own moral dilemmas, she methodically continued her ordained task, giving each kennel fresh food and water, paying close attention so she didn't make another mess. Lost in her own world, she didn't hear the soft pitter-patter of small paws breaking across the hard floor. So when something wet licked the back of her leg, Sunset jumped a foot into the air, scattering kibbles across the tile.

She turned around and glared down at the small dog sniffing her boot. It looked up at her with large eyes and a twitching nose, regarding her curiously. — “Shouldn't you be outside with the others? Go on, shoo.” — Sunset tried to wave it off with a hand, but the dog stayed firmly in place, wagging its tail.

Sunset narrowed her eyes, taking note of the creature in front of her. She wasn't sure what type of dog it was, but it looked rather scrawny, like it hadn't had a decent meal in some time. It had a shabby white coat and a brown circle around its left eye. Sunset's heart dropped a little as she looked at its long ears, and saw one of them appeared to be torn.

She knelt down on one knee, trying to take a closer look, but that was when the dog took a few tentative steps backward. She eased one hand forward, saying.

— “Hey, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you.”

The dog leaned forward, smelling the kibbles on Sunset's hand and began to lick her palm, scooting a little closer. Sunset reached with her other hand and scratched the back of its neck.

— “See? I'm not a—” — Sunset's tongue held fast, unable to finish a sentence she knew wasn't true. She was a monster... but, maybe she didn't have to always act like one.

After the dog had grown satisfied from licking the residue off of Sunset's hand, she gestured to the fallen kibbles around them.

— “So, wanna help me out a little?”

The dog barked and quickly snapped up the stray pieces of food, allowing Sunset to finish her job. Afterwards, Sunset led it through the door at the back and found a large, spacious enclosure, shaded by the two buildings standing on either side of the animal shelter. Toys were littered about across the green grass, which had been flattened in several places from dogs rolling in it. A separate area had been fenced off for the cats and filled with scratching posts and fake mice.

To her amusement, Sunset found Fluttershy down on all fours, playing tug o' war with another dog. Upon seeing Sunset approach, Fluttershy dropped the toy from her mouth and jumped to her feet, blushing again.

— “Oh, um, you're all finished?”

Sunset nodded.

— “Yep.” — She pointed to the small dog that had followed her out. — “I found this little guy wandering around inside.”

Fluttershy gasped.

— “Oh, Spot, I was wondering where you had run off too.”

Spot. Really?

Spot wagged his tail at Fluttershy before picking up a chew toy and darting off. Sunset watched him before taking an interest in all of the other strays milling about, either lounging around in the grass or partaking in some activity like chasing their own tail or playing tug o' war with another dog.

A frown appeared on Sunset's face as she noticed something about a few of the dogs and even a few cats.

— “Why do some of them have bruises like that?”

Fluttershy sighed and hunched over, her eyes downcast.

— “Some people take their anger out on poor animals. We don't just take in lost or stray ones, we have to rescue pets that are being abused as well.” — A

tear rolled down her cheek. — “It’s not fair... hurting something that can’t defend itself.”

— “Why didn’t you ever defend yourself, Fluttershy? Why’d you let me treat you so bad?”

Fluttershy’s voice came out as a hoarse whisper.

— “I thought if I didn’t do what you said, you might... you’d...”

— “Take it out on your pets?”

Her silence was answer enough for Sunset. She would have liked to think that her threats against animals were hollow, but after throwing a fireball at five students, Sunset wasn’t sure if there was a line she wouldn’t have crossed.

— “Fluttershy, I...” — Sunset bit her lip. — “I just want to say... everything I did to you... I’m... sorry.” — Her stomach churned. Apologizing from her heart still made her feel nauseous.

Staring with large, doe eyes, Fluttershy looked at Sunset like she had just transformed into a magnificent butterfly.

— “You... you really mean it?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” — Sunset said with melancholy. — “I was pretty horrible to you, even when you compare it to what I did to the rest of the school. I don’t know how you dealt with it for all those years.”

Fluttershy looked away, but not before Sunset saw the grim expression cross her face. She hugged herself, and said in a barely audible voice/

— “Sometimes... I didn’t think I could deal with it anymore. Sometimes... I didn’t want to.”

The last sentence struck Sunset in the heart, cutting into the conscience she was still just becoming aware of as she fully grasped the underlying meaning in Fluttershy’s words.

— “Please, tell me you didn’t really consider...?”

There was a weak nod, Fluttershy still keeping her back to Sunset.

— “It was never for long periods of time. Just briefly, when I would fall asleep. This—” — she gestured to the dogs playing in the grass — “—was all I had to

look forward to every day. But, it was enough. If I left, who would give them the love and care they needed?”

Sunset leaned against the back wall, feeling numb. She couldn’t decide what was worse: actively trying to kill six human beings, or knowing that she had indirectly caused one of them to contemplate doing it to themselves.

— “Fluttershy,” — she said breathlessly, — “I’m so sorry. I... I never bothered to think... how far I could have pushed some of you.”

When Fluttershy didn’t respond, Sunset continued.

— “Which makes me even more confused on why you forgave me. Out of everyone, why don’t you hate me the most?”

Fluttershy finally turned back around, tears flowing down her cheek. Despite this, she put on a soft smile.

— “Because, everyone deserves to be shown a little kindness.”

The rest of the day wasn't as bad as Sunset had originally anticipated. She and Fluttershy had talked for a while longer, and while Sunset couldn't call her a friend just yet, she was slowly beginning to understand why Equestria—why *both* worlds—put so much value in friendship. Spending time with someone and just talking about normal things actually felt... nice.

It might have felt better if Peter the Parrot hadn't been constantly flying around screeching obscenities at Sunset. Monster or not, Sunset wanted to strangle the bird.

After the animals had gotten their morning exercise, Sunset and Fluttershy had proceeded to bathe them, a chore that proved to be both difficult and messy for all involved.

Twice, Sunset had been knocked into the tub they had used to bathe the dogs, coming out covered with stray hair and shampoo. When Fluttershy had burst out laughing the second time, Sunset 'accidentally' sprayed her with the hose. From there, everything had quickly dissolved into a full-scale water war, leaving both girls soaked and shivering.

When they waded back inside to put the animals back in their kennels and dry off, Ms. Tenderheart had handed them towels, eying Sunset with a little less hostility.

Both girls sat outside under the afternoon sun, wrapped in their towels and cupping mugs of hot chocolate in their hands. Since there were no spare clothes, both of them had to make do with simply drying off naturally.

— “Well, ”— Sunset said evenly after taking another sip of her warm drink. — “I suppose today was... not as horrible as I thought it was going to be.”

— “Is that just your way of saying you had a fun time?” — Fluttershy asked.

— “More or less.” — Sunset lifted her cup to hide the thin smile crawling along her face. — “Don't get any ideas though. This was just a one-time thing. Probably.”

Fluttershy beamed at her.

— “Well, thank you for all of your help, Sunset. I appreciate it.”

Sunset lowered her cup, furrowing her brows slightly.

— “That’s what I don’t get though; you and Ms. Smiles-a-lot over there seem to handle everything pretty fine. Why do you need volunteers?”

Brushing a strand of wet hair out of her face, Fluttershy said.

— “It’s kind of an idea we had. You see, we thought if we asked people to come and volunteer instead of just outright asking them to adopt, they might feel less pressured. By volunteering, they get to really connect with one of the animals before taking it home.” — She let out a content sigh. — “And, it’s always nice to have someone split the work with you once in a while.”

— “Hmm, I see.” — Sunset nodded. — “That brings up my next question: where are the rest of your friends?”

Fluttershy blew at some of the steam curling out of her mug.

— “They were all busy today. And besides, most of them already have pets. But, they do volunteer every now and again. So does Ms. Celestia.”

— “Celestia comes here?”

— “Mhhmm. She’s a big animal lover.”

Sunset smirked, reminded of her former teacher and the phoenix she kept as a pet. Sunset was finding more similarities between the two personas every day.

They sat there for another hour, neither of them saying much, opting to enjoy the cool, fall sunshine and hot chocolate instead. When Sunset felt her clothes were dry enough to walk home in, she stood up and discarded her blanket.

— “Well, Fluttershy, I will be taking my leave now. Again, it... wasn’t a complete waste of my time.”

Fluttershy nodded up at her.

— “Thank you for volunteering. I think some of the animals even like you! And, umm... thank you for... apologizing like that. That meant a lot too.”

Sunset turned, scrunching her face.

— “Don’t thank me for that. I shouldn’t have hurt you like that in the first place.”

— “But you realized your mistake and apologized for it. Even that should be recognized. So, thank you.”

Shoving her hands into her pocket, Sunset marched towards the building.

— “I’ll see you around, Fluttershy.”

She made her way through the holding room, glancing as some of the dogs wagged their tails while they watched her pass by, barking in joy. She sincerely hoped they would all find good homes. None of them deserved to be alone.

Sunset re-entered the front room, heading for the door when a loud cough caught her attention. She looked to see Ms. Tenderheart standing in the doorway to her office, Peter perched on her shoulder.

— “Well, Miss. Shimmer, perhaps I was wrong about you. Maybe you’re not quite as bad as I made you out to be.”

Pushing the door open, Sunset murmured.

— “No, you’re right... I am.”

Kpok 11: Blue Beating

Time was now something Sunset had just a little too much of. It was only the middle of the afternoon when she exited the Canterlot Animal Shelter, hands in her pockets as she trudged down the street. She didn't feel like going home, where the only thing that awaited her was a stupid doll that she had projected her inner thoughts onto and a can of ravioli for dinner.

Her heart was still rather heavy from her time with Fluttershy, and she had a feeling that lounging on her mattress would not help in the slightest. Mulling over what a horrible person she was probably wasn't healthy.

Still, part of her heart couldn't just let go of the negative impact she had had on Fluttershy's life. How many others had she pushed to the brink of despair? How many had she emotionally scarred? Yet, even when keeping them in mind, part of her just didn't want to care. What was an individual's decision to her? Was it really her fault if they couldn't handle the harshness of life? Why should she care if someone was miserable or not?

Because you were the one causing their misery.

Sunset let out a snarl of frustration, rewarding her with surprise glances from those around her. She didn't particularly care though. She was too busy waging war with herself.

For years, Sunset had cared about only herself, never stopping to look at life from another person's point of view. Why start now? Why care about any of them?

She stopped and leaned against a light post, raising a hand to her heart.

Because... Because...

"Everyone deserves to be shown a little kindness."

Because, despite everything I've done to them, they still want to be nice to me. Maybe it's time I really just tried to be friends with them. What's the worst that could happen?

You could get hurt.

Sunset pushed off of the pole and continued meandering down the street, smirking ever so slightly.

I'm a big girl; I think I can handle myself.

She pushed away the rest of her thoughts, tired of her inner monologue. She was going to try and make friends and that was the end of it. She was going to be... well, maybe not nice, but at least decent for a change. If only so she could look in the mirror and not see a demon staring back at her.

Unconsciously, Sunset raised a hand and held it in front of her face. Staring at it, she could almost feel the claws lurking underneath, see her skin turning blood red. She shuddered violently at the memory, wanting to reject it and lock it away in the deepest region of her heart. Away with the part of her that had enjoyed it.

Amidst her aimless wandering, Sunset found herself in front of Canterlot High, unsure of exactly what led her here.

— “Familiarity, perhaps,” — Sunset murmured, stepping onto the campus. She moved in front of the marble statue, looking up at the proud horse positioned at the top, shining in the sun with all of its majesty. Her eyes moved down to the reflective base, where she caught herself looking back. Sunset never realized how much disdain and spite was held in her eyes.

Out of curiosity, Sunset placed her palm on the cold, smooth surface and closed her eyes, funneling her concentration into trying to see if she could peek beyond the veil that divorced the two worlds.

Just one look. Just to remind me it's still there. Something... anything.

Yet no matter how hard Sunset concentrated, all she saw was the darkness of her eyelids. She knew she probably wouldn't be able to see anything since the moon wasn't even out, but it still left a sting of disappointment.

Sunset slumped to her knees, sighing heavily. Of all the places her subconscious mind could have led her, it had to be the only link to her old home. She had enough emotions rolling around through her, now she could add homesick to the list.

She removed her palm from the marble surface, turning it into a fist before slamming it forward. She bit her tongue to stop herself from crying in pain, trying to ignore the throbbing coming from her hand.

Thirty more moons she'd be stuck here. What would she do when that time was up? Equestria would have changed so much by the time she was able to return home. Could she readjust after being gone so long? Subject herself under the new rule of Princess Twilight Sparkle?

— “No. Never,” — she said, her voice heavy with black antipathy. While Sunset had resolved to at least try and be a better person, there was one being she would never cease hating as long as she lived. It burned far too bright for Sunset to just extinguish it like it was nothing. Twilight had stolen everything from her in Equestria, ruined her plans here, then left her to languish.

And now, there was nothing Sunset could do to get back at her.

She rose from her spot on the ground, shaking the pain out of her hand.

— “Well... there is *one* thing I could do to make myself feel better.” — Sure, it was petty, but Sunset had already established that she was a petty person. One more act wouldn't kill her.

The sun was starting to set when Sunset finally began making her way back home. She cut through one of Canterlot's many parks, the cool evening air tousling her hair in front of her face. She parted it out of her vision, only to find a worse sight awaiting her.

Across the park in her soccer uniform was Rainbow Dash, bidding farewell to some of her teammates.

Sunset's face contorted into one of disgust. She was in no mood to hear Rainbow's accusations or judgmental comments. She turned to leave, muttering to herself.

— “There's no rule saying I have to be friends with all of them.”

She had only made it ten steps when Rainbow's voice pierced her ears.

— “Hey! Where do you think you're going?”

— “Well, I *was* going home,” — Sunset grumbled. She turned on her heel to face Rainbow, who marching towards her like a gladiator entering an arena.

Rainbow stopped short a foot away from Sunset, tapping her foot against the ground in an erratic rhythm.

— “Well?” — she demanded.

Sunset crossed her arms.

— “Well what?”

— “Don’t play dumb with me.”

— “Yeah, you’re right, I’d probably lose.”

Watching Rainbow’s face glow with volcanic fury gave Sunset an old feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment. Old habits die hard, it seemed. Though, Sunset argued, it wasn’t completely unwarranted.

Rainbow took a deep breath, her face regaining some of its original blue shade.

— “Did you do anything to Fluttershy today? And don’t try to lie to me!”

Not possible.

— “No, I didn’t do anything to Fluttershy today. I went in, I helped her with some animals and I actually just talked with her. It was really kinda nice.”

— “Really?” — Rainbow asked skeptically. — “That’s it? That’s all you did?”

— “Yep.” — Sunset crossed her arms. — “Why, what did you think I was going to do?”

— “Something horrible, like you always do.”

Sunset smirked and began to circle around her.

— “O’ ye of little faith. I wouldn’t possibly dream of doing anything that could incur your oh so terrible wrath. I made sure I was on my best behavior.”

Rainbow followed her, making sure Sunset never left her line of sight.

— “Why does that sound like a giant lie?”

— “Because you want to believe it is.”

— “So if I call Fluttershy right now and ask her what happened, she’ll tell me the same thing?”

— “Yes, yes. She’ll tell you we danced and sang with all the little woodland creatures about friendship and whatever.” — Sunset broke out of her circling and started walking away, tired of Rainbow’s attitude, and growing bored of baiting her.

— “If I find out you’ve done anything to her, I’ll take you down another peg!”

— Rainbow shouted after her.

Sunset stopped and looked over her shoulder.

How about I take you down a peg right now miss high and mighty.

— “And what about all of the things you’ve done to her, Dash?”

— “What?” — Rainbow looked taken aback. She wildly shook her head. — “I haven’t done anything to her!”

— “Exactly!” — Sunset pointed an accusatory finger. — “Where were you when I was pushing her around? When I was knocking papers out of her hand, shoving her into the lockers and taking her lunch? Oh, that’s right, you were sitting with the rest of your jock friends pretending not to notice so you could fit in with the cool kids.”

Rainbow gaped at her, her face caught between shock and outrage. An odd noise escaped her throat, sounding like a pained whine.

Sunset pressed on.

— “I admit, I was terrible to her, but in all those years, I never once saw you stick up for her.” — Sunset’s eyes widened in realization and she spread her hands. — “Which is why you’re trying so hard to protect her now, isn’t it? You feel guilty about ditching her like that!” — She snickered. — “That’s touching, really, but it still makes you a hypocrite, doesn’t it? Getting mad at me for everything I’ve done, when you did nothing to stop it.”

She turned her back and started to walk off again.

— “Face it, Dash. You’re almost as bad as I am.”

A sharp burst of pain exploded across the back of Sunset’s head, and she found herself lying in the grass.

— “*Don’t you dare compare me to you! We’re NOTHING alike!*”

Sunset slowly pressed her hands into the ground and pushed herself back onto her feet. She rolled her neck and growled.

— “You *really* don’t want to do this, Dash.”

— “Turn around so I can beat your face in,” — Rainbow said, filling her voice with as much malice as humanly possible.

— “Rainbow Dash, you’re an idiot.” — Sunset cracked her knuckles. — “But I’ve really been dying to get some aggression out.”

Sunset dropped down and spun, sweeping her leg out and catching Rainbow in the back of her ankles, sending her to the ground. Sunset then pounced on her like a lion, but Rainbow stuck her knees up, jabbing Sunset in the gut and throwing her onto her back.

Lying on the ground, Sunset saw Rainbow jump to her feet and rush over, her fist reared back, ready to bear down on Sunset. As Rainbow came down, Sunset rolled out of the way, hearing a hand strike the dirt instead. She got to her feet and aimed a kick at Rainbow’s head, but it was blocked by the back of her arm.

Snarling, Rainbow threw another fist for Sunset’s face, but was grabbed by the wrist as Sunset twisted her arm around and forced her to turn her back. Sunset then kicked off, sending Rainbow back to the ground.

— “Is that all you got, Dashie?” — Sunset brushed off some dirt from her shoulder, looking down at her opponent.

Rainbow ripped some grass out of the dirt as she rose back to her feet.
— “I’m just getting started.”

She moved with such speed, all Sunset saw was a blur before something connected with her nose. She staggered back but didn’t have any time to recover as Rainbow followed up with a swift punch to her gut. Sunset stumbled backward into a tree, holding a low branch for support, and clutching her stomach with her free hand. She could feel blood beginning to drip down her nose.

— “Alright, that was pretty good.”

Rainbow closed the distance, aiming a kick at Sunset’s side. Sunset twisted around and raised her leg, taking the brunt of the attack with her shin. She then let go of the branch and jabbed with her fist, decking Rainbow in the eye. When she raised her hands to put pressure on the new bruise, Sunset grabbed her by the arm and turned her body again, positioning Rainbow behind herself. She clenched her teeth, ignoring the pain coming from her center, and heaved Rainbow over her shoulder, slamming the girl onto the grass.

Coughing and holding her stomach, Sunset knelt down near Rainbow who was groaning in pain. Wiping the blood from her nose on the back of her hand, Sunset couldn't help but be impressed that Rainbow had managed to score some good hits. Then again, she was the captain of at least three different sports teams, so it didn't come off as too much of a surprise.

Regaining her breath, Sunset rose, leaving Rainbow on the ground.

Nice fight, Dash. Next time I won't go easy on you.

— “Augh!” — As soon as Sunset had turned her back, Rainbow had smashed into her, tackling her to the ground. The two rolled across the park, kicking and scratching as they screamed at one another.

— “You're just a... persistent little... gnat, aren't you?” — Sunset growled, digging her knuckles into Rainbow's cheek.

Rainbow flipped them over, pinning herself on top of Sunset.

— “And you're a demon that needs to just disappear!”

Sunset's eyes widened before they became dangerously narrow.

— “Stop *calling me that!*” — She threw Rainbow off and pressed her down on her stomach, grabbing the back of her hair. With a malevolent grin, she raised Rainbow's head and slammed it into the dirt. Once. Twice. Three times, before Rainbow freed an arm and smashed her elbow into Sunset's chest.

With Sunset's grip weakened, Rainbow threw her off and wobbled to her feet, wiping the blood off of her face before spinning around to give another high kick to Sunset.

Sunset caught the foot in midair, briefly contemplating on breaking it. She had grown tired of this fight, and Rainbow in general. She had restrained herself from doing any long term damage but was now thinking Rainbow probably deserved it. The only thing holding her back was what the other girls would think.

Instead, she yanked Rainbow forward and backhanded her across the face with as much force as she could muster before Rainbow fell.

Hoping Rainbow would finally stay down, Sunset limped away, pressing her nose to try and staunch the bleeding.

— “Get... back here. I’m not... done with you yet!”

“Oh for Celestia’s sake!” — Sunset said with a nasally voice. Looking back, she found Rainbow standing again, her left eye already swelling shut, giving her only one eye to glare at Sunset with.

— “Rainbow, please give up before I seriously hurt you.”

However, Rainbow merely barred her teeth and raised her arms in a fighting stance. The two girls stared off at each other, Sunset dropping into a stance of her own.

The sun had all but set now, with only a faint wave of pink marking the transition between day and night. Around them, the park had turned dark, a distant light post serving as their only source of illumination.

— “Well, well, well, what do we have here?” — a cocky female voice called from the darkness.

Sunset straightened up and turned around, her eyes falling upon a tall, rather muscular girl leaning against a nearby tree. She was tanned, like she had spent a little too much time at the beach, and had snow white hair that was spiked and dyed purple at the tips, matching her eye shadow. She wore a thick, brown leather jacket and a white tank top with brown cargo pants to complete her ensemble.

Next to her was a lanky boy with darker skin and grayish hair that was cut just above his eyes. He wore a white t-shirt with the picture of a dumbbell. Like the girl, his gaze was mostly fixed on Rainbow.

Behind Rainbow, two more boys stepped into the light of the lamppost. One was bulky and orange with brown hair, and the other was shorter with gray skin and black hair that fell over his eyes, similar to his companion.

— “Rainbow Dash,” — the girl said slowly, an even smile decorating her face.

— “We haven’t seen you in forever. Watcha doin’ here? Picking fights?”

The lanky boy next to her snickered.

— “Looks more like she’s losing them to me.”

Rainbow wiped some of the blood off her mouth.

— “Gilda,” — she said coolly. — “Dumbbell, Hoops, Score,” — she addressed each of the boys in turn. — “The hell are you guys doing here?”

Gilda pushed off the tree, her cocky smile still plastered to her face.

— “We were in the neighborhood and we just happened to stumble onto you two going at it. Then you started getting your butt kicked and pretty hard too.”

— She looked Sunset up and down before snorting. — “Come on, Dash, she doesn’t even look that tough. How can you be losing to her?”

Sunset rolled her eyes and looked at Rainbow.

— “How exactly do you know these losers?”

A guilty expression crossed Rainbow’s face, and she averted her eyes from Sunset.

— “They were... kinda in the gang I was in for a little bit.”

— “You were in a gang?” — Sunset almost shouted.

— “It was a phase!”

— “Damn right it was a phase,” — Gilda spat. — “One day she’s cool, and the next, she’s backing out ’cause she thinks we’re a ‘bad influence’ or something stupid like that.” — Her voice softened to its usual arrogant tone. — “But hey, once a Griffon, always a Griffon, right, Dash? I mean, we’re still pals, right? We can help you take care of this dweeb if you want.”

Rainbow glared at her.

— “No way, Gilda, this is my fight. Stay out of it.”

— “Your fight?” — Dumbbell laughed. — “Please, we saw the way she decked you in the face. You should be *begging* for our help.”

— “Hey, wait a minute,” — Score said, peering closer at Sunset. — “I recognize her! That’s the girl who beat up Needle and Pierce!”

— “What?” — Gilda leaned forward, taking another look with her eerie, birdlike eyes. — “Oh man, you’re right. She totally fits the description. They got arrested by that stupid Shining Armor cop because of you!”

Sunset cocked her head to the side before the realization hit her.

The two gangbangers from the night of the dance. So they got arrested. Good.

Gilda balled her fist.

— “We should seriously make you pay for sending two of our boys to prison.”

— “No way!” — Rainbow yelled. — “Back off, Gilda!”

— “What? You’d defend her instead of one of your own?”

— “You’re not one of my own,” — Rainbow said, her face turning red again.

— “You guys are a bunch of thugs and thieves. I told you, I want nothing to do with you!”

— “Hmph.” — Gilda pounded her fist into her open hand. — “You always did have a thick head, Dash. I guess we’ll just have to beat some of that stubbornness out of you before you can join us again.”

Sunset and Rainbow retreated until they were back to back with each other, surrounded on both sides. Sunset groaned.

— “How did I get myself into this?”

— “You can always run if you want,” — she heard Rainbow comment.

— “Please. Sunset Shimmer is no coward.”

— “Good, because I still plan on kicking your butt when this is done.”

Sunset smirked and put her hands up.

— “Don’t worry, Dash. We can still kill each other when this is over.”

Kpok 12: Working Together

— “Oh my goodness! What happened to you?”

Sunset had just closed her locker door when Twilight came rushing up to her, eyes frantically looking over the various bruises on Sunset’s arms and face.

— “I got into a couple fights,” — Sunset said nonchalantly. — “No big deal.”

— She knew someone was going to ask about her unsightly appearance eventually, but she was surprised it had only taken about five minutes since she had walked onto campus.

Somehow, she was not surprised it had been Twilight who had asked first.

— “A couple of fights?” — Twilight parroted loudly.

Sunset covered her mouth and shushed her.

— “Yes, I was fighting. And can you keep your voice down? No need to tell the whole school my business.”

Twilight nodded and Sunset removed her hand.

— “But, why? Who were you fighting? What did you do? Are you still hurt?”

Twilight, I freaking hate you.

Sunset thought, feeling the pressure on her throat rise.

— “I kinda accidentally provoked Rainbow into hitting me so we started fighting until some of her old gang members showed up, then we both started fighting them—”

— “Rainbow Dash is in a gang?” — Twilight shouted.

Sunset covered her mouth again.

— “No, she *used* to be in a gang. And if you want to hear the story, I suggest you stop interrupting me!”

After Twilight muffled what sounded like an apology, Sunset removed her hands again.

— “Alright, so from the top—”

A loud, shrill, metallic sound trying to pass itself as the school bell rang at that moment, cutting Sunset’s story short. She stuck her tongue out in displeasure.

— “Well, I guess you’ll be getting another story time at lunch today. Make sure you’re there.” — As she turned to head to class, she felt Twilight gently grab her sore wrist.

— “Okay, sure. But are you sure you’re all right?” — Twilight asked, her voice filled with pure concern. — “You still look pretty hurt.”

Sunset yanked her wrist out of Twilight’s grip.

— “Yeah, I’m fine. Geez, what are you, my mother? Why do you care so much?”

— “Because we’re friends.”

There was that ‘f’ word again. Sunset couldn’t help but be reminded of Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash, thinking it didn’t sound as foreign as it did only a week ago. While Sunset no longer abhorred the idea, the fact that Twilight could throw it around so easily mystified her. Then again, Sunset hadn’t done anything to deserve her ire yet. And in return, Sunset had no hatred left to throw in Twilight’s direction. Just a dull apathy for her looking like the princess counterpart that had condemned Sunset.

— “Yeah,” — Sunset murmured, walking off to class. — “Maybe we are.”

— “Rainbow Dash, what in tarnation happened to you?” — Applejack hissed, taking her seat next to her friend in the back of their math class.

Rainbow looked up from her absent-minded doodle in her notebook, her other hand self-consciously moving towards her black eye.

— “Oh, uh... well...”

— “And don’t try lyin’ to me.”

— “Darn it!” — Rainbow sighed and set her pencil down, looking Applejack in the eyes. — “Okay, truth is... Me and Sunset *may* have gotten into... a few fights.”

— “A few fights?” — Applejack shouted. Rainbow quickly covered her mouth and was thankful the teacher hadn’t come in yet.

— “Gee, A.J, why don’t you just tell the whole school while you’re at it.”

Applejack swatted her hand away.

— “Sorry, sorry. Mah bad. But, why on earth were you two fightin’ in the first place? Wasn’t she supposed to be helpin’ Fluttershy on Saturday?” — Her eyes widened in horror, and Rainbow could only imagine the wild thoughts running around up in her head. — “Don’t tell me Sunset did somethin’!”

— “No.” — Rainbow dismissed Applejack's delusions with a slow wave of her hand. Like much of her body, it was still sore and hard to move. — “No, she didn’t do anything this time.” — Rainbow sank into her chair, looking deflated and absent of her usual gusto. — “It was... my fault... well, mostly.”

Applejack cocked her head to the side.

— “What do ya mean?”

Rainbow took a deep breath, then exhaled as slow as she could, trying to stall from her story. She was ashamed of what had led to the brawl in the park. She had been ashamed since the end of freshman year. But she had pushed that shame down and ignored it by throwing herself into sports and outdoor activities, paying them hardly any mind. Just like Fluttershy.

It wasn't until Sunset's words had ripped all of those feelings and memories out and dragged them to the surface did Rainbow truly acknowledge them, and found—with great pain and guilt—that Sunset was right.

Fiddling with her pencil, Rainbow said.

— “I met Sunset in the park, and she said some... things. Things that were true and... I got mad. *Really* mad. So, I punched her and the next thing I know, we're fighting in the middle of the park.”

Bringing a hand to her face, Applejack groaned and said.

— “Ah can't believe y'all would stoop to fightin'. Actually, Ah can, so nevermind. But still, what did she say that got you so riled up ya had to hit her?”

The bell signaling the start of class drowned out whatever words Rainbow was going to say. As the teacher walked in and began writing on the whiteboard, Rainbow dropped her voice to an even lower whisper, forcing Applejack to lean in close.

— “She... well... She reminded me that even though she was mean to Fluttershy, I wasn't much better than her because I didn't do anything to stop it.”

Applejack bit her lip in a nervous manner, averting her eyes to the front of the room.

— “Well, sugarcube, Ah—”

— “You don't have to say anything. I know she's right,” — Rainbow said with a depressed sigh, thinking maybe that's why she had been in a blind rage when she attacked. To be called a bad friend was one thing, but hearing it from Sunset Shimmer... that was about as cruel as irony could get.

— “Dash, none of us were really good to each other at that time. We all just started ignoring each other, all because we were too stubborn to talk to each other in person. And to be fair, we all just kinda left Fluttershy danglin' in the wind. It ain't somethin' Ah'm proud of, but don't think it was just you who made that mistake.”

Rainbow carefully wiped a tear from her eye. Where had that even come from?

— “Still, I should have been there for her. I’ve known her since first grade, we’re practically sisters. And I just ditched her like that. Sunset was right, I am a terrible friend.”

Applejack put a hand on Rainbow’s knee and gave her a sympathetic smile.

— “No you aren’t, Dash. Yer a great friend. Ya came back didn’t ya? And yer tryin’ to make up for it. Seems to me like those are some things only a good friend would do.”

Stupid watery eyes.

Rainbow rubbed them again on the back of her hand.

— “Thanks, A.J. You’re a great friend, too.”

— “Thanks, sugarcube. So, uh, if ya don’t mind me askin’, what happened after that?”

— “Well—”

— “Miss Dash, Miss Apple,” — Mr. Quantum called from the whiteboard. — “You two seem awfully chatty this morning. Perhaps one of you would like to solve the equation on the board?”

Both girls stared blankly at the long algebra problem in front of them.

Rainbow nervously cleared her throat.

— “Do you have any ideas?” — She asked Applejack from the corner of her mouth.

— “Eeno.”

For the first time ever, Sunset found herself willingly sitting down at the same table as Twilight and everyone else. Rainbow flashed a knowing smile as Sunset took her seat in between Pinkie and Twilight.

Rarity looked back and forth across the table between Sunset and Rainbow, eying their matching bruises. Sunset could see the gears clicking in her mind and practically heard the light bulb go off when Rarity pointed fingers at the both of them and exclaimed.

— “You two went at it, didn’t you?”

— “What?” — Fluttershy gasped. — “That’s how you two got all those wounds? By fighting each other?”

Pinkie nibbled on her carrot stick.

— “Why are you both so surprised?”

Rarity gave her an incredulous look.

— “Why are you *not* surprised?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

— “Because, Sunset is—or *was*—the bully, and Rainbow is the jock. Everyone knows if they aren’t working together already, the only way for them to be friends and gain each other’s respect is to fight in a one-on-one fisticuffs, duh.”

— “Well, it wasn’t exactly one-on-one,” — Sunset said. — “We had some unexpected company.”

— “Woah, plot twist,” — Pinkie said, her eyes widening in interest. — “Now I *gotta* hear this!”

— “Yes,” — Rarity nodded, — “please, give us the details of this little bout.”

Sunset looked over to Rainbow, who gave a simple nod of her head in confirmation.

— “Well, after I said a few things that aggravated Rainbow a little, we started fighting it out.” — Sunset pointed to the bandage still resting on her nose. — “As you can see, we each got some good hits in.”

— “Wait, this *was* a fair fight, yes?” — Rarity asked.

— “Yes, it was a fair fight,” — Sunset snapped. — “At least, it was until Gilda and her goons showed up...”

Sunset leaned to the right, grabbing Score by the arm as he rushed at her. She swung with all of her might and pushed him into Dumbbell, who was coming at her at the same time. Dumbbell tried to skid to a stop, but his momentum had been too great and the two boys crashed into each other, knocking themselves to the ground.

They were only down for a second, however, and quickly scrambled back to their feet. Score rushed her again in a low tackle, while Dumbbell came around from the side. Sunset knew she was pinned, but would not be caught completely helpless.

She swung her boot, the bottom catching Score in the chest, stopping his forward assault. Dumbbell, however, kept coming, connecting his fist with the side of Sunset's face. She spiraled to the ground, her cheek throbbing painfully. As she tried to stand up, another strike came to the back of her head, rolling her into a patch of dirt.

Stars dotted Sunset's vision, while the grainy taste of sand mixed with the metallic tang of blood in her mouth. She spat out a mouthful and ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth, making sure she didn't have any broken teeth.

— **"Alright, time to play dirty," — she growled.**

Grabbing a handful of dirt, Sunset sprung to her feet, spinning and hurling the dirt clod right at Dumbbell. Even she was surprised at how well her aim had been. The dirt hit Dumbbell straight in the eyes, and he wailed in pain as he tried to scrape it off.

Sunset jumped forward and brought her leg straight up in a powerful high kick, slamming her foot into his jaw. She heard his teeth violently clash together and watched as he even caught some air before falling onto the ground, holding his jaw.

She didn't have time to catch her breath with Score stampeding after her again with his fist reared back. She grabbed it as it flew forward, then grabbed the other one, locking the both of them in place as they tried to overpower each other.

Sunset felt the wind leave her as Score's foot collided with her stomach. Her eyes widened, and she tried to suck in a breath of air, only to gasp like a dying fish. She collapsed to the ground again, clutching her stomach and struggling to breathe. Another kick to her side made her cry out in pain, Score striking an already tender wound.

Thoughts of humiliation and defeat danced through Sunset's head when she looked up and saw Score towering over her, raising his boot to bludgeon her face. She threw her hands up, grabbing the falling footwear, stopping it just inches from her face. Her arms strained against his weight, her body still trying to recover from the last blow she had taken.

— ***“Back off, dingus!”***

From her peripheral vision, Sunset watched Rainbow leap in and shoulder tackle Score onto the ground, allowing Sunset to roll onto her stomach and push herself up. The two girls locked eyes for a second, a silent showing of gratitude passing between them.

Behind Rainbow, Sunset could see Hoops lying motionless on the ground, while Gilda was getting back to her feet, blood streaming from her nose.

— ***“Boy, you really like aiming for the face, dontcha?”*** — Sunset asked, ***wiping off her own blood.***

Rainbow merely shrugged, putting her fists up again as Score and Gilda closed in...

— “Wait.” — Rarity held up a hand. — “Who exactly *is* this Gilda character you keep mentioning?”

Sunset drummed her fingers against the table, an irritated expression on her face.

— “She’s another member of the gang Rainbow was in.”

There was a simultaneous scream of.

— “*What!*” — from both Rarity, Fluttershy and Applejack, while Pinkie sprayed her milk across the table, hitting Rainbow in the face.

— “Whoops, sorry.”

— “When and why did you join a *gang*, Rainbow Dash?” — Rarity asked in a hiss.

All eyes were now on Rainbow, watching as she tugged nervously on her ponytail.

— “Around the start of sophomore year, after I thought... you know, we weren’t friends anymore. I don’t know how it happened. I just met Gilda at the mall one day and we just started hanging out.”

— “And when, exactly, were you planning on telling us?”

— “Never! I left, like, a year later and never looked back,” — Rainbow said heatedly. — “I didn’t think I’d ever run into them again. Besides, it was none of your business.” — She sulked in her chair, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

Rarity’s face softened.

— “Rainbow...”

— “I don’t want to talk about it,” — Rainbow said sourly. — “Sunset will probably get to it anyway.”

Everyone’s attention turned back to Sunset, still tapping her fingers on the table in a steady rhythm. She gave them each a heated glare in turn, pursing her lips in displeasure.

— “Oh.” — Rarity let out a short, nervous giggle. — “We interrupted you... sorry about that.”

— “May I continue?” — Sunset asked in a crisp tone.

— “Yes, please do.”

Sunset shook off her weariness, though her stomach still ached from the kick she had received. She and Rainbow stood shoulder to shoulder again, facing in opposite directions. Gilda strode towards them with a devilish grin on her face, and Sunset knew Score was coming from the other side.

She knew she was running on fumes, but Sunset refused to be beaten by a couple of punks. With a few short breaths, she readied herself for the next round as Gilda closed the distance. Making the first move, Sunset jabbed out with her fist, only to have Gilda merely block it with the back of her arm.

Gilda swung out with her other hand and Sunset ducked low, just in time for Rainbow's leg to swing over her head and kick Gilda in the cheek.

While Gilda stumbled back, Sunset spun around and gave an uppercut to Score who was still reeling from another hit Rainbow had landed moments before. He fell to his knees, and Sunset karate chopped him over the back of the head, knocking him out.

Turning back, she followed Rainbow's eyes to Gilda, who was rubbing the side of her face and looking, surprisingly, amused.

— ***"And then there was one."*** — ***Sunset smirked, a third wind catching up to her.***

— ***"Heh, you got moxie, dweeb."*** — ***Gilda spat on the ground and stood up straight, still wearing a cocky grin.*** — ***"You sure you don't wanna hang with us?"***

— ***"Nope. I don't hang around with scum like you."***

— ***"You're one to talk,"*** — ***Sunset heard Rainbow mutter under her breath.***

Sunset ignored her and kept her eyes on Gilda who had finally traded her sneer for a scowl.

— ***"Alright, dweeb, let's see how tough you really are."*** — ***She caught both Rainbow and Sunset by surprise with the speed at which she moved. She closed the distance between them in a few short bounds, and almost caught Rainbow in the side with the front of her leg.***

Rainbow just managed to move her arm down in time to deflect the blow, but Gilda followed up with her fist, smashing Rainbow in the chest and sending her back a ways before turning to Sunset and bringing her foot around again.

Expecting Gilda to aim for her side as well, Sunset blocked low and was rewarded with a powerful blow to the head. She crumpled to the ground, a sharp whining noise ringing in her ears and drowning out the world around her.

When the next blow didn't come, Sunset got back to her hands and knees and looked up to see Gilda and Rainbow grappling with each other in a flurry of quick punches and occasional kicks.

Sunset forced herself back to her feet, giving her head a violent shake, though it did little to alleviate the high-pitch whining. Still, she willed herself to ignore it and rushed back to join the fight, not wanting Rainbow to hog all the glory.

As Rainbow blocked a hard swing from Gilda, Sunset moved in from the side and slammed a fist against the side of her face. Was it a cheap shot? Yes. Did she care? Not in the slightest.

Rainbow seemed to share the same opinion, for she gave Sunset a half smile and a nod of approval. They both turned their attention back to Gilda who mouthed something, but it just came out as incoherent garble to Sunset.

Gilda then dropped low and swept her leg out, tripping up Rainbow. Sunset managed to react faster and jump over her before landing and striking her own foot out, hitting Gilda in the waist. As she fell back, Sunset swung her leg again and made contact with the side of Gilda's head, throwing her to the side.

Sweet revenge.

Much like Rainbow Dash, Gilda seemed to only stay down for a few moments before springing back up again. There was a murderous look in her eyes as she charged again, swinging her sharpened nails like claws. She grabbed the arm Sunset had used to block, digging her nails into Sunset's wrist and grabbed her other arm.

While Sunset struggled in her iron grip, Gilda reared her head back and slammed it into Sunset's, sending stars into her vision again. Her skull throbbed with pain, giving her an intense headache, border lining on a

migraine. Sunset's lack of coherent thoughts was the only justification for what she did next.

With Gilda still holding on to her, Sunset jerked her forward, bringing her own head back as she did, and smashed it down against Gilda's. The grip around her arms instantly disappeared, leaving Sunset to grab both sides of her head, trying to get the pulsing pain to die down.

She cracked her eyes open just a little bit; still wary of Gilda. But she was holding her own head, teetering in place. Sunset blinked once, and saw Rainbow in front of Gilda, striking her repeatedly in the face.

— ***“Stay. Out. Of. My. Life!” — Rainbow shouted between each punch.***

With a final knee to the stomach, Gilda collapsed, groaning something that sounded faintly like.

— ***“Traitor.”***

Sunset was aware of how quiet the park was now. Other than the sound of her's and Rainbow's breathing, nothing seemed to stir in the darkness around them. She fell into the soft grass, welcoming the dark, silent abyss and the solitude it brought.

Geez, I'm dark when I'm exhausted.

She was fully prepared to pass out, when she felt someone shaking her shoulder.

— ***“Sunset! Hey, Shimmer! Come on, get up!”***

Sunset fluttered her eyes open, looking up at Rainbow, who was wearing a mask of concern. Something clicked into place in the back of Sunset's mind, and she slowly pushed herself back onto her feet, holding her fists up in front of Rainbow.

— ***“Right... right, alright. Where were we? Come on, let's finish this.” — Sunset slurred a bit.***

Rainbow shook her head.

— ***“No, we're done.”***

— ***“What's the matter? Scared I'll kick your butt?”***

I'm also a tad loopy when I'm tired.

Holding a hand up to her face, Rainbow said.

— ***“Look... maybe... maybe you were right... about what you said earlier.”***

Sunset lowered her hands, giving Rainbow a perplexed look.

— ***“What?”*** — *She was honestly having a hard time recalling anything at the moment.*

Rainbow gestured with her hand.

— ***“Come on, I’ll talk about on the way. Let’s just get out of here. Can you walk?”***

— ***“No.”***

What? Of course I can walk!

Sunset walked forward, making it only a few steps before she fell to her knees.

Okay, I guess I really can’t.

Rainbow bent down, taking Sunset’s arm and hoisting it over her shoulder. The two stood up, Sunset leaning on Rainbow as they limped out of the park.

— ***“So, what were you mumbling about earlier? Something about me being right?”*** — *Sunset asked.*

— ***“Yeah.”*** — *Rainbow was silent for a while. Sunset could see the gears moving in her head, her expression solemn.* — ***“I... was a bad friend. Fluttershy and me—”***

— ***“I,”*** — *Sunset corrected.*

— ***“What?”***

— ***“The correct pronunciation is ‘Fluttershy and I’, not me.”***

Rainbow stopped walking and gave Sunset an incredulous look.

— ***“Really?”***

Sunset grinned sheepishly.

— ***“Sorry, continue.”***

— ***“Thank you.”*** — *The two proceeded to move down the avenue again.* — ***“Anyway, Fluttershy and I have been best friends since, like, forever. And***

you were right. I just sat back and watched while you pushed her around because I... just wanted to look cool.”

Rainbow sighed deeply.

— “I don’t know what I was thinking. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but... I just buried that part down so I wouldn’t have to hear it. And then you go and throw it back in my face.”

Sunset smirked.

— “Yeah. I could see how that might tick you off.” Sunset expression shifted and she frowned in curiosity. “But, why join them?” She jerked her head back in the direction of the park, quickly wishing she hadn’t as it had set off her headache again.

— “I don’t know. After you split us up—” — Sunset felt a knife twist in her heart — “—I just felt... lost. And then I ran into Gilda and she seemed totally cool. I just started hanging out with her more and more, and I just felt like I had someplace to belong again, you know?”

— “Not really.”

— “Oh. Well... yeah. That’s what happened.”

The silence returned, leaving both of them to their own thoughts. Sunset found herself once more reflecting on what her actions had caused for other people. She could now add Rainbow’s decision to join a gang onto her list. She groaned inwardly, knowing that it was going to haunt her later on. She took minimal solace in the fact that it wasn’t as bad as Fluttershy.

Still, her own depravity went further than she had even realized. For the second time that day, Sunset felt her heart burn with shame and guilt. She bit her lip, still fighting the urge to gag as she prepared herself for what came next.

— “Rainbow Dash... I’m sorry.”

At first, Rainbow didn’t respond, and Sunset was afraid she might have to repeat herself. Apologizing once was hard enough.

Then, Rainbow turned to her and said.

— “I’m sorry, too.”

Sunset blinked.

— ***“You’re sorry? For what?”***

— ***“For not giving you a chance. A real chance. I was just kinda going along with everyone else. I was waiting for you to mess up so I could hold it against you, or use it to justify... well, me beating you up.”***

— ***“So? You had every right not to give me a chance.”*** — Sunset spoke in a softer voice. — ***“I wouldn’t have given me a chance.”***

— ***“Well... I’m giving you one now.”***

Sunset brought them to a halt, removing her arm from around Rainbow.

— ***“Alright, I think I can walk now.”***

Rainbow backed off a little as Sunset took a few tentative steps forward. Her entire body felt weak and sore, and before she knew it, Sunset was back on the ground.

— ***“Sunset! Are you alright?”*** Rainbow rushed over, helping her back to her feet.

As she leaned on Rainbow again, Sunset shook her head and said.

— ***“Not really.”*** — She waved it off with a roll of her hand and continued. — ***“I don’t get it. Weren’t we trying to kill each other a little while ago?”***

— ***“Yeah,”*** — Rainbow nodded. — ***“And now... we’re friends.”***

Sunset scoffed.

— ***“Friendship is weird.”***

Leaning back in her chair, Sunset crossed her arms in a satisfied manner.
— “And that’s pretty much it.” — After sitting and talking for a while, all Sunset had done was limp home and took a cold shower.

— “So let me get this straight,” — Applejack said. — “You two first fought each other, then fought a bunch of gang members, and now you’re friends?”

Rainbow nodded.

— “More or less.”

Applejack stared hard at both of them for a full minute, then shrugged and said.

— “Alright, fine with me, just as long as y’all are done going at it like cats.”

— “Really?” — Rarity scolded. — “You’re really going to dismiss it just like that?”

— “Eeyup,” — Applejack nodded. — “They’re both still breathin’ and now, they’re friends. Sometimes it takes a little beatdown to make a friend with somebody.”

Rarity dropped her head in her hands.

— “I’m surrounded by unsophisticated nitwits.”

Fluttershy leaned in and carefully gave Rainbow a warm hug.

— “Don’t worry, Rainbow. I never held anything against you.”

Rainbow frowned at her.

— “Yeah, but, Fluttershy, why didn’t you ever tell me off or something?”

— “Because I wanted you to be happy, and I thought hanging out with the jocks made you happy so...”

A few tears fell from Rainbow’s cheeks as she returned Fluttershy’s hug.

— “No, what really makes me happy is being with all of you guys.”

Everyone at the tables—save for Sunset—broke out into a chorus of.

— “Awws,” — while she just pretended to gag.

Thankfully, the lunch bell rang, stopping the nauseating friendship fest. They each got up from the table, discarding their trays as they exited the lunch room.

Rainbow and Sunset walked side-by-side into the hallway.

— “You know,” — Rainbow said, — “I kinda feel bad about Gilda. I took some of my aggression with you out on her.”

— “Yeah.” — Sunset snickered. — “I noticed. But hey, it meant fewer bruises for me, so I’m not going to complain.”

They stopped at an intersection, leaning to go in opposite directions.

— “Well, I guess I’ll see you later then.” — Rainbow punched Sunset in the shoulder as a farewell.

Sunset socked Rainbow back.

— “Yeah, see ya.”

As they both turned away, Sunset gripped the bruise Rainbow had hit, cursing lightly.

— “I really wish she hadn’t done that.”

She made her way to class, unaware that Rainbow was thinking the exact same thing.

Kpok 13: Sweet Melodies

The garage door slowly cranked open, yawning louder and louder, a beast-like roar emitting from its throat. The sound cascaded down the street, filling the early morning air with its loud, ear-splitting din. To those still waking up, it was an obnoxious blare shattering the fragile morning peace.

To Sunset Shimmer, it was a chorus of angels.

She sat on top of the black Thunderbird, revving the throttle again and again, letting the sound of thunder wash over her. She reached down with her other hand and stroked the newly painted finish, her fingers trailing over the glossy, smooth surface.

— “I can’t believe it. She’s purring like a kitten,” — Sunset cooed. She looked down at the oil-stained young man leaning against the wall and looking quite proud of himself. — “Greaser, I don’t know how you did it, but you’re a genius!”

Greaser grinned.

— “Don’t tell me, tell my mom. She thinks fixing bikes and playing in bands is a ‘waste of my talent.’” — He stood off the wall and shrugged. — “But hey, I’m just glad I could help.”

— “Yeah, you have no idea what this means to me.” — Sunset rested her head on the dashboard, sighing in content. No more taking public transportation or, Celestia forbid, *walking* everywhere. She could ride wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. She opened an eye. — “By the way, what took so long?”

— “Hey, do you know how long it takes to get parts?” — Greaser tapped his foot against the engine. — “I mean seriously, this thing practically needed an overhaul. Why do you think I charged so much?”

Sunset rolled her eyes. That had taken a massive chunk out of her accumulated allowance. It was the reason she was living off of cans of ravioli and apples. And why she couldn’t afford that leather jacket.

Oh well, totally worth it.

Greaser walked around the bike again, looking pleased with his handiwork.

— “This thing was falling apart when you brought it in; I’m surprised you managed to ride it so long. What did you do, find it in a junkyard?”

— “Yes,” — Sunset said pointedly.

— “Well, props for keeping it alive for as long as you did.”

Sunset pulled on the throttle again, letting her motorcycle roar with fervor.

— “Thanks again, Grease.”

Walking over to his workbench, Greaser smiled.

— “No problem, Sunset. Hey, Flash Drive is having a gig this weekend. You gonna show?”

Sunset scooped her helmet off of the ground, focusing her gaze on the bright red painting.

— “No.”

— “You and Flash still on cold terms?”

Putting her helmet on, Sunset lifted the visor and said.

— “I don’t know what we are. But I doubt he’d want me there. See ya around, Grease.” — Not waiting for a response, Sunset slid her visor back down and flipped the kickstand up. With a jerk of her hand, the bike took off out of the garage, hitting the street and leaving a cloud of dust and gravel in its wake.

Sunset didn’t want to think about the past, nor the future. She just wanted to live in the now, and right now, she was free! She raced down the street, destroying the silence of the suburbs as she rode. She could feel her hair whipping behind her, the wind funneling around her body.

She turned onto the main road and headed up the off ramp onto the highway, pushing the acceleration further. She weaved in and out of the morning traffic, amazed that her motor skills hadn’t gotten rusty. Learning to drive hadn’t been the easiest thing for Sunset, but once she got a hold of it, it became the most natural thing in the world.

The road opened up in front of her, and Sunset gave her bike another burst of speed. She grinned from ear to ear under her helmet, reveling in the sense of freedom she felt. She could have just kept on going, leaving everything behind.

Traveling the open road to her heart's content, not having to worry about anything other than herself. She could be free, in the fullest sense of the word.

The idea was so very tempting to Sunset that she actually considered it. Until images of six certain girls floated through her head, all of them smiling and waving at her. There was a subtle pull in Sunset's heart, like they were calling her to come back.

It was a ludicrous idea that, in a previous lifetime, Sunset would have discarded without a second thought. But now that she had gotten to know them, abandoning them seemed... heartless.

That, and she doubted she had enough money to pay for food and gas for very long.

Over the sound of her engine, Sunset heard a wailing siren drawing close. She looked in her side mirror and saw a black and white police car dogging her, lights flashing brightly.

— “Aw, crap,” — Sunset muttered as she pulled off to the side of the road. She came to a stop and took off her helmet, taking a breath of fresh air.

The police car pulled up behind her, and out stepped the officer wearing a blue uniform that matched his hair. He had a pale complexion that reminded Sunset a lot of Vinyl Scratch. Perhaps there was some relation?

As he approached Sunset, he lifted his shades and asked.

— “Ma'am, do you know why I pulled you over?”

— “Yeah, I was going about twenty miles over the speed limit.”

He raised an eyebrow.

— “Well... thanks for not playing dumb with me. License and registration, please.”

Sunset pulled out her wallet and handed him her license.

— “Uhh, listen... Officer Armor,” — she said, reading the badge pinned to his chest.

Armor... Armor... I just heard that name somewhere.

— “About that registration thing...”

— “Sunset Shimmer?” — He asked with wide eyes.

— “Yes. Is something wrong?” — She watched him look from the card to her and back to the card, his face masked in concentration.

— “Listen,” — he spoke after a whole minute of silence, — “I’m going to let you go with a warning this time. Just make sure you obey the speed limit. I don’t want to have to pull you over again.” — He handed Sunset her license back.

— “Uhh, thanks.” — Sunset blinked. When she looked up, he was already walking back to his squad car.

As he got in and started the engine, he stuck his head out and asked,
— “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

— “Yeah...”

— “Then get back to class, Miss Shimmer.”

As Officer Armor drove away, Sunset couldn’t help repeating his name over and over in her head.

— “I know I just heard it, but where?” — She started her motorcycle and pulled onto the road, just as the memory hit her.

“They got arrested by that stupid Shining Armor cop because of you!”

Right.

Sunset thought to herself.

He was the one who arrested those two goons. Still, why did he let me go? Had he learned that it was her who had beaten the two gang members into submission? Even so, it seemed out of order for him to acknowledge that fact and let Sunset go scot-free.

Sunset gave a mental shrug, brushing it aside. Regardless of the reason, at least she avoided getting a ticket.

It was lunch time when Sunset decided to return to campus. She parked her bike in the school lot, shaking her hair out as a familiar pink face approached her.

— “There you are, Sunset! We were wondering where you went.” — Pinkie’s eyes landed on the black motorcycle. — “Hey, you got your bike back, that’s so awesome!”

— “Yeah, it is.” — Sunset nodded in agreement. She struck as quick as a snake, smacking Pinkie’s hand away. — “And if you touch it, I’ll give you a grand tour of the front wheel. Get it?”

— “Got it.”

— “Good.” — She smirked, walking around Pinkie and heading for the main building. “So, what’s new, Pinks?”

— “New? Hmm, let’s see... oh! Pound Cake’s teeth are coming in! I know because yesterday, he bit me and it hurt a lot! Aaaand, I got a B on my English paper yesterday. Aaaand...”

Why did I ask her anything?

Sunset reprimanded herself.

— “... Oh, and how could forget? I’m having a trick-or-treat/sleepover party on Halloween next week! You wanna come?”

— “Not really.”

Pinkie put on a pouty face, her eyes growing as large as dinner plates.

— “Aww, pleeeeeeease? Everyone else is gonna be there!”

— “Fine, sure, I’ll go.”

Not that I have much of a choice now.

— “Yippee!” — Pinkie bounced around Sunset and started doing cartwheels down the hall. — “You’re gonna have so much fun! First, we’ll go get candy, then we’ll go back to my house and have cupcakes and ice cream, then we’ll tell scary stories and roast s’mores! Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

— “No.”

Pinkie continued rolling down the hall.

— “You say that now, but wait until you’re actually there! You’ll love it!” — She wheeled into the cafeteria with Sunset following after her, and came to a stop at their usual table.

— “Girls, guess what? Sunset agreed to come to the Halloween party!”

Rarity looked up from her sandwich.

— “Well, that’s good to hear. The more the merrier.” — She smiled. — “So, what are you going to dress as?”

— “Nothing,” — Sunset said flatly. — “Aren’t you all too old to be dressing up for this?”

— “Oh of course not,” — Rarity said. — “It’s all in good fun.”

— “And it’s free candy!” — Pinkie said, looking as serious as Sunset had ever seen her. — “You *never* say no to free candy!”

Yeah, hold onto that philosophy, Pinkie.

— “Free candy aside,” — Twilight said, giving Pinkie a skeptical look, — “It’s still fun just to dress up as something. My friend and I used to take props from our theatre arts department and dress up in ridiculous costumes.” — Twilight smiled, a look of nostalgia on her face.

Sunset shrugged, snatching the apple off of Applejack’s plate and ignoring the glare she gave.

— “I never saw the point in any of it, even back in Equestria.”

Pinkie gasped.

— “They have Halloween in Equestria?”

— “Not exactly. See, we have something called Nightmare Night. It’s kind of the same thing except the lore behind it is different. The story goes—mmmmph!”

Sunset’s story was cut short by Pinkie, who clapped a hand over her mouth and shushed her.

— “Nononono! Save it for the party! It’ll make a good scary story!” — She finally removed her hands, completely unaffected by Sunset’s glare.

— “Anyway,” — Rarity intervened, — “are you sure you don’t want to dress up with the rest of?”

— “Positive. I don’t even know what I would go as.”

— “Oh, oh!” — Pinkie waved her hand around. — “You could totally go as a demon!”

This time, Sunset’s glare did have an effect on Pinkie. She lowered her hand and sank down into her chair, looking very embarrassed.

— “Too soon?”

— “Way too soon,” — Sunset said in a low hiss.

— “Well,” — Rarity jumped in again. — “If you change your mind, I’d be more than happy to help you come up with something.”

Sunset leaned back in her chair, folding her arms.

— “Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.”

There was only a squeaking sound to occupy Sunset's thoughts while she sat alone in the school's main hall, polishing the various trophies and medals won over the years. She had spent the rest of the day in a rather sour mood and could only take her frustration out by scrubbing the awards harder than necessary.

— “Oh, why don't you go as a demon?” — Sunset raised her voice an octave, trying to imitate Pinkie. She growled and rubbed the surface of the gold trophy harder. — “Life is just one big joke to you, isn't it?”

She raised the trophy, staring at her sparkling reflection.

— “I bet you wouldn't be laughing... if it had been you,” — she whispered.

A demonic face appeared, replacing hers, and Sunset dropped the trophy, letting it clatter to the floor. She held a hand over her heart, taking deep breaths as she tried to calm herself.

— “Keep it together, Shimmer. You're just seeing things.”

With one last deep breath, Sunset climbed to her feet, scooping up the fallen trophy and placing it back in its case. She looked down the row of awards, all of them gleaming under the fluorescent lights. Her work done, Sunset took the polish cleaner and the rag she had been using and brought them back to the janitor's closet.

Kicking the door closed, she wiped her hands on her jeans, trying to get the smell of polish off. As she walked back down the hall, a delightful hum began to sing into her ears. It was a light soprano pitch being sweetly played on soft strings. Sunset had never heard such a wonderful noise before.

She moved towards it, drawn in like a siren's call, desperate to know where it was coming from. Her search led her to a small classroom, one that was used by the music department. She peered through the window and was genuinely surprised at who she saw.

Twilight Sparkle was sitting alone at the front of the room, a violin tucked under her chin, her bow string dancing across the cords, making sweet music.

Very quietly, Sunset opened the door and slipped in, Twilight completely unphased by the creaking hinges. Staying against the back wall, Sunset continued to listen to Twilight's solo performance, enraptured by each chord and mesmerized by every arrangement. It was like listening to a piece in a symphony. The melody was so beautiful and pure, Sunset almost wanted to weep.

When the last chord faded away, Sunset opened her eyes, unaware that she had been carried off by the music. Taking advantage of Twilight's pause, she said in a hoarse voice.

— "That... was beautiful."

— "Ah!" — Twilight fumbled with her violin, catching it and holding it close to her chest. She swiveled in her seat staring wide-eyed at Sunset. — "Oh, it's you. How long have you been there?"

Sunset shrugged.

— "Don't know. Lost track of time." — She walked up to the front of the room and pulled up a chair. — "I didn't know you played an instrument."

Twilight looked fondly at her violin.

— "Yeah. I started when I was about six. And my old high school required everyone to participate in some extracurricular activity, so I joined the school orchestra."

— "You're really good. Like, really, *really* good."

Twilight's cheeks burned bright red at the praise.

— "Thanks, but, I'm not all *that* good."

Sunset gaped at her.

— "You're kidding, right? Do you hear yourself play? Our school president last year played the cello and got a full ride scholarship to a music school. I think you might play better than her!"

— "You really think so?"

— "Almost positive." — Sunset nodded.

Twirling a finger in her hair, Twilight said.

— “I really appreciate that, Sunset. But, this is really just a hobby more than anything. I’m not sure I want to go to music school.”

— “That’s a shame. You could be famous. World renowned even.”

— “Maybe.” — Twilight shook her head. — “But, I don’t want to become famous for music. I want to be a scientist or a physicist. I want to help the world at large.”

Sunset blew her hair out of her face, rolling her eyes.

— “Well, whatever floats your boat I guess.”

— “Do you play an instrument?”

— “No. Flash tried to teach me the guitar but...” — She looked down at her slender fingers. — “I could never quite get the hang of it.”

Twilight sighed, shifting in her chair.

— “Every time we talk, he seems sad. Did... the other Twilight do something to him?”

Sunset shook her head.

— “The pony princess didn’t do anything. He just fell in love and got his heart broken when she left.” — She shrugged. — “His own fault really.”

— “Oh.” — Twilight’s head fell, downcast. — “So the reason he keeps talking to me is...”

— “Listen, I said the girls would never treat you that way, and I doubt Flash would either. But he fell in love with a girl that looks like you and doesn’t know what to do with himself. Idiot,” — Sunset added under her breath. “He still has feelings for ‘Twilight Sparkle’ he just doesn’t realize it isn’t you.”

— “That’s kinda sad when you think about it.” — Twilight started tuning her violin, testing it with a few strokes. — “But, I’m not sure if I could return any of his feelings anyway.”

Sunset shrugged again.

— “He’s a nice guy. An idiot, but a nice guy.” — She stood up and stretched.

— “Anyway, I just came in here to say I liked your music. You should show the girls; that’d really set you apart from little miss princess.”

As Sunset made for the door, Twilight stood up and sputtered.

— “W-wait, Sunset, umm... d-do you wanna walk home together again?”

— “Nope, I’ve got my motorcycle back. Walking is for losers.”

— “You have a motorcycle?”

Sunset rolled her eyes.

— “Yes. I just said that, genius.”

Twilight looked down, rubbing the back of her head.

— “Sorry. Umm, I guess I’ll just see you tomorrow then.”

Geez, why does she look so sad?

Sunset watched her sit down and pick up her violin again, playing a few soft notes. She could hear the melancholy in them.

Ugh, why am I doing this?

Sunset rubbed her temples and said.

— “Twilight, do you want a ride home?”

Twilight snapped her head up.

— “A ride? On a motorcycle?”

— “Yeah, duh.”

— “I-I don’t know. Is it safe?”

— “Mostly.”

Tapping her fingers together, Twilight started to look very anxious.

— “I really don’t know how my parents would feel about me riding on a motorcycle.”

— “Then don’t tell them.” — Sunset could feel her patience quickly wearing thin as Twilight continued to mull it over. — “Alright, you have three seconds to decide. Two...”

— “Okay, okay, I’ll try it,” — Twilight said hastily. — “Just promise me nothing bad will happen, okay?”

— “I promise you, nothing bad will happen.” — Sunset had been forced to say it but wondered if the forces of nature would comply with that rule. — “Now grab your stuff, I want to go home already.”

Without another word—but with a rather happy smile—Twilight quickly packed her violin away and grabbed her backpack. The two left the music room, stopping by Sunset’s locker so she could grab her helmet before exiting to the parking lot.

— “This is your motorcycle?” — Twilight examined the midnight black bike.

— “It suits you.”

— “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

— “Oh, don’t worry, it was!” — Twilight said hastily. — “So, um, where’d you get it?”

— “Flash and I found it in the junkyard a couple years ago. We fixed it up and he let me keep it. But I guess we didn’t do as great of a job as we thought. The thing kept breaking down and finally just stopped working. I let one of his friends work on it for me, and he fixed it up real good.”

Twilight nudged the wheel with her foot.

— “So... it’s safe now, right?”

— “Yes, yes, it’s safe. Just trust me, okay?”

— “...Where are the seatbelts?”

— “There are no seatbelts.” — Sunset groaned.

Twilight looked up at her, tilting her head to the side.

— “Then... how am I supposed to ride with you?”

— “You hang onto me real tight.” — Sunset swung her leg over the middle and stuck her key in the ignition, earning her a roar from the bike. — “Get on,” she ordered.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Twilight climbed on behind her, wrapping her hands around Sunset’s middle.

— “I still don’t feel very safe about this!” — she shouted over the engine.

Sunset sighed in frustration and took off her helmet, shoving it on Twilight’s head.

— “There. Now sit down, shut up and don’t fall off.” — She flipped the kickstand and pulled on the throttle, backing out of the parking space before putting real power into it. They took off with a jolt, Twilight squeezing herself

onto Sunset, her entire body shaking. While Sunset found it amusing to some degree, she really hoped Twilight wouldn't fall off.

The wind billowed against Sunset's face, stinging her eyes and making her regret giving her helmet to Twilight. She was grateful, however, that the ride was a short one, as Twilight didn't live too far away from the school. Sunset slowed down a little as she entered the peaceful suburbs, still uncomfortable about the conformity most of the houses showed.

She came to a stop in front of Twilight's house and cut the engine. Twilight was still wrapped firmly around her, her helmet pressed into Sunset's back.

— “Hey, Sparky. You can let go now. We're here.”

Twilight looked up, slowly pulling herself off like she was afraid the bike would suddenly start again. She took off the helmet, handing it to Sunset before getting off the bike and taking a few shaky steps towards her porch.

— “Heh... that... wasn't so bad... heh...”

Sunset laughed at the terrified expression on Twilight's face.

— “Don't worry, you get used to it after a while.”

There was a click, and both girls looked up to see the front door open and, much to Sunset's surprise, Officer Armor stick his head out.

— “Oh, Shiny!” — Twilight squealed, her fears quickly vanishing. — “I didn't know you were home.”

Shining stepped outside, wearing more casual clothes as opposed to the uniform Sunset had seen him in.

— “My shift ended early today. I was actually coming to get you in a minute, but I see... you got a ride.” — He eyed Sunset warily.

Sunset smirked at him, mostly out of old habit when someone gave her a look like that.

— “Afternoon, Officer Armor.”

He walked down the steps, stopping to give Twilight a quick hug.

— “Miss Shimmer.”

Twilight looked between the two of them.

— “You two know each other?”

— “We had a bit of a run in today,” — Shining said. — “Miss speed demon was going a little too fast on her ride.”

Sunset’s eye twitched.

Shining looked down at Twilight.

— “Could you give us a minute, Twi?”

Twilight narrowed her eyes.

— “Shining...” — she said with a warning.

— “We’re just going to talk, honest.”

She eyed him for a few more seconds then nodded.

— “Fine.” — She smiled and waved at Sunset. — “I’ll see you tomorrow!”

Shining didn’t speak again until Twilight disappeared behind the door.

— “Sunset Shimmer.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. She had already pieced everything together, now she was just waiting to hear it confirmed. And to see what his judgment would be.

— “Nice bike,” — Shining complimented. That hadn’t been the first thing Sunset expected to hear.

— “Oh, thanks.” — She could feel herself still being examined by Shining’s critical eye.

There was a long minute of nothing before Shining spoke again.

— “Twilight... she speaks highly of you. I honestly wasn’t expecting you to be...”

— “To be what? Dressed in leather and riding a motorcycle?” — Sunset asked accusingly.

Shining looked guilty, scratching the back of his neck.

— “Well, yeah. Sorry... you just weren’t what I pictured.”

— “Hmph.” — Sunset reached for her keys until Shining’s voice stopped her.

— “But, you saved my sister.”

Ah, there it is. Well, so much for my Vinyl Scratch theory.

She looked over, waiting for him to continue.

— “So, that has to count for something. Twilight thinks you’re a great friend
—”

Twilight has poor judgment.

— “—so I can’t turn a blind eye to that. Look, what I’m really trying to say is... thank you. Thank you so much.”

Sunset would have laughed if she didn’t catch Shining quickly wiping a tear away. Instead, she just smiled softly and said.

— “Don’t mention it. Seriously, don’t mention it.” — She put her helmet on and started the engine as Shining called out to her.

— “Just stay out of trouble, Sunset! I won’t let you go next time!”

Sunset smirked from inside her helmet. Her bike gave off a thunderclap of noise and she peeled away from the curbside, taking off down the street.

You didn’t say please.

Kpok 14: House Call

For the fourth time in that long night, Sunset was jolted awake by her haunting subconscious, her face pressed into the damp pillow as she gasped for air. She lifted her head up and furiously rubbed her eyes, letting out an exasperated growl that rose into a yell. Reaching down, she grabbed the bottle of Nyquil sitting by her bed and threw it against the wall. There was a loud *thump* that almost masked the sound of plastic cracking. As the bottle hit the ground, a blue stain began to soak into the worn carpet.

Sunset sat upright on her mattress, staring at her hands in her lap. It had been this way for the last several nights; Sunset could only manage to get minuscule amounts of sleep before a nightmare overcame her and forced her to awaken. Last night, she had simply been too afraid to fall asleep, resulting in her need for medication in the hopes that it would ease her and let her rest.

It hadn't.

Sunset didn't know why her recurring nightmares were now happening so frequently. She could deal with it when it happened once a week, but now that they were coming back-to-back, it was starting to wear on her...

— *“Sunset, dear, are you alright? That's the second time you've fallen asleep in class,” — Rarity asked.*

— *“No. I'm... having trouble sleeping,” — Sunset grumbled, resting her head on her arm, eyes starting to droop again.*

— *“Oh, I experience that from time to time. Have you tried taking some medicine?”*

...Glaring over at the broken bottle, Sunset said.

— “Yeah, great advice, Rarity.”

— “That's not fair, she was just trying to help.”

Sunset's frown deepened and she reached under her pillow, pulling out the stuffed Princess Twilight Sparkle.

— “Don't you ever shut up?” — Sunset snarled.

— “Can't you make me shut up?”

Sunset opened her mouth, then paused, unable to think of a counter remark. It was technically true. The doll was just a manifestation of some of the inner workings of her subconscious. She could have got it to stop talking anytime... or burned it.

— “I hate you,” — she deadpanned.

— “Yes, you remind me every day. You should really come up with some new lines.”

After taking a moment to strangle it, Sunset tossed the toy back on her desk. She flopped onto her pillow, groaning in aversion. Though her eyelids lay heavy with exhaustion, she feared the idea of sleep, dreading what images she would be tormented with this time. She had seen enough to write a screenplay and send it to Hollywood.

Still, even the possibility of peaceful rest was enough to make Sunset draw her blanket over her head and curl up. She slowed her breathing to a steady, rhythmic pace, relaxing her mind like she had done in so many magic sessions with Princess Celestia. Mercifully, she managed to clear all of her thoughts.

You could have made all the nightmares go away...

Sunset couldn't have had her eyes closed for more than a minute when she heard her phone buzz loudly on her wooden desk, vibrating right off the edge.

— “Why, dammit, *why?*” — She instinctively reached for her phone, ready to give whoever was calling her a piece of her mind. She checked the caller ID and frowned.

— “On second thought, I should just let it keep ringing,” — she said, looking down at the words typed across the front screen.

Her hand flipped the phone open on reflex.

Clearly, I've learned nothing.

She held the phone an inch away from her ear, bracing herself for Pinkie's high pitched voice.

— “Hello?”

— “Hiya, Sunset! It's Pinkie!”

— “I figured. Do you know what time it is?” — Sunset growled.

— “Uhh, noon?”

Sunset looked up and saw a thin line of light coming from around the cardboard square she had fit around the window. Getting to her knees, she looked out onto the factory floor and saw more sunlight trickling in.

— “Oh.”

— “Wow, you sure like your beauty sleep. I know it’s Saturday, but you should really be up by now, silly.”

— “No, it’s Saturday, which means I should be asleep.”

When did I get so lazy?

— “Just tell me what you want so I can go back to bed.”

— “Well, actually, Flash and his band are having a gig down at the park today, and me and the girls were wondering if—”

— “*No!*” Sunset slammed her phone shut before Pinkie could finish her request. There was no way she was going to be dragged anywhere with Flash. Maybe her love for him hadn’t been entirely true, but it had still stung something fierce when he broke up with her. She could barely stand sharing a school with him; there was no way she was going to waste an afternoon listening to his stupid band play their stupid music.

— “Maybe you’re not mad at him, but mad at yourself for leading him on and —”

— “*Shut up!*” — Sunset threw her phone at the doll, knocking them both to the floor. She wrapped herself up once more in her blankets, shielding herself from the outside world.

— “No!”

There was a click as the line went dead. Six pairs of eyes blinked at each other before leaning away from the cell phone.

The girls gathered around Pinkie’s phone, standing under the thin shade of a large, shedding acorn tree, most of them wearing unsurprised looks.

— “See?” — Rarity stood tall and crossed her arms. — “I told you she wouldn’t want to come.”

Pinkie examined her phone, tapping a finger against her chin.

— “Hmm, maybe we should call again *juuuuust* to be sure.”

Twilight put a hand on Pinkie’s arm, lowering it.

— “She sounded tired. Maybe we should just let her rest.”

— “Aww, but she’s gonna miss the music.”

As much as Twilight would have liked Sunset to join them as well, by the way she had looked all week—tired and... *more* distant than usual—Twilight thought it was best Sunset got a little rest.

— “Don’t worry, Pinkie. I’m sure Flash will have other concerts,” — Twilight said reassuringly.

— “I know,” — Pinkie said, a hint of disappointment still in her voice. — “But I wanted this to be our first activity together as the Spectacular Seven! Now I’ll have to wait until Halloween.”

— “The spectacular what?” — Rainbow asked.

— “The Spectacular Seven!” — Pinkie bounced high in the air, throwing confetti flakes into the air. — “We can’t be the Canterlot High Five anymore *or* the Mane Six because we have Twilight *and* Sunset. That adds together to make *seven*! And seven is such a spectacular number, just like us! So now, we’re the *Spectacular Seven*!”

Twilight only heard half of Pinkie’s rant, choosing instead to try and figure out where the shower of confetti had come from. Rarity must have seen the look on her face, for she placed a hand on Twilight’s shoulder and lightly shook her head.

— “Right,” — Applejack said slowly. — “Well, let’s get a move on. Make sure we get a good spot.”

Rainbow cleared her throat.

— “Uhh, no offense to Flash, but his band isn’t *that* popular. I think we’ll have an easy time picking seats.”

The group migrated out from under the tree, making their way down the small slope it rested on. Picnic blankets patch worked the ground in the nearby field, while kites soared through the breezy air.

Twilight admired the soft autumn afternoon, feeling bad that she had decided to make Spike stay at home. She’d have to make it up to him with an extra treat.

They crossed the wooden bridge, a particularly cool breeze sweeping through and making Twilight huddle tighter inside her purple jacket. She looked out over the small creek that ran beneath them, remembering her encounter with Sunset and with it, the revelation of another world.

She still struggled with the concept occasionally, her rational brain wanting to dismiss it as the ramblings of... an entire group of students. However, spending time with all of them had proven that—save for Pinkie—they were all perfectly sane. Being in their presence gave Twilight a kind of warmth she had never felt before.

І кожного разу, коли Сансет була поруч з нею And whenever Sunset was with her...

— “Hmm? And what has you smiling and blushing like that?” — Rarity asked with a coy smile.

Twilight snapped out of her thoughts.

— “What? Me? Smiling? Oh, it was nothing, haha! Certainly not thinking about anyone in particular!”

All the girls turned back and looked at her, wearing smiles identical to Rarity’s. Pinkie sprung over, stopping inches away from Twilight’s face.

— “Oh, oh! You totally like someone! Who is it, who is it?”

— “N-no one!” — Twilight took a step back, trying to regain her personal space. — “I was just thinking about the weather!”

— “Darling, cloud patterns can’t make a girl blush like that,” — Rarity chided. — “Come now, you can tell us.”

Pinkie stuck her finger out, and poked Twilight on the nose, her mouth open in a wide smile.

— “You like Flash Sentry, don’t you? You do, you do! I can see it on your face!”

Twilight’s nervous grin had turned into a look of apprehension before upgrading to fierce protest.

— “I do not like him!”

— “I don’t know, Twi, sounds like you’ve got a crush on him to me.” — Rainbow grinned.

— “You do talk to him a lot,” Fluttershy added softly.

— “I don’t talk to him, he talks to me!” — Twilight said, growing more agitated by the second. — “He’s a really nice guy, but I don’t like him like that. Besides, he likes... the other Twilight Sparkle.”

No one was sure how to respond. The group lapsed into painful silence until Rarity spoke in an encouraging tone.

— “You don’t know that for certain, darling. He could be quite taken with *you*.”

Twilight shook her head, reflecting on Sunset’s words from earlier in the week. She was sure that in time, Flash would think of her as a separate individual. For now, he just wanted the princess.

— “Even if he is ‘taken’ with me, I don’t feel the same way.”

— “Well then, who *do* you have a crush on?” — Pinkie asked.

— “No one!” — Twilight yelled, her cheeks turning red once more.

Applejack stepped over and dragged Pinkie away.

— “C’mon, y’all, if she don’t wanna tell us, that’s her business.”

Twilight sighed and slumped her shoulders in relief.

Thank you, Applejack.

— “Yes, and besides, there is *no* business to tell.”

Even if I did like her... there's no way she'd like me like that...

While Rarity shot Twilight a dubious look, she nor anyone else pushed the matter further. They walked across the other half of the park, coming up on a large bandstand where a microphone, speakers and a set of drums were already set. Around the stage were a few rows of chairs, already occupied by a generous amount of people.

— “I thought you said Flash Drive wasn't that popular.” — Twilight looked over to Rainbow, who just shrugged.

— “Guess his popularity went up when we stopped hanging out in our own circles.”

Flash and his other band mates were gathered in front of the stage, tuning guitars and going over sound checks. He looked up from his instrument and gave a warm wave to Twilight, who returned it half-heartedly and with an anxious smile.

The girls pulled up seats in the front row, starting aimless chatter while they waited for the show to start. A few more teenagers floated in and filled some of the empty seats, while the other occupants of the park kept an interested but noncommittal distance.

Twilight wasn't entirely sure what to expect either. When she had asked Sunset how good of a band Flash Drive was, she had only responded.

— ***“They're alright, I guess. At least by your world's standard of modern music.”***

— ***‘Your world’s...’***

Twilight also had trouble sometimes remembering that Sunset wasn't from here. She was a pony... from another dimension....

When did life get so... weird?

A guitar riff cut through the air, hunted closely by the crackle of static. Twilight looked up from her scattered thoughts to find Flash at the forefront of his band, microphone in hand.

— “Canterlot Park! Are you ready to rock?”

There was an appropriate round of applause with a few scattered cheers here and there. Seeming unsatisfied, Flash played another riff and yelled.

— “I said, Canterlot Park, are you ready to *rock*?”

This time, the majority of the crowd broke into enthusiastic cheers. Twilight even heard Fluttershy give a light, “yay,” of excitement, while she herself stuck with just politely clapping.

Flash grinned at the crowd’s ovation before nodding to his drummer, a student Twilight recognized as Thunderlane. He started a steady beat, like the thumping of a telltale heart, followed closely by Flash’s guitar strumming. The rest of the band soon accompanied the two, and a wave of sound flared out over the audience.

Sound. That’s all it was to Twilight. Yes, it had rhythm and harmony, a good tempo and was played fairly well, but there was no purpose behind it. Other than wanting to sound cool. It reminded Twilight of all the rock bands Shining would often blast in his room. They were ‘good’, but they would never have heart and soul like the composers of old.

Still, Twilight tried to enjoy herself. She clapped along with some of the melodies and cheered at the end of each song. Flash Drive was by no means bad, they just weren’t her kind of music. It was then Twilight understood what Sunset had said, and she smiled to herself.

Guess we have the same taste in music.

An hour and a half later, Flash Drive played their last song before thanking everyone and bidding them farewell. Turning around, Twilight saw more people had shown up during the performance, flocking to the sound of decent rock n’ roll.

As everyone began to disperse, Twilight and the girls approached the bandstand where Flash was already disassembling everything. He noticed the girls approaching him and gave them all a wave.

— “So, what’d you think of the show?” — The question was directed to the group as a whole, but his eyes were on Twilight.

— “It was very nice—” — Twilight started.

— “It was freakin’ *awesome!*” — Rainbow cut in. — “You’ve got some sweet moves on that guitar!”

— “Glad you all enjoyed it,” — Flash said, packing the guitar away. — “This is the biggest crowd we’ve had since... well, ever! It’s nice to know we left a lasting impression.”

— “Yeah,” — Thunderlane spoke up from his drum set. — “It only took us three years to get noticed.”

— “Well, better late than never, right?” — Twilight encouraged.

Flash nodded.

— “Yeah, you’re right.” — He stood up, a nervous blush rising on his cheeks.

— “Uhh, listen, Twilight... I was just wondering... you know, if you aren’t busy or anything... do you wanna go out and do something tomorrow?”

Twilight stared like a deer caught in headlights. Was Flash Sentry asking her out... on a date? Her body went rigid while her mind went into overdrive.

Oh my gosh, what do I do? I can’t tell him no, that would be mean! But I don’t want to say yes either! Quick, think of something so I don’t hurt his feelings!

Apparently, Twilight had been standing in silence for longer than she thought, for Flash finally sighed and said.

— “Listen, if you don’t want to—”

— “No! No, that’s not it!” — Twilight waved her hands frantically. — “I just, uh, have other plans tomorrow!”

— “You do?” — Rainbow asked.

— “Yes! Uh... me and... Sunset are going out for ice cream tomorrow!” — Twilight announced with a broad smile.

— “You are?” — Flash asked with mild surprise.

— “You are?” — Her friends echoed.

I am?

— “Yes, I am! So that’s why we can’t hang out tomorrow, no other reason! I just have a prior engagement, uh, and by that, I mean platonic engagement!

We're just going out as friends, nothing more! Yep, Sunset and I, getting ice cream, just friends, haha!"

Everyone gave her an odd stare and Flash took a tiny step back.

— "Okay..." — he said slowly. — "Well, uh, you two have fun then."

— "Don't worry, we will! Haha ha..."

Oh geez, what have I done? By Monday, everyone will be asking how the hangout went! Everyone will find out I lied! Quick, think of something else! By that point Twilight could only think of two options: tell the truth now, or...

She turned to her friends who were still eying her with curiosity.

— "Uh, do any of you know where Sunset lives?"

Pinkie opened her mouth like she had an answer, then stopped, her face changing to deep contemplation.

— "Huh, that's a good question. Hey, Flash, do you know where Sunset lives?"

Flash froze in mid step, having tried to sneak away from the conversation.

— "Uh, yeah. I know where she... lives." — He kept his back to them the entire time.

— "Great!" — Pinkie cheered. — "We could totally go over to her house and cheer her up and stuff! I can't wait to see all the cool stuff she probably has in her room! Oh, I bet—"

— "Listen, girls," — Flash said in a neutral tone, — "I kinda made a promise not to tell anyone where she lived."

Rarity frowned.

— "Why ever not?"

— "So no one would go egg her house, probably." — Rainbow smirked.

— "It's more complicated than that," — said Flash.

— "Aw, c'mon now," — Applejack pushed. — "We're her friends now. Ah'm sure she'd love a little bit of company."

— "Actually..."

Everyone turned towards Fluttershy, speaking in a soft voice with her eyes towards the ground.

— “If Sunset came from the other side of the mirror... does that mean she lives by herself?”

All eyes returned to Flash, who slumped his shoulders in defeat.

— “Alright. Despite what happened between us, I still try to keep my promises. I can’t *tell* you, but... Thunderlane, you got a piece of paper and a pen on you?”

Thunderlane rummaged around through a backpack and pulled out the desired items. Flash took them and quickly scribbled something before folding the paper up and letting it fall to the ground.

— “Uh oh, I sure hope no one picks that paper up. They’ll find out where Sunset is staying,” — he said in a fake voice.

Rarity mouthed a ‘thank you’ before snatching the paper off the ground. Five other heads leaned in as she unfolded it, beholding a simple address and a few hastily written directions.

— “But wait, this address is in...” — Rarity’s mouth formed a thin line. — “Oh dear...”

Sunset sat cross-legged on her bed, leaning against the wall for support. In her lap was a notebook with complex math equations strewn across it. In front of her was her laptop, classical music pouring out of the speakers while she finished up her trigonometry homework.

She spun her pencil around her fingers, remarking at how much better she could do that now than when she had first come to this world. Her other fingers tapped along to the orchestra, her hand swaying to the sound of the violin. The music that came from these classical composers like Beethoven and Bach was really the only genre she enjoyed.

A yawn found its way out of her and she rubbed her eyes.

— “I should try falling asleep to this next time,” — Sunset murmured to herself. She gave a slow stretch of her arms and returned to answering her math problems. She didn’t get too far before she was jolted upright by a loud pounding on the door downstairs.

— “For crying out loud!” — Sunset set her work aside, stood up and checked herself over in the mirror to make sure she was decent. Pajama pants and a tank top shirt with her hair still a mess. She shrugged. She had looked a lot worse.

Stomping downstairs, Sunset found herself wondering two things. One: what could Flash possibly want from her? He was the only person who knew where she held residence. And two: why was she coming to answer the door in the first place? Whatever Flash had to say, she was pretty sure she didn’t want to hear it.

Sunset reached the bottom floor and approached the back door at the end of the hall.

— “I should really drill in a peep hole,” — she said as she gripped the handle.

She pulled the door open and stuck her head outside.

— “What do you—eh?”

— “Hiya, Sunset!” — six girls cheered.

Sunset slammed the door and threw her back against it, breathing hard.

— “Dear Celestia... they know where I live!”

— “Sunset,” — Rarity’s voice penetrated through the thick door, — “please open up. We just wanted to see how you were doing.”

With a resigned huff, Sunset opened the door again, glaring at the faces smiling back at her.

— “Flash told you where I live, didn’t he?”

Rarity gave her a guilty smile.

— “Well... in not so many words exactly...”

— “He’s so dead.”

— “Aw, come on, Sunny!” — Pinkie bounced up and wrapped her arms around Sunset, squeezing tight. — “Aren’t you happy to see us?”

— “Not... really,” — Sunset said, struggling for air.

— “But we’re your first house guests!” — Pinkie said, oblivious to Sunset’s face turning blue. — “Besides Flash, of course!”

Twilight tapped her on the shoulder.

— “Pinkie, could you let go of Sunset before she runs out of oxygen?”

Pinkie looked up at Sunset’s face, putting her grin against Sunset’s fiery stare.

— “Whoopsies, sorry about that.” — She released Sunset, who stumbled back and grabbed the door frame for support while she regained her breath.

— “What... are you all... doing here?” — she panted.

— “We told ya, we came to see if you were doin’ all right,” — Applejack explained. — “And ‘cause, we kinda got curious on where it was you lived.”

Rarity scrunched her nose.

— “Honestly, darling, how can you live in a place like this?”

— “I ignore everything that’s wrong with it.” — Sunset folded her arms and gave all of them her usual agitated stare. — “Besides, it’s free, which is exactly in my price range.”

— “Well, I like it!” — Pinkie cheered in support. — “It’s like your own bachelorette pad! So, you’re going to show us around, right?”

Sunset guessed she didn’t have much choice in the matter, seeing as she stepped out of the way and let all of them walk through. She slammed the door

with as much vice as she could muster, and jumped to the front of the line, leading the girls down the checkered hall.

— “Stairs, leads up to my bedroom. Bathroom. Kitchen. Closet. Factory floor,” — Sunset said with dispassion. She turned and faced them with a fake smile on her face. — “And that concludes our tour. Any questions? No?” — Her smile dropped. — “Then get out.”

— “Ooh, wait!” — Pinkie slipped around Sunset and pulled on the door behind her. — “I wanna see the factory floor!”

Sunset slapped a hand against her face as the girls pushed past her and into the wide, empty space. She couldn’t understand their sudden fascination with where she lived. Was this something all friends did, or just the crazy ones?

— “Oh my gosh! This place is so huge! We could totally have an awesome p —”

— “No!” — Sunset stomped her foot against the cold cement floor. — “You will be having no parties in my house! No shindigs, no hangouts, nothing! This is my personal sanctuary where I come to get away from everything. Friends or not, I need one place where I can enjoy my isolation.” — She circled around them, herding them up and shepherding them down the hall and out the door.

— “Thanks for stopping by, please don’t do it again. I’ll see you all at school on Monday. Now get out. Out, out, out, *out!*” — She threw the entrance open, and with a shove of her foot, kicked all five of them out in an orderly line. It wasn’t until after she slammed the door shut that she ran the numbers through her head again.

— “Twilight Sparkle, get out here!” — she yelled.

The sound of running water echoed through the hall, before Twilight stepped out from one of the doors, drying her hands on her jeans, and looking abashed.

— “Sorry. I had to use your bathroom... is the water always cold?”

— “Yes, it is. Now get out.” — Sunset pointed to the entrance.

— “Uh, right. Disturbing your privacy and all that.” — Twilight looked down at her hands, fidgeting slightly. — “There’s just one little thing I need to talk to you about.”

— “And I probably won’t care,” — Sunset said dismissively.

— “Could you just hear me out for a second?” — Twilight pleaded.

Sunset pursed her lips, unable to say anything.

— “So, um... well... Flash tried to ask me out on a date earlier today, but I kinda told him that I already made plans with you for tomorrow,” — Twilight said hastily. She gave Sunset a nervous smile.

— “Uh-huh. And I should care because...?”

Twilight pressed her hands into her face.

— “I lied! I’m a liar now!” — she lamented. — “Everyone thinks me and you are hanging out tomorrow and they’re going to be asking all kinds of questions on Monday!”

— “Or, they could not care,” — Sunset offered. — “I know I don’t.”

— “But what if they do?” — Twilight grabbed the sides of her hair, looking frantic. — “I’m not good at lying! I don’t like doing it! I just panicked and—”

— “Twilight, skip to the part that involves *why* you’re telling *me* this!” — Sunset said irritably.

— “Oh, right.” — Twilight chuckled weakly. — “Well, I was just thinking that maybe we could hang out tomorrow? That way I’m not a liar anymore, and you get out of this run-down place for a little bit.”

— “Uh-huh. Yeah... no.” — Sunset shook her head, an amused smile on her face. — “I’m not helping you fix your own mistake, Sparkles. You dug your grave. You pull yourself out of it.”

Twilight looked devastated.

— “Oh, come on, Sunset!”

Sunset walked around and started to force Twilight out the door.

— “Nope.”

— “But it’ll be fun!”

— “Doubt it.”

— “Please?”

Just as Sunset had her on the threshold, the horrible word had been spoken. Sunset felt the hated magic kick in.

— “Fine,” — she said through gritted teeth.

Twilight turned her head, a shimmer of hope in her eyes.

— “Really?”

— “Yeah, really,” — Sunset grumbled. — “But you so owe me.”

— “Deal!” — Twilight bobbed her head in glee.

— “Good. Now, get. Out.” — Sunset opened the door, tossed Twilight out and slammed it shut, all in one fluid motion before leaning against it once more.

— “And my suffering continues.”

Kpok 15: Just Can't Win

With a loud rumble, the motorcycle slid into the parking space near the front of Canterlot Mall. Sunset removed her helmet and rested her head on the dash, closing her eyes and letting her mind drift. How she had managed to drive herself all the way across town was a mystery to her.

Her bike wobbled, jolting her awake before it could topple over. She put the kickstand down and dismounted, placing her helmet on the handlebars.

— “Well...” — She rolled her neck and yawned. — “Let’s get this over with.” — Twilight had texted her to meet at the mall around twelve. Sunset checked the time as eleven forty-five and decided she had just enough time to grab a coffee.

She trudged into the mall, hoping the light layer of makeup she wore would cover the bags underneath her eyes. She looked bad enough with her ratty jacket.

Unsurprisingly, the mall was crowded with Sunday shoppers. Halloween decorations littered almost every store: pumpkin cutouts were stuck to windows, bats dangled from the ceiling. Some dress shops had even replaced their mannequins with skeleton models.

Sunset followed a trail of black and orange confetti to the coffee kiosk at the edge of the food court. As she strode up to the counter, the cashier halted her conversation with the barista and turned to face Sunset, a gracious smile on her face.

— “Welcome to—”

— “Double shot espresso. Two creams, three sugars. Whipped cream on top. Make it snappy.”

Denied a chance to promote the kiosk holiday beverage, the cashier closed her mouth, her cheery demeanor now inverted. Sunset slapped a fiver on the counter and scanned the area for a free table.

— “You know, you could say ‘please,’” — a voice said behind her.

Sunset looked over her shoulder and frowned at Twilight.

— “I’ve come to hate that word. And don’t ask me why,” — she cut in, seeing Twilight open her mouth to comment. She returned to the counter, drumming her fingers while she waited for the barista to finish her coffee.

— “Here’s your drink, ma’am,” — the disgruntled cashier said, pushing Sunset’s drink across the counter.

Snatching her drink, Sunset turned to fully face Twilight, trying not to laugh at the frustrated look she was receiving.

— “What?” — She took a small sip of her coffee, smacking her lips at the bitter taste.

— “I don’t get you. You do nice things but you can be such a... such a...” — Twilight scrunched her face, like she was having difficulty getting the next word out.

Sunset narrowed her eyes.

— “Go ahead. Say it,” — she dared. She raised her drink to her lips again.

— “A big grouch!” — Twilight stomped her foot.

Sunset swallowed her hot coffee down the wrong pipe and she began to cough while she laughed, making her throat burn even more.

Twilight took a step closer, concern replacing her discontentment.

— “Are you alright?”

— “Y-yeah.” — Sunset coughed a few times before laughing again. — “I’m fine, haha. Just remind me to teach you how to use big girl words later.” — She broke into another fit of giggles when Twilight simply rolled her eyes and started for the nearest vacant spot. They sat adjacent to each other at the round table, Twilight fiddling with her hair, while Sunset sipped her espresso, feeling revitalized. They didn’t make coffee this good in Equestria.

— “So what’s the plan, Sparkles? I wanna get this over with so I can go back home.”

Twilight gave her a bewildered look.

— “You can’t really call that place your home, can you?”

— “No. It sucks and I hate it. It feels nothing like a home should feel. But what else am I supposed to call it?” — Sunset slid down her chair. — “Besides, it’s not like I can go back to my real home.”

— “Why did you leave?”

Sunset slumped further, her eyes downcast.

— “I’m not sure anymore. Princess Celestia showed me the mirror that connects this world to Equestria and asked me what I saw. I told her I saw myself as a princess—an alicorn. But when I pressed her for answers about what it meant, she rebuked me. I decided to find out for myself, so I... I ran away. I wanted answers... I wanted power.” — She cracked a pained smile. — “Heh, turns out, I got both of them in the end. And I hated it.”

— “Oh” — Lost for words, Twilight continued to run a hand through her hair, her eyes seeming to go everywhere but in Sunset’s direction.

— “I’m sorry.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow.

— “For what?”

Twilight finally looked at her.

— “Well... you know, for all the things you’ve had to go through.”

— “I never got that.” — Sunset shook her head. — “Why do people apologize when it had nothing to do with them?”

— “Because it shows sympathy,” — Twilight explained, her bewildered look returning.

— “Sympathy?” — Sunset scoffed and sat up again. — “So in other words, you’re taking pity on me. Hmph. Pity is the last thing I need or want. I can handle things on my own, I’ve done it for years.”

— “But isn’t the point of having friends to have someone to help you when you need it?”

Sunset held her hands up.

— “I don’t know; I’m new to this whole friendship thing. You tell me. Aren’t you some friendship expert or something?”

It was Twilight's turn to sink into her chair, acting as if the floor was much more interesting.

— “Actually, I've only had one other friend. I was pretty introverted before she came along. Even then, when I did try to make friends at my old school, they seemed to want to avoid me.”

— “Really? Just one friend your entire life?” — Sunset fought the urge to laugh again.

— “Well, I don't count my old babysitter because she's practically family. So... yeah,” — Twilight said.

Sunset reached over and poked her in the arm.

— “Hey, that was one more than me until a few weeks ago. Now, look at us, surrounded by girls that will probably drive me crazy before graduation.”

Twilight smiled warmly.

— “I'll admit, a few of them can be a bit rowdy sometimes. But it's really nice having these many friends for a change.” — She stared at her lap and said softly, — “Maybe I should thank the other Twilight. She's kinda the reason I met all of you.”

— “She's the reason I'm stuck with all of you.” — Sunset pursed her lips. — “I'm still trying to figure out if that was a good or bad thing.” — Twilight giggled and Sunset said, — “You think I'm joking, but I'm not.”

— “Oh come on, you can't really say you don't want any friends, can you?”

Sunset crossed her arms.

— “I've warmed up to the idea a lot. But... part of me likes being alone.”

Twilight put a hand on Sunset's shoulder.

— “Hey, I used to feel the same way. But then I learned that even having one friend makes life a whole lot better. No one really wants to be alone.”

— “People can't hurt or take advantage of you if you're alone,” — Sunset whispered.

— “I think we both know that isn't true.”

Their eyes met for a brief second before Sunset pulled away. She stood up and threw her empty cup into the garbage can.

— “I’m tired of this conversation.” — She faced Twilight. — “And you never did tell me what we were going to do.”

— “Oh, um... Well, we’re at the mall, so we could just go shopping or something.” — Twilight rubbed the back of her head, looking sheepish. — “I really didn’t plan this well at all. Which is odd; usually I’m pretty organized.”

— “Shopping?” — Sunset rubbed her chin. — “Yeah, that’s something friends do together I guess. We can give that a try.”

Twilight blinked.

— “You really are new to this, aren’t you?”

Sunset headed for the escalator.

— “Yes, I just told you that. Come on, Sparky, keep up.”

Twilight hurried out of her chair to join her as they ascended to the second floor. Much like the ground floor, it was adorned with festive streamers and paper decorations.

The first store they passed made Sunset stop and gape at the display window. There, on sale, was the leather jacket she had eyed a few weeks ago. It hung on the rack in all its silver-studded glory. Sunset was drawn to it until she saw the price tag.

Her eye twitched.

— Дві тисячі гривень... і ви це називаєте знижкою? — She leaned her head a little and saw Flitter slouched against the register. She caught Sunset’s eye and stuck her tongue out.

— “I hate you,” — Sunset mouthed.

— “Sunset, what are you looking at?” — Twilight had stopped a few paces ahead and was glancing back curiously at Sunset.

— “A leather jacket I can’t afford,” — Sunset growled as she stomped forward.

The duo entered the next clothing store they encountered, advertising an autumn sale in the spirit of Halloween. Sunset mindlessly browsed and held up a few shirts to see how they looked on her. She wasn’t sure why she was doing

it; it wasn't like she could afford anything anyway. She flipped the shirt around and looked at the tag, sticking her tongue out at the price.

— П'ятсот гривень? І це зі знижкою? Чи слово «знижка» щось значить для когось? — She put the shirt back on the rack and looked over to Twilight, who was modeling a horrible green shirt in front of one the mirrors.

Sunset walked over to her.

— “You know, I don't know much about fashion, but even *I* know that that is one of the ugliest things I've ever seen.”

Twilight put it down, looking disappointed.

— “Yeah, I'm not very trendy either. My mom buys most of my clothes for me.”

Sunset snickered and patted her on the head.

— “Aw, wittle Twiilight Sparkwel still needs her mommy to shop for her?”

— “No!” — Twilight said defensively. She blushed and smacked Sunset's hand away. — “She never tells me when she does it, she just does.”

— “Well, maybe it's for the best.” — Sunset pointed back to the shirt. — “They'd laugh you right out of Canterlot High if you wore that... if Rarity didn't murder you first.”

— “You're probably right.” — Twilight reached down and looked at the price tag, making a face similar to Sunset. — “Yeesh, I couldn't afford this anyway.”

Sunset's mouth formed a thin line.

— “Wait a minute. If you can't afford anything, and I can't afford anything, then why are we here?”

— “Window shopping,” — Twilight said simply. — “That's what friends do together.”

— “Look at things they can't buy?” — Sunset scrunched her face in annoyance. — “That's stupid.”

Twilight put her hands on her hips and gave Sunset an inquisitive look.

— “Alright then, what do *you* do for fun?”

— “Well, I used to blackmail people and plot world domination, but that doesn’t really sound like fun anymore. Nowadays, I just lie around and... do nothing.” — Sunset pressed a palm against her head. — “I need a hobby.”

Twilight was silent for a moment, her face unreadable. Just as Sunset thought she had broken her, Twilight blinked twice.

— “Ummm, yeah... a hobby might be good for you. But, I think I have something else in mind you might find fun.”

— “What is it?”

— “How good are you at chess?” — Twilight asked with a sly look.

It was an intense battle.

Both sides had suffered numerous losses, and it was now coming down to the wire. It had been long and drawn out with both commanders out-moving and out-thinking the other before a piece could be lost.

Sunset wiped the thin line of sweat off her brow, biting down on her lip as she stared at her remaining soldiers. She paced back and forth on the outskirts of the giant chessboard set up in the mall's center. Twilight stood across from her, critically examining the board as well. Behind her were the numerous black pieces she had acquired from Sunset, while Sunset had her own impressive collection of Twilight's white pieces, none which had been lost willingly.

No, Twilight had fought tooth and nail to keep from losing any of her soldiers, while Sunset had been ready to make necessary sacrifices for the greater good of victory.

Around the two girls, an impressive crowd had gathered to watch the spectacle—a chess match of the ages. They whispered to each other, making sure not to break either girl's concentration. Some had even taken to recording the match.

Remaining on the board was a handful of pawns on both sides. On Twilight's end were both her knights, one rook, one bishop and her king. On Sunset's end was only one knight, but she had managed to keep both of her rooks at the cost of her bishops.

It was Sunset's move. Her king was tucked into the left corner, protected only by a mere pawn that faced obliteration in two easy moves. She needed to get rid of Twilight's rook, currently unobstructed by anything else on the board. Sunset knew she was at a disadvantage; the fact that she had fewer pieces left on the board spoke in volumes. But she was never one to admit defeat. No, she would win this match or die trying.

Unfortunately, Twilight wasn't stupid. She wouldn't fall for any simple ruse, and every move Sunset calculated seemed to ultimately end in her own failure.

However, Twilight was still desperate to not lose any more of her own soldiers. Perhaps Sunset could use that to her advantage.

She stepped onto the board and the surrounding crowd held its breath in anticipation. She picked up her rook and pushed it across the board, stopping three spaces under one of Twilight's knights. The other one stood and guarded the king.

Twilight frowned, looking between her knight and her rook. As she stepped onto the board, Sunset backed off, smiling as Twilight pushed her knight out of harm's way.

— “Oh, Twilight,” — Sunset said, repositioning her rook, — “you're so predictable.”

— “Am I really?” — Twilight moved her knight again.

— “Yes, you are—” — Sunset stopped, her rook in her hand as she examined the board again. Twilight was trying to lead her into a trap. Her knight was placed in a spot where, if Sunset placed her rook in front of it, Twilight's last bishop would sweep it away. — “Oh, well played.” — She placed her rook back down and walked to the other side. — “Unfortunately, you seemed to have forgotten about this.” — Sunset picked up her other rook and raced it over to Twilight's knight, pushing it out of position and taking it back to her side where the other pieces lay.

Twilight stomped her foot.

— “Drat. I didn't see that.” — She placed a hand over her mouth, concentration written on her face. Minutes passed without Twilight saying anything, let alone moving. Her eyes scanned the board, pausing at certain spots before jumping to another area. She finally raised her hands.

— “I yield.”

The crowd gasped and Sunset cried.

— “What?”

— “I've analyzed every possible move and unless you make a really amateur mistake, there's no way I can win. So, I yield.”

Sunset gaped at her.

— “You... you can’t just yield! This is a fight to the death! There’s no glory in this if you just give up!”

Twilight deadpanned.

— “Sunset, it’s a game of chess. Besides, sometimes the best strategy is to not fight at all.”

Sunset continued to stare, open mouthed as Twilight began returning the pieces to the board.

— “But-but-but...”

— “Relax, Sunset,” — Twilight said calmly, — “you won.”

It didn’t feel like a victory, and Sunset had half a mind to demand Twilight to play her again if a group of little kids hadn’t rushed onto the board at that moment.

— “Hey, hey!” — Sunset called, shooing them with her hand. — “We’re still using this!”

— “No, we’re not.” Twilight grabbed Sunset by the wrist and pulled her away.

Sunset struggled, but found Twilight’s grip was surprisingly strong when she wanted it to be.

— “But I haven’t beaten you yet!”

— “Yes you did, you won fair and square,” — Twilight insisted.

— “You gave up!”

— “I took my loss with grace.”

— “That isn’t—”

— “Let it go, Sunset!”

Sunset and Twilight stood back at the food court, in line for the ice cream and milkshake bar. Twilight had promised to pay since she had lost the chess match, though it didn't do much for Sunset's attitude. She stood next to Twilight, arms crossed and a bitter expression on her face.

Twilight looked at her and rolled her eyes.

— “Oh come on, Sunset, it's just a game. Why does it matter so much?”

— “Because that wasn't the way I wanted to win,” — she said sourly. — “I'm supposed to win using my sheer intellect and superior cunning skill! You're supposed to grovel at my boots, begging for mercy!” — She had her arms in the air with fingers curled, her expression that of devilish glee.

She tilted her head down towards Twilight who was giving her an unamused look.

— “What, is that wrong?”

Twilight pinched the bridge of her nose.

— “It's not what I'd call good sportsmanship. Especially with a game of *chess*.”

Sunset shrugged.

— “There's nothing wrong with wanting to win.”

— “Yes. But you could try winning with grace instead of wanting people to grovel beneath you.”

— “Old habits die hard and all that.”

Twilight gave a longing sigh and stepped up to the counter, pulling out a few dollar bills from her pocket.

— “What would you like?” — she asked Sunset.

— “I'll take a strawberry milkshake, plain and simple,” — Sunset said.

— “One strawberry milkshake and two scoops of vanilla, please,” — Twilight told the lady behind the counter. As she walked away to fill the order, Twilight leaned in towards Sunset and whispered, — “*That's* how you ask for something.”

Sunset rolled her eyes as hard as she could.

— “I don’t need politeness lessons from you.”

— “Somebody needs to teach them to you.”

The server came back with their milkshake and ice cream, and the two girls made their way over to a nearby booth, sitting across from each other.

Twilight took a spoon to her bowl of vanilla richness, taking slow nibbles out of it while Sunset slurped on her milkshake.

Opening her eyes from her strawberry heaven, Sunset caught Twilight staring in her direction with a vacant look in her eyes. Sunset looked back over her shoulder to see if there was anything of interest. All she found were pointless shop decorations and mall goers. She looked back to Twilight who was still staring into space. Her gaze seemed to be fixed onto Sunset; misty, purple eyes locked on target, a small glimmer within them.

It was making Sunset drastically uncomfortable.

— “What?” — she asked loudly, snapping Twilight out of her reverie.

— “What?” —she countered.

— “What were you staring at?”

— “S-staring? I wasn’t staring!” — Twilight’s face turned beet red.

Sunset clicked her tongue.

— “Uh, yeah, you were.”

— “No, no! I was just... thinking about... stuff,” — she said weakly.

— “Really? What kind of ‘stuff?’”

Twilight gave a dismissive wave of her hand.

— “Oh, you know, this and that. My mind really just goes everywhere, haha. It’s ironic, I mean, I’m so organized and yet, my brain isn’t half the time. I’ll just jump from topic to topic. One second I’ll be wondering how bees can fly with those tiny wings and next, I’ll be wondering how big the universe is!” — She swung her arms out to emphasize the stark vastness of the universe.

And collided with Sunset’s milkshake.

It flew backward and splattered all over the front of Sunset's shirt before dribbling down to her pants. Sunset stared down in shock, shivering slightly at the frozen treat's temperature.

— “You... you...”

— “Oh my gosh! I’m so, so, so, so sorry!” — Twilight squealed. She reached and grabbed a handful of napkins before reaching across the table and rubbing them across Sunset. — “Here, I can fix it!”

Sunset smacked her hand away.

— “Hey! You already spilled my milkshake, I don’t need you feeling me up as well!”

Twilight instantly recoiled, her face burning.

— “Feel you up? Oh, no, no, no! I would never feel you up! It was an accident! I wasn’t even thinking about your boobs! N-not that they aren’t nice! I wasn’t not thinking about them in the sense that they weren’t there, just the sense that I want nothing to do with them! Not that they’re bad, they’re better than mine! I mean, uh, from a scientific point of view they’re very appealing! And from a non-scientific view, I’m sure they’re nice as well! Not that I would know because I totally don’t think about girls that way. Actually, I don’t even think about guys that way! In fact, I’m asexual!”

— “Twilight,” — Sunset said in a low voice, dabbing at her shirt.

— “Yes?” — Twilight mewled.

— “Shut up!”

Twilight sank beneath the table.

— “Thank you.”

Sunset took slow, easy breaths, trying not to blow up at Twilight in public. She furiously scrubbed at the pink stain on the front of her red shirt.

Why does this always happen to me? I get dragged someplace, and then something bad happens.

Oddly enough, a smile spread across her face.

Heh, stay at home and have nightmares, or go out and be tortured by one of these six girls. I really can’t win.

— “Heh... heh heh.” — Sunset tossed her head back and broke into a loud chorus of laughter that echoed across the food court.

Twilight raised her head up.

— “What’s so funny?”

“My life!” — Sunset laughed. — “It’s so ironic! I try so hard to win and I always lose! Something almost always backfires on me now! And I’m so sleep-deprived that it’s *hilarious!*” — Sunset clutched her sides and stamped her feet on the floor, earning curious stares from those around her.

I’ll probably end up crying over it later, but right now it’s just so freaking funny!

Sunset couldn’t remember the last time she had laughed like this. Sure, it was over her own sad lot in life, but somehow, it still felt good.

She wiped a few tears from her eyes as her laughing fit came to its end. She grabbed her glass and sipped out the last dregs of her milkshake before standing up.

— “Come on, Sparkle. Let’s get out of here.”

Twilight slowly slid out of the booth, keeping a wary distance.

— “Wait, you’re not mad?”

— “Oh no, I’m furious,” — Sunset said in a casual tone. — “But right now, I don’t really care. So, you coming or what?” — Ignorant of Twilight’s answer, she continued on her path to the front entrance.

— “Again, I’m really, *really* sorry about that,” — Twilight said reappearing by Sunset’s side.

— “Meh. Just don’t ever mention it again. Ever.”

— “Deal.”

Sunset pushed the glass door open and stepped out into the waning sunlight. Had they really spent an entire afternoon together?

— “So.” — Sunset pointed over to her motorcycle. — “Do you want a ride back home?”

— “No!” — Twilight said quickly. — “I mean, uh, no thanks. Shining will pick me up.”

Sunset smirked.

— “Suit yourself.” — She shoved her hands into her jacket pocket, groaning as she made contact with syrupy residue. She let out a puff of air. — “Well, congratulations, Twilight, you’re no longer a liar. Happy?”

Twilight blushed again, pushing a strand of hair back.

— “Listen, I’m sorry I dragged you into this. I just panicked and yours was the first name that came to mind.”

— “Yeah, well... it wasn’t too bad. I had fun. Sans the milkshake.”

— “I’m glad.” — Twilight beamed. — “Maybe we can do it again with all the girls next time?”

— “Yeah, sure. That could be—” — Sunset stopped. — “Hey, wait a sec. Why did you single me out? Why didn’t you just say we were all going to hang out?”

— “Uh, uh, well... that’s because... they were all standing right next to me. I couldn’t expect them to keep up with my lie on the spot.”

— “Hmm.” — Sunset narrowed her eyes. — “I’m pretty sure most of them could have caught on.”

A nervous grin was plastered across Twilight’s face.

— “Well, I couldn’t take that chance. Better safe than sorry, right?”

Sunset snorted.

— “Wow. You were that desperate to get out of a date with Flash, huh?”

— “N-no! It’s not like that! I just... um...”

As Twilight fell silent, Sunset laughed and gave her a pat on the head. She turned on her heel and headed for her bike.

— “You know, I think I’m starting to like you more and more. Later, Twilight.”

Twilight gave a weak goodbye that was quickly lost on the wind. As Sunset put on her helmet and mounted her bike, a question popped into her mind that made her crease her brow.

Why was she staring at me like that?

Kpok 16: Ease on Down the Road

With how fleeting sleep had been at ‘home’, Sunset had learned a handy new trick: sleeping with her eyes open. It had started with her merely trying to stay awake in the middle of class, snapping her head up when she began to doze off and keeping her eyes open as wide as possible. Eventually, she just drifted off while still managing to stare at the chalkboard, her mind flickering between it and whatever her imagination was conjuring up.

By Wednesday, she would have liked to think she had become a master at it. She had gotten through all of her classes without being caught once, and she sat at the front of the class! She would have *liked* to think she was a master at it...

Until she snored in her last period.

Sunset had been resting her cheek in her palm, arm propped up on her desk. Her mouth was slightly agape and her eyes were glazed over in a vacant expression. Mr. Noteworthy had been in the middle of another long-winded history rant, his voice faintly buzzing in Sunset’s ear like tiny bees. Her snore had been loud enough that she managed to wake herself up. She quickly arranged herself in her seat to try and play it off, but the loud yawn that found its way out of her ruined any chance she had.

Mr. Noteworthy gave her a sharp glare, snapping the textbook he was holding shut.

— “Am I boring you again, Miss Shimmer?”

— “No, no more than usual,” — Sunset said in a weary voice. She was so out of it, she didn’t realize what she had said until a wave of giggles washed over the rest of the class.

Mr. Noteworthy let out a heavy breath through his nostrils.

— “Well then, you can have a nice, long nap in detention. Keep it up, Miss Shimmer and you’ll be serving until graduation.”

As he turned back to the blackboard, Sunset groaned and buried her face in her arms. He was right. With all the smart answers she had been giving her

teachers, she had accumulated an extra week-and-a-half of detentions on top of her original punishment.

Someone poked her in the arm. Sunset inched her eyes up to see Rarity giving her a sympathetic look.

— “Dear, are you still having trouble sleeping?”

Sunset gave a weak nod.

— “Yes.” — And she dropped her face again.

— “Didn’t you take any medicine like I suggested?”

— “I did. It didn’t help,” — Sunset growled.

— “Miss Rarity, would you like to join Miss Shimmer in detention?” Mr. Noteworthy asked, his back still facing the students.

Rarity immediately sat up straight.

— “No, sir.” — She fell silent and resumed taking notes. The class reverted back to its natural state of monotonous lecture and dim stupor.

Sunset was about to resort to pinching herself to stay awake before realizing there was little point. She had already received her quota of detention handouts for the day.

Besides, there couldn’t be that much time left in the school day to take a proper nap anyway...

The screeching school bell jolted her upright and she found everyone around her packing up and heading out the door. Either there really hadn’t been much time left, or she had managed to fall asleep without noticing again.

She grabbed her backpack and left the classroom, ignoring Mr. Noteworthy’s sour look as she walked out. Like usual, the hallways were a flurry of excited students scrambling to go home. And like usual, Sunset fought her way through the rowdy crowd, making her way to Celestia’s office to receive whatever manual chore the principal had in store for her today.

Pulling herself out of the tide of students, Sunset slipped into the office and slammed the door shut behind her. Celestia sat at her desk, filling out stacks of paperwork.

— “Must you always slam the door?” — she asked, not bothering to lift her head up.

Sunset was pretty sure the other Celestia had asked the same question years ago.

— “No, I suppose not. Force of habit I guess.” — She leaned against the guest chair, drumming her fingers on the head rest. — “So, what *exciting* task do you have for me this time?”

— “Well, I was thinking—” — Celestia looked up at Sunset and frowned, worry lines creasing her normally pretty face. — “Sunset, you look absolutely exhausted.”

— “I haven’t been getting great amounts of sleep recently,” — Sunset confessed, suppressing an unbidden yawn.

— “Would you like to talk about it?” — Celestia asked sincerely.

— “No.”

Celestia put the tips of her fingers together and gave Sunset a long, inquisitive stare. Her eyes were soft but still managed to pierce their way into Sunset’s soul.

Sunset tried to look elsewhere, but she could still feel the eyes on her. The silence in the room only served to make her more uncomfortable. It dragged on for several minutes before Sunset’s stubborn pride finally yielded.

— “It’s just some bad dreams, all right? It isn’t a big deal, just some stupid nightmares. I’ll get over it.”

— “I see. Have you tried talking to anyone about your nightmares? I’ve found talking them out is a great way to unburden the negative emotions they carry.”

— “No.” — Sunset slowly shook her head. — “Forgive me, but I’m not in a mood to spill my heart and soul. Like I said, I’ll get over it.”

Celestia let out a disappointed sigh.

— “Well, I can’t force you to talk about it if you don’t want to—” — Sunset bit down on her lip to stop herself from laughing — “—but keeping things bottled up is never healthy. I’ve seen you’ve surrounding yourself with a nice group of friends—”

To my dismay...

— “—perhaps you could confide in one of them?”

— “I’ll think about it. Now, can you please just give me my daily chore so I can do it and leave?”

Celestia smiled.

— “Actually, why don’t we just skip that for today? You’re free to go, Sunset.”

Sunset blinked in surprise.

— “Really? Just like that?”

— “Yes. I insist you go home and try to rest.”

Sunset’s whole face brightened up.

— “Well, you don’t have to tell me twice! See ya!” — With that, she bolted from the office, stopping only for a second to marvel at how fast the school could empty itself of its occupants.

She pushed out the front entrance and started her path home. She had forgone riding her motorcycle to school every day, remembering that gas was expensive... and she was practically broke. She had almost made it off school property when a loud, bubbly voice assaulted her ears.

— “Oooh, oooh! Sunset, wait for me!”

Sunset didn’t slow her pace, not that she had to. Pinkie was in step next to her within a few easy bounds, skipping along down the road.

— “Heeey, you’re not in detention! Did you decide to ditch today?”

— “No, Celestia decided to let me go early.” — She gave Pinkie a sideways look. — “Now, can I help you with something?”

— “Oh yeah! I was just wondering what costume you’ll be wearing for the party on Friday?”

— “I’m not wearing a costume, Pinkie. I’ve told you about ten times now,” Sunset said with an exasperated sigh.

Pinkie frowned.

— “Aww, come on, Sunny! Everyone else will be wearing one.”

— “So? If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you expect me to follow them?”

Pinkie fell silent, giving Sunset an absent-minded expression. She shifted back to her normal smile and said,

— “But you’ll get free candy! Don’t you want free candy?”

— “Not particularly.”

Stopping dead in her tracks, Pinkie gaped at Sunset, her eyes bulging out of her head.

— “*What?*” — She sped up and grabbed Sunset by the shoulders, spinning her around and shaking her. — “How could you say ‘no’ to *free candy*?”

“Like this: ‘No.’ Now, I’ll give you to the count of three to let go of me.”

Before Sunset had started counting, Pinkie had released her, allowing Sunset to continue her walk home. “I’m sorry, Pinkie, but I really don’t see much of a point to this holiday. I’m only going to the party because you asked.”

“Point?” Pinkie tilted her head. “Of course Halloween has a point.”

“I mean other than free candy.”

“I wasn’t going to say that!” Pinkie ran in front of Sunset and halted her. “Halloween is the one time of the year where we can dress up as our fears and laugh at them. It helps show that there’s nothing really to be afraid of! If we make something look ridiculous, then it isn’t scary anymore, right?”

Sunset stepped around her but began to reflect on her words. “Huh, I guess I never thought of it like that before.”

Pinkie caught up again and bobbed her head. “Uh-huh. It’s like my Granny Pie always told me—” She took in a deep breath of air, but Sunset’s quick hand covered her mouth before she could begin.

“No singing,” Sunset deadpanned.

She removed her hand, ignoring Pinkie’s pitiful expression. Pinkie, however, bounced back in a matter of seconds and asked with renewed optimism, “Soo, are you going to dress up now? It’s just for one night!”

Sunset sighed. Pinkie was right; it was just for a night. And she *was* supposed to be making friends. “Fine. I’ll do it. If only to get you to stop bothering me—oof!” Pinkie had wrapped her in a tight hug and spun her around a few times.

“Hooray! You’re going to have so much fun, I promise! And I know exactly who you could go as!”

“Oh no! I’m not taking any costume advice from you!” Sunset flailed her legs. “And put me down already!”

“Whoops!” Pinkie let her down, allowing Sunset to fix her crumpled jacket. “But, Sunset, you should totally take my advice this time!”

“Pfft, yeah, and I should totally get a new jacket, but that’s not gonna happen either.” She gave a forlorn look at her tattered black leather and groaned. “I’m perfectly capable of finding my own costume to wear.”

“Hey, with that jacket, you could make a good zombie!”

“Yeah, sure,” Sunset said dismissively. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to bed.”

“Alrighty, then!” Pinkie gave an emphatic wave. “But, if you change your mind, talk to Rarity! She’ll give you the perfect costume!”

I bet she will, Sunset thought. She began to whistle a simple tune as she contemplated what she could actually dress as. It was only for one night. What was the harm in playing along? Pinkie’s words about conquering fear had also struck a chord within Sunset. If facing your fears meant making them go away, then maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to...

She shook her head. “I’m not scared of anything,” Sunset said defiantly. “They’re just some stupid nightmares... that won’t go away... Guilty, maybe. But I’m certainly not scared.”

Sunset constantly reaffirmed this until she had reached the factory door, shoving it open with her shoulder. She dropped her backpack by the stairs and climbed up to her makeshift room, heading straight for her bed. She collapsed onto her lumpy mattress and pulled her boots and jacket off before drawing the blanket over her.

“You’re going to bed at this time of day?” Princess Twilight Sparkle asked from her position on the desk.

“It’s not like I have anything else to do,” Sunset grumbled. She looked at her alarm clock. It was only three thirty. With a sigh, she buried her face into her pillow and prayed for a good night sleep for once.

Pain. That was all she could feel. Intense, fiery pain that ate at her entire body. Yet, she could feel power coursing through every corner of being. Pure magic flooded her, drowning her in its burning embrace.

It was too much.

No, it wasn't enough!

Wings, claws, fangs... and fire. So much fire. She was something entirely different now. She wasn't equine, she wasn't human. She was a monster.

But she had power!

I've changed my mind! This isn't what I wanted!

No, yes it is! I finally have the Element of Magic! I'm unstoppable!

But it hurts too much!

Get over it! I've come too far to quit now! Not when I'm this close!

She was flying. Towering over all of them, showing off her superiority. They cowered beneath her, trembling in fear. It was so delicious, so satisfying, but she wanted more.

"I am your princess now, and you will be loyal... to me!"

Brainwashing all of the students... I can't even remember if this was part of the plan either...

Just roll with it. We have an army now! There is no way Celestia can stop us!

"Twilight Sparkle has interfered with my plans one too many times already! She needs to be dealt with!"

Wait... Wait! No! You can't kill them! They don't deserve that!

But the ball of fire had already been thrown, set on a direct course for the six girls huddling together. This was the moment. She had finally won.

Sunset laughed.

The next morning found Sunset wrapped tightly in her blankets, having created a cocoon to shield her from the bad dreams. She extracted an arm to

silence her noisy alarm clock before unfurling herself from her miniature sanctuary, still dressed in yesterday's clothes.

She couldn't decide which was worse: the nights she got no sleep at all, or the nights her sleep consisted of mostly nightmares. She rubbed her face, feeling the dry streaks her tears had made during the course of the night.

"What do I have to do to make it stop?" Sunset looked up at the stuffed toy, but for once, it didn't answer. "Figures," she huffed.

After a long stretch, Sunset hurried through her morning routine. The cold shower helped shake off some of the fatigue still clinging to her. After a simple breakfast of cereal and an apple, she returned upstairs and got dressed, taking a few spare moments to browse her limited wardrobe. She was curious now about the options she had for a reasonable costume.

She pulled out a nice, purple gown with large, pink sleeves. Holding it in front of the broken mirror, it looked like it might be a little snug, but Sunset was pretty sure she could make it work.

"Easy enough," she said, folding it up and putting it back in the dresser. "I'll just go as a princess." She walked over to her desk and selected one of her many crowns before standing in front of the mirror again with it held over her head.

Sunset screamed and threw herself against the far wall while the crown fell to the floor with a small *clang*. Her knees buckled and she joined it, panting like she had just run a mile. She leaned against the wall with a hand over her erratic heart.

Very slowly, she lifted her head up to look at her reflection. Staring back at her was a wide-eyed Sunset, differentiating from the original one only by the crack running down the mirror face. They both reached for the crown lying at their feet, staring like it was a snake ready to bite. In unison, both of them hurled the crown at the mirror, cracking the glass into hundreds of small shards. Many of them fell to the floor, while the rest reflected the appearance of a hundred disheveled Sunset Shimmers.

"You're seeing things... just get a hold of yourself. It's just some rampant paranoia!" Sunset took a deep breath and pushed herself to a standing position.

“What will it take to admit you’re scared?” Twilight Sparkle asked.

“I am *not* scared!” Sunset protested. “Do I have a guilty conscience? Sure, I’ll admit that! Am I annoyed that I’m being excessively punished? Yes! But, I am certainly not scared! I’m not scared of anything!” Sunset closed her eyes, holding two fingers against the side of her head and breathing deeply. She slipped on her jacket and boots and headed down stairs.

“Either way...” she mumbled to herself, “I think I’ll put a hold on the princess idea. Maybe I should ask Rarity for some costume advice.” She scooped her backpack up and pulled open the front door.

“But if she says the word ‘demon,’ I’m punching her in the throat.”

To Sunset’s surprise, Rarity had been absolutely thrilled at the idea of making an outfit for her. Sunset supposed it was just Rarity’s instinct as a natural fashionista to want to make clothes for anyone.

So, after another tedious day of school and detention, Sunset wandered over to Rarity’s dress shop, the Canterlot Boutique. For a store she practically ran by herself, it was pretty well maintained. It was a rather large building nestled on the street corner and stuck out amongst the other gray buildings with its white and purple paint. Well-dressed mannequins posed in the full-body window at the front and a bright, warm welcome sign was pinned over the entrance.

Sunset pushed the door open, the tinkle of a bell echoing over her head. The inside looked far classier than half of the corporate owned dress stores Sunset had browsed in. The walls and carpet were a calmer purple than the coat outside and adorned with several works of modern art. Soft couches were gathered around a glass table piled with fashion magazines. A long, black curtain veiled the doorway separating the waiting room from the rest of the shop.

“Rarity, you in here?” Sunset called.

“I’m in the back, darling. Come right on in.”

Sunset closed the door behind her and slipped through the dividing curtain, finding herself in what she guessed was the heart of the shop. A large stage had been set up in the center, flanked on three sides by full body mirrors. Next to it

was a work desk cluttered with roles of thread and color pallets. Stray mannequins stood around in various poses, some of them fully dressed and others with half-finished designs on them.

Rarity stood next to a fully clothed one, fiddling with its plaid skirt. A measuring tape was draped around her neck and a pair of red spectacles sat over her eyes. She smiled as Sunset came in. “Hello, dear. Sorry for the mess. Things can get a little hectic around here sometimes.”

“It’s all right,” Sunset said, spinning around once to get a look at everything. “So, how are we going to do this?”

Rarity straightened up and dragged the mannequin off to the side. “Just stand on the stage so I can take some measurements and we’ll work from there.”

Sunset complied and hopped up on the raised platform, holding her arms out as Rarity stepped up and started measuring her.

“Well, Sunset, I must say, I was rather surprised when you asked me to make a costume for you.” Rarity ran the tape along Sunset’s shoulders, stopping to quickly jot numbers on a clipboard. “I really didn’t expect you to warm up to the idea this soon.”

“Neither did I. Oddly enough, Pinkie convinced me it could be... fun in some ways. And I suppose trying something new won’t kill me.”

Rarity looked over her glasses with astoundment. “I’m sorry, did you say *Pinkie* convinced you?”

Sunset couldn’t help but smirk. “Yep. Don’t worry, I’m surprised too.”

With a shrug, Rarity continued with her measurements and said, “Either way, I’m glad you decided to join in our camaraderie. Now then, do you have any ideas on what you want?”

“Actually, no. I was kinda hoping you could give me some advice,” Sunset said sheepishly.

Rarity wrapped the tape around Sunset’s waist, humming to herself as she worked. “Well... I’m not entirely sure what to tell you, Sunset. People usually go as things they find interesting, or something that will really scare people. Maybe you just need to find something you like—something that relates to you.”

Sunset looked down at her. “And what are you going as?”

“Me? Actually, the whole group has decided to dress in a specific theme this year. Sort of a way to celebrate us coming back together as friends.”

Sunset eyes found the ceiling and cleared her throat. “Right. Well... what is this theme?”

“We all decided to be characters from *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“*The Wizard of Oz*...” Sunset tapped a finger against her chin. “You know, I’ve heard a lot of references to that, but I never bothered to look it up. What is it?”

Rarity looked at her in disbelief. “You’ve never seen *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“No. I thought I just made that clear.”

“Right, sorry.” Rarity walked over to the organized chaos that was her desk and began sifting through color pallets. “I guess even with the time you’ve spent here, you wouldn’t be caught up on all of our pop culture references. Still, I can’t believe you’ve never bothered to watch any incarnation of it... or even read the books.”

“So are you going to tell me sometime today, or are you just going to keep building suspense?” Sunset asked, her tone surly.

Fortunately, she couldn’t see Rarity roll her eyes. “It’s a timeless story about a normal girl that gets swept away to a magical and strange land.”

Sunset took a seat on the platform, getting comfortable. “I can relate to that.”

Rarity pulled up a chair. “It’s relatable to everyone, darling. It’s really a delightful tale that you should look into. And the musical performances are simply stunning!”

“Well, in the meantime, why don’t you tell me more about it?”

A smile graced Rarity’s lips. “I don’t see why not.”

For the next half-hour, Sunset sat in rapt attention as Rarity told her the story of Dorothy and all her friends. She listened to tales of munchkins and magical slippers. Of Dorothy’s travel down the yellow brick road and her encounter with the brainless Scarecrow, the heartless Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion. How Dorothy made it to the mystical Emerald City, only to be asked by the

Great and Powerful Oz to defeat the Wicked Witch of the West. And finally, how Dorothy beat the witch herself and revealed Oz to be nothing more than a charlatan before returning home.

Throughout it, Sunset couldn't help notice a few parallels to her own life, some less pleasant than others. While the story itself sounded ridiculous at some points, she had to admit it had its charms.

"So, for our costumes," Rarity said after concluding the story, "I'm going as the Good Witch of the North, Twilight is Dorothy, Applejack is the Scarecrow, Fluttershy is the Cowardly Lion, Rainbow is going to be Oz, and Pinkie decided to beat off the track a little and go as the Queen of Munchkin Land."

Sunset was unsurprised by most of these choices. She had to restrain herself from making a comment about Applejack or Fluttershy. "So, if I wanted to join you guys, I guess I only have two characters to choose from really."

Rarity nodded. "Yes. You could go as the Wicked Witch—"

"Not gonna happen."

"I figured as much. So, that just leaves the Tin Man, or Tin Girl in your case. That is, if you really want to."

Sunset leaned back on the podium and closed her eyes. She couldn't think of anything else she could go as. Besides, she and the Tin Man had some things in common. Most notably, neither of them had a heart.

Well, that's not entirely true. Sunset shuddered as an image of the black-crusted heart drifted through her mind. Still, it beat going dressed as a witch. Sunset was sure she didn't need anything close to *that* particular image of herself.

"All right, Rarity. I guess I'll be the Tin Girl of the group."

Rarity jumped out of her chair and ran over to her rolls of fabric. "Excellent! Oh, this is going to be so much fun! Hmm, it's going to be a challenge, though; Silver does not go well with your vibrant hair. But it will bring out your eyes."

"Rarity, it's just a costume," Sunset said pointedly.

“That doesn’t mean it can’t be stunning.” Rarity wagged a finger. “No matter the occasion, you must always look your best.” She pulled out a bundle of silver cloth. “Now, Sunset, I’m going to make you look *fabulous!*”

And I’m going to regret this...

Kpok 17: The Spectacular Seven

The Friday of Halloween found Canterlot High decked to the nines in all things spooky and festive. Cobwebs hung in every corner, complete with authentic looking spiders (to many of the students' displeasure). Orange and black banners draped from the ceilings, and a carved jack-o-lantern sat on every teacher's desk. Ominous fog drifted out of the lab rooms and coated many of the hallways in a light mist. Some of the students even found a skeleton hiding in their lockers.

Sunset had to admit it was all very impressive. But not as impressive as herself. She strutted down the hallway in her new silver boots, relishing every eye that turned her way. The polished boots matched the rest of her outfit: silver jeans and long-sleeved silver blouse with a tall collar. A square outline of black thread had been stitched into the front of the blouse to resemble a compartment door, and ball joints had been painted onto the elbows and knees, giving her an authentic mechanical look. Her hair had even been pinned up and tucked into a silver cap that sat on her head, completing the ensemble.

She continued her stroll down the corridors, swinging her hips with every step. The spotlight was on her again, everyone's attention turning as she walked past them. Some of them smiled, a small few even gave compliments. Sunset grinned, soaking in every second of it. It felt like she was in complete control again, dominating the school like she had only a month ago with everyone staring at her in envy or admiration. She felt tall, she felt empowered!

She felt the Munchkin Queen tackle her to the floor.

"Sunset, you *did* dress up! I can't believe it! And you went as my suggestion! Oh wait, I never told you my suggestion..." Pinkie gasped, her entire face lighting up. "You were going to dress up this whole time, weren't you? Yeah, you were! You just wanted it to be a surprise! Well, color me surprised because it worked! You look great as the Tin Man! Whoops, I mean the Tin Girl!"

"No, Pinkie, this was a last minute thing Rarity put together for me. Now, could you be so kind as to *get off me!*" Sunset would have pushed Pinkie off, but, like every other time she had been tackled, Pinkie had managed to pin her arms down.

Pinkie hauled Sunset to her feet and dusted her off. “Sorry, Sunny! I’m just so excited! Tonight is gonna be so much fun!”

Sunset looked Pinkie up and down, scrutinizing her costume. She was dressed in a poofy ball gown with an assortment of bright colors, most of them shades of pink. On her head was a large, regal crown—also pink—and in one hand was a short scepter, which too was... pink.

Sunset scrunched her face, fighting not to throw up at the sight of her.

“So, what do you think of the school’s decorations?” Pinkie asked, gesturing with her scepter. “I’ve been planning this all month!”

“It’s very nice. You did a pretty good job,” Sunset said. Leave it to Pinkie to go all out for an event like Halloween.

The bell to start school rang, only instead of its usual shrill cry, it tolled like an old church bell. Slow, even gongs that pounded at Sunset’s eardrums and echoed loudly across the campus. She was positive anyone in the surrounding neighborhoods had been woken up by it.

“How did you pull that off?” Sunset asked, rubbing her ears.

Pinkie smirked, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. “I have my ways.” She lifted her staff and tapped Sunset twice on each shoulder. “Now, you are cordially invited to have a seat at the table of the Spectacular Seven come this lunch period,” Pinkie said in her most royal voice.

“The Spectacular Seven?”

“Uh-huh. It’s our official group name! Isn’t it neat?”

“Not really, no. Why do we need a group name anyway?”

“Because making names is fun! And it makes us feel even closer as friends! Come on, don’t you feel even *closer* being in a group with a super cool name? What was the word Twilight used... oh yeah, it’s like solidarity!”

“I don’t know... I guess so?” Sunset doubted naming their little group could create any feeling of solidarity. And yet, just knowing she was being included sparked a small warmth inside of her. It was quickly choked out by the image of a fireball and the sound of maniacal laughter, leaving only a trail of guilt behind, and a deep frown on her face.

Pinkie laughed. “Wow, you’re really in character, Sunset.” She tapped Sunset on the head with her staff. “Don’t worry, Tin Girl, we’ll get you that heart!” She turned with a flourish and skipped down the hall, singing as she went. *“Follow the yellow brick road! Follow the yellow brick road!”*

Sunset sighed and rubbed her temples. “Why does talking to her always leave me with a headache?”

Even on Halloween, most teachers tried to conduct class as normal, though they spent half of the class time trying to rein everyone in from their conversations and exchange of early candy. Other teachers embraced the spirit of the holiday, dressing up along with the students and having a lax class session. Ms. Cheerilee had chosen to dress as a vampire this year and awarded candy to anyone who could answer her pop culture questions correctly.

Vice Principal Luna had donned what looked like gothic armor, and hid in the shadows or around sharp corners, jumping out and scaring the living daylights out of anyone wandering the halls alone.

The lunch room was a parade of costumes and a bazaar of candy deals. Black cloth covered every table, and the lights had been turned off, allowing the room to only be illuminated by the weak, autumn sunlight.

Sunset sat at her place at the table, a large slice of pumpkin pie in front of her. To her immediate right was Twilight, dressed in a white blouse and a long blue and white plaid skirt. Combined with the ponytail she had tied her hair into, it was a very country look and fit with the mental image Sunset had of Dorothy. Next to Twilight was Applejack, wearing a worn out shirt and pants, both of them dyed a muddy brown with straw sticking out of the openings.

Once again, it took all of Sunset’s energy not to comment.

Following Applejack along the table was Fluttershy. Her hair was tucked into the hoodie over her head, lined with thick tufts of pink fuzz, resembling a lion’s mane. She had a long sleeved cream shirt on with gloves in the shape of paws attached to the ends that she could slip her hands in and out of and a tail stuck out the back of her furred pants.

Rainbow sat next to her. Her outfit consisted of a black blazer with matching pants and a cape. Completing the look was a top hat that still managed to compliment her multi-chromatic hair. Out of everyone, Sunset found Rainbow's choice to be Oz the oddest. Though she supposed no one else in the story fitted very well. And it wasn't as if Trixie was going to join them anytime soon. Looking over to her table, Sunset saw that she hadn't even bothered to dress up.

Next was Rarity, sporting a sparkling white dress that shone in multiple colors when it caught the light. A small tiara sat on her head, and she had a wand strapped to her waist. Rounding off the table was Pinkie, stuffing her face with pumpkin pie.

"Applejack!" Pinkie said, spraying crumbs all across the table. "You promised you'd bring more pie to the sleepover, right?"

Applejack chuckled. "Don't worry, Pinkie. Granny Smith made an extra pie, just for you."

"Oh boy!" Pinkie lifted her plate to her face, licking it clean before setting it aside. Her expression became serious and she reached under the table to pull up a large sheet of paper. Unrolling it across the surface, Sunset recognized it as an outline of the local neighborhoods.

Pinkie uncapped a red pen and drew a circle around one of the houses. "All right, here's the game plan girls! We start from my house, then, we move up along West Oak and make a left onto Crescent." Her hand traced the determined path, dying the street red with ink and marking several houses with dots. "In the past years, these houses give out *really* good candy. Oh, and Mr. Dozer over here always gives out king-sized candy bars, but they go *super* quick, so if you want one, you'll have to run ahead with me. After that, we'll —"

Sunset eased back against her chair, tuning Pinkie out and closing her eyes for a moment. There was that feeling again: warm and tingly. She recalled something similar when she had worked at the Animal Shelter with Fluttershy. Sunset didn't bother to try and deny she was enjoying it. Yes, she still found most of the girls at the table annoying in some way or another, but perhaps she

needed annoying right now. Something, *anything* to distract her from her constant string of nightmares.

“—and then we’ll come back to my house and count up our haul! Then, we’ll play games, eat candy, tell spooky stories and play Monopoly!”

“Pinkie, we’ll be up until sunrise playing Monopoly,” Rainbow whined.

“That’s what you think,” Pinkie said shrewdly, a glint in her eye.

Sunset opened her eyes as a thought dawned on her. She furrowed her brow in concentration, trying to remember if what she thought could really be true.

Twilight leaned into her peripheral. “What’s wrong, Sunset?”

Sunset lifted her head. “Nothing. I just realized... this is my first sleepover.”

“You’ve never been to a sleepover?” Rainbow covered her mouth, snickering uncontrollably. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Rainbow, don’t laugh!” Pinkie exclaimed. “This is a serious matter!” She grabbed Sunset’s shoulders and looked her in the eye. “Don’t worry. Now, I *Pinkie Promise* you that you’ll have the bestest time ever! Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!”

“What kind of promise is that?” Sunset asked, giving Pinkie an outlandish look.

“The kind of promise that can’t be broken,” Pinkie said proudly.

Three loud gongs signaled the end of lunch, and everyone began to hastily shove candy into their backpacks. The seven girls got up, discarded their lunch trays and headed out down the hallway, breaking off into their respective classrooms.

“Remember, five o’clock, my house!” Pinkie called. “And don’t worry, Sunset, I’ll have a sleeping bag for you!”

Sunset gave Pinkie a simple thumbs up before following Twilight into their Advanced Trigonometry class. It was a small class size, consisting of only ten other students besides themselves.

They seated themselves at the front of the class, and like usual, Twilight went into what Sunset liked to call ‘absolute focus mode,’ where she managed to block out everything but the teacher. Not that Sunset ever complained.

Pulling out her notebook and pencil, Sunset heard Twilight whisper, “I really like your costume.”

Sunset smirked in surprise. “Oh, so she can speak in class. This is news to me.”

Twilight’s cheeks burned red, and she looked forward at the blackboard. “Sorry, I just get so caught up in learning.”

“Nerd,” Sunset said out of the corner of her mouth. Oddly enough, this got a giggle out of Twilight.

“All right, now settle down, class,” Ms. Vector said sternly, scraping the chalk against the board. “I don’t care if it is Halloween. We still have a lot to cover.”

Sunset began her dubious scribble of notes, only half paying attention to what was being said. A quick glance over at Twilight showed she was doing the exact opposite, completely enraptured by every word.

“Heh.” Sunset shook her head in amusement. “Not that it matters,” she said softly, “but I like your costume, too, Twilight.”

For the first time in forever, Sunset found herself actually looking forward to something other than sleeping after her detention session. She swept up the rampant amount of candy wrappers littering the halls, imagining what trick-or-treating would be like, or how the sleepover would go. It was more out of curiosity than excitement Sunset would tell herself. But, like with the small feeling of warmth she had found sitting next to the others, part of her couldn’t deny that she was just a *little* excited.

Just a little.

“*Boo!*”

“Ack!” Sunset jumped a yard back, dropping the broom with a *clang*. She placed a hand over her chest to still her pounding heart and glared up at her laughing tormenter. “Ms. Luna, what the heck?”

“Ahaha, I’m sorry, Miss Shimmer.” Luna smiled at Sunset, her face obscured by an odd blue helm, matching the rest of her armored attire. “But I saw you

were alone and couldn't resist scaring one more student before leaving. I'm surprised at how far you jumped."

"That's because you nearly gave me a heart attack!"

Luna airily waved a hand. "Lighten up, Miss Shimmer. Life is no fun without a good scare. Besides, it's Halloween; you should be expecting such things." She turned, flourishing her cape as she walked away. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, Miss Shimmer," she said in a ghoulish voice.

Sunset glowered in her direction as she picked the broom up again. She wasn't scared... she had just been surprised.

"I apologize about my sister—" Sunset jumped again at the voice behind her "—she's always taken a shine to this holiday."

Sunset turned and faced Celestia. She was wearing a slim, white dress with a golden tiara on her head. She resembled her pony princess counterpart more than ever.

"Yeah, I've noticed," Sunset said sourly. She returned to sweeping, using a bit more aggression to push the broom. "Nice costume by the way."

"You know, with that tone, I can't tell if you're being sarcastic," Celestia said testily.

Sunset softened her voice a little. "I mean it, it's a nice costume.... it suits you."

"Oh. Well, thank you. I like your costume too, Tin Girl. The silver really brings out your eyes."

A faint blush rose to Sunset's cheeks. It had been a long time since she had heard any sort of praise from Celestia. "Thank you," she murmured.

Celestia walked around her and picked up a stray piece of paper, tossing it into a nearby trash can. "I think I've kept you here long enough. I'd hate to ruin any plans you have for the evening."

Sunset leaned on her broom. "You know, for the lady who's supposed to be punishing me, you're awfully lenient half the time."

"Oh? Well, if that's how you feel I could always just contact the authorities and—"

“Did I ever mention that I just *love* how kind and gracious you are? Not to mention so forgiving and understanding.”

Celestia smiled in satisfaction. “Run along now, Sunset. I’m sure you have much better things to be doing today. Just try to stay out of trouble.”

“No promises,” Sunset said, briskly walking for the exit.

Outside, the evening air was cool and crisp. While Sunset was grateful to be wearing long-sleeved attire, she pined for her leather jacket and the extra warmth it provided, regardless of the multiple tears in it. She thought about it, sitting on her mattress in its forlorn state and sighed.

“Here you are, dear,” Rarity said, folding the silver shirt and placing it on top of the jeans being held in Sunset’s arms. “Everyone is going to love it! But, are you sure you won’t consider painting your face to complete the look?”

“I’m positive,” Sunset said flatly. She wanted to dress up, not look like a circus clown.

Rarity placed the silver cap on top of the shirt. “Suit yourself. Either way, you’re going to look stunning!”

Sunset managed a smile. “Thanks, Rarity. And listen, I don’t have much money right now, but whatever I owe you—”

“Money?” Rarity broke into a fit of laughs. “Don’t be silly, Sunset. You don’t owe me anything. This was a gift. From one friend to another.”

“Oh... well...” Sunset shifted her shoulders, focusing her gaze on a particularly interesting piece of carpet. “T-thanks... but, I don’t have anything to give back... That’s how this works, right?”

Rarity gave her a bemused smile. “No, Sunset. You don’t have to give me anything. Friends give each other things not because they have to, but because they want to. I won’t hold this over your head and blackmail you with it.”

Sunset made a tiny growl in the back of her throat. Rarity’s face looked sincere, but she couldn’t help but feel that had been a tiny jab at her own past practices. Regardless, she nodded her head in thanks and began to walk out the door, pausing in the threshold.

“Umm... Rarity. Do you think... is possible for you to fix...?” She looked over her shoulder and saw Rarity shake her head.

“I’m sorry, dear. I don’t work with real leather. Very expensive, and not really in my skill range. And I’d hate to think what Fluttershy would say if I did dabble.”

“Oh,” was all Sunset could muster herself to say.

“But, I could make you a new jacket,” Rarity said hopefully. “I have plenty of designs you could pick from.”

Sunset shook her head. “No thanks. You’ve done a lot already. I feel like I owe you as it is.”

Rarity clicked her tongue in disappointment. “Very well. But if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Sunset unceremoniously dumped the contents of her backpack onto the bed next to her jacket before re-stuffing it with pajamas, a spare change of clothes and her toothbrush. She turned to check herself in the mirror, frowning when she saw the fractured glass and her one-hundred broken reflections.

“Guess I’m using the bathroom mirror from now on.” She looked around the room one last time, making sure she had everything, then slung her backpack over her shoulder. As Sunset put her hand over the light switch, she looked back and asked, “Aren’t you going to say something?”

“No. Just try to have fun. And I mean actually *try*,” Twilight Sparkle urged.

“No promises,” Sunset said half-jokingly. She flipped the lights off, shut the door and headed downstairs. “Fun or not, it’ll be nice getting out of my own head for a while.”

Sunset quickly checked herself over in the mirror, adding a little more makeup to the bags under her eyes. When they were a little less notable, she departed from the factory, grabbing her helmet as she walked out the door.

She rode back across town, to the edge of the suburbs where some of the older houses sat. Parents were taking the younger kids on their rounds for candy while the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

Pinkie's house was... odd. Odd in the sense that it was completely normal. Sunset had been expecting some bright, bubblegum pink house with pinwheels sticking out everywhere or rooms in the shape of a cupcake or *something* strange. Instead, it was a dull, gray two story house with a patio that looked like it had seen better days.

Sunset dismounted from her motorcycle and walked up the stone pathway. On both sides of her, smooth gravel was laid out in decorative patterns while large, gray rocks sat scattered about.

"A rock garden?" Sunset mused to herself. Sure, it was weird, but it wasn't *Pinkie* weird. Sunset would have thought it to be incredibly dull by her standards.

She walked up the patio steps, the old, splintered wood creaking under her weight. Sunset was afraid it might snap under her. The only decoration on the porch was also the sole piece of evidence Sunset had that Pinkie lived here. It was paper mâché ghost hanging from a wire. It had a comically drawn face that made it look more silly than frightening. Other than that, there was a small sign on the door that said, 'We have candy.'

Sunset rapped on the door, bracing herself for whatever trap Pinkie was trying to lure her into. For all Sunset knew, Pinkie was trying to get her to lower her guard and get a good scare out of her.

Once again, Sunset was taken by surprise in the way she least expected. When the door opened, she was not greeted with a suffocating bear hug, a shower of confetti, or even an ear splitting 'hi.' On the contrary, standing in the doorway was a girl Sunset thought was the complete antithesis of Pinkie by aura alone.

She had gray skin, straight purple hair and was wearing the simplest frock Sunset had ever seen. Her very expression—if one could call it that—was that of total disinterest.

"May I help you?" Like the rest of her, her voice was devoid of feeling.

"Yes, uhh... Pinkie Pie... she does live here, right?"

The girl nodded slowly. "Wait here."

The door swung closed with a horrible squeak, and Sunset was left alone on the porch for several minutes. She had started to think the girl had forgotten to get Pinkie or was playing some kind of joke. Just as Sunset was about to knock again, the door burst open and Pinkie grabbed her by the arm and pulled her inside.

Pinkie squealed, jumping up and down with her arm still interlocked with Sunset's. "You came, you came! And you're the first one here! You must have *really* been looking forward to this! We're gonna have so much fun!"

"Pinkie, first tell me, who was the girl that sucked the life out of me?" Sunset yanked her arm back and rolled her shoulder.

"Oh, you mean Maud? She's my big sister! Isn't she cool?"

Sunset winced at what was coming next. "No, she isn't... I'm sorry, Pinkie, I didn't—"

"Aww, that's okay." Pinkie smiled fondly. "It takes a while to get through her shell, but once you do, she's really, really awesome! She's kinda like you actually!"

Great, I've been compared to practically a rock now. Life is good. Sunset pushed past the remark and observed the spacious room they were in. "So, this is where you live?"

All of the furniture—not that there had been much to begin with—had been pushed to the white walls which were mostly bare save for a few family portraits. A long table sat next to the window with bags of chips, punch, and pizza spread out over the top. Next to it were two large speakers with a disco ball hanging over them.

Pinkie jumped and spun around in the large open area. "Yep! And tonight, we have it all to ourselves! My mom and dad took my little sisters out for the night. Maud's just here to look after me."

"Pinkie, you're seventeen. You don't need..." Sunset blinked. "Nevermind, yes you do."

The doorbell rang, and Pinkie bounded over and flung the door open, revealing Oz and the Cowardly Lion. Both of them stepped inside, sleeping bags tucked under their arms and backpacks slung over their shoulders.

“Man, how long has it been since we had a sleepover?” Rainbow asked. She tossed her stuff into a corner and headed for the snack table.

“Forever! That’s why this one is going to be super awesome!” Pinkie gasped and ran up the stairs. “I almost forgot!” She returned to the balcony and tossed something over. “Here, Sunset!”

Sunset quickly stuck her arms out and caught it. Upon further examination, she found it was a rather dusty sleeping bag. And...

It was pink.

She stuck her tongue out and tossed it in the corner next to Rainbow and Fluttershy’s things. “Thanks, Pinkie,” she said begrudgingly.

Rarity was next to join them, followed shortly by Applejack with a pie in hand, and lastly Twilight, who came with Spike huddled in her arms. Rarity instantly went over to gush at him, practically snatching the dog from Twilight.

Spike didn’t seem to mind at all.

Everyone grabbed a quick bite to eat before pulling out pillowcases and flashlights and lining up in front of the door. Pinkie marched in front of them wearing her serious face again.

“All right, ladies! It’s that time of year again. The one day we brave the horrors of the night in search of the sweetest treats the neighborhood has to offer! It will be a dark, perilous journey. Filled with unspeakable horrors. Teeming with nightmares. Brimming with—”

“Pinkie, if you don’t hurry up, we won’t get any candy!” Rainbow said, tapping her foot and scowling.

“Whoops, sorry! Right then, on with the hunt!” She threw the door open and pointed out with her scepter. “Forward march!”

They spilled out into the settling dusk, their shadows lengthened by the last light of the sun. Sunset stepped out of the house last and found a miniature jack-o-lantern dangling in her face.

“Here, Sunset!” Pinkie shook the plastic container. “Now you can get some candy, too!”

“Pinkie, I’m not interested in getting candy. I told you that.”

Pinkie rattled the pumpkin again. "You know you want to!"

Sunset snatched the handle. "One house."

Satisfied, Pinkie skipped ahead singing, "*Ease on down, ease on down the road! Come on, now! Ease on down, ease on down the road...*"

Even as she shook her head in disbelief, Sunset felt the corners of her mouth twitch.

One house quickly turned into three, then five, then ten. If only because every time they went up to the door, someone made sure to drag Sunset up with them, preventing her from hiding in the shadows. She was surprised at how quickly her candy pail could fill up. Then again, no one seemed particularly stingy about dishing out candy.

By the time they had completed the first block, night had fallen completely, and the streets had been left to the older kids and rowdy teens. Laughter and shrieks of both fear and delight permeated the air. Flashlights and even a few sparklers lit the streets better than many of the lampposts.

Myths and monsters, ghouls and ghosts, heroes and villains all marched up and down the street with bags of candy in hand. Along their journey, the girls of the Spectacular Seven ran into many of their classmates. Colgate was dressed as the Tooth Fairy, Roseluck had gone as Medusa. They even ran into Derpy, wearing tattered clothes and a paper bag on top of her head.

"I'm a hobo!" she said cheerfully.

After what Sunset had estimated to be around their twentieth house, she had begun to discreetly tip some of her candy into other bags. Her own pail had begun to feel like an iron weight. On a few occasions, she had decided to sample some pieces, having never bothered to try this world's candy before. To her surprise, she found the sour lemon drops delightfully tasty.

They stopped in front of the next house, decorated with a string of orange lights in the bushes. Sunset couldn't be sure in the dark, but the house seemed familiar...

Something prodded her shoulder. "Go on, Tin Girl! You ring the bell this time!" Pinkie said encouragingly.

“Do I have to?”

“It’s part of the experience, dear. Be a good sport,” Rarity said.

Sunset humphed and marched up the path, everyone else trailing right behind her. She buzzed the doorbell, stuck her pumpkin out and bowed her head in embarrassment. “Trick or treat,” she muttered when she heard the door open.

“...Sunset?”

She snapped her head up at the familiar voice and narrowed her eyes. “Oh great, it’s you.” *Geez, how could I not recognize his house? I’ve only been here a hundred times!*

“Ooops. Awkward,” Pinkie whispered behind her.

Flash stared at Sunset with an equal amount of disfavor. “I thought you weren’t into Halloween.”

“I’m allowed to change my mind,” Sunset said icily.

Flash looked away, dropping a single piece of candy into her pail. “Well... your costume looks... nice.”

“Thanks.”

They both stood frozen in their positions. Sunset glared at him as hard as she could, while Flash kept his stoic face pointed in the other direction. Sunset gave up, resisting the urge to give him a good kick in the shins, and stomped off the porch, letting the others line up to receive candy.

Back on the sidewalk, she fished around in her store of candy for another sourball. She found the yellow ball and popped it into her mouth, clenching it between her molars while she listened to Flash make pleasant conversation with the other girls.

“Happy Halloween, Flash!” Pinkie waved back as she approached Sunset a minute later.

Sunset jabbed a finger at her. “You did this on purpose.”

Pinkie threw her hands up in defense. “I didn’t, honest. I forgot this was Flash’s house.”

Sunset puckered her face, and not because the sourball was getting to her. “Whatever, let’s just go.”

The Spectacular Seven continued their walk, running into more familiar faces and even making a stop at Cheerilee's house, where they had received both a holiday pop quiz and oversized candy bars.

"Have a good time, girls! And don't stay out too late!" she called after them.

Carrying on down the street, Twilight fell into step with Sunset who was lagging behind in the back. "Come on, Sunset, you're not going to let one run in with Flash ruin your night, are you?"

"No, of course not!" Sunset snapped. She crossed her arms and gave Twilight a smug look. "And you're one to talk. Who was trying her hardest to avoid going on a date with him?"

Twilight snapped her mouth shut and turned bright red. "Not fair," she mumbled.

Sunset laughed, feeling better already. Perhaps it was mean, but she couldn't help it. Part of her just enjoyed seeing Twilight squirm.

A scream pierced the veil of night, and the procession of friends came to a stop at what Sunset quickly assessed to be a haunted house. Tombstones and decaying body pieces littered the front yard. Cobwebs were coated around the open doorway from which mist and a pale light poured out of.

From behind a curtain covering the open garage, a young boy dressed as a knight came screaming, looking like he was on the verge of tears.

"Wow," Rainbow said, trying to get Fluttershy to stop clinging to her. "That must be one scary house."

Pinkie nodded affirmatively. "It's supposed to be the scariest house this side of Canterlot Park! But, I heard there's super good candy inside for anyone brave enough to go in."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "You've *heard*?"

Pinkie rubbed the side of her head with her staff. "I've, uhh... never actually tried to see if the rumors were true." She grinned sheepishly.

"What happened to 'giggle at the ghosties'?" Rainbow asked, finally prying Fluttershy off.

"Mmmf mmph mmf," Pinkie said, her mouth conveniently full of candy.

“Oh, come on. It’s not that scary,” Sunset said.

“Really?” Rainbow looked at her, a challenging spark in her eye. “I dare you to go inside then. Alone.”

Everyone gasped.

Sunset shrugged. “Deal.”

Everyone gasped again.

“Sunset, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Twilight asked, clutching her sleeve.

“Yes, it’s just a stupid house.” She wiggled her arm free. “I’ll be in and out, piece of cake.” She approached the house, stopping at the open front door to take a deep breath. Inside, she could hear the moans and wails of the undead.

“Y-you can do it, Sunset!” Fluttershy cheered.

Sunset steeled herself and marched inside, quickly becoming swallowed by the fog. Cackling surrounded her on all sides while she navigated the narrow corridor that had been set up. As she turned the corner, a series of severed heads dangling on strings dropped down in front of her.

She flinched, but quickly caught herself. “That’s not scary. That’s just disgusting.” She ducked underneath them and advanced to an open area where more corpses were strewn about the floor. The room was just as cold as the outside and smelled horribly rancid.

Well, gotta give them points for effects.

Something grabbed Sunset’s ankle and she jumped back, almost losing her balance from the hand’s tight grip on her. The corpse let go and slowly got to its feet, the others joining it and surrounding Sunset.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Sunset dove through the small opening in the closing circle and jogged down the next hallway, the moans of zombies not too far behind. Sunset gave the tiniest yelp as a group of animatronic bats swooped overhead, chittering noisily.

She came upon a fork in the hall with an arrow telling her to go left. Looking down the other way, she soon knew why. Stumbling towards her was a zombie in a mask, revving a chainsaw.

With a small, “Eeep!” Sunset ran down the adjacent corridor, her heart beginning to drum in her chest. *I’m not scared! I’m not scared! I’m not... wait a sec, that chainsaw didn’t have any spikes on it anyway!* She slowed her running just as she entered a much darker room. The chainsaw and zombie moans vanished behind her, leaving her alone in the black abyss.

Sunset squinted her eyes, just able to make out a silver bowl across from her with colorful wrappings in it. She smiled, striding across the room. *Jackpot. I’ll just grab a few pieces for the girls and leave.*

A loud sound of buzzing static disrupted the silence and made Sunset’s hair stand on end. *Of course. It could never be this easy.*

There was a quick flash of light before the room went dark again. But in that brief instant, Sunset saw a figure. The lights flashed again, and it appeared to be closer than last time, with Sunset able to make out most of its features. It had been tall, abnormally so, wearing what looked like a business suit. When it flashed in front of her again, Sunset jumped back, not just because of how close it had gotten, but because she had found the last notable detail of it:

It had no face.

Sunset ran around the perimeter of the room, breaking into a sharp left when another one appeared right in front of her. She made for the bowl of candy again, and froze in her tracks when she saw what was standing in front of it.

Her hair billowed like fire and her short dress blew in a non-existent wind. She spread her bat-like wings out wide, blocking the candy bowl from view, and smiled devilishly at Sunset, showing off her pointed teeth. Slowly, she extended a red claw towards Sunset.

Sunset’s heart nearly stopped as she stared at the demon. Yet, when the lights flashed again, she was gone without a trace. Sunset stood shivering with her arms wrapped around herself, remembering where she was only when the lights flashed and she saw how close the faceless monsters were to her. They held no fear for her, but she had had enough of this place. She ran forward, grabbed a fistful of candy and tore for the exit, breaking through the gap in the garage curtain and stumbling outside.

“Whooohooo! She did it!”

Sunset quickly reconstructed her impassive mask as six girls and a dog ran towards her. She straightened up and held out her hand, showing off her sweet prizes. “S-see? Piece of cake.”

“I can’t believe you made it all the way through,” Rainbow said, snatching a piece and putting it in her bag. “We didn’t hear you scream or anything.”

“Told you it wasn’t that scary.” Sunset distributed the candy, making sure not to make eye-contact with anyone while her heart continued to pound erratically in her chest.

Two more blocks and a score of houses later, the Spectacular Seven sat around in Pinkie’s living room, mountains of candy in front of them. They bartered and traded their haul, dining on the sugary treats or the provided pizza.

By the end of it, Sunset had accumulated a pile of various sour candies and a few other sweets she had found favorable. She swept them into her backpack, feeling the noticeable change in weight.

When the floor was cleared of candy, Pinkie zipped over and turned the lights off save for one. It hit the disco ball and threw dazzling spots across the room. Music blared out from the speakers as Pinkie shouted, “Whooohooo! *Dance party!*” She rushed to the middle of the living room, accompanied by most of the others and even Spike, who darted between their heels.

Sunset moved over to the snack table, watching them break out into ridiculous dance moves while she poured herself a cup of punch.

“You aren’t going to join them?” Twilight had materialized by her side.

“Nope.” Sunset took a sip from her cup. “I don’t dance.”

“Yeah. I’m not a very good dancer either.”

Sunset snorted. “From what I hear, the other Twilight isn’t much better.”

“Oh... Guess we have that in common, too.”

Sunset saw the downcast face Twilight wore and mentally chided herself. “I’m sorry, Twilight. I didn’t mean to compare the two of you.”

Twilight sighed. “It’s okay. I’m just being too sensitive I guess. It’s not her fault we happen to be... is dimensional twins a good way to describe us?”

“I don’t know.” Sunset drained the rest of her drink. “But, I do know this: with all the *amazing* things she can do, I’m positive she can’t play the violin as well as you can.” Sunset snickered again as Twilight turned red, wondering how many times she could make her blush in one day.

“You really mean that?”

“Of course. I’ve never heard anyone—wait, didn’t I already praise you?”

Twilight smiled. “Yes. But it means a lot coming from you. I’ve noticed that you tend to... dislike most things.”

Sunset raised an objective hand. “That’s not... wait... huh, maybe you’re right.”

Pinkie reached over and grabbed both girls by the wrists. “Come on, you wall flowers! I wanna see you move!”

“Pinkie, wait!” Both of them protested as they were dragged onto the dance floor.

Sunset found herself in a flurry of moving bodies, being pulled back in as soon as she tried to sneak away. She finally stopped resisting and surrendered herself to the music, moving and swaying in time like everyone else. And to her surprise, she found she actually enjoyed it.

After a long hour of dancing, the girls sat around in a tight circle, an empty pie dish in front of them. Pinkie was practically vibrating against the floor from all the sugar she had eaten thus far.

“Sunset, Sunset, Sunset, Sunset, Sunset, Sunset—”

“Pinkie!”

“Truth or dare?”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “You dared me to steal some of Maud’s bras last time, so I’m picking truth.”

“Okaaaaaay, then. Hmmm... Oh! You remember when you said we couldn’t ask you questions about Equestria?”

“Yes.” Sunset widened her eyes. “Wait, you remember that, but you can’t remember the simple rule of *don’t touch me*?”

“So, tell us something about Equestria! Ooh, ooh, tell us about your version of Halloween!”

There was an excited mutter of agreement, and Sunset slumped over, sulking. “Fine. Stupid game.” She straightened up and made herself comfortable. “Ahem. All right, so—”

“No, no, no! You gotta tell it like a scary story!” Pinkie got up and turned the last light off before tossing Sunset a flashlight. “See, now you’ve got the right atmosphere!”

“Pinkie, I’m not—”

“Pleeeeeeeeeaaaaasse?”

Sunset flicked the light on and brought it to her face. *I’ll get you for this.* “Long, long ago...” she began in a low, eerie voice. “There were two royal sisters who ruled over the land of Equestria in harmony. The older sister raised the sun, while the younger one raised the moon—”

“Wait a minute,” Twilight interjected. “They *raised* the sun and the moon? Even with magic that’s totally impossible!”

“I’m telling a story,” Sunset continued in her spooky voice. “Don’t interrupt me!”

“Right... sorry.”

“Anyways, the sisters raised the sun and the moon—because magic works like that—and kept balance in Equestria for many generations. They’re immortal,” Sunset added, seeing Twilight’s hand raise into the air. “But, over the years, the younger sister noticed how many ponies played in the day and slept through her night. She began to feel unappreciated.

“One morning, when it was time to raise the sun, the younger sister refused to lower the moon, claiming that her beautiful night would last forever!” Sunset turned the flashlight off and plunged the room into blackness. “With the power of darkness, she became a terrifying mare known as Nightmare Moon!”

She turned the light back on, having placed herself right in front of Fluttershy, who fell back with a loud, “Eeep!”

Sunset grinned wickedly. “Her older sister tried to reason with her, but the younger sister refused. With no choice, the older sister was forced to use the Elements of Harmony to banish her only family into the heart of the moon!” Sunset switched the light off again.

“But some say... not all of her went to her prison. Nightmare Moon’s shadow stalks the land, searching for ponies to snack on.” She crept around with catlike tread and ran a finger down Pinkie’s spine, watching her shoot into the air. “It’s said in the dead of night, she wanders into town and gobbles up small foals unless she is given an offering of something equally sweet. If she is not satisfied...” Sunset leaned next to Twilight’s ear. “*She eats you!*”

“Aaaaiiii!” Twilight jumped back, tossing Spike into the air. He, thankfully, landed safely in Rarity’s lap.

Sunset fell onto the ground, holding her sides. “I was wrong! That was amazing! You should have seen some of your faces!” She laughed. “And that’s why we have Nightmare Night. You offer candy so Nightmare Moon doesn’t come to eat you.”

“Psssh, that wasn’t so scary,” Rainbow said, once again trying to get Fluttershy off from around her waist. The bead of sweat running down her face told Sunset otherwise, but she was too satisfied to comment.

“Are you kidding? That was a *great* scary story!” Pinkie said from her position at the second-floor balcony. “Good job, Sunset! Oh, and it’s your turn again!”

Sunset moved back into her position in the circle. With all the excitement, she had forgotten they were playing truth or dare. “Hmm... all right, then. Rarity, truth or dare?”

Rarity tapped a finger against her cheek. “I’m feeling brave right now. Dare.”

Sunset rubbed her hands together maliciously. She pointed to Spike. “I dare you to let Spike give you a nice, wet kiss on the lips.”

“What? B-but...” Rarity looked down at Spike, who picked a good time to lick his underside. “That’s so... unsanitary.”

“Actually, dog mouths are supposed to be cleaner than humans,” Twilight said factually.

“I seriously doubt that,” Rarity grumbled. She lifted Spike up and held him at arm’s length. “Okay then. Just... don’t get any ideas, buster.”

Spike wagged his tail.

Rarity puckered her lips and brought Spike in close. Spike immediately leaned in and fervently licked every inch of Rarity’s face he could get at.

“Ack! Belgh, pbbbbtt! He got in my mouth!”

Sunset and the girls roared with laughter while Rarity had run over to the punch bowl to rinse her mouth out.

“Yes, yes,” she said bitterly, after spitting back into her cup, “laugh at my expense. But it’s my turn now. Twilight! Truth or dare?”

Twilight took a pleased looking Spike into her arms and stroked his head. “Dare.”

Rarity groaned. “Darn it. Why do you keep picking dare?”

“Oh, no reason,” Twilight said aloofly.

“Well then, I dare you to tell us who your crush is!”

Twilight narrowed her eyes. “That’s not a proper dare. That counts as a truth.”

“Does not.”

“Does too.”

“Does not.”

“Does too!”

The sound of creaking stairs ended their heated argument, as everyone turned their attention to the figure descending out of the darkness.

Maud flipped a light and blinked once. “May I have my bras back now?”

After returning Maud her personals, Twilight had called an end to truth or dare, suggesting they play a fun game like Monopoly instead. Sunset only agreed because she didn’t want to hear Twilight and Rarity argue again.

The game itself had only lasted an hour, ending when Sunset had gone bankrupt and lost to Pinkie, who owned everything on the board.

“It’s mine! It’s all mine!” Pinkie cackled maniacally, pooling the money towards her and throwing it into the air. “All hail the Munchkin Queen! Hahahahaha!”

Sunset slouched in her seat. “Next time, we’re playing Risk.”

With Pinkie rolling around on a pile of fake dollars, everyone decided it was a good time for bed. They unrolled their sleeping bags in a circular formation, with Sunset in between Rarity and Twilight, mostly to stop them from fighting again.

Pinkie sat on top of her sleeping bag, crossing her arms and pouting. “How can you girls go to sleep at a time like this?”

“Pinkie,” Rainbow said, having come out from changing in the bathroom, “it’s almost one in the morning.”

“So? It’s Saturday! Which means we should be partying, not sleeping! Who’s with me? Oh, I know! Let’s grab our flashlights and go play hide and seek outside! Or, or, I have cards! We could play Go Fish or Poker! Come on, who wants to win their money back? Bring it on, plebeians! The Munchkin Queen is ready to—”

Sunset looked up from her pillow to see Pinkie fast asleep, still dressed in her costume. *Thank goodness. I was worried she’d go on for another hour before clocking out.* She and everyone else got comfortable in their bags, leaving Pinkie to snore in bliss.

With a relaxing sigh, Sunset eased back into her pillow, closing her eyes. All in all, it had actually been a pretty good day. As much as she might have denied it at one point, hanging out with these girls was pretty fun. It definitely beat sitting in a factory all day.

Bone-chilling cold bit into Sunset’s skin, and she could see her breath with every puff of air she released as she ran.

Running. Why was she always running?

She turned the corner sharply, nearly tripping on the corner. She couldn’t afford to fall. Not if she didn’t want to be caught. She kept running through the

foggy corridor, swatting away spider webs and avoiding long, gnarly branches that grabbed at her.

Behind her, Sunset could hear them moaning and stumbling in her wake, growing ever closer. Mixed in with their moans was the sound of beating wings.

“Come play with me, Sunset. I’ll be your best friend...”

“Like hell you will!” The air around Sunset heated up to blistering degrees. She dived to the right, narrowly avoiding the screaming blaze. She rolled across her stomach and slid down a steep hole, tumbling head over heels while familiar faces flashed in front of her.

When Sunset opened her eyes again, she was standing in a grassy meadow. The sky overhead boasted an endless, blue calm, and gorgeous sunlight. A lone figure stood in the distance, her arms outstretched like she was welcoming the warm light.

Sunset stepped forward and the sky darkened instantaneously with grim clouds. A heavy wind kicked up, ripping chunks of rock out of the very ground, yet both Sunset and the figure remained in place.

Cackling erupted behind Sunset. Turning around, she saw an army of zombified students marching towards her, led by a shadow that sped across the ground.

Sunset tore into a sprint, desperate to reach the girl in the distance like she was her only hope. As Sunset drew closer, she recognized the green skirt and flowing pink hair.

“Fluttershy!” Sunset shouted.

“I’m so tired...” Fluttershy’s voice was soft, yet Sunset could hear it louder than any chorus. “I just want to go to sleep... maybe forever. No one can hurt me anymore...”

“No, Fluttershy, don’t!” Sunset reached an arm out, but Fluttershy was still too far away.

With her arms spread, Fluttershy stepped off the rocky cliff, falling into oblivion.

Sunset screamed, just having reached the edge. She looked over and saw the front lawn of Canterlot High. Her zombified army stood in front of the rubble that was the remains of the entrance. Five girls stood in opposition to her as she floated down on her devilish wings.

“Stand aside, Twilight Sparkle! You’ve been a thorn in my side, but I’m willing to overlook that if you bow to me.” Sunset hissed.

“We’ll never bow to you, you monster!” Twilight yelled.

“Wrong answer!” Sunset lifted her claws over her head, two fireballs blinking into existence.

Stop! Don’t hurt them, please! Sunset begged.

But this is what you wanted, Sunset. What we wanted. Power! And now, it’s time to show them who’s really in charge!

Not like this! I... I don’t I want this anymore!

Aww, what’s the matter, Sunset? Do you not want me to hurt your friends? Is that it? That’s what you want to call them now, isn’t it? Your friends?

Leave them alone!

Hahaha! You miserable weakling! Watch what I do to your friends!

With a menacing screech, Sunset hurled the fireballs down at the girls, watching them huddle together and cower.

They’ll... they’ll be fine... Harmony will protect them...

The fireball made contact, exploding in a plume of smoke and fire.

They’ll come out and stop me now...

When the smoke cleared, there was only dust...

What a shame. If they were really your friends, you would have done something to protect them. Guess we are just a heartless monster after all! Sunset threw her head back and laughed.

Her eyes snapped open and Sunset jolted upright, throwing a hand over her mouth to stop herself from screaming... or throwing up. She sat in her sleeping bag, heaving for air; shivering and drenched in sweat.

She quickly scanned the room, checking that everyone was still there, sleeping soundly. They were all accounted for, even Spike, sleeping by Twilight's neck.

Like a ghost, Sunset got up and slipped into the kitchen, groping around in the dark until her eyes adjusted. She fetched a cup out of the pantry and filled it with tap water. When it was full, she raised it to her lips, downing only a small sip before her trembling hands dropped it into the sink with a loud clatter. She struck her hand out to stop it from making any more noise, but she was sure the damage had been done.

She pressed herself against the sink, waiting for someone to come in and ask her what was wrong. After several tense seconds where no one did, she allowed herself to breathe easy. It was only after that, she heard the soft pitter-patter of paws.

Something soft brushed against her foot before something wet licked it. "Ugh, Spike!" Sunset whispered, her voice quivering. "Go back to sleep... please."

Spike gave a small bark and rubbed himself against her leg affectionately.

"S-stop it! Stop being nice to me!"

"Sunset?"

The singular light over the sink momentarily blinded Sunset. When she blinked the spots out of her eyes, she found Twilight standing in front of her with concerned curiosity.

"Are you okay? You look pale."

"No, I'm not!" Sunset shooed her away. "Forget it, just go back to sleep."

"But you just said something was wrong. Why would I leave you here?"

"Because..." Sunset bit down on her lip, trying to stop herself from bursting into tears. Her throat constricted at her hesitation and she blurted out in a strangled cry, "Because I don't deserve your sympathy!" She turned from Twilight and gripped the lip of the sink until her knuckles were white. "I don't... I don't deserve any of it..." Tears fell like waterfalls from her face, and her shoulders shook from the force of the sobs she was holding in.

“Sunset,” Twilight rested a gentle hand on her back. “That’s not true. Please, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Sunset held her breath, wanting so bad for Twilight to just leave rather than spilling out emotions to her. But as always, her enchantment proved to be stronger. “I told you... about that night... how I turned into a... a monster.” Sunset squeezed her eyes shut. She could feel the power surging through her. The claws, the wings, the fire, all of it. “I hadn’t planned that. I didn’t think the Elements would do that to me. But... part of me... *enjoyed* it.”

Twilight stared at her, her own eyes reflecting Sunset’s pain. “Really?”

“Yes... no... yes... I don’t know!” Sunset covered her face with her hands. “I was being torn in two... I had all the power I ever wanted... but it hurt so much... and... *I* wasn’t in control anymore. I mean, I was, but it wasn’t *me*. It was like watching a play I had written but everyone had forgotten their lines and just started improvising. But, I didn’t try to stop it. I wanted to see what would happen. I *wanted* to not be in control. Acting on that impulse... it felt...” Sunset wildly shook her head, muffling her cries behind her hands. Her legs gave out and she sank to her knees, Twilight quickly joining her while Spike continuously brushed against her tenderly.

“I have nightmares, Twilight... they were infrequent first, but now, they’re every night! I can’t sleep and I think I’m losing my mind! I keep seeing the demon everywhere now! She won’t leave me alone! I don’t know what to do... Do I still have to apologize? I’m sorry, all right? I’m sorry! I’m sorry for ruining so many friendships and driving everyone away... I’m sorry for the blackmail and the threats... I’m sorry for lying and stealing... I’m sorry for being a monster...”

“Sunset, you aren’t a monster,” Twilight said firmly.

Sunset finally lifted her head. “I’ve seen it, Twilight. I’ve seen my own heart. I picked to be the Tin Man for a reason. It’s so dark... so black... I might as well not have one at all...”

“Sunset—no, Sunset, look at me.” Twilight grabbed her by the shoulders. “Listen to me, Sunset. I may not have known you back when you did all those

things, but I know you have a heart—no, this time, you’re not going to interrupt *me*.”

Stunned by her forcefulness, Sunset could only listen as Twilight spoke.

“Everyone’s done things they aren’t proud of. And sure, you may not have had the best of morals until recently. But look at you now, Sunset. All the nice things you’ve done, all the friends you’ve made, even these tears prove that you’re trying to change. That you’re trying to be a better person.”

Sunset emphatically shook her head. “No, no, no. All those things I’ve done... they weren’t... I didn’t...” Sunset paused and soaked in Twilight’s words. At first, she wanted to write off all those kind deeds as just circumstances she was forced into by her penance. But when she really thought about them... She hadn’t been forced to be nice to Twilight when she was crying in the bathroom or practicing in the music room. And in the instances she had been forced to do something, no one had told her to enjoy it. In fact, in all three cases of the Animal Shelter, the mall and even this party, Sunset could have made lives miserable if she wanted.

But she hadn’t. All three times, she had enjoyed herself and behaved decently.

Twilight smiled at her, seeing the realization in Sunset’s eyes. “See? You have a heart, Sunset. You just needed some friends to help you see it.”

Friends... Sunset remembered the vow she had made to herself. She had resolved to make friends... then got into a brawl with Rainbow not an hour later. But Rainbow had called them friends afterward.

That warm feeling she had felt during lunch... was that what friendship felt like? Had she felt it before and not noticed it until then?

“Friends,” Sunset whispered, feeling the word on her lips. After all this time, it still felt weird to say it so genuinely. “I have friends...” They weren’t just ‘the girls’ or ‘the others.’ They were her friends.

They were the Spectacular Seven.

Sunset threw her arms around Twilight. “I... I have *friends!*” she sobbed. “I had them the whole time, but now, they’re *here!* In my heart! I... I’d been

alone so long... I'd forgotten what that warm feeling was. It's so small, but it's there!"

Twilight returned the hug, leaning into Sunset. "And we'll always be here, Sunset... *I'll* always be here."

"Thank you, Twilight." Sunset rested her head on Twilight's shoulder, her eyelids growing heavy. "I'm still so tired though... and I'm still scared."

"Go to sleep, Sunset. I promise, you won't have any nightmares this time."

A small idea danced through Sunset's head. It was ludicrous at best. But maybe, just maybe, it would work. "Twilight... say 'please.'"

"What?"

Sunset raised her head. "Ask me to go to sleep and to have a good dream... like it's a favor. Please, do it for me."

For the fifth time that day, Twilight blushed a deep red. "Umm, okay. Sunset, please go to sleep and dream of something nice? Like that?"

Sunset felt her mind grow foggy as she slumped into Twilight's arms. She closed her eyes, smiling in satisfaction. "Yes. Like that..."

The Tin Girl stood tall next to her friends as they stared down the Wicked Witch of the West.

"Give me those slippers!" she hissed at Dorothy.

"No!" Dorothy yelled. Her faithful dog, Toto, growled from his spot on her shoulder.

The Wicked Witch stepped forward, flexing her claws. "Then I'll just take them from you!"

The Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow stepped in front of Dorothy, holding their arms out. "You'll have to get through us first!" the Lion said.

"Very well! That can easily be arranged!" A ball of fire appeared in the Witch's hand and she hurled it at the girls.

"Duck!" the Scarecrow shouted, tackling her friends to the ground.

The Tin Girl got up first and saw the Wicked Witch making another fireball. Not too far from her was an unassuming bucket of water. The Tin Girl ran over and grabbed it. “Hey, Witch!”

The Wicked Witch spun around. “What? Are you going to stand there again, cowering while I destroy your friends?”

Sunset shook her head, staring the demon in the eyes. “No. Because I’m not scared of you anymore.” She threw the contents of the bucket at the Witch, watching her scream as she dissolved onto the floor.

“Nooooooooo! I’m melting! I’m melting! Ahhhhhh!”

Dorothy rushed over and hugged the Tin Girl. “You did it! I knew you could do it! You saved all of Oz!”

“Ding dong, the Witch is dead. The Witch is dead, hooray!” The Munchkin Queen sang, dancing around the group.

“All right, now where’s that Oz wizard?” the Tin Girl asked. “I believe she owes us some things.”

There was a rainbow puff of smoke, and the mighty Oz appeared, coughing and waving the cloud away. “Ack, too much magic dust.” She looked around the throne room. “Wow! You actually beat the Witch! I was betting that you’d lose.”

The Tin Girl crossed her arms. “Well, we didn’t. So, hand over that heart you promised.”

“And Ah’d like some brains, please.” the Scarecrow said.

“And some courage. Umm, if you don’t mind that is...” the Lion added.

Oz wrung her hands together, sweat gathering on her brow. “Uhh, yeah, about that... Seems I’ve run out of magic for the day, so you’ll have to come back later when I’ve stocked up.”

Dorothy narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean you’ve run out of magic? You’re Oz, the Great and Powerful. You can do anything, right? Hmm, actually... if you can do anything, why didn’t you beat the Witch yourself?”

“All right, fine! You caught me!” Oz said, throwing her hands up. “I’m not really an all-powerful wizard.” She reached behind her neck and pulled a

zipper, revealing herself to be Trixie. *“Trixie is just a stage magician. A great and powerful stage magician! But still, I only know simple tricks.”*

Everyone stared at her with open mouths. “So you lied to us?” the Scarecrow asked.

“Lying is such a harsh word,” Trixie said, twiddling her fingers. “Trixie would think of it more as...”

“Conning us?” Dorothy said heatedly.

“Well, that makes it sound worse.”

The Lion fell back on her rump, looking like she was on the verge of tears. “So we did all that for nothing?”

“Of course not, darling!” A heavenly voice sang. From the ceiling descended the Good Witch of the North, Glinda. “You helped save the entire land. That alone should be commended.”

“But Oz lied to us,” the Scarecrow said dejectedly. “How are we supposed to get the things we need now?”

“Darlings, don’t you see? You’ve had those things all along.” She pointed at the Scarecrow. “You were smart enough to duck when the Witch attacked you.” She moved on to the Lion. “You were willing to defend Dorothy to the death if necessary.” She looked lastly at the Tin Girl. “And you stood up to her for the sake of your friends.”

“Wow, I guess you’re right,” the Tin Girl said. She placed a hand over her metal chest and could feel something warm beating inside.

“See?” Twilight smiled at Sunset. “I told you there was a heart in there.”

Sunset fluttered her eyes open, warm sun hitting her cheek. Even with the morning grogginess clouding her senses, she could tell something was different. She actually felt *rested*. That had been the best sleep she had gotten in weeks!

Her eyes shrank to pinpricks when she realized where she had fallen asleep. Her face rested against Twilight’s chest while her arms were wrapped around

her middle. Likewise, Twilight was resting on top of Sunset's head, holding Sunset close.

"Gaaaah!" Sunset threw herself away from Twilight and scrambled to her feet. "What were you doing?" Sunset demanded.

Twilight rubbed her head, having bumped it on the floor tile. "I was sleeping," she said wearily.

"No! I mean why were we... sitting like that?"

"What, you don't remember last night?"

"Yes, I do." Even as she said it, memories of her tearful encounter with Twilight resurfaced in her mind. "Right..." Sunset felt her own cheeks heat up. "About that..."

"It's okay," Twilight said, an equally red blush on her face. "I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks."

They stood apart in the kitchen, pretending to be distracted by various objects. Sunset was deeply interested by the microwave while Twilight focused on the coffee machine.

"So..." Twilight broke the silence. "Did you have a nice dream?"

"Yeah... it was the best sleep I got in a while."

"That's good."

"...Um, we should head back to the other room. You know, before anyone gets any ideas."

Twilight laughed and pulled at her ponytail. "Yeah. We certainly don't want that. Haha..."

Sunset led Twilight back to the living room, pausing when she saw everyone was still asleep. She spun around and gave Twilight one more hug. "Thank you."

Twilight had been caught off-guard but quickly recovered and said, "You're welcome."

Maud watched the whole spectacle from her seat at the kitchen table. She blinked, slowly chewing her cereal.

“What an interesting display of affection.”

Kpok 18: Goddess of Love and Fortune

A delicate finger tapped the microphone, sending clear feedback through the headset clamped over locks of pink, purple and gold hair. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the 'On Air' display switch to green and clapped her hands together, smiling.

This was always the highlight of her day.

"Good morning, Canterlot!" her warm, cheery voice echoed from all the radios tuned in from across the city, captivating those who listened to it. Tender, passionate and always upbeat, it could make a grown man weak at the knees. "It's your Mi Amore in the Morning!" Cadence giggled, brushing her long bangs out of her eyes. "Oh, but today is Sunday, isn't it? Yep, you know what that means! I'll be with you all day today, playing your favorite love songs and as always, giving you my best love advice. So perk up, Canterlot! Grab your special someone and tell them how much you love them! I'll be back in a little while to take some questions, so have your phones ready! In the meantime, here's some old school love hits to start your morning."

Sliding her rolling chair over to a large switchboard, Cadence flicked a few switches and listened as the music began playing over her headset. Smiling broadly, she gave a thumbs up to the control room across the window and gestured for her visitor to come inside.

Twilight opened the door as the green light switched off again and ran over to give Cadence a hug.

"Twilight, sweetie! How are you?" Cadence gushed, hugging her tight. "And you silly girl! You know you don't have to ask to come down to the studio."

Twilight broke away and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. I just didn't want to drop in unannounced. I know how busy you can be sometimes."

"Never too busy for you, we're practically family after all." Cadence sat down in her comfy chair again, reaching for her cup of coffee. "But I must admit, I was surprised you called me yesterday. Anything you want to tell me, you just wait until Shining brings me over for dinner," she said with a soft laugh. Cadence frequented the Sparkle household so many times, they had set up a permanent chair at the dinner table.

A genuine smile graced Twilight's lips this time. "I know. But I just wanted to have a more... private conversation. Just some girl talk."

Cadence lowered her mug, a concerned frown darkening her normally radiant features. Twilight almost never came outright with anything. Cadence could remember having to sit for an hour by Twilight's bed while she hid underneath, refusing to tell why she was upset. "Is everything all right, Twilight? You're not in trouble, are you?"

"Oh no, nothing like that." Pulling up a chair of her own, Twilight sat down and began twirling a finger through her hair while she stared at the soundboard. "It's just that... well..."

Cadence looked at her thoughtfully. She leaned back in her chair, carefully calculating Twilight's actions. *Same old Twilight*. She would have to do this nice and slow. "Okay, let's start with something easy. How is school going?"

Twilight bolted upright. "Oh, school is going great! I got an A+ on my last history paper! And the music teacher is recommending me for the school symphony!"

"That's great to hear! I'm glad you're taking the move so well. Now, tell me more about these friends you made." Cadence had been overjoyed when Twilight had told her she had made not just one, but a whole group of friends.

"Oh, well there's Rainbow Dash: she's an athlete and plays on a lot of the school teams. She's kind of pushy, but she means well. Then there's Fluttershy: she's the nicest girl you'll ever meet but she's super shy. And Rarity, she loves fashion, but I think she's a gossip girl. Applejack is always looking out for me and knows how to keep the group in line. Pinkie is... well... I can't really describe her. She's just... Pinkie Pie. And then there's Sunset Shimmer... she's... um..."

Cadence quirked an eyebrow and pressed her fingertips together. *Hello. Have we found the source of today's conversation?* She looked at Twilight's flushed cheeks. *Could it be...?*

"But, yeah," Twilight quickly moved on, "those are my friends! They're really great. I've never had so much fun before."

Hmm, she's still avoiding it. Just have to ease her in. "I'm really glad for you, Twilight, they all sound wonderful. So, how was that sleepover the other day?"

"It was great," Twilight said, a fond look in her eye. "We went trick-or-treating and got lots of candy, then when we got back, we danced. I didn't like it at first, but I kinda got into it near the end. And no one laughed at me... at least, I think they didn't. Anyway, we played truth or dare afterward and Sunset told this really good scary story." Twilight held her hand up to her mouth as she started to giggle. "And then, she dared Rarity to let Spike kiss her! It was so funny! I wished you could have seen it!"

Cadence nodded her head, her heart warming at the sight of Twilight laughing in earnest. Having to leave her one friend behind had really sunk her spirits. But with all these new friends now... Cadence hadn't seen Twilight this happy in a while.

"... and then we played Monopoly, but Pinkie beat us super-fast. I still don't know how she did it. And then we went to bed and... yeah, that's it."

There was that hesitation again. Cadence furrowed her brow slightly. She knew she was getting closer, but she still couldn't go in for the kill yet. Not without a large struggle.

"Cadence, you're on," a voice spoke into her ears.

Cadence sat up and adjusted her seat. "One second, Twilight." She corrected her headset and leaned over the mic again, switching it on in synch with the 'On Air' sign.

"Okay, all you lovers out there. Need advice on your relationship? Trying to get someone's attention? Mi Amore is all ears. Remember, you'll always stay anonymous, so don't be shy. If it's love you want, I'm your girl."

A small bulb started to flash, and Cadence pressed the button under it. "You're on with Mi Amore, how can I help you?"

"Umm, hi, Mi Amore," a nervous voice crackled out of the speaker.

"Flash?" Twilight whispered.

Cadence held a finger to her lips while Flash continued to speak.

“So, there’s this girl I kinda like, but she... reminds me a lot like this *other* girl I used to like, and I think she knows that. But, I still want to try and get to know her, you know? What should I do?”

“Well, sweetie...” Candace glanced over to Twilight, who had resorted to playing with her hair again. “Just start by being friends. The foundation for any great relationship is friendship. If you want to know her, just talk to her, even if she’s with her friends. In fact, that’s preferable, that way, you don’t make her uncomfortable.”

“I think I can do that. Thanks, Mi Amore.” The voice clicked off and Cadence released the button. “Alrighty then, next caller please.”

She only kept at it for around ten minutes before promising to come back in an hour. In the meantime, she set the playlist for the next wave of love songs and turned her attention back to Twilight.

“So... Flash?”

Twilight shook her head. “It’s... complicated. But I don’t like him like that! If he wants to be friends, sure, but... nothing else.”

“All right, all right, calm down, Twi. I don’t doubt you,” Cadence said soothingly.

“I’m sorry.’ Twilight took a deep breath and sighed. “It’s just, all my friends keep insisting that I like him, but...”

“You like someone else?”

Twilight sank into her chair, her eyes downcast. “Maybe a little...”

Cadence reached over and took her hand. “Twilight, being in love is a wonderful thing! Yes, it’s scary and dangerous, but the reward is so worth it. Finding that one special person you can connect with and dream of spending the rest of your life with. Your knight in Shining Armor.” Cadence sighed, an image of her boyfriend on a white stallion filling her thoughts.

She shook it out and said, “If you think Flash is trying to make advances on you, just politely tell him you aren’t interested. But do try to be gentle. He sounds like a nice boy.”

“I’ll try,” Twilight said meekly.

“Good.” Cadence cupped her other hand over Twilight’s and pulled her up in her seat. “Now, I’m pretty sure you didn’t come here to just talk about Flash. Come on, Twi, you know you can talk to me.”

“I know, I know.” Twilight took a string of deep breaths. “Okay... so... I like someone... but... but...”

“She’s a girl,” Cadence said slowly.

Twilight bit her lip, her entire face burning red, even up to her ears.

“Twilight.” Cadence brought their hands up, keeping a firm but gentle grasp. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s the twenty-first century; people are a lot more open-minded now.”

“I know, but...” Twilight’s voice quivered.

“Including your parents,” Cadence added. “Twilight, the fact that you’re in love at all will make them happy. I’m sure they were worried you’d never find someone you were attracted to.” She leaned in. “But if you’re really that worried, whenever you’re ready to tell them, I’ll be right beside you, I promise.”

Twilight sniffed and looked at her with watery eyes. “Sunshine, sunshine...”

“Lady bugs awake...” Cadence unclasped their hands and they played a quick patty cake. “Clap your hands—”

“—And do a little shake!” Twilight and Cadence hopped out of their chairs and shook their rumps at each other. They both broke into fits of giggles, and Twilight wrapped her arms around Cadence. “Thanks, Cady.”

“Of course, my little lady bug.” Cadence sat her down again and quickly checked the queue of songs, measuring how much time she had left. She was relieved to find only two of the songs had finished. She still had plenty of time. “So, tell me about this girl, Twilight. I want all the details.”

Twilight found a loose string on her blouse to play with. “Well... I told you about Sunset Shimmer...”

Cadence’s eyes widened. “Is that the same girl who...” She put her hands to her cheeks and squealed. “Twilight, you fell in love with your own knight in shining armor!”

“Don’t say it like that! It sounds weird.”

Cadence laughed. “I’m sorry. It’s just so romantic. And now, I have a reason to like her already. Oh, I can see it now: my poor little Twilight, alone and helpless. And then, Sunset Shimmer comes swooping in and rescues you, taking you away on a magical steed! The two of you ride off into the setting sun!”

Twilight pressed a hand against her face. “Cadence... stop.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re doing it again.”

Cadence blinked, realizing she was standing in her chair. “Whoopsies.” She sat down again and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Twi, you know how I get sometimes. I just love seeing two people in love!” She cleared her throat. “But you’re right, I shouldn’t be making light of that situation.”

Twilight shook her head. “No, it’s okay. Joking kinda helps. It’s just... it’s scary how accurate you can be sometimes,” she murmured.

“She has a magical steed?” Cadence asked excitedly.

“... She has a motorcycle.”

Cadence snorted, trying to cover up the euphoric bubble in her throat. She placed a hand over her mouth, still chortling. “Please, tell me more about her.”

“Well, she’s... she’s hard to describe in just a few words.” Twilight said as she wrung her hands together. “She can be kinda mean and she has a bit of a temper. Not to mention a superiority complex.” Twilight’s eyes softened. “But then... underneath all of that, she can be really nice and she’s trying so hard to be a better person. I can see it in her eyes... she doesn’t think she’s good, but I know she has a wonderful heart. She’s smart, she’s funny and... and she’s really pretty.”

Cadence let out a small, “d’awww.” She reached over and pinched Twilight’s cheeks. “I can’t believe it! My little Twilight’s in love!”

“It’s not... I mean... love is such a strong...”

“I know love when I see it, Twilight, and boy, do I see it!” Cadence tapped her on the nose. “If you can see past her flaws and describe her the way you just did, you are one hundred percent in love.”

“But, but love is used to describe your absolute investment into something, like a deep passion, or—”

“You’re *in* love, Twilight. You don’t love her. There’s a difference.”

“Oh.” Twilight relaxed her shoulders. “See, Cadence? I don’t know the first thing about love. Just stuff that I read out of books. I don’t know what to do! Every time I talk to her, I start blushing like crazy or I get embarrassed and I start talking about something stupid!” She threw herself backwards in her chair. “Ugh, it’s not fair! Why me? Why her? How am I supposed to tell her how I feel? She probably doesn’t even like girls that way! What am I supposed to do, Cadence!”

“First, breathe, Twilight. Nice and easy; just breathe.” Cadence brought a hand to her chest, inhaling deep, then exhaled as she brought it away.

Twilight followed her lead, the tension visibly leaving her body. She slumped in her chair, looking calmer though she wore a disgruntled frown. “Now I wish I *was* asexual,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just tell me what to do now.”

“Hmmm.” Cadence closed her eyes and drummed her fingers against her chin. Same sex relationship advice was a little more difficult to give out. Ultimately, the first step and most difficult step was seeing if the other person was attracted to the same sex as well.

Twilight’s first venture into the realm of love, and it’s with another girl. Cadence chuckled to herself. *I’m honestly not too surprised. Still, if her heart gets broken now, she’ll probably never try to find love again. It’s a gamble; love is always a gamble.* Cadence opened her eyes, a confident smile spreading across her face. *But I am Canterlot’s Goddess of Love and Fortune! If anyone can help Twilight, it’s me!*

“Okay, Twi, here’s what you do. Like I told Flash, just start out as friends. Get to know her, get to really understand how she works—and make sure she’s

really the girl for you. The more time you spend with her, the more chance there is for *some* connection to develop.”

Twilight nodded. “Okay, I can do that. I think we’ll be spending a lot more time together anyway.”

“Excellent. Make sure you find some common ground; something you both can talk about.” Cadence took another sip of her coffee. “Hmm, perhaps we should work for some sort of goal. Are there any school events coming up?”

Twilight looked towards the ceiling in thought. “Well, there’s the winter formal at the end of the semester next month.”

Cadence nodded fervently. “That will do perfectly. Between now and then, you want to become close enough so that you can ask her to the dance with confidence, or even the other way around if everything goes well.”

“Get close enough to ask Sunset to the dance, got it,” Twilight repeated, an intellectual gleam in her eye.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Cadence wagged a finger at her. “I see what you’re doing. You can’t set this to a schedule, Twilight, you just need to let it happen. Love is spontaneous and unpredictable; you can’t just control how fast it goes.”

Twilight tilted her head. “But you just told me to ask her out to the dance.”

“I gave you something to work for. But nothing is set in stone. Things might move faster, things might move slower. And if you try to organize this too much, you’ll forget to bend and go with the flow.”

Twilight sighed. “Love is confusing.”

“I know, sweetie. Just follow your heart, and everything will work out.”

“But, what if I ask her out and she says no? What if she isn’t...”

Candace put her hands on Twilight’s shoulders. “Then you’ll still be friends. It’s just like what’s between you and Flash. You said you didn’t like him that way but were still willing to be friends, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if she’s as nice as you think she is, you’ll still be friends even if she doesn’t like you that way.” *I hope.*

“All right. So I just follow my heart. I can do that.” Twilight tried to give a confident nod, but there was still apprehension on her face.

“Don’t worry, Twilight. If you ever need me, I’m just a phone call away.”

Twilight stood up and hugged her. “Thanks, Cady. I knew I could talk to you.” There was a small *buzz*, and Twilight reached into her pocket and pulled her phone out. “I have to go. Dad will be back to pick me up soon.”

Cadence stood up and walked her to the door. “Well, I guess I’ll see you at dinner sometime during the week.”

“Heh, yeah.” Twilight stopped, her hand hovering over the knob. “Umm, you won’t tell—”

“Your secret is safe with me. Even from Shiny.”

Twilight smiled. “Thanks, Cady.” She opened the door and hurried off down the hall.

Cadence sighed and leaned against the door frame, grinning from ear to ear. *My little Twilight’s a lesbian. So cute...*

III. No Rest for the Wicked — Kpok 19: Fate's Sleight of Hand

Sunset yawned loudly and curled up tighter in her warm blankets. The thick walls of the factory drowned out any noise of the outside world, leaving it as silent as a graveyard. There was only the occasional rattle of one of the interior pipes, and Sunset's own snoring.

Sweet sleep. How Sunset has missed it: the simple act of closing her eyes and falling away into the soft embrace of slumber without the fear of nightmares. She drifted on the fringe of consciousness, the Neverland just before waking, savoring the amount of rest she had gotten over the last day. That was all she had done when she had returned from the slumber party. She slept through all of Saturday, rising only to have a snack before going to bed again.

Her mind finally grew tired of sleeping and forced Sunset to open her eyes. As usual, her room was dim: the square of cardboard still blocking the window leaving only the main floor windows to illuminate the factory. She sat up and stretched her arms, yawning again while her bones clicked and popped. Her curtain of crimson and gold hair fell around her shoulders, and she didn't need a mirror to tell her how much bedhead she had. She rubbed the collected dust from her eyes, replaying the events of Halloween night over in her head.

It had been eventful to say the least. So much had happened in that short span of time, Sunset couldn't believe it had all transpired in one night. And at the end of it all...

Sunset ran a finger through her hair, smirking. That word... a simple word that carried so much meaning behind it. It had been staring her in the face the whole time and she hadn't seen it. Not until her own nightmares threatened to break her, not until someone finally came and intervened...

Friends.

Sunset's smirk grew wider. The word tickled her for various reasons. It was still foreign in a way, and part of her just couldn't take it seriously. Sunset Shimmer making friends? An old version of her would have scoffed at the idea. But another part of her was almost giddy with euphoria at the prospect of finally calling that ragtag group of girls her friends. It was like a dormant fraction of her heart had finally woken up from a long sleep.

“Listen to me, spouting poetical nonsense.” Sunset shook her head, though her smile persisted. She reached over her bed and pulled up her backpack full of candy. She selected a piece of taffy and plopped it into her mouth. *Next thing I know, I’ll be baking and singing songs with Pinkie.*

She stood up, stretching once more before stepping over and removing the cardboard from the window, allowing a small trickle of sunlight inside. She could see the dust particles dancing through the air, skating and swirling as they drifted to the ground. They vanished in an instant when the light flicked on.

Sunset sat down at her desk, pulling her legs up against her chest in her chair. She savored the last bit of taffy before it melted away and traced a finger over an old groove in the desk.

“So, now what?” Princess Twilight Sparkle asked, her button eyes pointing in Sunset’s direction.

“Good question.” Sunset leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling. Where did one go from a place like this? Yes, she had friends—Sunset snickered to herself—but what did she do with them? She supposed she could call one of them up and ask if they wanted to do something. But what would they do?

Sunset wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin against her knees. This friendship stuff was complicated. She let a breath of air out through her nose. “Well, miss Princess of Friendship? What should I do?”

The doll was silent for a moment before saying, “Friends don’t always have to know what they’re going to do before they do it. You and Twilight just wandered the mall before finding things to do, right?”

“Yeah, that’s kinda true I guess.” Sunset closed her eyes, an image of Twilight appearing in her mind. Sunset had openly bawled onto her shoulder, then fallen asleep in her arms. Just thinking about it made Sunset’s cheeks burn. “How mortifying.”

Still, it was because of Twilight that Sunset had a large weight lifted from her shoulders. It was because of her that Sunset could sleep again. It was because of her that some of the darkness had begun to burn away from Sunset’s heart.

Sunset glared at the stuffed toy. “That’s something you two share in common: you both don’t know how to keep your nose out of things.”

“Admit it,” Princess Twilight said in a mocking tone, “you’re grateful.”

Sunset turned her head away. “Not to you. Not in a million years.” Sunset had already shown her gratitude to Twilight. In her heart, Sunset had thanked her a thousand times over. But just because she was grateful didn’t mean she had to go soft and hand out warm-fuzzies every time they met. No, a hug and a few words were all Twilight was getting. And it would be a cold day in Tartarus before Sunset thanked *Princess* Twilight for anything.

Two sides of the same coin. Sunset liked this Twilight and even *enjoyed* her company. Her intellect was almost on par with Sunset’s own, and her awkward mannerisms were always fun to watch. And the way she played the violin... Perhaps Sunset was over-fantasizing it in her imagination, but it had sounded like it had come straight from Heaven.

And on the other side of that coin was the princess who swooped in, ruined everything, then condemned her to suffer.

“Oh, come on. You’re not really suffering.”

Sunset flicked Princess Twilight in the head. “Maybe not so much anymore. But everything was going just fine until she waltzed in.” She uncurled herself and slumped in her chair. “And to think, I could be sitting on a throne right now.”

“But would that really have made you happy? Alone with everyone beneath you instead of having actual friends for a change?”

She grabbed the toy and tossed it carelessly across the room. “I’m in no mood to discuss the definition of ‘happiness’ with you.”

Unfortunately, the infuriating plushie had a point. Sunset couldn’t help but wonder about the outcome of her botched plan. Would she really have been happy stuck in the form of a demonic harpy, brainwashing or eliminating anyone who challenged her rule? If her past nightmares were anything to go by, the answer was no. Of course, in that scenario, she’d still be running off the primal impulse that controlled her instead of the guilt that had blanketed her the past month. So who could say for certain?

“You just don’t want to admit you’re grateful to Princess Twilight for stopping you before you went too far,” a small voice said from the corner.

Sunset closed her eyes and massaged her forehead. “That’s right, just keep on talking. Keep pushing my buttons. See where it gets you. I’m not above tossing you in the microwave and seeing how long it takes before you melt.” She slapped a palm against her head. “I’m still talking to a doll.”

She reached over and grabbed her phone, then scrolled through her contacts list until she found Twilight’s number. She clicked the call button, hoping Twilight wasn’t busy on a Sunday.

To her dismay, the phone only rang until it went to voicemail. Sunset hung up and tossed her phone on the bed. She really just wanted to hang out with Twilight at the moment. That, and out of her friends, the only other number she had saved was Pinkie’s.

That was a definite *no* at the moment.

Sunset swiveled her chair, looking about the room for something that could keep her entertained for a while. There was only her laptop, and she couldn’t think of anything fun or productive on it besides playing chess against an A.I.

She spun in a circle, the room becoming a blur of colors before she slowed down and her eyes rested on her tattered jacket lying on top of her wardrobe. She stood up and plucked it from its resting place, holding it up in front of her to examine it.

Scuff marks and holes decorated it in several areas from when she had been hit by the Elements. A large piece was missing from the back from when the goat had eaten part of it. And she was sure the pockets were still sticky from when her milkshake splattered across her.

“I can’t wear this anymore,” Sunset said with a heavy voice. “We’ve been through so much together, but... well, you make me look more pathetic than I already am. And you remind me of a life I don’t want to live anymore.” Sunset hastily wiped away a tear. She couldn’t believe she was getting sentimental over a jacket.

Then again, it had been *such* a nice jacket.

She sighed and folded it up before putting her slippers on. Just before she stepped out the door, she turned back to the desk and stared at the seven crowns resting upon it. She went back and scooped them up, feeling sickened by just looking at them. More relics from an age gone by.

She marched downstairs and out into the alley, feeling the cold November wind against her bare arms. She wished she had had sense enough to come out in more than just a tank-top and pajamas. No matter, she wouldn't be long.

Sunset placed the collected items in front of the dumpster and swung the lid open, gagging at the smell of rancid food and other discarded products. She picked the first crown off the ground, the very first one she had won at Canterlot High.

Lifting it over her head, Sunset gripped it tight and bent it with all her strength until it snapped in half. The sound echoed down the alley, scaring away a lone crow. She dropped the two pieces into the dumpster, then proceeded with the second one.

It was a liberating feeling. With each snap, Sunset felt the world becoming a little brighter; the weight on her shoulders growing ever lighter. Each one of her friends passed through her head as she broke each crown: Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, Applejack, Rarity, Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle.

Sunset picked up the last crown—the last she had won before her tiny world had been shattered by the greater reality. A symbol of dirty, underhanded tricks, manipulation of inferior... of her fellow peers, and blackmail against a girl who had deserved to win far more than she had. Sunset bent it, watching as it cracked down the middle before splitting into two halves, the plastic ruby in the center crumbling into pieces. She took both halves and snapped them again before letting it fall into the garbage below.

Lastly, Sunset took her leather jacket, beholding it one last time before tossing it into the trash and slamming the lid. She stood there with a somber expression, despite the small relief she felt. More than anything, she was confused again. What to do now?

Her stomach roared at her, and Sunset realized she hadn't properly eaten since Friday. She turned and shuffled inside, hoping there was still some ravioli left in the pantry.

To her stomach's displeasure, all she had left was a can of noodles and an orange. She stood in front of the microwave, waiting for her soup to heat up and peeled the orange while she waited, tossing the skin into the garbage pail.

"Guess I should go grocery shopping today. How'd I let myself get this low on food, anyway?" Sunset frowned, remembering just how little money she had left. She could only afford so much food. "Great, now I have to get a job, too." She tossed her head back and let out a loud groan as the microwave dinged.

After an odd lunch and a cold shower, Sunset got dressed, using her reserve sweatshirt in place of her jacket. Sunset hated it for two reasons. One: Flash had gotten it for her for Valentine's Day. And Two: it was pink.

She grabbed her wallet and was about to grab her keys, before deciding she really needed to save gas until she was confident she could refill her bike whenever she pleased. She groaned again as she stepped out the door. It was a half-mile to the nearest food outlet.

Sunset picked up a basket from in front of the entrance and walked inside. She made a mental checklist of all the things she needed. Mostly whatever canned goods sounded filling, cereal, some fruits, and water. She made her way down the breakfast aisle, picking the cheapest but tastiest looking cereal she could find before moving on to the canned foods.

I wonder how much a job here pays, Sunset thought as a store clerk passed by her. She had peeked into her wallet and was horrified to find she had even less than what she remembered. She would need to find a job fast if she wanted to eat in the coming weeks.

She had been looking at a can of veggie ravioli, her mind drifting to various places she could potentially work, when a whizzing sound went off behind her and someone shouted, "*Lulamoon!*"

“Augh!” Sunset tossed the can into the air, fumbling with it until she had a tight grip and held it against her startled heart. She turned around to scowl at the man behind her.

He looked exactly the same as the last time she had seen him. His wavy silver hair was brushed back and his goatee had the smallest curl to it. He still wore his expensive looking blue suit, silver shoes, and a purple cape. With a smug grin, he said in his showman voice, “Miss Sunset Shimmer, so we meet again!”

Sunset narrowed her eyes. “Artemis Lulamoon.”

Artemis twirled in place and posed with his arms out wide. “The Supreme and Mystical Artemis Lulamoon!” He bowed and spun his hand, a rose appearing in between his fingers. “At your service.”

Sunset placed the can in her basket. Of all the people she had expected to meet again in her life, he was near the bottom. So far down in fact, that she hadn’t given him a second thought after the street fair incident where she had played as his assistant and was sawed in half. “What are you doing here?”

Artemis stood up straight and curled his beard with his free hand. “My magical instincts were telling me someone needed my help. And lo and behold, it’s an old assistant of mine!”

“Uh-huh.” Sunset nodded her head and turned back to selecting more food. “Tell me, what are your ‘magical instincts’ saying now?” She held her fingers up in air quotes.

“That you don’t believe me and you’ve neglected to take my words of wisdom to heart.” Artemis slid into her peripheral vision. “Still cuddly as a cactus and struggling to see what’s right in front of you, hm?”

“Yes to the first. As to the second, I see tonight’s dinner in front of me,” Sunset said dismissively.

“As blunt and callous as I remember.” Artemis let out a bark of laughter. “I’d be remiss if I said your sharp tongue hadn’t been a refreshing change of pace for my show.”

Sunset looked at him, scanning his face as to discern what he was up to. All she could see was that insufferable grin that could match Pinkie’s. “Seriously, what do you want?”

Artemis tapped the rose against her nose. “I should be asking *you* that. I wasn’t kidding about my magical instincts. They’re as well trained as a jungle cat’s. Never led me astray before.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Listen, Mr. Lulamoon—”

“Please, Mr. Lulamoon is my father, and quite frankly it makes me sound old. Call me Artemis, or if you prefer, The Supreme and Mystical Artemis Lulamoon.”

“Fine, Artemis.” Sunset paused and took a deep breath. This man was almost as bad as Pinkie Pie, except he wasn’t bouncing off the walls. “Listen, unless your ‘magical instincts’ can point me towards some money, I don’t need, nor do I want your help.”

Artemis clapped his hands together, sparks flying out of them. “Aha! Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve found the problem! And I have a solution!” He held up his rose and in a puff of smoke, it turned into a simple business card. He handed it to Sunset. “I believe today is your lucky day, Miss Shimmer.”

Sunset snatched the card and examined the holographic surface, watching the picture change from a store front to shelves of odd items. It read: *The Lulamoon Magical Item Emporium*. Beneath it were store hours and a phone number.

“Wait... are you?” She looked up at Artemis expectantly.

“That’s right! Once again, my magical instincts come to the rescue! You see, between my growing career and trying to teach my darling Trixie the true essence of magic, I’m starting to become a bit understaffed at my dear, little store. Once upon a time, it was my pride and joy, and I’d hate to see it go under.”

“So you want me to come and work for you?”

Artemis snapped his fingers and confetti rained down on Sunset’s head. “And she gets it in one! Yes, my fiery assistant, I’m offering you a place at the most wondrous shop in the known world!” He threw his arms back and a spotlight appeared to hit him, making him glow in a gold light.

Sunset doubted the whole ‘most wondrous shop’ part, but still. A job was a job, and there were worse places she could end up working. “All right then, Mr.

Lu—Artemis. You’ve got a deal.” She stuck her hand out which Artemis grabbed and vigorously shook it.

“Excellent, my dear, most excellent!” Artemis pulled his arm back; his hand, however, stayed within Sunset’s grasp.

Sunset let out a cry of panic and dropped the dismembered hand, watching it vanish in a puff of smoke and reappear at the end of Artemis’ sleeve. She glared at him. “So, when do I start?”

“As soon as you can.”

“Well... I still have detention this week, so...”

“Detention?” Artemis asked with a raised eyebrow. “Rebellious inside and out, I see. No matter. We’ll just start you on the weekends. Don’t want to overwhelm you with the amount of magic you’ll be exposed to.”

Sunset rolled her eyes again.

Artemis patted her on the head. “Oh, I can tell you’re going to be a handful. Well, even entertainers need to be entertained.” He took a step back. “Farewell, my assistant! I shall see you eight o’clock on Saturday! *Lulamoon!*” There was a giant plume of smoke that quickly dissipated leaving an empty spot where Artemis had stood.

Sunset stared at the remaining wisps of smoke, then looked at the card in her hand. She slipped it into her pocket and was about to resume her shopping when she became aware of the number of eyes staring at her. She gave an annoyed glance to the other shoppers who had peeked into the aisle, no doubt hearing her exchange with Artemis.

“Mind your own business!” she snapped. She collected a few more cans of vegetable soup and quickly finished her shopping.

When her items were lined up at the checkout aisle, Sunset pulled her wallet out and extracted her measly thirty-five dollars. Sunset frowned and bit the inside of her cheek. *How did he know I’d be here? And how did it just so happen that he was ready to give me a job?*

“Thirty-nine dollars, ma’am.”

Sunset looked up from her money and paled. “What?”

“Thirty-nine dollars,” the clerk said impatiently.

“Are you serious?” Sunset thumbed through her wallet again, though she knew there was no cash left. She sighed, sticking her wallet back into her pocket and looking at what she’d have to put back on the shelves. Her hand brushed against something papery. Confused, she grabbed it, positive that she had put the business card in her other pocket.

In her hand was a five dollar bill and a sticky note that read, *Enjoy your dinner! -Artemis. P.S: This will be deducted from your pay. Over.* Sunset turned the note over. *Smile!*

Sunset frowned out of sheer defiance.

Six girls sat around a circular dinner table. In front of them was an enlarged calendar with each of their names scribbled in the boxes.

“Pinkie, this was a marvelous idea!” Rarity said as she wrote her name under November 30th. “I can’t believe we didn’t think of it before!”

Pinkie bit off a large chunk of her chocolate bar. “I have my best moments when there’s candy or cupcakes in front of me,” she said, spraying crumbs over the calendar.

Rarity brushed them away with a look of disgust. “Right. Well now, do we all know the plan?”

The other girls nodded and Applejack said, “It’s easy. All we gotta do is take turns keepin’ Sunset out of that dingy old factory for as long as we can.”

Fluttershy nodded. “The less time she spends inside, the better. The lack of sunlight can’t be good for her.”

“Plus, it gives all of us a chance to get to know her better,” Twilight added.

“As soon as her detention session ends this week, she’ll be stuck with us,” Rainbow said.

Pinkie rubbed her hands together mischievously. “Operation: Occupy Sunset is a go!”

Kpok 20: Detention Party

Sweep the gym.

Dust the trophy case.

Scrape gum off the undersides of the desks.

These were the chores given to Sunset on her last week of detention. She had made sure to be on her best behavior in front of her teachers, ensuring that they wouldn't have any excuse to extend her punishment. An easy feat now that she was well-rested again.

Her life at school overall continued with the same monotony: going to class, eating lunch, more class, and detention. Sunset could feel an inward change, however, notably when she was sitting with her new friends at the lunch table. No longer was it a forced involvement; Sunset genuinely wanted to sit with them now, if for anything, just to keep the warm feeling of inclusion she had. She didn't add much to the conversation, choosing to just listen to whatever pointless things they were talking about.

No, not pointless. I'm sure it's relevant in some way... Maybe.

Friends or not, these girls still managed to bore her occasionally. Still, it proved better than sitting alone every day. At least, it had until Thursday when Flash decided to walk over.

The small talk came to a halt as he hovered over the empty chair with his tray of food in hand. Sunset gave him the best evil eye she could manage, but he kept his gaze averted.

"Mind if I sit with you girls?"

"Yes," Sunset said scathingly.

Everyone else ignored her and shook their heads, gesturing for him to sit. Sunset had a full mind to get up and leave right then, but was disheartened to see all the other tables occupied.

She turned back to Flash. "What do you want? Don't you have your own friends to hang out with?"

"I'm allowed to have more than one group of friends, Sunset," Flash said calmly, locking eyes with her.

“So, anyone catch the game last night?” Applejack cut in, breaking the tension before it could scale too high.

Sunset groaned as the conversation turned to sports and started to count the strands of hair in her bangs, tuning them out. She couldn’t believe Flash had the nerve to try and sit at *her* table. No, scratch that, she could believe it. The poor guy was still deluded that he could get Twilight to fall for him.

When the sports talk ended, Flash opened up the topic of music with Twilight.

“So, I heard you play the violin?”

Twilight looked up from her food and smiled politely. “Yes, I’ve been playing since I was about six.”

“Really? Well, I’d love to hear you play sometime.”

Sunset suppressed her urge to throw up. *Go lay your slimy, calloused, guitar playing fingers on some other girl. Hopeless idiot.* She listened as they continued their little discussion, giving their opinions on musical genres. No one else seemed to be contributing anything, creating a simple back and forth. Though Twilight would occasionally flick her eyes in Sunset’s direction.

As much as Sunset would have enjoyed derailing the conversation, she had nothing to offer that wasn’t a direct insult. She was trying to be better than that, though the temptation was an itch just begging to be scratched.

To Sunset’s relief, the bell rang before she had a chance to give Flash a verbal flailing. He left with a cheery goodbye with the others following suit one-by-one as they slipped into their respective classrooms, leaving Sunset and Twilight alone.

“Well, you handled that pretty well. I was expecting you to babble like an idiot,” Sunset said.

Twilight harrumphed and crossed her arms, giving a good impersonation of Sunset. “I only do that when I’m nervous. And I was expecting *you* to say something unruly.”

“Trust me, I was *dying* to say something. But, I held my tongue like a good girl so, you’re welcome.”

“Yes, thank you for practicing what is considered common courtesy by everyone else,” Twilight said with a roll of her eyes.

Sunset looked at her impressively. “Was that a display of sarcasm? I didn’t think you were capable of such a thing.”

Twilight smiled as they walked into their math class. “You’re clearly a bad influence. Eventually, I’ll start coming to school in a leather jacket.”

“Please, you could never pull it off.” She motioned to flick her collar out of instinct, then remembered she was wearing her horrid pink sweater. She collapsed into her chair and let out a whine. “I miss my jacket.”

Twilight patted her shoulder. “It’s okay, you can get a new one someday. Besides, you look good in that sweater.”

Sunset gave her a skeptical look. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.” Twilight’s smile seemed forced, but Sunset didn’t get a chance to question her. The bell rang again, and the class session quickly started.

Today’s material had mostly been review from earlier in the week, and after a short lecture, Ms. Vector had split them off into pairs to do group work.

Sunset and Twilight scooted their desks together and sped through the assigned problems, opting to do the extra credit work as well when they had finished early.

Looking at the clock, Sunset saw they still had half-an-hour until school ended. She double-checked the board, making sure they had completed everything and whistled in amazement.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this—” she flashed a smile at Twilight “—but, we make a pretty good team, Sparky.”

Twilight laced her fingers through her hair, giving off her usual blush. “You really think so?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m a genius, you’re *almost* as smart as me. Look at everyone else: they’re still trying to solve the normal problems and we’ve double checked the extra credit with time to spare.” Sunset folded her arms behind her head and put her boots up on the desk. “Let the school bow to our combined intelligence,” she said half-jokingly.

“Well, now that you mention it, there’s the school science fair coming up.” Twilight looked at Sunset, who merely stared at the white tiled ceiling. “First place gets free tickets to the Aerospace Museum,” Twilight added excitedly. “They’re adding a new rocket flight simulator! I’ve always wanted to fly a rocket!”

Sunset closed her eyes. “Twilight, science fairs are for geeks and nerds with too much time on their hands. You don’t seriously expect me to enter one, do you?”

“Aw, come on, Sunset,” Twilight pouted. “You said it yourself: we work well together. Just imagine the project we could build.”

“Pass.”

“But imagine the prize! The museum! Imagine...” Twilight put on a devilish smirk and leaned in closer. “Imagine *winning*.”

Sunset tilted her head towards her. “I’m listening.”

“I know how much you like to win. Just think about standing on the podium and accepting the blue ribbon. You’ll get that feeling of glory you like so much. Just make sure you don’t let it go to your head,” Twilight added. “It is a *friendly* competition after all.”

Sunset pursed her lips, mulling it over. She couldn’t deny her thirst for victory. And it wasn’t like the ribbon was magical, so there wasn’t a chance of her having an *incident*. Still, science fairs were uncool and she had viciously mocked anyone in attendance of them in the past.

On the other hand again, it was an excuse to hang out with Twilight as well as flaunt her superiority over the lesser minds of Canterlot High.

“Fine, I’ll do it. But, I demand a whole day of gloating after we win.” Sunset needed to get her kicks somehow.

Twilight narrowed her eyes. “I just said it was a friendly competition.”

“Doesn’t matter what kind of competition it is, winners get to gloat,” Sunset said smugly.

“Fine,” Twilight groaned. “Half a day.”

“Full day.”

“Eight hours.”

“What? You can’t go lower!”

“Four hours.”

“Okay, okay!” Sunset waved her arms. “Half a day, geez.”

“Deal!” Twilight beamed at her and they shook hands. Twilight instantly began to bounce up and down in her seat. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun! We get to work on a science project together! What do you think we should make? Hmm, let’s make a list of the fields we find most interesting and go from there. Personally, I find thermonuclear dynamics fascinating, but, I doubt we could build something like that. I won’t say no to advanced physics, though. Perhaps we could test something with gravity or centrifugal force? What do you think?”

Sunset ran her fingers over her temples. “I don’t know. Maybe. I think you should calm down before you wet yourself.”

“Hey!”

“Sorry. But seriously, take it easy, Twi. Just drum up some ideas and call me later tonight.”

Twilight pulled a notepad out of her backpack and began scribbling furiously. “Has to be something practical... but it can’t be too simple either. Oh, but it needs to be exciting. Hmm, maybe we can...” she continued to mutter to herself.

Sunset couldn’t help but laugh. *Geez, Twilight, you’re such a dork. It’s almost cute.*

Clapping chalk board erasers together. That was Thursday’s chore for Sunset. She coughed up another cloud of dust as she dropped two more erasers into her ‘done’ pile. She looked over to the pyramid next to it and sighed.

“This is so archaic.” Sunset grabbed the next two and started smacking them together, holding them at arm’s length. “I’m pretty sure Celestia is just doing this because she’s out of chores to give me.”

Thunk.

Sunset turned towards the half-open window, saw nothing and wondered if she had just imagined the noise. Just as she started clapping the erasers together again, she heard it.

Thunk.

She dropped the erasers and walked over to the window, throwing it open and sticking her head out.

Thwack!

“Ow!” Sunset pressed her hands against the bump on her forehead and swore loudly. She looked down from her second story perch and saw Pinkie looking at her with a guilty smile.

“Sorry, Sunset. I was just trying to get your attention.” She held up a handful of acorns.

“Why?” Sunset hissed.

“So you’d have the window open when I climbed up, duh.” Pinkie grabbed some of the vines hanging on the wall and started her ascent, while Sunset stared, dumbstruck.

“Pinkie, what are you doing? Why are you climbing up the wall?” Now, Sunset couldn’t tell if her headache was coming from the welt on her head or Pinkie’s actions. Past experience told her it was probably the latter.

Pinkie scrambled into the classroom and dropped her backpack on top of the closest desk. “We’re here for your detention party, silly! We’re gonna celebrate your freedom!” Pinkie punched the air.

Sunset looked back out the window, seeing nothing but empty lawn. “We?”

Pinkie squeezed her face next to Sunset’s. She frowned. “What the...? They were all here a second ago.”

The door behind them clicked open and in walked the rest of Sunset’s friends carrying various party supplies: balloons, chips, pizza and even a cake.

“What? How’d you guys get in here?” Pinkie asked, looking like they had just walked past Secret Service.

“Pinks, we were tryin’ to tell you, but ya wouldn’t listen,” Applejack said. “It’s a public school, not a bank vault. Ya don’t have to sneak in.”

Pinkie turned away and pouted. “Yeah, but it fit with the party theme.”

Rarity strolled over and immediately began trying to dust Sunset off with a napkin. “Darling, you’re covered in dust!”

“Wow, Rarity, I hadn’t noticed.” Sunset snatched the napkin and wiped her fingers off. “I’ve been clapping erasers for the last hour, what’d you expect?”

Rarity put her hands on her hips. “Well, no need to get snippy.”

Sunset sighed. “Sorry, sorry.” She looked at the spread of party goods. “I suppose I should thank you guys for doing this. I’d forgotten you’d wanted to throw this party, Pinkie.”

Pinkie immediately brightened. “If there’s anything I’m serious about, it’s a party! Besides, we have to celebrate the end of your sentence! This party will help you get adjusted back to normal life.”

“Pinkie, I’ve been in detention, not the state penitentiary.”

“Can’t you girls let me have *anything*?” Pinkie threw her arms into the air and groaned in exasperation.

Applejack reached into her backpack and pulled out a case of Fizzy Apple Cider. “Here, have a soda.” She tossed a bottle over to Pinkie.

“Oooh, fizzy!”

Applejack made to hand one to Sunset but quickly retracted. “Right, almost forgot ya ain’t a real fan of my family’s cider.”

Sunset snatched the bottle anyway. “I’m allowed to change my mind.” She snapped the top open on the corner of a desk and took a large sip. Tasting it without the determination of hating it, Sunset found it was actually pretty tasty. She saw Applejack give her a knowing smirk and frowned.

“It’s all right,” she said casually.

“So Celestia has you clapping erasers today?” Rainbow asked, popping open her own soda.

“Yes. It has to be the most boring work she’s given me.”

“Not to mention old-fashioned,” Rarity added. “I mean, why do we even still have blackboards in half the classrooms? White boards are much cleaner, and they don’t make that horrid noise if someone runs their nails down it.”

Screeeeeeeeeeeech!

“Yes... like that. Thank you, Pinkie Pie.” Rarity glared and rubbed her ears.

They gathered the desks around in a tight circle, while Pinkie pulled a boombox and a few board games from her backpack, including monopoly which was turned down in a six to one vote. Instead, they took turns playing Battleship, watching as it turned into a grudge match between Rainbow and Applejack.

“Dagnabit! There goes my submarine!” Applejack tossed her hat on the floor.

Rainbow smirked and leaned back in her chair. “Yep, I told you no one can beat me at this game.”

Applejack began setting her board up again. “We’ll see about that. Best eleven out of twenty!”

Meanwhile, everyone else enjoyed a friendly game of Uno with Fluttershy managing to win almost every round. In fact, they had managed to go a full rotation before noticing Fluttershy didn’t have any cards left.

“Seriously, she’s so quiet, you forget she’s here,” Sunset said, shuffling the cards again.

Fluttershy just smiled.

“Augh!” Applejack planted her face against the desk. “How does she keep doing it?”

Rainbow took a sip from her cider. “Wanna go best of thirty?”

Sunset set the cards down. “All right, move over, Applejack. I want a turn against the great Rainbow Dash.”

Applejack complied and traded seats. Sunset looked at the board for a moment before arranging her ships. She looked over the top board and saw Rainbow doing the same thing, grinning like she had already won.

“Heh, heh. You’re so going down, Shimmer.”

“We’ll see, Dash.”

“Heck, I’ll even let you go first; you’ll need all the help you can get against me.”

Is that what I sound like sometimes? Boy, that's annoying. Ah well, can't be helped. She stuck a pin to the top board. "A7."

Rainbow stopped laughing and paled a little. "Uhh... hit." She frowned. "Lucky shot. G4."

"Miss. B6"

"...Hit. D3."

"Miss. C5."

The girls gathered around the battling opponents and watched in amazement as Sunset deftly defeated Rainbow's entire fleet, all while taking only a single hit near the end. Her top board was covered entirely with red markers.

"And last, but not least, G12." Sunset put her last pin up.

Rainbow stared, her mouth hanging open, eyes wide with defeat. "You... you sank my battleship."

"I did, didn't I?" Sunset rested her chin on top of her hands, looking smug.

"I don't understand. How? No one's ever beaten me at this game!"

"I've been listening to yours and Applejack's matches, and from the few times she managed to hit you, I was able to figure out a pattern in your ship placement. You keep all your ships diagonal because you think people will guess horizontal or vertical first, saving you at least two turns. And instead of randomly shuffling your pieces around, you carefully move them clockwise or counterclockwise by just a few spaces because you know no one would think to start with somewhere you just had your ships. After that, it was simple probability. I have to say, it's actually impressive. Strategy is the last thing I'd expect from you."

Rainbow's eye twitched. "But, how come I only hit you once?"

"Because I did the one thing you'd never expect." She turned her board around to show Rainbow. "I placed my pieces in the exact same spots."

Twilight clapped and cheered, "Wow, Sunset, that's amazing!"

"I know. I truly am brilliant. It hurts to be this good."

Twilight's face morphed into an unamused frown. "Okay, enough with the gloating."

Sunset gave her an irritated glance. “What, are you my parole officer now?”

Rainbow pounded a fist against the desk. “I want a rematch!”

“Nah, don’t feel like it,” Sunset said, her smug look returning.

“Oh come on!”

“Just accept your loss, Dash.”

“You’re one to talk,” Twilight mumbled.

“What was that?” Sunset warned.

“Oh, nothing.”

“You girls having fun?”

All of the chatter stopped, and every head turned towards the door. Ms. Celestia stood leaning against the frame, drumming her fingers against her arm. Her expression was unreadable.

“Lots, actually,” Sunset said, earning her a slap on the back of the head from Rainbow.

“Ms. Celestia, we can explain,” Rarity said nervously.

“Really? Because it looks to me like you’re having a party during Miss Shimmer’s time in detention. Am I pretty accurate?”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” Sunset said.

Rainbow gave her an incredulous look. “Seriously? I thought you were good at lying!”

“Miss Dash, it’s quite obvious what you girls are up to. Lying at this point would just be insulting my intelligence.”

They all bowed their heads. “We’re sorry.”

Ms. Celestia walked past them and started cutting herself a slice of cake. “That said, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a group of friends sneak back into the school to throw a party in detention. Break someone out, sure, but never to have a party.” She grabbed a fork and took a large bite from her piece of cake. “Mmm, my compliments to the baker.”

“Why, thank you!” Pinkie smiled.

Walking back towards the hall, Ms. Celestia said, “Well, in all fairness, I think you’ve been punished enough.” She glanced over the Spectacular Seven and smiled. “The last thing I can do is ask that you girls keep Miss Shimmer out of trouble. I don’t want to see her in detention again.”

“Can’t give any promises, ma’am, but we’ll certainly try.” Applejack gave a mock salute.

“Good. Well, I’ll let you girls carry on. Just remember to clean everything when you’re finished. Including the erasers.” She looked directly at Sunset. “And remember: my door is always open if you need something.” With that, she walked out into the hall, munching on her large piece of cake.

Sunset stared blankly after her. “I still say she’s too soft.”

“Hey, this is no time to be complaining,” Pinkie scolded. “You’re a free bird! This is a time for celebration, for dancing!” She clicked the play button on her boombox and started to wiggle to the music. “Your Munchkin Queen commands you to dance!”

Sunset leaned over and smacked Rainbow in the head before getting up to join Pinkie. It wasn’t as fun as the Halloween party, but, at least Sunset had a reason to celebrate.

“So, what’s it like knowing you have no more detention?”

“It’s nice, but it also means two extra hours of sitting around and doing nothing.”

“Or you could, you know, spend time with us.”

“Oh yeah.”

Sunset sat at her desk with cell phone in hand, listening to Twilight on the other end. The party had ended only an hour ago, and they were already conversing again. Though Sunset honestly didn’t mind. It was nice to talk to someone other than herself while she was at home. It helped remind her she was still sane. She glanced over to the doll on her bed.

If only by a margin.

“Did you like the party?” Twilight asked.

“Yeah. It wasn’t the Halloween party, but I had fun. Seeing Rainbow’s face after I crushed her was definitely a highlight.”

She heard Twilight sigh on the other side. “Both of you need a lesson in humility.”

Sunset blew a raspberry. “Please, I know how to be humble. I just choose not to. Gloating is one of the few things I have left.” She could imagine Twilight shaking her head in disbelief.

“Anyway, let’s talk about the science fair.”

Sunset tried to get comfortable in her chair. It was probably going to be a long night. “All right, Sparky, hit me.”

Twilight cleared her throat and rustled some papers around. “Option one: we make a scale model of the solar system.”

“This isn’t fifth grade, Twilight. No one is going to do something so childish. Well, one person will, because there’s always someone, but it’s not going to be us.”

“You’re right, too simple.” There was the sound of paper being torn and crumpled. “Option two: we test the effects of helium by—”

“Pass.”

“...Okay then. Option three: design our own computer from scratch.”

Sunset paused, thinking on it briefly. “When’s the fair?”

“The day before Thanksgiving.”

“Seriously?” Sunset pressed a hand against her forehead, wincing when she touched her bruise. “Twilight, we have neither the time nor the resources to build a stupid computer!”

“Hmm, I guess you’re right. Guess that also means I should scratch off miniature particle accelerator and rocket engine, too.”

Sunset gawked. “Where would we even get supplies for that?”

“My dad knows people in the science department at Canterlot University,” Twilight said with a hint of pride.

“Okay, I know I told you not to do something childish, but it also needs to be *plausible*.”

“Right, sorry. Most of them are, I just got excited.”

Sunset brushed her bangs aside. “I’ve called you a nerd already, yes?”

“Yes,” Twilight deadpanned, “that’s been firmly established.”

“Just checking.”

They spent the night talking over ideas, with Sunset shooting most of them down either out of mediocrity or lack of appeal. Thankfully, Twilight had a long list.

However, by option fifty-two, Sunset realized they weren’t getting anywhere and decided to look up any fair worthy ideas on the internet. If she was going to do this, she was going to do it right. Their project couldn’t be second-rate.

“Option fifty-three,” Twilight continued, “we create an artificial wind tunnel using... oh wait, this one is impractical.”

“At least you can tell which is which now,” Sunset said as she scrolled through online sources. *Come on, there has to be something here worthy of first prize.*

“Option fifty-four: a model rocket.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen these science fairs before, Twi. Like the solar system, there’s always someone with a model rocket. They never win. And paper maché volcano better not be on there.”

She heard paper crumple before Twilight spoke again. “You know, you could pitch an idea once in a while since your super picky about this.”

“I’m just making sure we win. You *do* want to win, right?”

“Well, yes, but I want to have fun, too.”

Sunset clicked a page open. “Trust me, it’s more fun to win than to lose.... Hello, what’s this?”

“What?”

““Electromagnetic Interference,”” Sunset read.

“Oh, EMI’s or EMP’s,” Twilight said in a teaching voice. “Basically, they can obstruct electrical currents or radio waves by breaking the frequencies. It could also cause data loss in some devices.”

“Yeah, I know what they are, I just found this interesting page online,” Sunset snapped. “Goes into greater detail about how they work and some common household items that could create one...” Sunset broke into a smile. “Twilight, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I think so,” Twilight said hesitantly. “But is it legal to make something like that?”

“I don’t know. And it’s not like we’re going to *use* it.” Sunset looked over the information again. “Although, if I had made a jammer, it would have made life much easier. Darn it, I could have built one of these, used it to disable the school security system and just stole the crown that way!”

Twilight groaned. “If only you used your powers for good.”

“Ha, ha. This is a good idea and you know it.”

“Well, it’s certainly innovative. If we build it from scratch and get it to work, we could definitely get first prize.”

“So, you in?” Sunset asked, knowing the answer already.

“Yes, yes, we’ll build an electromagnetic jammer.”

“Who’s a genius?” Sunset sang.

“Don’t push it,” Twilight sang back. Then she said, “Wow, it’s almost eleven o’clock.”

“Aww, did I keep little Twilight up past her bedtime?”

“N-no,” Twilight said, though Sunset could hear the fluster in her voice. “I’m allowed to go to bed whenever I want.”

“Twilight Sparkle,” a new voice called in the background. “You know you should have been in bed an hour ago, young missy.”

Sunset howled with laughter, leaning out of her chair and clutching her sides, while Twilight muttered a simple, “Shut up.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Sunset said in between breaths. “No wait, I’m not!” She erupted with laughter again. “Hurry to bed, Twilight or you’ll be cwanky in the morning.”

“Early to bed, early to rise makes a girl smart, pretty, and wise,” Twilight said defensively.

“Oh, Twilight, that’s so adorable.” Sunset giggled a few more times before composing herself. “Okay, I’m done. Thank you for the amusing night, Twilight, I enjoyed it.”

“Yes, I’m glad you got a kick out of my sleeping habits.”

“Leave the sarcasm to me, Sparky.”

Twilight seemingly ignored her and asked, “So, do you want to get started sometime this weekend?”

“I can’t.” Sunset stuck her tongue out like she was going to be sick. “I got a job.”

Kpok 21: The Lulamoon Magical Item Emporium

Sunset pulled her sweater tighter around herself, yet it did little to stop her from shivering in the November wind. Though the sun shone brightly, the air was cold and brought warning of the snows preparing to mount an assault in a few weeks time. She grimaced at the idea of spending yet another winter in her uninsulated factory home.

All around her, the streets of Canterlot were abuzz with early morning shoppers and joggers. Sunset navigated her way through them, occasionally checking the business card tucked in her pocket. Although her legs were burning from the distance she had walked, Sunset was glad she had left her motorcycle at home. Finding parking in the city was always a hassle, even for small vehicles. And that savage wind would have only made her feel more numb than she currently was.

She finally found her destination: a blue building with a large snow globe on top, with another blue building topped with a similar globe inside of it, with the theme repeating itself several more times. Sunset rolled her eyes. *Hilarious*.

The Lulamoon Magical Item Emporium was scrawled in elegant, loopy cursive over the door, and blue wands were painted onto the surrounding windows.

Much like when she had arrived at Pinkie's house, Sunset braced herself for the worst. Fireworks, doves, obnoxiousness of the highest caliber; Sunset was sure *something* unpleasant was waiting for her inside. With a deep breath, she pushed the door open and marched inside.

The jingling bell echoed through the store, but Sunset still felt the need to call out, "Hello?" The lights had not yet been turned on, drowning everything in shadows. As Sunset's eyes adjusted, she could make out rows of shelves lined with various knickknacks. To her far left was a wooden staircase that led to a second floor.

She moved down the aisle, eyeing what had been put out for sale. There were the run-of-the-mill amateur magic items, ranging from decks of cards, to wands, to entire coffins for sawing people in half. Then, as Sunset neared the back of the store, there were more interesting looking antiques. A dusty mirror

that looked like it was glowing on its own, a book with odd designs that Sunset swore subtly changed every time she looked at it. An odd looking horn that seemed to be crafted from crystal, a golden ring, a locket with a snake on it, a white conductor's baton, an ornamental box with six keyholes.

Sunset stopped at the back counter and tapped her fingers impatiently. *Where is everyone? Pretty stupid of them to leave the door open and not have anyone looking after the register.* She glanced at it, thinking how easy it would be to take whatever was inside and walk away unnoticed.

No. Stealing is bad. That's the old me. New Sunset doesn't stoop to petty theft. She walked around the counter to examine it better. *Still... it would be so easy...* She shook her head. *Bah, it's not like there's much money even in there. Not even worth it.*

"What do you think you're doing here?"

The lights flashed on, dazing Sunset for a second before they adjusted and she saw Trixie glaring at her from across the store.

"I'm here to start my job," Sunset said, blinking her eyes a few more times.

Trixie scoffed and marched towards her, a broom in her hand and a scowl on her face. "Likely story. You were trying to steal from my father's shop, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't." Sunset crossed her arms and added, "It's not like there's anything worth stealing here anyway."

"How dare you! The Emporium is the greatest store in all of Canterlot!" Trixie threw her arms wide. "The mystery, the magic, the low prices!" She pointed the broom at Sunset. "You should be in awe at such greatness!"

"Oh, trust me, I'm in awe." Sunset couldn't believe how much of a resemblance Trixie had with Artemis. *Dramatic flair must run in the family.*

"Good," Trixie said, missing the note of sarcasm in Sunset's voice. "Now, get out!"

"I told you, I'm working here now."

Trixie jabbed the broom handle at Sunset, poking her in the chest. “Oh no, you aren’t. Trixie won’t allow it! You can run amok at school all you want, but Trixie won’t have you sabotaging Trixie’s store!”

“I thought it belonged to your dad?”

“Don’t play semantics with Trixie!”

“Ladies, ladies, please.” A cloud of purple smoke appeared behind Trixie, and out walked Artemis, waving his hands to clear some clinging wisps. “Why the hostility? I can’t have my two honey bees trying to sting each other.”

“Father!” Trixie latched onto Artemis’ sleeve. “She’s trying to ruin the shop!”

Sunset threw her arms up. “I haven’t even done anything yet!”

“Ha! So you admit you’re up to something no good! Trixie knew it!”

Artemis patted Trixie on the head. “Buttercup, what on earth makes you think she’s up to something?”

“Because she’s evil! Trixie has seen it with her own eyes!”

“She doesn’t seem evil to me.” Artemis leaned closer, looking at Sunset like she was a particularly interesting artifact. “And I like to think I’m a pretty good judge of character.”

Trixie narrowed her eyes. “That’s just her innocent act. She’s evil! She’s the one who held the entire school in a tyrannical grip! And while Trixie can’t remember the Fall Formal that well, Trixie knows *she* did *something* evil! There was a hole in the ground after... whatever happened!”

Sunset pressed a palm against her face. “Okay, I admit that I was a horrible person in the past. Blah, blah, blah, I’m sorry, *again*. Look, I’ve been apologizing for things for the past month. Can’t we just skip this part and hug it out?”

Artemis clapped his hands. “There, you see, Trixie? Anyone trying to turn their life around deserves a second chance. And there’s no such thing as bad people, just bad choices.” He walked around the corner and opened the register. “Besides, I already gave her a cut of her pay. She needs to work it off.”

Trixie pulled her lips back into an ugly snarl. “Trixie doesn’t care! She’s not allowed in Trixie’s store!”

“Technically it’s my store.”

“*Don’t play semantics with Trixie!*” She stamped her foot on the ground and poked Sunset with the broom again. “Trixie doesn’t care if you apologize, Trixie still doesn’t like you!” With a final huff, Trixie turned and stomped upstairs, muttering insults all the while.

Artemis let out a tired sigh. “Stubborn. Just like her mother.” He brightened and put a hand on Sunset’s shoulder. “But, she’ll come around; she always does.”

Sunset just nodded her head. “So, where does she get the third person speech from?”

“Artemis has no idea. I’m joking, I’m joking!” Artemis laughed after seeing the dry look Sunset gave him. “We all have our quirks. She speaks in third person, I pull quarters out of people’s ears when I’m bored.” He spun a quarter on the tip of his finger.

Sunset rubbed her ear. “I’m not even going to ask when you pulled that out.”

Artemis chuckled and dropped the coin into the register and slammed it shut. “Now then!” He leaped over the counter and spread his arms out as he landed, just as Trixie had moment’s ago. “What do you think of *The Lulamoon Magical Item Emporium*?” His voice boomed throughout the store and rang in Sunset’s ears like he had yelled through a megaphone.

“It’s horribly tacky and mildly interesting at the same time,” Sunset said, massaging her ears again.

“All I heard was ‘mildly interesting’.” Artemis put on a jubilant smile. “Come, come, I’ll give you a quick tour.” He shimmied down the center aisle and gestured for Sunset to follow.

Sunset groaned and left the comfort of the back counter. She paused, feeling eyes on the back of her neck, and looked up to the second-floor balcony where Trixie was still glaring at her. Sunset rolled her eyes and followed after Artemis’ cape.

“As you can see, I’ve placed all your standard, yet state-of-the-art, magical supplies at the front for the aspiring amateur. The left rows have more childlike items and the right rows have more sophisticated merchandise.” He took a can

off the shelf and held it in front of Sunset. "Peanut brittle?" he asked with an innocent smile.

Sunset kept her stoic, unamused frown. "No. How dumb do you think I am?"

"Quite the contrary. You seem to be a very intelligent girl. It's your sense of humor I question." He gave the top a twist and out of the can shot several paper snakes. "Always brings a smile to my face."

Sunset brushed a snake out of her hair. "Hilarious."

Artemis tapped her on the nose, little sparks jumping about. "We've got a lot of work to do I see. But here, I'm sure you'll find the items in the back more of your taste." Artemis led her to the far end of the rows, pointing to the items Sunset had already glossed over. "I spent a few of my bachelor years wandering the world, searching for the answer all true magicians seek: what *is* magic? Along the way, I found several interesting relics and artifacts."

Sunset picked up the glowing mirror, admiring her complexion. "And you've decided to sell them instead of keeping them for yourself?"

Artemis shrugged, appearing next to Sunset's reflection. "Oh, I certainly thought about it. But why should I keep all these wonderful things to myself when someone else could get more enjoyment from them? Or figure out how they work in the first place?" He picked up the box with six keyholes. "I've had this for years and still can't find the keys for it." He set it down and pointed to the mirror. "Supposedly, you can scry on anyone with that. All you have to do is say their name." He rolled his head back and sighed. "I got it to work once, but can't seem to do it again."

Sunset placed it back on the shelf. *A mirror that can spy on anyone? Nah, it has to be a hoax... Or maybe it's... nah, that's impossible.* She looked to the higher shelves and saw a red flower bulb in a simple pot. "You have a rose for sale?" Sunset asked as she reached for it.

"Oh, that's not a rose. I can never remember its full name, but it's a very rare flower that can live without sunshine. I call it Cindy."

Sunset poked it... and promptly screamed when the bulb opened up and clamped down around her finger, making an odd slurping sound. "Get it off!" Sunset viciously tried to yank her finger free but to no avail.

Artemis pressed a hand against his mouth, failing to suppress a boyish giggle. “Cindy, be nice to our guest.”

Cindy shivered then spat out Sunset’s finger, licking a green tongue around its petals before going back to a docile state.

“Relax,” Artemis said, watching Sunset examine her hand. “Cindy just eats germs and dead skin off of humans. Bugs aren’t so lucky.”

Sunset had to admit, her finger looked cleaner than it had previously. Still, she shot a scathing look at Artemis. “You could have warned me.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?” Artemis scooted past her and headed for the stairs. “Come along, the tour is almost over.”

He led Sunset up to the second floor where an impromptu stage greeted them. It lacked any of the pomp and flair she’d come to expect from Artemis, though she supposed there was only so much room in the shop. Tucked away in a far corner was a bookcase along with a chair and a host of pillows.

“This is the stage!” Artemis held his hands up, and neon lights came to life, illuminating the surrounding area and spelling *Lulamoon* across the top.

And there’s the flair, Sunset thought.

“This is where I host a few magic shows; nothing too big, just something to draw a crowd.” Artemis pointed to the homely corner. “And that’s where we have storytime with the children.”

Sunset’s eyes widened. “Oh don’t tell me—”

“You’ll be expected to read to them whenever I or Trixie cannot.”

“I was afraid of that.” Sunset suppressed a moan and looked back to the stage, where Trixie was sweeping away the collected dust. “Wait, does anyone else work here?”

“Nope.” Trixie hopped off the stage to stand next to Artemis. “My mom comes in occasionally to help, but it’s usually just us,” she said proudly, eying Sunset with contempt.

Artemis held his hands up. “The last person I gave a job to came into the store, saw some of the items, shouted something about witchcraft and ran out. Go figure.”

“Yeah, can’t imagine why someone would think this is witchcraft,” Sunset said under her breath. “Gah!”

Artemis threw an arm around Sunset’s shoulder and pulled her into a half hug. “Ah, but I’m sure you’re full of much tougher stuff!” He raised his free arm to the ceiling. “Just smell the magic in the air! Feel the excitement waiting to happen!” He reached over and pulled Trixie in. “Isn’t this going to be fun?”

“No,” both of them answered simultaneously.

Artemis’ smile faltered just a bit. “I might need some Tylenol for this.” He clapped both girls on the back and let them go. “Well, I’ll be downstairs checking the inventory. You two...” He rolled his hand at them. “Please try to get along.” He took a step back and jumped over the balcony railing, only instead of falling, he floated down like he was filled with helium.

Sunset blinked, then shook her head. “I will never figure him out.”

Trixie put her hands on her hips and turned her nose up. “He is the greatest man on the face of the planet! Trixie is going to grow up to be just like him!”

There’s a scary thought. Sunset looked to the discarded broom leaning against the stage. “Well then, what am I supposed to do?”

“You can stay up here and finish cleaning!” Trixie snapped. “Trixie is going to man the register.” She gave a wide gesture to the surrounding area. “If you try to sabotage anything, Trixie has ways to make her father change his mind. He only trusts you because he hasn’t seen the real you! But Trixie has! She remembers everything you’ve done... except for the Fall Formal, but she knows you did something there too! So Trixie advises you to watch your step.”

“Is Trixie ever going to stop referring to herself in third person?” Sunset asked dryly.

Trixie scrunched her face, her cheeks turning an angry red and puffing out enough to remind Sunset of an angry chipmunk. She gave her hair a violent swish as she marched for the stairs. The wood creaked in agony as they endured her furious footsteps.

Sunset picked up the broom and leaned on the handle. “Well, this is lovely. My eccentric boss and my angry co-worker.” Sunset couldn’t say she was honestly surprised at Trixie’s behavior. With all the people she wronged in the

past, there were bound to be some who wouldn't forgive her, even if she did say sorry.

She brought the broom across the floor, sweeping up some leftover dirt. As she brought it into a pile, she felt something land in her hair. She paused and ran a hand through her blazing locks, pulling out a large toy spider. She held it in her palm and scoffed. "Stupid toy."

The spider scuttled up her arm.

"Aiiiiiieee!" Sunset dropped the spider on the floor and stomped on it repeatedly, determined to ensure its death.

Below, she could hear Trixie howling with laughter. Sunset raised her boot and found no messy arachnid body, but an empty floorboard.

Sunset's mouth hung open. "Was... was that...?"

"That's what you get for calling Trixie a lousy magician!"

Sunset snapped her mouth closed and resumed sweeping. *It's going to be a long day.*

Kpok 22: Berries and Facial Cream

Long ago, Sunset had kept a day planner to keep track of all her personal affairs. Affairs that included keeping tabs on people she needed to harass and/or blackmail. Once she hired Snips and Snails, the planner had become obsolete. The two were surprisingly good at reminding her what she needed from whom at what time.

Sunset wished she had her planner now to keep track of the busy week that was staring her down.

Her first weekend of work had gone as smoothly as she could have hoped given the circumstances. Business had been slow, so Sunset and Trixie had spent a majority of their time cleaning and restocking in tensed silence.

The minute Sunset had walked through the factory door Sunday evening, her phone began to vibrate like Pinkie after a bowl of sugar. Incidentally, it had been Pinkie on the other end begging to hang out with Sunset Thursday after school. After Sunset had been forced to say ‘yes’, she hung up the phone only to have it ring again with another one of her friends wanting to spend time with her after school. Then another. And another. Sunset had wanted to say ‘no’ to more than half of them, but they had all countered using the dreaded ‘p’ word.

Oh, how Sunset *hated* that word.

Sunset sat down on her bed, dropping her warm cell phone onto her pillow. She held up an index finger. “Monday: spa day with Rarity.” Despite all the pampering she had received while she had been Celestia prodigal student, Sunset had never liked the idea of somepony else running their hooves across her. That preference carried over to her human form.

And bathing in mud was for earth ponies.

She held up another finger. “Tuesday: hiking with Applejack into the forest. Boy, that’s just screaming ‘great idea.’”

“Wednesday: soccer with Rainbow Dash.” She groaned loudly, pressing her palms against her eyes and throwing herself backward onto the mattress. She hated soccer. And she *knew* Rainbow knew she hated it. Yet, Rainbow was

under the impression soccer would help ‘build character’ or something stupid like that.

“On Thursday: bake cupcakes with Pinkie.” Sunset lifted her pillow and beat her face into it repeatedly.

She held up the last available digit on her hand. “Friday: Fluttershy and the animal shelter part two.” At least this was something Sunset didn’t mind doing.

“But wait, there’s more!” She started counting on her other hand. “Saturday: work, followed by a meeting at the library with Twilight.” She rolled onto her stomach and gave an audible sigh. “Why must I suffer before I get to do the things I *want* to do?”

On the other hand, it gave her something to look forward to over the long week. She got up and stretched her arms over her head. “And finally, to top it all off: a group trip to the mall on Sunday. Should be interesting.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little conspicuous how they all called you on the same day to make separate plans with you on each day of the week?” a voice squeaked.

Sunset dropped into her chair and wheeled it closer to the desk. “Oh, no, I’m sure they’re up to something. But, it’s not like I have a choice now. And you know, friendship and all that. Maybe they want me to learn something from all this.”

“But you hate half the things they want to do with you.”

Sunset picked up Princess Twilight Sparkle and looked over her with vague interest. “I’m trying to be a little optimistic this time. So far, everything I thought I would hate, I actually enjoyed, so, you never know.” She paused, a grim frown sliding down her face. “Except baking with Pinkie. I know I’ll hate that.” She noticed a loose thread in Twilight’s tail and yanked it out as hard as she could.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“I was bored.”

Sunset found that in this world, cars either reflected their owners or proved they were compensating for something. In Rarity's case, it was the former, thankfully. Her car was small, purple, and the inside smelled of perfume and makeup.

Rarity was humming along to some horrible teen romance song that made Sunset want to claw her own ears off. Regardless, she held her tongue, choosing to focus on the outside world as it zipped by.

"So, Sunset," Rarity spoke up as the song finally came to an end, "have you ever been to a spa?"

"Only for a hooficure and horn filing." She caught Rarity's expression of bewilderment and explained, "It's a like a pedicure for your hooves and horn. It's popular back in Equestria."

"Ah, I see. And do they have facials and tissue massages there as well?"

"They do, but they never appealed to me. Besides..." Sunset ran a hand down her cheek. "My skin is flawless already."

"So I've noticed," Rarity grumbled, hunching over in her seat. "Anyway, I think you'll really enjoy this." She sat up straight again, her face beaming with anticipation. "I ordered us a massage, facials, mud baths and the steam room."

"So, someone digging into my back, goop on my face, bathing in mud and sweating." Sunset counted off on her fingers. "It's a dream come true."

"Oh, please, don't be Rainbow. Just try it before you claim you're too 'cool' for any of that."

Sunset held her hands up. "Hey, I'm not claiming I'm too cool for anything. I'm just having a hard time believing you find any of this relaxing."

"Well, if you don't want to go to the spa, we could go back to my store and you could do some modeling for me," Rarity said with a sly smile.

"We're going to the spa."

"I thought so."

The building smelled of incense and fancy soaps; a swirling, soothing aroma that was enough to make Sunset's eyes droop. The slow, tranquil music that

issued from the speakers only heightened the effect. Sunset's mind was locked in a light fog, making her lose concern over what was going on around her faster than usual. She vaguely remembered being introduced to two women, one with pink hair and the other with blue, before being pushed into a changing stall with a bundle of white robes.

She shook her head until the fog dispersed and stared at the robes in her hand. "Umm, Rarity?" She knocked on the side of the stall.

"Yes, Sunset?"

"Am I... supposed to get completely... undressed under this?"

She heard Rarity snicker on the other side. "Come now, Sunset. You're not afraid of a little intimacy, are you?"

Sunset wanted to scream 'no' but was forced to say, "Yes."

Rarity laughed a little harder. "Don't worry, dear, we're all friends here. You've got nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm leaving."

"I'm joking."

"I'm still leaving."

"Oh, lighten up a little, it was just a joke. You can leave your undergarments on if you want. Though, I don't understand where this modesty is coming from. Weren't you naked all the time back in your pony world?"

Sunset unfolded the robe, regarding with disdain the short length of it, ending just below her thigh. She flipped it around and fought the urge to walk out again, seeing as the robe had a large exposed area for her back, leaving only her shoulders and her butt covered. "Yes, I was. But things change, all right? I've come to enjoy many things in this world, like wearing clothes. Besides, isn't being naked taboo here?"

"In most instances yes. That's why they gave you the robe, dear."

"It hardly covers anything."

"Sunset!" Rarity snapped.

"Fine, fine, I'm changing. Not like I have much dignity left to lose anyway." She pulled most of her clothes off and wrapped the white robe around herself,

making sure it was on as snug as possible. It was incredibly soft and fluffy. Sunset guessed this was what a cloud felt like to pegasi.

She stepped out of her stall where Rarity was waiting for her, wearing an identical robe. Sunset tugged on the bottom of her own to make sure she wasn't showing off anything.

The pink hair girl—Aloe? Or maybe Lotus? Sunset couldn't care to remember—returned with a clipboard, while her sister carried a tray with expensive looking bottles of lotions and oils. “So first, we have your usual massage, Miss Rarity,” she said with a slight German accent.

Rarity clapped her hands together. “Wonderful! Come along, Sunset, you'll enjoy this.”

Doubtful... Optimism, optimism. This could be an enjoyable experience.

The masseuses led them to two flat tables and instructed Sunset to lay down on her front. She did as she was told, nestling her face into a square cushion with a hole cut into it, giving her a magnificent view of the floor. “Now, just relax,” Aloe (or Lotus... whichever) said.

Sunset complied, only to tense up again when she felt something wet run across her back. The scent was strong and had an undertone that reminded her of a rainforest. It was like someone was rubbing liquefied Amazon across her back. “What is that?”

“Body oils to help loosen the muscles. Now, be still, please.”

And like that, Sunset was reduced to a rag doll, maintaining only her facial functions as the masseuse began to work on her back. She was at least grateful for that; the only way she could relieve some of her discomfort now was by contorting her face. She was also grateful it was hidden by the pillow. She'd never admit that a simple massage was hurting her.

Oh! Ow, ow ow! Ow! Geez, people do this for fun? Sadists. Sunset mentally flinched as Aloe (she was just going to assume it was Aloe) hit a particularly tight knot near her shoulder. Aloe pressed down into it and rolled it with her thumb, while Sunset chewed on her own tongue like it was taffy.

“You have much tension around here,” Aloe said. “This may feel a little uncomfortable for a minute.”

“Mnnnph!” Was Sunset’s only answer. *I knew people touching me was a—*ow! *Bad idea...* Yet, even as the thought ran through her head, she could feel some of the tension leaving her body. The pain slowly receded until all Sunset felt was Aloe’s hand repeating a rhythmic, soothing motion that almost tickled. She felt her body slump into a relaxed state and she released a breath of satisfaction.

“Enjoying yourself, dear?” Rarity asked from the next table over.

“Yeah, I think so.” Sunset moaned as Aloe undid another knot. “Yes, I’m definitely enjoying myself.”

“So, I hear you and Twilight are entering the science fair together,” Rarity said trying to create idle chit-chat, though she was unaware if Sunset was even cognizant of anything she was saying.

For her part, Sunset was buried shoulder deep in the pit of warm mud, an avocado mask smeared across her face with cucumbers resting over her eyes, akin to Rarity. They had just come out of the steam room with little conversation between them. Now, Rarity seemed to be determined to keep a conversation going.

“Yeah. It was all her idea though. I’m just doing it for the sweet satisfaction of knowing I can trounce anyone in this school in terms of sheer intellect.” Sunset tried grin in her sinister manner but found it difficult with the facial mask. All she managed to do was curl the corners of her mouth up in a very subtle fashion.

“Well, it sounds like a fun bonding experience,” Rarity said with a giggle. “I’m amazed you two could become such good friends in spite of what happened between you and the other Twilight.”

“I try to keep my hatred for the princess separate from my friendship with Twilight. I mean, it’s not like *she* tried to ruin my life.” Sunset stared at the back of the cucumbers. It was truly amazing how far they had come in the span of a month. Sunset couldn’t believe only a short while ago she had told Twilight she hated her and wanted her to stay away. Now, Twilight was the one

Sunset probably liked the most. Perhaps it was because their friendship wasn't forced by anyone else's meddling; it had just happened.

"Now, Sunset, I wouldn't say the princess *ruined* your life."

"She shot me with a rainbow beam, left me in a crater and... other things," Sunset said, putting as much sour in her tone as she could. *This mask feels great, but I can barely move my face!*

"Yes, but look at the aftermath. You have six new friends who care about you. You need to take the good with the bad, Sunset."

"Yeah, yeah, friendship after ultimate defeat and all that junk. Silver linings and life isn't as horrible as I make it out to be." *It really isn't. I just like to complain sometimes.* Sunset smiled to herself... or at least, she tried to. She sank deeper into the mud, breathing in the tranquility flowing through the air. In spite of the fact that she was practically naked under the mud, Sunset was in a state of complete nirvana.

You know, if this is what friends do most of the time, this isn't so bad.

Sunset walked out the door feeling absolutely relaxed. Her body felt loose and free, and her skin was practically glowing. She took in a deep breath of air and relaxed her shoulders. *Wish I had taken advantage of the royal masseuses when I had the chance.*

"Well, I take it you enjoyed yourself?" Rarity asked, leading the way back to her car.

"Yes, I did. It was better than I expected." She looked down at her manicured nails. She hadn't seen them this well-polished in ages. She then ran a hand down her face. "And my skin feels even smoother than usual."

"Oh, good! I had a feeling you would like it," Rarity sang, ducking into her car seat. "So, I was thinking next week, we could go dress shopping! Oh, better yet, we could go pick up some fabrics and you could help me model some new outfits I'm designing! Or, or, better yet! We could—"

Sunset cleared her throat. "How about we just make another spa appointment?"

“Deal!”

Sunset rode her motorcycle down the dirt road on the outskirts of Canterlot. The evening sun filtered through the eaves of the trees and rapidly flicked light into Sunset’s visor. She emerged from the green tunnel and gazed upon acres and acres of tall apple trees; their leaves of gold and brown plucked off by the wind and sent spiraling to the ground.

Directly ahead was a modest sized farm house with a bright red coat of paint and a gray roof. Standing on the wrap-around porch was Applejack, sweeping the leaves off onto the dirt. She waved at Sunset’s approach and stepped off the porch to greet her.

Sunset slowed to a stop, kicking up as little dirt as she could and pulled her helmet off. “Nice place you got here.”

Applejack smiled and nodded. “Mah own little slice of heaven. You should see her in the summer time. All the trees with green leaves and juicy apples just waitin’ to be picked.” She took in a breath of nostalgia. “Brings a tear to yer eye.”

“Sure it does,” Sunset said breezily. She put her helmet up and stretched her arms out, taking in a deep breath of air. She had to give a point to Applejack for the freshness of the air around the country. It was clean and rich and natural compared to the stale, smoggy air that engulfed the city.

“So, where did you say we were hiking to?” Sunset asked, kicking a pebble across the road.

Applejack pointed to one of the far hills. “There’s a wild blueberry patch in the Everfree Forest over yonder. We’re just gonna march in, pick some and bring ‘em back so Granny Smith can bake a pie. Nothin’ to it.”

“Blueberries?” Sunset tilted her neck. “I thought you were apple people?”

“Just because we grow apples for a livin’ don’t mean we can’t eat other things!” Applejack said, her nostrils flaring.

“Okay, okay! Calm down, sheesh.” Sunset raised her hands in a guarded manner. “I was just wondering.”

Applejack pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “Sorry, sugarcube, Ah didn’t mean to snap at ya. There just used to be a rumor at school that said my family was *obsessed* with apples. It got to the point where people thought Ah worshiped an apple harvest god or somethin’.”

“Gee, that sounds terrible, wonder how that started, shall we go on that hike now?” Sunset said at rapid speed.

“Sunset...” Applejack clenched a fist.

“Hey! That looks interesting!” Sunset dashed over to the side of the barn and pointed up a mural depicting Pinkie’s jubilant face along with a radiant sun and fluffy clouds. “Why don’t you tell me about this?”

Applejack shook her head. “Pinkie painted that a while ago, before we all started fightin’ and junk. No matter how hard Ah tried, Ah couldn’t bring myself to paint over it.” She chuckled. “Guess no matter how mad at her Ah was, Ah didn’t want to forget the good times we had.”

Sunset stared at the childish painting and thought of Celestia and Flash. “Good times, huh?”

“Now, back to the matter at hand.” Applejack turned to glare at Sunset.

Before Sunset could put up a defense, a voice shouted, “Applejack, wait!”

Three figures emerged from the barn door and slid to a dusty stop in front of the two older girls. They were each covered in hay and grease stains, and the purple-haired one had several welts on her hand. It took Sunset a moment, but she recognized the trio. Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo, or as the rest of the school had started to call them in their short time there, the Canterlot Motley Crew.

Scootaloo pointed to Sunset. “What’s she doing here?” It wasn’t as accusing as it could have been, but it still made Sunset fidget.

“She’s the charity case mah sister and them are workin’ on, remember?” Apple Bloom said.

Applejack swooped over and covered Apple Bloom’s mouth. “Hehehe, Apple Bloom, where on earth did you hear somethin’ like that?”

“But you said—mmmhmm mmhm.”

It was Sunset's turn to glare at Applejack. "Charity case?"

"Hey, Ah got an idea! Let's pretend that last five minutes didn't happen, deal?" Applejack's smile stretched thin across her face.

Sunset rolled her eyes. "Yes, deal."

Applejack released her sister from her iron grip. "All right, now, what do you three want?"

"We wanted to come with you into the forest!" Apple Bloom said, her two friends nodding vigorously.

"No," Applejack said decisively. "Ah don't need the three of y'all slowin' us down or gettin' lost. Besides, don't y'all have some fancy science project to work on?"

"We decided to take a break," Sweetie said.

"Yeah, I got tired of Sweetie Belle hitting me with the hammer," Scootaloo said, pointing to her bruises. She gave Sweetie a disgruntled look, to which Sweetie responded with a sheepish grin.

"Wait, you three are entering the science fair?" Sunset asked.

"Uh-huh." Apple Bloom nodded. "We wanna win a blue ribbon."

"And see if we're good at being scientists. Since being rock stars and comedians failed." Sweetie said.

"And no! We're not telling you what it is, so you can't steal it!" Scootaloo said with full accusation this time.

Sunset scoffed. "Please, like I'd need to steal any ideas from silly little freshmen like you."

"Hey, we're not silly!" Apple Bloom protested.

"And we're not little!" Sweetie added.

"*And* we're not freshmen!" Scootaloo said.

"Umm, actually, Scoots..." Apple Bloom said.

"... Dang it."

Applejack took off her hat and ran a hand through her hair. “Anyway, why don’t you three go take yer break inside the house? The forest ain’t for the likes you.”

Apple Bloom slouched her shoulders. “Aw, come on, Applejack. Ah’ve lived next to the forest all mah life and still haven’t been inside it.”

“That’s because it’s dark and dangerous!”

“Applejack, ya can’t keep treatin’ me like a baby! Besides, ya said it yerself, yer just gonna go pick some berries. How ‘dangerous’ can that be?”

Applejack chewed on the inside of her cheek, giving Apple Bloom and her friends a scrutinizing look the entire time. She covered her face with a hand and sighed. “Fine. Y’all can come so long as you keep close.”

“Yaay!” The CMC shared a group high-five, while Sunset rubbed her ears, trying to get the buzzing to stop.

“You’re fine with this, right?” Applejack asked.

“I don’t care either way,” Sunset said.

Applejack slipped into the barn and grabbed three flashlights, handing one to Sunset and Apple Bloom. Dusk was settling as the quintet approached the edge of the forest. The tree’s shadows stretched across the ground like a row of black, pointed fangs. The only thing separating the farm from the forest was a short wooden fence that had seen better days. They came up to one of its several broken sections with Applejack in the lead.

“It gets dark in there mighty fast, so, let’s pick those berries and get back before the sun finishes setting.” Applejack stepped over the post, flashlight in one hand and a basket in her other. “And remember: stay close.” She focused her eyes on Apple Bloom before continuing on.

“Hey, do you think Sasquatch lives in there?” Scootaloo asked in a hushed whisper.

“Ain’t no such thing as Sasquatch,” Applejack replied, blasé.

“What about a snipe?” Apple Bloom asked.

“There are no snipes in there neither.”

“Unicorns?” Sweetie tried.

“There’s no such thing as unicorns!” Applejack shouted.

“The girl from another dimension filled with sentient unicorns *and* pegasi would like to have a word with you,” Sunset said casually into Applejack’s ear.

“Shut up.”

Only the thinnest trickles of dying sunlight managed to breach the tops of the Everfree trees and light the forest floor. Sunset could imagine things were hardly better in the middle of the day. She could also see why Applejack had been reluctant to let her sister voyage into the forest. It was eerie and ominous no matter how you tried to approach it. When it was silent, every muscle in Sunset’s body tensed, prepared to flee at the drop of a hat. A reaction from her old instincts no doubt. And when the forest came alive with the cries and squawks of animals, it felt like they were surrounding her and her friends and drawing straws to see who would pounce first.

The forest also had no path for the girls to follow, just subtle markers Applejack and Big Macintosh had set up a long time ago. Once or twice Applejack had to stop to remember which marker pointed to where. Sunset prayed that Applejack knew where she was going. She’d hate to be out here longer than she had to.

Not that she was scared or anything.

Sunset pulled her hands into the sleeves of her sweater so it looked like she had a flashlight for a hand. Another rush of cold air blew through the trees and sent a frenzy of leaves cascading down onto her head. She swatted them away with her flashlight, sending the luminescent beam dancing through the black canopy, trails of eyes appearing in its wake.

“Sunset, will ya quit doing that?” Applejack hissed. “No need to tell the whole forest where we are.”

“Yeah? Well, who’s stupid idea was it to go berry hunting at night?”

“Granny Smith wanted it done, and ya don’t say ‘no’ to Granny.” Applejack pushed back a large leaf. “‘Sides, I’ve had a hankerin’ for a blueberry pie for weeks.”

The leaf snapped back and slapped Sunset in the face. She shoved it out of the way, hoping it would do the same for the CMC behind her. Unfortunately, it just grazed the tops of their heads.

Stupid short freshmen.

They trailed behind Sunset and Applejack with expressions of wonder and delight, like they were on the road to El Dorado. Between the symphony of the animals and the silence of the forest, one of three felt compelled to ask Applejack questions or hold a conversation amongst themselves. Sunset supposed their chatter was better than what the forest had to offer, if only just.

“Hey, if we aren’t good at science, maybe we can become professional explorers!” Scootaloo pumped a fist into the air.

“Yeah! We’ll be like Indiana Jones!” Apple Bloom cheered.

“And then, we can write books about our adventures and sell them!” Sweetie said.

“Yaay!” they all cheered.

Applejack pressed a hand into her face and groaned.

“That’s supposed to be my line,” Sunset joked, squeezing herself next to Applejack amongst the narrow trees.

“Sorry, Sunset.” Applejack let out a slow sigh. “Ah just wanted us to have some quality time together. Ya know, just one-on-one.”

“Why?”

“Because, you’re mah friend and Ah’d like to get to know you more. Everythin’ we’ve done so far, it’s been as a group. We haven’t had a chance to just spend time and relate to each other.”

Sunset was silent for a minute, her eyes turned away from Applejack. “So... I’m not just a charity case then?” she asked, unable to keep some of the hurt out of her voice. *Geez, way to sound vulnerable.*

Applejack gave her a softhearted look. “Aw, sugarcube. When Apple Bloom heard me say that, it was right after the Fall Formal when everything was still iffy between us. You aren’t a charity case, and you know Ah would never say anything like that now.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Just like Ah know you’d never start any rumors about me now,” Applejack added with a friendly grin, though her eyes added an ‘or else.’

Sunset straightened up. “Hey, in my defense, I only started the rumor, I never escalated it. Worshiping apple harvest gods was not my idea.”

Applejack let out a small chuckle and pointed to a clearing a few yards ahead of them. “Here we are.”

It was a small grove tucked against the side of a short cliff. The berry bush ran against the bottom of it, plump blueberries hanging off the ends of green leaves that had only recently begun to lose their color.

“Strange little bush,” Applejack said as she knelt down to pick some. “Manages to stay in season right up until the snows hit. Happen to be the best berries Ah’ve ever tasted, too.”

“Uh-huh.” Sunset just bobbed her head. For a moment, there was only the sound of berries being plucked off the vine. It was quiet, and while Sunset would have appreciated it normally, it was too quiet. She swung around and groaned.

“All right, mission accomplished.” Applejack stood up and dusted her pants off. “Let’s get these back to Granny so she can bake that pie.”

“Uh, Applejack?” Sunset pointed a thumb over her shoulder. “They’re gone.”

Applejack stared into the thicket of trees, her face slowly becoming more and more red. Sunset quickly shoved her fingers into her ears just as Applejack bellowed, “*Apple Bloom!*” An armada of birds took off into the twilight sky, scattering more leaves on top of the two girls.

“When Ah get mah hands on her, Ah’m gonna wring her little neck,” Applejack seethed.

“You know, provided she hasn’t gotten eaten or something.” Sunset saw the murderous stare Applejack gave her and said, “Right, not helping.”

“If you wanna help, start tracking them down!” Applejack shone her flashlight against the ground, inspecting it for footprints. “They can’t have gotten that far.”

The duo left the clearing, plunging themselves back into the full cover of the forest. Sunset stayed behind Applejack, listening to her mutter vehemently while she scoured for any sign of the trio of freshmen. The forest chattered with life around them, the sun having now fully set, curtailing Sunset's range of vision to about three feet in front of her without the use of her flashlight. Sunset hoped the animal noises were just aimless squawking and not a discussion about the meal they had just had... or a decision for seconds.

"Apple Bloom, you get back here this instant!" Applejack shouted. "So help me, Ah'll..."

"Must be tough having a little sister to watch."

Applejack growled in frustration. "Ah love her to death, but she can be so bullheaded sometimes."

Wonder who she gets that from.

They walked on for a minute longer before Applejack asked, "So, you don't have any siblings?"

Sunset shook her head. "Nope. An only child. Probably for the best; I would have treated my sister terribly."

"Now, you don't know that for sure," Applejack said reassuringly. "Maybe a sibling would have kept you from being so... ya know."

"Yeah, maybe." Sunset stopped; she could almost feel her ears twitching. "A.J., I think I hear something." She broke off course and dove into a bush, shoving her way through the thick foliage. The mewls of help steadily got louder as the trees thinned out. Sunset skidded to a halt, grabbing a tree for support as her foot teased off the side of a cliff. Applejack came up on her and saved herself by throwing herself backward.

"Help!" three voices cried, seeming to come from below the cliff.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack leaned over and looked down, Sunset copying her movements. Down some ways, hanging to the side of the cliff was Apple Bloom with Scootaloo hanging to her ankles and Sweetie wrapped around Scootaloo's waist. "What happened?"

"W-we-we we're s-standing by the cliff a-and it c-c-c-collapsed," Apple Bloom sobbed.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Applejack said. Sunset was amazed at how fast her tone had gone from furious to soothing and gentle. “It’s gonna be all right. We’re gonna get you outta there, just hang on.” She looked at Sunset. “Quick get me some vines!”

Sunset didn’t need any enchantment to tell her to help out. She sprang into action, charging back into the forest and ripping any vine she could reach off the trees. She kept only the ones that proved more difficult to pull off, coiling them around her arm before returning to Applejack to drop them off and fetch more.

“Applejack, hurry! I’m starting to slip!” Scootaloo cried.

“Just hang on, it’s gonna be okay,” Applejack said reassuringly while she tied the vines together. “Just hang on a minute longer.”

Sunset dropped off the second batch and sat down to tie them together. She didn’t realize she had been sweating until some of it beaded down into her eyes. *How do I always seem to end up in situations like this?* she thought as she wiped her eyes.

Applejack took the completed vines and lowered it down the cliff. “Okay, A.B. Real slow now, take the vine and hang on.”

Apple Bloom trembled, her arm twitching in a fruitless attempt to grab the vine. “Ah can’t, Ah’m gonna fall! Applejack, Ah’m so sorry, it’s all my fault!”

“None of that now. Just take the rope, sugarcube. Ah know you can do it.”

“Please, Apple Bloom!” Sweetie begged. “We can’t hang on forever!”

Apple Bloom gave a slow shaky nod and reached her hand out, fumbling with the vine before latching onto it with all her might. The shift in weight dragged Applejack forward a bit, but she hung on.

Applejack dug her boots into the dirt and started to pull. “Sunset, help me reel them in.”

Sunset felt herself pulled forward like a magnet, and her arms locked around Applejack’s waist. With a mighty heave, they began to pull the girls up, their muffled sobbing becoming louder as they approached the top. Sunset’s body tensed, however, when she heard the faint sound of snapping fibers.

“Umm, Applejack...”

Applejack gave one more pull before throwing herself forward just as the vines snapped, while the CMC shrieked in horror. She grabbed Apple Bloom by the wrists, yet continued to slide forward. Sunset jumped and threw herself on top of Applejack’s legs, forcing her to a stop.

“Thank you, Sunset,” Applejack grunted.

“Don’t thank me yet!” Sunset gripped her ankles and pulled, slowly bringing Applejack back from the edge, and in tangent, the Canterlot Motley Crew.

Applejack pulled herself to her knees and finished the work, hauling the three girls onto the ledge where they proceeded to take five large steps away.

Everyone collapsed onto the ground, panting and/or crying over the ordeal. Apple Bloom was the first to recover, tackling her big sister and sobbing into her shirt. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle joined suit soon after, leaving Sunset to lean against an old tree on her own.

“Why did you three wander off in the first place?” Sunset asked.

“Apple Bloom thought she saw Sasquatch’s footprints so we decided to follow them,” Scootaloo said in between sniffles.

“We followed them to the ledge when it gave out and...well, you know the rest,” Sweetie said.

Sunset sighed in exasperation and looked at the basket of blueberries lying off to the side. *All this for a stupid pie. That better be the best damn pie I’ve ever had.*

Applejack stood up and pulled Apple Bloom to her feet. "Come on, let's get outta here. Ah think we've seen enough excitement for one night."

"Am Ah grounded, Applejack?" Apple Bloom asked, eyes wider than the moon.

"Ahh, sugarcube." Applejack pulled her in close. "Of course you are."

Sunset and Applejack sat on the patio steps under a gorgeous star-filled sky; an empty pie tin sat in between them. The corners of Sunset’s mouth were still stained with blue juice and pie crumbs.

Passable, she thought, patting her content stomach.

Applejack leaned on back on her hands, looking up at the crescent moon. “Thanks for today, Sunset. Ah hate to think what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been there.”

“Don’t mention it. Seriously, don’t mention it.” She wiped the remains of her meal from her mouth. “You think they’ll be okay?”

“Please,” Applejack said with a snort, “by this time tomorrow, they’ll be back to some new shenanigans and driving me up the wall.”

“Well, you handled the situation really well.”

“Ah just told them what they needed to hear. If Ah had panicked, they would have panicked even more and... well, probably slipped.”

Sunset tilted her head towards Applejack. “You make a pretty good big sister.”

Applejack smiled. “Ah reckon you would, too, sugarcube.”

Kpok 23: In the Absence of Detention

“Rainbow Dash with the ball! She takes it down field! The goalie gets ready to defend!”

The ‘goalie’ just stood there with a pointed look.

“She shoots! She scores! Gooooooooooooooooaaaaaal!”

Sunset scooped the soccer ball up and tossed it back towards Rainbow Dash. “Can I go home now?”

“No way, we’ve only been here for twenty minutes.” Rainbow caught the ball with the side of her leg and kicked it into the air before bouncing it up and down on her knees.

As the sun fell into its slumbering position off the side of the world, the shadows provided by the stands of the school stadium stretched and covered the football field in shade. Sunset and Rainbow stood at one end where a soccer net had been set up underneath the goal post.

Sunset and Rainbow had walked onto the field when school had ended, Rainbow going on about her favorite soccer players, while Sunset dragged the goal. She spent the next few minutes watching Rainbow stretch before the wannabe superstar started dribbling the ball and taking shots at the net.

Bored already, Sunset sat down cross-legged and started pulling at the blades of grass. “Rainbow, why did you drag me to do this? What part of ‘I hate soccer’ did you not get?”

Rainbow rolled her eyes, transitioning the ball from her knees to her head. “Please, nobody hates soccer. It’s the sport of kings! That and track and field. Besides, you spend most of the time sitting in detention or in that dingy factory you call a home. When’s the last time you got some exercise?”

“Last night, when I went hiking with Applejack. And prior to that, when I kicked your butt in the park.” Sunset tossed the pieces of grass into the air, watching the wind run off with them before looking up at Rainbow’s irked expression.

“Okay, first of all, we never actually finished that fight. And second of all, I was so totally winning.”

“Really?” Sunset stood up and grinned with superiority. “And who was the one who kept getting knocked to the ground?”

Rainbow snatched the ball from the air and got into Sunset’s face. “Keep talking and I’ll give you another bloody nose.”

“Try it, I dare you. Next time I knock you down, you won’t be getting back up.” They stood nose to nose, their foreheads pressed against each other. Sunset grinned wickedly while Rainbow gave her an agitated frown.

It didn’t last long. Rainbow’s lower lip trembled and she broke into a grin. Sunset couldn’t help but smile as well and proceeded to break into fits of laughter as she and Rainbow pulled away from each other. Their laughs echoed into the stands, filling the stadium with jubilant merriment.

Rainbow resumed showing off her fancy footwork with the ball. “But seriously, a little exercise won’t kill you. Come on, one game; I’ll even go easy on you.”

Sunset sat back on the ground. “Dash, I don’t even know how to play this stupid game.”

“It’s easy; I’ll teach you. First rule is you can’t use your hands.”

“I figured that one out on my own, believe it or not.” Sunset stood up again. “All right, might as well.” *She probably won’t let me leave until I engage in some sort of activity with her anyway.*

“Awesome!” Rainbow let the ball drop to the ground. “Okay, let’s start with the basics. Take the ball and dribble it down the field.” She kicked the ball over to Sunset, who managed to stop it with her heel.

“All right, piece of cake.” Sunset kicked it with the tip of her boot, letting the ball roll a short distance before chasing after it. She kicked it again, making sure not to trip over her own feet like a certain princess had. Lucky for Sunset, with the two years she had of using her legs, she considered herself an expert of sorts.

At least she had until she made a slight overstep and landed on top of the ball instead of kicking it. It rolled under her foot, quickly screwing up her balance and before she could blink, Sunset found herself eating grass. It didn’t taste too bad for what it was worth.

She heard footsteps approaching before Rainbow said with a playful laugh, “Wow, that was almost as bad as pony Twilight.”

Sunset pointed up at her. “New rule,” she said, her face still buried. “Never compare me to *her*. Ever.”

Rainbow kneeled down to help Sunset to her feet. “Relax, I was just joking. That wasn’t bad for your first time. Try using the inside of your foot instead of your toes though. Makes it a lot easier.”

Sunset took her advice and continued dribbling the ball up and down the field. Like Rainbow said, it was much easier to control the ball this way. Sunset found she had a reduced number of faceplants than what she could have had.

They continued practicing dribbling and coordination until the stadium lights came on, bathing the field in their luminescent glow. Rainbow then brought Sunset over to the goal to practice kicking.

“It’s not all about the power you put behind your shots, it’s how well you can aim them. I’ve seen plenty of beautiful kicks go right over the goal and cost the team a point they needed.” Rainbow stood near the goal while Sunset was fifteen yards back with the ball. “Just concentrate and you’ll be fine,” Rainbow encouraged.

Sunset nodded and took a step back, squinting her eyes and biting her tongue as she sized the goal up. It was basic trigonometry with a little bit of physics. Find the right angle, apply the right amount of force and...

She took a wide lunge forward, brought her leg back and slammed her foot against the ball, watching it sail towards the goal... and right up over it.

“Yep,” Rainbow said with mild amusement. “Just like that.” She ran off to retrieve the ball while Sunset pondered over what had gone wrong.

“Too much pressure? Or maybe I misjudged the distance. No, it must have been my position on the ball.” Said ball bounced against her legs, snapping Sunset out of her thoughts.

“Try again,” Rainbow said with command. “And this time *aim*.”

“I was aiming!” Sunset snapped. She aligned the ball with the goal and reconfigured her mental calculations, then took another step back. *Wait I see*

what the problem is. She adjusted her position a little and ran forward, kicking the ball with the flat side of her foot.

Once again, the soccer ball soared for the goal, this time finding its target and landing inside the net.

“Yes! I did it!” Sunset cheered. She stopped and coughed into her hand. “Naturally. Just my raw talent coming to light again.”

“Uh-huh,” Rainbow said with playful skepticism. “Let’s see if you can do it again.”

Sunset continued to practice her goal shooting, Rainbow repositioning her every few minutes to see how adaptable she was. Sunset, the adaptable genius that she was, was able to get the ball in every single time. There had been a few close shaves, sure, but she always got her target in the end.

Rainbow clapped her hands, a look between amused and impressed on her face. “Not bad for a rookie. Now, let’s see how you do when there’s a goalie blocking your path.” She stepped up to the goal and rolled the ball back to Sunset. “Good luck; you’re gonna need it.” Rainbow rolled her neck and pounded her fists together.

“Pfft, if you play soccer like you play Battleship, then I’ve already won,” Sunset said as she lined the ball up. Rainbow’s thin frame didn’t take up too much of the goal space; it would be easy getting a well-placed shot in. Sunset did a few calculations, then fired.

Rainbow was faster than a cheetah. She slipped to the side, stuck her knee out so the ball bounced against it and ricochet into the air, then caught it as it fell. She gave a victorious smirk. “What were you saying?”

“I was saying I was going to kick your butt. Give me the ball, I was just warming up.” The ball landed at Sunset’s feet and she took aim again. *Maybe I can curve it around her.* She made the proper adjustments and tried again. Just like the first time, Rainbow moved as fast as lightning and stopped it.

Sunset demanded a redo and this time tried to fake Rainbow out. It failed spectacularly, with Rainbow stopping it with one hand. Again and again, Sunset tried, eventually forgoing her equations and just kicking with all her might. Rainbow, for her part, never broke a sweat.

Rainbow stopped the most recent attempt and tucked the ball under her arm before marching over to a panting Sunset. “You wanna know what your problem is?” she asked, still smirking.

“Yes... please enlighten me,” Sunset said trying to catch her breath.

“It’s because, you’re playing with this—” Rainbow poked her in the forehead “—not with this.” She poked Sunset in the heart.

Sunset slapped her hand away. “Don’t ever touch my boobs.”

Rainbow laughed. “Sorry, I meant, you’re not playing with your heart. You’re just thinking like it’s some stupid math problem. When you’re in the heat of the moment, you don’t have time to think that hard. You just have to trust your instincts and go for it.”

Sunset gave a reluctant nod, knowing Rainbow was right—she had been looking at it far too analytically. That, and Rainbow was in a class above her when it came to sports, as much as she loathed to admit it.

“Now, you wanna trade places? I bet you can’t block one shot from me,” Rainbow said with a cocky grin.

After the previous display of both their skill, Sunset should have said no. But, staring at Rainbow’s overconfident smile made the blood rush to her face and she said, “You’re on!”

Standing in front of the net, Sunset carefully eyed Rainbow’s movements. The slightest fidget or twitch could give her an indication of the direction she was going to kick in. In a single motion, Rainbow moved forward and slammed her foot into the ball where it then took off like it had been fired from a cannon. Sunset barely had time to lean out the way, and she felt the ball skim her head.

“One, zip,” Rainbow said, putting extra emphasis on the ‘p’.

Sunset tossed the ball back and got ready again, swearing she wouldn’t let the ball intimidate her. Rainbow kicked, and Sunset dove, but the ball continued over her and caught the net.

“Two!”

“Shut up!”

Sunset tried again, this time managing to scrape the ball with her fingertips. She missed completely the fourth time, Rainbow having tricked her to go the opposite direction of the ball.

“Wanna keep going?” Rainbow asked.

“Yeah, one more,” Sunset demanded.

Their determined eyes met under the fluorescent lights. Sunset leaned forward and widened her stance, preparing herself to jump either way. Rainbow slowly took a step back from the ball, never breaking eye contact with Sunset.

A faint breeze blew through the grass as Rainbow rushed forward. Sunset was barely able to keep up, but she saw the subtle twitch in Rainbow’s demeanor before she had kicked. Sunset didn’t think, she just acted and lunged to stop the ball.

She wished she had put a little more thought into her movement. Her foot slipped as she jumped to the side and the last thing she saw was a world of black and white.

“Well... on the bright side... at least you blocked a goal,” Rainbow said with a nervous smile.

“Dash,” Sunset said, pressing another swab of bloody tissue against her nose, “if there weren’t three of you right now, I’d murder you.”

Sunset stood in the kitchen of Sugarcube Corner after closing hours, sporting a new bandage on her slightly crooked nose. Her friends had found some humor in her attempt to block a soccer ball with her face. Pinkie stood to her left looking as excited as ever, while the owners of the store, Mr. and Mrs. Cake, stood across from them looking nervous.

“Now, Pinkie,” Mr. Cake said slowly, “it isn’t that we don’t trust you, it’s just...” His eyes quickly glanced to Sunset. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Don’t worry, boss! Sunset’s just here to help me bake some goodies. I’ll have my eye on her the whole time. Plus, she’s all nice and good now, right, Sunny?”

“More or less.”

“See?” Pinkie wrapped an arm around her and Sunset fought down the urge to tell her off.

The cakes looked dubiously at one another then back to Pinkie. “Well.. if you’re sure,” Mrs. Cake said. “Just be sure to lock everything up when you’re done.”

“Okey-dokey-lokey! Tell the twins their auntie says hi!” Pinkie waved them out, leaving the store to the two students.

“Alrighty then, Sunny!” Pinkie turned around, suddenly wearing a chef’s hat. “Let’s get cooking!”

“Ohmygosh, Pinkie, I’m like, so excited!” Sunset said in a high voice, popping a heel up.

“Ohmygosh, so am I! We’re gonna have a blast!”

“Yeah, totally! I love baking!”

“Me too!”

“And tomorrow we go hunt for rainbows and leprechauns!”

Pinkie looked like she was about to burst. “That would be sooo amazing! Let’s do it!”

Sunset put her foot down and gave Pinkie a dismal look. “Sure. And the day after that, we can work on your sarcasm detector.”

Pinkie came down off her happy high, giving Sunset a dubious look. “So... we’re not going to go find leprechauns?”

Sunset facepalmed. “No.”

“Rats.” Pinkie snapped her fingers. “I thought I had finally found a leprechaun hunting partner. I mean, do you know how hard those guys are to track down on your own?”

Apparently, Pinkie's question was so out there, even the enchantment couldn't make Sunset give an answer. She just stared blankly at her before shaking her head. "Let's just get this over with," Sunset said in exasperation.

"You can't rush cupcake perfection, Sunset. Besides, why would you want to go home so quick?"

"To get away from you." Sunset clapped a hand over her mouth.

Pinkie frowned. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because I think you're loud, obnoxious and extremely annoying," Sunset blurted out. *Aw, crap.* She could see Pinkie's hyperactive energy begin to drain away.

"Oh," Pinkie said in a mouse-like voice that would have impressed Fluttershy. She turned away from Sunset and started pulling ingredients out of the cabinets.

Sunset, meanwhile, berated herself and the stupid curse. *This is why people lie! Way to go Elements of Harmony!* She took a step towards Pinkie. "Hey..."

"It's okay," Pinkie said quietly. "I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with sometimes. I just thought... I didn't know I still bothered you so much. I thought... since we were friends..."

Oh no, we're about to have a moment. I hate moments. Sunset tapped into the small, yet steadily growing well of empathy and cleared her throat. "Listen, Pinks, you can't take anything I say to heart. Yeah, we're friends—and trust me, I wouldn't say that unless it was true—but remember, I'm... still shallow, temperamental and generally unpleasant."

Pinkie turned around, looking at her with big puppy-dog eyes. "But that's why I take it to heart, because we are friends. The last thing I want to do is annoy my friends."

Sunset sighed and closed her eyes. "Pinkie, understand this: you *all* annoy me to some degree. Yeah, I think you're an overactive nuisance, but I also think Rainbow's an airheaded jock, Applejack's a country hick, Rarity's a diva, Fluttershy's still a doormat and Twilight is a nagging bookworm. But—and if you repeat this to anyone, I swear I will flay you alive—I like all of you and I'm really, really glad you're my friends." Sunset shuddered a little. Good

person or not, she would never get used to throwing her honest emotions out into the open like that.

Pinkie smiled brightly at her, her normal cheer returning. “So, you think I’m annoying, but in a good way?”

“No, you’re just plain annoying,” Sunset said flatly.

Pinkie frowned again.

“But,” Sunset quickly added, “that doesn’t mean I don’t like you or anything, or that you need to change something about yourself. I just need to adjust.”

Pinkie smiled and leaped forward to throw her arms around Sunset. “Don’t worry, Sunset, I promise, I’ll help you adjust into the wonderful world of friendship! If you need anything, just say the word!”

“Stop hugging me.”

“But hugs are nice,” Pinkie pouted.

“Pinkie,” Sunset said with a warning tone.

“Right, sorry, being annoying.” Pinkie let go of her and grinned sheepishly before studying Sunset with a knowing gaze. “But you know, you aren’t always ‘unpleasant.’ In fact, you were pretty nice just a minute ago.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “You’re delusional.”

Pinkie giggled. “You know, I think I’m starting to see why Twilight likes you.”

Sunset crossed her arms. “I’ve said it before: Twilight’s a poor judge of character. I still don’t know why she wanted to be my friend so bad.”

Pinkie opened her mouth to say something but quickly snapped it shut and returned to the bowl on the counter.

“What?” Sunset asked.

“Oh, nothing. Come on, let’s get baking!”

The night progressed with Sunset watching Pinkie whip up the first batch of cupcakes and setting them in the oven before she had to do it herself with Pinkie’s close instructions. Pinkie was actually a pretty good teacher; always

encouraging, amusing to some degree and patient with Sunset, who had never been the best cook. All of her meals were either microwaveable or consisted of raw fruits and vegetables.

Still, her slightly lumpy cupcake batter made it to the oven, while Pinkie's perfect looking cupcakes cooled on the nearby counter. While they were waiting, they proceeded to work on the frosting; an activity that quickly became messy after Pinkie flicked some on Sunset's cheek.

She wiped it off with a finger and locked her eyes on Pinkie. "I know you just didn't throw frosting at me."

Pinkie smiled, trying to look innocent as possible, but Sunset had already dipped a spoon into her mixing bowl and flung a scoop of red frosting at Pinkie, getting lost in her wild hair.

"Hey, that's gonna take me forever to find!" The battle was on then. Frosting flew across the kitchen as both girls ducked behind cabinet doors while trying to land the most frosting on the other. By the end of it, Sunset was covered in blue and pink while Pinkie was covered in red and yellow. As the cupcakes cooled, the girls made new batches of frosting, being careful not to spill it on each other.

They then decorated their pastries; Pinkie's looking professional and appetizing, Sunset's looking like a first grader had smeared the frosting over the top with his hands. While not gaining points for aesthetics, Sunset had to admit they didn't taste too bad for her first try.

The girls sat at one of the tables in the front of the store, the kitchen clean and the utensils and ingredients put away. While they had cleaned their faces up, their clothes remained a mess. A plate of cupcakes sat between them.

"So," Pinkie began before scarfing down another one. "I'm in charge of the Winter Ball again this year."

"Not surprising," Sunset said, nibbling on her own sweet. "You *are* the school's Event Committee President."

"True. But, I was gonna ask you if you had some input for the theme this year?"

Sunset looked taken aback. "Uhh, no. Why would you want my input?"

“Silly, I take inputs from everyone around the school.”

Sunset gave a noncommittal shrug. “I don’t know. I’m probably not even going to go.”

Pinkie gasped. “Why not? It’ll be the biggest dance next to prom!”

“Because I have no reason to go. I refuse to run for princess, mostly because no one in their right mind would vote for me. And, I have no one to go with. You know how those stupid dances are. Everybody’s got to bring somebody.”

“Aww, Sunset.” Pinkie reached over and patted her shoulder. “Come on, I bet *someone* in this school might ask to go with you,” she said with a sly smile.

Sunset scoffed. “No one in this school is dumb enough to ask *me* to the dance.” She briefly thought of Flash and grunted. “Okay, *almost* no one in this school.”

Pinkie pursed her lips together, making an odd face before she said, “Well, you could always come with us! It’ll be fun, I promise!”

Sunset took another bite of her cupcake. “I’ll think about it.”

Walking to the animal shelter with Fluttershy on Friday, Sunset discovered that, while Fluttershy was indeed shy by nature, it turned out she also just didn’t have much to say. That is if the topic didn’t include anything about flora or fauna. Whenever they were in their group, someone else usually voiced a similar opinion to her, leaving her with little point to comment as well unless directly asked.

Still, she made polite small conversation for part of the journey, asking Sunset if she had a good week and if her nose still hurt from where the ball impacted. It did.

Sunset, for her part, rather enjoyed the silence. It was a nice change of pace from the rest of her week, as eventful as it had been. While she couldn’t say she missed sitting alone in her sparse room, she had missed the simple tranquility of it. Just her and her thoughts... And a doll that responded to her thoughts.

Yeah... this is probably better for my health, Sunset thought as she and Fluttershy crossed the street to the shelter.

Fluttershy pushed the door open, and as they stepped inside, a loud squawk assaulted Sunset's ears, disrupting any good feelings she had about coming here again.

"Raaawrk! Demon queen is back!" Peter the parrot flew from where he was perched on the front desk and circled over Sunset once before landing on Fluttershy's head.

Sunset's eye gave a violent twitch and she dug her nails into her palm to stop herself from saying anything she would regret later. Instead, she eyed the brightly colored bird with a generous amount of disdain, slightly hoping he would catch on fire if she stared hard enough.

Fluttershy for her part looked genuinely apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Sunset! I-I swear we haven't said anything mean about you... recently."

"It's okay, Fluttershy," Sunset said through grit teeth. "I don't blame you."

As if on cue, Ms. Tenderheart peeked out of her office and looked at Sunset with a combination of surprise and disappointment, like she had gotten an undesirable birthday gift. "Oh, it's you," she said, not hiding any of her discontent. "I wasn't expecting you to show up again."

"Gee, nice to see you too," Sunset said bitterly. "I see your bird still hates me." Sunset watched Peter soar over to Ms. Tenderheart's shoulder.

"Oh nonsense," she said dismissively, "Peter doesn't hate anyone. I'm sure he's just playing with you. Isn't that right my little birdy?" Ms. Tenderheart started scratching him under the chin, though Sunset was positive the bird had stuck his tongue out at her.

Sunset and Fluttershy donned their white coats and stepped into the back room where the pets began to cry out for affection. Fluttershy, her smile dimming the overhead lights, obliged them and opened up their cages. The animals practically mobbed her, eventually knocking her over so they could get a good lick at her face. All Sunset could hear was her cooing and giggling.

One dog, however, broke away from the crowd and wandered over to Sunset, looking up at her with big, brown eyes and a wagging tail.

“Hey, I remember you,” Sunset said as she knelt down and scratched him behind his good ear. “You’re Spot, right?” He was still shabby looking, though Sunset thought it added a bit of charm to him. The fur around his right eye was brown, and his left ear was torn slightly.

Spot made his way around her, sniffing whatever he could before coming full circle and jumping up to lick her face.

“Hey, easy there,” Sunset laughed. “Take me to dinner first, at least.”

Fluttershy pulled herself out of the literal dog pile, her hair in complete disarray, but looking completely happy. “So, I was thinking maybe you’d like to give them their evening exercise this time while I clean up in here?”

“Sure, no problem,” Sunset said casually. *How hard could it be to watch them chase a ball around?*

Fluttershy clapped her hands together. “Yaay,” she cheered in a quiet way only she could do. “Let me introduce you to all of them first so you know who’s who.”

Sunset’s face dissolved into a thin frown.

“This one is Fifi,” Fluttershy said, holding up a small poodle. “And over there is Rex. That’s Sir Fluffy and his best friend, Lancelittle. Over here is Tiberius, and then we have—”

“Aahhh!” Sunset flailed her arms to get Fluttershy to stop. “I’m never going to remember all of that! Just let me handle it all right?”

“Oh. Well, if you’re sure.”

Sunset smiled confidently at her. “Trust me, we’ll be fine.”

It was chaos. And not the good kind.

“No, Tiberius stop that; Fifi is not a chew toy! No, leave the cats alone! You! Whatever your name is, get back down here! Oh... is that what Fluttershy meant when she said those two were best friends? Yeah... I didn’t need to see that. What? No, Rex, don’t roll in that! And I will throw your ball in a second, let me just—ow! Don’t bite me!”

“Raaawrk! Loser!”

“Shut up, Peter!”

Sunset found herself in a tizzy, running to and fro trying to keep some semblance of order. Not even a minute after Fluttershy had left her alone with the rest of the animals, everything had gone to hell in a furry handbasket. The dogs, when not snapping at each other, were trying to break into the cat enclosure. One of the cats was trying to make a break for it by scaling the wall of one of the surrounding buildings. Luckily, he couldn't seem to get very far before running out of ledge room. The dogs that weren't causing havoc were circling Sunset, each one demanding attention that Sunset currently couldn't provide. All of this was topped off by Peter occasionally dive-bombing Sunset and screaming at her.

The only pet that wasn't driving Sunset insane was Spot, who was trying his hardest to assist by barking at the rest of the dogs, no doubt telling them to fall in line. Sunset appreciated the effort but wished he would stop as his barking was only adding to the noise.

I don't get it! They were completely obedient when Fluttershy was playing with them! “Ouch!” Another dog had nipped at her heel, pointing his nose down at the squeaky toy in front of him. Sunset reached down and threw it across the enclosure, watching as half the dogs that had been hounding her chased after it and then proceeded to fight over it.

“Auugh! That's it! I'm the alpha around here, and you're all going to listen to me!” Sunset stuck her index finger and her thumb into her mouth and blew, releasing a very shrill whistle. Flash had taught her that trick. It had proven useful when she needed to get people's attention.

Lucky for her, it had a similar effect on dogs. Each one of them stopped what they were doing and looked at her expectantly. Sunset lowered her fingers and nodded in satisfaction. “Yeah, that's right. Now then...” She switched to her authoritarian voice and pointed with a commanding finger. “Tiberius, let go of Fifi.”

The large bulldog let go of the small poodle's tail. Fifi quickly scampered and cowered behind Sunset's legs.

“Good. You, Greyhound, step away from the cats. That’s it, nice and easy. Sir Fluffy, get off of Lancelittle, *Now!* And you, you little Chihuahua, for the love of Celestia, *shut up!*”

The brown Chihuahua that had been barking nonstop for the last fifteen minutes finally stopped and stared at her with tennis ball-like eyes.

Sunset took a rejuvenating breath. It felt so *good* to have command like that again. Even if it was just for a host of dogs. She pressed a finger to her temple, trying to stop the rush of power from going to her head. She already felt pangs of longing for the fear and respect of the students of Canterlot High.

She looked back up at the dogs in front of her, one of them holding a ball in his mouth. *This’ll have to do*, Sunset thought. “All right, listen up! Here’s how this is gonna work...”

Within the frame of ten minutes, Sunset had returned order to the enclosure. The cats had been left to their own devices, while the dogs either played friendly games of tug-of-war with each other or chased after the balls Sunset would throw. Many of them came over to her just to be rubbed, though none more so than Spot, whom Sunset had deemed her favorite. Peter had even stopped dive-bombing her—an added bonus.

Sunset sat on the patio next to the door, rubbing Spot’s belly while he kicked a foot in the air. Despite the temporary setback, the day had been quite enjoyable. She had forgotten just how much she had missed the feeling of power. She then cringed when she remembered what happened when she got too much of it. Still, there had to be some balance she could find. She was a born leader, Celestia had said so herself. She just needed to lead without becoming a megalomaniac.

She frowned, wondering if that was even possible for her, before shrugging it off. “I’m thinking too hard. No one would want me to lead them anymore anyway.” She looked over at Spot. “Except maybe you.” She scratched his belly a little harder, and his tail slapped the ground in delight. “Thanks for trying to help me. Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy? You are! Yes you are! Yes you a—”

Sunset paused her scratching and slowly turned her head around. Fluttershy was standing right behind her, her hands clapped against her mouth, though Sunset could still see her cheeks turning pink with mirth.

“Not a word to anyone, Fluttershy,” Sunset said darkly.

“Aww, but Sunset, that was—”

“Not. A. Word!”

Kpok 24: Opposite Extremes

Sunset pushed the door to the emporium open, listening as the bell tinkled overhead. Today, however, that wasn't all that happened when she stepped through. Bright miniature fireworks erupted on both sides of the doorway, making her jump at the sudden display.

Stilling her racing heart, Sunset approached the counter in the back where Artemis was examining what appeared to be a ship in a bottle. He looked up and smiled his usual charismatic smile. "Impressive, no? I added sparklers to the storefront. Thought they would add a little more razzle-dazzle." He gave a wild shake of his hands for emphasis.

"No. And how is that going to attract more customers anyway? You're just going to give them heart attacks." But Artemis wasn't listening. Instead, his eyes were fixed on Sunset's nose.

"My dear, Sunset, what happened to you?"

"I tried to block a soccer ball with my face," Sunset said dully. It wasn't the first time she had been asked that question.

"I see," Artemis said, fighting a guilty smile. "And how did that go for you?"
I'm wearing a bandage, how do you think it went? "I'm pretty sure it's broken."

"Well, Trixie thinks you look better that way."

Sunset sighed. "Good morning to you, too, Trixie."

Trixie walked over to the front window and switched the 'closed' sign to 'open.' "Not anymore it isn't."

"Now, Trixie, get along. You two are going to be working together today," Artemis admonished. "But first..." he looked back at Sunset with a confident gleam in his eye. "I bet I could fix that nose right up."

Sunset's pupils shrank to pinpricks, a myriad of horrible outcomes flashing through her head. "Uhh, no." She clasped a hand against her nose, wincing at the contact. "I'd really rather you didn't."

“Come now, Sunset, it’s an easy fix.” Artemis reached into his sleeve and pulled out a black magician’s wand. “Fixing a nose is like fixing toes, and I’ve fixed plenty of those.”

“Stay away from me!” Sunset tried to take a step back, but he had already reached over the counter.

“Lulamoon!”

Crick!

“Auugh!” Sunset pressed both hands against her nose and hopped up and down. “You crazy idiot! You lunatic! You—you—you fixed my nose.” Sunset tapped it, noting the pain had vanished entirely. It was perfectly straight, just how it had been at the start of the week. “How did you do that?”

“Sunset, a magician never reveals his secrets, surely you know that by now?” He slipped his wand back into his sleeve with a boyish grin.

“Right.” Sunset peeled the bandage off and discarded it into the trash. “Well... thanks.” She felt her nose again. It was certainly no illusion: Artemis had somehow made it whole once more. Sunset found herself caught in a state of two beliefs, much as she had when Artemis had sawed her in half. She knew full well magic existed, but to have someone as mundane as him do something like this in this universe...

“Anytime!” he said jovially, halting Sunset’s train of thought. He closed his eyes and put a hand to his chin. “That reminds me of the many bruises I acquired throughout my travels. Why, I once encountered a brute who snapped my arm like a twig.”

Trixie let out a gasp, mesmerized by Artemis’ story. Sunset had a feeling this was a common occurrence and pulled up a chair, feigning interest.

“Yes, the pain was excruciating! But, of course, he was still no match for my magic. I brought him down with one arm behind my back—almost literally! Incidentally, that was the same day your mother and I met the Prince of Nigeria. Gave us that carpet for the living room. Nice fellow. A bit full of himself though. ”

Sunset watched the irony soar right over Artemis’ head and straight out the door.

Artemis stood, lost in his story—which Sunset doubted the legitimacy of—for a few minutes before blinking out of his reverie. “Where was I? Oh, yes. You two.” He twiddled his fingers at Sunset and Trixie. “I have been called off to business elsewhere, and Selena is busy at the moment, ergo, you two are responsible for running the shop whilst I’m out. Trixie, you’re in charge.”

Sunset was already imagining a thousand ways this could go wrong.

Trixie’s face was a shining star. “Really? Trixie is in charge? Total control?”

“Yes,” Artemis said in a slow, suspecting voice.

Trixie threw her arm into the air. “Then Trixie’s first order of business is to —”

“You can’t fire Sunset.”

Trixie’s arm fell a little. “Then Trixie shall—”

“Or put her on probation.”

Trixie’s arm fell some more. “Then—”

“Or dock her pay.”

Her arm went limp.

“Honestly, Trixie, you act like she’s going to burn the store down or something.”

“Trixie wouldn’t put it past her.” She shot Sunset a scathing leer.

Artemis ruffled her hair. “Forgive and forget, Little Moon, forgive and forget. If we didn’t forgive each other, the world would be filled with war and poverty.”

“It is,” Sunset said.

“My point exactly!” he gave them a satisfied smile. “Now, I’m off. Trixie, behave. Sunset, listen to her... *reasonable* requests. Try not to destroy the store while I’m gone.” His smile melted. “Seriously, don’t. I don’t have insurance for most of these things.” He clapped his hands together and vanished in a puff of smoke.

Trixie huffed and flicked her hair back. “Trixie can’t believe she’s stuck with you for the next four hours.”

“Trust me, this isn’t a picnic for me either. I can think of plenty of other things I’d rather be doing right now,” Sunset said sourly.

“Yes, Trixie is sure you have a whole list of felonies to commit and little children to beat up.”

“I’ve never beaten up any children! I have standards, you know.”

Trixie clucked her tongue. “Trixie finds that hard to believe.”

“Is Trixie ever going to tell me *why* she hates me?” Sunset asked hotly. “For any other reason than the standard crap I pulled?”

“If you can’t bother to remember, then Trixie has a reason to hate you further!” Trixie yelled.

Sunset cupped a hand over her eyes. “Trixie, I can remember, with pretty accurate detail, just about everything I’ve done over the years. I seriously can’t think of anything specific that I did to you that you would hate me for.”

Trixie looked down at her, cheeks puffed with incandescent rage. “You ruined Trixie’s first magic show,” she said in a seething whisper. “Trixie was a laughingstock for weeks.”

Sunset looked up at the ceiling, straining her memory. She recalled sitting in the audience. It had been near the end of freshman year, and she had been under the impression that magic was dead in this world, seeing as she had none of her own. Sunset had been reassured of this thought after watching Trixie’s rather dismal display.

“I didn’t do anything,” Sunset said, shaking her head. “I remember the show, Trixie, but I didn’t do anything to sabotage you. You did that all on your own.”

“Don’t lie!” Trixie balled her fists. “Everyone laughed! You were laughing the loudest! Trixie demands to know what you did!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Sunset said in a level voice.

“Oh yeah? Well, we’ll just see about that!” Trixie turned and stormed down one of the more exotic aisles. She stopped and picked up a small eyeglass box and removed a pair of oddly colored glasses. One lens was green with red swirls while the other was red with green swirls. Trixie put them on and Sunset thought she resembled an odd Christmas ornament.

“These glasses let one see past deception and lies. Even half-truths won’t work,” Trixie declared proudly.

Sunset couldn’t help but smirk. *You didn’t need glasses to see if I’m lying.*

“Now then, did you sabotage Trixie’s magic show in freshmen year?”

“No.”

“Did you hire someone to do it?”

“No.”

“Did you put a curse on Trixie so her magic wouldn’t work right whenever she was in public?”

“No! And now, you’re starting to get ridiculous!”

Trixie stomped her foot. “No, I’m not! I’ll get the truth out of you somehow!”

Sunset stood up and advanced on her. “Here’s a truth: have you ever considered the possibility that, real or not, you’re not good at magic?”

A sharp silence rang through the shop. Trixie stared at Sunset like she had been slapped in the face. Her mouth went up and down a few times, but it took her a full minute before disjointed words began to come out.

“Not good at... I *am* good... Trixie’s father is... so I must be... I...” Her face erupted in anger. “I’ll show you!” Trixie raised her hand, sparks flying out of her fingertips.

Sunset took a step back, fear rising in her stomach. The possibility that Trixie could be labeled as dangerous had never crossed her mind. Yet there was a real anger in those eyes layered with conviction. And those two things mixed together rarely ended well for the person being gazed at.

Trixie flung her hand forward. “*Lulamoon!*”

The next thing Sunset knew, she was on her back, her lungs burning as she coughed violently, plumes of soot rapidly being expelled from her body. When she had regained her breath, she sat up and rubbed her eyes, beholding the sight before her.

Trixie laid on the floor across from her, coughing as hard as Sunset had been, while the majority of the store was covered in a fine layer of gray ash. Cindy, the potted plant, was shaking itself violently to get it off. The ash had even

coated the ceiling and some of the fans, spinning and wafting the soot around even further.

Sunset looked down and saw her whole front dusted gray. Her nose twitched and she released a powerful sneeze, coughing up even more dust. She scrambled to her feet and tried wiping her face off. *Why is it whenever I tell someone an unfortunate truth, they try to kill me?* “Hey, Trixie, you all right?” she asked in a hoarse voice.

Trixie sat up; the glasses were askew on her face. “Why does that never work in public? It always works for father!”

“I’m going to take that as a yes.”

“You!” Trixie got up and pointed a white finger at her. “This is all your fault!”

“Clearly!” Sunset exasperated. “Since I’m the one who tried to *burn the store down; the one thing Artemis told us not to do!*”

“Trixie wasn’t trying to burn the store down, she was trying to blow you up!”

“Well, that makes it so much better now!”

There was the tinkling of a bell and an explosion of miniature fireworks, and both girls turned to the storefront where a startled young man was looking around with a very disturbed expression.

“The... the sign said you were... um, I’ll just come back later,” he said quickly before dashing off.

Trixie wasted no time in rounding on Sunset. “And now, you made Trixie lose her first customer. I hope you’re happy.”

Sunset had to clutch her hands together to stop herself from strangling Trixie.

Sunset had spent the rest of her shift cleaning the entire store from top to bottom. Since it had been ‘her fault’, Trixie had deemed it ‘fair’ that Sunset did a majority of the cleaning alone. Miraculously, everything had been dusted off before Artemis had returned, and he had asked no questions, but merely stated that the two girls had done a good job. Though, he had been disappointed there had been no customers.

Sunset quickly dismounted her bike in the parking lot of the First Library of Canterlot, knowing full well she was a good thirty minutes late for her meeting with Twilight. She had rushed home to take the quickest shower possible, and even after running several red lights, she was still behind schedule. Her foul mood was only uplifted by the thought that she was finally going to hang out with Twilight.

It may just be a research study session, but with the day I've had, I'll take anything, she thought as she rushed around the side of the building and bounded up the steps to the front entrance.

Her face broke into a grin when she saw Twilight standing in front of the door, then quickly fell back into a disgruntled frown when she saw Shining Armor standing next to her. He looked oddly mediocre in his street clothes: long, baggy jeans and a shirt with the logo of some nerdy game on it.

"You're late," he said tersely.

Sunset took a moment to regain her spent oxygen. "I had work." She gave Shining a level stare. "And I don't remember inviting you to this party."

"Watch it, Sunset. Just because I'm off duty—"

Twilight nudged him in the back, laughing uncomfortably. "Okay, Shiny, she's here now. You can leave. Everything's fine."

Shining looked down at her, his mouth set in a thin line. "Alright, I'm leaving. But I'll be back to pick you up at six. I don't want you riding that motorcycle again." He kissed her on the forehead and walked down the stairs, casting one more cautionary glance at Sunset.

Twilight cleared her throat, breaking the silence Shining had left in his wake. "So, how was work?"

"Awful." Sunset gestured to the door. "Shall we go inside?"

They entered the library, the smell of preserved paper and leather-bound knowledge tickling their noses. Rows upon rows of literature greeted them, stretching across the ground floor and continuing up on the second.

The librarian looked up from her own book and eyed Twilight. "You're not planning on staying until midnight again, are you?"

“No,” Twilight said in a huff.

They set off down the rows, looking for books on electronics, EMP’s and general engineering. Both girls had decided to tackle the research part of their science project first, wanting to write up their accompanying paper before getting started on the jammer.

Once they each had a pile of books in their arms, Sunset and Twilight dropped their pile of research on a reading table near the back windows.

Sunset grabbed a book from the top of the pile and aimlessly leafed through it. She was already exhausted, and research was the last thing she felt like doing. Instead, she tried to strike up a conversation, hoping Twilight wasn’t too strict about being quiet in the library.

“So, how was your week? You know, outside of school.”

Twilight looked up from her book and smiled. “It was good. I’ve started learning Beethoven’s fifth on the violin.”

“Really?” Sunset raised an impressed eyebrow. “You’ll have to play it for me sometime.”

“I’d love to.” Twilight leaned closer, studying Sunset’s nose with fixed curiosity. “Wait...”

“What?”

“Your nose. It’s fixed. It was still broken yesterday, wasn’t it?”

Sunset rubbed her nose. “Oh yeah. Artemis fixed it.”

“Artemis? He’s your boss, right?”

“Yep. Self-proclaimed greatest magician in the world.” Sunset rolled her eyes. “I thought he was just crazy. Then, his daughter tried to blow me up.”

“She what?” Twilight yelled. She clapped a hand over her mouth and looked over to the librarian's desk where a pair of hawk-like eyes were pointed in her direction. Twilight dropped her voice to a mousy whisper. “What do you mean she tried to blow you up?”

“She tried to cast some magic and it backfired. All she did was blow smoke everywhere. Which, incidentally, is why I was late.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay. But...” Twilight cocked her head to one side, the gears in her head visibly turning, albeit with some difficulty. “Didn’t you say magic didn’t exist in this world?”

“I said magic was weak in this world, I didn’t say outright it didn’t exist.” Sunset ran her fingers through her damp hair. “Still, I didn’t think anyone here could wield it. *I* can barely feel anything. Of course, maybe most human bodies just aren’t used to sensing or channeling magic. Still, I find it hard to believe that someone like *him* can do it. But, he just realigned my nose, so I’m running out of excuses.”

Sunset finished her rant and saw Twilight’s face scrunch up while her mind went to war with itself. The willingness to believe Sunset’s words versus her scientific rationality.

If I leave her alone long enough, will her brain catch fire? I’d love to see that! Sunset watched Twilight internally suffer for a few more seconds before saying, “All right, that’s enough, Sparky. Just because there’s a little magic in the world doesn’t mean the laws of nature have suddenly stopped working or a vampire is waiting under your bed.”

Twilight sat up straight, brushing her hair back in an attempt to look completely composed again. “Well, of course not. There’s no such thing as vampires.” She gave Sunset an uncertain glance.

Sunset capitalized on it. “Are you sure about that? How do you know I’m not one; secretly waiting for a pure maiden whose blood I can suck to regain my full powers?”

“Please, you’ve had plenty of opportunities to suck my blood.”

“Who said I was talking about you? Geez, someone is self-centered.” Sunset leaned back in her chair with impish satisfaction, watching Twilight’s face glow red. A moment later, both girls were trying their hardest to stifle their laughter, lest the librarian swooped over to kick them out. It was a hard fought battle, but eventually, their mirth subsided, and they resumed their reading.

Sunset read little and took even fewer notes, her mind constantly sidetracked by anything else it found more interesting than this, which was to say, everything. She bounced from wondering how Artemis knew magic in the first

place, to discerning why Trixie was vehement on blaming Sunset for her magic show failure, to pondering what she would make for dinner tonight. A salad sounded nice. She was growing tired of ravioli.

She lifted her head to glance a peek at how far Twilight had gotten, expecting to find copious amounts of notes and a small pile of finished books. Instead, when she had looked up, Twilight had quickly jerked her head down and resumed reading. Next to her was a small page of notes equal to the amount Sunset had written.

Guess we're both having trouble focusing today. Sunset tried to gear herself into paying attention, hoping that maybe if they took enough sufficient notes quickly, they could do something fun. She was writing a bullet point about electrical currents when something tapped her foot. She paused for a second, then gave it no mind. A few paragraphs into her book later, it happened again. Sunset looked up at Twilight, still reading her book, though she hadn't made any progress in her notes.

She's not... No, that's stupid. She resumed her note taking, and not a minute later, there was another tap on her foot. Annoyed, Sunset tapped back. Twilight tapped again, and Sunset brought her leg back and slammed it forward into Twilight's shin.

"Meep!" Twilight pursed her lips together to stop herself from crying in pain. She hunched over the desk, rubbing her injured leg.

"Oops, sorry," Sunset said earnestly. She hadn't meant to hit her *that* hard.

"It's okay," Twilight mumbled. "I-I didn't know that was your foot."

"Mmhmm." Sunset looked at her book again. *She says she didn't know it was my foot, yet she taps it three times like she was expecting something. She wasn't... playing footsie with me, was she? No, that'd be stupid.* She tilted her head up at Twilight, who was still rubbing her leg, looking flustered. *Only couples play footsie with each other.* She remembered when Flash had tried to do it with her. She had promptly slammed her boot on his toes.

Yeah, that's right. That's something only couples do. So, if Twilight was playing footsie with me, then that would mean...

Sunset's face paled and her eyes expanded until they could barely fit on her face. She flipped her book up to hide her face from Twilight. *Sunset Shimmer, that is officially the dumbest idea you have ever come up with! Twilight... me? Ha! That's so dumb, it's laughable! Go on, laugh!* Yet, it felt as if a tube of glue had been squeezed down her throat. *Come on, there's no way Twilight would... me. Me, of all people? No one in their right mind would be in... with me! Tartarus would freeze over before that happened!*

But what about all the blushing and the nervous giggling? And Halloween Night?

Listen you, she's a socially awkward nerd! Of course she's going to blush and giggle! And Halloween was just... a friend helping another friend. That's all we are: just friends! The very thought that Twilight would like me as anything more is so stupid, it almost hurts.

But what about when she used me for a cover story against Flash, or...

Auggh! You're reading into this way too much. I'll prove it to you; Twilight just likes me as a friend, same with the rest of the girls. Sunset continued to hide behind her book, trying to think of a way to ask Twilight without directly asking her.

"Sooo, Sparky." Sunset peered over the top of her book. Twilight was giving her full attention. "I was just wondering... let's say that I hadn't been available to team up with you for the project. What would you have done then?"

"Oh, I don't know." Twilight looked away, rubbing the back of her neck. "Maybe... I would have asked someone else?"

"Cool, just wanted to know. Thanks." *Ha! See? She just picked me because of my brilliant intellect. Nothing more!* She couldn't understand why her heart was beating so fast.

Maybe you should ask another question just to make sure.

No! Seriously, you are thinking about this waaay too hard. Twilight doesn't... you, and even if she did, I'd stomp her heart flat. I don't like girls that way—I barely like guys!

Sunset took a few deep breaths, her haywire train of thought coming to a stop. It was stupid, impossible, *improbable*. Anyone liking her? Not after what she had done. Of course, Twilight hadn't been there...

"Well look, if it isn't the former queen of Canterlot High," a nasally voice said.

Sunset lowered her book and looked at the two lanky boys approaching the table. One of them had messy black hair, a multitude of pimples and a slight overbite. The other one looked certainly cleaner, with a clean face and straight brown hair, however, his glasses were being held together by a thick roll of tape, and he had a pocket protector filled with pens.

"Oh great, if it isn't Dexter—" she looked at the messy haired boy "—and his sidekick, Quick Wit. You two come all the way here just to give me your lunch money? Hate to break it to you, but I'm done taking money from losers, so why don't you go invest in a new pair of glasses."

Quick Wit shot a hand to his broken spectacles. "They're only like this because *you* snapped them in half!"

Sunset chuckled. "Oh yeah. That was a good one." She saw the disapproving look Twilight gave her and shrugged nonchalantly. "He was giving me lip. I had to do something."

Twilight gave an exasperated shake of her head before addressing the two boys. "Is there something we can help you with?" she asked politely.

"We heard Sunset was going to enter the science fair this year," Dexter said.

"Yeah, what of it?" Sunset said brazenly.

Quick Wit looked at her with wide eyes, magnified even further with his glasses. "So it's true? *You're* going to enter the science fair?"

"Yeah. Me and Twilight. Again, what of it?"

Dexter snickered. "Well, we just wanted to tell you good luck in getting second place."

"Yeah, Dexter and I have won the fair for the last two years," Quick said with smug superiority.

Sunset quirked an impressed eyebrow. “Preemptive gloating? That’s why you came over here? You’re going to gloat to *me*? You’ve clearly forgotten who you’re dealing with.”

“Pffft,” Dexter blew a quick raspberry, leaving Sunset to have to wipe the spit off her face. “You’re still the running joke of the school. No one’s scared of you now.”

Sunset jerked her body forward, watching the two boys flinch with looks of horror. She leaned back into her chair. “Yeah, not scared of me, huh? Listen, the only reason you two dorks have won the science fair is because *I* wasn’t in it.”

“Pffft,” —Sunset growled at Dexter, wiping more spit off— “you seriously think you can beat us?”

“Yes. In fact, we plan on *crushing* you. Isn’t that right, Twi?”

“Well, it’s *supposed* to be a friendly competition...”

“Please,” Quick jumped in, “there’s no way two girls could beat us.”

Twilight gave him a sharp look. “Excuse me?”

Quick pushed his glasses up further on the bridge of his nose. “Girls are smart, I’ll admit. You’ll probably have a good research paper. But when it comes to actual design and implementation, it’s a scientific fact that guys are superior. Most of history’s greatest technology has been created by man.”

Twilight gaped at him, a look of disgust crawling across her face. “That has to be the most chauvinistic, fallacious, supercilious misconstruction I have ever heard!”

“Here’s a scientific fact for you,” Sunset said heatedly, “anything you can do, a girl can better.”

“We’ll see about that,” Dexter said. “Our project is going to sweep the competition. We’ve been working on it for months.”

“Oh yeah, care to put your money where your mouth is? Unless, of course, you want my fist to go there first.”

Dexter took a step back. “Are you proposing some kind of wager?”

Sunset nodded. “Yeah, I am.”

Dexter and Quick Wit looked at each other and grinned. “All right, name your stakes,” Quick said.

“Let’s see... if we win...” Sunset tapped a finger against her chin. “Well, I don’t want you two morons doing my homework for me.” What was the most humiliating thing she could make them do without it becoming illegal? “How about this: you have to admit girls are superior to boys—”

“Fine.”

“I’m not done.” Sunset held up a hand. “You have to admit it, not just to us, but the entire school. More specifically, whenever Twilight and I walk past you in the hallways, you have to get on your knees and praise us.” She grinned savagely at their shocked expressions.

Twilight leaned over the table. “Sunset, your megalomania is showing,” she hissed.

“I know, isn’t it great?” *Besides, they were totally asking for it. I’m completely justified this time!*

“I don’t know, Sunset, that seems a little harsh.”

Sunset fixed her with a rigid stare. “Twilight, I’ve had a long day. And if these two dorks think they can insult our intelligence and not face the consequences, they’ve got another thing coming. Unless, of course, you want them to continue to think that girls can’t win a science fair?”

Sunset could see Twilight’s mind going to war again, her good hearted nature battling against her competitive drive. The competitive drive evidently won out because she nodded and said, “You’re right, let’s do this.”

“Very well then,” Quick agreed. “Now, what if we win?”

“Pigs will fly,” Twilight said under her breath.

“If you win, I’ll give you both a kiss,” Sunset said, the idea being the first that popped into her mind.

Dexter and Quick looked at her excitedly. “Really?”

“Really?” Twilight stared, transfixed with horror.

“Yes.” Sunset gave them a feral grin. “Yeah, if by some miracle you two win, I’ll give you the biggest, wettest and *only* kiss you’re ever going to get. So will Twilight.”

“*What?*” Twilight looked mutinous.

“Deal!” both boys said in unison.

Just then, the librarian stomped over, looking livid. “Will the four of you be *quiet?*” she hissed.

They all gave her sheepish looks, apologizing until she finally left.

“Well then, good luck with your projects,” Dexter whispered. “You’re gonna need it.” He and Quick took off deeper into the library, laughing as quietly as they could.

Twilight immediately turned to Sunset with wide eyes. “We’re going to win, right? Because there’s no way I’m wasting my first kiss on either of them!”

“Yes, we’re going to win, so relax,” Sunset said calmly. The second half of Twilight’s statement played back in her ears. “...You haven’t had your first kiss yet?”

Twilight cleared her throat. “Well, no, I um... just never found... we should get to work!”

“Right.” Sunset tried to push the thought out of her head. “Clear your schedule, Sparky. We got a lot of work to do.”

They both resumed their note taking, a new air of determination surrounding them. Their pencils danced across the paper, alive with the fervor of victory.

Still, amongst her reading and writing, try as she might, Sunset couldn’t get those annoying thoughts out of her head. She would dispel it for a time, but a mere glance up would draw it back to the forefront of her mind. The evidence was... staggering. But still, the actual notion...

Twilight... in love with me? Ridiculous.

Крок 25: Home

Sunset slammed the factory door shut with her boot, her arms occupied with a potted fern, and two shopping bags draped over her shoulder. She marched into the kitchen, set the fern on the table and dropped into the closest chair, letting the bags slip from her arm and crash onto the floor. She winced, hoping nothing had broken. Though she had protested upon receiving half the things in those bags, it would be a shame if they broke so soon.

Sunday had found Sunset together with the rest of the Spectacular Seven as they spent the entire afternoon at the mall. Twilight and Sunset had browsed through the hardware and electronics stores to find parts for their project. Sunset was glad she was getting her first paycheck next week, as she was now completely spent. She told no one of course.

“They’re already taking pity on me,” she growled, staring at the plant. It was a nice fern, she had to admit, though she didn’t expect it to last more than a week without the proper amount of sunlight.

Once they had finished purchasing parts, Rarity had taken charge and led them around to various stores, starting with home goods.

“You know, Sunset,” Rarity said when they were isolated in a back aisle, *“the girls and I have been thinking—”*

“That’s never good,” Sunset said, unable to stop herself.

“Anyway, we were thinking about your current living situation—”

Sunset picked up a candle holder to give it a closer examination and said, “Rarity, unless you know where I can get about a thousand dollars to start paying for an apartment, there isn’t much to talk about.”

Rarity plucked the candle holder from Sunset and gave it an offended look. “No. We were thinking we could—”

“I’m not coming to live with any of you.” Sunset’s temper began to flare. *“I’m not going to be a freeloader.”*

Rarity balled her fists. “Would you please let me finish a sentence?”

Sunset felt her tongue glue itself to the roof of her mouth.

“We were thinking,” Rarity continued after a cool breath, “that we could buy a few things for your lodgings. You know, spruce the place up a little, make it homier.” She lowered her voice. “Just because it’s a factory doesn’t mean it has to be a factory.”

Sunset unstuck her tongue and said, “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m quite happy the way it is now.” In hindsight, she should have expected what Rarity’s response would be.

She crossed her arms and quirked an eyebrow, creating such a likeness that Sunset thought she was looking into a purple haired mirror. “Really?”

“No,” Sunset said grudgingly.

“Darling, why are you acting like it’s so bad we want to help you?”

“Because I hate being treated like I’m some sort of beggar! Or a charity case!” Sunset yelled.

Applejack, who had been coming down the aisle, froze and pretended to be interested in some hand-stitched blankets.

Rarity put a hand on Sunset’s shoulder. “Darling, you’re not a beggar. This has nothing to do with us looking down on you or anything of the sort. We’re your friends and we want you to be comfortable. Just consider them early Christmas presents.”

“It’s still November.”

“Very early Christmas presents.”

Sunset pressed a palm to her forehead. She honestly didn’t know why she bothered resisting at this point. “Small gifts, Rarity. Just small gifts.”

As Sunset sat at her kitchen table, she rummaged through her bag, pulling out the welcome mat, two sets of window curtains, a string of small lights that could be hung across the walls of her room, a picture frame with the words ‘friends for life’ scribbled around it and a soccer ball.

“You have all that empty space you can use for practice,” Rainbow had said with a smug grin.

Sunset kicked the ball away and started to set up one of the curtains over the kitchen window. She went about it with lingering aggression. They said they were doing it out of friendship, but Sunset still saw the simpering looks of sympathy on their faces.

But I guess, if things were reversed, I'd try to help them out too.

As she returned to her table, she realized that there was a difference between pity and sympathy. It was a small difference, defined only by the bond she now shared with her six friends. She supposed it was like when Flash used to buy her things. He had done it because he wanted to, not because he had to.

Sunset gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles turned white. "Stupid Flash Sentry," she growled.

The day at the mall had been going decently until, who should appear but Flash and his two band mates. Rarity had the brilliant idea that they should all hang out together. Sunset protested vehemently but, thanks to the horrible system of democracy, she had been terribly outvoted.

The ten of them then spent an hour in the arcade, watching Rainbow and Applejack take turns beating each other at air hockey, Flash perform a ridiculously long song on Guitar Hero, and Pinkie obtain a perfect score on Dance Dance Revolution five times consecutively.

Sunset had asked Fluttershy to a friendly game of skee-ball. Or at least, that had been the intention until Flash joined up on Fluttershy's other side. Sunset, in a rush of anger, rolled her ball with such excessive force that it managed to land it in the center hole. Flash, albeit with less aggression, managed to copy her.

Sunset saw this as a challenge.

The two of them began a brutal scoring competition with each roll becoming more agitated than the last, and with both competitors leering at each other. Neither of them noticed when Fluttershy, who had been the only thing between them, had tiptoed away.

"Well, would you look at that," Sunset said with false nonchalance after three rounds, "two-hundred tickets."

Flash rolled up his own, not making eye-contact. "That's nice." After a pause, he said, "Two-hundred and forty-two."

As he walked away, Sunset found herself wishing she had thrown the fireball at him instead. The wish intensified when she saw him walk over to Twilight and offer her his winning tickets.

"Are you going to use those?" Pinkie asked, materializing next to Sunset.

Completely unphased, Sunset handed her the tickets with a mutter of, "No." Pinkie ran off to buy an overstuffed teddy bear.

Twilight found her way to Sunset's side, and to Sunset's amusement, without the tickets in hand. They spent the next ten minutes talking and laughing, though Flash managed to stay just close enough so he could also laugh at anything Twilight said.

Eventually, the group came around to the giant chessboard at the center of the mall, and Twilight challenged Sunset to a friendly match. Their friends took seats on the surrounding benches and began to root both of them on (though Rainbow managed to fall asleep two turns in).

Perhaps it was because of the excessive cheering. Or maybe it was just because of Flash. In fact, Sunset was positive it had been Flash's fault. Either way, Sunset had been handed a sound defeat with most of her pieces captured by Twilight and her king pinned in the corner by a rook and a queen.

She felt another surge of irritation, not just for Flash as he congratulated Twilight, but for Twilight as well. Sunset felt little sympathy for her as they sat down at the largest table the pizza parlor could offer them, with Twilight sitting in between Sunset and Flash.

There was plenty of chatter around the table, even Fluttershy found something to talk about, though her voice was so quiet Sunset had to strain her ears to hear it. Sunset kept silent and observed for the most part, taking slow bites from her mushroom and olive pizza. She repeatedly noticed Rarity giving a percipient eye to Flash and Twilight before moving over to Sunset, then back to Twilight.

Sunset gave Rarity a calculating look of her own, but Rarity would give nothing away. Eventually, Sunset turned her head back to Twilight and Flash

and observed them herself. Twilight politely engaged him in conversation and listened attentively to his stories, yet her body was only half turned towards him, and Sunset could tell her eyes never met his for long stretches of time.

Twilight clearly was not interested in him, whilst Flash resembled a love-sick puppy, trying his hardest to keep Twilight's attention. And while Flash's looming failure sent a shiver of giddiness down Sunset's spine, it also reawakened an idea that she had tried to let die the previous night.

That Sunset had somehow stepped into a bizarre universe where maybe, possibly, with the smallest margin of chance, she'd-have-to-be-out-of-her-flipping-mind, with a one in one thousand probability, Twilight Sparkle might have a crush on her.

The argument was revisited in her head as she ate her pizza. Unlike Flash, Twilight was making no obvious signs she liked Sunset more than a friend, barring the supposed footsie incident in the library. She talked to the rest of the Spectacular Seven as much as she did Sunset, made time to get to know each of them better, laughed at their jokes, facepalmed at Pinkie's antics. She even scolded Sunset whenever she made a snide or snarky remark that'd been a little too mean-spirited.

Sure, Twilight had a tendency to blush more than normal around Sunset, and maybe they had fallen asleep in each other's arms Halloween Night, and yes, Twilight deeply valued Sunset's intelligence, but that didn't mean she liked Sunset. Yet, whenever Sunset dwelt on the idea, a swarm of butterflies would raid her stomach.

*Coming back to her kitchen table, Sunset blinked several times to shake away her crowded thoughts and got up to stretch. The butterflies returned as she thought about her meeting with Twilight tomorrow at her house so they could get to work on their science project. She chased them away with a swatter made from annoyance and improbability. Twilight would be stupid to like her. Of course, Twilight was stupid in a lot of ways, but she wasn't *that* stupid. Twilight just appreciated their friendship the most, probably because she had deemed Sunset her closest friend since she had arrived at Canterlot High.*

“Friends,” Sunset said, swatting down the last butterfly. “Two friends working on a science fair project. Completely normal.” She enunciated each syllable like it would destroy even the vague possibility that it could be anything different.

She picked up her bags and headed upstairs, shutting her consciousness off. The discussion was over, and nothing a certain doll could say was going to reopen it. For good measure, when she reached her room, Sunset took the doll and buried it in the bottom of her dresser.

It was then, with great reluctance, that she got ready for a shower. As a cold draft made its way through the factory, Sunset wished she had asked her friends to buy her a thicker bathrobe.

The last school bell rang, unleashing a swarm of teenagers upon the world once more. Scarves and wool jackets were now the *de facto* clothing choice as winter sent an early greeting card of cold wind with an attached present of steel gray clouds that dropped buckets of freezing rain and occasionally hail.

Monday had observed such a phenomenon. Sunset had woken up to the heavy torrent of rain outside her window, and the soft *drip, drip* of water leaking from her ceiling. She had remedied it with a bucket.

Inside the insulated halls of the school, she pulled her umbrella from her locker and zipped her bag up tightly, desperately hoping nothing would get wet during her walk to Twilight’s. She had left her motorcycle at home under the tarp; the less time it was exposed to the rain, the better.

In the entrance hall, Twilight was waiting for her, wearing a purple raincoat, a white and pink scarf and yellow rain boots. Sunset was glad Rarity had gone home already. The poor girl probably would have died... or killed Twilight.

They set off into the world together, the rain instantly lashing at them upon exiting the sanctuary of the school. Sunset fumbled to get her umbrella open with her thick gloves on, and the minute she did, the wind gave a particularly strong howl and flipped it up so it resembled a red bowl.

She flipped it back down and gave Twilight a shove for giggling at her misfortune. They joined the parade of umbrellas as they marched off school

grounds; Twilight's purple one bounced next to Sunset's red. The crowd thinned out the more they walked, students branching off onto the adjoining streets that made up the suburban complex.

Sunset and Twilight chatted aimlessly as they marched through the downpour, jumping from the weather, to school, to going through the blueprints for their jammer. They found shelter when they arrived at Twilight's porch, closing their umbrellas and shaking any excess water off before heading inside.

The Sparkle household was nice and toasty, and Sunset could smell something sweet baking in the oven. She politely pulled her boots off and moved from the small entrance hall into the living area where a fire was happily crackling in the fireplace.

Sunset took in the spacious room, a far cry from what she remembered Pinkie's house to look like. Twilight's family had decorated their home with fine works of art in addition to family photos. The couch in the living room looked brand new, as did the wooly rug it was sitting on top of. The walls, instead of being bare white were at least painted a nice shade of beige. Overall, the house had a feel that Sunset could associate to Twilight, whereas Pinkie's house had just felt like a place where she happened to live.

From around a corner came Spike, running as fast as his little legs could carry him. Like a practiced routine, Twilight knelt down to greet him, and Spike jumped up into her open arms and began to lick at her face. Sunset was reminded of Spot, and began to rub his belly in her mind's eye, watching his leg kick in content. It was a warm and calming thought.

From around the same corner poked Shining's head. "Hey, Twily. I was just about to call and see if you wanted me to pick you up."

"You wouldn't have even thought about it if I hadn't reminded you," a soft voice said from behind him.

The girl stepped around Shining and smiled warmly at Twilight and Sunset. She was pretty tall and had a heart-shaped face with long hair that curled near the end, and was tri-colored in shades of pink, purple and gold. She had on a pink sweatshirt with a large heart on it and matching sweatpants.

“Hi, Cady! I didn’t know you were going to be here,” Twilight said. Her eyes went from Cadence to Sunset and she gave a little jolt as if just remembering Sunset was there. She smiled lopsidedly. “O-oh, uhh, Cadence, this is Sunset Shimmer, and Sunset, this is—”

“Mi Amore Cadenza,” Sunset said, straining to keep the contempt out of her voice. She put on what she hoped was a convincing smile.

Cadence walked forward, and Sunset noticed a smudge of flour on her cheek. “Just Cadence is fine. It’s nice to finally meet you, Sunset Shimmer. Twilight’s told us many pleasant things about you.” She stuck her hand out.

Be good, Sunset, be good. This isn’t that Cadence. Sunset shook her hand. “She’s mentioned a little about you as well. Must be nice having your own radio show.”

Cadence laughed a crystalline chime that sounded just like the noise the other one made. “Yes, it certainly is a thrill. But, I’d be nothing without my fans; they’re simply the best.”

Yes, legions of desperate, lovestruck, delusionals who think they’ve found a new goddess. Sounds about right. Sunset continued to smile, but the muscles in her face were beginning to strain.

“Well, mom and dad both have to work late tonight, so we’re having pizza,” Shining announced. “What do you want on yours, Twily?”

Twilight gave an odd shrug, Spike still sitting in her arms. “I don’t know. Do you want anything, Sunset?”

“Just mushrooms would be nice.” She craned her neck trying to see into the kitchen. “So then, what smells so good?”

Cadence gave a casual wave of her hand. “Oh, I just decided to bake some cookies. It’s a nice day for them, right? I hope Mrs. Velvet won’t mind I used the last of the flour.”

Twilight smiled. “I really doubt mom will mind. Well, Sunset and I will be upstairs working.”

“Cookies should be ready soon,” Cadence called as Twilight led Sunset up the stairs. “Stay out of trouble, you two,” she added playfully.

Twilight made an odd noise, a cross between a laugh and a choke.

Twilight's room was at the end of the hall and greatly resembled its occupant. The walls were painted purple and had a poster of the Periodic Table and a map of the world, while on the ceiling hung a model of the solar system. A bookshelf was sagging from the weight of the various tomes that were crammed together side-by-side and stacked on top of each other. Whatever didn't fit on the shelves had been set haphazardly around it. A few extra sat on the desk that faced the window. Joining them was a pair of thick set glasses that appeared to be gathering dust, and a picture frame with a photo of Twilight and another girl with a very pretty face and red and purple hair.

"Sorry about the mess," Twilight said, straightening her already folded bed sheets with an uneasy smile.

Sunset blinked. Other than the overflow of books, the room was spotless. She shrugged it off as part of Twilight's neurosis and put her bag down next to the door.

"A chair!" Twilight cried, springing up from her bed making. "You need a chair! I'll go get one!"

"No, Twilight, it's really... fine." Twilight was gone before Sunset could finish her sentence. With a huff, she crossed the room to the bed where Spike had already made himself comfortable. She scratched him behind the ears and watched his tail beat against the blanket.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Sunset stopped and looked at Spike, wondering how his tail could make such a wooden noise. She then realized the sound was coming from the hall, and a moment later, Twilight appeared, dragging a dining room chair with her.

"Here... you go," she puffed, giving Sunset a shaky smile.

"You really didn't..." Sunset shook her head. "Thanks." She sat down and watched Twilight settle into her desk chair.

"So... welcome to my room," Twilight said, giving a small gesture and a nervous laugh.

"Yeah. It's nice."

“Thanks.”

They sat across from each other, the empty air around filled only with Spike’s jingling collar as he resettled himself. Twilight looked down at her lap while Sunset pretended to read the Periodic Table. Amidst the silence, the butterflies returned to raid Sunset’s stomach.

“Should we get to work then?” Sunset asked, perhaps a little too loudly, for she had made Twilight jump a foot in the air.

“Y-yeah, we should get to work. Ha, lots to do and... yeah, let’s start.”

Twilight quickly ran out the room to get her father’s tool kit, while Sunset took out the supplies from her bag and laid them across the floor. She could see the completed jammer in her mind’s eye. “If this doesn’t get us first place, nothing will.” She gagged a little at the thought of what would happen if they lost.

Twilight returned with various tools, rubber gloves, and safety goggles. She saw the mess on the floor, frowned and started to organize the supplies.

Sunset rolled her eyes and grabbed the screwdriver and one of the disposable cameras. She pried the back off and carefully removed the flash circuit before tossing the camera over her shoulder. She looked up to see Twilight piercing her with strong disapproval.

“Fine,” Sunset grunted. She got up and placed the used camera in what would now become the discard pile.

A simple nod of satisfaction was Twilight’s only response. She pulled out the blueprints and placed it in the last open space between them. She ran through all the items on the supply list, Sunset calling, “Check” for each one while she removed the flash circuit from two more cameras.

Once Twilight had finished, she strapped on a pair of goggles and slipped on the rubber gloves. “All right, let’s get to work!”

Sunset, holding a flash circuit in one hand and a coil of wire in the other, did not look up as she attached the two together. “Way ahead of you, Sparky.”

While the rain spat against the windows, the two girls sat inside the warm room, a platter of pumpkin cookies sitting on the desk, while the chairs were occupied by plates of half-eaten pizza and notebooks. By the end of the hour,

Twilight and Sunset sat on the floor, side-by-side with a half-built EMP jammer in front of them.

“Okay, be careful here, Sunset.” Twilight picked up her notebook and scanned over it. “The capacitor might have some residual shock and some of the sparks might jump.”

Sunset leaned over the small compartment that housed the internal structure of their jammer. “I know, Twilight, that’s why I’m wearing rubber gloves and goggles. ‘Safety first, Sunset.’” she said in a high-pitched imitation.

“I do not sound like that!”

“Oh, of *course* not.” Sunset grinned to herself. As she held the ohm resistor over the leads that were ready to shock her at a moment’s notice, a wicked idea came to her head. She touched the resistor to the leads, making sure Twilight was watching, and began to shake violently.

“Zzztttztzzttz!”

“Aaaaahh, Sunset!” Twilight screamed.

Sunset straightened up and threw her head back with a loud, uncontrollable laugh. She only laughed harder when Twilight started slapping her with the notebook.

“That! Wasn’t! Funny!” she sounded out with each hit.

Sunset fell over, holding on to her sides. “I-I beg to differ!” Sunset said in between gasps. “The l-look on your face was so worth it!”

Twilight lifted her goggles and pinched the bridge of her nose. “You... big... stupid... jerk.”

“Brilliant vocabulary, Sparky.”

Twilight bent over and hit Sunset again. Sunset burst into more laughter.

“All right,” Twilight said, tossing her notebook onto her bed. “Let’s take a break.” She took her pizza and climbed into her chair, slouching slightly.

“Aw, come on, Twi, it was just a joke.” Sunset sat down opposite of her and took a bite out of her mushroom and cheese pizza.

“Fine. But when you really get electrocuted, don’t expect me to help you.”

“Okay, then I reserve the right to haunt you afterward.”

“Then I reserve the right to have you exorcised.»

Their eyes met again, and Twilight cracked a smile before a snort escaped her followed by full blown laughter. It was so infectious, Sunset found herself doubling over as well, unable to stop. A few mushrooms slid off her pizza and onto the floor, and Spike, who had been silently eyeing the food the entire time, shot off the bed and snapped them off.

Sunset and Twilight only laughed harder.

After dinner, Twilight pulled out her violin and began to play, serenading Sunset with the newest pieces she had learned. Sunset watched her gracefully handle the instrument with an odd hypnosis. Twilight looked refined, elegant and so relaxed; it was an intoxicating affair. Whenever Twilight made a mistake, she made up for it in the next note tenfold.

Sunset found herself lost in the music, swaying her head with the symphony. Twilight consumed her vision, subtle details became sharp and clear to Sunset. Her cheekbones while she rested against the shoulder guard. Her long eyelashes while her eyes were closed in concentration...

Sunset bolted upright, blinking rapidly. *Where did that come from?* She gave a rough shake of her head, chasing away whatever haze had tried to grab hold of her.

“You didn’t like it?”

Twilight had paused and was giving Sunset a doleful look. “I can stop if you want.”

“No, no! I loved it. It’s nothing. Seriously,” she added, seeing Twilight open her mouth. *Nothing!* she affirmed to herself, ignoring the squeaky voice in the back of her head.

Twilight finished her piece, and Sunset clapped enthusiastically to make up for her earlier distraction. “You really are good at that, Twilight,” Sunset said, taking enjoyment at the blush that spread across Twilight’s cheeks.

“Thanks,” she said quietly, packing the violin away. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.” She tucked the case under her bed and sat back down. Once again, both girls found themselves sitting across from each other, eyes fixated anywhere else.

The silence began to grow on them until Twilight fidgeted in her chair. “Umm, Sunset... there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you for a while.”

Sunset’s entire body tensed. *She isn’t... she can’t be... She’s not really that stupid, right?* Still, her heart was hammering in her chest. If Twilight asked to go on a date with her, would she have to say yes? Sunset gripped the armrest as tightly as she could, preparing herself to say no, no matter if the penance tried to make her say otherwise.

“You have that mark on a lot of your shirts. What does it mean?”

Sunset froze for a second then looked down at the sweatshirt she was wearing. Stitched into the center was a crimson and gold sun with eight rays fanning out. “Oh. That’s my cutie mark.” She could feel every muscle in her body untightening.

Twilight stared vacantly at her. “What’s a cutie mark?”

“In Equestria, whenever a pony discovers something they’re really good at or a hobby that they love, they get a symbol on their flank that represents whatever that talent is. It’s kinda like a coming-of-age thing.”

“So... what does yours mean?”

Sunset looked down at it thoughtfully. Something knotted in her chest as familiar incomprehension snuck its way back into her mind. “I... I never really found out.” Her voice was small and distant.

“But you said it appears when a pony discovers something they’re really good at.”

“I know. That’s what usually happens.” Sunset slumped and rested her chin against an open palm. “I was really good with magic. And I started studying under Celestia around the time mine appeared.” She smiled. “I remember being so happy. I thought it was the greatest day of my life but....”

She sank even lower. “Part of me thought it meant my talent was being Celestia’s student, but that was stupid. I even asked her what it meant, and she promised to look into it... but she never found anything. So, I kept thinking it had something to do with magic. But, I think I was wrong.”

Sunset fell quiet, memories bursting to the surface of her mind. Memories of things she hadn't bothered to recall in a long time. An old life that was millions of miles away.

"I was wrong about a lot of things back then." Her hand jumped to her eye before a tear could fall, and she played it off like it was just an itch.

Twilight wasn't easily fooled though. Her eyes pierced Sunset again, this time with sympathy and compassion. "Sunset, if you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

Sunset's automatic response was to say 'no' like she always did. But the words never left her throat. Twilight seemed so sincere in wanting to listen. The rain pattering outside and the soft light of Twilight's room made Sunset feel safe and secure. Maybe, just for a moment, just for Twilight, she could drop her guard.

"Well..." Sunset looked out the window to the gray sky and the falling rain. "Where do I even start?"

Kpok 26: The Rise and Fall of Sunset Shimmer

The beginning? Well, I was born in Equestria's version of Canterlot. Honestly, it makes this city look like a dump, it's so beautiful. Built into the side of the mountain with tall gleaming spires painted in purple and gold. Perfect buildings made of marble and brass. Green parks and streams all throughout the city. A stunning view of the Unicorn Range, with all of its rolling hills and pastures. And a wonderful sunset every evening. Then there was the castle! The peak of Equestrian architecture. The house where Princess Celestia ruled the entire country and raised and lowered the sun and moon every day. It had a beauty all its own. You would have loved it, Twilight.

But like every city, Canterlot had a darker underside; the alleys and slums that the upper-class nobles turned a blind eye to. The dirty streets lined with ponies who failed to make it in the city or had clung to the coattails of somepony powerful until they were dumped like yesterday's trash.

That's where my family was: mom, dad and me. Small house, small yard and something was always broken. But at least we had a roof over our head and food to eat, no matter how small a meal.

My parents worked hard every day to keep us above water. Long hours and mediocre jobs. On the weekdays I only saw them early in the morning and, if I was lucky, late at night before I went to bed. They spent time with me whenever they could, but...

Sunset trotted into the living room with a book clutched gently between her teeth. She reached the small sitting table and stretched her neck up to spit the book onto the surface. "Daddy, it's story time!"

The large, orange stallion gave a loud yawn and rubbed his eyes. "Sunset, shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I stayed up so we could read together. You promised we would." There was a line of hurt in her voice.

Her dad gave her an apologetic smile, though it was weighed down by weariness. "I'm sorry, sweetie. Daddy is really tired right now, he's about to go to bed. You should be doing the same."

“But...” Sunset’s lip trembled.

“I promise, we’ll read together tomorrow.”

There were... a lot of promises that weren’t kept. They tried their best back then, but quality time felt few and far between. I would see kids getting picked up from school by their moms and dads while I would have to walk home alone and eat the dinner mom had thrown together before rushing to work. I would try to stay awake just long enough so they could kiss me goodnight.

“You didn’t have any friends to play with?”

No, I didn’t have any friends. I was more interested in books. I... disliked all of the ponies at school. I always felt they were looking down on me because I was poor. I had second-hoof—er—second-*hand* books and backpacks and was not always as well groomed as the other foals. Some of them gave me those disgusting looks of pity, asking me if I needed anything. And some of them tried to bully me, thinking a peasant didn’t deserve to go to school.

Heh, the bullying only lasted about a day.

But those condescending looks... and the babying voices...

“How are you, Sunset Shimmer? Everything all right at home?”

“Did you get enough to eat, Sunset? You can ask the cafeteria for seconds.”

“Do you have all your books, Sunset? I know they might be a little expensive for somepony like you...”

Sweet Celestia, I hated it! Looking down on me just because my parents didn’t make that much money. Treating me like I was some fragile flower just because I didn’t get a banquet every night for dinner. I swore I’d show them. One day, they’d associate the name Sunset Shimmer with greatness! They were going to regret pitying me.

“Couldn’t you ask the princess to help you?”

No, Celestia can’t just hand out bits to everypony who asks, no matter how great she is. If she did, the economy would break down in tears. Come on, Sparky, that’s basic economics. No, we had to fend for ourselves.

I spent most of my time studying and practicing my magic. I think I was looking for a spell that would make their lives easier. Or make them pay more attention to me. Probably both.

All of it paid off when I got accepted into Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. It's the most prestigious magic school in Equestria. The examiners said they had never seen such a display of magic from somepony my age. I couldn't wait to tell my parents that night. They were happy when they found out, I know they were. But they were so tired... they promised we would celebrate later, but... it never really happened. They said, "Congratulations" and that they were proud.

They were proud.

...Is it selfish of me to have wanted more? For them to have said more than just, "We're so proud of you"? To have just one full day where they only paid attention to me; where they showered me with praise and affection?

"Umm..."

That's okay. You don't have to answer. They worked hard because of me. That was their way of showing affection. I always knew that. It just felt like... I wasn't important enough sometimes. But having them work *and* play with me... maybe that was asking a little too much...

"Well, maybe having a friend or two would have made it better."

Heh, you're one to talk about friends. How many did you have before coming to CHS? Just one, right? But I suppose one would have been better than none. But I was... arrogant. Yeah, I can admit that now. I was stupid and proud and thought I could only rely on myself. All of those rich, egotistical snobs were beneath me in terms of knowledge and magical talent. I hated them. And I hated the ones who tried to throw their compassion on me. I would not be pitied by any of them!

...I realize now that maybe not all of them were taking pity on me. Maybe some of them really wanted to help and be my friend. I was too blind to see it though.

"Sunset, you don't need to beat yourself up over every mistake."

I can't help but beat myself up over it! I was a stupid little brat for most of my life! If I could go back in time, I'd give myself a good kick up the—

“Sunset!”

Sorry. I just never took the time to look back on what I've done. Now that I have... I really don't like what I see. ...You know, getting slapped in the face with all your past mistakes every five seconds start to *really* get on your nerves after a while. I can't go a day without being reminded that I screwed up royally in some way or another!

And... I guess... I'm glad I feel guilty because it reminds me that I'm not a complete monster. But it just wears me out sometimes.

“We can stop talking about it if you want.”

No, might as well keep going now. Rip the band-aid off and see how much I bleed.

“...”

I'm sorry, that was dark, even for me. Anyway, where was I? Right, I got accepted into Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. That's when I started to see my parents even less. I was so determined to show those snobs what a poor nobody could do, I locked myself in my room to study whenever I wasn't at school.

An orb of light suspended itself over Sunset's bed. Books and scrolls took up the majority of it, leaving just enough room for Sunset herself to stretch out. She leaned against the head post, her eyes tearing through the book floating in front of her. To her right, notes scribbled themselves furiously, occasionally sending bits of ink flying across the room. On her left, a bowl of mushroom soup hovered, enchanted to deliver a spoonful to Sunset once every minute.

“Starswirl's theory of teleportation states that the transportation of any matter is equal to—”

Knock, knock, knock.

Sunset halted her murmuring and looked at the door across the room. It was three in the morning; who else could possibly be awake?

She accepted the spoon of creamy mushrooms and said, “Come in.”

Her mother poked her head around the door. Stringy locks of maroon hair sprouted from her head. Light bags sat under her eyes, a sad compliment to her dull, beige coat. “Sunset. What are you doing still up?”

“Shtudyin,” Sunset said with a mouthful of lukewarm soup. She swallowed and asked, “Why are you up?”

“I just got up to use the bathroom and I saw that light from under your door.” She pointed to the floating orb, shining brighter than a chandelier. “Sweetie, I’m so glad you’re taking your studies seriously, but don’t you think you might be overdoing it?”

Sunset gave a bark of laughter. “Overdoing my studying? Of course not. Not when you’re aiming to be the best...”

Your passion for science? It’s nothing to how I felt about magic. I wanted to learn everything I could—every spell, every theory, every branch of the arcane tree. Not only did I want to learn everything, I wanted to master it. I wanted to make sure I was unsurpassed in knowledge and power! Lucky for me, it all just came naturally. I was a born prodigy, and soon, everypony in school knew it.

“Did you hear? Sunset Shimmer just made a blizzard in the auditorium!”

“I heard Sunset learned to make illusions of herself! Not even the seniors can do that!”

“She corrected one of the professor’s equations and solved it in two minutes!”

“Do you think she’ll tutor me? She’s gotta be the smartest girl in school.”

I was the undisputed queen of the school by the end of my first year. And after getting perfect scores in all of my classes and making some of the seniors look like drooling diamond dogs, Princess Celestia took me in under her wing. We had had tea a few times before. She didn’t ask me too many academic questions, she wanted to know more about me...

The fragrant spring breeze parted the curtains and allowed sunlight to drift into the royal parlor. Celestia and Sunset sat at a low table, a tray of sandwiches, cookies, and tea in between them. Sunset took another slow sip of her tea, waiting for Celestia to speak again.

Celestia set her own cup down and gave Sunset a smile warmer than the sun outside. “So, how are you, Sunset?”

“I’m doing fine, Your Majesty,” Sunset said in a formal voice. The princess had told her before, she didn’t need to act so stiff behind closed doors. But you couldn’t just stop treating the Princess like a princess!

Celestia didn’t seem to mind, however. She leaned over the table and gave Sunset a sly smile. “Just fine? I would think a young mare who scored a one-hundred on every test is doing a little more than ‘just fine.’”

“Oh, that.” Sunset tried to hide her blush by raising her tea cup again. “That’s nothing, really. I just like to learn.”

“So I’ve noticed.” Celestia chuckled. She nibbled on a cookie then said, “I bet your parents must be thrilled about your achievements.”

“Y-yeah. They’re really... proud. They’re proud.” Sunset’s voice faded into her cup, her eyes focused on the brown liquid sloshing around inside.

“Is everything all right, Sunset?”

Sunset jerked her head up and gave Celestia the widest smile she could muster. “Of course! They’re proud! They’re always proud! I’m the best student in the school, and they’re proud! Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

Celestia met Sunset’s gaze, her ancient eyes foreign and unreadable. She got up from her pillow and walked around to Sunset. “I know they work hard, Sunset.” Celestia draped a wing over her. “And I know you want more than their words. But you must know that they’re giving you their hearts as well.”

“I know,” Sunset said, her throat tight. “I’m being selfish.”

“A sign of a good leader is knowing when you’re at fault.” Celestia looked down at her. “But your heart is in the right place, Sunset.”

Sunset sat in Celestia’s embrace and soaked in the calming aura she exuded.

“So, Sunset,” Celestia said after a few minutes. “Have you given any more thought into what you want to be when you’re older?”

“I have but... I still don’t know. Maybe a historian? Or a professor.... Something with magic, I know.”

Celestia laughed again. “Well, I would hope as much. I think a pony like you would make great contributions to the fields of magic.”

Sunset raised her cup again. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

Celestia nodded. “Yes. Actually, with the level of magic you have already shown, I’m beginning to think perhaps you need a more focused curriculum in order to really find where you want to go.”

Sunset twisted around and looked up into Celestia’s radiant face. “Princess... what are you saying?”

Kind, violet eyes stared back at her, the promise of infinite possibilities within them. “Would you like to become my personal student, Sunset Shimmer?”

To say I was happy is an understatement. I was over the moon! I screamed so loud, I shattered the porcelain cups. Celestia and I just laughed afterward.

“And what did your parents think?”

They... they were actually as happy as I was that time. I mean, they actually found time to show how proud they were. It wasn’t anything too extravagant, it was just a cake my mom had made. But still, it was the best day of my life.

In fact, that’s probably where I peaked. After that, I started to live in the castle. It was easier to get to my lessons from the fifth floor than from across the city.

“She didn’t let your parents move in with you?”

No, they had their own lives to lead. Besides, moving a whole family into the castle? The nobles would have a fit, calling ‘favoritism’ and junk. No, it was just me. But, Celestia did give me a generous student stipend and told me to “do as you please” with it.

I sent most of it to my mom and dad so they could finally cut back on working so hard. They didn’t have to live in that tiny, leaky house anymore; they could finally relax. At the same time... I...

“What?”

I had kinda moved on, as bad as it sounds. I stopped trying to impress them. I... didn’t care if they were proud of me or could spend time with me now. I had Princess Celestia as my mentor. Her praise was all I needed. No matter

how busy she got, she always made time just for me. Hours where nothing would interrupt us. I would have her undivided attention. I loved showing off what I learned, I loved seeing her smile; it was so radiant, I couldn't help but smile too.

I'm pretty sure it was during one of those lessons that *this* appeared. I don't remember when specifically, just that I had been doing extraordinarily well that day. I think Celestia had said she had been having a long and tiring day and I wanted to cheer her up. At the end of the lesson, she pointed out my cutie mark and I screamed so hard, I cracked one of the windows this time. We still laughed, even after the royal glass maker scolded me.

My parents threw me a party, and I was grateful for it. Deep down, I guess I still wanted them to pay attention to me. But I had moved on to impressing Celestia and being the number one student at CSGU. Of course, I realized that with status come those who want to mooch off you.

"Hey, Sunset!"

Sunset, sitting beneath a tree in the park, looked up from her book. A pink unicorn with a very cheesy smile was looking down at her.

"Um, hi?" Sunset drew a blank on her name, meaning she couldn't be that important.

"Why are you sitting out here all by yourself?"

"Because I enjoy the peace and quiet," Sunset said slow and deliberate, hoping the unicorn would take the hint.

"Oh, yeah, of course! Like, I know how hard it is to study when it's all noisy and stuff," she said, unaware of the twitch in Sunset's eye.

"Yeah, so maybe you—"

"Anyway, I noticed you spend a lot of time by yourself and thought, 'hey, that girl needs a friend.' So I was thinking you and I could go shopping for some new dresses and go to the school dance as buddies! It'll be so much fun! Oh, and don't worry; we'll find plenty of time to study as well. We can be study buddies and—"

"Woooooow." Sunset looked at her with half-lidded eyes. "At least the others tried to be discreet. Yours is the most thinly veiled attempt at being my friend

yet.” She placed her book inside her saddlebag and stood up. “Well, thanks for the entertainment, but I’ll be leaving now. I’m sure the Princess is expecting me. Oh, and good luck on finals. I’ve seen your grades and you’re going to need all the help you can get.”

Sunset walked away, leaving the unicorn gaping at her.

First, I was the foal everypony avoided or pitied because she was poor or ‘second class.’ Now, everyone wanted to be my friend and hang onto my coattails.

Ponies would come up to me and ask if I could introduce them to the princess or tutor them in whatever subject they were failing. I had better things to do than babysit a bunch of second-rate students. But I liked being looked upon and admired for my brilliance. They could all wallow in the fact that they would never be as good as me. I had started out with almost nothing while they came from privileged rich families. Yet I was their superior.

Until *she* showed up.

“Who?”

Princess Mi Amore Cadenza.

“*What!* Cadence was a *Princess?*”

Yes, Cadence was a princess back in Equestria. The Princess of Love.

“Why didn’t you mention this before?”

Because it was never important! And because I kinda hate her! That stupid, perky, optimistic, popular...

“Oh. So I guess...”

What? No! Ugh, no! I don’t hate the Cadence downstairs. Not right now at least, but the night is young. Oh, I’m joking, geez! It’s the same situation with you and Princess Twilight: I hate her, not you. I know how to separate my feelings for the two of you.

“...So, what did Princess Cadence do to make you hate her?”

Stole Princess Celestia’s attention. Stole the school’s admiration. Got everything she wanted handed to her on a silver platter. The first time I met her,

she was already an alicorn. At that moment, I knew we were never going to get along.

Sunset's jaw hung open and almost touched the floor. Standing in front of her was a disgustingly pink... alicorn, with a shy but happy smile on her face. Her eyes shone with dangerous amounts of kindness and joy. In fact, her entire aura reeked of love.

Sunset closed her mouth, fearing she would throw up from standing in this mare's presence too long.

"Sunset, I would like you to meet Mi Amore Cadenza," Celestia said, standing in between them.

"Oh, just Cadence is fine," Cadence said in a sweet voice.

Sunset swallowed the rising bile and glared at Celestia. "I didn't know you were taking in another student. Much less an alicorn," she said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, it's quite a surprise for everypony." Celestia gestured to Cadence. "She's demonstrated such a deep understanding of love and the power it contains that she's been deemed worthy by Harmony itself to be ready for ascension, something no pony has ever done before."

Cadence rubbed her horn. "Heh, it was nothing, really. I was just trying to keep my family safe. I really didn't think spreading love and happiness would make me a princess."

Sunset's eye almost popped out of her head. "She gets to be a princess too?"

Celestia nodded. "Yes. She is heir to an ancient kingdom that shall reveal itself in due time. But she has a long road ahead of her before she is ready to rule it."

Cadence smiled sheepishly, rubbing her horn again.

"Well, I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I daresay you'll be spending a lot of time together. Hopefully, you can learn from each other as well." Celestia gave Cadence a smile. She gave one to Sunset too, but with an additional look that said, 'play nice,' then walked out of the hall.

“Sooo,” Cadence said, shuffling her hooves. “How long have you been Princess Celestia’s student?”

“Longer than you have,” Sunset said stiffly.

Cadence blinked, then started giggling. “Oh, Sunset. You’re not jealous, are you?”

“Of course not! Why would I be jealous?”

“Good. Because I’m not here to steal anything from you.” She stuck out her hoof. “Come on, let’s not be silly or petty and just be friends.”

Sunset looked at Cadence’s hoof and put on a fake smile. “Sure. Friends.”

The day I made friends with her was the day Tartarus would freeze over. She said she wasn’t here to steal anything, but she stole *everything*. First, she took Celestia’s time with me. She had less time to train me because she had to teach miss sugar and rainbows how to be a princess.

It wasn’t fair! She did nothing! I started with scraps and fought for my position! I fought for everything and she gets to become a princess overnight! I deserved that title! That was *my* destiny! And, to add insult to injury, she had to steal away my popularity at school. No one cares that you can make a mile-long beanstalk from a shrub if there’s a *princess* attending your class. I could synchronize dancing cats for crying out loud! But everypony wanted to be friends with Cadence.

And... unlike me... she wanted to be friends with everyone else as well.

“Psst, Cadence, why are we going over to her again?”

“Yeah, she only spends time with those books of hers.”

Sunset’s ears twitched in agitation as the trio of ponies approached the table she was sitting at. She wondered if they knew they weren’t actually whispering.

“Good afternoon, Sunset,” Cadence said politely.

“Afternoon, Cadenza,” Sunset said without looking up from her notes.

“The girls and I were going out for ice cream. Would you like to come with us?”

“No. I have studying to do.”

Cadence frowned. “Sunset, you’ve been studying all week.”

Sunset finally lifted her head. “Yes, but unlike you underachievers, I’m preparing myself for midterms next month.”

“Didn’t Auntie Celestia tell you to try and make some more friends. And act with a little humility?”

Sunset’s blood boiled. “What, are you spying on me and ‘Auntie’ Celestia’s conversations too? What I do with my life is none of your business!”

Cadence sighed. “Fine, fine. Come on, girls.”

Sunset watched the three of them walk away, and gagged when a group of handsome stallions, some with flowers, got up and chased after them.

“Hopeless idiots.”

By then, I pretty much resented everyone around me. I was even starting to get sick of Celestia and her cryptic lessons and lectures about how I should make friends and stop treating everypony around me like they were dirt. Which they were.

“Sigh.”

Right, bad mentality. That’s just what I thought back then. I thought I was entitled to everything by that point. Makes me wonder why Celestia showed me the mirror in the first place. All I saw was myself as an alicorn—what I thought was my rightful place. And then I saw... something else.

“What?”

I don’t know. It was gone so fast, I didn’t have time to process it. But it got me curious. *Really* curious. I badgered Celestia about it, but she refused to tell me. She said I wasn’t ready, that I still had a lot to learn. I thought she was just trying to hold me back. So naturally, I disobeyed her and started looking for answers on my own, starting with the restricted section of the library.

Sunset threw the book at Celestia, only to have it bounce off an invisible shield. “You liar! You said Harmony deemed Cadence worthy of ascension! But you could have made me an alicorn the entire time!”

Celestia strode forward, her normally radiant face clouded with anger and disappointment. “I could have. But your recent attitude and actions have proven to me that you are not ready for ascension.”

“Not ready?” Sunset yelled. She stood her ground in spite of Celestia’s looming figure. “How am I not ready? I’m the most powerful unicorn in Canterlot! I’m the smartest student in your school! I’ve worked from virtually nothing! And you’re going to refuse me something I clearly deserve?”

“You ‘deserve’ nothing of that nature,” Celestia said in a low whisper. “I thought I saw sincerity and compassion in you, Sunset, but it looks like it was just blind ambition. A princess needs more than wisdom and power. You need to stop being selfish and reflect—”

“I need to stop being selfish?” Sunset snorted. “That book says I could be an alicorn princess! I’ve worked hard all these years! I deserve to rule this place! You’re being selfish by keeping me from my rightful place!” Sunset picked the book up again and threw it at Celestia, watching it bounce away again. “Make me a princess!” She stomped her hoof.

Celestia looked down at her with a fierce coldness. “Being a princess has to be earned. Something you have not done despite my teachings. Every time you say you ‘deserve’ something just proves to me you are not ready. Now cease this foalish tantrum and return to your room.”

“Not until you make me an alicorn!”

A silence fell between them; the shouting match continued between their eyes. Neither one blinked nor looked away.

Celestia slowly spread her wings out and narrowed her already thin eyes. “Very well, Sunset. If we cannot move past this... then I’m afraid you are dismissed from my tutelage.”

Sunset staggered back and bumped against the bookcase. She tried to breathe, but it felt like someone had punched her in the chest. “You’re... you’re kicking me out?”

Celestia turned away, nodding to the guards that had accompanied her. “Unless you can learn some patience and humility, your studies end here. You may continue attending my school, but you are no longer welcome in this castle.”

The guards flanked Sunset and escorted her out the door. “This is the biggest mistake you’ll make in your life.”

I couldn't tell you what was going through my mind then. It was all too much. I just knew I couldn't let it end like that. I couldn't let Celestia have the last laugh. I kept telling myself she was wrong, that I did deserve to be a princess. That I deserved to be admired. That I deserved all of the attention because I was the best.

The book that told me Celestia could make me an alicorn also told me that the mirror acted as a gate to another world. So, in my last act of defiance—not even knowing if it would work or not—I knocked out the guards and jumped through.

“What happened when you got to the other side?”

Well...

Sunset stumbled out of the portal, already feeling something was wrong with her anatomy. She took two steps and fell flat on her face. She groaned, and gripped the sides of her head, still dizzy from the vortex of swirling colors.

“Well that was... interesting.” She pushed herself up onto her knees, and let out a scream when she saw the skinny appendages that had helped her up.

“What the Tartarus?” She flexed the thin, fleshy... things, suppressing the urge to scream again.

She stretched out her foreleg, now covered in an odd material of clothing. In fact, she was dressed head to hoof in surprisingly fashionable clothes.

“But I wasn't wearing anything when I jumped through...” She used her appendages to feel the black jacket. She wasn't sure what it was made of, but she liked it. She tried to stand up, but her new body trembled from the waist down. Her knees buckled and she fell down again.

“Dammit all! What am I?” Sunset closed her eyes and tried to conjure a mirror.

Nothing happened.

“What the...?” She tried again but felt no connection to her magic. Breathing hard, she lifted her hoof... thing to her forehead.

It was bare.

Sunset screamed again, louder this time. “What kind of horrible world is this?” She flipped around and faced the object she had been thrown out of: a marble white base with a statue of a horse on top. In the base, she saw a clear reflection of herself. She was tall, lean and thin... and hairless. She still had a mane, however: long and flowing in her natural crimson and gold colors. She no longer had a muzzle, just a tiny nose, almost like a cat. Her ears were on the side of her head and she couldn’t move them like before. Her legs appeared to be longer than they had been when she was a pony. They were certainly longer than her forelegs that had those wiggly things attached to them.

But the most glaring thing she noticed about her transformation was the lack of her horn. “No, no, no!” She started crawling for the portal. “I can’t live without magic!”

She froze. Celestia would know by now what had happened. What if she was waiting for Sunset to come back? She would throw her in the dungeon for assaulting the guards and... whatever it was that she had just done. Either way, she’d lose her magic.

It was either stay here where she was free at least. Or go back home and be imprisoned.

Sunset weighed her actions. Could she get used to this alien body and world? She didn’t even know what she was or if the creatures here were hostile.

“Hey!”

Sunset jumped and spun around at the voice. From out of the darkness came one of the creatures she had turned into. He kind of looked like her, save for the clothing choices and his blue hair.

“Are you all right? I heard someone screaming.” He offered an appendage down to Sunset.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Yeah... I, er, lost something.” She took the appendage and was hoisted up. She found herself looking into his cool, blue eyes. Possibly the only attractive thing about him.

“Do you need help finding it?” he asked.

“No. No, it’s... I left it back home.” She dropped his appendage, but lost her footing again and fell forward into his arms.

The blue-haired monkey thing caught her and slowly stood her upright again. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She brushed him off and finally managed to stand on her own. Sunset looked around, taking in her surroundings for the first time.

It was night, and the only illumination came from two lamps on either side of the tall building in front of her. The more Sunset looked at it, the more it resembled a school. “Well, if they have education here and can talk, they can’t be completely backward,” she mumbled under her breath.

“What?” the boy asked.

“Nothing. Umm, this is going to sound like a dumb question but, where am I exactly?”

The boy looked at her like she had indeed asked an obvious question. “Canterlot City.”

Sunset snorted. “No, seriously, where am I?”

“Canterlot City,” he repeated. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I told you, I’m fine!” she snapped. Her brain paused. Maybe she could use him to get through this world. But she had to be careful. She couldn’t fake amnesia, he might turn her over to a hospital or something. “I’m sorry. I just... ran away from home and... it’s been a long night.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” he said sympathetically. He hesitated then said, “Sorry if this sounds forward or anything, but I’d be happy to help you if you need anything.”

Sunset bit her cheek to stop from smiling. She couldn’t believe this idiot was falling for it. “Well... maybe just somewhere to sleep for the night, if it isn’t too much trouble that is.”

“No, of course not! My family loves guests. Come on, I live down the street. Umm... what’s your name again?”

“Sunset Shimmer.”

“Wow, that’s a really pretty—ahem, I mean, nice to meet you. I’m Flash Sentry.”

Sunset gave him her warmest fake smile. "Thank you, Flash. I think you and I are going to get along great."

So, Flash brought me home and let me stay there for a few days. He has nice parents, I have to admit. They never asked too many questions. After that, he helped me find that old factory for me to stay in. That's when I started attending Canterlot High. I... well, I forged some documents, just enough to get me into the school. Either the school system here really sucks, or they just don't care who gets admitted.

And that's when my reign of terror began. I mean, I had to start somewhere so I figured, why not rule this school the way I ruled that last one? Just until I came up with a plan. I played the act of nice, new girl first while finding out how this world operated. Turns out, it isn't that different from Equestria. Teens love to gossip and spread rumors. With all these phones and the internet, it was pretty easy to sabotage relationships from the background while getting people to like me in time for the Spring Fling. I won in a landslide. The other girl was too busy crying her eyes out over her boyfriend cheating on her.

Don't give me that look. You're making me feel worse than I already do.

"Sorry. It's just hard for me to imagine you stooping so low."

Really? Is it really that hard?

"...I was trying to be nice."

Thanks for trying. But you don't have to sugarcoat it. I know I was terrible.

"Yeah... you kinda were."

Just wait, it gets better.

Sunset approached the school courtyard, already spotting her first victim of the day, and one of her favorites. She smoothed out the collar of her leather jacket and walked forward with a sinister smile.

"Please help the animal shelter," a meek voice called out. "Adopt an animal today and give it a loving home. Help an animal that can't help itself."

"Morning, Fluttershy."

The girl jumped a foot into the air and spun around. "Oh, S-Sunset Shimmer! G-good morning." She retreated behind her curtain of pink hair.

“Still trying to get people to help your animal shelter?” Sunset dropped her voice to a mock whisper. “You know, maybe people might actually volunteer if you didn’t sound like this all the time.”

“Well, I... um... I just...”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you over your pathetic stammering.” Sunset cupped a hand over her ear and leaned in closer. “Mind repeating that?”

Fluttershy whimpered.

Sunset straightened up and gave her a condescending smirk. “You wanna know why no one in this school bothers to help you? A. Because they all think you’re a spineless coward. And B. No one cares about your stupid animals.”

Fluttershy shrank beneath Sunset’s imposing shadow. Her eyes watered and her shoulders began to shake.

“Aww, going to give me another reason to hate your guts? Sniveling crybaby. By the way, you dropped something.” Sunset jerked her hand up, smacking all of the papers from Fluttershy’s arms and sending them scattered across the lawn.

Fluttershy gasped and quickly tried to pick all of her flyers up, keeping her sniffles to a minimum.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Sunset knelt down and started picking some of the papers up. Less than a minute later, Flash came around the corner and walked up to the two girls.

“What happened here?”

Sunset smiled at him. “Hey, sweetie. Fluttershy dropped all her papers again so I decided to help clean them up. You know how clumsy she is.”

“Uh-huh,” Flash said with a note of skepticism.

Even though I won Princess of the Spring Fling, people didn’t recognize me as their leader. It was then I learned that ‘princess’ here really was just a title and didn’t mean anything more than some bragging rights. So, I dropped the nice girl act and decided to assert my dominance over the school the old fashion way: with fear and manipulation.

Wasn't too hard when half the school hated each other. I picked up some handy skills though that helped me stay in power. Video and audio editing. Basic computer hacking. I even taught myself some different martial arts moves from videos online. Since I didn't have magic to back my threats up, I needed something else. It's primitive, but it works.

"Why though? Why go through all that trouble?"

Self-validation. I needed to know I was the alpha dog, and I needed everyone else to know it too. I had spent most of my life trying to get people to stop looking down at me. I decide to take the preemptive strike and make sure no one ever had a chance. I would rebuild the kingdom I had at Celestia's School and I would be a princess.

I think somewhere in my childish mind, I knew how petty that sounded. I just didn't care. I just told myself I deserved this. And that I was just biding my time until I thought of a way to get back at Celestia.

During my time here, I put a lot of investigation into the mirror I fell out of. I knew it only opened once every thirty moons. What I didn't know was that it could still be used even without full power. Depending on the phase of the moon, I could see back into Equestria and get an idea of what was happening. I would sneak back onto campus around the full moon and press myself against it to see what was happening.

And lo and behold what I found out one day...

Sunset dropped her duffle bag next to the statue. The forecast had warned her it was going to be chilly tonight, so she packed a blanket and a thermos of hot soup. She sat down in front of the base and placed a palm against the cool marble.

The reflective face seemed to ripple in front of her, and soon, an image appeared. The throne drifted into view and with it, Celestia sitting on her dais.

Sunset smirked to herself. She couldn't believe Celestia had decided to move the mirror into the throne room. It was like she wanted Sunset to spy on her. If only she could get audio with the stupid thing!

It was still better than nothing. If anything, it helped Sunset learn to read lips. For the next hour, Sunset watched Celestia conduct court in her usual

benevolent fashion. It was a horribly dull affair that made Sunset question why she was doing this in the first place. Sure, she was getting better at reading lips, but during the last two months she had done this, she had learned nothing useful that could help her get revenge.

Another hour passed. Sunset was taking sips of her soup when court came to an end.

“Is that the last petitioner?” Sunset read from Celestia’s mouth.

“Yes, Your Highness.” Sunset didn’t even have to read the guard’s lips to know that was how he responded.

“Good. Go tell — she can come in now.” Sunset tilted her head. She couldn’t make out the word Celestia had said.

“Tilt? Tile? Twinkle? Mmm, closer. Pretty sure there were two syllables.”

A few minutes later, a small, purple unicorn trotted into view, carrying a large book bag and an energetic smile.

“—, my faithful student, so good to see you today.”

Sunset choked on her hot soup. She sputtered and pounded a hand against her chest, coughing and gasping for air. “Faithful student? Did she say faithful student?” Sunset threw herself against the marble again, but Celestia and the unicorn were already walking away.

She leaned back and let the soup fall from her hand. “She replaced me...”

“I’m sorry, Sunset.”

Don’t be. I deserved it. Well... Princess Twilight can go fall off a cliff, but still... Celestia deserves a student who won’t stab her in the back.

After I saw that, I became even more vindictive and spiteful, believe it or not. I was obsessed with getting back at both Celestia and Princess Twilight, that I took my anger out on the school. It took a year, but Flash finally wised up and broke up with me.

Sunset wrenched the old factory door open and grinned at Flash. “Cryptic text. ‘I need to talk to you.’ Well, what’s up?”

Flash stood on her doorstep, not wearing his usual goofy trying-to-be-cool smile, but looking anxious and tense. He rubbed the back of his head and

looked away. *"Yeah. Listen, Sunset, there's no easy way to say this but... I-I'm... I'm breaking up with you."*

Sunset stared at him, an odd ache stirring in her heart. She forced a laugh and said, "No, seriously. What's up? I know you didn't drive across town just to tell me that."

"Actually, I kinda did."

The smile slid from her face. "You're breaking up with me?"

Flash nodded.

Sunset scowled. "Wait, is this because I wouldn't let you... what's that expression? 'Get into my pants?'"

Flash jumped back, his face bright red. "What? No! No, this isn't about that!" He took a deep breath. "Sunset, I can't keep pretending I don't notice how you treat everyone in this school. You're a bully! Actually, that's putting it mildly. You're a tyrant! And I... I can't go on in good conscience associating myself with you."

The lines on Sunset's face hardened into a full glower. "You're choosing now to grow a conscience? I didn't hear you complaining when you were voted prince of all the school dances, or when I was making out with you all over the entire freaking school!"

"Yeah well... I took a long look at myself in the mirror and asked what kind of man I want to be. And I decided I'm not going to be a boy toy to an egomaniac."

"Excuse me?" Sunset shouted.

Flash crossed his arms. "You heard me. You're a self-centered, bossy, manipulating, egomaniac, and I—"

Slap!

Flash staggered back, holding both hands against his cheek.

Sunset's breath came out hard, her face red and splotchy. "You wanna grow a spine now? Fine, go ahead. Just remember, I've got two year's worth of dirt on you too! Remember all the things you helped me do! So if I go down, I'm dragging you with me!" she shrieked.

Flash looked at her through watery eyes. “Might be worth it if I thought it would fix what you broke.” He turned and walked out of the alley.

“And for the record,” Sunset yelled after him, “I broke up with you!”

That part didn’t hold much water in the following weeks. Soon, everyone knew Flash Sentry had broken up with Sunset Shimmer.

“Did you... did you ever actually like him?”

A little towards the end. Maybe that’s why I was so mad when he broke up with me. I mean, he was the first person to help me out in this world. I... don’t know where I’d be without him. Ugghhh! That stupid idiot! He’s just as meddling as Princess Twilight. Those two were made for each other. They both can go fall off a cliff together.

Whew. Anyway, you know most of the story from there. The semester started, and I knew the thirtieth moon was coming up. I had a plan to take the Element of Magic out of Equestria where it would be disconnected from all of the other Elements and see what happened. My theory was that it wouldn’t be able to recognize its proper bearer and would just bestow power on whoever was wearing it.

I was... sort of right.

The crown landed in Sunset’s hands and she stared hungrily at it. “At last! More power than I could ever imagine!” Sunset raised the crown high and jammed it on her head, unable to wipe the look of triumph on her face.

Until a jolt of electricity ran down her spine and claws began digging into her skull. She reached up to pull the crown off, but it burned her hands upon contact. Her heart accelerated to dangerous levels. The burning sensation in her hands spread throughout the rest of her body. The world started to fade away in a void of white.

Pain rocked her entire being, not just her body but her soul as well. She was being torn in two. She was being burned from the inside out.

She was crying.

She was laughing.

She was a demon.

I got everything I wanted that night. A crown, power, servants. But I didn't want it. Not at that price. It wasn't worth falling that far. It wasn't worth becoming a monster.

“...”

...

“...”

Thanks for listening, Twilight.

“Do you feel better?”

Not really but... I finally did what Princess Celestia asked me to do. Maybe I'll feel better tomorrow, but right now, I'm just tired.

“You're leaving? Are you sure you want to walk home in the dark?”

I'll be fine, Sparky. But thanks... for everything.

“You're welcome, Sunset.”

The rain was still falling when Sunset stopped in front of Canterlot High. It was odd. Her body felt lighter, like something had been taken off her shoulders. Yet her heart was still heavy and there was an emptiness in her stomach.

She walked up the statue and lowered her umbrella, instantly getting soaked by the rain. She placed a hand against the marble and concentrated with all her might.

Nothing appeared.

She rested her head against it, closing her eyes and feeling the rainwater run down her face, ruining her light layer of makeup.

“Mom, Dad, Celestia... I'm sorry.”

Kpok 27: Law of the Universe

The sky was dyed a beautiful shade of azure. The sun touched the horizon and set it on fire, bathing the buildings of Canterlot in its glowing embers.

Sunset sat on a terrace overlooking the Unicorn Range. The fields and valleys endlessly rolled out before her, stretching in all directions. Floating above it was Cloudsdale, sculpted from the fluffiest, white clouds. Rainbows poured over the sides in multicolored waterfalls.

She sat in the embrace of her mother and father. Their coats felt soft and warm beneath her fingers. Her mother ran a hoof through her hair, while her father whispered, “We’re so proud of you, Sunset.”

And for once, that was all Sunset wanted to hear.

After a while, Sunset stood up and waved goodbye. She walked down the street, still in her human form. None of the other ponies seemed to notice; they all smiled and waved at her. She smiled and waved back, finding a lot of familiar faces in the crowd. There was Daydreamer, sleeping on a pile of hay, and Blue Crescent, eating one of Donut Joe’s donuts. Across the street was Quantum Leap, she had tried so hard to outsmart Sunset in school. And next to her was Moondancer, looking as pretty and sweet as she always did.

Sunset never liked her.

Up and down the street she went until she finally came to a small park in front of the castle. It was empty, save for a solitary figure at the top of the hill. Sunset climbed towards them, her heart beating faster and faster the closer she got.

It was Twilight waiting for her at the top. She smiled at Sunset and pointed to Canterlot Castle. “Is this what you wanted to show me?”

Sunset nodded. “Yeah? Do you like it?”

Twilight nodded. She and Sunset sat down under a large tree and admired the view in silence. Twilight rested her head on Sunset’s shoulder.

“The view is really pretty... but not as pretty as you, Sunset,” Twilight whispered.

Sunset straightened up and looked at Twilight's large, purple eyes. So curious. So kind. So trusting. There was an intense fluttering in Sunset's stomach as she leaned closer to Twilight.

Sunset snapped her eyes open and quickly sat up in her bed. She wasn't breathing hard, but her heart was pounding in her chest.

She stared unblinkingly into the darkness before her. The tail end of the dream tried to replay itself in her mind, but Sunset shook it away.

"That's it. No more drowning my ramen in hot sauce."

"Yes. *That's* why you had that dream."

Sunset grabbed Princess Twilight from off her pillow, trying to remember why she was there in the first place. She gave up and flung her across the room before throwing the blankets over her head and going back to sleep.

Sunset pulled her head through her sweater on the morning of a dreary Friday. She brushed her hair out and checked her reflection on the surface of her phone. Looking at the broken mirror sitting in the corner, Sunset reminded herself, *again*, to take it out to the dumpster later.

She laced her boots, swung her backpack over her shoulder and scanned her room to make sure she didn't leave anything behind. On her desk was the completed EMP jammer, along with the five-page paper and schematics she and Twilight had worked on.

Sunset grinned to herself, recalling the completion of their project Wednesday evening.

Sunset held a finger against the switch. "All right, this is it."

Twilight pressed a pencil against her notepad. "Initialize first test in three... two... one... now!"

Sunset flipped the switch, feeling the jammer make a short buzz in her hand. One second later, the light in Twilight's room went out, and her alarm clock went black.

"It worked!" Sunset cheered.

“Yes!” Twilight jumped up from her chair. “We did it! I knew we could do it!”

She flung her arms around Sunset, and Sunset gave her a tight hug.

“Twilight!” Shining’s voice ripped them apart. They both jumped to attention as the door flung open. “What did you do?”

“We built an EMP jammer,” Sunset said casually. “We just tested it, and guess what? It works!”

It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Sunset was sure Shining was glaring at her. “You do know that’s illegal, right?”

“Only if used for the destruction of property,” Sunset replied.

“Don’t worry, Shiny, we’re just using it for our science fair project. The lights will come back on soon, trust me.”

“I trust you, it’s her I’m worried about,” Shining said, turning back down the hall.

Sunset crossed her arms and smirked. “I’m flattered.”

Her smirk grew wider as she shut her bedroom door. “We are so going to win next Wednesday.”

She left the factory and mounted her bike, carefully maneuvering out of the alley before riding off down the street. The storm had blown itself out earlier in the week, leaving the sky blotchy with puffy, white clouds. The sun ducked between them, playing a game of hide-and-seek with Canterlot, plunging it into shadows every few minutes.

Sunset enjoyed a casual ride to school on her motorcycle, feeling the crisp morning air brush against her face through the thin breaks in her helmet’s visor. The smell of wet asphalt flitted in and out of her nose during her cruise through the suburbs.

It was a fleeting moment of genuine happiness amongst the usual idle contentment Sunset felt. She tried not to indulge in it too much. That was usually when things started to go wrong. Still, the warm flicker filled her stomach and helped her enjoy the moment.

The feeling persisted all the way to school, though it diminished slightly when she stepped into the hall and received her daily looks of distrust and annoyance from some of her fellow students.

Sunset opened up her locker and stored her backpack inside, trading it for her history textbook. She knew this brief happiness would fade the second she stepped into Mr. Noteworthy's class.

"Pinkie Pie, get back here!"

Sunset turned her head down the hall, spotting Pinkie round the corner holding a paper bag. Hot on her heels was Rainbow looking murderous.

"Give me back my lunch!"

"I just want the pudding cup you promised!"

Sunset casually stuck her arm out, catching Pinkie in the chest. She fell back and hit the ground, a soft *poof* coming from her volume of hair.

"Lose something?" Sunset pointed to Pinkie as Rainbow slid to a stop.

"Thanks." Rainbow swooped down and grabbed the paper sack. "Gimme that."

"But Rainbow, you said you'd bring me a pudding cup!" Pinkie whined.

"I never said anything like that!"

Pinkie pointed an accusatory finger at her. "Yes, you did. Yesterday, I said, 'Ooh, that pudding looks delicious,' and you said, 'yep, got it from home,' and I asked, 'could you bring me one?' and then you said, 'I've only got one left,' and then I asked really nicely, 'pleeeeeeaaase?' and then you said, 'sure, Pinkie, I'll give my last pudding cup to you,' remember?"

Rainbow facepalmed. "I was being sarcastic!"

"Oh."

Rainbow kept her hand over her face as she walked away, grumbling under her breath.

Still lying on the ground, Pinkie smiled up at Sunset. "So, how are you today, Sunny?"

"Surprisingly well, thanks." Sunset reached down and hauled Pinkie to her feet. "Pudding shortage aside, how are you?"

“I’m doing terrific!” Pinkie threw her arms in the air. “Principal Celestia has just given me the budget for the Winter Ball, which means I can finalize my decoration ideas! It’s gonna be spectacular!”

Sunset closed her locker and started down the hall, Pinkie at her side. “Sounds great.”

“Yep! So, are you excited for the science fair next week?”

Sunset smirked. “Twilight and I are going to own the competition. Naturally.”

Pinkie began to skip. “I hope so. You two are super smart smartypantses. I bet you’ll win. You know, I thought about joining the fair too!”

“You did?” Science and Pinkie were not things Sunset would regularly associate together.

“Uh-huh. I’ve been working on a—” Pinkie stopped skipping and dropped her voice to harsh whisper “—secret project.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “What kind of secret project?”

Pinkie patted her on the head. “Silly, it wouldn’t be a secret if I told you. But, I’ll give you a hint: it starts with a ‘party’ and ends with an ‘annon.’”

“You’re making a party cannon?”

Pinkie clapped a hand over Sunset’s mouth. “Sshhhh. The walls have ears. You never know who might steal your ideas!”

The bell rang, and Pinkie let go of Sunset and skipped off in the opposite direction. “See ya at lunch!”

Sunset rubbed her temple. “Huh, headache isn’t so bad today. I must be building up resistance.”

Much to her own chagrin, Sunset was right about her happiness ending when class started. She had sat down at her desk, greeted Rarity and exchanged small pleasantries, and had managed to not receive a look of disdain from Mr. Noteworthy.

In hindsight, Sunset blamed herself for getting complacent. She was drumming her pencil on her desk, waiting for Luna to finish the morning announcements when her day turned sour.

“...and finally, as you all know, our annual Winter Ball is coming up at the end of the term. Ahem, due to... renovations the school had to pay for not too long ago, we no longer hold the budget to pay for a venue for both the ball and Prom. As such, the Winter Ball has been relocated to the gymnasium. If you would like to join the decoration committee, please speak to Miss Pinkamena Pie. Anyone that would like to help fundraise to keep the budget for Prom up can talk to Celestia or myself. That is all; enjoy your day and your weekend.”

Without Sunset tapping her pencil, the room was hauntingly silent. She could feel the heat of twenty glares on the back of her neck. The intensity was so great, that Sunset was actually scared to turn around. Instead, she tilted her head just enough to see Rarity in her peripheral vision. The apologetic look Rarity gave her was the only proof Sunset needed not to turn around. She knew it was pretty bad if even Mr. Noteworthy was giving her a look of sympathy.

“Ahem, let’s start the lesson, shall we?” He turned to face the blackboard.

As Sunset began taking notes, a wad of paper bounced off the back of her head. She gritted her teeth and ignored it. A second one, however, landed on her desk. Against her better judgment, Sunset uncrumpled it, revealing a vulgar choice of words.

Sunset crumpled it again and shoved it in her pocket. She dropped her head into her hand, just as another wad of paper hit her.

Sunset had thought the battle was over. Her campaign of terror cumulated, and ended, with the Fall Formal. She had fallen, the students were free, and everyone lived happily ever after. The only battle scars Sunset would have to deal with was being forced into friendship by the Elements, and being ignored by everyone else.

The second role, she accepted gladly, because being ignored was better than revenge from those she had wronged. Not that anyone was dumb enough to try and get revenge on Sunset Shimmer. The little fear she had left over the students ensured Sunset she didn’t have to keep looking over her shoulder.

All of that changed with one single announcement. Sunset was in the hot seat again, receiving spiteful glares and dark murmurings wherever she went. Only

a month ago, Sunset had walked through the halls, ambivalent to the disdain her classmates had for her. She even reciprocated it, though it had been weak, and followed by guilt.

They had done nothing wrong, her newly forming conscience would remind her. *You can't be mad at them for being mad at you.*

A month of friendship had only made her conscience louder and diminished her hatred for the other students. She *knew* she had been wrong now. And that knowledge... hurt.

During passing period, Sunset had returned to her locker to find a note with more vulgar expletives on it, and on her way between class and lunch she heard more than one person shout, "You suck, Shimmer!"

Sunset collapsed into her seat at the table, all six of her friends already present. Sunset groaned and pressed her face into the surface, while Rarity patted her on the back.

"There, there, dear, it'll be all right."

Sunset scoffed and lifted her face. "I'm starting to doubt that. I think there's a law of the natural universe that states I'm not allowed to be happy for more than a few minutes at a time. Otherwise, the universe sends me a greeting card that says, 'we still hate you.'"

Rarity gave Sunset's shoulder a tight squeeze. "Don't listen to it, dear. We don't hate you, you know that."

"I know, and your opinions are the only ones I care about. But, it'd be nice to not have to hear—"

"You suck, Shimmer!" a random voice shouted.

Sunset slumped in her chair. "That."

"Well," Twilight said gently, "you could always try and apologize."

Sunset sat up in her chair with sudden enthusiasm. "Well, gosh and golly gee, Twilight! That's a swell idea that never crossed my mind! In fact, let me get up right now and make a formal apology! How's this sound? 'Hey, everybody, I'm sorry about being a tyrant and making your lives crap for the past three years. Oh, and turning into a raging she-demon and destroying school property, on top

of brainwashing you and almost ruining your dance!” She crossed her arms and slumped into her chair again.

“Wow.” Rainbow rested her arms on the table. “Pinkie, what does the scouter say about her sarcasm levels?”

“It’s over nine-thousand!” Pinkie crushed the pudding cup she was holding, splattering chocolate all over her face. “Oopsies.”

“Hey, wait a sec!” Dash glared at the lack of pudding on her side of the table.

Sunset rolled her eyes at whatever dumb joke the two of them had made. She turned to Twilight. “Sorry, I’m just agitated right now. Luna makes one remark, and everyone remembers that I’m still the bad guy.”

Twilight shook her head. “Students here take dances a little too seriously.”

Just then, Trixie stomped over to their table and pointed a finger down at Sunset. “Listen here, Shimmer. Trixie isn’t as upset that you already messed up the Winter Ball, but if you mess up Prom, Trixie will make you wish you had never been born!”

Trixie turned on her heel and stormed away, leaving Sunset to drop her face against the table again. “Yes, Sparky. Yes, they do.”

Rarity pursed her lips for a moment. “Well, Sunset, as much as you’re not going to want to hear this, I agree with Twilight.”

“What, you think I should apologize to the whole school? Do I need to remind you how long it took me just to apologize to you guys?”

“Well, when I think about it…” Rarity pressed a finger to her cheek. “I don’t think you ever actually gave us a formal apology.”

Sunset raised her head. “Exactly.” She dropped against the table, then raised it again. “Sorry, by the way.” She dropped again.

“Err, apology accepted. Anyways, I’m not saying you have to stand in front of everyone and say you’re sorry, but maybe it’s time you tried to change your image.”

“Gee, I thought me *not* being a tyrant and being friends with all of you was a pretty drastic change. I’m trying my best here given the circumstances, what more do you want from me?”

“Well,” Applejack said, “you could try, ya know, being a bit friendlier to everyone who ain’t us.”

Sunset sat up and rested her chin in her hand. “Easier said than done when the entire school hates you.”

“Yeah, A.J,” Rainbow said, pinning Pinkie’s face against her tray with one hand and eating with the other, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Sunset isn’t exactly the friendliest person here.” She blinked. “No offense.”

Sunset drummed her fingers on the table. “None taken. You’re not wrong.”

Twilight smiled. “But we know how nice you can really be.”

Fluttershy spoke up for the first time that lunch. “Oh yes! Especially at the animal shelter, when she...”

Sunset looked at her with the intense heat of the summer sun.

“...W-when... when she volunteers to do paperwork while I go play with the animals.” Fluttershy picked up her apple and took a large bite out of it.

Good job, ‘Shy.

Applejack looked between them and shrugged. “Point is, we know you’re good, you’re just a little... rough around the edges.”

“So, what are you suggesting?” Sunset asked.

“We try and find a way to get the school to see how good you can be.”

Sunset ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “Girls, I appreciate the gesture, but I think you might be overthinking this. I’m not asking for the whole school to be friends with me.” She shuddered. “No, I certainly don’t want that; you six are all I need. I just want them to stop looking at me like I’ve done something wrong... recently.”

Something wet and slimy hit Sunset in the back of the head. She combed her fingers through her hair again and fished out a fresh spit wad. She gagged and wiped her fingers on her jeans. “Aaaaand, the suggestion box is open.”

“Mmmm mm mmm mmm mmmph!” Pinkie flailed her arms.

“Umm, Rainbow?” Fluttershy pointed. “I think she wants to say something.”

“Fine.” Rainbow sighed and let Pinkie up.

Pinkie inhaled like she was trying to take all the oxygen from the room, then smiled. “I have an idea!”

“We figured,” Sunset said. “Out with it.”

“So, everyone’s mad because they think Sunset ruined the next dance, right? So, what if Sunset helps with the Winter Ball? She could join the Event Committee and help with all the preparations!”

Everyone’s head turned to Sunset. She rubbed her arm and said, “I don’t know, Pinkie. I see what you’re getting at, but me working on the Ball would just give kids another reason not to go. Then the dance really would be a disaster.”

Pinkie leaned across the table and grabbed Sunset by the shoulders. “But if everything goes well, and everyone knows *you* helped make it possible, then they’ll know you’re not a complete mean grumpy skirt anymore! Then they’ll tell their friends, and their friends will tell their friends, and everyone will like you!”

Sunset shifted. It was surprisingly well-founded logic for Pinkie. She was just full of surprises today. “Well...”

“Please, Sunset? No one else has come by to sign up to help yet, and I need all the help I can get to make this happen.”

A familiar jolt ran down Sunset’s spine, and she sighed. Whether or not this was a good idea, she was locked into it now. “Sure, I’ll help, Pinkie.”

Pinkie jumped back into her chair and screamed, “Yes! I hereby name you my second-in-command, Sunset Shimmer!”

“Count us in too, darling,” Rarity said, raising a hand. “We’ll do everything we can to make this go off without a hitch.”

Pinkie looked ready to burst into confetti. “This. Is going. To be. The best. Ball. *Ever!* The second biggest dance of the school year hosted by the Spectacular Seven! There’s no way people will hate you after this, Sunny!”

Sunset smiled. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

The lunch bell rang, sending students to the doors for their last class of the day. Pinkie began to jabber about some of the ideas she had laid out. The group

pushed out of the cafeteria with the rest of the mob and made their way down the hall.

“Twilight, hey, Twilight!”

Sunset turned her head with Twilight and scrunched her nose when she saw Flash jogging towards them. “Can we help you with something?”

Flash ignored her. “Listen, Twilight, can I... talk to you alone for a sec?”

Twilight started to play with her bangs. “Umm, sure, yeah.” She waved to the others. “I’ll see you girls later.” She followed Flash to an adjacent hallway.

Something bubbled in Sunset’s stomach, and she had to fight the urge to hit something. “What is that loser up to now?”

Rarity tapped a finger on her chin. “Hmm... I just remembered I left something in my locker. I should go get it before class starts.” She slipped between incoming students. “Don’t wait up!” she called, vanishing into the crowd.

“That nosy little... uugh!” Sunset shook her head and walked off to class.

Sunset sat in the back row during her last period to avoid any more paper balls. Unfortunately, she found it harder to concentrate. Her mind constantly slipped from the lesson to thoughts about the science fair, the Winter Ball, Flash, and Twilight.

The latter two popped up the most, no matter how many times she told herself she didn’t care. She sighed, supposing that wasn’t entirely true. She *did* care. She just didn’t want to see Twilight get hurt by Flash.

Good friends are supposed to look out for each other, right? That’s all she was being: a good friend. That’s why she wanted to punch Flash in the face... well, *one* of the reasons.

By the time school ended, Sunset found herself even more tense than before lunch. She wanted to know what Flash had talked to Twilight about, though Sunset had a good idea. More importantly, she wanted to know what Twilight had said.

Sunset stopped at her locker to put her English book away and grab her gloves. When she shut it, she was surprised to find Rarity standing there with a knowing smile. It quickly flipped to a frown. “Darling, you still looked stressed.”

Sunset shrugged. “I’ve had a day.”

“I’m sure. Would you like to come to the spa with me, then? You’re overdue for pampering as it is.”

“That sounds lovely, Rarity.”

Rarity clapped her hands together. “Good! Come along then; I’m parked in the back parking lot.”

Sunset slung her backpack over her shoulder and followed close behind. “So, are you going to tell me what you needed to ‘get from your locker’?”

“Hmm? Oh, ahem.” Rarity held a closed hand to her mouth and gave a few more coughs. “Unladylike, I know, but curiosity got the better of me.”

“And?” Sunset pressed.

“Well... Flash asked out Twilight.”

“I knew it!” Sunset stomped a boot against the floor. “That desperate, skirt-chasing...” She went on grumbling any insulting name she could think of.

Rarity let her go on for a minute, wearing a bemused expression. “Don’t you want to hear what she said?”

Sunset looked up. “Yes.”

“She said no.”

“Ha! What a loser!”

Rarity frowned. “Sunset, that isn’t very nice. Rejection hurts something fierce.”

“I know that.” Sunset opened the door to the stadium and took a deep breath of the autumn air. “I just don’t have much sympathy for him.”

Rarity’s frown deepened. “Don’t you think it’s time you two buried the hatchet and tried to make up?”

“No.”

“Ugh.” Rarity pinched her nose. “You could treat this as part of your goal to get the school to stop hating you.”

Sunset stopped. “If the school stops hating me, that’s cool, great even! But I could care less if Flash never wants to be my friend.”

Rarity narrowed her eyes. “Sunset, this is getting petty and unhealthy. I understand he broke up with you, but he had every reason to. Quite frankly, you were terrible to him.”

Sunset threw her arms into the air. “Whose side are you on, Rarity?”

“I’m on *your* side dear, but I’m not against Flash. He’s friends with the rest of us, and if he was your friend too, it would go a long way to helping your image, and your psyche.”

“What do you mean my psyche?”

Rarity breathed slowly. “Sunset, I’ve seen you make tremendous progress over the last few weeks. You’re letting go of a lot of the things that made you... unpleasant. You keep making good strides, so don’t let this hold you back from making more because that’s what it’s going to do if you let it.”

Silence washed over them. Or it would have if it weren’t for the sound of a strumming guitar. It was slow and melancholy and sang of unrequited love.

Sunset peeked around the wall and saw Flash sitting in the top row of the bleachers, alone. She looked back at Rarity and growled, “You planned this.”

Rarity put on her knowing smile. “No I didn’t. We’re simply in the right place, at the right time.” She gave Sunset’s wrist a light squeeze. “Please, at least *talk* to him.”

As Sunset’s body led her off to confront Flash, she turned her head back and mouthed, “I hate you.”

Rarity just smiled and waved.

Sunset stomped up the bleachers, making sure Flash heard her coming. He paused, looked up, knitted his brow, then kept playing. Sunset sat down ten feet from him and kept her body turned away. She had hoped she wouldn’t have to start the conversation, but the terms of Rarity’s favor worked against her. A pressure built up in her throat until she was forced to blurt out, “Hey.”

Flash kept strumming. “Hey.”

Silence passed between them, and Sunset felt the pressure building in her throat again. “So... I hear Twilight turned you down.”

His finger slipped, giving off a dissonant chord. “Yeah. She said...” Flash played a few more chords, pulled a face, then started tuning his guitar. “She said she couldn’t like me the way I like her.”

“Well... that sucks.”

Flash looked up, scowling. “Is that why you came up here? To rub it in?”

“No, I came up here to talk, believe it or not,” Sunset said sourly.

“Yeah, well...” Flash resumed tuning his guitar. “I’m not sure I want to listen to you right now.”

“Fine, then this conversation is over.” Sunset stood to leave but caught sight of Rarity below in the shadows. She pointed at Flash, then at Sunset, then at the spot on the bleachers Sunset had just been.

Sunset resisted giving Rarity a rude gesture and sat down again. “Look... you don’t want to do this, and I don’t want to do this... but maybe it’s time we... talked things out.”

“Sure, where do you want to start: messing with my emotions, getting me to lie for you, or brainwashing me and the rest of the school?”

Sunset flinched at the bitterness in his voice. “None of those really.” She looked down at her hands. “So you remember the brainwashing?”

A loose string answered her first. “Not everyone believes it was a hallucination, Sunset.”

“Right.” She paused. “I...um...” She kept stalling for time, not wanting to feel the influence of her penance while she fished for the right words. “I’m... sorry about the brainwashing thing. I didn’t mean for things to go that far.”

Flash didn’t answer. He kept his eyes on his guitar.

Sunset sighed. “I’m guessing your silence means you don’t forgive me.”

Flash waved a hand through air. “Someone give the girl a prize,” he said in a flat tone.

Sunset clenched her fists. “I’m trying to be sincere here.”

Flash gave a bark of laughter. He looked up at her with faux amusement. “You being sincere? That would have been a first in our relationship.”

“Who’s the one that tagged along like a lovesick puppy?”

“Excuse me for giving you the benefit of the doubt and thinking there might *actually* be a nice person under all of...” He gestured to Sunset. “That.”

“You stuck with me all that time just to see if I could be a nice person?” Sunset asked dumbfounded.

Flash sat his guitar up and looked Sunset in the eyes. “I know you can be a nice person... when it benefits *you*. You’ve never done anything nice just for the sake of being nice.”

Sunset pointed a finger at him. “That’s not true. I cheered Twilight up once when she was crying her eyes out when I could have easily made her life worse.”

“Oh boy.” Flash rolled his eyes. “One to one-thousand. You sure showed me.”

Sunset crossed her arms. “Huh, so this is where I get my sarcasm from.”

Both of them fell into silence again; Flash plucked at his guitar strings and Sunset pulled at the loose yarn on her sweater. Nothing would make her happier than to leave, but she was positive Rarity was still in the shadows, watching.

Flash spoke again. “So... what... was Twilight crying about?”

“She thought the girls only wanted to be friends with Princess Twilight Sparkle, and she was just a stand in since they looked alike.”

Flash flinched. “Oh.”

Sunset narrowed her eyes. “That’s what *you* were thinking, weren’t you?”

“No! I mean, not intentionally. I wanted to get to know her—”

“Sweet Celestia, you’re pathetic.” Sunset shook her head.

“I just wanted some closure, okay!” Flash pressed a palm against his head. “My first girlfriend’s a demon, the girl I like turns out to be a princess from another dimension, and one week later, the girl who looks just like her shows up. I don’t tell my heart who to like, it just does it.”

The strumming started again, sadder than before. As much as Sunset hated it, she could *feel* Flash's heartache in each note.

Almost each note.

"Your A string is off," she murmured.

"What?"

"Your A." She pointed. "It's off-key."

Flash tuned the peg and gave it a few plucks. "Is that better?"

"Yeah, much."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Flash continued to play for a minute. "You know... I didn't think you took anything away from those guitar lessons."

Sunset looked out to the setting sun. "I was paying attention."

"Then why'd you want to stop?"

"I wasn't good at it."

"...I thought you were doing pretty well."

Sunset bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from smiling. "Thanks."

Flash set his guitar down and scooted a little closer. "So, why'd you come up here?"

"I told you, I wanted to talk."

"About what?"

Sunset shrugged. "You and me. How we treat each other. Rarity says it's unhealthy. She's probably right."

Flash followed her eyes to the sun. "You're actually friends with them, huh?"

She smiled. "Yeah. I'm still in shock too." She shoved her hands into her sweater pockets. "You were right, there was a nice person underneath all of this. She was just... buried very, *very* deep down. And she still has some climbing to do."

Flash gave her a genuine smile, one Sunset hadn't seen in a long time. "I'm glad I was right." He sighed as a cloud blocked the sun out. "Rarity's right: neither of us should be holding a grudge."

Sunset smirked. "I didn't think you were capable of holding a grudge."

"Heh. Remember the dart board I had in my room?"

Sunset raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

Flash rubbed the back of his head. "There... *may* have been a picture of you taped to it the first month after we broke up."

Oddly enough, Sunset found herself snorting in amusement than angry. *Well, with everything I've done to him, I guess it's justified.*

"I still don't get something though."

Sunset stopped laughing and looked at him.

"Why didn't you want to stay? Why'd you want to live in that run down factory anyway?"

Sunset fiddled with the insides of her pockets. "I didn't want to be a freeloader. I hate it when people take pity on me. I needed somewhere I could call my own." She smiled again. "Besides, would your mom approve if your girlfriend lived twenty steps from your room?"

Flash laughed. "You might have a point. She still asks about you sometimes. She still wants to meet your 'grandma.'"

Sunset gave a half-hearted chuckle, remembering the lie she and Flash had created to explain Sunset's living arrangements.

Flash reached for his bag and pulled out two lukewarm sodas. "Thirsty?" He offered one to Sunset.

"Yeah, thanks." Sunset was glad it was room temperature; she was cold enough as it was. After taking a few sips she said, "I'm going to be honest... you weren't on my list of people to apologize to."

"Can't imagine why." Flash took a short sip of his soda.

"Heh... yeah. But, I *am* sorry, Flash. I was terrible to you. And when I think about it, you were the first friend I really made here. You gave me a lot, and I just... led you on. So, I'm sorry."

Flash set his soda down. "I'm not gonna lie, Sunset. Breaking up with you was one of the hardest things I've ever done, not just because I was afraid of what you'd do to me... but because breaking up with you meant I was wrong about all of the decisions I had made about you." He wiped at his eye. "I didn't want to give up on you but..."

Sunset reached over and grabbed his hand. "The fact that you held on that long says a lot, Flash." She bobbed her head to the side. "One, that you're a sap. But two, you're a very determined and very sincere sap. But maybe it's because you finally gave up on me that helped push me to get back on the right path."

Flash frowned. "So, me dumping you... helped you?"

"In a roundabout sort of way, yeah."

"Well... glad I could help then." He smiled. "And apology accepted."

Sunset mirrored his smile, leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "I still think you're a dork, Flash Sentry. But you'll make a girl very happy someday."

Flash stood and helped Sunset to her feet. "And maybe soon, everyone else will see you are a changed person."

Sunset pushed a lock of hair from her face. "Maybe." She turned and started down the steps. "Later, Sentry."

He gave a wave. "See ya, Shimmer."

Sunset walked back over to the shadow of the school, where Rarity was leaning against the wall, filing her nails. "So how'd it go?" she asked in a melodic voice.

"Pretty good. We don't hate each other anymore. Are you happy?"

Rarity put her nail file away. "The question is, darling, are *you* happy?"

"Kinda, yeah. I'm afraid to say yes because that's when the universe decides to kick me."

Rarity waved a hand. "That's nonsense, Sunset; the universe is not out to get you." She twisted a finger through her locks and gave Sunset a wry smile. "But I know someone who is."

Sunset's eyes widened. "What? Who..." Butterflies began dancing in her stomach. She crossed her arms and started for the parking lot. "This conversation is over, Rarity."

Rarity pouted but hurried after her. "But, Sunset—"

"I know, Rarity, believe me, I know. And right now, I don't want to talk about it." *Actually, I'd like to never talk about it.*

Rarity caught up and sighed. "Very well, it has been a long day for you. Best not to add more stress. I won't press it anymore."

"Thank you, Rarity."

They arrived at her car and got settled in, throwing their stuff into the back seat. "But," Rarity said, "if you *do* want to talk about it, please know I'll be there to lend an open ear."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sunset said, trying to ignore the butterflies and stray thoughts of Twilight Sparkle.

Kpok 28: Love and War

It was pink.

Not just the seat or the handlebars—the entire bike was pink. Hot pink. With more crude language scribbled on in red. It was very easy to see in the late twilight.

Sunset stared, feeling a vein bulge in her neck. She knew the students were mad, she *knew* that. Yet she had hardly given her motorcycle a second thought when Rarity offered her a spa treatment.

Any relaxation Sunset had been feeling was now long gone.

Rarity stood by her shoulder, tapping her fingers together. “W-well, dear, umm... at least it’s still in one piece.”

Sunset shoulders tensed; her blood boiled. She took a very deep breath and said in a low, controlled voice. “Rarity, please go home.”

“But, Sunset—”

“I’m about to use very vulgar language, and I don’t want your poor virgin ears to hear it.”

Rarity held up a finger, looking like she wanted to say something, but shrugged and turned away. “Just call me if you need any help.”

“Will do, Rarity,” Sunset said, grinding her teeth down to the gums. “Will do.”

Rarity got into her car and started the engine. Sunset waited until she heard the car exit the parking lot and turn onto the street, then gave it another five seconds.

She took a deep breath, then screamed to the heavens.

By the next morning, Sunset’s mood had hardly improved. While her dream had consisted of her running down the students of Canterlot High with her motorcycle while her friends cheered her on, it hadn’t been something she could call uplifting.

At least, not out loud.

She sat on her knees in the alley of her factory, a bucket of water beside her. Her hand clenched an old sponge, and she furiously scrubbed the paint off her motorcycle. After an hour and a half, she had managed to reduce a lot of it to dull, pink stains. The leather seating, however, was permanently damaged.

She threw the sponge into the bucket of pink water and stretched her hand out. It ached from staying locked in a single position for so long; each of her knuckles popped upon full extension. Her knees were just as sore, and practically sang in delight when Sunset finally stood up.

Looking over her bike, she found she had done a... decent job. It didn't look like a hideous abomination anymore, just a mildly hideous motorcycle.

Sunset sighed. "Maybe some paint remover will help." She would add that to the list of things to buy when she got paid today.

Sunset got a wave of joy at the thought of having money in her pocket again. Then, she shuddered, remembering that to get it, she'd have to endure working next to Trixie for five hours.

She leaned against the wall and cupped her hands over her face. *Five hours... five hours next to her. Is it really worth it?*

Remembering that the student body hated her, apologizing to Flash, and the desecration of her bike had left Sunset with very little energy; certainly not enough to deal with a venom-spitting Trixie. But Sunset knew she needed the money if she wanted to keep eating.

She slid down the wall, flopping her arms to her sides. Only a few days ago, Sunset's heart had felt lighter thanks to her talk with Twilight. She hadn't been absolved of the guilt for the things she had done, but at least she had confided in someone.

Now the guilt was hitting her again in full force, along with a piercing anger, both at the student body and herself. Didn't they get she regretted what she had done? Didn't they see she was trying to be a better person? She hadn't threatened or humiliated anyone in over two months!

She slammed a fist into the wall and cringed at the spike of pain. When the throbbing dulled to an ache, she stood up and returned inside.

Sometimes, she thought it would be easier if she was still evil. Then, she wouldn't have to feel this horrendous guilt.

Sunset shook her head. *No. Being evil means I wouldn't have friends anymore either. And I refuse to go back to that now.* Being friendless, not having any face to look forward to every day, that was a road Sunset didn't want to travel down. She could look herself in the mirror and not see a red demon glaring back at her.

She still saw a bitter and sarcastic girl with clearly definable issues, but at least she wasn't a demon.

After gathering her clothes for the day, Sunset shuffled down to the bathroom and turned the cold water on. "You'll get through this, Sunset," she said, bracing herself for the icy sting. "You have friends, and they have a plan."

She took a deep breath and stepped under the curtain of freezing water, surprised she still wasn't used to it. Teeth chattering, she made quick work of cleaning herself and washing her hair. When she could no longer feel her fingers, she knew she was done, and stepped out onto the fluffy bath mat, snatching her towel off the rack.

"I'd kill for another trip to the spa right now," she said, thinking of the warm mud bath and hot showers.

The bathroom mirror showed what she expected to see: the bitter and sarcastic girl frowning back at her. Sunset tried to smile at herself, but it came out forced. Still, her eyes held less contempt than the last time she had looked at them.

She pulled open the pantry behind the mirror and grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste. "Let's try to cut down on the introspection for a bit. I feel like I'm my own shrink." She raised the brush to her mouth, then paused. "Also, stop talking to yourself."

Sunset finished her habitual grooming and got dressed in her room. She laced her boots up and slipped her sweater over her head before heading for the door and turning the light bulb off.

A spectrum of colors still danced across the walls. Strung from the ceiling were the lights her friends had bought her. Sunset had never realized how dim her room had been with only one light until she had six others to compliment it.

“Thanks, girls.”

Walking sucked. Sunset hated it, but she was too embarrassed to ride her motorcycle at present; and a little paranoid about what might happen to it while she was inside. What would have been a ten-minute drive was now a forty-minute walk. Too much time for Sunset to think.

Her mind conjured a list of scenarios in which Trixie would make her life miserable. A lot of them ended with Sunset getting fired, and two of them ended with Trixie in the hospital. The closer Sunset got to the Emporium, the more her disquiet grew.

It's just Trixie, it's not like the entire school is going to be there. Still, Trixie didn't put much effort into hiding her animosity from Sunset.

Deep breaths, Sunset. In and out. She took slow, calm breaths through her nose, letting out the tension building in her shoulders. *That's it, calm thoughts.*

She thought about standing on the beach with her friends, listening to the tranquil waves as they washed over her feet. Perhaps when it was warmer they could all take a road trip. She thought about the science fair on Wednesday, and receiving first prize with Twilight by her side. She then thought of Twilight and her bright smile and cheery demeanor and giant purple eyes that held the entire universe within their gaze.

Sunset stopped and bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't feel better. Now, she was just annoyed.

A blustery wind prompted her to keep walking. She shoved her hands in her pockets and debated what was worse: working with Trixie or thinking about Twilight and her stupid purple eyes.

Rounding the corner to the Emporium, Sunset could already tell something was different. Good or bad was yet to be determined. But, there were certainly more cars lining the streets than last weekend, and the emporium doors were wide open, with cheery music pouring out.

For the first time since Sunset had worked there, the Emporium was actually filled with customers. Not just one or two, but a couple dozen people. A lot of them were children, but Sunset was still blown away.

She weaved her way through the crowd and up to the register where Artemis stood, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Sunny, my bright assistant, there you are! I was starting to fear you might miss all the fun!”

“What is all of this?” Sunset waved a hand at the meandering crowd behind her.

Artemis stroked his goatee. “This is pure *genius*! I spent all week advertising an event day for us! You and Trixie are going to read to the kids, I’m going to put on a *spectacular* magic show, and later, Selena is going to do a book signing!”

“A book signing?”

“Haven’t I told you? Selena is an accomplished author,” he said proudly. “Her fame even surpasses that of my own.”

Sunset rolled her eyes. She hadn’t met Selena yet, but now she had an image of an older and bigger braggart than Trixie.

The gears turned in Sunset’s head, and she held her hands up. “Wait, back up. Did you say me *and* Trixie were going to read to *children*?”

“That’s right. Oh, come now, don’t look so glum,” he said, seeing the frown Sunset made. “It’s just a few short stories. It’ll only be half an hour, tops. After which, I’ll put on the greatest magic show their young minds have seen thus far!” He placed one hand on his chest and reached to the heavens with the other. “They shall beg their parents for more, and of course, I’ll be happy to oblige. For a small fee of course.”

Sunset groaned inwardly. Reading to children with Trixie? How could the addition of two subjects make reading sound so horrid?

A large plume of smoke burst from the ground next to Sunset, and wafted into the aisles, making everyone in the vicinity cough and gag.

Trixie stepped out from the cloud, wheezing and trying to wave it away. “Ack, too much magic!” She sputtered some more, then quickly tried to play it off by clearing her throat and straightening her skirt out. “Daddy, why does *she* have to read with Trixie? You know Trixie does perfectly fine with the children on her own.”

Artemis patted her on the head. “I’m well aware, Little Moon, but this is an excellent way for you two to bond a little bit.”

“Trixie doesn’t want to bond with her!”

Sunset crossed her arms. “The feeling’s mutual.”

Artemis gave a rare, serious frown. “Well in life, we have to do a lot of things we don’t want to do. Like pay taxes. But you two are going to work together on this, and later, we’re all going to sit down and talk this out like adults.” He cracked a smile. “Heh, those parenting books actually came in handy for once.”

Both girls hunched their shoulders as they marched upstairs. Sunset supposed the bonding was working in some small way, as both of them were in agreement that neither one of them wanted to be here.

The stage was already set up, a curtain decorated with stars and moons draped over the front. In the corner was a large, stuffed armchair with a selection of books next to it.

Trixie made herself comfortable in the armchair and shot a scathing look at Sunset. “Trixie gets the chair. You can have the stool.” She pointed to the opposite corner where a wooden stool sat.

Sunset walked over and picked it up, forcing herself not to throw it at Trixie. Instead, she just replayed the scenario in her mind. She smiled to herself. *Yes. These are soothing thoughts.*

She got as comfortable as she could on the stool, placing it an arm’s length away from Trixie. Artemis shepherded a flock of children—the oldest being no more than six—upstairs and sat them down on the carpet.

“Now, both these lovely girls are going to read a few stories before the show, so why don’t you give them a big round of applause!”

All the little kids clapped and cheered, which oddly enough, calmed Sunset's nerves. She had never been a fan of children. Pony or human, they were often noisy, messy, and annoying. And they stared. A lot.

Like they were doing right then.

Sunset's nerves tightened again, and she tried to smile. She was certain smiles weren't supposed to hurt and knew she was giving more of a grimace.

"Sooo, uhh..." A bead of sweat rolled down the back of her neck. "W-why don't we start reading—"

"Your hair's really pretty," a girl in the front said.

Sunset unconsciously ran a hand through her hair. "Oh, thank you." She smiled.

"What's your name?" a boy asked.

"I'm—"

"That's Sunset," Trixie cut in. "I am the Great and Powerful Trixie, and *I* shall be reading you stories today!" She picked a book from the stack and held it up. The cover was a picture of a tall wizard with a long beard and blue cloak. It reminded Sunset a lot of Starswirl the Bearded.

"First, Trixie will read tales from *The Adventures of Merlin*. Then later, she'll read *The Pumpkin Princess*." Trixie opened the book. "Now, let's get started."

Sunset listened for the first ten seconds, then tuned Trixie out. The kids seemed enthralled though; they were leaning forward, hanging on to Trixie's every word.

Guess I'll just sit here and look pretty for the next thirty minutes. Could be worse I guess. Sunset closed her eyes and daydreamed about the science fair again. She pictured Twilight jumping up and down, squealing with joy when they received first prize.

I wonder what she's doing right now. Probably reading. Stupid nerd. Not that I care. She stifled a yawn. *Pinkie's probably baking something, Rainbow's playing video games, Fluttershy's at the shelter, Rarity's making a dress and Applejack's... huh. I don't know what Applejack might be doing. Wrestling a pig? Whatever farmers do when they're not farming.*

Sunset shifted in her seat. *Okay, I'm bored.* She zoned back in on Trixie's reading.

"...And Merlin raised his staff and shouted, 'Abrakadabra!' and the dragon was vanquished!" Trixie said in a bombastic voice. The children cheered and clapped again, and Trixie gave a small bow.

"Can we read *The Pumpkin Princess* now?" the girl who had complimented Sunset's hair asked.

"Of course we can, sweetie." Trixie put down Merlin's book and picked up the other. "Ahem, now—"

"How come she isn't reading anything?" another kid asked, pointing to Sunset.

Trixie eyed Sunset. "Because she is Trixie's lowly assistant. She doesn't get to read anything."

Sunset clenched a fist. *I'll show you 'lowly assistant.'* She put on her best smile and looked at the children. "Would you guys like me to read the next story?" Sunset told herself she was only doing this out of sheer spite, and not because the children were looking at her with big, hopeful eyes.

"Yes, please!" most of them chanted.

Sunset snatched the book from Trixie's hand and stuck her tongue out. She flipped open to the first page. "Once upon a time, in a land faraway, there was a big pumpkin patch. The night before Halloween, a boy came into it, looking for the perfect pumpkin to bring home to his family." Sunset cleared her throat and made the best impression of a young boy. "'It's almost Halloween, but we don't have a pumpkin to make pumpkin pie.'"

The children all made 'mmm' noises at the mention of pumpkin pie. One of them raised her hand and said, "You have a pretty voice."

Sunset raised the book to hide her blush and her smirk. "Thank you." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Trixie pucker her lips.

"The boy knew the pumpkin patch was haunted, but he *had* to find a good pumpkin," Sunset continued to read. "It was dark. Only the moon lit the pumpkin patch, making it very spooky. '*Who goes there?*'" Sunset asked in her spookiest voice. "'Who are you?' the little boy asked. 'It is I, the Pumpkin

Princess!’ A girl wearing an orange cape and a pumpkin on her head appeared.” Sunset paused, biting her lip to stop herself from laughing at the picture in the book.

“All right, that’s enough of that,” Trixie said, throwing a hand in front of Sunset. “Wouldn’t you kids rather hear what happens to Merlin than some silly pumpkin?”

“I wanna hear about the pumpkin!”

“I wanna hear about Merlin!”

Trixie opened her book again. “Merlin it is! After defeating the dragon, Merlin climbed down the mountain to return the village, but something stopped him.”

Sunset’s nails dug into the book. *So that’s how it’s gonna be? Well, two can play this game.* Was it petty? Yes. But Sunset reminded herself that she was indeed still very petty.

Raising her voice, she read, “The Pumpkin Princess blocked his path and said, ‘You are not allowed to take these pumpkins, for they are my friends and subjects.’”

Trixie growled and raised her own voice. “The witch raised her staff and said, ‘for defeating my pet dragon, I shall lay a curse upon you—’”

“The boy looked sad. ‘But I need a pumpkin for my family. Please reconsider —’”

“—I shall spare you and the village if you do something for me,’—”

“—the Pumpkin Princess declared. ‘Sure, I’ll do anything,’—”

“—Merlin said. ‘You must go—’”

“—into the dark forest, alone—”

“—and find an eye of newt—”

“—to be my new friend—”

“—so that I may bake a pie—”

“—and eat it. Then you may—”

“—go home to your—”

“—*pumpkin pie for Halloween!*”

One of the kids whispered, “This is my new favorite story.”

Sunset and Trixie were on their feet now, shoulder to shoulder, breathing hard from the shouting they had just finished. Trixie looked murderous; Sunset, defiant.

“Ooookay!” Artemis stepped out of a puff of smoke and pushed them apart. “I think that’s enough of storytime. Who’s ready for a magic show?”

The kids jumped to their feet and started cheering.

Artemis scooted Sunset towards the stairs. “Man the register, please. Come, Trixie, we have a show to put on!”

Sunset stomped down the stairs, happy to be away from Trixie. She stopped behind the front desk and slumped over it. “Well, I suppose it could have been worse.” She sighed. “All for the paycheck. All for the paycheck.”

Above her, she could hear Artemis and his stage voice, accompanied by the sounds of fireworks, and ‘ooohs’ and ‘aaahs’ from the crowd.

“I hope they don’t burn the place down.”

Sunset watched the customers wander around, looking at the odd artifacts that were on display. She got a kick every time someone poked Cindy, resulting in their finger getting sucked on. Not many people bought anything though, leaving Sunset with more free time than she knew what to do with.

Her eyes drifted shut as her mind wandered again. How else would she spend her money besides food and paint remover? Maybe she could put a little of it away and start saving for that leather jacket. Or, she could spend it on Christmas presents for her friends. Yes, that would be the right thing to do. Of course, she wasn’t getting paid *that* much. She could probably only afford cheap trinkets for them.

What was she going to do for Christmas? What was she going to do for Thanksgiving? Sunset slouched her shoulders. *The same thing I did last year: sit alone in my room with my blanket wrapped around me.*

The thought depressed her, especially when she coupled it with the thought of all her friends gathered around their respective families.

Too many sad thoughts. Think of something happy!

Twilight popped into her brain.

Something else!

Unfortunately, the image of Twilight sitting with Sunset on Christmas morning lodged itself within Sunset's brain. She could almost smell the scent of lavender Twilight always wore.

Nope, don't think about it.

Twilight smiled and waved at her.

Don't think about it!

Twilight leaned against her arm.

For the love of Celestia, don't think about it!

Twilight drew her face close to Sunset's.

"Dammit all!" Sunset shouted.

Several customers stopped and stared. She brushed them off with a wave of her hand. "Go back to what you were doing."

She folded her arms on the counter and silently fumed. Of all the people in this world, why her? Why Twilight Sparkle? Why the human doppelganger of her arch nemesis?

Twilight Sparkle has a crush on me. Sunset pressed her face into her arms. *Celestia, why? Oh, that's right, because the universe enjoys seeing me squirm!*

Of all the problems Sunset could have predicted, someone legitimately having a crush on her was near the bottom. And *Twilight* of all people?

Okay, no, I should have seen that one coming.

Hindsight didn't make anything easier, however. Try as she might, Sunset couldn't see why Twilight liked her. She was petty. She was rude. She was spiteful. She was a *mess*! How did Twilight not understand that? More importantly, what gave her the idea that Sunset would like her back? Yes, Sunset liked Twilight; maybe even a little more than the others because their friendship wasn't founded on a favor to the most insufferable person in existence.

But Sunset still kept Twilight in the same place in her heart where her other friends stood. Because that was what they were: *friends*. Certainly nothing more. They could never be anything more, because Sunset could never like Twilight like that anyway. The only thing that could result from that courtship was heartache for Twilight and misery for Sunset.

Besides, she found nothing about Twilight attractive. Certainly, her long flowing hair was nice, complemented by that magenta streak. And it was true, she always smelled of lavender, which Sunset found soothing. Her eyes were wide, sparkling violets full of curiosity and compassion. She was intelligent, something Sunset valued greatly, and yet could be so stupid, something Sunset found both irritating and yet fun to exploit. Twilight would then give off her signature flush—the way her cheeks turned pink like she had been standing outside in the cold for too long always put Sunset in a good mood. And Sunset had also noticed the slight shake of her hips Twilight gave when she walked down the halls, showing off the subtle curves of her body—

Sunset slapped herself across the face. “Get a grip, girl! You and Twilight? No!”

The butterflies danced in her stomach again.

“I said no!”

A *boom* came from upstairs, followed by Trixie’s cry of, “Trixie meant to do that!”

The noise generously reminded Sunset of her other problem, and she buried her face again. She could feel the world trying to crush her from two sides. On one was the wrath of Trixie and the rest of the student body. On the other was Twilight Sparkle. It was a race to see who would drive Sunset insane first.

A light and serene voice floated into Sunset’s ear. “You seem troubled.”

Sunset waved a hand. “It’s nothing. Just the universe having a laugh at my expense.”

“Ah. I think we’ve all been there before. For me, I found writing out my problems helps, but I know talking works just as well.”

“I already tried that. It helped for a second, but then... ugh! And the person who I talked to is also part of my suffering!”

“Hmm. Well, I know it’s certainly not my place to pry, but I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

Sunset looked up from her arms. In front of her was a woman with sky blue hair that cascaded down to her waist and stunning green eyes. There was a pencil behind her left ear, and she wore silver, star earrings that went well with her silver blouse. She gave off a very motherly vibe, both warm and inviting, but Sunset could feel a certain level of discipline buried deep within.

It almost reminded her of Celestia. Though the woman’s aura didn’t give off nearly as much authority.

Sunset traced a finger across the front desk and said, “Have you ever done something bad? Like, really, really bad? But at the time, you didn’t think it was all that wrong, but when you look back at it, you realize that you really, really messed up?”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t say I have.”

“I know what I did was wrong, and I’m sorry about it. I mean, sure, I guess I haven’t shown too many people how sorry I am but... it feels like they’re just kicking me while I’m down now. I guess the irony is, I would have done the same thing when I was... not as nice as I am now.”

“Well, I’ve found that it’s our actions, not our lack of them, that show people who we are.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?” Sunset threw a hand into the air. “What if I try to show how nice I am and they still hate me? What if I can’t bring myself to stop hating them?”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Do you hate ‘them’?”

Sunset wilted. “I don’t know. Not really. I’m just really angry. At them for lashing out, and at myself for causing them to lash out.”

A warm hand wrapped itself around Sunset’s, and the woman smiled at her. “Well, you’ll never know until you try. If you’re truly sincere about wanting to correct your mistakes, you’ll take the actions necessary. Then, those who matter will forgive you. Anyone who doesn’t isn’t worth your time.”

Sunset smiled. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Now, what was this other problem you had?”

Sunset cringed. “My best friend’s in love with me, and I have no idea what to do.”

A voice came from behind Sunset. “Did someone say love?”

She jumped, her heart momentarily freezing in place, then turned to find Artemis standing there. “*Artemis, don’t do that! I hate people sneaking up on me!*”

Artemis just threw his head back and laughed, while the woman put her hands on her hips and scowled. “Seriously, Artemis, you scared the girl half to death.”

“I know!” He laughed. “Do you know how hard it is to get a reaction out of her? Now I know what to do for the future.”

“Artemis,” she said warningly.

“Oh, I kid, turtle dove. I won’t do it... on purpose.”

Sunset looked between him and the one he had called ‘turtle dove.’ Something clicked in her brain, and she facepalmed. “You’re Selena.”

Selena blinked in surprise. “Did I not introduce myself? How rude of me.” She held a hand out. “Yes, I’m Selena Lulamoon. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sunset.”

Sunset shook her hand, still looking between her and Artemis. “So let me get this straight: you married *him*?”

“That’s right.” Selena nodded.

“You got married *to* him?”

“Yes.”

“Of your own free will?”

Selena laughed. “Yes, Sunset.”

“Are you sure? Blink twice if you’re being held against your will.”

Artemis tapped his wand against Sunset’s head. “The only magic I used was my own natural charms.” He tipped his nose up. “Believe it or not, I left quite

the trail of broken hearts throughout my school days. Yes, there was many a girl who pined for Artemis Lulamoon.”

Sunset saw Selena playfully roll her eyes.

“But of course, I only had one true love. Well, two if you want to count my passion for magic. But, that didn’t stop them from trying! I remember one time in college, a desperate fan tried to sneak into my dormitory through my window.”

“Oh, I remember that one,” Selena said fondly. “I believe I told her that if she tried it again, I’d run her through with my fencing saber.”

Darn it, Sunset thought. And here I was, getting my hopes up thinking she might be the normal one.

“So, where’s Trixie?” Selena asked.

“Err, she’s cleaning up the stage,” Artemis said, brushing soot off his shoulder. “I don’t understand. During practice, she’s fine. A little shaky, but fine. Up on stage, however, something always blows up.”

Trixie came downstairs, wiping a black smudge off her cheek. She glared at Sunset, like it had been her fault. She turned to her mother and smiled. “Hi, Mommy. Your table is set up upstairs.”

Selena walked over and kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you, sweetie. How are you?”

Trixie’s face soured as she turned to Sunset again. “I’ve been better.”

“Didn’t your father tell you two to get along?”

“I refuse to make nice with her!” Trixie stomped the floor. “She sabotages everything! Like my magic act upstairs!”

“I never touched your magic act!” Sunset yelled.

“Trixie knows you did something—”

“Trixie, enough!” Selena’s voice was hard and firm, and Sunset could feel the full force of her motherly discipline.

Trixie straightened up and bowed her head. “Yes, Mother.”

Selena motioned to Sunset. “Now, I hardly think Sunset did anything to your magic, seeing as she’s been down here most of the time.”

“She has black magic! She blew up the school’s front entrance!”

“Really?” Artemis asked, looking excited.

Sunset covered her eyes. “Yes... really. And I told you, I’m sorry.”

Trixie turned her back to Sunset. “One apology doesn’t stop you from being evil.” She saw the look her mother gave her and fell silent.

Selena’s expression softened. “You’re right. One apology doesn’t always fix everything.” She looked at Sunset. “But I think she plans to do more than just apologize, right Sunset.”

Sunset nodded. “Yes.”

“That’s what Trixie’s afraid of.” Trixie marched back upstairs without another word.

Selena let out a puff of air, then looked at Artemis. “She gets that stubbornness from you.”

Artemis brushed a hand through his hair. “Yes, along with my devilish good looks.”

With another sigh, Selena followed Trixie upstairs. Sunset slumped over the counter again, mentally exhausted.

“So, black magic, hmm?” Artemis leaned in next to her. “Very interesting for someone who claims not to believe in magic.”

“I never said that. I just didn’t believe *you* had magic. There’s so little magic in this world, I didn’t think humans were capable of producing anything.”

“You talk as if you aren’t one.”

“That’s none of your business!” Sunset snapped.

Artemis grinned. “Very well then, we can talk about this little love life of yours.”

Sunset proceeded to mentally strangle him. “That’s also none of your business!” She paused. “Because there’s nothing to talk about!”

Artemis produced a coin from nothing and flipped it into the air. “We need to pass the time somehow. Black magic, or a passionate tales of love.” The coin hit the counter, landing upright.

Sunset flicked the coin away. “Neither. All you need to know is I messed with something I shouldn’t have and... it blew up in my face.”

“I smell an interesting backstory!”

“Been there, done that. Not doing it again anytime soon.” Sunset rubbed her temples. “Seriously, Artemis, I’ve done enough soul-searching and reflection this week. In fact, I think I’ve met the quota for my entire life. If I had it my way, I’d never talk about it again.”

Artemis walked over and gave Sunset a tight hug. “Ah, Sunny. Reflecting on our past actions is how we grow as people. It’s all a part of life.”

“Life sucks.”

Artemis released her and put his hands on her shoulders. “I admit, life isn’t always as fun as I’d like it to be. But that’s why we have friends and family to lean on when the going gets tough. I know you’re a strong girl, Sunset, and you can take on any challenge life throws at you. But also know that the Lulamoon are always here for you.”

Sunset couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Artemis. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good! Now, while Selena is signing books, why don’t I tell you the story of how we defended all of Greece from a group of evil songstresses?”

Sunset listened as Artemis launched into his long winded tale. Both of them were unaware of Trixie eavesdropping from the second floor, a deep scowl on her face.

Sunset awoke Monday morning to the pleasant sounds of birds chirping out her window. She got up and stretched, wondering what to eat for breakfast.

She had squealed upon receiving her paycheck, and on Sunday, she treated herself to grocery shopping. She had a fridge full of food again, and, thanks to the paint remover she had also bought, her bike was almost back to normal.

Sunset had a gourmet breakfast of eggs and fruit before getting ready for school. As she walked back into her room, her eyes drifted towards the desk, where she immediately spotted something missing.

Her heartbeat tripled as she got closer. She pressed her eyes shut, counted to three, then opened them again.

Her science fair project was still missing.

“Where is it...? Where is it, where is it, *where is it?*” She ripped the blankets off her mattress, dug through her dresser, and even ran down to the factory floor and searched every nook and cranny.

“It was here!” Sunset yelled, slamming her room door open again. “It was right here! Who? When? Why?” She spotted Princess Twilight and grabbed her by the neck. “*Where is it?*”

“Let me remind you that I’m just part of your subconscious. If you don’t know, I don’t know.”

Sunset threw her against the wall. She grabbed her phone off the desk and took a deep breath. “Okay, hold on. Let’s not panic yet. Maybe I never had,” she said, her eye twitching. “Maybe Twilight still has it.” She jabbed in Twilight’s number and bounced from one foot to the other as it rang.

“Hello?”

“Twilight! Thank Celestia!”

“That’s still weird to me. Anyway, what’s up?”

“Tell me you have the EMP!”

“Uhh, I gave it to you, remember?”

“Yes,” Sunset said in a whimper. “I was just hoping I was wrong.”

“Sunset, what’s the matter?”

“*Someone stole our science fair project!*”

Kpok 29: Vendetta

The old Sunset was awake again. And she was *pissed*.

She marched onto school campus, fists clenched, teeth grit and a fire blazing in her eyes. She made sure her aura exuded nothing but pure malice. Her menacing appearance was slightly marred by the lack of her leather jacket, but she made up for by hissing at anyone who got too close.

Sunset shoved the doors open, hitting a student in the face. Under normal circumstances, she would have found it hysterical, but she was on a hunt. Her eyes scanned the hallway, looking at the flocks of student wandering around. They eyed her with contempt until her spiteful gaze overpowered theirs, and they backed away.

Who did it? Which one of these lowly, sniveling, dirt-eating, project-stealing

“Sunset! Sunset, wait!”

The voice that normally sent a wave of calm through her only made her growl in frustration. Sunset whirled around and looked down at Twilight. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“That’s because I know what you’re going to do, so just calm—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! I hate that!” Sunset snapped. “I’m going to find who did this, and then, I’m going to—”

“Stop!” Twilight held her hand up. “Violence is not the answer here!”

“Twilight—”

“Not the answer!”

Sunset pinched the bridge of her nose. “Twilight, I’ve had wads spat at me, my bike defaced, and now, our project is gone. If I don’t hit someone, I’m going to explode!”

Twilight grabbed her hand. “Okay, please, just—”

“Don’t use that word, I hate it! And don’t tell me to calm down!”

“Stop yelling, I’m trying to help!”

Flash slid between them and held them at arm's length. "Girls, hey, what's going on here?"

Sunset grabbed Flash by the collar of his shirt. "I'm having a series of unfortunate events happen to me, culminating with the theft of our science fair project. So I'm just a *little* upset right now."

"Noted."

"Sunset..." Twilight warned.

"Not now!" She looked Flash in the eye and put on her brightest smile. "So, Flash... I *did* apologize to you, right?"

"Uhh, yeah, just last Friday."

"Good, good. So we're friends, right?"

"Sunset—"

"Answer the question!"

Flash flinched. "Yes, we're friends, more or less."

"Good. So, us being friends means you wouldn't do something like sneak somewhere you shouldn't and steal something that didn't belong to you, right?"

"Sunset, I didn't take your project—I wouldn't even if we weren't friends. Now could you please let go of me?"

Sunset's hands let go of their own volition, and she stepped back. "Okay, okay. Sorry. Just making sure. I know you wouldn't do that, but just to be sure..." She jabbed a finger at him. "How many people did you blab to about my living arrangements?"

Flash grabbed her hand and gave it a firm squeeze. "Sunset. Calm."

"I. Hate. That—"

"Calm," he said sternly.

Sunset snatched her hand back and crossed her arms, grumbling under her breath. She took a deep breath and exhaled heavily through her nose. "Fine."

Twilight leaned toward Flash. "How did you do that?"

Flash smirked. "Just gotta know which buttons to press."

Resisting the urge to strangle the pair of them, Sunset snapped her fingers and said, "Let's focus here! We have less than forty-eight hours to find our project, and hang whoever was dumb enough to break into my house and steal it." Sunset's eyes bugged out of her head; blocks of ice fell into her stomach. "Dear Celestia... someone knows where I live..."

Twilight and Flash cringed. "That's bad," Flash said.

"Ya think?" Sunset gripped the sides of her head. "Oh man, just when I thought this couldn't get any worse. If they tell child services... or the police!" Her breath quickened and she started to pace. "Okay, okay, don't panic. No one's looking for you yet, there's still time." She grabbed Twilight and Flash by the shoulder. "Listen, I need both of you to..." She cleared her throat. "I need both of your, ahem," she said in a quiet voice, "help."

"Didn't quite catch that," Flash whispered in an equally quiet voice.

Sunset was about to shout he heard damn well what she had asked but knew it wouldn't help her case. "Help," she said firmly. "I need your help."

Twilight patted her hand. "Of course we'll help, that's what I've been trying to do."

"Telling me to calm down isn't helping!" Sunset shook her head. "Nevermind that. Flash, go find Snips and Snails and see if they know anything. *Only* ask about the project. They don't know I live you-know-where, they just thought I used it for a hangout."

Flash nodded and ran off.

"You're with me, Sparky." Sunset took off in the opposite direction, pulling Twilight by the arm. She rounded the corner and caught sight of the two she was looking for.

Twilight looked over Sunset's shoulder. "Okay, I see where you're going with this. How about I talk to them first? You know, good cop, bad cop?"

"Fine." Sunset let Twilight step in front of her. As she passed, Sunset caught a hint of the lavender aroma decorating Twilight. Breathing it in brought Sunset's agitation down a notch.

Just a notch.

Dexter and Quick Wit looked up from their lockers and shared a smug look with each other. “Well look who it is,” Dexter said, trying to lean against his open locker. He fell into it, but quickly stood and played it off like he was smoothing out his shirt.

“Come to admit an early defeat before we crush you on Wednesday?” Quick Wit asked.

“No,” Twilight said calmly. “We came to ask you a few questions.”

Dexter pointed his nose up. “We’re not telling you what our project is.”

“We weren’t asking,” Sunset sniped.

Twilight cleared her throat. “You see, our project was in a very... *obscure* location, but it seems to have gone missing.” She smiled politely. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Wait a minute.” Quick Wit started snickering. “You *lost* your science fair project?”

Sunset growled. “It was stolen.”

Dexter closed his locker before leaning against it this time. “You know what I think, Quick? I think they’re just scared of losing to us, so they made up this story so they don’t have to compete.”

Quick Wit crossed his arms. “If that’s the case, we’ll take out kisses now.”

“Okay, that’s it.” Sunset pushed past Twilight, grabbed Dexter by the front of his shirt and shoved him against the locker. “Listen here, Poindexter, I’m going to ask you one simple question. Answer right, and I’ll leave your face intact. Answer wrong, and I swear to whatever unholy force spawned you, I will crush you like a bug and smear you across the floors. I don’t care if I have to spend the rest of the year cleaning you up, I’ll gladly do it—and don’t go anywhere, Quick!” Sunset yelled, catching Quick trying to slink away. “You’re not off the hook. I’ll use you to paint the walls.”

She released Dexter, but planted her hands on either side of the locker, boxing him in. “Now, you’re a smart boy, so I expect the right answer. Where. Is. Our. Project?”

Dexter quivered; sweat poured down his forehead and drenched his shirt. Sunset tried to savor the look of terror in his eyes, but Twilight's disapproving glare made it very difficult.

"I-I-we d-don't know!" he mewled. "We never touched it—we don't even know what it is, we swear!"

Sunset's eyes bore into his soul, searching for the smallest sign he was lying. He flinched and twitched under her brutal stare, but, to Sunset's annoyance, he was telling the truth.

She stood back and dropped her hands. "Fine. You're clean. Now get out of my sight."

Dexter and Quick Wit took off, scrambling over each other to get away as fast as possible. Neither of them dared to glance back.

Twilight's silence made the back of Sunset's neck itch. A void of regret replaced the brief euphoria she had from exerting her power. Not over her actions per se, over the fact that Twilight had been there to witness it.

Finally, Twilight said, "Sunset, that was—"

"I know, I know. Mean, rude, violent, irresponsible..."

"Creepy," she added.

"Right, creepy. I'm sorry you had to see me act like that, Twilight. But the world isn't all sunshine and gumdrops. Sometimes, you *have* to be demanding to get what you want."

"Maybe so, but you took it too far." Twilight's disappointment was so strong, Sunset could feel herself shrinking beneath it. "There was no need to be mean to them like that, even if they are misogynist jerks."

Sunset raised a finger, and Twilight flailed her hands. "I know what I just said! The point is, you're better than them; I know you are. You're having a bad day, I can sympathize with that, but you shouldn't let that affect how you treat other people. You have to take the high road and be the better person, good times and bad."

"Wait a minute, you mean I have to be good *all* the time?"

Twilight dropped her head into her hand and cradled it.

Sunset shrugged. “What? It was a legitimate question. All the time sounds like a lot. I mean, you’re not nice all the time either, are you?”

“I try to be!” Twilight snapped. The bell rang, eclipsing her tired sigh. “Just... please, give what I said some thought.” She adjusted her backpack strap. “I’m going to class. Try to calm down before lunch. And please, *please*, if we interrogate someone again, could you *not* threaten them?”

Two jolts ran down Sunset’s spine. “Fine.” *I hate you.*

Twilight took Sunset’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll get through this, I promise.” She turned and walked off, taking some of Sunset’s butterflies with her.

Sunset stood there, still feeling Twilight’s squeeze. She lifted her hand, examining it like a foreign object, then slammed it into the locker.

Even through the pain, Twilight’s touch still lingered.

As per Twilight’s request, Sunset sat through class and thought about their conversation. Sunset admitted that she shouldn’t have snapped at Twilight and Flash.

‘You have to take the high road and be the better person...’

There was a difference between trying to be *a* better person and *the* better person, and Sunset had failed at both. But she had been angry, what else was she supposed to do? Someone had the gall to steal from right under her nose; she wasn’t going to take that lying down!

There are more productive ways to vent anger you know. Sunset pursed her lips. Her conscience was beginning to sound too much like Twilight. Still, it had a point. Threatening the nerds wasn’t right.

But it felt so good! But it wasn’t supposed to feel good. She wasn’t supposed to take pleasure from the pain of others.

But it felt so good!

She sighed and rested her head on the desk. Again, she was reminded of how hard being good was. Yet the alternative was being alone and miserable.

Keep snapping at everyone, and you'll end up that way. At least that one sounded like herself.

The lunch bell rang, and Sunset quickly gathered her things and headed for the cafeteria. She gave hard looks to everyone she passed, hoping she could break through their thoughts and find the culprit.

Applejack caught up to her. Sunset was so engrossed in her scrutiny, she didn't notice until Applejack spoke. "Hey, Sunset."

Sunset jumped and swung her hand out. Luckily, Applejack caught it. "Whoa, easy there, sugarcube."

"Sorry, you snuck up on me. And I've had enough surprises for a week."

Applejack tipped her hat. "Yeah, Ah heard about yours and Twi's project-thingy. No good, rotten thieves. Any idea who took it?"

"Anyone in the school," Sunset said, sliding a hand down her face.

They entered the lunchroom; Sunset forwent grabbing anything to eat and sat down at their table. She saw the sympathetic looks her friends were giving her and wrinkled her nose. "What?"

"Nothing, dear," Rarity said. "We just want to make sure you're all right in light of everything."

"Oh yeah, I'm peachy. Sugar and rainbows for me; life is grand!"

Pinkie wiped a hand across her forehead. "Thank goodness. We thought you'd be *really* mad."

A sharp pain started building up behind Sunset's eyes. "You know, I just remembered something, Pinkie."

"What's that?"

"You're an idiot!"

Twilight jabbed her shoulder. "That was uncalled for!"

Sunset buried her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it, Pinkie, but for the love of Celestia, learn sarcasm!"

Pinkie saluted. "On it. And don't worry, Sunny, I've been called worse things. Most of them by you actually."

Sunset shoved the surfacing memories back down. “Right, anyways...”

To her relief, Flash came over to shift the conversation. “I talked to Snips and Snails, but they don’t know anything. In fact, they didn’t even know we were having a science fair.”

“Hey, it was news to me too,” Rainbow said.

Keeping her face buried, Sunset made a low whine. “What now? You six are the only ones who are supposed to know where I live, and everyone has some vendetta against me. The possibilities are endless!” She looked at everyone through her spread fingers.

No, no. Don’t go there.

Unfortunately, Rarity read her like a book. “You’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” *Okay, I’d like to go home now.*

Rarity crossed her arms. “Sunset, I’m insulted that you’d think one of us would speak of your privacy.”

“That’s why I didn’t say anything.”

“Still, you should know we wouldn’t do anything like that.”

Rainbow put down her sandwich. “I dunno, Rarity. You can be kind of a blabbermouth sometimes.”

Everyone scooted their seats a few inches from Rarity, who had a hand against her chest and her mouth wide open. “*Excuse me?*”

“What? We all know you like to gossip.”

“Harmless, tasteful gossip; not slander or the invasion of someone’s private affairs!”

“I think talking about why so-and-so broke up with what’s-their-face is a private affair.”

Their argument quickly escalated, leaving Sunset to slide as low as she could in her seat. Her eyes scanned the room, still trying to find someone who looked guilty.

What’s the point? We’re doomed.

Her eyes passed over Trixie, and for a second, they locked gazes. In that one second, Sunset saw Trixie give her the smallest of smirks—spiteful, avaricious and victorious.

Sunset's blood spiked, and she stood up so fast, her chair flew back. "Excuse me, I have to go commit first-degree murder." She stormed away from the now silent table.

Twilight scrambled after her, calling, "High road, high road!"

In five long strides, Sunset towered over Trixie. The grin Trixie wore grew into a sinister smile. "Hello, Sunset."

"Where is it?" Sunset hissed.

"Trixie has no idea what you're talking about."

Sunset balled her fist. "Don't play this game with me, Trixie. I want to know where, and I want to know how."

Trixie spread her hands, small sparkles jumping between her fingers. "Never doubt Trixie's magic again."

Sunset's shoulders shook as she resisted the urge to punch Trixie in the face. Twilight placed a hand on her shoulder, and Sunset managed to get them steady. "All right, fine. You've made your point. You're absolutely *brilliant*. Now, give it back."

"Hmmm." Trixie tapped a finger against her lips. "No. In fact, Trixie thinks she'll use it to enter the science fair and win."

Sunset slammed her palm against the table, startling Trixie. "Listen, you little witch, if you don't give our jammer back, I'm going to—" Her tongue stuck itself to the roof of her mouth, and Sunset choked on her words.

Trixie snickered. "You're going to what?"

"I'm... going... to—" Sunset couldn't get the words out; her mouth and throat refused to cooperate.

"That's what Trixie thought. She holds all the cards now." She steepled her fingers. "You can't prove Trixie has your precious EMP-thingy. And to add insult to injury—" she dropped her voice "—Trixie knows your dirty little secret."

The color drained from Sunset's face. Of all the people to know, Trixie might be one of the worst.

"Oh, don't worry. Trixie won't tell anyone. At least, not yet."

Sunset looked at her curiously. "Why not?"

Trixie stood up and leaned in closer. "Because I want you to feel what it's like to have something held against you. Just think what I could do with this kind of information. A few little words, and you could end up on the street. Or even better, far away from here in some shelter."

Twilight threw herself in between Sunset and Trixie before Sunset could throw a punch. Grabbing both of Sunset's arms, Twilight looked back and said, "That's just cruel. What gives you the right to do something like this?"

"What gives *me* the right? What gave *her* the right? I'm just returning the favor."

"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Trixie stuck her tongue out. "Please, save me your philosophy; she brought this upon herself. It's about time she got a taste of her own medicine." She flipped her hair. "Besides, Trixie will keep quiet... as long as she's kept happy."

Sunset's stomach turned. "What do you mean?"

"It's quite simple. Just follow all of Trixie's demands and she won't tell anyone where you live."

Sunset was sure she could break from Twilight's grip and tackle Trixie in one smooth motion, but refrained from doing so. For now. "If you think I'm going to take orders from you, you're dumber than I thought."

Trixie shrugged. "Very well. Trixie wonders what the police will do with this information."

A brief glance into Twilight's eyes told Sunset she was contemplating letting Sunset go. Sunset was past her boiling point now and thought beating Trixie to a pulp would be a decent way to go before the police took her.

Looking again, Twilight's expression had changed to say, *I know she's being a massive -insert bad word here- but take the high road*. Sunset wasn't sure that

was an option. It was either listen to what Trixie told her to do, or wait for the authorities to find out she was homeless, which would then lead to them finding out that she had no legal paperwork whatsoever. There was no high road, only a slippery slope.

Sunset's energy drained out of her. She was trapped. This was officially as low as she could go. She wanted to scream, wanted to hit Trixie as hard as she could, wanted to curl up into a ball and pretend this was a bad dream.

And then hit Trixie again.

So this is what it's like to have someone take revenge against you. Well, universe, are you happy? I'm getting my comeuppance.

She lifted her head; Trixie was still wearing her victorious grin. "So what's it going to be, Shimmer? I promise I'll be fair."

Sunset looked into Trixie's eyes and found something very familiar. She had seen those eyes before. She had looked in the mirror every day and saw those eyes looking back at her. Cold, haughty, superior. The eyes of a tyrant.

She gently pulled Twilight off of her and stepped up to Trixie. "Go ahead, Trixie. Do your worst."

Trixie reeled back. "What?"

"I said do your worst. Tell everyone that I'm homeless, I don't care. I won't be intimidated by you. Do whatever it is you want to make my life miserable. Just remember: I've been where you are now. Stealing and blackmailing? That makes you no better than what I was. So take a good, hard look in the mirror before you do what you're going to do. If you can live with being compared to me, then by all means, rat me out. I'm sure Artemis would be proud."

With Trixie immobilized by her words, Sunset took Twilight by the hand and led her back to the table.

"So how'd it go?" Rarity asked.

"Terrible," Sunset said bluntly. "Trixie was the thief, and is now threatening to tell the authorities I'm technically homeless."

"*What?*" Rainbow shouted. "That little... I can't believe her! Come on, let's get Celestia to set her straight!"

Sunset shook her head. “Not going to work, Dash. We don’t have any proof, and Trixie isn’t dumb enough to have brought the jammer with her.”

“Forget the jammer,” Applejack said, “what are we goin’ to do about Sunset and her livin’ conditions? If the police come snoopin’, they’ll take her away, and the nearest shelter is two towns over!”

“She could stay with one of us,” Fluttershy suggested. “Or we could trade off every few days.”

Rainbow shook her head. “Don’t you think our parents would get suspicious if we kept having her sleep over every other day?”

Sunset looked back to Trixie. She was slumped in her seat, picking at her food, looking morose and thoughtful. “You know, guys... I don’t think we have to worry about that just yet.” She saw their curious faces and smiled for the first time that day. “Let’s just say I gave her something to think about.”

Rainbow didn’t look convinced. “And what if she blabs anyway?”

Sunset’s stomach turned again. “Then I’ll deal with it. Besides, depending on how detailed Trixie is, you guys hiding me would only delay the inevitable.”

There was a long exchange of concerned looks and half-finished sentences until they all agreed it was a bridge they would cross later.

Twilight played with her hair, dejection shadowing her face. “Well, that brings us back to our science fair project.”

Sunset leaned against the table and sighed. Unless Trixie had a change of heart within the next day, she and Twilight were doomed. The thought of losing filled Sunset with magma. There was no way she was going to lose to those two stooges and let one of them kiss Twilight!

Because I don’t want to ruin her first kiss. That’s it. She deserves to have it mean something. Nothing else.

“So, what are you going to do?” Pinkie asked, snapping Sunset back to the table.

“I don’t know,” Twilight said miserably.

Sunset stood up. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to build a new project.”

Twilight gaped at her. “The fair is in two days! We don’t have enough time to build anything that’ll win!”

“That’s quitter talk, and Sunset Shimmer isn’t a quitter!” She could feel the determination pumping through her, faster than blood. The universe was trying to strike her out with curve balls. Well, it was time for her to hit back and make a home run!

Note to self: work on metaphors.

Sunset grabbed Twilight by the arm and pulled her to her feet. “Come on, Sparky! We’re not done yet!” She tugged her away from the table while their friends cheered them on.

“Where are we going?” Twilight yelled after they left the cafeteria.

“The library! I hope you like coffee, ‘cause for the next two days, it’s gonna be you, me and caffeine!”

“Wait! Wait! Sunset, stop for a second!” Twilight managed to get her arm free and slide to stop.

Sunset looked back at her. “Come on, don’t tell me you’re really giving up?”

“N-no, not that,” Twilight panted, her hands on her knees. “Just needed to catch my breath.” She took a deep breath and stood up straight. “And, I wanted to say I was proud of the way you handled Trixie. You proved you were the better girl.”

Sunset felt herself starting to blush, and turned away. “Yeah well... I had some help. So thanks. And I’m sorry for being so short with you earlier.”

“Apology accepted.” Twilight took Sunset by the hand and started for the library door. “And you’re right, we have a fair to win!”

The tingling sensation was back, and as much as Sunset wanted it to go away, she felt it was empowering her new found drive for victory.

Get ready, universe. You messed with the wrong girls!

Kpok 30: Science Fiction II

In the last forty-seven hours, Sunset had learned quite a few things.

Firstly, she learned that Twilight had connections. Her father worked at Canterlot University as the astronomy professor and was good friends with several of the other professors in the science department. As such, he could ask for a few favors from time to time. Favors that included obtaining science equipment for his daughter.

The second thing Sunset learned was that, Shining Armor aside, Twilight came from a very warm and inviting family. Monday, after Sunset and Twilight had grabbed an armful of books and hurried to Twilight's house, Sunset finally got a chance to meet Mrs. Velvet.

When they entered the living room, a woman with purple and white hair greeted them. She was average height and was right in the middle between thin and plump.

"So this is the mysterious Sunset Shimmer; it's so nice to meet you, sweetie!" Mrs. Velvet pulled her into a warm hug. She was still wearing her nurse scrubs and smelled of antiseptic.

Sunset's face heated up. "It's nice to meet you too."

Velvet pulled away and gave Sunset a quick examination. "You're right, Twilight, she does have really pretty hair."

"Mom!" It was hard to tell who was blushing harder now, Sunset or Twilight.

"But you look a little thin, dear," she continued like Twilight had said nothing. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Yes please," Sunset said against her will. The last thing she wanted to do was take advantage of Mrs. Velvet's hospitality. Her stomach, however, cared little for politeness and was instead demanding to be fed.

"Good, I'll whip something up. You're a vegetarian, right? Well, just because you don't eat meat doesn't mean you should just waste away. Honestly, you're skin and bones."

"Moooooom!" Twilight looked ready to die.

“Oh relax, sweetheart, I’m trying to help.” She put her hands on her hips. “The first friend she brings home since we moved here and she thinks I’m trying to embarrass her. I haven’t even brought out the baby pictures yet.”

“We’re going upstairs now, kthanksloveyoubye!” Twilight grabbed Sunset and hurried upstairs before her mom could say any more.

Two hours later, after enjoying a very filling dinner in Twilight’s room, her father came in holding a box of supplies in front of his face.

“Well, that’s everything you asked for. Next time, give me a little heads up before—” He set the box down and saw Sunset. “Miss Sunset Shimmer, I presume?”

Sunset stood up and put her hand out. “Yes. It’s nice to meet you Mr. Night Light—oof!”

Night Light pulled her into an even tighter hug than Velvet had. He then clasped Sunset’s shoulders and looked her in the eye. Twilight had gotten most of her looks from Velvet, but meeting Night Light’s gaze, Sunset knew where Twilight got her intelligence.

“It’s very nice to meet you too, Sunset. You... you helped my daughter when she needed it the most. I know you probably don’t want to hear this after all this time, but thank you.” He shook her hand and beamed at her. “If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Sunset was tired of blushing for the day, but her face lit up regardless. “It was no... well, I was just... you’re welcome,” Sunset mumbled, looking away.

Night Light’s smiled lingered as he looked around the room at the scattered books and paper littered about. “So what did you need all this stuff for anyway, Twily?”

“Oh, umm.” Twilight shared a look with Sunset. Sunset subtly shook her head. “We... decided that our last project wasn’t good enough to win, so we’re making a new one.” Twilight smiled a little too widely for Sunset’s tastes.

“This close to the fair?”

Twilight’s smile widened.

“We’re going to be drinking a lot of coffee,” Sunset said.

The classroom clock read 2:00; forty-five minutes until school let out, then an hour until the fair. Sunset yawned and rubbed the bags under her eyes. It was hard to listen to whatever Ms. Vector was lecturing about. The odd combination of exhaustion and nerves sent Sunset's mind in random directions.

Still, she handled sleep deprivation better than poor Twilight. She sat at the desk next to Sunset, textbook up to hide her sleeping form. Her hair still stuck out at a few odd ends, and she had bags under her eyes worse than Sunset's.

The third thing Sunset learned Monday night was that Twilight didn't handle coffee well. Or maybe she handled it *too* well.

Four tall, empty cups of coffee cluttered Twilight's desk. Only one of them had belonged to Sunset.

Sunset sat in the rolling chair, watching Twilight pace in a circle so fast, it made her dizzy just watching. On the bed lay Spike, curled up next to the skeleton of their project. Looking at it only reminded Sunset of how far they had to go.

At least the paper's almost done.

Twilight stopped, dropped to the ground and began scribbling on one of the blank sheets of paper. As she drew, she spoke at a rapid fire pace. "So our biggest problem is how are we going to convert energy into electricity without a running water supply? I have a few ideas, but we're going to need jugs of water and something to tie them with—no wait that's stupid! You know what's also stupid? Smart cars are stupid! They're not smart; one crash and bam! No more you! It's like calling a driveway a parkway and a parkway a driveway! Who comes up with these things? Oh. My. Gosh.

Ijusthadagreatidealet'smakeitintoasolarturbineandgetpanelstopowerthewholeschoolwe'llwinforsurenowaitwedon'thavethatkindoftimespeakingoftimecanyoubelieveit'sthreeinthemorninggoodthingShinyisn'thomeorhe'dkillusforbeingupsolateareyougoingtogohomethislateSunsetpleasestayhereandsleepoveryoucanhavemybedandI'llsleeponthefloorIlovesleepoversIwouldhavethemallthetimewithmyfriendMoondancerandwe'ddoeachother'shairwellshewoulddominebecuaseherhair

was always nice looking she always drank tea and so did I until today now I see how good coffee is and I never want to go back anyway the generator how are we going to get it to spin spin why is the room spinning?"

All Sunset knew was that there had been a 'please' somewhere in there because she felt her spine tingle. She watched Twilight bounce up and down against the carpet with a giant smile plastered across her face. "You're about to crash so hard."

"I can't crash, I'm not driving. Hey! Can I have a ride on your motorcycle later, Sunset?"

"Uh, Sure, but I thought you didn't like it?"

Twilight laughed so loud, Sunset swore the other Twilight could hear it. "Are you kidding? I loved your motorcycle! It was so fast, like, vroom, vroom!" Twilight got up and started running in circles.

Part of Sunset found this hilarious. The other part of her was hoping the caffeine would wear off soon for Twilight's own good.

"What are we doing?" Twilight shouted.

"It's three in the morning quick let's get back to work we have so much to do!" She grabbed a piece of metal and the blow torch, and ran over to the project sitting on the bed.

The flammable bed.

The blow torch spat out a tongue of fire.

Sunset jumped up and snatched the blow torch away. "You know, maybe we should save all the torching for tomorrow and do it outside? Or anywhere else where we won't burn alive."

Spike made a low growl of agreement.

"Well, what else are we going to do? We still need to attach the turbine and find a power source and lock in the turning mechanism and adjust the spokes and—"

Sunset covered Twilight's mouth. "I'll handle it. Calm down and get some sleep."

“Sleep? I don’t need sleep; I feel wide awake!” She jumped from the bed to the desk and started typing away on her laptop. “In fact, I’ll finish the paper right now and you can fiddle with the turbine!”

Clacking keys filled the silent void. Sunset made a few adjustments, but mostly watched Twilight. The computer light illuminated her pale, pretty face. Sunset looked back down at the bolt she was wrenching in. She was more tired than she thought.

She looked up at Twilight again. Twilight yawned, making a small squeaking sound as she exhaled.

Dammit, Sparky, now you’re doing it on purpose! Sunset looked down again, then snapped her head up when she heard a thump against the keyboard.

Twilight’s face was pressed into the keys with her mouth ajar; the letter H repeated across the screen. Sunset counted to three, then got up and poked her in the shoulder. Twilight mumbled something but didn’t move.

“And she’s down for the count.” Sunset moved their project to the floor, then gently picked Twilight up and tucked her into bed. Spike moved and curled up against her stomach, making Twilight smile.

Sunset smiled in turn. She didn’t want to admit it. She really didn’t want to admit it. But Twilight looked cute when she slept.

Looking at her now, Sunset was annoyed she still harbored that thought. Twilight wasn’t supposed to be cute! Fun, smart, adorkable and a shoulder to lean on, but not cute, or pretty or eye-catching in any way!

Sunset tapped her pencil on the desk. There was still twenty-five minutes to go. School seemed to pass by at a snail’s pace when she was tired. Over the last two days, she barely had a total of ten hours of sleep. After Twilight had gone to bed, Sunset had tried to sneak home, only to find out what Twilight’s favor had been. Instead, she stayed up to five in the morning editing their research paper and fixing up their poster board.

Two hours later, a delightfully surprised Twilight had woken her up. Twilight’s eyes were bloodshot and her hair was a mess, but her smile still

managed to make all those annoying feelings in Sunset's stomach bubble to the surface.

They both had washed up quickly, neither one of them having time for a full shower before Night Light drove them to school. Since Sunset had no clean shirts of her own, she had to borrow one of Twilight's many button-up blouses.

School dragged on, but Sunset was thankful for the lack of excitement after Monday. Trixie had so far kept her mouth shut, or at least hadn't told anyone in school. Sunset wouldn't say it aloud, but she was glad Twilight had asked her to sleep over. She wasn't ready to go back to the factory and see if an officer was waiting to escort her away.

After school, she and Twilight had rushed to her house again, anticipating another long night. Sunset made sure Twilight only got *one* cup of coffee that time.

"Dad was complaining about the noise you two were making last night, so he asked me to move some things around in here so you can work." Shining flipped a switch, and the garage lights blinked on.

Sunset gazed upon a small mountain of unopened moving boxes taking up enough room to make parking a car inside impossible.

Shining saw her expression. "We downsized."

"Clearly."

In the corner closest to the door was a white desk and a work bench. Shining nodded toward it. "All yours. Just keep it down."

"Thanks, Shiny," Twilight said.

Shining smiled at her then shifted to an inquisitive frown. "Remind me why you're doing a new project."

"Because we really want to win." There was that overly big smile.

"Okay. Now, what's the real reason?"

"Someone stole our first project," Sunset grumbled.

Shining's eyes turned to saucers. "What?"

"Relax," Twilight said quickly. "We have it under control."

“Twilight, someone is running around out there with an illegal, security crippling device!”

Sunset waved her hand. “Please, the jammer barely had enough juice to knock the house lights off. Besides, we know who took it. She’s petty, vindictive and self-centered, but she’s not a criminal.”

“If you know who took it, why didn’t you report it?”

“Because we have no proof.”

They had a brief staring contest before Shining gave up with a harrumph. “Fine, have it your way.” He crossed his arms. “So, what are you building now?”

“A miniature hydroelectric generator.” Twilight gave the box she was holding a little shake.

Shining turned and walked out. “Well, at least it’s legal.”

Twilight sighed and set the box on the table. “You know, this was going to my little lab space. As soon as dad finished unpacking.”

Sunset looked around. “A lab?”

“Yeah. Nothing much. I just wanted a space to take things apart and see how they work, make chemistry experiments, track weather patterns, draw star charts from my astronomy observations—”

“So, nothing much?” Sunset grinned.

Twilight blushed. “I know. Nerd.”

Sunset gave one of Twilight’s bangs a gentle tug. “Yes, but you’re my nerd.” She coughed and stammered, “I-I mean, y-you’re my friend... who’s a nerd. My nerd... friend.”

Smooth, genius.

“R-right. I’m your nerd friend.” Twilight chuckled unconvincingly. “We should finish this so we can get a good night’s sleep tonight.”

They had finished their work around one-thirty in the morning. Sunset got to sleep on the couch instead of a chair that time.

After a cold shower (mostly out of habit, but also because Sunset had to make it very quick) and breakfast from Mrs. Velvet, Twilight and Sunset headed off to school, Sunset wearing another one of Twilight's blouses. Mr. Night Light promised to drop off the generator later.

Now there were only five minutes left.

With Ms. Vector facing the blackboard, Sunset reached over and nudged Twilight. She gave a light snort but didn't awaken. Sunset nudged her again, harder, and she bolted upright.

"Forty-two!" She blurted out. The class broke into snickers while Sunset facepalmed.

Ms. Vector turned around. "Would you like to share something, Miss Sparkle?"

"N-no. I was just... taking an educated guess."

"Well you're not even close, so pay more attention!"

Twilight blushed and sank in her seat. "Yes, ma'am." When Ms. Vector turned around, Twilight glared at Sunset.

Sunset gave her a helpless shrug. "I was trying to be subtle," she whispered. "Not my fault you sleep like a log."

Twilight copied Shining, making a harrumph and folding her arms for the rest of class. Granted, it was only three minutes, but Sunset admired her determination to look angry.

Upon the last the bell, Sunset stuffed her book into her bag and jumped to her feet. "Come on, Grumpy Sparkle, it's fight time."

Twilight slumped after her. "I'm not grumpy, I'm just tired."

"Oh yeah, that's right, you have a bedtime," Sunset said playfully. "What was that you said? Early to bed early to rise, blah, blah, blah, pretty?"

"How are you not tired?" Twilight asked, bordering between angry and desperately curious.

"Oh, I am. But after going almost a month of having nightmares every other night, I've learned to handle my sleep deprivation. Besides, only one of us needs to be the grumpy, snappy one. You can fill the part today."

Twilight's only comeback was a guttural growl.

Outside, Mr. Night Light was waiting in his car by the curb. He got out and unloaded a wagon hauling a large box, a folded poster board and a large tank of water with a pump. "So, you girls ready?"

"Yes," Sunset said determinedly.

"Y-y-yeah," Twilight yawned.

"Good. And afterward, you both can get some rest. Still don't know what you were thinking redoing your project this close to the deadline."

"Don't worry, Dad. Sunset and I know what we're doing."

"I know you do, sweetheart." He kissed Twilight on the forehead and gave Sunset a hug. "Go on and get set up, I'll be inside later."

Sunset took the wagon and led it and Twilight back into the halls. Halfway to the gymnasium, Rainbow caught up to them, dressed in her soccer gear.

"Hey guys, just came to say good luck!"

Twilight frowned. "You're not coming to watch?"

"Pfft, nah." Rainbow pointed to herself. "I've got practice. Besides, you'd never catch me at one of those geek fests. Uh... no offense."

Sunset and Twilight looked at each other, then back to Rainbow. "Whatever," they said together.

Rainbow took off, and the duo proceeded to the gym. Several tables had been set up lining three of the walls. Overhead, balloons with atoms printed on them hung around a silver banner that read, 'Canterlot High's 30th Annual Science Fair!'

Principal Celestia approached from the center of the room. The smile she had been wearing creased into a worried frown. "Girls, you look exhausted."

"We've had a long week," Twilight said curtly.

"I see. Well, I'm still happy to see you both here. Especially you, Sunset. With your intelligence, I'm surprised you never entered before."

"Frankly, I thought science fairs were for nerds and geeks."

"Well, I'm glad you changed your mind."

“I never said that.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Celestia’s face. She raised her clipboard and said, “Regardless, welcome. Cheerilee, Luna and I are the judges. You two can set up at booth number seven.” She pointed to the far left corner. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Sunset waved and brought the wagon over. She looked around at the students who had shown up so far.

Dexter and Quick Wit were three tables down with a cloth over their project. Derpy was two tables from them, fiddling with a light bulb and a muffin. Across the back wall was the Canterlot Motley Crew: Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo with, what appeared to be, a miniature blimp. Next to them was Twist with a model volcano. The only person on the far wall was Lyra Heartstrings, the school president. She was wearing a black semi-formal suit with a mint green tie to match part of her hair. On her face, she wore a pair of green glasses, each with three lenses stacked on top on one another.

“Looks like a fair amount of competition,” Twilight said as she set up their poster.

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Please. They’re all a bunch of second-rate students.” Her eyes wandered to the cloth covered project. Dexter and Quick were smart, she’d grant them that. But she hadn’t come here to lose!

She helped Twilight pull the generator from the box and set it on the table. As she heaved the tank of water out, the doors opened again, revealing Trixie with a small box under her arm. Sunset watched her talk to Celestia before she moved to the table kitty corner from Sunset.

“Hold down the fort,” Sunset ordered.

“You’re not going to do anything violent, are you?”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “No, I’m just going to talk.” She marched from her table and across the open floor, her eyes constantly on Trixie. So she was completely thrown off when Lyra jumped in front of her path.

“Heeeey, Sunset! Just the girl I wanted to see!” she said cheerfully, punching Sunset’s shoulder.

“Uhh, hi Lyra.” Sunset craned her neck to see Trixie, but Lyra blocked her view.

“That’s Madam President to you.” Lyra pointed to the presidential button on her blazer.

Sunset rolled her eyes again. “Right, sorry. Can I help you with something?”

Lyra pushed her glasses up to her forehead. “Actually, yes, there’s a certain matter I need to discuss with you.” Her tone remained upbeat, despite her trying to look serious. “You see, I have it from my Events Committee head, aka Pinkie Pie, that you’ve volunteered to help organize the Winter Ball.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Weeeell.” Lyra wrapped an arm over Sunset’s shoulder. Sunset’s death glare had no effect whatsoever. “Listen, Sunny—can I call you Sunny?”

“No.”

“Sunny, here’s the thing. As a person, I hold no ill will towards you.” Lyra laughed. “I mean, yeah, you made our lives suck for three years, but hey, everything’s in the past, right? Bygones be bygones and all that.”

Sunset’s eyebrow rose. “But?”

“Buuuuut, as the school president, humble civil servant of the people, it’s my job—nay—my *duty* to inform you of, well... the *circumstances* surrounding your involvement with the ball.” Lyra raised her other hand and pretended to examine her nails. “You see, the council gave Pinkie Pie a very decent budget for this dance because, well, she’s Pinkie. We know she can deliver a good party. In fact, with her at the head, we were hoping for almost double in return revenue. But now...” She looked sideways at Sunset.

“Let me guess: me helping is making people skeptical of how well the dance is going to go?”

“Skeptical! Good word; much better than what I was going to say!” Lyra cleared her throat. “I mean, yes. They’re a little skeptical. So here’s where the bad news comes in.”

“We weren’t there already?”

Lyra patted her shoulder. “Noooot quite, sweetie. You see, it falls to me to inform you that due to your past track record and what’s at stake here for the Winter Ball, you’re on a sort of probation.”

“Probation?”

“Shh shh, it’s okay.” Lyra chuckled like she was telling a simple joke. “It’s not that serious. It’s just that, well... if the Winter Ball isn’t a major success in attendance or profit, then I’ll have no choice but to ban you from all future school events, including Prom, Grad Night, and the yearbook signing party. You can still walk at graduation though.”

“*What?*”

“I said—”

“I heard what you said, I just can’t believe it!”

Lyra patted her shoulder again. “Yeeeeeah. Well, good luck in the fair!” She hurried back to her table without a second glance.

Sunset stood rooted to the spot, trying to process everything. The lack of sleep must have blocked out most of her anger because all she felt were the first signs of a headache and an empty feeling in her stomach.

“It just never ends,” she murmured, continuing her march to Trixie.

On Trixie’s table was the EMP jammer, except its container was painted a light blue. Sunset stared at it, then moved her eyes up to Trixie. “So you’re entering the fair with our project?”

Trixie turned her nose up. “Of course not. This is Trixie’s project. She dismantled it and put it back together again. Therefore, it’s hers.”

“Yeah, I’m not even going to point out the flaw in that logic.”

“Trixie’s logic is perfect, just like her project!” She poked Sunset’s shoulder. “Trixie’s going to beat you and claim that blue ribbon for herself.”

Sunset swatted her hand away. “Hold onto that pretty dream, Trixie. It’s all you’ll have left after Twilight and I wipe the floor with you.”

Trixie smirked. “Oh Really? Don’t forget, Trixie has an ace in the hole. If she loses, she can guarantee you’ll be going down with her.”

“All the more reason to win, then.” Sunset squared her shoulders. “If the last thing I do here is beat you, then at least I went out with my dignity intact.” She turned away. “And remember Trixie: do you really want to become like me?”

Trixie’s silence was enough of an answer for Sunset. Before she could walk back to her table, a cloud of blue smoke obscured her path. When it cleared, she was unsurprised to see Artemis and Selena standing in front of her.

Artemis broke into a wide grin. “Well, of course you’d be here, Sunset! I don’t know how I could have expected anything less!”

Behind Sunset, Trixie stammered, “M-mommy, Daddy, what are you... I thought you’d be busy.”

“We’re never too busy to see your accomplishments, sweetie, you know that,” Selena said cheerfully.

Artemis put an arm around Sunset’s shoulder. She had to admit, it was less irritating than when Lyra did it. “Didn’t even know she was competing until this morning when she bolted out of the house. Our little Trixie, gifted in magic *and* science!”

Sunset bit her tongue to keep from smirking. “Oh yeah, she’s something all right.”

Artemis let go and gave her a little nudge. “Well, off you go. Can’t wait to see what you cooked up! You’ll have to be on your A game to beat Trixie.”

“Good luck, Sunset!” Selena called as Sunset walked away.

More competitors had filed in while Sunset had been distracted. Thunderlane had brought in a cage with three mice inside. Daisy had a flower with multicolored petals. Caramel was setting up his model of the solar system.

Called it.

When Sunset reached her table, Twilight was sitting down and nodding off, her head bobbing up and down as she fought to stay awake. “Up and at it, Sparky.” Sunset snapped her fingers. “We can sleep when we win.”

Twilight yawned. “R-right. Yeah. Don’t worry, I’m awake. So what did you find out?”

“Trixie is using our old project to compete and is threatening to sell me out if she loses, though I doubt she will since her parents are here. Caramel made a solar system model, so I told you so. And if the Winter Ball isn’t a success, I’m banned from every school event for the rest of the year.”

“*What?*” Twilight was wide awake now.

“I said, Trixie is using our—”

“I heard what you said, I just don’t believe it!” Twilight threw her hands up. “Why are you punished if the ball fails?”

Sunset rolled her shoulders. “Probably because I wasn’t adequately punished after destroying the last dance, and because, if it does fail, they know exactly who to blame.”

Twilight’s face turned red and she clenched her fists. “That’s.... that’s such an injustice! They’re turning you into a scapegoat just because of your previous transgressions! That is a grievous misuse of judicial power that needs to be rectified and—”

Sunset pinched Twilight’s lips shut. “Sparky, right now, I honestly don’t care. I will try my best to make the dance as awesome as I can. If it works, cool. If not, oh well. I think I can live with not going to another dance. Let’s just get through today first.”

When she removed her hand, Twilight sighed and said, “Okay. One thing at a time.” Her face turned a deeper shade of red. “But, a-about the dance, Sunset... I-I w-was wondering—”

Static rippled through the speakers as Celestia tapped her microphone. “Welcome, everyone to Canterlot High’s 30th annual Science Fair!” She waited for the scattered applause and cheering to die down before continuing. “The official judging will begin in half an hour, in the meantime, parents and student are encouraged to look at all of the wonderful projects presented today. First prize will receive the blue ribbon and tickets to the Canterlot Aerospace Museum. We wish all of you good luck!”

Sunset turned to Twilight. “Ready?”

Twilight’s shoulders shook. It was small but still noticeable. “Y-yeah, totally.”

“Relax.” Sunset gave Twilight’s shoulder a squeeze. “We can win this.”

When Twilight looked into her eyes, Sunset felt something other than butterflies in her stomach, something much stronger. She didn’t know what it was, just that it was working its way up to her heart and making it pound in her chest. She could see the universe in Twilight’s eyes—a vast sea of knowledge and compassion and hope.

The room was suddenly warm. Sunset took a large step back and shoved her hands in her pockets. “So uh...” She looked in the opposite direction, feeling her face burn. “What were you saying earlier?”

“Nothing!” Twilight blurted. “Nothing. Like you said, one thing at a time—let’s deal with this first.”

“Yeah... one thing at a time.” Sunset swallowed the rock in her throat. *First, the fair. Then...* Her mind conjured the image of her and Twilight holding hands with perfect clarity. *No! No... I can’t—we can’t! There is no logical universe where I end up with Twilight Sparkle! I don’t care how different she is from her pony princess version! I refuse to be in love with—*

“Sunset?”

Sunset found Pinkie staring deeply into her eyes. She shouted and jumped back, nearly crashing into the table. “Pinkie, don’t sneak up on me!”

“But I was standing right in front of you.”

Applejack chuckled. “You looked more distracted than a kitten with a ball of yarn.”

“Yeah,” Pinkie chirped. “What were you think—”

“Nothing!” Sunset waved her hand. “I was thinking about nothing.”

Pinkie giggled. “Silly, you should be thinking about science!” She tapped Sunset on the head.

“Right, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Off to the side, Rarity had pulled out her makeup kit and was trying to remodel Twilight’s face. “Honestly, darling, just because you’re lacking a little sleep doesn’t mean you shouldn’t look your absolute best, especially on today!”

Twilight coughed, waving away a cloud of powder. “Rarity, you said you’d just cover the bags under my eyes.”

“I’m trying to help you look fabulous! It’s all in the presentation!”

Applejack looped an arm through Rarity’s. “C’mon, girl, why don’t we go give our sisters some encouragement?” She dragged Rarity off before she could protest.

Twilight grabbed a napkin and wiped the eye liner off before sighing in relief. Personally, Sunset thought Twilight looked fine without any makeup on.

No, that’s a perfectly reasonable thought for one friend to think about another friend.

Fluttershy walked around the table, curiously inspecting Twilight and Sunset’s hard work. “If you don’t mind me asking, what is it?”

“It’s a miniature hydroelectric generator,” Sunset explained. “It turns water into electricity.”

“Oh wow, that sounds amazing.” Fluttershy poked one of the light bulbs attached to the wires. “Does it work?”

“Of course it does. Here, I’ll give you a demonstration.” She attached a tube from one end of the tank to the generator, then rapidly squeezed the pump, shooting the water through the tube. It cascaded down and pushed the turbine around, making a small humming noise as it did. After a few seconds, the three light bulbs on the other end flickered to life.

Pinkie and Fluttershy ooh’d with delight. Her point proven, Sunset released the pump and nodded in satisfaction. “It took forever to build, but it purrs like a kitten.”

Twilight tugged on her sleeve. “You might want to look over there.”

Dexter and Quick Wit had removed the cloth and revealed their project. It was mostly wiring and metal frame, but it looked pretty sturdy. It was comprised of a base and two thin arms with three metal claws at each end. The head was mostly circuit boards with two light bulbs for eyes. In front of it was a chess board. Dexter made a move, and a few seconds later, the robot moved one of its arms and picked up its knight.

“Dear Celestia, they built a chess playing robot,” Sunset said in awe and shame.

“Gonna be hard to beat that,” Pinkie said.

“Hmm, yeah.” Sunset rubbed her chin. “Would be a shame if someone spilled water on it.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Twilight deadpanned.

Sunset rolled her eyes. “I’m joking... mostly...”

Parents and spectators made their rounds. Sunset and Twilight made short demonstrations only when Night Light and Artemis and Selena came around in an effort to save their water. The CMC constantly flew their blimp around, almost crashing it into Twist’s volcano, which occasionally belched out steam and sparks.

Trixie refused to present hers, claiming it was, “So phenomenal, Trixie can only show it once.”

Sunset acknowledged there was some truth to that. She was sure the judges would only be impressed with the lights going out once.

Ten minutes to judging, Dexter sauntered over. He saw the generator, and his confident smirk faltered for a second. “Looks pretty impressive.”

“Doesn’t it? I hope you’re ready to bow, loser,” Sunset said with a toss of her hair.

“On the contrary. Our robot is far superior to your little generator.” He gestured to his table. “Care to play against it?”

“No.”

Twilight stood up. “Sure.”

Sunset stuck her tongue out. “Why are you bothering with their stupid thing?”

“I want to see how well it works. It could be fun.”

Dexter snickered. “We programmed it with the best algorithm for chess. There’s no way a girl is going to beat it.”

Twilight’s face darkened. “And now, I’m doing it to prove a point.” She stormed over to the robot, pulled up a chair, and moved her first pawn.

Sunset hurried to her side, just as the robot made its first move, mirroring Twilight.

Pinkie hovered over Sunset's shoulder, eating handfuls of popcorn from a bag. "Oh boy, the classic showdown of man vs. machine!"

"Girl vs. machine," Twilight corrected as she captured her first piece. The robot wasted no time in capturing her forsaken pawn. Twilight retaliated by capturing its bishop.

Within ten minutes, most of the board had been cleared, and Twilight had surrounded the robot's king with her rook, her knight, and a pawn. "Checkmate."

The robot made a few blips, analyzing the board. It lowered its arms, and its light bulb eyes dimmed. Dexter and Quick Wit, meanwhile, gaped like fish, unable to form proper words.

Twilight stood up and yawned. "Your algorithm needs work." She turned and walked away, leaving everyone, Sunset included, staring in awe.

"Hmm," Celestia mused standing a few feet from the table. "That might cost you boys a few points."

Sunset pocketed the onslaught of gloating she was going to unleash and ran over to Twilight. "Sparky, that was brilliant!"

Twilight twirled a finger through her hair. "It was nothing. Their algorithm was mostly response based. It was just a matter of manipulation and getting it to respond how I wanted it to. A.I's only have so much free-thought."

Sunset just kept smiling at her. "I love your nerdy brain." Behind her, Sunset could hear Pinkie making smooching noises behind her hand. Sunset quickly kicked her heel back into Pinkie's shin.

The judging began, and the atmosphere became tense as Celestia, Luna, and Cheerilee made their rounds. Sunset strained her ears to hear what they had to say about each project, her heart becoming lighter every time they awarded someone an effort ribbon. She nearly split her sides when Thunderlane tried to claim his three mice were cloned from each other.

"So, Miss Heartstrings," Cheerilee began, "please tell us about those glasses of yours."

Lyra slid them over her eyes. “These are hypospectrum delensifiers! They allow you to see the Subcarbium Nytroate particles the government is secretly releasing from planes to make us all their willing sheep!”

Sunset clapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from laughing too loud. Twilight hung on her shoulder, wiping tears away.

Fluttershy wrung her hands. “T-that’s not a real thing, right?”

The judges went to Derpy’s station next, where she was still fiddling with her muffin and light bulb, connected by two wires. She kept flipping a switch, but the light wouldn’t turn on.

“I swear, it was working last night,” she said desperately.

“I’m sure it was, Miss Doo,” Luna said, jotting something on her clipboard before handing Derpy an effort ribbon.

Derpy took the ribbon and sat down. She unplugged her muffin and took a large bite out of it, dejection blanketing her face.

“Poor, Derpy,” Pinkie said. “She forgot the baking powder.”

Don’t comment, Sunset thought.

Despite Twilight’s outstanding performance against the chess-playing robot, Sunset’s stomach began doing backflips when the judges arrived at Dexter and Quick’s table. Celestia made a few moves to watch the robot react and scribbled something on her clipboard. They talked for several long minutes, giving Sunset enough time to work up her nerves and bring them back down.

Celestia looked toward her, and Sunset saw it her eyes: the same high expectations Princess Celestia had once anticipated from her.

Sunset straightened up. *I hope you’re watching, Princess. It’s no magic spell, but it’s the next best thing.*

“Entry team number seven,” Cheerilee read off as they neared. “Sunset Shimmer and Twilight Sparkle. Two of the highest GPAs in the school.”

“Then this should be quite interesting,” Luna said.

“But no pressure.” Celestia winked at them.

Sunset smiled. “Right. This is our hydroelectric generator capable of generating one kilowatt of power with this water supply. We comprised the main base by taking...”

She and Twilight took turns explaining the construction and function of their project before giving a demonstration. The turbine purred, and the lights switched on, garnering applause from the judges. Sunset made a small bow.

“Quite impressive,” Luna said, leaning in for a closer look. “How long did it take you to make this?”

“Two days,” Sunset said, then yawned.

“Even more impressive.”

Celestia nodded. “I suppose that explains why you look so run down. Though, neither of you look like the type to put something off until the last minute.”

Sunset shifted her eyes to Twilight, then to Trixie on the other side of the room. “We had some... complications with our last project.”

“Well, I’m glad you were still able to enter.” Celestia smiled at them one more time before she and the others moved on to Trixie.

Twilight collapsed into her chair and rested her head on the table. “We did it.” She sounded more exhausted than excited.

“You girls did wonderful!” Fluttershy said.

“Thanks.” Sunset patted Twilight on the head. “Don’t fall asleep yet, Twilight. We still need to find out who won.”

“Mmhmm,” was the only sound Twilight made.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go watch Trixie crash and burn.” Sunset followed the judges to Trixie’s table.

“Behold! Trixie’s great and powerful electromagnetic pulse jammer!” She waved her hands over the EMP. “With this, Trixie can disrupt the very electricity that flows through this room and beyond!”

Cheerilee gave a small roll of her eyes. “Very well, Trixie. Could you please explain how it works first?”

“Of course she can!” Trixie paused, looking lost for a moment. “Err... Oh wait! Trixie has flashcards!” She fished around in her pocket until she found a set of crumpled cards. “It’s quite simple, you see... wait, wrong one. Ah! Trixie’s jammer works by emitting a pulse that disrupts the frequencies of other electric devices.”

Luna wrote something down. “Uh-huh. Care to elaborate a little more? Explain *how* your device works.”

Trixie paled but kept smiling. “O-of course. You see...”

Sunset watched Trixie fumble over her words and give a half-baked explanation of ‘her’ project. She could explain how she put it together pretty well, but struggled to name most of the parts. Watching her sweat, Sunset knew there was justice in this world.

Sweet, sweet justice.

“And now, Trixie shall activate her EMP!” Trixie yelled, regaining her confidence.

They all took a step back. “Very well,” Celestia said, “let’s just give everyone a chance to turn off—”

“*Lulamoon!*” Trixie cried, and flipped the switch. There was a collective hum as everything electronic died within seconds. The lights flipped off, leaving the room lit only by the afternoon sun. Everyone fell silent until there was only a whirring noise filling the air.

Sunset looked up to see the CMC’s blimp falling out of the sky and heading for Twist’s volcano.

“Apple Bloom, do something!” Scootaloo shouted.

“Ah can’t! The controls aren’t responding!”

Sweetie covered her eyes. “Oh, the humanity!”

Their blimp crashed straight into the crater, engine first, and plugged in completely.

“No, no, no!” Twist tried to reach for the blimp and pull it out. “I uthed ammonium dichromate! If it geth too hot, ith going to—”

Fwooom!

The blimp blasted out of the volcano, leaving behind a trail of sparks and embers. Everyone watched it arch through the air and crash again, this time obliterating Caramel's entire solar system.

Applejack reacted first. She grabbed the fire extinguisher and put out the smoldering remains of the two projects. When there was a fine layer of foam, she stopped and tipped her hat up. "Well... that happened."

Sunset looked at the stunned expression on Trixie's, the CMC's, Twist's and Caramel's faces. Her own face was red from trying to hold back her laughter. *I should have brought popcorn.*

A single applause echoed throughout the room. "Ha!" Artemis cheered. "Now *that* was entertaining! Clearly, that deserves first prize!"

"Thank you, Mr. Lulamoon, but we'll decide that," Luna said tersely.

"First, we should probably get the power back on," Celestia reasoned. "Trixie, how long do the effects of your jammer last?"

Trixie scratched the side of her face. "Ummm... they should wear off... eventually. Soonish?"

Sunset bit her hand, desperate not to laugh out loud. She turned her back to the spectacle and headed for her table. *Well, I've had my fun for today.*

"Sunset?" Celestia called.

She looked over her shoulder. "Yes?"

Celestia smiled. "I have a favor to ask of you."

A tingle crawled down Sunset's spine. "Sure. What is it?"

"Well, you said your generator powered a kilowatt with your supplied amount of pressure, correct?" At Sunset's nod, Celestia continued. "If we could supply a stronger source of water, could you find a way to power the gym?"

"We could try."

Celestia clapped her hands. "Excellent! Go get ready, and Luna will escort you to the fuse box in the basement."

She and Sunset parted ways. Reaching her table, Sunset jabbed Twilight's shoulder. "Sparky, wake up! We got things to do!"

Twilight snorted and raised her head. "What happened?"

“Well, Trixie caused a blackout, so the CMC’s blimp crashed into a volcano, which spewed it back out, so it crashed and destroyed the solar system.”

Twilight blinked. “How long was I asleep?”

“Ten minutes and thirty-two seconds,” Pinkie answered.

“Nevermind that.” Sunset waved her hand. “Celestia wants us to use the generator to power the gym.”

Twilight rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. “But we don’t have a water source strong enough to generate that much power.”

“She said she’d give us one.”

“Hmm...” Twilight picked up their research papers and flipped through them. “I guess it could be possible if we can hook it up to the right wires.”

Sunset unhooked the tank and disconnected the light bulbs from the generator. “Perfect. Come on, let’s get moving. Pinkie, Fluttershy, watch the table.”

“Aye aye, captain!” Pinkie saluted.

Twilight and Sunset followed Luna from the gym and down the halls. A few of the hall lights had been shut off as well, leaving a dimly lit path. The door to the basement was at the end of a lonely corridor, surrounded by some very old and beaten lockers. Luna produced a key and opened the door, revealing a set of rickety stairs descending into darkness. She fumbled for a light switch and soon found one, though it only flipped on two old hanging lamps.

At the bottom of the stairs, Luna led them past some damp boxes and the boiler to the large circuit breaker box against the far wall. She opened it up, found the breaker labeled ‘gymnasium’ and flipped it a few times. The tiny light next to it remained unlit.

“Still fried,” she muttered. She reached behind one of the boxes and pulled out a battered tool bag. “Hmm. I’m not sure if this has what you’ll need, but feel free to use it. I will look for more tools and assist Celestia with bringing the hose down.”

Sunset and Twilight were left alone in the dim room, the main source of light coming from the open door above them. Sunset felt around the tool bag until she found a screwdriver and flashlight.

“Here, give me a little more light.” Sunset handed the flashlight to Twilight. With the light on the breaker, Sunset unscrewed the cover and revealed the wiring.

“There’s no gloves in the bag,” Twilight said before Sunset could ask.

“And I don’t feel like getting electrocuted, so I guess we have to wait.” Sunset sat cross-legged on the floor; Twilight sat next to her on her knees.

“If we do this... I think we’ll win,” Twilight whispered.

“Yeah,” Sunset mused. “Funny how things work out like that.”

“How did you know Trixie would use our project against us?”

Sunset shrugged. “Because I would have done it. But I’m smarter than her. I knew when she flipped that switch, we had to have something that didn’t run on electricity, but could still take first prize. Best solution? Make something that *made* electricity.” She grinned. “I amaze even myself sometimes.”

Twilight snorted, then broke into a wide smile. In the dark, her teeth shined like little white diamonds.

“But, you know...” Sunset traced a circle in the dust. “Even if we don’t win—which we totally will—I still had a lot of fun.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I wanted to just win at first, but hanging out with you and making things has been kinda amazing.”

“I had a lot of fun too, even with all the setbacks. I’ve never had another person who could keep up in a scientific discussion before. It’s nice not having to bounce ideas off of Spike for once.”

Sunset laughed. “I’m sure he has some great ideas.”

“Sure, as long as they revolve around food, walks, or belly rubs.”

They both quietly snickered, then jumped when the boiler made a chilling moan. A minute passed, and Sunset said, “Oh yeah, I should also probably apologize for dragging you into that stupid bet.”

Twilight looked down at her knees. “Yeah, a little heads up would have been nice. Though I guess it gave us an extra drive to win.”

Sunset leaned back on her hands. “Still, I should have told you first. Your first kiss should be special. Not with those... eeegh.”

“Yeah... special,” Twilight parroted.

Sunset’s hands slid further back until she brushed against Twilight’s. They both jumped, and blurted, “Sorry!” They locked eyes again, Twilight’s still filled with so much knowledge and so much curiosity.

And still very pretty.

Sunset’s heart drummed in her chest. Were they getting closer? What was happening?

A loud *clang* at the top of the stairs sent Sunset and Twilight diving away from each other. Sunset’s face burned, but she didn’t know why. They hadn’t done anything. They weren’t going to do anything!

“I’m back with the supplies!” Luna announced.

Sunset gave her a thumbs up, still looking away from Twilight. “Great.”

Ten minutes later, the generator was humming loudly, powered by the school garden hose, and light had returned to the gym.

All of the entrants stood before Celestia, Luna, and Cheerilee, with the parents and spectators standing off to the sides.

“Well,” Cheerilee started, “that was certainly the most exciting science fair we’ve had in years.”

Luna dipped her head. “Indeed; and you all presented a good showing. But, there can only be one winner.”

Sunset stood perfectly still, allowing the butterflies in her stomach to do all the moving for her. Next to her, Twilight shifted from one foot to the other, making it look like she had to pee more than anything.

Celestia held up the blue ribbon. “The winner of Canterlot High’s 30th Science Fair is...”

Everyone held their breath.

“Sunset Shimmer and Twilight Sparkle!”

Both girls screamed in delight and wrapped their arms around each other before running up to receive their prize. Pinkie cheered the loudest of the crowd, throwing handfuls of confetti over them from who knew where.

Celestia handed Sunset the ribbon. “Congratulations, you two. You showed not only hard work and ingenuity, but practical applications for your project as well.” She then handed both of them a ticket. “And here is your pass to the Canterlot Aerospace Museum. I hope you have a good time.” She smiled and joined in on the applause.

Sunset looked at the ribbon in her hand, ‘1st prize’ sewed into the center. She folded Twilight’s hand around it and lifted it into the air for all to see. She couldn’t stop grinning from ear to ear. Maybe it was Dexter and Quick Wit’s look of devastation. Or maybe Trixie fuming so hard, Sunset swore smoke would start pouring from her ears. But perhaps, overall, it was the feeling in her heart that she had *earned* this victory. She had fought a fair, clean race and won.

Sure, most of the students looked at her like she had cheated, but at least she knew she had played fair.

“Wait a minute!” Trixie yelled. She stepped from the line and held a finger up. “Trixie has something she’d like to say!”

Sunset’s euphoria came crashing down. *She wouldn’t*. Looking into Trixie’s eyes proved otherwise. *Oh, Celestia, she would!*

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Trixie?”

Trixie looked at Sunset. Sunset jerked her head toward Artemis. Artemis flashed a winning smile back at Trixie. Trixie frowned and glared at Sunset.

“Trixie would like to say...” she trailed off; her gaze drifted from Sunset to Twilight, and her eyes filled with fear.

From the corner of her eye, Sunset saw Twilight with a fierce and dangerous expression Sunset didn’t know she was capable of.

Trixie turned away. “S-she was going to say...” She stammered to a stop. Around the room, all of Sunset’s friends fixed Trixie with looks of disapproval

or contempt. None of them were as strong as Twilight's, though Fluttershy's came pretty close.

"I..." Trixie looked back to her dad, then hung her head in defeat. She walked over and grabbed his hand. "Trixie would like to go out for ice cream," she pouted.

Artemis squeezed her hand. "There, there, buttercup, you put on an excellent show! But, I do believe ice cream is the best solution for a broken heart." He pulled Selena close with his free arm. "Congratulations, Sunset! *Lulamoon!*"

In a flash of smoke, all three of them were gone, and Sunset released the breath she had been holding. She then gave a bright smile to each of her friends. *I love you girls!*

The crowd dispersed to pack away their things and file out the room. Sunset turned to Twilight and held out the blue ribbon. "Here. I think you should keep it."

Twilight looked at it, then at Sunset. "Really? Why?"

"You wanted to do this in the first place. Besides, it'll look better hanging in your room than it will in mine."

Twilight clutched the ribbon in both hands. "Thank you, Sunset."

Sunset crossed her arms and turned away. "Sure, sure. Now, I believe there's one more matter of business to take care of," she said, watching Dexter and Quick Wit trudge toward them.

Dexter stared at the floor. "Well... I guess you beat us fair and square. Starting Monday, we'll comply with your demands."

Sunset glanced at Twilight and sighed. *Stupid conscience.* "As much as I would love to see you two grovel and lick the dirt from my boots... the bet's off."

"What?"

Even Twilight looked bewildered. "Really?"

"Yeah, I changed my mind. You dorks losing to us should be punishment enough. Just remember: anything you can do, we can do better."

Quick Wit tapped his foot on the ground. “So, uhh... if that part of the bet is off... do you think we could get those kisses anyway?”

“*Get lost!*” Twilight yelled, sending them into a mad scramble for the door. She blew her bangs out from in front of her face. “I needed that.”

Sunset roared with laughter, clutching her sides. “You’re just full of surprises today, aren’t you?”

They took down their table and collected their generator from Celestia, receiving another round of congratulations from her and their friends. Sunset helped put everything in Night Light’s car, then stood on the sidewalk across from Twilight.

Twilight kept her hands behind her back. “So... two tickets to the Aerospace Museum.”

“Yep.” A knot twisted in Sunset’s stomach.

“It’d be fun to go... together. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it could be fun.” *Or a disaster. You know where she’s going with this. Just tell her!*

“Maybe we could go later this weekend?”

“Maybe.” *Tell her no! Under no circumstances are you allowed to go there together on a... you-know-what.* Sunset opened her mouth.

“Sunset?”

“Yes?” *Get ready...*

Twilight cleared her throat. “I also wanted to know if... well, my mom wanted to know too... but of course, I want you to come as well...”

Okay, I’m lost now....

“Would you like to have Thanksgiving dinner with us tomorrow?”

Sunset relaxed her shoulders. “Oh, uhh, sure.” *Yes! That is totally not a date! Ha!* Sunset wasn’t quite sure who she was laughing at but laughed all the same.

Twilight made a lopsided smile. “Great. Yeah, that’s great. It’ll be fun. Umm... be there around five.”

“Can do.” Sunset gave her a two-finger salute and started to walk off. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you.”

Sunset turned from Twilight’s blushing face and walked home, mentally berating herself. She had a perfect opportunity to let Twilight down—to tell her that she didn’t want to be anything more than friends.

So why hadn’t she taken it?

She pulled the ticket from her pocket. She could rip it right now and destroy the scenario entirely. But she wanted to go to the museum with Twilight. Just as friends of course. Certainly not on a date. Sunset would just have to be clear about that. She would not—*could* not date Twilight Sparkle.

An empty soda can crossed Sunset’s path, and she kicked it with all her might. *Stupid Twilight. Making my heart do stupid things. Stupid.*

She kicked it again, turning her thoughts over to the fair. *I barely did any gloating.* Looking up at the evening sky, Sunset saw the first star appear. *Something must be wrong with me.*

IV. My Past Does Not Define Me — Kpok 31: An Evening with the Sparkles

“It’s just dinner. I’m just going over to Twilight’s house to have dinner with her family. There’s absolutely no romantic subtext here whatsoever.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“*Why do I keep you?*”

Sunset stood in the center of her room, contemplating whether to use the brush in her hand to straighten her hair out or beat Princess Twilight over the head.

Don’t let her get a rise out of you; she’s only cotton. Sunset ran the brush through her hair. She *did* want to look nice after all.

“Aww, see? You do care about her!”

Sunset swiped her brush, knocking Princess Twilight off the desk and onto the floor. “Shut up!”

“You won’t even consider the possibility that you might like her?”

“It’s *not* a possibility!” Sunset stomped her foot on the doll’s head. “Yes, she has a crush on me! Fine, I accept that! Why she does, I’ll never know! But there is no way I have any romantic feelings for her in return! She’s the human version of you! By all rights, I should *hate* her! But I don’t because I’m a nice person, and she hasn’t ruined my life! So, yes, I care about her, I want to make sure she’s happy and I love spending time with her, but that does not mean I have a crush on Twilight Sparkle!”

Her breaths came in long, heavy pants; her finely brushed hair now stood frizzy and tangled. With the room, and her conscience, quiet again, Sunset returned to straightening her hair out.

“You know you just described all the signs of liking someone, right?”

“Yes. I know.” The brush went limp in her hand. This feeling in her stomach... it couldn’t be an attraction for Twilight. She wouldn’t let it be!

For both of their sakes.

“I just have to make that clear. I just want to be friends.” Sunset took a deep breath. “I’ll nip this in bud before it’s too late.”

Sunset finished brushing her hair and examined herself in the broken mirror. Each shard showed a nervous girl wearing a nice blue blouse and her best pair of jeans. She pushed most of her hair back, leaving a bang in front to cover her left eye. She thought it helped keep her mysterious and aloof appearance.

In one of the fragments, she could see Twilight, twirling her hair and looking at the ground. “You look nice, Sunset.”

Sunset pressed a hand against her forehead. “Tomorrow. I’m throwing away the mirror.” She slipped her sweater over her head and laced up her boots. Off went the light bulb, leaving the string of multicolored lights to keep the room lit.

She paused at the door and took a deep breath. “It’s just dinner... with a girl who has a crush on me... and her family.” She stepped down the stairs, grabbing her helmet before exiting the factory.

“It’s going to be a long night.”

With Daylight Savings Time over, it was nearly dark when Sunset parked her motorcycle in front of Twilight’s house. The sun kissed the horizon, casting a wave of orange and pinks across the sky.

As Sunset dismounted, a cold wind blew over her, sending goosebumps up her arms. She started up the walkway, her stomach back flipping the entire time. *It’s just dinner*, she told herself. Yet, she couldn’t shake the foreboding feeling that swirled around her, mixing with the autumn air. It wasn’t a *bad* foreboding, just the sense that *something* was going to happen.

Good or bad, Sunset was sure she didn’t want it.

As she stepped onto the porch, her phone buzzed in her sweater pocket. She pulled it out and flipped it open, finding a text from Rarity reading, “Good luck!” Next to it was a wink face.

“Hate you, Rarity,” Sunset mumbled, shoving her phone away. One last deep breath and she rang the doorbell.

There was a clamor of sounds and voices on the other side, barely distinguishable from one another. She heard Mrs. Velvet yell something, then Shining, then something that sounded like an oven door. Finally, there were footsteps, and Twilight swung the door open.

She wore a sparkling purple shirt with long sleeves and a pink ruffled skirt that went down to her knees. The scent of lavender was particularly strong today.

“Hi,” she squeaked.

“Hi,” Sunset replied once the wind returned to her chest. She cleared her throat. “Well, now I feel underdressed.”

Twilight looked down at what she was wearing and blushed. “No, no, what you’re wearing is fine. I probably overdressed anyway—I’ll go change if—”

“Sparky, it’s fine. I was just joking.”

“O-oh... I knew that.” Her blush deepened and she stepped to the side. “Please, come in.”

Sunset rolled her eyes at the spine-tingling sensation that ran through her. *Was that really necessary?* The second she crossed the threshold, a dozen aromas descended upon her nose, mingling together to create a heavenly redolence, the likes of which Sunset hadn’t smelled in a very long time.

Mrs. Velvet peeked out from the kitchen. “Sunset, sweetie, welcome! We’re so glad you could join us. Dinner was delayed a little bit because *someone* forgot to put the rolls in the oven!” she yelled back into the kitchen.

“I was working on the yams!” Night Light called back.

Velvet rolled her eyes. “Anyway, dinner will be ready in a bit. I’m sure you and Twilight can keep yourselves entertained for a while.” She disappeared into the kitchen again. “*Shining, if you touch that turkey again, I will cut off your fingers and serve them with the meal!*”

Sunset blinked. “Uhh, do you think we should try and help or something?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, there’s already five people in the kitchen. We’d just be in the way.”

“Is it always this crazy on Thanksgiving?”

“Just about.” Twilight led Sunset up to her room. “Do they have Thanksgiving in Equestria?”

“Sort of. We have the Autumn Harvest Festival, where we celebrate the end of the harvesting season. We don’t have parades or anything, but we do eat quite a bit. Or, at least, that’s how you’re supposed to celebrate it.”

Twilight sat down on her bed and patted the space beside her. “What do you mean?”

Sunset plopped down next to her. “Well, you know I wasn’t... wealthy most of my foal—*childhood*. That day was just another normal day for us.” Sunset’s face darkened. “Everypony else got to stuff their faces even more than usual while my parents and I just ate enough to get us through the day.” She sighed. “Of course, once I got to the castle, I stuffed my face whenever I could. My parents ate pretty well too. But I never gave a thought to anypony else who could have been in a situation like mine.”

The room was quiet, punctuated by the absence of Spike’s jingling collar. Sunset guessed he was already searching for holiday handouts downstairs.

“I just depressed you, didn’t I?” Sunset asked after a minute had passed.

“No! No, of course not!” Twilight said quickly. “I was just... thinking.”

They fell silent again, both of them staring at the floor. Sunset’s stomach rumbled as she deeply inhaled the mouth-watering smell of roasted asparagus and buttery rolls. Her eyes rose to the wall, where the blue ribbon hung proudly inside a new frame.

“I see you were quick to hang your crowning achievement,” Sunset said.

“Yeah, Shining bought it for me. He was really happy when I told him we won.”

“Happy that *we* won, or happy that *you* won?”

Twilight nudged her. “He likes you, Sunset. He’s just... overprotective sometimes.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Sunset laughed when Twilight nudged her again. “So, what do you want to do while we wait?”

Twilight hummed. “Well... I haven’t done my violin practice for the day.” She twiddled her fingers. “Would you like to hear me play again?”

“Yes!” Sunset said excitedly. She cleared her throat. “I mean, yeah, sure. That’s cool.”

Reaching under her bed, Twilight pulled out her violin case and set it on the chair. She delicately lifted the instrument out, tuned the strings and the bow, then began to play.

Sunset sat on the bed, entranced once again by Twilight’s heavenly music. She had run out of things to compare it to—it simply was one of the sweetest things she had ever heard.

It took a second for Sunset to realize Twilight had finished her piece. She blinked, and said, “What, did you get better since the last time I heard you?”

“You really think I’m that good?”

“I think you’re the best.”

Twilight twisted away from Sunset to hide her glowing cheeks, and squeaked out a tiny, “Thank you.” She set the violin in her lap and started twisting her hair around her fingers. “I... um... I think you’re really good at... being smart... and stuff.”

Sunset snorted. *Is... is she trying to flirt with me? I’d be more embarrassed if she wasn’t so bad at it.* A devilish smirk crossed her face, and she covered it with her hand. It was probably a bad idea, but it was too funny not to try.

She stuck her bottom lip out and said, “You’re just saying that. I’m not that good at anything.”

Twilight turned toward her. “No, no, you are! Like... umm... chess! You’re really good at chess! And... uhh... riding motorcycles?”

Sunset snickered. “It’s okay, Twilight. I’m well-rounded and can do just about anything, but I guess there’s not much I excel at. Not anymore.” She rubbed the center of her forehead.

Twilight picked up her violin and handed it to Sunset. “Well, maybe we can find you a new talent.”

Sunset took it in a gentle but firm grip. It was smooth and had been recently polished. She took the bow in her other hand, and tucked the violin under her chin, trying to replicate Twilight's posture. She felt Twilight scoot closer and place her hands on Sunset's elbow and wrist, gently making corrections.

"Okay, now just curl your fingers like this." Twilight rested her hand on top of Sunset's and adjusted her fingers. Sunset tried to keep them loose like Twilight intended, meanwhile, the rest of her body was incredibly stiff. Twilight was sitting close enough that her breath brushed against the hairs on the back of Sunset's neck. The scent of lavender was so strong, it sent Sunset into a daze. She shook her head, passing it off like she was trying to move her hair from out of her face.

"Are you comfortable?" Twilight asked, her voice hovering next to Sunset's ear.

She shuddered. "Y-yeah." Her eyes concentrated on the violin. Her plan to fluster Twilight had come back to bite her.

"Now, just gently run the bow across the E string—one broad stroke."

Sunset drew the bow across the string; the scratching sound leveled out into a decent hum after the first second. She repeated the motion with the other three strings, producing something that resembled music.

Twilight adjusted her a few times and told her to go over the strings again. Sunset sounded better the second time around and even better on the third.

"Look, you're starting to get the hang of it."

Sunset made the mistake of turning her head. She found herself mere inches from Twilight's face, staring right into that starry universe hidden behind her eyes. Sunset found her throat stuck, and the room temperature had jumped a few hundred degrees.

She managed to swallow. "You really think so?"

Twilight nodded, her cheeks turning red again. "I really do." The distance between them closed an inch. "Sunset?"

"Yes?" Sunset couldn't tell who was leaning forward.

The distance closed another inch. "I've... been meaning to say something."

Sunset's body began to do a number of things. Her stomach rolled, her heart hammered and her blood roared in her ears. "I've been meaning to say something too." *This is it: do or die.*

Twilight hesitated. "Can I go first?"

"Yes."

"I..." She took a deep breath. "I really—*Cadence!*"

Sunset whipped her head to the door, where she caught a pink bang dip out of sight. She heard Cadence whisper, "Darn it!" To them, she said, "Ignore me, I'm not here!"

Twilight scrambled to the other side of the bed. "What do you want?" Her voice cracked a bit.

Cadence poked her head around the corner. She looked embarrassed and disappointed. "I just came to get you two for dinner, but you were *clearly* in the middle of something—"

"We're not in the middle of anything!" Sunset said quickly. She stood and placed the violin back on the bed. "Dinner sounds great—I'm starving!"

Cadence continued to look disappointed, Sunset stood with a pained smile on her face, and Twilight sat on the bed, looking mortified.

"Sure... dinner sounds good," Twilight squeaked.

Downstairs, the dining room table was already set for eight. Upon helping move the food to the table, Sunset met Cadence's parents: Mr. Elm and Mrs. Rose Quartz.

Everyone took a dish and found a place to squeeze it in amongst the vast amounts of food. There was turkey, mashed potatoes, asparagus, yams, stuffing, potato salad, ham, macaroni and cheese, cranberry sauce, gravy, and rolls.

The children sat on one side of the table while the parents took the other. Sunset was in between Twilight and Cadence.

Velvet let out a relieved sigh as she sat down. "Thank you all for joining us for dinner this year. I hope it tastes as good as it looks."

“Nonsense, Velvet, dear,” Rose said. She was an older woman with red hair done up in a bun, and a pale green complexion. “You always cook a good meal.”

Velvet smiled warmly. “Thank you, Rose. Well, if I had to pick one thing to be thankful for, it would be friends, both old—” she smiled again at Sunset “—and new.”

“Agreed,” Night said.

“Hear hear!” Shining raised his glass. Everyone followed his lead.

“To friends!” they cheered, Sunset the loudest of them all. She drained her glass of apple cider and smiled.

Yep. Friends. Good friends. She tried not to look at Twilight.

Within a few seconds, Sunset’s plate was piled with food, courtesy of Velvet. Having eaten nothing all day, she dug in with fervor. Next to her, Twilight discreetly slipped pieces of food to a waiting Spike below. While she ate, Sunset listened to the conversation across the table.

“So, I hear the mayor is running for reelection again,” Night said.

Cadence bobbed her head. “She actually came to me last week and asked if I could air one of her campaign commercials. She’s such a sweet old lady”

Mr. Elm, a thin man with deep green hair and a surprisingly deep voice said, “She’s the best thing to happen to this city; she’ll win in a landslide. Meanwhile, I’m still trying to figure out how that oaf, Blueblood got to be governor.”

Shining rolled his eyes. “He looks handsome and gives pretty speeches that are full of hot air. Like his head.”

Twilight leaned toward Sunset. “He’s still mad because Blueblood tried to cut the police budget.”

Evidently, Shining heard her, because he stabbed his turkey with enough force to scrape the plate. “There’s gangs running around the suburbs and inner-city crime is at an all-time high! And then he has the nerve to say we’re not utilizing our resources well enough! I worked three double shifts last week!”

Oh, so that’s why he’s so irritable all the time.

Cadence rubbed his back. "It's okay, sweetie. We all know you're doing your best."

Shining took a deep breath and returned to his meal, taking out his frustration by cutting the turkey into thin strips.

"So, Rose, how is the jewelry business treating you?" Velvet asked.

"Very well. The Pies just sent us a large shipment of pearls."

Sunset almost choked on her potatoes. "You know the Pies?"

Rose nodded. "Of course. They send my store regular shipments of precious metals from their mining operations."

Sunset didn't know why she was surprised. Anything involving the name Pie was likely to both come out of left field, and make perfect sense at the same time.

"But tell me a little about yourself, Sunset," Rose asked. "I've known Twilight for a long time, and it's not often she brings home any friends."

All eyes were on Sunset now. Her stomach suddenly felt quite full. "Oh, well, there's not much to tell really. I'm just a regular girl."

"Not the way Twilight tells it," Cadence said under her breath. Sunset fought the urge to kick her.

"Well, I heard you won the school science fair," Rose continued. "Sounds like you're a little more than a 'regular girl.'"

You don't know the half of it. Though, I'd like to keep it that way. Sunset smiled. "It was just a little generator. Besides, I only did half the work."

Twilight spoke up. "She's being modest. She did most of the work—I was kinda falling asleep half the time."

Night nodded. "These two thought it would be a good idea to redo their project at the last minute."

"Now, why would you do something like that?" Elm asked.

"Because our first project got stolen," Sunset said, mentally slapping herself multiple times, while Twilight's fork clattered against her plate.

"What?" Night narrowed his eyes. "You two never mentioned that."

“Yes,” Twilight said through her teeth, looking at Sunset. “We never mentioned that.”

“Ehehe, we didn’t want to bother you with the details. It was no big deal, really.” Beads of sweat ran down the back of Sunset’s neck.

“Who stole it?” Velvet asked.

“Trixie Lulamoon.”

Rose tapped a finger against her chin. “Lulamoon. That name sounds familiar. Aren’t they the weird family that lives a few blocks down?”

“Yes.” Sunset looked down at her plate. “Weird is putting it mildly though.”

Velvet gave an indignant snort. “What is this world coming too? Kids will steal anything these days. And how did she manage to take your project anyway?”

Sunset cringed. She hated Trixie, but ratting her out had consequences for her too. “She...” Sunset tried to fight it, but her mouth moved for her. “She snuck into my... *home* and stole it while I was sleeping.” She could see Twilight making frantic movements with her eyes like she was sending Morse Code.

Shining dropped his fork and knife. “*What?* Breaking and entering—you never mentioned that!”

“I told you: it’s no big deal, really! We handled it!”

Cadence rested a hand on Sunset’s shoulder. Sunset wanted to snap it off but forced herself to keep calm. “Sunset, someone broke into your house—that’s pretty serious.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Sunset said, lightly brushing Cadence’s hand away, “but it really isn’t a big deal. That was the only thing she took.”

“I would think your parents would beg to differ,” Night said.

“Oh, I don’t think they mind too much.” Sunset was a rat trapped in a shrinking cage. This was only going to get worse the longer it went on.

“Why’s that?”

“They don’t exactly know it happened.” Sunset glanced at Twilight again, and received an eye message that read: ‘Shut up, please, shut up!’

Shining held a hand to his head. “You didn’t tell your own parents either?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Sunset cringed again. “Because they live in another dimension—ow! I mean they were out of town.” Sunset wiggled her sore foot, bruised from where Twilight had slammed against it. “Just a little inside joke. We hardly communicate, so it’s like we’re in separate worlds. Hehehe.” She didn’t know whether to glare at Twilight or thank her.

The rest of the table gave her odd looks but seemed to buy her story. Velvet cleared her throat and said, “Why don’t we just move on? I don’t agree with your decision, Sunset, but what’s done is done.” She paused for a bite of turkey. “So, what do your parents do?”

“My mom is a maid, and my dad pulls carriages.”

Cadence blinked. “Your dad... *pulls* carriages?”

“Yes.” Sunset was ready to stab herself with her fork.

“You mean like those guys downtown on the bikes?”

“No, he pulls other ponies around.” Sunset moved her arms under the table and started digging the fork into her hand. Everyone was staring at her with utter confusion, save for Twilight who looked like she wanted to be anywhere else. “He... works at a carnival?” Sunset tried.

“That’s quite an odd carnival,” Elm said.

“Real small, not very popular,” she added quickly.

“So, are you home by yourself a lot?” Rose asked.

What is this, 20 Questions? “All the time.”

Velvet nodded. “Me and Night had to leave Twilight alone pretty often when she was younger and Shining had school. That’s why we hired Cadence to babysit.”

“I’d like to think it worked out pretty well,” Night said, nodding to Cadence and Shining.

Sunset eyed the two of them as well. “So, are you two, like, married, or engaged...?”

Shining turned red, making his cheeks appear sun burnt. He found serious interest in his plate. Cadence blushed as well, but it was far less intense.

“Not yet,” she said, though Sunset could hear the hint of longing in her voice. “But, we are trying to move in together. Oh, that reminds me, Shiny; I found this cute little apartment on the east side of town I want you to look at.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little far from work?”

“But it’s *really* cute!”

Sunset sipped on her apple cider, trying not to gag at their exchange. Cadence batted her eyelashes at Shining, and Sunset was disgustingly reminded of the looks she’d give Flash whenever she wanted something.

“So, Sunset, where do you live?” Velvet asked.

“In an old factory,” Sunset said absentmindedly, still eyeing Shining and Cadence. Her eyes bulged when she realized what had slipped through her mouth.

Everyone stared in confusion now. Twilight froze, her fork halfway to her mouth. Shining raised his eyebrow so high, Sunset thought it might float off his face.

“W-what?” Elm asked.

“I live in an old fact—ow!” Sunset leaned forward in her chair, rubbing a hand against her shin. *Damn, Twilight, you kick hard!*

“She means she lives in an old apartment building they call ‘The Factory.’” Twilight rapidly winked at Sunset.

“Y-yeah.” Sunset tried to smile through the pain. “Stupid idea really. But it lives up to its name. Pretty ratty, on the edge of the old suburbs near the industrial section. Really nothing special.”

Shining kept his eyebrow raised. “I’ve never heard of it before.”

“It’s very small.” Sunset hoped the sweat running down the side of her face wasn’t giving her away.

“So...” Cadence began, trying to defuse the tension. “Have you been living there long?”

“About two years.”

“Where did you live before?”

“In Equestria.” Sunset dug the fork further into her hand. *This... is a nightmare.*

Cadence looked on with her mouth slightly ajar. “What... is Equestria?”

“It’s another di—”

“Whoops!” Twilight yelled. “I seemed to have dropped my fork somewhere under the table. Haha, clumsy me. Sunset could you help me find, please?” Twilight ducked under the table.

The penance tickled her spine. “Uhh, sure.” She slid under the tablecloth after Twilight. She quickly found the lost fork and held it out to Twilight. “Here you go.”

Twilight snatched it out of her hand. “What are you doing?” she whispered, ignoring Spike’s small whines for more food.

“Talking to your family.”

“I see that! I mean, why are you telling them all of... *that*? I thought you wanted—*had* to keep it secret?”

“I do.” Sunset ran a hand through her hair. “I... can’t explain it, Twilight. I just... have a hard time lying.”

“Well do me a favor and lie! I can’t believe I’m asking you this, but please lie!”

It was the oddest feeling Sunset had experienced. The jolt ran down her spine, paused, then ran back up it again. Every nerve in her body tickled for a moment, then it was all gone. Sunset knelt next to Twilight, blinking several times. “Uhh... okay.”

Cadence popped her head beneath the cloth. “FYI, under the table... not the most subtle place for a conversation.”

Sunset and Twilight quickly scrambled back to their seats, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. “Found it,” Twilight mumbled.

Shining cleared his throat. “So, what was that about ‘Equestria’?”

“Oh, that was nothing.” Sunset waved her hand. “Just the name of the street I lived on in my old city.” She had to stop herself from laughing at how easy this

was. She barely had to think about it; the lie just came out. Her answer seemed to satisfy everyone save for Shining, who continued to look at her with skepticism. Fortunately, the conversation turned elsewhere.

The men dove into sports, football in particular. Naturally, Sunset was asked whether she followed any teams. She was able to sell a very convincing lie about her love of the game. For the first and only time in her life, she thanked Flash and his friends for their geeky sports talk.

“So, you think the Canterlot Comets have a shot at the Super Bowl this year?” Night asked enthusiastically.

“Oh, absolutely,” Sunset replied with equal enthusiasm. “Their quarterback has a great arm, and the team has a solid defense.” *Dear Celestia, make it stop.*

“Too bad they’re not playing tonight.”

Velvet poked Night in the shoulder. “Yes, too bad. Instead, you’re forced to enjoy a wholesome dinner with friends and family.”

While Night fumbled his way out from his own words, Rose struck up a conversation with Twilight. “So, how goes the college applications?”

“Oh, I finished those weeks ago,” Twilight said casually. “I applied to all the top schools in the country, and Oxford and Cambridge.”

“Our wallets can attest to that,” Night said, earning him another poke from Velvet.

Something pulled on Sunset’s heart. “You applied to Oxford? As in, all the way across the ocean?”

Twilight nodded. “I didn’t tell you that?”

The word ‘no’ formed in her mouth, but when she opened to speak, Sunset said, “Yes, of course you did. I probably just wasn’t paying attention.” *I don’t believe it... this might be worse than being forced to tell the truth.*

Twilight pushed her empty plate away. “Well, yes. I applied abroad. I don’t know if I’ll actually get in, but I gave it my best shot.”

Sunset leaned back in her chair, processing this new information. The idea of Twilight going so far away made her stomach sink. What was Sunset supposed to do if Twilight moved away?

What would she do if *any* of her friends moved away?

Rose disrupted her thoughts by asking, “What about you, Sunset; did you apply anywhere?”

“Yes; I applied to Harvard and Berkeley and a few other colleges.” Her stomach sank even deeper.

“What do you plan on studying?”

“Science. Maybe electrical or aerospace.”

Twilight smiled at her. “Imagine if we went to the same college.”

“Yeah.” Sunset’s smile came out as a grimace. “That’d be... something.”
Something that’ll never happen.

Dessert was brought out, and Sunset helped herself to two servings of pumpkin pie in an attempt to make the sucking pit of depression in her stomach go away. She didn’t want to think about the future. She didn’t want to think about where she’d be in one years’ time. She didn’t want to think about Twilight going off to some foreign land.

Twilight saw the pensive look on her face and whispered, “Are you okay?”

Sunset automatically brightened up. “Yep, I’m super dandy!”

“...Are you sure?”

“Never been more sure in my life!”

The conversation dwindled down as everyone settled into a food coma. Sunset yawned, feeling her eyes start to droop. She couldn’t recall the last time she had eaten a meal like that.

Velvet looked over and laughed. “Seeing as you had two of everything, I’m guessing you enjoyed the food?”

“Nope, it was disgusting.” Sunset pinched herself under the table and shouted, “Kidding! It was great, Mrs. Velvet, thank you so much.” Sunset got up from her chair and stretched. “I should get back home now before my parents start to worry. Thank you again for the lovely meal.”

Twilight stood up as well. “I’ll walk you out.”

Shining followed suit. “I’ll help you.”

Cadence grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him back down. “No, you won’t.”

With one last wave to everyone, Sunset slipped her boots on and stepped outside, Twilight hurrying behind her in just her socks. Night had fallen, and a cold wind blew through the streets.

Twilight shut the door behind her and walked Sunset off the porch. “Thanks a lot for coming over.”

“You’re welcome. It beat spending dinner alone.”

“Yeah. I’m guessing eating alone for so long has hindered your social skills,” she said, half-joking.

Sunset fidgeted. “Yeah, about that...” She hesitated. Right now, she had the ability to lie whenever someone asked her something. Thinking over the conversations at dinner, lying had actually saved her from revealing things no one needed to know. At the same time, Sunset knew honesty was the best policy. But white lies went for miles.

Did she dare ask Twilight to ask her to tell the truth again? But that would lead Twilight to ask ‘why?’ Could she tell Twilight about the penance interfering with her life? She had told Twilight a lot of things, but this was dangerous leverage for anyone to have.

But this is Twilight we’re talking about. Still, Sunset didn’t know if she wanted *anyone* to knowingly have power over her.

Twilight pulled on Sunset’s sleeve. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Sunset said. “Nothing at all.” She turned for her bike. “I should go.”

“Wait, Sunset... I still have something I need to say to you.”

Sunset turned again. Twilight’s face was flaming red and she held one arm behind her back. Sunset’s mouth went bone dry, and she felt all the food trying to crawl back up her throat. “W-what?”

Twilight took a step closer. She looked down at the ground and said, “I... really like spending time with you. A lot. I like how you’re trying to be a better

person, and..." She looked up and took another step forward. She was very close now.

"Twilight..." Sunset's brain told her to back away, but she remained locked in place, looking into Twilight's eyes. The wind blew around them, tossing Twilight's hair to one side. Sunset's heart wanted to beat out of her chest. It simultaneously agreed with her brain about running away, screaming into the night, and wanted to stay put and see what happened.

Leaning in even closer, Twilight dropped her voice to a fragile whisper. "And... you told me my first kiss should be special. It should be *with* someone special."

Sunset could count every eyelash Twilight had, could feel her warm breath against her face. Her brain had gone completely fuzzy. She was sure it was trying to relay a message, but the rest of her body failed to respond.

"You're very special to me, Sunset." Twilight closed her eyes.

Their lips brushed together.

Sunset's brain surged back to life, playing every terrible scenario behind Sunset's eyes at once. It seized control of Sunset's actions again, and she took a large step back.

Twilight kept leaning and lost her balance, teetering forward on one leg. Sunset threw her hand up and caught Twilight by the arm.

They stood there, frozen in the bitter cold; a still moment in time where even the wind held its breath. Their eyes did not meet; Sunset stared at the house, while Twilight gazed at the pavement. Finally, Sunset hoisted Twilight upright and stepped back from their engagement.

Sunset took in a slow, shuddering breath. She could still feel where Twilight's lips had met hers. "Twilight, I... I'm—"

"I'm sorry!" Twilight blurted. "I'm so sorry! I-I just... I thought... I wanted..." Instead of her usual blush, Twilight's face was splotchy and pale. "You... you don't like me that way, do you?"

"No, I don't." Sunset clamped down on her tongue. "No, no, I mean, I think... Twilight, I... it's not that I don't like you..." Sunset grasped for the words, but they eluded her like the wind.

Twilight took a deep breath, now fighting back tears. “Sunset, please, just tell me what you think of me.”

No... Sunset’s spine jolted. She bit down on her lip so hard, she could taste a small trickle of blood. Her throat constricted, the answer building up inside. She lasted a whole minute before the curse beat her, and she spat out with terrible conviction, “I hate you, Twilight. I think you’re a nerdy, show-offy know-it-all who can’t keep her nose out of other people’s business. I certainly don’t think you’re pretty, and I despise spending time with you.” Sunset covered her mouth, then shouted, “I didn’t mean *any* of that!”

But Twilight was already in tears. “If you didn’t mean it, then why did you say it?”

“Because it was funny.” Tears started to well up in Sunset’s eyes. “No, it wasn’t funny. Twilight—”

“I d-don’t understand! I’m t-trying to be serious, and you’re j-just taking this as a j-joke! I th-thought you were better than that!”

“I am! Twilight, just listen to me—” Sunset reached for her arm, but Twilight jerked away and ran for the house. “Twilight!”

Twilight hovered her hand over the doorknob. “Please... just leave me alone, Sunset.” She threw the door open and slammed it shut, never looking back.

Sunset walked to her motorcycle, her body doing all the work while her mind was in a daze. *Why...? How...?* She mounted her bike and put her helmet on. *She asked me... to leave her alone.*

She started the engine and revved forward, making it roar into the night sky. *I should have just told her... but she asked me to lie.* She pressed the throttle and shot down the street. In her side-view mirror, she saw Shining step out onto the porch and glare threateningly at her.

I deserve it, she thought. Everything was numb. Her entire body was on autopilot, from the penance or the shock, she couldn’t tell.

Sunset had pulled away from Twilight to avoid having either of their hearts broken. Yet in doing so, she had done just that. She had created the worst scenario possible.

She had lost her Twilight.

Kpok 32: Makes Me Crazy

Sunset had finally done it. It was the first thing she had done when she got home Thursday night. Tears running down her face, hatred in her heart, she had stomped upstairs, picked up Princess Twilight, and tore her head clean off her body.

The next morning, she had taped it back on, but it was still therapeutic in some small way. The real princess wasn't here for Sunset to punch.

She lay curled in bed all of Friday, blaming Princess Twilight for the curse the Elements of Harmony had placed on her. It was their fault Twilight wouldn't talk to her. It was their fault Sunset couldn't pick up her phone and call to try and make things right.

"Please... just leave me alone, Sunset."

The memory replayed itself over and over again, burning into her mind until it consumed her. Why did Twilight have to confess her feelings then? Why didn't Sunset tell her about the curse? Why, why, why?

Maybe it was because she had torn its head off, or maybe because she was doing nothing but beating herself up. Whatever the reason, Princess Twilight had not said a word since Sunset had come home. Not that Sunset minded. She could despise herself without any help.

When the sun rose Saturday morning, Sunset was still curled beneath her blanket, her pillow wet with tears. Her stomach roared at her to get up and eat something, but her heart told her to stay down.

She would have listened to her heart, but her bladder began to protest vehemently.

With the speed of a tortoise, Sunset rolled herself off the mattress, still tangled in her blanket. She crawled out and ran both hands through her hair, letting out a sigh that rose into a yell. She slid her hands down her face. "I'm not allowed to have nice things, am I?"

"Nice things?" a voice asked. "I thought we didn't *want* to be with Twilight."

Sunset looked around. The voice wasn't high and squeaky like the one she attributed to Princess Twilight. It was closer to her own, laced with heavy

amounts of cynical amusement. She looked at the cracked mirror and the dozens of reflections it held. Only, instead of showing her tear streaked face, every Sunset smirked at her with a familiar haughtiness.

“Great. More crazy,” Sunset deadpanned.

The largest reflection grinned at her. “We should really go in for a CAT scan sometime.”

“Noted. Any particular reason I’m bugging me today?”

The reflection shrugged. “I’m just wondering why you’re so upset. We broke Twilight’s heart; wasn’t that the goal?”

“No!” Sunset snapped. “I wanted to gently tell her I just wanted to be friends because...”

“Because you knew you were going to screw up somewhere down the road?”

Sunset crossed her arms. “I might be more annoying than the Princess.”

Mirror Sunset laughed. “Let’s face it: this is better for us. You pushed her away before she could get too close; that’s good. I mean, every time you get too friendly with someone, you destroy the relationship anyways.”

“I do not!”

“Your parents: abandoned. Celestia: double-crossed. Flash: treated like crap. You seeing a pattern here? Because I know I am.”

Sunset raised a finger, prepared to make a point, then dropped it. Her doppelganger was right; every close relationship she had, she screwed up. That *was* the reason she didn’t want to date Twilight. But she hadn’t wanted to push her away, just stop her before things went too far.

“Personally, I don’t see the difference. So you broke her heart and possibly destroyed your friendship. What’s the big deal? It’s not like you liked her anyways.”

“But...” Sunset looked at her lap. “I... I can’t believe I’m saying this... but I think... I think I really—”

Her reflection gagged. “Don’t say it! We agreed that us and Twilight would not work, remember?”

“I changed my mind.”

“Pffft, a little late for that, don’t you think? You already made her hate your guts. She’s never going to want to talk to you again.”

Each word was a blow to Sunset’s heart. She had royally screwed things up thanks to her stupid penance and there was no way to fix it.

“That’s right, it’s helpless. Every relationship, you screw up. It’s only a matter of time before you even drive your other friends away. Face it, Sunset...” Her reflection transformed, her skin turning red and her hair going up in flames. The demon bared her fangs at Sunset. “You’re better off alone.”

Sunset lunged forward and punched the mirror, knocking every fragment out of the frame and onto the ground. Her fist stung, and blood covered her knuckles. She knelt in front of the mirror, gasping for air, hair hanging in front of her face.

“I’ll show you.”

She stood up, stepped over the broken glass, and went downstairs to the bathroom, nursing her cut hand. She cleaned it off and wrapped her knuckles up before relieving herself and fixing the rats’ nest that was her hair. On her way back up, she grabbed the broom and dust pan.

“Thank you, evil me,” she said, sweeping up the glass shards. “You’ve given me a reason to finally get rid of this stupid thing.” She dumped them into the trash can, then hauled the frame downstairs and tossed it out the door.

Back in her bedroom, Sunset sat on her mattress and mulled things over. She couldn’t deny it any longer: the realization that had swept over her as she rode home Thursday night; the thought that had consumed her ever since.

“I have a crush on Twilight Sparkle.”

Too bad it took losing her for Sunset to realize it. She checked her phone, dismayed that Twilight hadn’t contacted her.

Sunset flopped onto her pillow. “What now? What do you do when you’re...” She squeezed her eyes closed and squeaked, “In love?”

On the floor in the corner, the newly bandaged Princess Twilight said, “Try talking to someone.”

“Like who?” The answer was in Sunset’s head the second she asked the question. “Rarity.” Sunset picked her phone up again and flipped it open. Her finger hovered over the button. Telling Rarity she liked Twilight would no doubt include telling her how she got into this particular problem in the first place.

She’d have to tell Rarity about the penance.

She lowered her finger. The same dilemma that had plagued her Thanksgiving night was back. How much did she trust Rarity? She did have a tendency to gossip, but for anything serious like this, she seemed like a pretty solid confidant.

But again, did Sunset trust *anyone* with that much power over her?

“Remember why you’re in this mess in the first place,” the Princess squeaked.

“Because of you and your stupid magic charms?” Sunset sighed, knowing the doll was right. If she had told the truth, she wouldn’t be sitting here missing Twilight.

And speaking of telling the truth, Sunset needed someone to ask her to stop lying.

She swallowed her pride and prayed to whatever god would listen to her, then shot Rarity a text. The fewer questions asked over the phone, the better.

Less than a minute later, her phone buzzed, and Sunset found a reply. “Of course.”

An hour later, Sunset was showered, dressed, and riding back across town to Rarity’s house. It was surprisingly sunny with a near cloudless skies. The wind was still bitterly cold, however, reminding Sunset that winter was close.

She parked outside Rarity’s house, a large, lavish home with a perfectly manicured lawn and purple ribbons tied around the porch beams. Sunset thought it fit Rarity to a T.

“All right, let’s do this before I lose my nerve... again.” She stepped up onto the porch, noticing the pink bike laying on its side. It seemed out of place amongst the neatness of everything else.

Before Sunset could knock on the door, it flew open to reveal Sweetie Belle. She looked taken aback at finding Sunset standing on her porch, but smiled and said, “Good morning, Sunset!” She turned her head back into the house and yelled, “*Rarity, Sunset’s here!*”

“Morning, Sweetie,” Sunset said lifelessly. She watched Sweetie pick her bike up and roll it down the porch steps before mounting it. “Where are you off to?”

“Scootaloo’s house,” she said, buckling her helmet on. “We’re gonna play on her trampoline and then play video games.” She kicked off and turned down the street. “Bye, Sunset.”

Sunset waved, then jumped when Rarity marched past her and leaned off the porch.

“A lady does not *scream inside the house!*” she yelled at Sweetie’s shrinking form. She breathed, then smiled at Sunset. “Hello, dear, how are you?”

“Terrific,” Sunset said, still lacking any enthusiasm.

Rarity tilted her head. “To be frank, Sunset, you look quite the opposite.”

“I know. I’ve got a lot I need to tell you.”

With a sweep of her arm, Rarity invited Sunset inside. “Well then, let’s get you comfortable. I’ll put on some tea, and we can have a nice heart-to-heart.”

Sunset stepped across the threshold, unsurprised to see a perfectly tidy and well-decorated living room. Everything about it screamed Rarity, from the purple tablecloth to the matching rug and couch. The only thing Rarity probably had nothing to do with was the entertainment center, decorated in football paraphernalia.

“I’m guessing you don’t let your parents shop without you?” Sunset asked as Rarity led her to the table.

Rarity stuck her tongue out. “You should have seen this place before I took up fashion. It was an absolute disaster that words cannot describe. Now, you sit here, I’ll go put on the tea.”

With Rarity in the kitchen, Sunset was left to twiddle her thumbs, trying to think of the right words to say. *So, Rarity, the truth is, I have this sort of curse on me that won’t let me lie and kinda forced me into being your friend back when this all started!*

Sunset wondered if it was too late to run for the door. She shook her head; she was no coward! Usually! She would tell Rarity the truth and hope for the best.

A few minutes later, Rarity returned with the tea and a tray of cucumber sandwiches. Before Rarity could invite her, Sunset snatched one and wolfed it down, having eaten nothing since Thursday.

“Er, help yourself,” Rarity said.

Sunset shoved another one into her mouth. “Swowy.”

“*Please*, darling, do not talk with your mouth full.”

Sunset was forced to swallow her food, nearly choking on the half-chewed sandwiches. “Right, my bad.”

Rarity dismissed it with a wave of her hand and took a sip of tea. “Okay, Sunset, what seems to be the problem? Your text seemed rather urgent.”

“Absolutely nothing,” Sunset said. She facepalmed.

Rarity lowered her cup, looking very confused. “Are you sure, dear?”

“Yep! I mean, no!” Sunset groaned. “Okay, Rarity, this is going to be hard to explain, so please, don’t ask me any questions until I’m done.”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

Sunset set her tea cup down. “Okay, here I go.” She exhaled slowly. “I—”

“Have a crush on Twilight?” Rarity blurted out.

“No! I mean... yes! But that’s not—”

“Oh, I *knew* it!” Rarity jumped from her seat and began hopping around the room. “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!” She dropped back

to her seat and leaned into Sunset's personal space, a giant smiled plastered across her face. "You two are *adorable* together!"

Sunset leaned out as far as she could. "Rarity... you're scaring me more than usual."

Rarity leaned back in her seat and composed herself. "I'm sorry, that was completely out of line. But do you know how long I've been holding that back?"

"No." Yes.

"A very long time, Sunset!" She threw her hands into the air. "It was absolute torture waiting for you to admit it! When you texted me this morning, I knew that *had* to be the reason you were asking for help!"

"That's only part of the reason I'm here, Rarity." Sunset crossed her arms. Maybe she should have gone to Applejack instead. At least she wouldn't be interrupted then.

Rarity cleared her throat. "Sorry, sorry. Go on."

Sunset breathed deep to lower her agitation. "Okay, first, I need you to do me a favor. It's going to sound a little weird, but it'll make sense in a second, okay?"

"Okay..." Rarity shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"I need you to say, 'Sunset, please stop lying.' Don't ask me why yet, just do it," she snapped. "Please."

Rarity smiled in relief. "If that's all, then sure. Sunset, please stop lying."

There was the tingling sensation, and Sunset felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She slumped in her seat. "Thank you, Rarity."

"Anytime, dear. Care to tell me what this is all about now?"

"Yes, yes I would." Sunset sat up again. "This is going to sound crazy, but with everything you've already seen, it shouldn't be *too* crazy." Sunset took a long sip of tea. "The night of the Fall Formal, after you girls blasted me... something happened."

"Something as in...?"

“As in, I—” Sunset choked, her throat suddenly blocked. She coughed until she could get air down again and cleared her throat. “Ahem, I—” Her throat did it again, clogging up before she could mention anything about what had transpired when she had been hit by the Elements.

Rarity leaned forward. “What is it?”

Sunset pounded her chest a few times. “The night of the Fall Formal, I—” Her throat seized up again. It was just like when she was forced to tell the truth, only in reverse.

What’s going on? Why can’t I talk about it? “Rarity, I—” She tried to fight through the pressure, her face turning red from the exertion. She choked again and gasped for air, doubling over in her seat.

“Sunset, are you all right?” Rarity sat her up straight and handed her a cup of tea.

“N-no, I’m not.” Sunset guzzled it down in one gulp, scalding the back of her throat. “I’m not okay, because there is a—” She gagged, almost spitting her tea up. “*Aaaaagh!* What the hell?”

Rarity leaned back. “Sunset... you’re starting to scare me.”

Sunset ran her hands down the sides of her face. “May I have a pen and some paper, please?”

“Of course. Wait one second.” Rarity hurried out of the room, a little too quickly for Sunset’s tastes.

Seriously, what’s happening? Did something go wrong when Rarity asked me to tell the truth? It was pretty straightforward. She crossed her arms, a theory already forming in her head. Hopefully, she was wrong, or things were going to get very awkward, very fast.

Rarity returned with a pen and paper and laid them on the table. Sunset snatched the pen up and set it against the paper.

‘I have a—’ Her hand cramped up, forcing her to drop the pen. The second she did, the cramp went away, and she tried again, only for it to return when she picked up where she left off.

“No... no, no, no!” Sunset stared at the paper, a blank and hopeless void mocking her attempt to save herself. *I can't talk about the curse. The whole time, I thought it was a choice. Every time someone got close to it, I always made the choice to steer clear... and in the end, it was off-limits anyway.*

A hand rested on her shoulder, and Sunset looked up to see Rarity with wide eyes. “Sunset, what’s wrong?”

“I...” Sunset hung her head. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why ever not?”

“I just can’t. I want to—I really do... but I can’t.”

“Sunset, I don’t understand.” Rarity moved her hand down to take Sunset’s. “If you want to tell me then just do it. I swear I won’t repeat anything you don’t want me to.”

Hopelessness filled Sunset’s stomach—a terrible combination with the hunger she still had. She looked into Rarity’s eyes, desperately wanting to say everything. Was it so no one could take advantage of her knowingly? Or did the Elements really just enjoy making her miserable? Regardless of the reason, Sunset hated them even more.

Still, Rarity was looking for an answer. The more Sunset dodged it, the more curious Rarity would get; and who knew how long Sunset could say no before Rarity got annoyed or angry. Sunset inwardly screamed, though it did little in helping her vent.

She needed to tell Rarity something and steer the conversation in a different direction. Thinking fast, Sunset found the only topic that would knock out two birds with one stone.

“The night of the Fall Formal... is when I first met Twilight. I stopped two creeps raping her.”

Rarity threw her hands over her mouth to cover up the horrified shriek she made. “Good heavens! I can’t believe it! That’s-that’s...” Rarity shuddered and gagged.

“Yeah, I know.” The very idea made Sunset sick with rage. She wished she could go back in time and deliver a more lethal beating.

Still steamed, Rarity stood up, took several laps around the table, then sat down again. “Well,” she said after a long breath, “it’s a good thing you were there.” She picked her tea up and swished it around. “Though I can see why you were hesitant to tell me this; it seems a little more of Twilight’s business.”

Well, I had to tell you something. Sunset took a sandwich and nibbled on the corner. Despite her hunger, her stomach didn’t seem to eager to take in food at the moment.

“Still, I see why Twilight values you so much as a friend.” Rarity tried to hide her smile behind her cup. “She thinks you’re a hero.”

Sunset put the sandwich down. “Not anymore. I... really, *really* messed up on Thursday.”

The smile melted off Rarity’s face. “Oh no, what happened?”

“Well, She told me... she confessed that she liked me,” Sunset said miserably. The memory played through her mind, along with a thousand different ways it could have gone that didn’t end with Twilight in tears.

Rarity looked caught between happy and scared, tilting from one side of her chair to the other. “But, didn’t you tell me you liked her too?”

“Yes, I did—I do! I can’t believe it, but I really do like her, Rarity. But I was scared. I’m still scared! I didn’t want to mess it up and hurt her, so I... When she tried to kiss me, I pulled away.”

Apprehension clouded Rarity’s eyes. “And then...?”

“And then, I said a lot of things that I didn’t mean, and Twilight ran inside the house.” Sunset lifted her knees and hugged them against her chest.

“What did you say?”

Sunset cringed. “I said that I hated her and that she was a nosey, show-offy nerd and that I despised hanging out with her.”

Rarity gaped at her. “Sunset...”

“Don’t ask me why I did it!” Sunset covered her face. “It was horrible, I know! I didn’t mean any of it, it just... it was forced out of me.” She banged her head against her knees. “Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!”

Rarity stood up and grabbed her head. “Enough of that! Beating yourself up emotionally is one thing, but I will not have you physically hurting yourself. Which reminds me...” Her eyes wandered to Sunset’s bandaged hand. “What happened there?”

Sunset held her hand out. “I punched my mirror because it was mocking me.”

With a sympathetic sigh, Rarity took her hand. “These bandages look filthy. I’m guessing they’re as old as the building. I’m going to get some fresh ones and some disinfectant, then you can finish your story.” She got up and hurried out the room.

A clock chimed somewhere in the house. When it finished, Sunset found it eerily quiet. It made her wailing thoughts even louder.

At least I got her to ask me to stop lying. But this stupid penance... I really can't tell if it's trying to protect me or make my life a living hell! I suppose it doesn't matter right now; I just need Rarity to tell me what to do about Twilight.

Sunset sighed. Curse or no curse, Twilight wouldn’t want to talk to her. And what would Sunset say anyway?

Before she could put more thought into it, Rarity returned with bandages much whiter than the ones Sunset was wearing, and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. She sat down, took Sunset’s hand, and started undoing the old bandages.

“Okay, so to sum this up, Twilight told you she liked you, you two *didn't* kiss, and then you panicked and broke her heart.”

“Well, I didn’t *not* kiss her. We kinda, sorta kissed... a little... almost.”

“Brushing lips is not a kiss, dear.”

What is she, psychic? “Okay, so we didn’t kiss. Anyways—ow, ow, ow, ow!” Sunset jerked her hand back.

“It’s going to sting a little,” Rarity chastised. “You’re a big girl, handle it.” She pulled Sunset back and rubbed the alcohol in. “Sunset, I can understand panicking, but telling her you hate her to avoid hurting her feelings seems to be going to the extreme.”

“I *really* panicked, okay?” Sunset squeezed her eyes shut. Not even the rubbing alcohol could numb the pain in her heart. “I couldn’t even admit I liked

her until after it was all over. That's why I came here, Rarity." Sunset pressed her free hand into her forehead. "I'm in love with Twilight. But I don't know the first thing about it. I was so scared I was going to mess it up that I messed it up!"

Rarity gently finished wrapping Sunset's bandages, then held a cup of tea to her. "Drink."

Sunset took it and sipped the tea down. It didn't make her feel better, it just made her want to pee.

"Now, let's take this one step at a time. First, describe your feelings for Twilight to me."

"All of them?" She groaned when Rarity made a sharp nod. "Okay... well, I always feel *happy* around her. Usually, I'm just content or satisfied, but when it's just us, I'm smiling more or laughing. And I feel like I'm not fighting an uphill battle to prove something to her. She wasn't there when I was... old me, so it's like she isn't judging me for what I did in the past. And, I like making her happy and seeing her smile. I *love* making her blush—her cheeks turn this adorable shade of pink! I love how smart she is and how much she cares about everyone. She plays the violin so well, it sends me to another world where it's just us. And she always smells of lavender, and... and..."

Sunset moved her hands to cover her face. "Celestia... she makes me crazy. I sound like some stupid, lovestruck teenager."

Rarity smiled. "See, now was that so hard?"

"Yes, I hate wearing my heart on my sleeve!" Even without being forced to lie, Sunset wasn't sure she had it in her to admit all of that to Twilight.

Picking up a sandwich, Rarity said, "Well, as you've already proven, lying in an attempt to protect her didn't work. You obviously like her and she likes you."

Sunset slumped in her chair. "You're making it sound so simple."

"Well, in this case, it is." Rarity took a bite of her sandwich, chewing methodically before swallowing. "If you really care about her as much as you say you do, then I don't know why you're worried about hurting her. You're

becoming a better person, and she sees that. Coupled with the fact that you saved her life, it's no wonder she likes you so much."

"Not anymore." Sunset looked at the rest of the sandwiches but decided she was no longer hungry. "She probably never wants to see me again."

Rarity waved a hand through the air. "Just go and talk to her."

"I can't." Sunset cringed again. "She asked me to leave her alone."

"Uuugh! And people call *me* a drama queen."

Sunset hummed, tapping her fingers together. "Rarity, could you do me another favor and—"

With a roll of her eyes, Rarity said, "Yes, I'll go talk to Twilight and convince her to give you another chance."

That wasn't what I was going to ask, but okay. Sunset smiled. "Thank you, Rarity."

"You're welcome, dear."

They fell silent. Rarity poured more tea into her cup, and Sunset finally found the stomach to finish a sandwich while she contemplated on what she was going to say to Twilight.

"Confidence," Rarity said.

"What?"

"The only thing you need, Sunset, is confidence. And I know you have some the way you threw your dominance around the school."

Sunset shifted in her seat, letting her legs down. "Y-yeah. But this is an entirely different scenario."

"Hardly. The only difference is that you're trying to make someone happy instead of miserable."

"I guess." Sunset's stomach turned. "But what if I don't make her happy? What if—ow!" She rubbed the top of her head where Rarity had flicked it. "What was that for?"

"I just told you to have confidence!" Rarity wagged a finger at her. "I know love can be scary, but you have to be confident in yourself. You want this, Twilight wants this... *I* want this!"

Sunset fixed Rarity with a deadpan look.

Rarity looked away and cleared her throat. “Personal feelings aside, you deserve to be happy. Maybe you’ll work it out or maybe you won’t, but you’ll never know until you *try*! Otherwise, you’ll be looking back wondering what could have been.”

Sunset mulled Rarity’s words over. It wasn’t that simple; if she tried and failed, she could lose Twilight forever. On the other hand, if she tried and succeeded.... After all, look what had happened when she gave friendship a chance.

Her heart drum rolled in her chest. Her and Twilight together.... The thought was terrifying, yet so very compelling.

“Okay.” Sunset swallowed the sandpaper in her mouth. “I’ll try.”

Rarity smiled. “Good girl. See how simple that is?”

Sunset huffed. “Sure, it’s simple, but it’s not easy.”

“Well, love never is. If you want it, you’ll have to fight for it.”

Fight for it. Never in a thousand years did Sunset think she’d be fighting for the affection of Twilight Sparkle. The very thought made her want to laugh and curse the universe for its irony. She’d been denying her feelings for so long, admitting it felt surreal.

She liked Twilight Sparkle.

She groaned. “I hate you, Twilight Sparkle.”

Rarity let out a dreamy sigh. “Love is such a grand and fickle thing. Uncontrollable, unpredictable, and it makes us do the craziest things.”

“Yeah,” Sunset muttered. “The craziest things...”

Cadence could hear the caterwauling of a dying cat before Shining opened the door and ushered into the house. For such a small instrument, Twilight’s violin could be very loud when she wanted it to be.

“Yesterday, she was just mopey,” Shining said, “today, she’s trying to play Ode to Joy. I’m not sure which is worse.”

The noise stopped, and they both sighed in relief.

“I’m guessing she hasn’t come out of her room?” Cadence asked.

Shining shook his head. “She comes out to grab something to snack on, but won’t say a word to anyone.”

Well, at least she’s eating, Cadence thought. The first time she had heart broken, she tried starving herself for two days. Thankfully, Twilight drowned her sorrows out in badly played music.

“Okay, I’ll see if I—” Cadence covered her ears as the screeching started again. She started to wonder if Twilight starving herself was the better option. The wailing hit a high note, and Spike howled, burying his face into the couch cushion.

“Please do something before I go deaf, Cady,” Shining begged.

Cadence nodded and climbed the stairs. “Love goddess Cadence to the rescue.” She reached Twilight’s room and knocked. “Twily, it’s Cady. Do you want to open the door for me, ladybug?”

The torture music stopped. Ten seconds later, Twilight cracked the door open and poked her head out, a set of thick black glasses sitting on her face. It was something Cadence hadn’t seen in almost three years. Behind the glasses were puffy red eyes.

You can’t hide anything from me, ladybug. Cadence smiled. “Good afternoon, Twily. How are you?”

Twilight sniffed. “Fine.”

“Can I come in?”

There was a thin trace of resentment in Twilight’s eyes, but she yielded and allowed Cadence passage. Since the walls weren’t painted black, nothing was smashed, and there were no scraps of badly written poetry lying around, Cadence thought Twilight was handling it rather well.

They sat on the bed together, and Twilight picked up her violin. Cadence quickly placed a hand on her knee. “Sweetie, why don’t we put the violin away for a moment?”

“I need to practice,” she said curtly.

“Oh, I think you’ve practiced enough for today. Come on, let’s just talk for a little bit.”

Twilight lowered the violin into her lap. “Fine.”

“Good.” Cadence patted her knee. “So, I see you’re wearing your old glasses today.”

“I didn’t feel like putting in my contacts,” she said as she rubbed her eyes.

Cadence nodded, knowing it was more of a case that they wouldn’t stay in. She hummed to herself, wondering how to ease her way into the problem.

“Love stinks!” Twilight shouted.

Or, we could do that. Cadence moved her arm around Twilight’s shoulder and pulled her close. “Twilight, don’t let one bad experience turn you off from love forever. Just breathe and tell me what happened.”

Twilight inhaled and held it for a moment before releasing it slowly. “I tried to kiss Sunset, but she pulled away and said... she didn’t like me that way.” She curled into Cadence.

Cadence sighed. “Aww, sweetheart; I’m sorry. But you know, not everyone swings that way.”

“That’s not why I’m upset,” Twilight mumbled into Cadence’s side.

“Oh?”

Twilight lifted her face. “It’s what she said after that. I asked her what she thought of me and...” Twilight raised her glasses and started rubbing her eyes. “She said... she said she hated me! She said I was annoying and that she hated spending time with me!”

Cadence squeezed her. “Twilight, that’s... that’s...” *That’s really confusing actually.* Sunset may have acted a little odd at dinner, but she seemed like she was enjoying herself. In fact, she seemed pleasant overall. With all the nice things she had done with and for Twilight, why would she turn around and say she hated her?

“I don’t get it!” Twilight yelled. “First she says she likes spending time with me and says she loves it when I play violin and all this other nice stuff, and

then... then..." Twilight pressed herself into Cadence. "She just wants to play with my emotions."

"No, I think Sunset is just confused about her own emotions. Love is hard for some people. Maybe she just couldn't express herself properly."

"She said she did it because it was funny."

Or she's a jerk. Cadence took a deep breath. "Okay, Twilight, maybe she just needs a little space. Give her some time, then, if she doesn't come to you, go and talk to her again. Don't be confrontational, just gently explain that what she did hurt you, and you want a serious explanation."

"Okay."

"And if her answer doesn't change, you can send Shining after her." Unfortunately, Twilight didn't smile. Cadence lifted her up and brushed a tear away. "Twily, this isn't the end of the world. Remember: if it doesn't work out, there will be other Sunsets."

"I know. I just thought she liked me. At least as a friend."

"I'm sure she does." *I hope she does.* "She just needs time to get everything settled in her heart. I'm sure there's a good explanation for everything." She held Twilight for a few more minutes until she stopped sniffing.

"Thanks, Cady, I feel a little better now."

Cadence stroked her hair. "Good. Would you like me to bake you some cookies?"

Twilight smiled. "Yes, please."

She stood up. "One batch of triple chocolate chip coming up!" She stepped out the room and closed the door behind her. The moment she did, Twilight started sawing away on her violin again. Cadence opened the door, walked over, gently took the violin from Twilight's hands, and walked out.

Upon returning downstairs, Shining asked, "How is she?"

"She'll be fine. I think there's just a little miscommunication going on between her and Sunset." She set the violin on the table and walked into the kitchen.

Shining followed her and leaned against the counter. “There’s something fishy about that Sunset. I know Canterlot pretty well, and I’ve never heard of any apartments called ‘The Factory.’ And people give streets weird names, but ‘Equestria’? I think she’s trying to hide something.”

Cadence reached for the flour and sugar. “I think you’re just looking for an excuse not to like her.”

“She saved Twilight’s life. I’m not looking for a reason to dislike her, I’m just trusting my gut feeling.”

Setting her ingredients down, Cadence pinched Shining’s cheek. “You’re so cute when you’re being the protective big brother. But don’t go playing detective against the poor girl. Just trust Twilight.”

Shining crossed his arms. “Twilight I trust. It’s this Sunset Shimmer I have questions about.”

Kpok 33: Friends, Foes, and Family

Sunset and Rarity had long since finished their tea and sandwiches but had continued to sit and talk for a couple of hours. To Sunset's luck, Rarity had forgotten to ask why Sunset needed to be asked to stop lying.

The sun started to get low, and Sunset decided she wouldn't impose any longer. Truth be told, she wanted to go home and think for a while.

"Really, darling, it's no bother. You can stay as long as you want," Rarity insisted while they stood on the porch.

"No, you've done enough already." Sunset gave her a warm hug. "Thanks again, Rarity."

Rarity patted her back. "I'm glad I could help. Everything's going to work out, you'll see. Just remember, confidence."

Sunset rubbed her arm. "Right, confidence. You'd think being a former tyrant queen would give you plenty of that."

"Well, you weren't exactly a social butterfly. Expressing yourself can be hard, but I know you can do it. And I'll be rooting for you every step of the way."

"Thanks." Sunset turned to go, but Rarity cleared her throat.

"Actually, Sunset, there was one more thing I've been meaning to talk to you about." She rolled a hand through the air. "You see, I was thinking of running for princess of the Winter Ball, and I was hoping you might consider maybe, possibly lending me a little assistance?"

Sunset smiled. "Yes, Rarity, I'll help you run for princess. It's the least I can do."

Rarity beamed at her. "You really are a good friend, Sunset."

Sunset stepped off the porch, dismissively waving her hand. "Debatable."

"Confidence!"

"I'll see you on Monday, Rarity!" Sunset strapped her helmet on and took off down the road, grinning as she heard Rarity shout at her one more time.

It wasn't that she *didn't* have confidence. It was just often misplaced. She had been confident in her superiority. She had been confident she could wield the Element of Magic and take over Equestria. She had been confident that she didn't like Twilight as anything more than a friend.

All three times she had been wrong.

Breaking at a stoplight, Sunset wondered if she was wrong again. Was trying to date Twilight a really good idea? She ignored the part of her brain that said no and remembered that, dating or not, she needed to apologize to Twilight and tell her what she really felt. Whether or not Twilight would still have feelings for her come Monday was a different story.

One thing at a time, Sunset. One thing at a time.

She arrived back at the factory and slid her bike into the alleyway, then covered it with a tarp. Thinking back, she counted herself lucky Trixie hadn't touched it. Sunset's stomach growled, unsatisfied from the cucumber sandwiches Rarity had provided. She was about to go inside and have some ravioli when she decided she had enough money to spoil herself to a large salad at a deli not too far from her.

Too lazy to uncover her motorcycle again, Sunset decided to walk. She dropped her helmet in front of the door and stepped onto the main street. The sun dipped low in the sky, casting streaks of orange between the old buildings. Somewhere close by, a cat shrieked, setting off a loud dog.

Sunset walked up the street with her hands in her pockets, whistling a nameless tune. Aside from the stray animals, the old streets were relatively quiet, something Sunset appreciated. Lost in the silence, Sunset thought about everything she had to do in the coming weeks. Prepare for semester finals, help organize the Winter Ball *and* help Rarity win it, ask Twilight to forgive her, and buy enough blankets to get through another cold winter.

She was very glad the science fair was over now.

Turning a corner, Sunset smacked face first into one of the last people she'd expect to run into. Both of them crashed to the ground, rubbing their bruised noses.

Sunset narrowed her eyes, more in confusion than agitation. "Trixie?"

Trixie looked up, still holding her nose. “Augh, Sunset Shimmer! You’re not supposed to—I-I mean, what are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way to get a salad.” She stood up and dusted herself off. “I’m allowed to do that on my day off, right?”

Trixie jumped to her feet. “Trixie doesn’t care what you do. In fact, she was glad you weren’t in the shop today.”

Sunset crossed her arms, looking skeptical. “Uh-huh. Then why are you down here?”

“Trixie enjoys taking walks around the city. Is that a crime?”

“No, but something tells me that isn’t why you’re here.” Sunset tapped her foot. “You came to spy on me, didn’t you?”

Trixie swatted her hand through the air. “No, she did not! And you can’t prove anything, anyway!”

Sunset looked down and shook her head. “Whatever. I don’t have the energy to deal with you today, so if you want to spy on me and my ‘evil deeds’ be my guest, just do it quietly.”

“Stop thinking the whole world revolves around you.” Trixie turned her nose up. “Trixie said she was out for a walk. Why would she waste time trying to see what you’re up to?”

“Because you’re obsessed with getting revenge on me for something I didn’t do,” Sunset deadpanned.

Trixie balled her hands. “Trixie is not obsessed!”

Sunset shrugged. “Whatever you say. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m hungry and just want a salad, so move.”

With a huff, Trixie said, “You can do whatever you want. Trixie doesn’t care.”

Sunset crossed her arms. “Good.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

They both stepped to the right. They stared at each other, then stepped to the left. Their stares morphed into glowers and they both stepped to the right again.

Sunset raised a hand. “Okay, this is getting ridiculous. Just move!”

“You move first!”

“Fine, I’m not even going to argue with you on—”

“*Hey!*” a new voice screamed.

Sunset looked across the street, and her blood ran cold at the four figures now marching toward her and Trixie.

The lead figure now sported a scar on her left cheek, and her nose looked crooked. She still had snow white hair with purple tips and wore too much eye shadow. The other three hadn’t changed in the slightest, though they appeared angrier than the last time Sunset had seen them.

“Gilda.” Sunset put on a fake smile. “Nice to see you again. You look well.”

Gilda wasted no time in getting up in Sunset’s face. She grinned fiendishly. “I can’t believe my luck today. Got some graffiti in, snagged some smokes, *and* I get to wail on this runt? Santa must think I’ve been a good girl this year.”

Sunset smelled the tobacco on Gilda’s breath and gagged. “I’m guessing you didn’t steal any mints while you were at it?”

Gilda held a fist up. “Don’t give me any cheek. I’m about to carve your face up; you don’t want me to turn this into a homicide.” Her eyes wandered to Trixie. “Or even a double homicide.”

Trixie took a step back. “Umm, Sunset, how do you know these people?”

“Rainbow and I got in a fight with them a few months ago and won.”

Gilda grabbed the front of Sunset’s sweater. “But little Dashie ain’t here, is she?” She gave Sunset a rough shake. “I bet you’re not so tough without her watching your back.”

Sunset leered at her. “I’m going to have to ask you to let go of me before you piss me off,” she said calmly.

“Fine.” Gilda shoved her to the ground, then kicked her in the side.

The wind rushed out of Sunset, leaving her gaping like a fish. She clutched her side and struggled to stand up. *Why today? First Trixie, then Gilda?*

Seriously, haven't I had enough karma done to me? Sunset got to her feet, breathing hard. Gilda and her gang members were still laughing at her distress.

"All right, Gilda, you want a rematch?" Sunset forced some more air into her lungs and put up her fists. "Let's go! So, Trixie, how good are you in a fight?"

Trixie didn't respond.

Sunset turned her head, finding the space next to her empty. Looking behind her, she saw Trixie's skirt turn the corner.

"Dammit, Trixie," Sunset groaned. She looked back to the Griffons. The boys each pulled out a switchblade, while Gilda flipped a butterfly knife in her hand before pointing it at Sunset's neck.

Sunset scooted a foot back, feeling even less unsure about the fight. She was many things: brave, stubborn, and determined. But she wasn't stupid. "Oh hey, I just remembered I have a thing to do, so—" Sunset broke into a run after Trixie.

"*Get her!*" Gilda screamed.

Sunset had trouble breathing the first hundred feet and her ribs were aching from that one kick. She wouldn't be surprised if Gilda was wearing steel-toed boots. Despite her handicaps, she managed to catch up to Trixie in less than a minute.

Trixie glared at her. "Stop following Trixie! It's you they want!"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't put it past them to go after you for association with me," Sunset said in one breath.

"Trixie hates you!"

"Tell them that, maybe they'll let you join their club!"

Gilda closed in on them, her heavy boots thundering across the pavement. With every step, Sunset wondered if Gilda was close enough to start swinging her knife.

Spotting a narrow alley, Sunset grabbed Trixie by the arm and pulled her into it, never breaking her stride. Behind her, Gilda and her gang members stumbled to a stop before turning down the alley, opening the distance between them.

Okay, now what? Sunset knew she couldn't go back home, and turning to fight was a really bad idea with them swinging their knives around. But she also couldn't run forever—her bruised rib wouldn't let her.

In front of them was a gated fence with a 'keep out' sign posted on it. Sunset dropped Trixie's hand and said, "We'll try to lose them in there."

"But... Trixie... can't climb!" she panted.

"You can teleport can't you?"

"Oh... right." Trixie clapped her hands together and vanished in a puff of smoke, reappearing on the other side of the fence. "See ya!" She waved and ran further into the alley.

So much hate right now. Sunset jumped onto the fence and scaled up as fast as she could. She was almost over the top when a sharp, burning sensation pierced her calf, forcing her to scream. The knife tore from her leg, and Sunset toppled over the fence, landing on her back. Her world spun, pain dragged tears from her eyes and blurred her vision. She could hear the gate clinking as someone climbed over it.

The adrenaline began to kick in. Sunset shook her head and saw Gilda almost over the fence, waving her bloody knife. Without thinking, Sunset lunged for a nearby trash can lid and flung it like a frisbee. It struck Gilda in the head, sending her back over the fence, landing on Dumbbell, Hoops, and Score.

Biting down a scream, Sunset got up and ran down the alley, putting all her weight on her uninjured left leg. She used the walls for support whenever she was about to fall over. The alley turned several times and split more than once.

Eventually, Sunset escaped the labyrinth and found herself in a construction site. A three-story skeleton stood at the center surrounded by iron beams and scaffolds. It looked as if no one had touched it in a while.

Sunset took a knee and tried to look at her wound. Her blood had soaked through her pants and dyed it crimson. Now that she had stopped moving, the pain came in sharp pulses, and her leg felt incredibly weak.

Now what? Hopefully, she had outmaneuvered Gilda, but now she was stuck in the middle of Celestia-knew-where with a bloody leg.

There was a *crack* followed by large crash, and someone screamed, "*Help!*"

Sunset jumped to her feet, only to collapse in the dirt. Still, the cries of distress forced her body to get up and shamle on. She made her way to the far side of the building and looked up to see Trixie hanging from a broken plank on the third floor.

“Trixie, how the heck did you get up there?” Sunset shouted.

Trixie flailed her legs, trying to climb back up. “I tried to teleport again, but I ended up here instead! Please, do something!”

Sunset sighed. “Don’t worry, I’ll do what I can, just hang on.” She started searching for a way up, wondering what she would have done if she didn’t have a curse on her. Trixie was a thorn in her side, but Sunset was pretty sure she didn’t want to see her dead.

There was a ramp nearby that led to the second floor, and another one across from it that led to the third, though Sunset wasn’t sure she’d call it a floor. There were steel beams and a few wooden blanks, but most of it was still incomplete. Sunset stepped lightly as to not break the wood, and because it was all her leg would allow. Regardless, it gave out a few feet from Trixie, and she fell against the wood, rattling the entire structure.

Trixie screamed and scrabbled at the edge. “I’m slipping, I’m slipping!” she sobbed.

Sunset crawled on her belly, throwing herself the last foot to catch Trixie just as her hand slipped. The force yanked Sunset forward, nearly sending her over the edge as well, but she caught her foot against a support beam.

“Don’t let me fall, please!”

Sunset grunted, pulling Trixie back with all the strength she could muster. “I won’t, I promise.” The wood creaked ominously beneath her.

“*I found them!*” Hoops shouted.

Today is not my day. Sunset gave Trixie another heave while trying to wiggle back to safety. Her leg protested violently, sapping her strength and making her vision double. She shook her head and concentrated on Trixie, who looked scared beyond belief. She kept looking down and shaking.

“Hey, hey,” Sunset said in her best reassuring voice. “You’re gonna be fine. Just look at me. It’s gonna be okay.” She could hear multiple footsteps on the ground below.

Trixie shook her head. “I’m sorry, Sunset, I—“

“Don’t wanna hear it.” Sunset heaved again. “You’re going—to—be—all right!” They were almost there. The structure rattled with the addition of four more bodies.

“But I’m slipping!”

Sunset tightened her grip on Trixie’s sweaty palms. “Just hang on a minute longer!” Applejack’s words echoed through her. Trixie may not have been her sister, heck she wasn’t even a friend. But Sunset would be damned if she let her fall!

Her legs screamed in protest and her vision started to fade; but with her newfound determination, Sunset rose to her feet, hauling Trixie up. She latched onto a support beam while Sunset stumbled back and fell again. Both of them were silent save for their heavy panting.

Gilda’s march up the ramp broke their moment of peace. “Nowhere to run now, dweeb!”

Sunset pushed herself up and stood in front of Trixie. She wobbled at first but found her footing. “Any chance you can teleport both of us out of here?” she whispered.

“No; I can’t even go long distances, never mind taking someone with me.”

Figures. Sunset put her fists up as Gilda approached with a predatory smile. She took up the narrow pathway, leaving Hoops, Dumbbell and Score to maneuver around on the steel beams.

“Okay,” Sunset said, “then I need you to leave by yourself and run.”

Trixie hesitated. “But, Sunset, what about you?”

“I’m probably going to die,” she said in a low voice. She shook her head. “I’ll be fine, just go.”

“But your leg—”

“Just go!”

“Sunset!”

“*Leave before I push you!*” Sunset knew Trixie had finally listened to her because Gilda’s expression switched to shock and confusion.

“What the hell?” She looked around the yard. “Where’d she go?”

“Dunno,” Sunset said. “But you should be focusing on me.”

Gilda grinned. “Your funeral.” She jabbed her knife at Sunset.

Sunset pressed herself to the side so the knife only cut a thin line through her sweatshirt. She stepped back when Gilda slashed again, drawing dangerously close to the edge. Her leg gave out, and she knelt in front of Gilda. The knife pressed into Sunset’s cheek, drawing beads of blood.

“That’s right, kneel, you little bitch. I’m going to cut your pretty face to ribbons.” Gilda pressed the blade in harder. “But tell you what? If you’re good, I *won’t* push you off.”

“As tempting as that sounds—” Sunset grabbed Gilda’s wrist and twisted it away. The tip of the knife cut her cheek again as she turned it away, but it was better than the alternative. They wrestled over the knife, Gilda trying to bring it back to Sunset’s face, and Sunset trying to pull it out of her hand.

Gilda smacked Sunset’s face, but with only one hand on the knife, Sunset was able to pull the knife free and turn it on Gilda. She jumped back as Sunset slashed forward, almost losing her balance.

Sunset rose again and waved the knife. “I think this evens the odds a little bit.”

Gilda reached into her pocket and pulled out a second butterfly knife.

Of course. She had to give credit where it was due: Gilda wasn’t an idiot. Both girls swung; the blades scraped against each other creating a horrible metallic screeching. They swung again, managing to create sparks this time. On the third swing, Gilda aimed for Sunset’s fingers, nicking her thumb when Sunset jerked away at the last second.

“Hey, feel free to jump in anytime!” Gilda yelled to the others.

Score shrugged. “Hard to when you’re taking most of the space. Besides, you got this.”

Gilda rolled her eyes. “If you want something done right...” Her blade clashed against Sunset’s again.

Sunset wished she had tried to go with Trixie, even if she couldn’t teleport two people. Blowing up might have been a better alternative to what she was facing now. She strained to stand, sweating from the exertion. Combined with holding Gilda off and having pulled Trixie back from a three-story drop, she was surprised she hadn’t passed out.

Well, with the way things are going, that’s still a possibility. Even if I manage to beat Gilda, I have three more losers to fight through, and I have to crawl home. The outlook was bleak if Sunset was honest with herself.

Evidently, Gilda sensed Sunset’s waning optimism and pressed her attack, forcing Sunset to take a half step back. She swung again, and the two blades pressed against each other.

Gilda grinned at her. “Enjoy your fall.” She threw her weight forward, shoving Sunset off the building.

Sunset did not scream. She just fell. She closed her eyes and waited for the end, regretting not seeing Equestria again. Regretting not getting to apologize to Twilight. Regretting Gilda’s laugh would be the last thing she ever heard.

It was a slow fall. So slow in fact, that Sunset wondered what was taking so long for her to hit the ground. She then realized that, while there was a feeling of weightlessness, there was no sensation of actually falling. She opened her eyes, finding herself surrounded a glow of purple magic, drifting slowly to the ground.

“Seriously, what the hell?” Gilda shouted above her.

“Lulamoon,” Sunset whispered as she touched the ground.

Trixie ran up to her, surprising Sunset with how concerned she looked. She also looked like she had just run a marathon; her stuck to her face and she was sweating everywhere. “Are you okay, Sunset?”

“Not really,” Sunset said, falling to her knee again. “Didn’t I tell you to run?”

Behind Trixie, a familiar voice said, “Lulamoon never run, Sunset.” Artemis and Selena strode up, having popped out of nowhere. “Strategically retreat, maybe...” Artemis pulled out his wand. “But never run.”

“What are you doing here?” Sunset asked.

Selena put a hand on a saber strapped to her side. “Trixie came and told us you were in trouble. Looks like we arrived just in time.”

So many thoughts ran through Sunset’s mind, but the loss of blood made them all jumble together into a knotted mess. Instead of trying to make sense of it, she decided just to watch whatever was about to happen unfold.

Gilda and the others had scrambled off the building and were running back for the alley. Artemis appeared in front of them, his arms crossed and pointed hat pulled down over his eyes.

“Out of the way, old man! I ain’t afraid to cut you!” Gilda snarled.

Artemis raised his hat an inch. “Did you just call me old?”

Selena drew her saber and took large steps forward. “Poor choice of words. That was your second mistake.”

“Your first...” Artemis’ voice became hard. He lifted his hat up the rest of the way, revealing dangerous eyes. “Was threatening my daughter and attacking her friend.”

Sunset would have pointed out that she and Trixie weren’t friends, but she had never seen Artemis angry and really wanted to know how this would play out.

Gilda rushed forward, pulling her arm back to strike. At the flick of Artemis’ wand, she flew backward, her knife dropping from her hand. Selena flipped her saber around and jabbed the butt into Gilda’s back, sending her to the dirt face first.

Hoops, Score and Dumbbell stood dumbfounded, looking from Artemis to Selena to Gilda. Hoops recovered first, running and taking a stab at Artemis, only to go through an illusion. Artemis came from the side and took off his hat, setting a flock of doves upon Hoops. They pecked and smothered his face with their wings. Each time he hit one, it turned into bubbles, then reappeared as two more.

Score turned to Selena after watching the doves chase Hoops off. He made a jumping slash at her, following up with a combination of quick jabs and wide

sweeps. Selena dodged each of them with grace, taking light but decisive steps until Score wore himself out.

He swung wildly, and Selena blocked it with the pommel of her blade. She grabbed his wrist and twisted so the knife fell, then jabbed his shoulder with the butt of her saber, smashed his foot with her heel, and knocked him onto his back with an open palm to the chest.

Dumbbell saw all of this happen, looked at Artemis and Selena who were watching him expectantly, and broke into a run in the opposite direction.

Artemis cupped a hand over his mouth and spread his fingers apart. He blew a stream of fire that rose and curled into a massive ball above him. It uncurled into a scarlet dragon and soared after Dumbbell, unleashing a ferocious roar that made Sunset's hair stand on end.

The flames engulfed Dumbbell, and for a second, Sunset thought Artemis had actually incinerated him. The inferno died down, revealing Dumbbell tied up in thick ropes, but very much alive.

Gilda got up and looked at the scene around her. Hoops curled on the ground with the doves nesting on top of him. Score lying on the ground, groaning in pain. Dumbbell tied up, looking terrified.

“Seriously.... What. The. *Hell?*”

Selena placed the tip of her saber under Gilda's chin. “You should really think twice before you mess with someone. You never know who they know.” She edged the tip a little closer and narrowed her eyes. “And if you ever mess with my Trixie or her friends again, I'll gut you like a fish.”

Gilda stared at her, either unable to comprehend she had been beaten, or unable to comprehend being threatened by some random adult. She roared, pushing herself back before springing off the ground. Snatching her knife from the ground, she rushed at Selena again and swung, meeting her blade.

With a flick of her wrist, Selena sent the butterfly knife spinning into the air. She then turned her saber and smacked Gilda across the face with the flat side. Gilda spun around and crumpled to the ground, clutching her cheek. Selena stuck her hand out and caught the falling blade by the handle.

Artemis eased back into his boyish grin. “And that, Trixie, is why I married your mother!”

Sunset blinked. “That... was awesome.”

The Griffons sat bond together in a bundle of ropes with a blue bow attached. All of their weapons (save for the butterfly knife Sunset had snatched from Gilda) sat in a metal box twenty feet away with another bow on top.

“You’re seriously going to just leave us here?” Gilda asked. There was a purple welt across her cheek from where Selena’s saber had slapped her.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Artemis said, helping Sunset off the ground. “The police should be here soon. If not, I’m sure those ropes will keep you warm through the night.”

Gilda screamed obscenities while Sunset teleported away with the Lulamoon. It was a lot like teleporting as a pony: the world twisted around you, and you felt like you had been shoved forward at maximum speed. Only, there was more spoke upon reentry.

They appeared in front of a large home on the other side of the suburbs; it couldn’t have been more than five blocks from Twilight or Rarity. It was blue with white trimmings, and coming off the back was a pointed tower. Blue roses filled the garden bordering the walkway.

Artemis carried Sunset to the front door, decorated with a large L in calligraphy. Sunset only got halfway through rolling her eyes when the door opened and they nearly popped out of her head. The Lulamoon living room made Twilight’s and Rarity’s seem tame, and Pinkie’s look like a barren wasteland by comparison.

Pictures, portraits, and tapestries covered almost every inch of the walls. Most of the paintings were of starry night skies or depictions of nature. Everything else featured at least one of the Lulamoon. Starting on the wall to the left, Sunset found a picture of Artemis as a young boy. He looked exactly the same minus the goatee. A girl stood next to him, identical in nearly every way. She had the same childish smile and a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

Sunset's eyes went across the wall, finding a picture of an older Artemis performing in front of a large crowd with Selena on one side and the other girl on his left. Next was a picture of Selena disarming her opponent in a fencing duel. The subsequent picture was of Selena holding up the first place trophy.

Further down, Artemis and Selena were holding hands on the bow of a cruise ship. Then, they were standing side-by-side under the Eiffel Tower. Artemis wore a sky blue tuxedo with a top hat replacing his pointed cap, while Selena wore a breathtakingly beautiful white dress adorned with sapphires. A bouquet of blue roses sat in her hands.

On the next wall, Sunset found Artemis and Selena in several places around the world. They were dressed in cargo pants and pith helmets somewhere in the Amazon, turbans and robes in front of the Great Pyramids, khakis and binoculars on the Savannah, thick winter coats and goggles on what Sunset assumed was Mount Everest, and traditional Chinese robes on the Great Wall of China.

Following their world tour was a simple picture of a very pregnant Selena followed by one of her in the hospital holding a bawling Trixie. Then, there was Artemis feeding her a bottle, and Selena reading her a bedtime story. Both of them helped Trixie blow out her birthday candles, then Artemis held onto her while Trixie rode her first bike. All three of them, plus the girl from before, now a grown woman, were jumping on a trampoline. Trixie was on stage dressed as a flower. She was then being measured by the woman Sunset could only assume was Artemis' sister. Standing next to Trixie was a girl about the same age who looked oddly familiar to Sunset. She had red hair that turned purple, and was very pretty, even at that young age.

Sunset put little thought into it, still dizzy from her bleeding wound. But looking around at all of the pictures, all the snapshots and snippets of the Lulamoon's lives, an overwhelming feeling of love took hold of Sunset's heart. This place was more than a house.

It was a home.

Artemis placed Sunset face down on the soft, fuzzy couch. She heard Selena make a soft 'tut' before gentle fingers danced around her open wound. Her leg gave an involuntary twitch.

“She got you pretty deep,” Selena said. “I think she got a nerve. We should take you to the hospital instead.”

Sunset jerked her head up. “No! I... I mean, no thank you. It’s not as bad as it looks.” Sunset could hardly move her leg. “Besides, can’t you heal it, Artemis?”

“As phenomenal as my powers are—” Artemis lifted a hand, letting sparks fly from his fingers. “Healing magic is not my forte.”

Sunset glared at him. “But you fixed my nose!”

He shrugged. “It was only a little out of place, I just popped it back in. We’re talking about reconnecting nerves and tissue here. Very precise and delicate work.”

“Oh, come on! You must have *something*!” Sunset crossed her fingers. There was no way she could go to a hospital.

Selena hummed. “Well... we do have that spring water from the Himalayan monks.”

Artemis frowned. “Yes... but I was trying to save that for something, you know, *dire*.”

Selena whacked him on the shoulder. “She only needs a few drops, not the whole bottle.”

“Okay, okay... Trixie.”

Trixie jumped, looking like she had been called on for a problem she didn’t know the answer to. She had hardly said a word after coming back with help. “Yes?”

“Upstairs in the study, there’s a bottle on the third shelf behind the desk. Fetch it for us, would you, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Trixie bounded upstairs.

Selena walked around into Sunset’s sight. “Forgive me if I’m being nosy, Sunset, but how did you end up in this situation in the first place?”

Sunset sighed. “My friend Rainbow Dash and I got in a fight with those creeps a while back. They saw me on the street with Trixie and decided today would be a good day for payback.”

“And why were in such a seedy area in the first place?” Selena pursed her lips. “In fact, why was Trixie there?”

“I was going to get a salad. I think Trixie was spying on me.”

“Trixie was *not* spying on you!” Trixie marched down the stairs with the bottle in hand, and her usual sour look.

Nice to have you back, Trix. Had me worried for a second.

Selena took the bottle and uncorked it. From the open tip, a few crystal clear drops fell onto Sunset’s leg. It was warm and soothing, spreading deep into Sunset’s wound. The numbness vanished, replaced with a tingling sensation.

Sunset got to her feet and tested her healed leg, amazed to find it working just fine. She twisted around, finding the cut was nothing more than a pink scar. “Wow...” She looked at Selena. “I don’t know what to say. Well, thanks, obviously, but... that was amazing.”

“You’re very welcome.” Selena capped the bottle. “But you should be thanking Trixie. If it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t have known to come and get you.”

Trixie huffed and turned away. “Trixie doesn’t need your thanks. She was just repaying a favor. Now, we’re even.” Her eyes drifted back to Sunset. “She’s... glad you’re not dead though.”

Sunset gave a lopsided grin. “Thanks anyway, Trixie. All of you, thank you.” She took a backstep to the door. “I should go now before it gets too dark.”

Artemis frowned. “Are you sure you have to leave already? We’d love for you to stay for dinner.”

A flashback of the last family dinner she attended made Sunset instantly say, “Yes! I mean, no! I mean, no thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I really should go.”

“Very well,” Artemis said with heavy disappointment. “Allow me to at least accompany you out.” He flicked his wrist, and the door creaked open.

Sunset waved goodbye before she stepped over the threshold. Selena returned it enthusiastically, but Trixie kept her back turned and headed for the stairs.

Artemis closed the door behind them and walked Sunset down the path. “You know,” he said in a serious voice, “I worry about you sometimes.”

Sunset stopped. “Really?”

“Yes. I’ll admit, I’m baffled myself. I mean, I care a great deal about the people around me, but you, Sunset... I’ve only known you for a short while, but there’s something special about you. I knew it from the moment you stepped onto my stage. But I didn’t think destiny would have run into each other again and again.”

Stars began to pop overhead as night settled in. Sunset looked up at them, unsure of what to say. Perhaps Artemis was picking up the remains of her Equestrian magic.

“Are you all right, Sunset?”

“No.” Sunset sighed and held a hand up. “I appreciate the concern, Artemis, really, I do. Life is... sucky right now. But I’m a big girl. I can handle it.” *I hope.*

Artemis looked thoughtfully at her. “Proud as a lion, eh, Sunset?” He chuckled and twirled his goatee. “If you’re certain you can handle it, then I guess I have no right to question you. But I stand by what I told you last week: the Lulamoon is always here for you.” He gestured back to the door. “It may seem a bit forward, but our home is always open to you.”

A lump formed in Sunset’s throat, and she quickly turned away to wipe the tear that fell from her eye. “T-thank you, Artemis.” She composed herself and smiled. “You’re crazy... but you’re the good kind of crazy.”

“Then I’ve succeeded in my life goals!” he proclaimed. He ruffled Sunset’s hair. “Take tomorrow off, Sunset, but try to stay out of trouble, okay?”

Sunset playfully brushed his hand away. “Okay.” *I will definitely try.*

“Then good night, Sunset. Remember, if you need anything—” he snapped his fingers “—just call.” He vanished in a puff of smoke. Sunset questioned the point of teleporting when he was twenty feet from the front door.

With a half-hearted shrug, she began her walk home. She put her hands in her sweatshirt pockets and felt something flat and rectangular. Pulling it out, she

found it was the card Artemis had given her when she had first agreed to work for him.

She flipped it through her fingers, wondering if she could have found a way to get him to remove the curse. She shook the idea away. This was the magic of harmony—not even Artemis could dispel it. No, she was sure freeing herself was something she had to do on her own.

If it was even possible.

Before she turned the corner, she looked back at the Lulamoon's house. Much like how Artemis had said she was special, Sunset felt something special coming from the house. Or rather, from *within* the house. Even with Trixie's cool demeanor, it had been the warmest home she had stepped foot in.

Another silly idea formed in her head, and she chased it away. She wasn't a freeloader or a burden, and she'd never take advantage of their hospitality like that. She stuck the card in her pocket and kept walking.

You're better off alone.

Sunset looked down at her bandaged hand. She wasn't alone—she had friends! She just refused to take advantage of them. She was solitary, independent...

But not alone.

Kpox 34: Words Unsaid

At the buzzing of her alarm, Sunset rose, immediately feeling the knots in her stomach. She slapped her alarm until it fell silent, then dragged herself out of bed.

Judgement Day Part Two. In which I try to apologize to Twilight. The knots tightened, killing her appetite. She turned to examine herself in the mirror, once again forgetting she had disposed of it two days ago. Grumbling to herself, Sunset rummaged through her dresser until she found some clean clothes and stomped downstairs to the bathroom.

Sunday had been spent doing much of nothing. Sunset had enjoyed not having to go in to work, but found little to do. She had occupied her time by drafting apologies and explanations to Twilight. Many of them felt rehearsed and dry, and in the end, it came down to whether or not Rarity could convince Twilight to give her the time of day.

Ultimately, there were two outcomes. Either Sunset would end the day miserable, or she'd be holding hands with Twilight.

She wasn't sure which idea scared her more.

"No, confidence," she told her bathroom mirror. "You can do this. You want this, Twilight wants this... hopefully. I mean, yes, she still wants this! Go out there and make it happen!" She hurried in getting dressed, not wanting to see if her reflection would start hassling her again.

The weather outside put a damper on her mood. Heavy grey clouds hung overhead, and the air was frigid, making her breath visible. There was a thin layer of frost on her motorcycle seat and handlebars. After retrieving gloves, a scarf, and a knife from inside, Sunset scraped the ice off and started the engine.

Much like Thanksgiving night, Sunset had a sense of foreboding as she let the engine warm up. She couldn't tell if it was good or bad, all she knew was that *something* was going to happen. All she could do was hope the universe had gotten enough laughs from her misery for a while.

She hopped on her bike and rode out of the alley. Snow hadn't fallen yet, but several parts of the road were icy, making Sunset slow down. She arrived at

school with only five minutes until the first bell, meaning her conversation with Twilight would have to wait until lunch.

With semester finals one week away, Sunset's teachers were piling on the work and constantly reminding them that just because they had sent in their college applications, didn't mean they could slack off the rest of the year.

Sunset sighed in defeat as Cheerilee reminded them the importance of maintaining their grades for official transcripts. While it was relevant for most of the class, it just reminded Sunset of her uncertain future beyond graduation.

Enrolling herself into a public high school had been one thing. Sunset had neither the skills nor the resources to get herself placed in an institute of higher learning. Not without drawing unnecessary attention to herself. She pushed the bleak scenario away, locking it in the back of her head where she always kept it. That was a problem for another time.

When left alone to do their classwork, Sunset had a hard time concentrating; her thoughts constantly strayed to Twilight.

You're very special to me, Sunset.

Please... just leave me alone, Sunset.

Such a turnaround in so short of a time. Sunset would have found it laughable if it didn't cause her stomach to churn.

Time mocked her, forcing the minute hand to crawl by at an ungodly pace. Sunset tried to focus on her English assignment but kept looking up at the clock every few seconds.

"Eyes on your own paper, please, Sunset," Cheerilee said from the front of the class.

Sunset's eyes fixated on the paper in front of her, unable to look anywhere else. *I hope this isn't a problem later.*

At the end of the writing assignment, Sunset found it was more of a nuisance than a problem. Cheerilee collected the papers and put them on her desk, forcing Sunset to look forward for the rest of the class. Lucky for her, most of it was just lecture. Walking out when the dismissal bell rang, Sunset's eyes were still glued to her paper until she stepped into the hallway.

Oh boy, 10:00 A.M. and I'm already annoyed. Sunset headed to the second floor for her next class, only to find Twilight at the other end of the hall.

Twilight looked up from her book bag and froze. Her expression was unreadable, though it was clear she was waiting for Sunset to make a move.

Sunset tried. She tried to move forward—tried to say something, but her body was paralyzed. All she could do was stare back at Twilight, and try to tell with her eyes what her mouth couldn't say.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Come on, come talk to me, please!

Twilight inched forward, then turned into her classroom without another glance. Sunset regained the feeling in her body and kicked one of the lockers before walking into her class.

Two hours. Just two more hours. Come one, Rarity, don't let me down.

Sunset couldn't leave the classroom quick enough. She flew down to the first floor, taking the steps three at a time. The building anticipation had made Sunset shiver throughout most of her class. She wanted this over with *now*.

The cafeteria was already full when Sunset stepped in. She didn't bother getting in line for lunch, choosing to go straight to the table. Ten steps from her seat, she stopped, unable to go any further. Twilight was already seated, poking at her salad while the rest of the girls waved Sunset over.

Sunset forced herself an inch forward but could move no more than that. Twilight looked up, maintaining her guarded expression from earlier. She looked ready to remain silent until Rarity poked her shoulder. "Hi, Sunset," was all she mumbled.

Sunset blinked as a reply.

Twilight stared, expecting more, then returned to her guarded expression, and her salad.

Rainbow looked between the two of them. "Am I missing something, or does anyone else feel tension?"

"Nope, ain't just you." Applejack gestured to the empty seat next to her. "You wanna sit down, Sunset?"

“Yes.” She didn’t move.

Everyone stared at her. Applejack cleared her throat. “Are ya gonna sit down?”

“No.”

Rarity slapped her palm against the table. “Oh for goodness sakes!” She grabbed Twilight by the arm and jumped up from the table. “Come!” She moved towards Sunset, who started backpedaling against her own will. She now knew how magnets felt.

She was pushed out of the cafeteria and down the hall. Rarity stopped and peeked through each classroom window until she found an empty one. She threw the door open and pointed Twilight inside, then grabbed Sunset who had kept walking a few feet.

“In,” she said, giving Sunset a small shove and closing the door behind her, leaving Twilight as the only other occupant.

She stood on the other side of the room, allowing Sunset take a few steps forward so she wasn’t pressed against the door. The room was dim, the only light came from the window. Twilight stood in the illuminated square, looking at the blackboard and twirling a finger through her hair.

Sunset sharply inhaled. Twilight had an ethereal beauty with the winter light bending around her. The slight draft from the windows made her hair waltz. Sunset cleared her throat, getting Twilight’s attention, but that was all she could do. When she opened her mouth to speak, no sound came out.

“Yes?” Twilight asked.

It was similar to Saturday, when Sunset tried to tell Rarity about the penance. Pressure built on Sunset’s throat keeping the words down. She tried to mouth ‘I’m sorry’ but Twilight didn’t pick up on it. Whenever Sunset tried to move forward, her body locked up.

Twilight pursed her lips. “Are you going to say anything?”

Sunset shook her head, then facepalmed. She held her index finger up, then fled out the door. Rarity was waiting on the other side.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked, hands on her hips.

Sunset shut the door. “Nowhere, I just needed to talk to you!”

Rarity pointed to the classroom. “You’re supposed to be talking to Twilight.”

“I can’t, Rarity!” Sunset flailed her arms.

Pinching her nose, Rarity said, “Sunset, Twilight agreed to listen if you talked, but so far, you haven’t said a word to her. I told you, you need to have confidence.”

“I have confidence, Rarity, but I *can’t* talk to her!”

“Why not?”

“Because...” Sunset hesitated, wondering how much she could say before the curse stopped her. “She... asked me to leave her alone.” She continued to think, trying to map out how she could get Rarity to reverse it without descending into a repeat of Saturday’s conversation.

Rarity stared, mouth slightly open, looking perplexed. She scratched the side of her head. “Okay... while I respect your adherence to her request for personal space...” She opened the door and pushed Sunset back inside. “*Please* just *talk* to her.” The door slammed shut.

Thank you, Rarity! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Sunset twirled and faced Twilight with newfound optimism. “Twilight...”

She crossed her arms. “You’re going to talk now?”

“Yes. Sorry about before; I was...” Sunset waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter. I *did* want to talk to you though.” She paused, picking her words carefully. All of her rehearsed apologies sounded terrible, so she decided to just wing it. But even that was proving difficult.

“Twilight, I know I said... some things on Thursday. And I know that I hurt you.” Sunset slouched her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to. Hurting you is the last thing I want to do.”

Twilight looked at the blackboard again. “You said it was funny.”

“I know.” Sunset clenched her fists. “I know what I said, but I didn’t mean any of it. That’s the opposite of how I feel about you, Twilight.” She closed her eyes. “You’re special to me too. I like seeing you laugh and blush and smile. I love it when you play the violin, and I love playing against you in chess.

You're the only one in this school I consider on par with my intelligence—heck, you might even be smarter than me. I like your lavender perfume, your hair... your eyes..."

Twilight turned from the board, showing Sunset her pretty purple eyes.

Sunset smiled. "I'm really sorry I said those things, Twilight. I don't hate spending time with you—I *love* it. And I couldn't admit it to myself that night but... I really like you too." She wanted to close the distance between them, but that action was still off-limits.

Lacing her fingers together, Twilight stared at the floor, her bangs falling over her eyes. "Sunset, I want to believe you. But, why did you say all those things in the first place?"

Because you asked me to lie. Sunset gave a subtle shake of her head. That excuse didn't hold much ground if Sunset couldn't tell Twilight about the curse. In fact, nothing she thought of could serve as a satisfactory answer. In her rehearsals, she had hoped the conversation strayed down this path. She had imagined Twilight accepting her apology, and then a second attempt at their kiss from several nights ago.

Sunset bit her lip. *Come on, think of something!* The only other excuse she could think of, however, was that she panicked, but that was almost worse than pinning the blame on Twilight. She looked at Sunset expectantly again, demanding an answer Sunset couldn't give.

"I can't tell you," Sunset said, defeated.

"Why not?"

"Because." Sunset looked away, unable to withstand Twilight's gaze. "I just can't, Twilight."

"I don't understand," Twilight said, irritation creeping into her voice. "You tell me you hate me, take it back and tell me you didn't mean it and that you actually like me, and then say you can't tell me why you said those things in the first place?"

"Yeah," Sunset said, her optimism and confidence fading into nothing. "That pretty much sums it up."

“I-I don’t...” Twilight shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Sunset, just tell me why you said all those things.”

“I can’t!” Sunset put her hands together. “I can’t tell you why I said what I said, but please believe me when I say I didn’t mean any of it.”

“How do I know you mean anything you’re saying right now?”

Sunset sighed, her entire body wilting. “You don’t. You just have to trust me.” As the words left her mouth, she felt the room drop a few degrees.

Twilight looked at her with a mixture of pain and incredulousness. “Sunset, do you know how much it hurt to hear my... my first crush—my *friend* hated me and found my suffering funny?”

“No,” she said, though she had a different hurt spreading through her heart.

“It hurt a lot!” Twilight wiped the tears from her eyes. “I want to believe you didn’t mean what you said, but I want to know *why*. Otherwise, how do I know you’re not just going to do it again?”

“You don’t.” Sunset covered her face with her hand. “I want to tell you, Twilight—I really do. But I can’t.”

Twilight squared her shoulders. “Well when you can, come talk to me.” She headed for the door, unknowingly forcing Sunset to step wide to the side to let her pass.

The door shut, leaving Sunset alone for precisely ten seconds before Rarity popped her head in. “Sunset, what—”

Sunset held a hand up. “I don’t want to talk right now, Rarity.”

“But—”

“Please.” Sunset closed her eyes, her anger and frustration boiling. “Just leave me alone right now.”

Rarity hesitated but closed the door. Her footsteps faded away, leaving Sunset completely alone. She grabbed the nearest textbook and flung it across the room with yell. It crashed into a desk before landing on the floor, the binding bent.

“Damn you, Harmony.”

Shining wasn't sure whether or not to be surprised Sunset's name came up in the police database. Admittedly, part of him was disappointed it had.

He sat at his desk in the Canterlot Police Station, his lunch of Thanksgiving leftovers sitting on top of a stack of paperwork. He knew he should have listened to Cadence's advice and not played detective, and would no doubt get an earful if she found out. But Shining's protectiveness had overruled Cadence's reasoning.

And he *really* wanted to know who this Sunset Shimmer really was. Shining didn't care if his sister was gay, (and if she was trying to hide it, she was doing a very poor job) but he did care about who she wanted to date. He had been a cop long enough to know Sunset was acting odd during dinner. Maybe it was nerves.

Or maybe, she was hiding something.

Shining took a sip of his soda and opened Sunset's file. Several accounts of shoplifting and one account of vandalism; all in all, it could have been worse. He took a close look at her mug shot. Sunset wore a small smirk that said she had every intention to steal again.

Before he scrolled down to her personal information, the date of the mugshot and her last recorded crime caught his eye. At first, he thought he read it wrong, but looking again, he saw it was from eleven years ago. He looked at the photo, then the date, and conjured an image of Sunset in his head.

This can't be right. She looks almost exactly the same age. Maybe there was a glitch somewhere in the system. The idea became murky when he pulled up the rest of her file. Judging by her birth date, the dates on the photos matched what her age should have been. There was no date of death.

Shining leaned back in his chair. *Okay, so she's either an immortal high school student, she has an evil twin with the same name, or she's impersonating someone with incredible detail.* Putting away his comic book fantasies, the only one that seemed plausible (though still incredibly odd) was the impersonation act.

He scribbled her address down on a sticky note and stuck it to the side of his computer before picking up the phone. He needed to check one more thing

before jumping the gun. “Hey, File Check. I need a student record from Canterlot High.”

Tuesday was colder than Monday. Even inside the cafeteria, packed with students and warm food, Sunset was still cold.

Here she was again, sitting alone at a table in the corner, watching her friends eat lunch without her. They frequently looked her way, silently asking her to rejoin them.

While Sunset could technically talk to Twilight, the ‘favor’ of being left alone still stood. Sunset could not come within twenty feet of her, making even group interactions near impossible.

The food in front of her looked unappetizing, though Sunset was quite famished. She hadn’t eaten anything yesterday; in fact, since Thanksgiving, her eating had been quite irregular. She forced herself to take a bite of her apple. Starving herself wouldn’t do anyone any favors.

“Umm, Sunset?”

“Waah!” Sunset jumped, tossing her apple into the air. She made to catch it, but missed, and watched it hit the ground.

“Oh my, I’m sorry!” Fluttershy squeaked.

“It’s okay.” Sunset reached for the apple. It was severely dented, but still edible. She was more surprised Fluttershy had been able to scare her. “What’s up, ‘Shy?”

Fluttershy sat down across from her. “I wanted to see if you were okay. We’re all worried about you.”

“I’m...” Sunset didn’t even bother to lie. She just sighed and let the apple drop onto her plate. “I’ve been a lot better.”

“Why don’t you come and sit with us?”

“I can’t.”

Fluttershy tapped her fingers together. “Is this about... you and Twilight?”

“Yes.” Sunset looked over to their table. “Did she tell you?”

“She told us you... said some mean things. Then you said you didn’t mean them, but wouldn’t tell her why you said it.” Fluttershy hid an eye behind her long bangs. “She said you were being... aggravating.”

That’s pretty mild, all things considered. “Well, that’s about the gist of it.”

“Why can’t you tell her?”

Sunset poked her mash potatoes. “I just can’t, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy frowned. “I know I shouldn’t meddle, but Twilight seems really hurt. You... like her, don’t you?”

“Yes, Fluttershy, I like her. I really like her, but I *can’t* tell her why I was a jerk.” Sunset growled. “Believe me, I wish I could.”

“Well... you could still come and sit with us. We’re not taking sides or anything.”

“Can’t do that either.”

“Oh...” Fluttershy furrowed her brow. It was the closest thing to frustration Sunset had seen on her. In the blink of an eye, it had returned to her kind and demure expression. “Would you like to come to the animal shelter today, Sunset?”

Sunset nodded. “Yes, Fluttershy, I would love to.” They arranged for a time to meet after school, then Fluttershy reached over and gave Sunset a hug before departing.

Across the cafeteria, the remaining Spectacular Seven gave Sunset an awkward wave. She waved back, straining herself to smile. At the sullen look Twilight gave her, her smile evaporated.

Twilight. What can I do to make you trust me again?

Later on, Sunset would find out that picking up dog poop and being nipped in the heel had been the highlight of her week.

She had performed the same routine as the last time she visited, watching over the animals while they got their exercise. Spot had been tremendously happy to see her, completely ignoring Fluttershy when she opened his cage. In

addition, Sunset had assisted in setting up the canopy to prevent snow from falling into the enclosure.

Sure enough, on Wednesday morning, Canterlot City found itself covered in a light layer of fluffy powder. Snowflakes lazily drifted from the sky, carried by the icy wind that froze the roads. Sunset had walked to school, not trusting herself to drive at the moment. She was still running on one meal a day.

Come lunchtime, however, Sunset was hungry enough to force down everything on her plate. She was still stuck in the corner of the cafeteria, and once she had finished her food, she had no idea what to do with herself.

Temporary as it was, Rainbow managed to fill the boring void. She stomped over and pointed sharply at Sunset. “You, me, soccer, after school. Be there.”

Sunset looked out the window, then back to Rainbow. “It’s snowing outside.”

“You think I care? Soccer field, 3:15. No excuses.” She flashed Sunset her cocky grin before taking off.

Sunset watched the snow fall. She knew what Rainbow was going to do, and it would be pointless. Fluttershy had tried to do the same thing at the animal shelter, though in a much more subtle way. She knew they meant well, but she *couldn’t* talk about it.

She sighed and got up, getting a head start to her trigonometry class so she could grab a seat in the back. It was now her least favorite subject, ranking below history since she had to spend the entire class staring at the back of Twilight’s head.

They stood on two sides of an impassable gorge. Sunset could shout all she wanted, but Twilight would not hear her. The one thing that would close the space between them was the one thing Sunset could speak nothing about. She knew Twilight would believe her. She knew Twilight *wanted* to trust her again. But Sunset had nothing else to offer.

Class began, dragging on like every class before it. On occasion, Sunset thought she had seen Twilight tilt her head back towards her, but it was mostly wishful thinking.

When they paired up for group work, Twilight sat next to Twinkleshine. Since Minuette was absent, Lemon Hearts was forced to work with Sunset, and she seemed none too happy about it.

“So, what did you get for number fourteen?” Sunset asked, trying to remain civil despite Lemon’s cold attitude.

Lemon looked up from her paper with a scowl. “I’m still on ten.”

“Oh... sorry.” Sunset looked longingly over to Twilight. She was giggling at something Twinkleshine had said.

“Don’t you two normally work together?” Lemon asked.

“Yeah...” Sunset pulled her eyes back to her own paper. “She’s kinda mad at me right now.”

“Big shocker,” Lemon muttered.

Sunset endured mostly working by herself for another forty-five minutes before school ended. Twilight was out the door before Sunset had finished putting her things away.

After storing her books in her locker and grabbing her scarf and gloves, Sunset headed to the soccer field, where Rainbow was already waiting. She scored another goal before acknowledging Sunset.

“Took you long enough,” she said, fetching the ball.

“Dash, school ended not even five minutes ago.”

“Still too slow. C’mon, we got a game to play.” She dribbled the ball on her knees, then passed it to Sunset.

She stopped it with her shin and let it fall into the snow. “How do you even play in these conditions?” She kicked the ball, sending a small flurry with it.

“It’s tricky, I’ll admit that much.” Rainbow ran after it, having little trouble handling the ball in the snow. “But if you can dribble through snow, normal conditions are a breeze.” She passed the ball back to Sunset.

“Rainbow, cut to the chase and tell me why I’m really out here freezing my butt off.” She passed the ball back.

Rainbow frowned. “What, I need a reason to hang out with my friend?” She kicked the ball with a little more force.

“No, but I know you pulled me out here for more than soccer.” Sunset kicked the ball even harder.

“Yeah, I wanna know why you’re giving us the cold shoulder during lunch.” Rainbow kicked the ball so hard, it sailed over Sunset’s head and into the goal on the far side of the field.

“I’m not giving you the colder shoulder. I just... I can’t be around Twilight right now.”

Rainbow trudged past her to get the ball. “Yeah, we know. She said she liked you, and you did something stupid. That doesn’t mean you have to avoid the rest of us.”

Sunset kicked a mound of snow. “It’s not exactly on purpose, Dash.”

“What do you mean?”

“Forget it, doesn’t matter.”

Rainbow kicked the ball back in her direction. “Man, Fluttershy and Twilight are right; you can be really cryptic sometimes.”

Sunset pulled her foot back to pass the ball, but slipped on the wet grass beneath and fell back into the snow. She could hear Rainbow snickering in the distance. Despite her winter pants, she could feel the cold water sneaking in and freezing her legs.

“Sunset Shimmer, there you are!” a cheery voice yelled.

Pulling herself up, Sunset saw Lyra skipping over with a folder in hand. Sunset had half a mind to bury herself back in the snow. Instead, she mustered the most annoyed look she could manage.

It had no effect on Lyra. She continued to approach, smiling like she was approaching her best friend. “I was hoping to run into you soon. Just wanted to check up on the progress of the Ball.”

Sunset took a pause from brushing the snow out her hair. “Uhh, right about that... we haven’t exactly started yet.”

Lyra sucked in air between her teeth. “Ooooh, not quite what I was hoping to hear. You see, Sunny, we’re starting to sell tickets, and we need to know what we can promise the students.”

Rainbow walked over, her expression matching Sunset's. "Pinkie's the head planner. Just tell everyone it's gonna be awesome."

Lyra smiled again. "Well, that's what we're trying to do. But it would set a lot of people at ease if we had some more details. I'm honestly trying to look out for Sunset here. I'd hate to see her banned from the rest of the school's activities."

"What?" Rainbow cocked her head to Sunset. "What's she talking about?"

Sunset shoved her hands in her pocket so they wouldn't see her fists tightening. "If the Winter Ball isn't a success, I'm banned from every major school event from now till graduation."

"*What?* Are you serious?"

"Yep."

Rainbow glared at Lyra. "Hold it, you can't do that, even if you are the president! The council can't ban someone without Celestia's permission."

Lyra snapped her fingers. "You're right, Rainbow. Technically, the council doesn't have that power. Which is why it really pains me to have to show you this." Lyra flipped open the folder and pulled out a bundle of pink papers. "You see, some of the students started a petition to ensure you couldn't participate in *any* school function period. I was able to at least let them give you a chance with the Winter Ball, however, this version was still passed around the school." Lyra handed the papers to a numb Sunset. "The petition states pretty much what I've already said. Failure to make an amazing ball, blah, blah, blah, results in event ban. As per school rules, if this petition gets enough signatures and is presented before Principal Celestia, she'll have to agree to the students' demands."

Rainbow looked over Sunset's shoulder, mouth agape. "Bullshit! That isn't in the school rules!"

Lyra cleared her throat. "School Code, Section Five, Article B: On the Matters of the Voice of the Students, paragraph two. 'Should the students wish to enact policy changes or address grievances with the acting faculty, they have the right to rally and/or petition in a peaceful and non-aggressive manner. Should they wish to petition, any change requested must be in written form and

be signed by no less than three-fourths of the student body. The form may then be submitted to the acting principal at the time for review. If it is within the principal's power to comply and has met the following criteria, changes shall be made. Should requests not fall within the current budget, they shall be filed away until such a time they can be afforded.'

"Paragraph three. 'Petitions cannot be made for the following: additions to the school buildings or grounds, changes in class time or school time, distribution of homework and tests, expulsion of students or faculty, or any changes that would conflict with state and/or federal laws.'" Lyra inhaled, then gave a theatrical bow.

Rainbow continued to gape. "That's... I... why..."

"I know, it's pretty amazing," Lyra said, buffing her nails against her coat. "I have the whole School Code committed to memory."

"That wasn't..." Rainbow snatched the papers from Sunset's hands. "There's no way this thing has three-fourths of the school's signatures."

"It has a lot," Sunset said glumly. It reminded her of how she used to kick people while they were down. Seeing all those signatures felt like a curb-stomping. She had to hand it to the students though; when she wasn't slicing them up into easily-controlled groups, they knew how to rally and get something they wanted.

Lyra gave a hapless shrug. "So sorry, Sunny, but that's the way things are."

Rainbow waved the papers. "You could just not turn these in, you know!"

For the first time in their conversation, Lyra looked genuinely upset. "And ignore the will of the people?" she asked indignantly. "I am the school president, humble servant to the students of Canterlot High! It is my job—nay, my duty—nay, my *privilege* to carry out their will and voice!" She raised a finger to the sky. "I shall not become like the bureaucrats in our political offices who ignore the people who voted for them and serve only themselves and fund the corporate plot for world domination! I shall serve the people and deliver unto them their God-given rights of truth, justice, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!"

Sunset and Rainbow both watched her hold the pose for a full minute. She snapped back to reality and plucked the papers from Rainbow's hand. "So anyway, good luck!" She walked away, humming a merry tune.

"Well..." Rainbow gave the soccer ball a gentle tap. "That sucks."

Sunset nodded. It wasn't the possibility of being banned that bothered her so much, as it was the fact that so many students despised her enough to suggest it.

Rainbow slapped her on the back. "Hey, don't worry. We'll make a ball so awesome, it'll make them forget all about the Fall Formal... and everything else you've done." Rainbow chewed the inside of her cheek. "This might take a lot more work than I thought."

"Thank you for the confidence booster, Dash."

Shining pulled up to the house and turned his windshield wipers off. Snow began to pile up the moment he did. He took one more sip of his coffee, then pulled out the piece of paper he had written the address down on to confirm he was in the right location.

Yesterday, Shining had followed the address from Sunset's juvenile file. It had been correct, except her family no longer lived there. The new family wasn't sure where they had moved to.

Shining knew it was probably a fake, but he had taken down the address written in Sunset's school records. The house in front of him looked occupied, but it had clearly seen better days. One of the windows was held on by duct tape, the garage door was dented, and the entire house needed a new coat of paint.

He got out the car and approached the gate surrounding the house. Through the snow, he could see most of it was severely rusted. It opened with a horrible screech that reminded him of Twilight's miserable violin playing.

Various cat toys were littered across the yard, half buried in the snow. As Shining got closer, the smell of felines grew stronger; by the time he got to the porch, it was almost unbearable.

If Sunset lives here, I'll eat my badge. She claimed to live in an apartment on the opposite side of town. Though, if she really did live here, Shining wasn't sure he could fault her for lying.

There was a delay when he pressed the doorbell, and it sounded distorted and fading. After a minute he rang again, unsure if whoever owned the home even heard it the first time.

"Hold on, hold on, I'm a comin'!" a voice crackled. The door opened up to reveal a short, old lady with curling grey hair and saggy skin. "Oh, hello, officer. What can Ah do ya for?"

Shining's first reaction was to jump back and gag at the horrifying cat odor spilling from the house. He played it off as a strong cough and said, "Good afternoon, ma'am. My name's Shining Armor." He looked over her and into the house.

Cats. There were cats everywhere. On the floor, on the counters, on the tables, on the stairs, on the T.V. What wasn't covered in cat or cat hair was taken up by cat bowls, litter boxes, scratching posts or mice, fake *and* real. There was also a considerable amount of junk lying around. Broken lamps, old portraits, and boxes of assorted items.

This has to be against at least three city ordinances. Shining focused on the old lady again. "Sorry to trouble you, but I'm looking for the residence of a young woman by the name of Sunset Shimmer. Her school records posted this home as her address."

"Sunset Shimmer?" She squinted her eyes in thought. "Nope, never heard of her. Explains the school newsletters Ah've been gettin' every month. Ah thought Ah just subscribed to somethin' and had forgotten about it." She started laughing until she broke into a short wheezing fit."

When she finished, Shining asked, "So you don't know anything about her or where she might live?"

"Nope! She ain't got nothin' Apple in her name, so Ah know she ain't kin." She tapped her chin. "Hmm, then again, we always get some odd ones in every bunch. Maybe she's in one of my old albums. How about you come inside and have a look?"

Shining took a step back. “Oh, no, no. I don’t want to waste any more of your time.”

“Nonsense!” She reached forward and looped an arm through his. “Ah can’t just turn an officer of the law away! Ah’ll let you look through all my albums and bake some cookies.” She started pulling him inside with more strength than Shining had expected from her.

All the cats stared at Shining with wide eyes, meowing loudly at the newcomer. *Somewhere, Sunset’s laughing at me*, he thought as the door shut behind him.

Sunset sat in the back of the class, eagerly awaiting the weekend. This week easily ranked as her worst one ever. She admired her friends for their efforts at keeping in touch with her, even with the rift between her and Twilight. Yesterday, Pinkie had tried to drag Sunset to the table.

As Sunset entered ‘the Twilight zone’ her body started prickling like she was being bitten by fire ants. Still, Pinkie managed to get her to sit down so they could talk about the dance after Rainbow had relayed what Lyra told them.

One minute later, Sunset had a sudden urge to use the bathroom that could *not* be ignored. How it was possible, she wasn’t sure; she had barely eaten all week.

Today would be different, however. The girls were going out for pizza after school, and as Rarity had already told her, Twilight couldn’t come because she had violin practice. Sunset was sure the group was going to rag on her at some point, but at least she could sit at the same table as them.

The last bell rang, dismissing Canterlot High for their first snowy weekend. Once again, Twilight had already packed her stuff and left the classroom before Sunset could put her notebook away. Entering the hall, Sunset couldn’t find her in the sea of passing students. Not that it mattered much.

Snowball fights had already broken out in the schoolyard. No matter the age, snow brought out the childish nature in everyone.

Frozen slush pelted Sunset in the face, impeding her vision. She jumped at the cold shock and wiped it from her eyes, finding Rainbow pointing at Applejack.

“She did it!”

“Shut up, Rainbow!”

Sunset flung snowballs at both of them in response, nailing them in the face. Applejack scooped up as much snow as she could hold and hurled it at Sunset, while Rainbow pelted Applejack with several smaller ones.

A minute into their fight, Pinkie popped up from behind the statue and threw four snowballs at once, hitting all of her targets, and pelting Rainbow a second time. “All hail to the snowball queen!”

Three snowballs collided with her face and knocked her into the snow.

Rarity and Fluttershy exited the building, both of them almost getting pegged by a stray snowball. “If one of those ends up in my hair, so help me...” Rarity warned.

Rainbow snickered, tossing a snowball up and down. “You scared to get your hair a little wet?”

“I just had it done.” She gave it a flip. “I’ll have you know it took three hours, so—” A snowball pegged her in the side of the head.

“Applejack did it!”

Applejack laughed. “Ah’m not even gonna deny it! Worth it!”

Rarity fumed. “Applejack, you’re dead meat!” She grabbed a fistful of snow and jumped down the stairs.

For the next half-hour, six girls traded snowballs across the schoolyard, breaking into teams and switching to a frozen free-for-all on the fly. For a moment, Sunset forgot her troubles and remembered how much fun it was to laugh and let go. It was short-lived though. Her heart grew heavy the minute the fight ended and she was made painfully aware of the absence of Twilight.

They hurried as fast as they could to Marinara’s Pizzeria, shivering, chattering, and covered in snow. Rarity’s hair had become a mess, but she

didn't seem to mind anymore. Inside, other students were seated, eating pizza and drinking hot cocoa.

Sunset pointed out an open booth in the back corner. The wall's rich red paint color made her feel warmer already. Six mugs of hot chocolate were ordered, and Sunset requested a personal mushroom and olive pizza. She was certain she could devour the entire thing.

Applejack took her hat off and placed it in her lap. "So, can Ah ask why you haven't been sittin' with us at lunch, or am Ah gonna get the same answer as everyone else?"

"Same answer." Sunset sighed. "I just can't."

Their waiter delivered their hot chocolate, and Applejack took a sip before speaking again. "Ah don't understand why you can't just tell her *why* you acted like a jerk. Honesty is the best policy."

Easy for you to say. Sunset blew the steam off the top of her drink. "It's complicated."

Rarity made a small "tsk" as she spooned sugar into her cocoa. "Honestly, dear, I think you're making excuses for yourself now."

"I am not!"

"Then you need to address this problem head-on. Besides, it's not like you can avoid her forever."

"Well, maybe if someone were to *ask nicely*." Sunset tried to wink but ended up blinking instead. *Stupid penance!*

Rarity rolled her eyes. "*Please*, Sunset, stop being a child and avoiding Twilight."

Outwardly, Sunset only smiled and said, "Okay." Inwardly, she was throwing a party. She didn't have to stand twenty feet from Twilight anymore! Maybe she still wasn't talking to Sunset, but it was progress. *One step at a time, Sunset.*

Everyone else gave her a range of odd and skeptical looks. Pinkie banged her empty mug on the table, making them all jump. "Let's move on, shall we? We

still have a ball to plan, and it has to be awesome so Sunset can come with us to Spring Fling and Grad Night and Prom!”

“Right,” Rarity said with a nod. “It’s completely unfair what the rest of the students are trying to do, even with your past track record.”

“Well, to be fair, she did brainwash half of them,” Applejack said. “No offense.”

Sunset pinched the bridge of her nose. “Just because you say ‘no offense’ doesn’t make it any less offensive.”

“Anyways...” Rainbow gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “What do you have so far, Pinkie?”

Pinkie pulled out a notebook. “Well, balloons and streamers are already ready. They just need to be strung up, but that’s easy-peasy. I need a centerpiece though. I was going to go with a winter castle theme this year, so I was thinking columns sculpted from ice.”

“Oooh, that sounds marvelous,” Rarity gushed. “I can already picture Greek style pillars flanking the dance floor, and a crystal dais on the stage for the crowning of the Winter Princess. I did mention I was in the running, yes?”

“Really?” Rainbow pressed her hands against her cheeks. “Gosh, Rarity, we had no idea! It never occurred to us that you’d be running for princess even though you mentioned it a *bajillion* times and have your posters hanging all over the school!”

Sunset laughed into her mug. It was true, Rarity’s face could be seen in every hallway across campus. Though sometimes it was lost in the sea of other princess hopefuls. Now that Sunset was no longer in the running, a vacuum had opened with every girl in the school wanting to claim the title of princess.

Rarity blushed. “Ahem, right. Just checking. Please continue, Pinkie.”

“Hmmm.” Pinkie flipped through her book. “Okay, so we agreed on the decorations. We still need catering—“

“Ah’ll do it!” Applejack shot her hand in the air.

“Done and done!” Pinkie crossed something off with a pen. “Now for music.”

Fluttershy spoke up from her corner. “What about Flash and his band?”

Rarity shook her head. “As much as I adore Flash and his music, this is the Winter Ball. We need something a little more classy and refined than rock and roll.”

“Hey, you can never go wrong with rock and roll,” Rainbow argued.

“What do you think, Sunny?” Pinkie asked.

“Oh, umm...” Sunset shrugged. “It doesn’t need to be super fancy, but it should be something better than a high school band.”

“How about a jazz band?” Rarity suggested.

Fluttershy nodded. “I like jazz.”

Rainbow shrugged. “Meh.”

Pinkie scribbled in her book. “We’ll come back to that one later. It’s pizza time!”

The waiter came over with six personal pizzas, piping hot. Sunset grabbed a slice and took a nibble, almost burning the roof of her mouth on the hot cheese. Still, the pizza was delicious and just what her tummy wanted.

Pinkie swallowed a slice of her pizza like it wasn’t fresh out of the oven. “So, who’s taking who to the dance?”

Rarity twirled a finger through her hair. “Well... I was actually thinking of asking Flash. He really is quite a gentleman.”

Applejack deflated. “Aw, Ah was hopin’ we could go as a group. You know, gal pals.”

Rainbow licked a dollop of whip cream off her thumb. “I dunno, A.J. I think I’d like to find a date this year; if only to get Cloud Kicker to stop asking me out. Seriously, do I have to wear a sign around my neck that says I’m not gay?” She glared at Sunset.

Sunset clenched her jaw. *Is she trying to pick a fight... ooooh.* She facepalmed. “That wasn’t me, believe it or not.”

“What wasn’t you?” Rarity asked.

“I didn’t start the rumor that Rainbow was gay.”

Rainbow furrowed her brows. “Well, if it wasn’t you then who was it?”

“I don’t know.”

Applejack couldn’t look guiltier if she tried. She placed her mouth against her cup, though none of the cocoa passed her lips. Her eyes darting back and forth at rapid speeds.

“It was you?” Rainbow cried.

“No! Ah mean, not on purpose.” Applejack sank into her seat. “It was a while back when we still weren’t talkin’ to each other. Thunderlane asked me if I knew if you were seein’ someone.” She tugged at her collar. “Ah said, ‘no, but Ah... don’t think her barn door swings your way.’” She hung her head.

Rainbow threw her hands up. “Applejack, I can’t believe you!”

“It was an honest mistake!”

“You’re the reason no boy has ever asked me out!”

“Like you care! You said you didn’t care much about datin’ anyway!”

“That’s not the point!”

“Well, Ah’m sorry! Ah was just statin’ what I thought. And...” She fumbled with her ponytail. “Ah was tryin’ to get the heat off of me since people were goin’ around sayin’ Ah sacrificed other fruits to an apple harvest god.”

“So you deflected it to *me*?” Rainbow asked, outraged further.

“Well, Ah thought it was either you or Sunset that started it.”

Pinkie raised her hand. “Oh no, that was me!” She stopped smiling. “Wait, that’s a bad thing.”

Applejack turned redder than the walls. “Pinkie, why would you of all people do somethin’ like that?”

“It was a joke... kinda, sorta.” Pinkie tapped her fingers together. “A lot of students got sick after one of my parties, and later, I found out the reason was the apple fruit punch I had ordered from Big Mac. Soooo, I may have made one tiny off-hand joke saying that it had been tainted because you hadn’t properly sacrificed to the apple harvest god.” Pinkie put on a pained smile.

Applejack slowly raised her hands like she was about to strangle Pinkie. Sunset pulled on her shoulder, gently keeping her restrained.

“Okay, let’s all just calm down for a second. You all did horrible things to each other, but let’s not forget who started all of this.”

“You didn’t ruin the punch, did you?” Pinkie asked.

“Well, no...”

Fluttershy raised a shaky hand. “I, umm... I think I might have accidentally done that.”

A wave of disbelief washed over the table. “*You?*” Rarity asked.

“W-well, I was at the party... but I brought some of my animal friends along because I just felt so bad leaving them home alone. But some of them got out of my sight for a little bit, and when I found them, they were covered in punch. So, I think, maybe...”

“Your animals *swam* in my punch!” Pinkie yelled.

Rainbow jabbed a finger in Pinkie’s direction. “Don’t yell at her, hypocrite! You had a baby alligator swimming around in one of your punch bowls one time!”

“That was a house party! And Gummy is always clean! That was a serious breach of party etiquette.”

Fluttershy stomped her foot under the table. “My animals are always clean too!”

“And you’re not one to talk about etiquette, Pinkie,” Rarity added. “You violate several rules on a daily basis.”

Sunset waved her hands across the table. “Girls, girls, let’s just breathe and take it easy—”

Applejack spoke up, drowning Sunset out. “Ignore her, Pinkie. Rarity always gets fussy whenever somethin’ don’t match her standards of ‘etiquette.’”

Rarity flared her nostrils. “Excuse me for having some level of decency and decorum.”

“That ain’t decency and decorum. Half the time it’s you bein’ a wannabe rich snob.”

Sunset flinched. “Applejack—”

Rarity swatted Rainbow, who had been laughing loudly. “Shut up!”

Rainbow swatted her back. “Why are you mad at me? At least I’m not running around spreading rumors about people.”

“It was an accident!” Applejack protested.

Rainbow scrunched her face and made her front teeth stick over her bottom lip. “Howdy, y’all, Ah’m Applejack. Did you know my old friend’s gay? Ah gots no proof but Ah’m sure it’s true! Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk!”

“Ah do not sound like that!”

Pinkie roared with laughter. “You totally do!”

“Shut up, Pinkie! Half of this is your fault anyway!”

“No it isn’t, it’s Fluttershy’s fault!”

Fluttershy wilted in her seat.

Rainbow hissed. “Leave her alone!”

Sunset tried to interject again. “To be fair, all of this really starts with me, right?”

“Sunset, please stay out of this conversation,” Rarity said, her eyes locked on Applejack.

There was the tingling sensation Sunset had grown to hate so much. She sat in her corner of the booth, unable to say anything while her friends dragged up things best left forgotten. The thought that not very long ago, she would have found this sight hilarious disgusted her. Yet, much like her situation with Twilight, there was nothing she could do at the moment. No one noticed the tear rolling down her cheek.

Just when Sunset thought it couldn’t get any worse, Applejack made another comment about Rarity’s need for things to be prim and proper. Rarity grabbed a slice of her pizza, reached over and shoved down Applejack’s shirt.

“What’s the matter?” Rarity asked with a smug grin, while Applejack fumbled to get the still hot pizza out of her bra. “I thought you didn’t mind being dirty?”

Applejack got the pizza out and glared daggers at her. She threw the slice back, getting cheese and tomato sauce all over Rarity’s winter coat. She

shrieked and threw another piece, but her aim was off, and it smacked Pinkie in the face instead.

The next slice hit a hysterical Rainbow Dash. She immediately stopped laughing and splashed her cocoa in Pinkie's direction.

Sunset sank underneath the table, unable to bear the war her friends were waging. Fluttershy had already beaten her there. She was curled into a ball with her face behind her knees. She looked up at Sunset's gentle touch.

"T-this is worse than last time!" Fluttershy sobbed. "I-I don't know what to do!"

"Neither do I, Fluttershy," Sunset whispered. "Neither do I."

"*That's it!*" Rainbow yelled. Her arm reached under the table and pulled Fluttershy up. "Come on, 'Shy; we're leaving!"

Sunset lifted herself up to see Rainbow trying to climb over Rarity to exit the booth. Both of them were a mess of cheese, sauce, and toppings. Applejack and Pinkie had already exited Sunset's side of the booth and were fighting to see who would leave the restaurant first. Applejack overpowered Pinkie and stomped out into the snow, a string of cheese hanging off her hat. Pinkie was next to leave, followed by Rarity, then finally Rainbow and Fluttershy.

It was only after they had left that Sunset could get up and chase after them. Ignoring the stares of the customers and staff, she threw the door open and ran out into the cold evening.

"Girls, wait!" she yelled. All of them were walking in separate directions. "Come back! You can't stay mad at each other! Remember who the root of all evil is: *me!*"

None of them paid her any attention, save for Fluttershy, but Rainbow had an iron grip on her.

Sunset stood shivering in the snow, desperate to come up with an idea. "Come on, girls, it really isn't that bad! We'll... we'll sing a song and it'll all be better, right?" The wind blew Sunset's tears away and stung her face. "Jump up, make a sound... turn around... friendship!" she tried.

Her friends vanished, leaving only random pedestrians to hear her pleas. The winter air slipped through her skin and into her heart, freezing her from the inside out. She felt sick all over again, and numb from the bitter cold.

She bowed her head, letting her tears hit the snow. “Girls, please... don’t leave me alone.”

Kpok 35: Long Night of Solace

Shining impatiently tapped his finger against the steering wheel. He sat third in line at what had to be the slowest light in all of Canterlot. There wasn't even any crossing traffic; the light just seemed content to keep him in place.

He took another large slurp of his coffee, finding he had reached the bottom. He was going to have to get another cup for the long night ahead. With all the late night patrols he'd been stuck with, he'd be lucky if he got to have another date with Cadence before the new year.

The light finally changed, and traffic progressed smoothly. Everyone always took extra caution when a cop was around. Not that Shining minded; it meant less paperwork for him. He coasted down the road, windshield wipers keeping the snow at bay. The clock in his car read 10:04 P.M. Only four more hours until the end of his shift.

Four. Long. Hours.

He groaned. Being a police officer had been his dream and he loved doing it. But this week had worn him out, though it was partly his fault. Chasing the enigma that was Sunset Shimmer had left him confused and frustrated. And wasting time in that crazy cat lady, Goldie Delicious' house hadn't helped.

It had crossed his mind to just ask Twilight, but judging by her sullen mood the entire week, Sunset was still a sore topic. And something told him, she wouldn't say anything anyway. Friend Code and all that.

"I really should just trust her," Shining muttered. If Twilight knew the truth of whatever Sunset was hiding and still wanted to be her friend, then maybe it wasn't that bad. Twilight made good judgment. Of course, that's *if* Twilight knew the truth. Whatever that truth was.

Shining constantly weighed the pros and cons of Twilight's interaction with Sunset. On one hand, aside from her snark and mode of transportation, Sunset seemed like a decent girl. Yet on the other hand, Shining felt something was *off* about her. Not to mention everything on file about her was a lie.

In the end, it came down to his gut instincts. It was his job to keep Twilight safe, something he had already failed at once. Even with his personal feelings out of the equation, he needed to talk with Sunset the first chance he got.

He pulled into a quiet parking lot and put the car in park so he could eat his dinner. Cadence had packed him a large sandwich, a salad, a cookie, and a note that said, ‘Love you, have a great night at work!’ She had dotted the exclamation mark with a heart.

Shining smiled to himself. “I love you too.” All the guys in the world, and she picked him. Soon—very soon—he’d take the next step and ensure they’d belong to each other forever.

He was glad no one could see the goofy grin on his face.

Taking a bite of his sandwich, Shining spotted something in his rear view mirror. He squinted, trying to see through the layer of frost built up on his back window. There was no mistaking that fiery-red hair, however. Shining put his sandwich down and watched Sunset move from his rear view mirror to the side view. She walked very slow and had her scarf down instead of pulled around her mouth.

Shining was about to get out and talk to her when an idea struck him. Perhaps this was his chance to find out where she was hiding. He waited until Sunset had passed the parking lot, then shifted back into drive and slowly pulled out after her.

Sunset didn’t care about the freezing wind biting her face. She didn’t care that her hands felt raw from all the dish-washing she had done at Marinara’s. She didn’t care that at the rate she was walking, she wouldn’t get home until Christmas.

It was incredible how fast the universe could turn on her. One hour, they were having a snowball fight. The next, her friends were flinging pizza at each other. And of course, to add insult to injury, since Sunset was the only one left, she had to help the staff clean up the mess. Not to mention pay for everyone.

Twilight wouldn’t talk to her.

Her friends hated each other.

The rest of the school was united against her.

She was broke.

She hadn't thought it possible, but she was actually in a worse position than when she had climbed out of the crater three months ago. Back then, she hadn't cared about anyone else's opinions of what they thought of her. Back then, she didn't have any friends to worry about.

Back then, she didn't have a bookworm wrapped around her heart.

Tonight, her entire soul ached. She wanted to rip it out and throw it away; she wanted to not care anymore. She was tired of being knocked to the ground every time she stood up. Her victory at the science fair seemed so long ago, she wondered if she hadn't dreamed it.

Maybe this is all a fantasy. Maybe I'm still in the crater and this is my real punishment. She pushed the existential thoughts away. This was reality, plain and simple. And in this reality, everything she did came back to bite her in the end.

The beginning of her plan... the start of her tyrannical rule over a single high school. Breaking up all the students into manageable cliques and turning them against one another. She sat back and laughed while she carved up friendships left and right, then watched them snap at each other, further fueling their own disdain for one another.

And it had come back to her. This one didn't bite Sunset—it *devoured* her. Never did she think her grand plan would come back to hit her like this. Because of her, her friends had secretly dealt blows to each other during their two years of animosity.

It was all her fault.

Everything was her fault.

She wanted to curse Princess Twilight at the top of her lungs, but Sunset knew the princess had nothing to do with this one. Neither did her curse. This was merely the past, returning to her once more.

Her legs wobbled, and she leaned against a light post. Hot tears trickled down her freezing cheeks. Why did she have to be such a terrible person? Because

her parents hadn't paid enough attention to her? Because Celestia wouldn't let her be a princess?

Sunset kicked the post, sending a pile of snow down on her head. She screamed in frustration. *"Why? Why'd you have to be such a spoiled, little brat! Look what you've done!"* A trail of hot air poured from her mouth. *"I hate you!"*

She continued down the road, a new pain in her foot. Home was only a block away though. Her cold, dark, lonely home.

Face it, Sunset... you're better off alone.

Alone. Her friends were fragmented and turned against each other. And she was the root of it all. Maybe the sick voice in her head had a point. Maybe she was better off alone. She couldn't hurt anyone that way.

She slipped into the alley and forced her shoulder against the door.

It didn't open.

Sunset tried again, only to succeed in bruising her shoulder. "Come on!" She rammed it once more, but the door remained stuck. "Come on, come on!" She slammed her boot against it, but nothing happened.

She screamed again and pounded her fists against the door. "Stop it! Stop it, stop it, stop it, *stop it!*" The blue door continued to mock her, refusing to allow her inside.

"I will not be beaten by a damn door!" Sunset ran down the alley to the kitchen window, only to find it closed and only opened from the inside. "Let me in!" She picked a rock off the ground and drew her arm back.

"Ahem."

Sunset turned her head, the rock dropping from her hand. Shining Armor stood at the mouth of the alley, his arms folded over his chest.

Confusion, surprise, anger, panic; Sunset's brain couldn't settle on one. Not even the cold fazed her anymore. She didn't shiver, she just stood, staring condemnation in the face. There was no escape now. If she ran, he would chase her. If she stayed here, he would ask questions.

Her life shattered around her, falling into thousands upon thousands of glittering pieces. There were too many to pick up; most of them were lost in the snow. She had nothing now. No ace in the hole, no trump card, no strings to pull.

Maybe I can knock him out and tie him up! Keep him my prisoner!

Stop, you're making it worse!

But it could work! I just need to find something heavy!

Sunset shook her head. She couldn't go crazy, not now. She had to keep it together. Hard as it was, Sunset managed a smile. "Hello, Shining. What's up?"

Shining looked towards the door. "I could ask you the same thing. You know this building is off-limits, right?"

"Yes." *Quick, find the rock again!*

"So, what are you doing here?"

Sunset fought with all her might. She bit her tongue, she covered her mouth, she held her breath. But the truth blurted out of her in one breath. "I live here!"

Shining kept his face neutral; not even his eyes gave anything away. "You live here?"

Sunset's back hit the wall. "Yes."

"As in this factory?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have anywhere else to live." She shoved her hands in her pockets. "I'm homeless, okay?" She ground her teeth together, her rising anger driving the cold away. "So before you ask, yes, I was lying at dinner, okay? I lied." Before she even knew what she was doing, Sunset snatched a handful of snow off the ground and flung it at Shining. "I'm a liar! Are you happy now? You've got another reason to hate me!" She threw more snow at him. "I lied right to your face! You're freaking happy now, right?"

Shining let the snow bounce off him. He kept his face calm and his expression soft. "No, Sunset, I'm not. And clearly, you're not either."

Sunset threw another wad of snow. *“Don’t pretend you care! You haven’t liked me since day one! Well here it is! I’m homeless! I forged all my documents to get into school! I fooled all of you! Ha!”*

Shining took a few short steps forward, brushing the snow off his face. “Sunset, I just want to talk.”

“I’m tired of talking! Talking always gets me in trouble! I don’t want to talk to you! I don’t want to talk to anyone ever again!” The last snowball dropped from her hand. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed into the snow. “All I do is hurt people. All I do is make a mess.” Tears poured down her face. “Why? I tried so hard...”

The snow crunched in front of her, then there was a strong hand on her shoulder. Shining knelt in front of her, an earnest look in his eye. “Sunset, I want to help you.”

“No you don’t. You just want a reason to take me away.”

Shining brushed away the tears under Sunset’s eyes. She didn’t bother pushing him away; she didn’t have any energy left to fight back.

“I became a police officer to help people, not throw them in jail. I’ll admit, I was trying to turn up some information on you, but it wasn’t so I could take you away. I was curious about who you were. Now I see, you’re someone who looks like they need a friend to talk to.”

Sunset gnawed on her lip, torn between desperation and anger. “Stop coddling me,” she said between sobs. “I don’t want your freaking pity.”

“I’m not here to pity you, Sunset.” Shining stood up and held a hand down to her. “I’m here to help.”

Sunset stared at the hand in front of her, utterly perplexed. “What is it with you Sparkles? Always sticking your nose into other’s business... always trying to help someone.”

Shining smiled. “Guess it’s just in our blood.”

The wind whisked through the alley and brushed against Sunset’s cheek. Her boiling anger had ebbed away, leaving her cold again. She tried to weigh her options, but realistically, she only had one. Running would do nothing for her. She had nowhere to hide.

Maybe he'll show me mercy. Sunset looked into his honest eyes. He would listen to her. But what would he do when he thought she was crazy? Or decided she was just a common criminal? *Only one way to find out.*

She reached up and took his hand.

Since she had only eaten one slice of her pizza, the sandwich Shining had given her was delicious. After she had pulled the meat off of course.

They sat in his police car with the heater on, restoring feeling to Sunset's fingers and toes. She devoured the sandwich with desperate fervor, while Shining picked at his salad in silence. Sunset didn't understand how she was able to eat now of all times when most of the week her anxiety had kept her nauseous. It seemed her stomach had told her brain to shut up for two seconds so it could have a proper meal.

When she finished eating, Shining asked, "Feeling any better?"

"Not really. But I *was* starving, so thanks."

"You're welcome." Shining drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "So..."

Sunset balled up the sandwich wrapping. "Is there any way for me to get out of this without you asking any questions?"

Shining shook his head. "You gotta talk to me, Sunset."

"Yeah, I thought so." Sunset leaned back in her seat. "Well, go ahead; ask me anything. I'll tell you the truth, but you're going to think I'm crazy."

"We'll see about that. I've heard some pretty crazy things." He pulled a cookie from his bag and broke it in half, handing one piece to Sunset "You promise to tell the truth?"

Sunset took the chocolate chip cookie. "Yes. Trust me, Shining, I don't have much of a choice."

"All right. So, why are you living all alone in a factory?"

"I told you: I don't have anywhere else to live." She took a bite out of her cookie.

"What happened to your parents?"

“They’re back in Equestria.” Sunset closed her eyes, knowing what was about to come next.

There was a pause before Shining asked, “What is Equestria?”

“A mirrored reality of this one. Except in it, everyone is a pony. To be more specific, you’re either an earth pony, a pegasus, or a unicorn. I was born in Equestria as a unicorn and came to this world via magic mirror.” She opened an eye, watching confusion and disbelief overtake Shining’s expression.

“Sunset, are you taking any drugs?”

“No, I’m not!” She took another angry bite of her cookie. “I knew you weren’t going to believe me.”

Shining sighed and rubbed his forehead. “You just told me you’re a pony from another world. That’s not something you hear every day.”

“I thought you said you’ve heard some crazy things?” Sunset brushed the crumbs from her mouth. “Mine just happens to be true.”

Shining slid his hand down his face. “Okay. I’ll entertain the notion of another dimension full of magical ponies. Why’d you leave?”

Sunset pulled her legs against her chest. “Because I was a spoiled brat who couldn’t get what she wanted, so as an act of rebellion, I disobeyed my teacher and ran away.”

“Through a magic mirror?”

“Yes, through a magic mirror. Opens once every two and a half years for three days.”

“Seems pretty convenient.”

Sunset dropped her legs and reached for the door. “I don’t even know why I’m bothering! You clearly don’t believe any of this!”

Shining put a hand on her shoulder. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry! You’re right, I’m a little skeptical right now. But I promise, I’ll listen to everything you have to say, and I’ll try to keep an open mind.”

Sunset took her hand off the door, glaring at Shining all the while. She settled back in her seat and said, “Fine. What else do you want to know?”

“Well, how have you been surviving in this world?”

“At first, I bullied and manipulated the students at Canterlot High into giving me anything I needed, mostly money. Recently, I got a real job since the students aren’t afraid of me anymore.”

“And you forged transcripts to get into school?”

“Yep. It wasn’t easy, I’ll tell you that. I didn’t know how technology worked when I first got here.”

Shining nodded like he understood. “But if you’re from another dimension, why would you waste time going to high school? Aren’t there other things visitors from other worlds would rather do?”

Sunset couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or not. “I didn’t know what else to do. I was just trying to think of how I was going to get my revenge against Princess Celestia. And I needed to stay close to the mirror when it opened again.”

“Princess Celestia? You mean *Principal* Celestia, right?”

“Nope. In my world, Celestia’s a princess.”

Shining furrowed his brow in confusion. “You said your world was a mirror of this one, except we were all ponies.”

Sunset shrugged. “Okay, that was a bit of a simplification. It’s not an exact mirror. Equestria has its own geography, history, everything. There are a lot of inconsistencies between our worlds. For instance, your Celestia is a high school principal, mine is an immortal princess.”

“So our worlds are different, but everybody has a doppelganger?”

“Seems like it.”

Shining was silent for a minute. “So, what happened to the you of this world?”

“I don’t know. Kinda glad I haven’t run into her. Who knows what’ll happen?”

That at least got a snort out of Shining. “What, are you afraid if you two touch hands, it’ll tear a fabric in the space-time continuum?”

“I am now; thanks for putting that scenario in my head.”

Shining laughed, which in turn made Sunset smile just a little. It was short-lived as they lapsed into silence a moment later.

Sunset brushed some hair out of her face. “So, what are you going to do with me?”

“Nothing yet. I still want to talk.”

“About what.”

Shining looked at her with genuine concern. “You were pretty upset when I found you. You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

The ache in Sunset’s soul returned. Her dinner threatened to return as well, albeit in an even less pleasant way. She nodded, deciding that if she didn’t talk, she’d probably scream again. “Yes... I... I messed up. I *keep* messing up. I told you, I used to be a bully... that’s an understatement really. I was a horrible person. I set up everyone around me to fail. I twisted words and spread rumors until everyone hated each other and kept the infection spreading.

“It wasn’t until a few months ago when I learned how wrong I was about... *everything*. I finally made friends, and I hated them at first but now they’re the most important things in the world to me.” She wrung her hands. “And then, earlier tonight... we were getting pizza, and they found out about things they had done to each other while they were fighting a year ago. Things that were originally *my* fault! They all hate each other now because of me!” Sunset blocked her face with her sleeve, trying to hide her tears. “They hate each other, Twilight still won’t talk to me, everyone in the school wants me gone, and now, you’re going to take me away before I can fix any of it!”

Shining pulled some tissues from the glove box and handed them to Sunset. “Hey, it’s going to be all right.”

Sunset blew her nose like a trumpet. “No it’s not! You think I’m crazy!”

“I never said that.” Shining took a long breath. “I don’t think you’re crazy... I just...” He slowly picked over his words. “I don’t think you’re telling me the whole truth.”

“I *am* telling the truth! I can’t make this stuff up!”

Shining held his hands up. “Okay, maybe it’s just me then. But right now, that’s not the point. What matters is you’re living on the streets, Sunset; regardless of the reason why, you’re living broke and alone in an old factory.”

Sunset wiped her eyes. “I’m doing just fine.”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that?”

“No. But I can take care of myself—I’ve been doing it for almost three years!”

Shining shook his head. “Sunset, the heart of the matter is, you’re homeless. Whether or not you can take care of yourself is irrelevant. *I* can’t go on with my life in good conscience knowing that you’re not in a safe place and eating well.”

Sunset stopped dabbing at her eyes. “Wait... really?”

“I told you, Sunset, I became a cop to help people.” He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. “Regardless of what’s going on between you and Twilight right now, I know she still cares about you. And it’s not like I *don’t* care about you, Sunset, I just—”

“Don’t trust me with your sister?”

Shining passed his hat back and forth between his hands. “Big brother instinct, you know?”

“No. But I understand.” She sniffled again. “I appreciate that you care about me, Shining, but what are you going to do with me?”

There was a pained look on his face. “Sunset, I can’t let you go back to that factory.”

“Where else am I supposed to go?”

Shining put his hat back on. “Listen, there’s a shelter not too far from Canterlot—”

“Shining, no!” Sunset shouted.

“You’re still a minor. You’d just be there until we can get you into the system —”

“Didn’t you hear me? I can’t leave! I screwed things up and I need to fix them!”

“What else am I supposed to do, Sunset?”

“Just let me keep living on my own.”

Shining grit his teeth. “You know I can’t do that. I’m already trying to ignore your felony of creating false documents. I’m not going to let you keep living on the streets.”

Tears started welling up in Sunset’s eyes. “Please, Shining—”

“I’m sorry, Sunset, but I can’t.”

Sunset twisted her fingers together. She couldn’t leave, she just couldn’t. But what else could she do? Beg to stay with Shining? He’d never agree to that. What about one of her other friends? As much as it pained her to ask them for a favor this large, she just couldn’t leave Canterlot the way things were. But which friend would be willing to put up with her? And that was assuming none of them were mad at her as well for the fight earlier that evening.

She slipped her hands into her pockets while she thought, and her fingers brushed against something slim and papery.

No, she thought. *It’s too crazy. He’d never...* She pulled out the card and turned it over in her hands. She’d known them for the least amount of time out of all her friends. She was pretty sure Trixie still hated her in some way.

But Artemis had said to call if she needed anything.

It was an impossible long shot. Sunset didn’t even want to consider the long-term complications. She just needed someone to take her in, even for one night to get away from Shining.

She looked back over to him. “Shining, what if... what if I found someone to take me in?”

Shining raised an eyebrow. “Right now?”

“Right now.”

“Sunset, it’s nearly midnight. Even if I said yes, who are you going to find to take you in at this hour?”

A buzzing on the nightstand interrupted Artemis’ light snoring. He cracked an eye open and saw it was a phone ringing, though he couldn’t identify if it was

his or Selena's. He rolled over, choosing to ignore it. "Turtle dove, it's for you."

Selena snorted and placed her head under the pillow. "That's your phone, Arty."

"You sure?"

"Just answer it and make it stop!"

Artemis released a dramatic sigh and groped around until he found the phone. "Hello, you've reached the Supreme and Mystical Artemis Lulamoon," he said in a dull voice. "Please leave a message after the snore."

"Artemis? It's me," a female voice said.

"I'm sorry, I don't know anyone by that name."

"It's Sunset!" the voice snapped.

A small portion of the fog smothering Artemis' brain dissipated. "Ah, Sunset." He stifled a yawn. "Wonderful to hear your voice. A bit late for a party, though."

"What? No, that's not why I'm calling. Listen, I need a favor... a really big favor. As in, you can dock my pay forever if you say yes."

"I like money." Artemis grinned deliriously to himself. "Anything for you, Sunny Bun."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

"Great! I need you to come pick me up from the police station... and maybe.... letmelivewithyouforawhile, pleeeeeease?" Sunset begged.

Artemis yawned again. "Of course, Sunset. Easy-peasy." He sat up and arched his back. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" The phone clicked off, leaving the silence to ring in Artemis' ears.

Selena stirred underneath the pillow. "Was that Sunset?"

"Yep." Artemis crawled out of bed and trudged over to the closet.

"What did she want?"

He picked out one of his blue suits. “Needs me to pick her up from the police station. And something about living with us for a while.” He yawned again.

Selena slowly pulled her head from beneath the pillow and gave Artemis a blank stare. “What?”

Sunset sat on a stool in Shining’s cramped office. The rest of the space was taken up by a filing cabinet and a desk where Shining sat, tapping a pen against his chin. Several folders, a phone, and two photographs, one of his family, and the other of Cadence filled the space on his desk.

They hadn’t spoken much after Sunset had made her phone call. It was just a waiting game now. The anxiety was eating Sunset alive, making her change her position every ten seconds. What if Artemis never showed up? What if he changed his mind and refused to take Sunset in?

Shining grumbled to himself. “This is so against protocol. I’m sure this isn’t even legal.”

Sunset fidgeted in her seat. Or what if Shining decided to follow the rules and throw her in jail, or the asylum, or the homeless shelter? “I guess saying sorry won’t make things better?”

Shining swiveled his chair to face her. “It’s just...” He tapped his pen against the armrest. “I don’t know what to do with you. You don’t have *any* official records. Which actually begs the question, how do you have a license?”

“Forgery.” Sunset tugged on the collar of her shirt. *Really not helping my case here.*

The pen tapping stopped. Shining turned to his desk again and planted his face against it. “I really can’t believe I’m doing this. You do know I have every reason to arrest you, right?”

“Yes, I know. Shining, I didn’t have any choice—I’m not from here!”

“Yeah.” Shining lifted his face up. “I think I’m starting to believe you.” He faced her again. “I’m breaking a lot of rules tonight, Sunset. Half the reason is because I really don’t know what to do in this scenario. The other half...” A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I believe you’re a good kid.”

Sunset looked away, her cheeks heating up. “I’m... thanks.”

“Don’t prove me wrong, Sunset. If I let you walk away, you have to promise me something.”

“Sure, anything.”

Shining fixed her with a stare that looked into her soul. “You said you wanted to make everything right. So promise me you will. Promise me you’ll help your friends. And promise me you’ll make Twilight happy again.”

“I promise,” Sunset said immediately. She didn’t know what she was going to do, but she knew she had to try *something*. She had just made friends, she wasn’t in the mood to lose them now.

The desk phone rang, and Shining clicked the speaker button. “Yes?”

“Shining, the Wizard of Oz is here to see you.”

Shining cast a look at Sunset, who nodded fervently. “Send him back.”

There was a knock on the door, and Shining opened it up, allowing Artemis inside. He looked tired but still managed his boyish smile. Sunset almost couldn’t believe he had actually come.

“You must be Artemis Lulamoon.” Shining stood up and shook his hand. “I’m Officer Armor.” He paused and gave Artemis a scrutinizing look. “Wait... you, uh, didn’t happen to tie up four members of the Griffon Gang and leave them in a construction site last week, did you?”

Artemis gave a very subtle wink in Sunset’s direction. “Nope, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Riiiiight.” Shining looked between the both of them, then shrugged it off. “Well, I’m glad you came, Mr. Lulamoon—”

“Please, call me Artemis. Mr. Lulamoon is the name of my ageing father.” He pointed his nose up. “I refuse to be called such a title until I am his age.”

Shining cleared his throat. “Sorry, I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, Sunset’s not in any real trouble... well, sort of. It’s just that...” He looked at Sunset. “You know what, it’s probably better if you explain it.”

Sunset stood up. “Artemis, I’ll give you the long version later. The short version is...” She rubbed her arm. “I’ve kinda been lying to you. I don’t

exactly have a home... or a guardian of any sort. I've just been living in an old factory for the past two years."

Artemis gaped at her, his facial expression rapidly changing from surprise, to anger, to sympathy, and back to surprised. "You've been living in a *factory*?"

Sunset flinched. "Yes."

"Sunset, why on earth didn't you tell anyone?"

"Because I didn't think it was a big deal and I didn't want to bother anybody." She kicked at a dust mite on the floor. "I didn't want to be a freeloader."

Artemis held a hand over his face and sighed. "Sunset, there is a difference between being a freeloader and *asking for help*!"

Either one was a blow to Sunset's fragile pride. Even with all the support around her, she thought things were best if she could do them by herself.

You're better off alone...

Sunset shook her head. No! That's *why* she had friends—so she wouldn't have to be alone! She looked up at Artemis. "You're right, there's a big difference. That's why I'm asking for help now." She swallowed her pride. "I know this is really sudden... and you can say no, but... please, Artemis, I need somewhere to live—"

"Of course."

"What?"

Artemis crossed his arms. "Of course you can stay with us, Sunset. I already said yes over the phone, even if I wasn't in the right state of mind."

Sunset blinked. "J-just like that? You're going to take me in on the spot?"

"I don't see why not. You need my help, I'm here, and there's a spare room at the house. I don't think this decision needs anymore thought."

"B-but, what about—"

"Sunset, do you want to stay with us or not?" Artemis asked with a frown.

"I want to stay with you." Her heart swelled like a balloon, and before she knew it, she was running into Artemis' arms and giving him an enormous hug. "Thank you so much! You don't know what this means to me!"

Artemis put his arms around her and smiled. “I think I have a pretty good idea.”

Shining cleared his throat. “Well, that’s that I guess. Sunset, you’re free to go.”

Artemis looked up. “Wait, don’t I have to fill out some paperwork or something?”

Shining dropped into his chair. “Normally, you would. But Sunset seems to be a special case. I don’t know what paperwork would be suited for this occasion.” He sighed. “I’ll... try to get back to you on that.”

“Special case?” Artemis looked back at Sunset. “What does he—”

“I’ve got a lot to tell you later,” Sunset said, still smiling. She looked back at Shining. “Thank you.”

Shining gave a flippant wave of his hand. “Don’t mention it.” He looked at Sunset with a grave expression. “Seriously, don’t.”

Sunset gave him a thumbs up and turned to follow Artemis out the door.

“Wait a sec,” Shining called. “Are you really a magician?” he asked Artemis.

Artemis grinned, twirling his goatee. “I don’t know. Is that a chair or a hog you’re sitting on?”

Shining looked at Artemis like he was crazy. “Pretty sure it’s a chair—”

“Lulamoon!”

In a puff of smoke, the chair turned into a grown hog lying contently on the floor. It snorted a few times when Shining jumped off it, yelling in terror. Sunset roared with laughter, holding the door frame for support.

“Okay, you’re a magician.” Shining gestured to the hog, now sniffing his desk. “Can you change it back now?”

Artemis tapped his wand against his chin. “I’m waiting for the magic words.”

“Please?”

“Actually, they’re Lulamoon.”

Shining rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Lulamoon?”

“Lulamoon!”

Just like that, the hog was a chair again. Shining poked it just to make sure, then collapsed into his seat again and rested his head on the desk.

Artemis chuckled and slipped his wand away. “Come, Sunset. Let’s go home.”

Sunset’s smile continued to light up her face. “Yeah, lets.”

Kpok 36: The Trouble With Trixie

It was the eeriest thing Sunset had ever experienced.

Students filled the halls—talking, laughing, walking around and conversing with each other. One dribbled a basketball around.

Yet none of them made a sound.

Sunset walked past them, her footsteps ghostlike. She couldn't hear her own breathing or the beating of her heart. Even the ringing left in the absence of sound was gone. It was utterly, wholly silent. But everyone was so animated. Their mouths moved, their bodies functioned. So why was Sunset deaf to everything?

She stopped in front of Flash and tried to say hi. Her mouth formed the words, but sound never escaped. In fact, Flash didn't seem to notice Sunset at all. She waved a hand in front of him, but his eyes looked through her. Sunset stepped away, a foreboding bubble expanding in her stomach. She tried again when Lyra walked past, but she neither saw nor heard Sunset.

A cold frost spread through her veins, and she ran down the halls, desperate to find her friends. Her heavy footfalls still made no noise whatsoever. She even stopped to bang her hand against a locker. Still silent.

She made her way to the gym, where she found five of her friends scattered across the room, their backs all turned. She approached Rainbow first, standing with her arms crossed and her nose turned up.

“Dash, what's going on?” Sunset gasped, relieved she had her voice back.

Rainbow, however, continued to ignore her. She occasionally glared in Applejack's direction, but she made no acknowledgment of Sunset's presence.

Sunset moved on to Applejack and waved a hand in front of her face. “Come on, you can hear me, right?”

Evidently, Applejack couldn't.

“Girls, what's going on? Why are you ignoring me?” Sunset noticed Rarity's mouth move, prompting Pinkie to spin around and point a finger at her. Rainbow turned around as well, shouting nothing. All of them soon gathered at

the center of the gym, yelling in silence and making wild gestures at one another.

Sunset danced around them, trying to get their attention. “Girls! Girls! Hey, stop! Whatever this is, I’m sure we can work it out! Stop fighting; you’re supposed to be friends!”

“And what do you know about friendship?”

Twilight stood in the doorway, arms folded across her chest, eyes narrowed and mouth set in a thin line. She walked forward, thunder clapping with every step she took.

Sunset’s mouth dried, and she backed away. “Twilight, I...”

“Well? Answer the question. What do you know about friendship, Sunset?”

“I... it’s...” She bowed her head in defeat. How could she describe friendship? It was a maze of confusing ideas and scenarios. It was something that made her happy, she knew that. It involved helping others without expecting something in return. It was a jumble of experiences that made Sunset stop and think about herself as a person.

She shook her head. “It’s complicated. Maybe I don’t really understand all of it. But I know they shouldn’t be fighting like that.” She looked up and found Twilight inches from her face, still scowling. It was so exaggerated, so alien. It didn’t sit right on Twilight’s face.

“But it’s your fault they’re fighting like that in the first place! Time doesn’t heal all wounds, Sunset!” Twilight jabbed a finger at her. “You sabotaged their friendship all those years ago, and look what happened!”

Sunset raised her hands in defense. “I know, but I was different back then! I don’t want them fighting now! I want to fix it!”

The corners of Twilight’s mouth twisted upwards into a smug grin. “You want to know how to fix it? Maybe I’ll tell you if you can catch me!” Twilight took off back down the halls, laughing gleefully.

Sunset cast one more look at her screaming friends, then chased after Twilight. The hallways bent and twisted around her as she tried to close the gap between the two of them. Sunset was surprised at how hard she pushed

herself just to keep up. Twilight stopped at the top of the stairs, leaving Sunset to catch her breath.

“What’s the matter, Sunny? Tired already?” she cooed, the same smug grin tugging eerily at her lips as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I guess you really don’t want to find out how to help your dear, dear friends, hmm?”

Sunset tightened her fists and ran up after her. Twilight glided down the halls, staying just out of Sunset’s reach. The rest of the students had vanished, taking their silence with them and replacing it with Twilight’s bouncing laughter. The chase continued on for some time until Twilight had run herself into a corner, illuminated by flickering lights. She looked straight at Sunset with a cocky smile.

“I got so bored being ahead of you, I kinda stopped paying attention.”

“Well, I’ve caught you either way, so start talking. How do I fix this?”

Twilight twisted a finger through her hair. “Look at the proud Sunset Shimmer, asking me for help. How the mighty have fallen.”

Sunset squared her shoulders. “I’m not afraid to ask for help.” A book flew from one of the lockers and smacked her in the head. “Ow—what the hell?”

“That’s a lie and you know it,” Twilight said, slowly sauntering around Sunset, her cocky smile never faltering. “I seem to recall you outright saying no when your friends wanted to help you in that dingy factory you called a home. Or how about when the Princess offered you a hand of friendship?” She looked up at Sunset, eyes shining with mischief. “You hate people pitying you, remember?”

Sunset pressed her teeth together. “Why are you being so mean?”

“Why are you being so stupid?”

She threw her hands up, curled her fingers, and took a deep breath. “All right, I get it, you’re mad. You don’t have to be a jerk about all this, though.”

Twilight’s smile finally melted and she glared at Sunset. “I don’t have to be a jerk? Excuse me, who spent their entire life walking around like she was holier than thou? Who tormented everyone she considered beneath her just for giggles? Who nearly drove Fluttershy to suicide?”

Sunset's entire body trembled, suppressing the urge to slap Twilight across the face. "I've learned, okay? I know I screwed up before, but I'm learning."

"Yes, bravo, you're not an evil, vindictive, narcissistic megalomaniac anymore. You're just a scared girl who can't take a few hits to her pride."

Sunset growled, her resistance to hitting Twilight slipping by the second. "My pride isn't an issue here; I know when to swallow it."

Twilight spread her arms wide. "And yet, you continued to sleep in a factory after you made 'friends.' You still refuse to even acknowledge that Princess Twilight helped—" Her head snapped to the side as Sunset held her hand out.

Sunset's face flushed an angry red. "Don't you dare talk to me about that Princess!"

"See! There it is, right there!" Twilight grinned again. "That pride just oozing all over your soul! You can't even accept that she helped you in some small way!"

"She's the reason the Elements put that damn curse on me in the first place—all it's brought is trouble! It doesn't matter how much good I do for others, those stupid elements have just continued to set me up for failure! I-I can't even explain why I acted like a big, stupid jerk to the girl I've fallen in love with." Sunset felt her throat tighten up and her knees give out beneath her. She bit her lip as she looked up to Twilight.

Twilight sneered, showing off pointed teeth. "There she is, the scared, little girl. How does your pride taste? Does it taste like failure?"

"Stop. Please."

"You want it to stop?" Twilight extended a hand to Sunset, her nails sharper than normal. "I'll show you how to make it stop." The sclera of her left eye turned black.

Sunset curled her fingers. "You... you're—"

A bright light erupted from behind the imposter Twilight, making her shriek in pain. Her features dissolved into a familiar shadow, then sped away across the lockers.

From the light came a second Twilight, only her features weren't warped in any way. There was no superiority in her step, and she smiled at Sunset the way the normal Twilight did. "Are you okay?"

"I..." Sunset sat on her knees. "I don't know. I don't know what to do."

Twilight took her hand and pulled Sunset to her feet. "You're almost there. Don't listen to the darkness; it's only there to make you feel worse. You know more about friendship than you think you do."

"Maybe, but, I still feel so lost. Friendship and... and love." She made a limp motion with her arm. "It's all just one big mess."

Twilight gently pulled her arm away and stepped back toward the light. "Friendship isn't always easy... but..." She mouthed something that Sunset couldn't make out before the light consumed all.

Sunset stirred, turning her face against the soft pillow. She pulled the warm sheets higher, trying to lull herself back to sleep, even if it had been uneasy. Luckily, the bed was incredibly soft, making falling back to sleep a breeze.

Her eyes snapped open. Her bed wasn't this soft; it was hard as a rock! She bolted upright, finding herself in a blue room, the window across from her showing off the snow-covered rooftops of other houses.

Where am I? What's going on? Her heartbeat skyrocketed. She scrambled out of the queen sized bed and onto the soft blue carpet. She looked down at the pajamas she had on, and everything became clear. They were midnight blue and had stars and moons on them.

"Right," Sunset murmured to herself. The events of the previous night played back in her head. Shining Armor, her breakdown, being taken to the police station, and then being taken in by Artemis.

She looked around the guest bedroom. It was fairly large—certainly larger than her space at the factory. It had a desk and a nightstand, a dresser, and even a closet. A mirror hung on the back of the door, showing Sunset the severe bags under her eyes. She didn't linger on her reflection for long, choosing to look out the window instead.

A fine layer of snow covered the neighborhood. It had stopped falling from the sky for now; the sun had broken through the clouds and smiled down on the world. Some kids were already outside, having a snowball fight.

So... this is going to be my life now? Artemis had allowed her to stay here; for how long remained to be seen. But she had finally moved on from that factory.

Sunset sat on her bed, a whirlwind of emotions spinning through her. Part of her felt like she had given up some freedom by accepting this deal. Yes, the factory had been terrible and she hated it, but she didn't have to answer to anybody. Now, she was a guest under someone else's roof—she'd have to play by their rules.

Come on, it beats sleeping in an office and always worrying about my next meal, right? Besides, it was warm in the house! Sunset was used to waking up freezing, but she could feel a blast of hot air coming from the vents. *See, you can do this; you're adaptable.*

Sunset thought about returning to sleep for a while now that she knew where she was. The last dream haunted her, however. She couldn't remember all of it, just bits and pieces. And the impression it had left on her heart.

"What do I know about friendship?" Sunset asked herself. She could remember the last words Twilight said to her. "'Friendship isn't easy, but'... but what?" She sighed; already the dream was becoming hazy. Still, she remembered her resolve to fix the rift between her friends. She didn't know how yet, but she would find a way.

In the meantime, she had *this* to deal with. She looked around the spacious room again, brushing her socks against the soft carpet. The whirlwind returned, sending her emotions into a tizzy. This wasn't hers, she had to remember that. She was just borrowing this room until she could find a way to escape and continue living on her own.

"See! There it is, right there! That pride just oozing all over your soul!"

Sunset flinched at Twilight's scathing words. It hadn't really been Twilight though. Dream or not, Sunset should have known better. Even at her angriest, Twilight was never cruel.

“This isn’t about pride,” Sunset said with defiance, curling her hands into fists. “This is about me being a freeloader. I’m not afraid to ask for help, but I can’t mooch off of them forever!”

“Face it, Sunset, you’re better off alone.”

“I am not!” Sunset lifted her fist toward the mirror, but dragged it back at the last second. She looked at the little scars on her knuckles from the last time she had done such an act. Her reflection looked back at her, wide-eyed and afraid. They narrowed into annoyance.

Why was she fighting this? She had a house to live in! She had been found out by the police and *wasn’t* on her way to a homeless shelter or a government research facility. She had finally pulled herself back from the brink.

Then why did everything still feel like a tangled mess?

Sunset ran a hand through her bedraggled hair. It was too much to think about. *One thing at a time, Sunset. First, your new home.*

She opened the door and poked her head out. A gentle silence filled the house. Was she the only one here? She glanced back at the wall clock in her room. It was a little after nine. Perhaps the Lulamooners were just late risers. Sunset stepped into the hall. She wanted to look around a little, but felt like she was intruding. Even more so, she wanted to take a shower and clean herself off from last night. She still had pizza sauce under her fingernails. Again, the problem of intrusion came up, along with the realization that she didn’t have anything to change into.

Out of curiosity, Sunset went over to the dresser and rummaged through it. There were all sorts of clothes of various patterns and sizes, few of them looked like they’d fit though. Sunset pulled out a light blue shirt with a ruffled blouse along the bottom. “Hey, you’re pretty cute.” She turned it over and hummed to herself, then put it away. She had just gotten here, she couldn’t be borrowing clothes.

A door opened up, and Sunset ran back to the hall to see who was awake. Trixie stepped out of her room, wearing a long blue nightgown. She stretched her arms out and yawned, freezing when she saw Sunset.

“Wh-what are you doing in Trixie’s house?”

“Uhh, I kinda live here now.” Sunset put on a lopsided smile.

Trixie worked her jaw. “Since when?”

“Last night.”

“What? But, you can’t... why... how...” Trixie pointed a finger at Sunset and broke into an uneasy grin. “Oh, Trixie knows what you’re doing, haha. This is a joke, isn’t it? Hahahaha, *well it’s not funny!*”

“She’s not joking, Trixie!” Artemis called from downstairs. “She’s our newest guest!”

Trixie ran to the top of the stairs and looked over the railing, then to Sunset, sheer horror painted on her face. “No... no, no.”

Sunset held her hands up. “Listen, Trixie, I—”

“*No! No! No, no, no, no, no, no, no!*” Trixie stomped her feet against the floor and marched downstairs, screaming, “*No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!*”

Sunset sighed and followed after her. “She took that better than I thought.” As she descended the stairs, the smell of roasting coffee beans tickled her nose. Inside the kitchen, Artemis and Selena were at an island table separating the kitchen from the dining room, reading the morning paper and scribbling in a notebook respectively.

Trixie slammed her hands on the table. “How could you do this to Trixie? Sunset already works at the shop; you want her to *live* with us too?”

Artemis folded the paper. “Trixie, Sunset here had nowhere else to go. I’m not going to turn a blind eye to someone who needs a little help. Besides, she’s your friend.”

Trixie dragged her fingers down the sides of her face. “No, she isn’t! Trixie *tolerates* her at best! She’s just—” Trixie flailed an arm in Sunset’s direction “—there! Trixie admits Sunset saved her life, but that doesn’t make us friends!”

Sunset sighed deeply, looking away from Trixie as she tried to organize her thoughts. “Look... I know we haven’t gotten off on the *best* foot, but I’m

willing to make an effort if you'll do the same. Truce?" she offered a hand, eyes locking with Trixie's.

Trixie stared obstinately at Sunset's outstretched hand for a solid minute. She then turned on her heel and marched upstairs. A slamming door told Sunset the conversation was over.

Artemis sighed in frustration and rubbed his temples. "I don't know where she gets this stubbornness from." He raised his finger as Selena opened her mouth to speak. "Even I'm not that stubborn."

Selena lightly cleared her throat. "Well, you did kind of just spring this on us, Arty." She looked sincerely at Sunset. "Not that I'm not glad to have you here, Sunset. Goodness knows, I would never let you just freeze outside." She looked back to Artemis. "But you know how much Trixie hates change."

Sunset hung her shoulders and kept her eyes on the floor. "Listen, I don't want to create a rift or anything. If this is going to cause problems, I can—"

"Nope!" Artemis smacked his palm on the table. "I refuse to let you go back to some run down factory. You can stay here as long as you need to. Trixie will calm down eventually. If not, I'll just get her another Christmas present."

Selena propped an arm up and rested her head in her hand. She sighed and said, "You can't keep bribing her with gifts."

"It's been working so far." Artemis waved a hand. "But that's neither here nor there right now." He pulled up a barstool for Sunset and patted the seat. "I believe you have some 'splainin' to do, Sunset."

Sunset hopped up onto the barstool, still keeping her head down. She tapped her fingers together. "Yeah, I did promise to explain things later." Inside, she growled in frustration. It seemed like she was telling *everyone* her private past now. She raised her head to the ceiling, avoiding any eye contact. "Where do I start this time?"

"Well," Selena said, lightly tapping her pencil against her notepad, "you could tell us why you were living in a factory for starters."

Sunset let out a hollow laugh. "Yeah, that's kinda a long story." She looked down again and tapped her fingers together. "Heh, you'll probably get a kick

out of this. See, I'm not exactly from *here*. I was born in a parallel dimension in a land called Equestria." *That never gets any easier to explain.*

There was a long pause, in which Sunset could feel Artemis and Selena's eyes on her. "Come again?" Artemis asked.

"I was born in another dimension in a land called Equestria."

"So, you're an alien?" Selena asked.

"In a matter of speaking, yes."

Artemis let out something that sounded caught between a cough and a laugh. "I see. Do continue."

Sunset moved her hands to her lap. "Well, it gets better. In the land I'm from, we weren't exactly human." Sunset swallowed. "Equestria is inhabited by magical ponies, including pegasi and unicorns. I was a unicorn back home." She dared to inch her eyes up and saw Artemis pressing a hand over his mouth, his cheeks red.

"Mmhmm," he said in a restrained and muffled voice. "Please, keep going."

Sunset got in a sigh before her mouth kept making words. "So, yeah, I was a unicorn. One of the best of my time." She allowed herself a guilty grin. "*The* best if I let my ego run free for a second." Regret and shame draped themselves over her face, covering up her smile. "I was taught by the ruler of Equestria herself, Princess Celestia."

"Isn't that the name of the high school principal?" Selena asked.

"Yes. Forgot to mention, when I said Equestria is a parallel dimension, I mean, everyone here has a pony counterpart somewhere there."

Artemis had both elbows up on the table and was resting his cheeks against his closed fists, looking at Sunset with stars in his eyes. "So, the principal of a high school here is a unicorn princess in your world?" His voice cracked from the enthusiasm he was holding in.

"Actually, she's an immortal alicorn. Alicorns are combinations of all three pony types. Anyways, back then I was... you know, not a nice person—pony." Sunset wrung her hands. "I was a spiteful, narcissistic jerk looking for power to prove a point." She sunk lower in her chair, to the point that she was eye level

to the island. *Let's try to keep the self-loathing down to a minimum today.* She nodded to herself. "To make a *really* long story short, I didn't get what I wanted, threw a tantrum and ran away through a magic mirror that only opens once every two and a half years to this world. Since I had nowhere to go, I had to find a place to lie low. Hence the factory.

"Once I got here I... continued to act like a petulant child." Sunset dug her nails into her palm. "Trixie isn't *wrong* to dislike me. But, I'm trying to get better." She was half-tempted to look up and see if Artemis was still grinning, but couldn't bring herself to do it. "I spent years keeping everyone around me down and turning them against one another." She sighed, noting how similar this sounded to her talk with Shining Armor last night.

"Anyway, to make another long story short, I ran back home when the mirror opened up, stole a crown to give me infinite power, brought it back here, put it on, turned into a demon, then six girls stood up to me and blasted me with a rainbow beam of friendship. I saw the error of my ways, tried to get better, and here we are." She finally lifted her head again, seeing Artemis' twitching smile.

"So, the core of this story is, you're actually a pony from a magical dimension?"

"Yes," Sunset said with a sigh.

"Mmhmm." Artemis fell onto the floor and erupted into gales of laughter, clutching his sides. He rolled onto his back and kicked his legs in the air. "I love it! I love it, I love it, I love it!"

Sunset stared at him, then looked to Selena. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Give him a minute. He'll be fine."

Artemis' laughter slowly subsided, and he picked himself up, using the chair for support. He looked at Sunset and broke into another fit. "Nope! It's just too perfect!"

"You did hear the *whole* story, right?" Sunset threw her arms out. "I used dark magic and turned into a demon! This isn't all sugar and rainbows!"

"But you said you got blasted by a rainbow beam!"

"Artemis!" Selena snapped. "The poor girl is trying to be serious."

“You’re right, you’re right.” Artemis straightened up and fanned himself. “Whew. Okay, I think I’m good. Haven’t laughed that hard in while.” He sat on the stool again and faced Sunset, a childish smile still scribbled on his face. “Okay, so you made a few mistakes. Last I checked, didn’t you say you were trying to be better and that you were sorry?”

“Yes, I did, and yes, I am.” Sunset lifted herself up again, but kept her shoulders low. “I don’t know. I knew you would probably take this in stride but...”

Artemis raised his eyebrow. “What? Did you think we’d turn you away after we found out you dabbled in some dark magic?”

Sunset made an uneven roll of her shoulders. “A little.”

Selena reached a hand over the table and laid it across Sunset’s. “Sweetie, you told us a while ago you were trying to be a better person, and we believed it. If you’re willing to turn over a new leaf, then we’re willing to help you.”

A small laugh rose up in Sunset’s throat, and she shook her head. “Ponies and humans have a lot of things in common, you know. Most of you are just so ready to forgive someone.”

“Keyword being ‘most’,” Artemis said. He leaned back in his chair and stroked his goatee. “If you’re going to be living here, Sunset, we need you and Trixie to get along.”

“Well, I’ve done all I can do.” Sunset turned her head away.

“Yes, you’ve made an effort. Perhaps the two of you just need some more quality time together.” He snapped his fingers. “And I know just how you’ll get it!” He stood up and made a shooing gesture with his hands. “But first, go wash up and put on some fresh clothes.”

Sunset opened her mouth.

“Yes, anything in your room is yours to wear.”

Sunset closed her mouth. “Well, if you insist.” She got up for the stairs when a thought struck her. She looked over her shoulder. “Um... does your bathroom have hot water?”

Selena nodded. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it?”

Tears filled Sunset's eyes, and she looked away. "N-no reason. I just wanted to know. T-thank you." Sunset ran upstairs before they could ask what was wrong. She grabbed a towel from the hall cabinet and rushed into the bathroom.

Like everything else in the house, it was painted blue, with two sinks, and a toilet adjacent to the shower. Sunset twisted the shower knob to 'hot' and stuck her hand out, feeling the water heat up against her palm. Her lip quivered and tears fell from her face in earnest.

She stripped herself of her clothes and threw herself under the scalding water, relishing every drop on her skin, even if she started to turn pink at some point. Steam rolled off her and filled the room, clouding the large mirror. Sunset lifted her face, her tears indistinguishable from the falling water.

"This is the best day ever!"

Warm and squeaky clean, Sunset stood on the fluffy bath mat, brushing her teeth with a new toothbrush she had conveniently found in one of the drawers, still in its packaging. The bathroom was still covered in a fine layer of steam, and Sunset had to rub a spot in the clouded mirror to see her reflection.

This... this is nice. She let out a calm sigh through her nose. A long, hot shower was a luxury Sunset had been denied since she had hidden away in her factory. Living here, she could take one whenever she wanted! The thought almost brought her to tears again.

"Would you hurry up in there!" Trixie yelled, pounding on the door.

Guess I'll have to deal with that, too. Sunset spat into the sink and rinsed her mouth out, her body running on autopilot. "Give me a second."

"Trixie's already given you an hour! Get out!"

With her towel secured around her middle, Sunset opened the door and brushed past Trixie. Trixie glared at her before stepping into the bathroom and slamming the door shut.

"You're welcome," Sunset said to the door. She shuffled to her room, feeling the warm draft of the heater tickle her bare skin. It was a foreign feeling: this basic comfort of heat, the smell of pancakes coming from downstairs, and

collapsing onto a bed she knew hadn't come from the curbside of a garage sale. Sunset was still used to the frigid air that permeated the factory, the stale must that clouded her room, and the hard mattress she had called her bed.

This room wasn't hers; Sunset knew that. Nothing in here belonged to her. She was a stranger, nothing more. Then why did she feel so comfortable? Why was she *letting* herself get comfortable? Everything could be taken away from her in an instant. Artemis and Selena said they didn't care about her past, but what about the future? What if she messed up or did something to make them regret taking her in?

Sunset looked around her room, noticing the lack of a certain squeaky voice to assuage her fears. She shifted her mouth to the side and said in a high pitched voice, "You're being too hard on yourself. They see you're trying to be better; have faith in them having faith in you."

In her normal voice, she asked, "What about Trixie?"

"She can't stay mad at you forever. Just give it some time."

Sunset stood up and pressed her palm to her forehead. "Okay, so today we learned, it's not the doll; I'm just crazy."

Sunset removed the towel and got dressed, pausing to think that she was putting on someone else's panties. They were at least clean, so she tried not to think about it too much. She put on a long-sleeved shirt and covered it with a festive sweater decorated with Christmas trees. For pants, she selected a pair with stars decorating the legs. A little mismatched, but she liked it.

She stepped out of her room and followed the smell of food back downstairs, where a spread of pancakes, eggs, and bacon was laid out on the island table. Trixie had already helped herself to breakfast, seating herself at the larger table in the dining room.

Sunset looked at the food anxiously, her stomach growling. She meant to grab a plate, but realized she didn't know where anything was. Artemis and Selena were nowhere around, so Sunset fell back to Trixie. "Umm, where are the plates?"

Trixie stoutly ignored her.

“Come on, Trixie, what’s it gonna take for us to at least be *civil* toward each other?”

Trixie swallowed her food. “You living anywhere else but here.”

Sunset raised her hands to shoulder levels. “Come on, Trixie, can’t we at least *try* to get along for once? Hating you requires more energy than I’m willing to spend right now.” *I’m using most of it on myself.*

Lowering her fork, Trixie eyed her with suspicion and indifference. It was *just* a touch softer than the look she had given Sunset an hour ago. She pointed with her eyes. “Cabinet closest to the fridge.”

“Thank you,” Sunset said, being extra careful to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She pulled a plate from the cabinet and looked around again. “Umm, where are the forks?”

“Eat with your hands.”

Sunset gripped the plate tighter, a consolation for not using it as a lethal weapon.

Artemis walked into the room, proving to Sunset that he *could* appear without a puff of smoke. “Oh good, you’re both here! I have a special little bonding mission for the two of you.”

Trixie stiffened. “What?”

“Oh, come one, Trixie, it’ll be fun!” Artemis clapped his hands together. “We’re leaving it to you two to get a Christmas tree!”

“*Just* the two of us?”

Artemis reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Maybe it’ll get you two to agree on something. Here’s a hundred bucks.” He held it out to Trixie, and as she reached for it, he pulled back. “Try not to spend all of it.” He handed her the money.

Trixie took it and stuffed it into her jacket pocket, grumbling all the while. “Trixie is doing this under protest.”

“Ha!” Artemis patted her head. “That’s what your mother said to me when I proposed to her!” He straightened his cape, then snapped his fingers, causing his hat to appear. “Guess I’m running the store on my own for a little while.

You two have fun!” He narrowed his eyes. “And I do mean try. *Lulamoon!*” And like that, he was gone in a puff of smoke.

Sunset held a hand out. “Wait, where are the... forks...” Her arm fell.

Trixie wiped her mouth with a napkin before getting up and grabbing her keys. “Let’s go. The sooner we get this over with, the better.” She marched into the hall, refusing to make eye contact.

Sunset stared at the food remaining on the table. She grabbed a pancake, shoved it into her mouth, and hurried after Trixie.

Trixie drove a bright blue buggy. Sunset wasn’t sure what she expected, but it was a decent fit, even if the car smiled more than its driver.

There was no music. Sunset and Trixie drove down the freeway in absolute silence. Trixie wore an impassive face, completely still save for the blink of her eyes and the occasional pucker of her cheek. Sunset kept a tight grip on her seatbelt, unsure if this was just how Trixie drove or if she was hardly paying attention to the road.

Snow had been pushed to the far sides of the freeway where it now melted in the late morning sun, leaving runoffs of asphalt tainted water. The light reflecting off the water and remaining snow made the world brighter.

Sunset watched the houses turn into apartment complex, then into the block buildings of the city. “Soooo...” she said between pinched lips.

“No talking.” Trixie tensed her shoulders. “Trixie needs to focus.”

Sunset pressed her head back into the seat. *So much fun.*

They pulled into the Barnyard Bargains parking lot. White tents had been erected over a large section of it, housing emerald green trees Sunset could smell from the car.

Trixie cut the engine and stepped out. “We go over, we pick one, we go home.”

Sunset got out, keeping her hands snug inside her sweater pockets. “You can’t just not talk to me forever, Trixie.”

“Sure I can. You won’t be staying in *my* house too long.” Trixie started for the tents.

“Okay, look,” Sunset said, briskly walking to keep up, “I’m not one-hundred percent thrilled at the idea either, but I don’t have anywhere else to stay, so, I’m kinda stuck here.”

“No, you’re not. You can go back to that Equi-whatever place you came from.”

Sunset put a little extra force in each of her steps. “Well, if you were eavesdropping on the *whole* conversation, you would know that I can’t for another two years. So, I’m literally *stuck* here.”

Trixie stopped and wheeled on Sunset, pointing a finger off into the distance. “Go be stuck here somewhere else!” She exhaled a cloud of hot air.

“Okay, sans the clear fact you still don’t like me, why don’t you want me around?”

Trixie put her hands on her hips. “Trixie was starting to warm up to you until you went and pulled *this* stunt?”

Sunset threw her hands out, regretting the decision as soon as they felt the air. “What stunt?”

“Trying to weasel your way into my family so you can do who-knows-what with our magic!” Trixie’s cheeks began to turn pink.

Sunset ran a hand down her face, then shoved it back in her pocket. “I don’t want your magic, Trixie! Magic is half the reason I’m in this mess in the first place!”

“Then why did you call Trixie’s father of all people to help you?”

“Because he was the only person I *could* call! And because he told me I could ask for help from him if I really needed it!”

Trixie flared her nostrils, letting out more steam. “Well, it won’t matter once Trixie tells them what *really* happened at the dance—that not only did you turn into a *demon* and tried to destroy the school, you also brainwashed most of us! That’s right, Trixie remembers everything now! And trust me, I have ways of changing my parents’ minds!”

Sunset cringed, punched by Trixie's words. "Look, Trixie, I already said it: I'm not proud of how I use to be." She curled a fist in her pocket. "I'm sorry about the dance, okay? But that's not who I am and I'll never go back to being that way for as long as I live."

Trixie's mouth formed a thin frown. "And how does Trixie know you're telling the truth?"

"Because if I hadn't changed... I would have left you on the scaffolding for Gilda to deal with you." The implication behind her words set in, and Sunset refused to meet Trixie's eyes. She was thankful the surrounding parking lot was nearly empty.

For her part, Trixie had turned her back on Sunset, but hadn't said a word. A cloud blocked out the sun, casting them in shadows and making the air even chillier.

Sunset quickly ran a hand through her hair. "Listen, I'm sorry. But that was the truth. You don't like me, you don't want me around, I get it. But I'm not here to make your life miserable, or steal your magic, or take away your parents love from you." She kicked a stray pebble. "Honestly, I just want to stick around so I can get my friends to stop fighting, and to apologize to the right people." She looked up at Trixie again. "Once I do that, if you still want me gone... I'll leave."

Trixie looked over her shoulder. Her eyes gave nothing away. Without even a nod, she resumed her walk to the cluster of trees.

Sunset sighed, the tension leaving her shoulders, replaced by heavier disenchantment. She followed after Trixie, hoping the smell of pine would at least cheer her up some.

An hour later, they were back on the highway heading home, a new tree strapped to the top of the little buggy. Trixie had been surprisingly thorough in her tree search, and when she finally stopped at a tree for longer than ten seconds, she had asked if Sunset liked it.

For a brief moment, Sunset thought she might have gotten through to Trixie, but those were the only words spoken between that moment and when the

selected tree had been properly secured. The stony silence returned with a vengeance, stifling any chance of Sunset having a small amount of enjoyment.

She looked out the side-view mirror, seeing the scattered trail of pine needles they were leaving behind. *I hope there's still some left on the tree when we get back.*

“Sunset?”

She almost jumped at the sudden voice. “Yeah?” She looked at Trixie.

“Why didn’t you tell my parents about me blackmailing you over the science fair?”

“Because I didn’t want to.” Sunset straightened up. “I mean, you stealing our project is really the reason Twilight and I won in the first place.” Her heart twisted at the mental image of Twilight’s joy over the blue ribbon. “And, well, who would benefit from knowing at this point? I told you, Trixie, I’m not here to make your life miserable.”

Trixie stared ahead at the road, but Sunset could see a softness in her normally hard eyes.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into the driveway and parked, the motion scattering one last layer of pine needles. After Sunset undid the buckles, Trixie managed to lift the tree in a shaky blue glow. It was a healthy, medium tree with wide boughs and, thankfully, most of its needles still on.

The tree slipped through the open door and into the living room where a stand was already waiting for it. Trixie set it down and was rewarded with a round of applause from Selena.

“That was very good, sweetie.”

Trixie blushed. “Thank you.”

Selena turned to Sunset. “So, did you two girls bond?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Sunset said, carefully maneuvering her words.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Selena said, looking honestly relieved. She turned down the hall. “Well, I guess I should stop procrastinating on getting those ornaments out. Of course, your father probably buried them in the hardest spot to reach.”

With Selena gone, Sunset was left to stand awkwardly in the living room while Trixie admired the tree. Deciding she was no longer needed, Sunset headed upstairs; to do what, not even she knew.

“Where are you going?” Trixie asked.

Sunset looked down at her. “My... the guest room.”

Trixie regarded her for a second. “You... should stay down here and decorate with us.”

“Really?” Sunset raised a suspicious eyebrow.

Trixie crossed her arms. “Well, if I didn’t tell you to do it, my mother would anyway. So, yes, really.” A tiny smile graced her lips. “I’m sure we can find *one* ornament for you.”

Sunset matched her smile. There were no lights on the tree yet, but the whole room seemed brighter.

Kpok 37: Determination

Wrapped in a blue scarf and wool jacket, Sunset walked up the frosted steps of Canterlot High, dreading what she would find beyond the front doors. With everything else that had happened over the weekend, the thought of confronting her broken circle of friends had seemed more distant than it really was.

She pushed the doors open, stepping into the central rotunda. *I'm going to fix this. Don't know how, but I'll put everything back together.* She took a right, weaving through students until she got to her locker. After pulling out her history book and slamming the door shut, Sunset saw Twilight standing down the hall at her own locker. She caught Sunset looking at her and stared back with hesitant longing.

Sunset's breakfast churned in her stomach. She could approach Twilight now—talk to her again. Maybe she still couldn't tell her the truth, but saying anything was better than nothing at this point. Yet Sunset's legs refused to work properly. She tried to smile, but it came out as a lopsided grimace.

Twilight took a step forward, but the first bell stopped her advance. She gave Sunset one more look before turning the other way.

Sunset slumped against her locker, regaining the feeling in her legs. *Only you can make me feel like an idiot, Twilight.* She picked herself up and made her way to class. Rarity was already seated at the front, and Sunset mentally crossed her fingers, hoping Rarity wasn't mad at her as well.

Quite the contrary, when Sunset sat down, Rarity gave her the widest smile Sunset had seen on her. "Why hello, Sunset! How's my closest friend this morning?"

"Okay, I guess," Sunset said evenly. "How are you?"

"I'm doing great, thanks for asking! I spent all weekend working on different dress designs for the ball. Which reminds me, you have to come over so I can work on yours."

"R-really? You'd do that for me?"

Rarity held a hand to her mouth and laughed. “Darling, of course! That’s what *friends* do for each other! You appreciate my style and charms!” She clenched her teeth. “Unlike a certain group of people whom I shall not mention.”

All right, so this is going to be harder than I thought. As Sunset pondered the right words to defuse Rarity, Mr. Noteworthy walked in, ending all side-chatter. Sunset pulled out her notes but hardly paid the lecture any mind. *If Rarity’s still mad, the others are as well.* Sunset tapped her pencil against the paper. Bringing them back together was going to take every ounce of cunning and planning she had. And a lot of luck.

She bit her tongue. With her recent run of luck... well, it could go either way.

Sunset hadn’t seen anyone else during passing period, and her second class contained none of her friends. She devoted it to more planning, but realized, until she had a good gauge of just how mad the girls were at one another, it’d be hard to come up with the perfect plan. All the while, Twilight’s hesitant look flashed in her mind.

How do I fix us, Sparky? I’ll do anything for you to talk to me again. Sunset shot up straight and tightly clutched her pencil. *Does Twilight know about what happened on Friday? Oh Celestia, she’s going to hate me even more when she finds out what I did!* Sunset whined and slammed her face against her desk.

“Is something wrong, Miss Shimmer?” Miss Cheerilee asked.

Sunset groaned and looked up. “All my friends hate each other, and my best friend is about to hate me even more.”

Miss Cheerilee opened her mouth to respond, but hesitated. “Oh... umm.” A bead of sweat ran down the side of her face. “W-well, I hope things get better soon, Sunset.”

“Thanks.” Sunset buried her head into her desk again. Thankfully, Cheerilee found the destruction of friendships a good enough excuse to not bother Sunset for the last twenty minutes of class. When the bell rang, Sunset hastily grabbed her things and left, acknowledging the smile of encouragement from Miss Cheerilee.

After stopping to put her things away in her locker, Sunset made her way to the lunchroom, bracing herself for what lay on the other side. She slipped in and scanned the room, and while she wasn't surprised at what she saw, her heart still ached.

Her friends were scattered about at different tables. Applejack sat in one corner with Apple Bloom, a few students from the garden club, and some of the marching band. Rarity sat near the middle with Sweetie Belle, and a combination of fashionistas, drama students, and cheerleaders. Rainbow and Fluttershy sat against the east wall with Scootaloo, and Flash and his band. Pinkie was nowhere to be seen.

Oddly enough, none of the Canterlot Motley Crew looked excited to be where they were.

As Sunset took a few steps further into the cafeteria, Rarity got up and approached her. "Sunset, there you are! Come, I saved a spot for you!" She looped an arm around Sunset's.

Just then, Applejack came up from Sunset's left. "Hey, Sunset! We got a spot saved just for you! Why don't you come and sit with us?"

Sunset gave her a pained smile. "Well, actually—"

Rarity cut in. "I'm sorry, I believe *I* asked first," she said, her smile now laced with malice. "And she'd rather sit with me anyway."

Applejack put a hand on Sunset's shoulder. "Why? 'Cause yer more *cultured*? Ah don't think Sunset wants to be bothered by your tales of high frou-frou fashion. Ain't that right, Sunny?"

"Well, I mean—"

Rarity gave a gentle tug on Sunset's arm. "Don't presume to speak for her. And unlike you, I'm sure Sunset appreciates my 'high frou-frou fashion' as it were."

"Girls, please—"

Applejack took Sunset's other arm and pulled. "You were the one speakin' for her first. Come on, Sunset, would you rather sit with this fuss bucket, or with me?"

“I want—”

“That’s not fair, Applejack!” Rarity tugged harder on Sunset’s arm. “Sunset, you’d rather have an engaging conversation with me than this country rube, wouldn’t you?”

“What I really want is—”

Applejack pulled harder. “Ah ain’t no country rube! Now quit tryin’ to hog my friend!”

Rarity pulled back. “Quit trying to hog *my* friend!”

“*Girls!*” Sunset shouted, getting them to stop pulling her arms from their sockets. “I’m not the last slice of cake!”

Rarity gave her a sympathetic pout. “Oh sweetie, of course not.” She glared at Applejack again. “You see what you’re doing?”

“You started it!” Applejack said, fuming.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Rainbow stomped over, glaring at both of them. “Quit playing tug-of-war with Sunset.”

Applejack narrowed her eyes. “Stay out of this, Rainbow.”

“Oh, I’d love to, but something tells me, you’d drag me into it anyway!”

Sunset groaned in pain. “This is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Rainbow pushed Rarity off of Sunset and took command of her arm. “Let go, Applefat,” Rainbow said, ignoring Rarity’s outraged cry. “Today’s my day with Sunset anyway.”

“No it ain’t! And even if it were, the calendar’s null and void anyway!”

Sunset stopped gritting her teeth and looked between the two of them. “Calendar? What calendar?”

All of three of them switched from anger to guilt in the blink of an eye. “Aw, shucks,” Applejack said, her cheeks pink. “A while back, we sort of made a schedule of when each of us would get to spend some personal time with you. You know, get to know you on a one-on-one basis.”

“I knew you guys were up to something!” Sunset shouted.

“Hey, we were doing you a favor,” Rainbow said, tightening her grip. “We were trying to keep you out of that dingy factory for as long as we could.”

Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore.

Rarity put both her hands on Sunset's shoulders, trying to ease her out of the others' grasp. “We had your best interests at heart. Just like I do now. Come with me, and we can start the designs for your ball gown!”

“No fair!” Rainbow shouted. “You can't bribe her!”

“It's not a bribe, it's a generous offer. I give it to all my *friends*!”

The cafeteria door opened up, and Twilight walked inside, pausing at the scene across from her. All four girls stopped their struggling and stared at her.

Sunset glanced at each of them, seeing ideas build themselves in their heads. Eyes wide, Sunset looked at Twilight and mouthed, “*Run.*”

Twilight quickly backed out of the cafeteria.

With the girls distracted, Sunset pulled her arms back, shaking them out and rolling her shoulders. “Look,” she snapped, “this is stupid. You're all friends; you shouldn't be fighting over...” She made a wild gesture with her newly freed arms. “This!”

Rarity crossed her arms and turned her nose up. “I refuse to be friends again until I get an apology.”

Applejack put her hands on her hips. “An apology for what? Us tellin' the truth?”

Rainbow scoffed. “Yeah, *you* telling the truth. That's rich.”

“Stop it!” Sunset gripped her hair. “Yes, you were all terrible to each other, but *I'm* the cause of all this, remember? Come on, how about you all band together and remember how good it felt to stand up to me?” Sunset put on a strained smile.

Rainbow shook her head. “At least you apologized afterward.”

Applejack gaped at her. “Hey, Ah apologized, too!”

“Yeah, after hiding it for years! You targeted me for something I didn't even do!” Rainbow threw her hands up. “I could have had a boyfriend by now!”

“You don't care about boyfriends!”

“Don’t tell me what I do and don’t care about.”

Rarity tittered under her breath. “Immature children.”

Both of them rounded on her. “Oh, don’t you start again!” Applejack said.

“Aaaaaaaaauugh!” Sunset’s scream drew the attention of anyone who wasn’t already watching them. “Be friends, dammit!”

They all looked at each other, then gave an uneasy glance to Sunset.

“Fine! Fine! Keep acting like idiots!” Sunset backed up, pointing a finger at them. “But mark my words, I’ll get you all to make up with each other, even if it kills me.” She hit the wall and realized she was a good foot from the door. She repositioned herself and backed out, pointing from her eyes to theirs.

Out in the hallway, she made another short scream and stomped off, not entirely sure where she was going. Her stomach growled, but returning to the cafeteria would destroy the meaningful exit she had made. Still, her stomach persisted for food, rumbling obnoxiously. She walked down the halls to the nearest snack machine and purchased a fruit bar to tide herself over.

Chewing thoughtfully on the strawberry flavored bar, Sunset pondered what she could do for the next twenty minutes until class. She thought of chasing after Twilight, but her nightmare from two nights prior reared its ugly head.

Twilight isn’t a jerk though. She’s not going to act like that. Yet the question of what Sunset could potentially say to her stopped any advance. Sunset still couldn’t give Twilight a reasonable explanation.

Sunset tore the last bit of her snack out of the wrapper and practically swallowed it whole. She tossed the wrapper away and resumed her aimless wandering. Twilight and the rest of her friends teeter-tottered back and forth in her mind, with the Winter Ball balanced between them.

The ball. Maybe I can—

Sunset turned the corner and crashed into someone, knocking both of them to the floor. The growl building in her throat died when she lifted her head and saw Twilight sitting across from her, rubbing her nose.

“Twilight! I’m so sorry, are you okay?” Sunset got up and offered her a hand.

“Y-yeah, I’m fine.” Twilight looked tentatively at the hand for a moment before taking it. As soon as she was on her feet, she pulled away. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Sunset’s stuck tongue came not from the curse this time. Try as she might, she couldn’t think of how to move the conversation forward. Both girls stared at different spots on the ground.

Twilight finally looked at her. “Sunset...”

“Yes?” she asked, a little too eagerly.

The pause carried on for a few tense seconds. “How are you doing?”

Sunset opened her mouth but wasn’t sure how to respond. To explain exactly how she was doing would take the rest of the day, so, feeling the pressure on her throat, she simplified it to, “I’ve been better.”

“Oh.” Twilight looked down again and twirled a finger through her hair. “Listen... Shining told me about what happened a few nights ago... about how he found out where you were staying.”

Sunset hunched her shoulders. “Yeah. Should have figured he’d mention that.”

“So, does that mean the Lulamoon really took you in?”

“Yeah.” Sunset couldn’t fight the guilty smile slipping across her lips. “It’s actually pretty nice, not having to wake up in an old factory.”

“That’s good.” Twilight smiled. “I’m really glad you found somewhere to stay. If you left...”

In that empty space, Sunset found a spark of hope.

“Twilight!” Sunset snatched at the hope, and subsequently Twilight’s hand. “I know you want to know why I said those things that night. And I swear, one day, I’ll tell you—I’ll tell you *everything*.” She squeezed Twilight’s hand. “I made a mistake. I made a *lot* of mistakes. But in the end, it doesn’t matter why I made them; what matters is how I’m going to fix them.” Sunset took a breath. “And... I don’t know *how* I’m going to fix them, but I’m going to fix them!” Sunset refused to look anywhere else but Twilight’s eyes.

Twilight stared right back at Sunset. Neither of them blinked. Sunset could see her face reflected in Twilight’s eyes, determined yet still vulnerable.

Slowly, Twilight lifted her other hand and placed it on top of Sunset's. "Okay," she said softly. "I believe you."

Sunset blinked, returning moisture to her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. I still want an explanation, but... I can tell you really are sorry." She nibbled the bottom of her lip. "And... I really missed talking to you."

Sunset suppressed a snuffle, and instead flung her arms around Twilight in a tight embrace, graciously returned. The smell of lavender graced Sunset's nose, and she never realized how much she had appreciated it until then. "I really missed talking to you too, Sparky."

Twilight sighed. "I really don't get you."

"I don't get me sometimes either."

They pulled apart so both of them could try, and fail, to discreetly wipe their eyes. Twilight jerked a thumb in the direction of the cafeteria. "So, umm, what was—"

The bell sounded at that moment, and the first rumblings of the student stampede could be felt. Sunset was almost grateful that the lunch period was over. "I'll explain later," she said, hoping that when she did, Twilight wouldn't take back her belief in her. "Have you seen Pinkie today?"

Twilight shook her head.

The stampede approached from the west, bringing with it the calamitous racket only high schoolers could make. Twilight and Sunset pressed themselves against the lockers to avoid getting swept away. "Well," Sunset said, "I guess I'll—" She spotted a head of cyan hair with a white streak slowly moving closer to her position. *Oh no, not today!* She poked Twilight on the shoulder. "Got to go, talk to you later!" She quickly slipped into the crowd and kept her head low.

Her heart was swelling with joy now. She wasn't about to let Lyra ruin, what was in all likelihood, a temporary happiness.

Positive thoughts, Shimmer, positive thoughts. You've started to repair one friendship, now you just have to fix five more. She made it to her classroom and sighed audibly. "It's going to be one of *those* weeks, isn't it?"

During her last class, Sunset received a text from Pinkie, telling her to go to the gym after school. With only four days left until the ball, she assumed she and Pinkie were going to be working overtime to make sure everything got done. Sunset had a sinking feeling the others weren't going to be of much assistance now.

The last bell rang, and students began their flock home. Sunset stored her things in her locker and headed for the gym, let down that it still lacked any decorations.

"Pinkie?" she called. She put her guard up in case Pinkie was trying to get the drop on her. No matter which way she looked, however, Sunset found no sign of anything pink or poofy. Her phone went off, and she flipped it open.

"Hello?"

"Are the girls with you?" a scratchy voice asked.

"Nooo," Sunset said slowly.

"Good." The speaker broke into a fit of coughs.

Sunset gripped her phone. "Pinkie, why do you sound sick?"

"Because I *maaaay* have caught the flu over the weekend."

"Oh no!" Sunset moved the phone in front of her. "No, no, no! You are *not* allowed to be sick *now* of all times!"

Pinkie sneezed and sniffled. "Sorry, Sunny, but I can't help it." Even in a nasal tone, Pinkie still sounded upbeat, albeit drowsy. "If I hadn't already thrown-up three times today, I'd totally be there!"

Sunset tugged at her hair with her free hand. "Pinkie, what am I supposed to do then?"

"Easy! You'll have to be in charge of the dance!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Pinkie, I don't know what I'm doing! I can't organize a dance in four days!"

"Sure you can! I believe in y-y-yachoo! You! And don't worry, I'll text you all the things you need to remember! You'll make a great head party planner!"

Her voice became serious. “You’ll have to find someone else to cater the party though.”

“Why?”

“Because Applejack is a butt! And you can tell her I said that!”

“I’m not telling her that, Pinkie,” Sunset deadpanned. “And if I’m in charge now, then I’m keeping her as the caterer.”

Pinkie tried to growl, but ended up in another coughing fit. “F-fine. I’ll text you some other ones in case you change your mind. Or, she acts like a butt!”

Sunset sighed. “Anything else?”

“Yep; we have just over two-thousand dollars for the budget! If you still want ice sculptures, they’re kinda expensive, but I bet—*achoo!* I bet you can manage money super well. I’ll text you everything else!”

“Thanks, Pinks,” Sunset said unenthusiastically. She flipped her phone shut and stowed it in her pocket instead of flinging it against the wall.

“Okay, no big deal. Pinkie is sick, so you’re officially in charge of the ball everyone is thinking you’re going to mess up. Your friends are still mad at each other and will probably never work together even if it is with you. You have four days to put together said ball, which is also the last time all your angry friends will be together in one place. And if it fails, you’re banned from everything between now and graduation. Oh, and there’s finals.”

Sunset threw her head back and screamed, stomping her foot repeatedly against the floor. She took a deep breath and raised her hands. “Okay, okay, I’m cool. This just *seems* like a large problem, but it all has one simple solution: don’t mess up the ball! And look on the bright side, Twilight isn’t mad at you anymore!”

“Sunset?”

“Twilight!” Sunset spun around, her heart racing. “When did you come in?”

“Right about when you stopped screaming, I think. Are you okay?”

“No, no I’m not!” Sunset started pacing the floor. “I have to put on a dance so great, it’ll stop the school from hating my guts, and stop our friends from hating each other’s!”

Twilight's face paled, coinciding with her wide eyes. "They hate each other? Why do they hate each other?"

Sunset threw her arms in the air. "Because on Friday, we went to go get pizza, and Rainbow found out Applejack started the rumor that she was gay, but she only did that because Pinkie told everyone she worshipped an apple god, but Pinkie only did *that* because her punch got ruined which Fluttershy accidentally caused because she brought animals to the party, and then, of course, they start insulting Rarity and her tendency to be high society and whatnot. And then, there was pizza flying and dirty bras and I tried to sing a song and it didn't work, and it's all my fault!"

Twilight put a hand on one of Sunset's arms and gently lowered it. "Okay, first, calm down."

Sunset's eye twitched. "You know I hate—"

Twilight took Sunset's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Calm," she said firmly, looking Sunset in the eye.

Had it been anyone else, Sunset was certain she would have ignored them and continued to panic. Yet, Twilight's touch and strong expression were enough to make Sunset take pause and gather her wits. She took a breath and exhaled slowly. "Okay, I'm good again."

"Good." Twilight's hand slowly retreated. "So, I'm guessing *this* is the mistake you were talking about earlier?"

"Yeah." Sunset took a seat in the extended bleachers. "I thought after the princess had brought them back together, they had put aside all their petty differences. Turns out, there was a whole list of things they did to each other while they weren't friends." She hung her head. "My stupid, evil plan worked even better than I thought it would."

Twilight took a seat next to her. "Well, I won't lie and say you didn't have a hand in it. But don't you think you're blaming yourself too much?"

"No, I'm blaming myself just the right amount. I'm the root of all evil and backstabbing at this school, Twilight. Everyone lived in peace and harmony until I showed up."

"Okay, I'm sure that's an exaggeration."

Sunset leaned back and looked at the ceiling. “Exaggeration or not, I still screwed up.”

Twilight twiddled her thumbs. “Well... maybe you did single-handedly make some of the students miserable.” She smiled at Sunset. “But that doesn’t mean you have to single-handedly fix everything.”

Sunset sat up, giving Twilight her full attention. Her dream returned, and she remembered the other Twilight’s cold look. Sunset squeezed her eyes shut, driving the image out. She opened her eyes and replaced it with the real Twilight’s sweet face.

“Twilight, will you help me organize the Winter Ball and reunite our friends?”

Twilight nodded. “Of course I will.”

With an eager grin, Sunset stood and offered her hand to Twilight. She wanted to do a lot more. She wanted to take Twilight and spin her around, praising what a wonderful human being she was. Sunset wanted to dance with her and spill every secret she had been hiding.

Sunset wanted to finish the kiss they had started Thanksgiving night.

But that would all come later. She had just gotten Twilight back; she wouldn’t take any chances to lose her right now. Besides, they had a mission to accomplish. So, Sunset was content to just having Twilight’s hand in hers, electricity running up her arm and into her heart.

“I hope you have a pen and paper, Sparky.” Sunset looked at the empty gymnasium. “Because we have a lot of work to do.”

Kpok 38: Princess Royale

Monday: 6:00 P.M. Ninety-six hours until the Winter Ball.

Sunset had never been more grateful of Twilight's compulsive organization until that afternoon. She walked down the street, looking over Twilight's extensive notes on all the things they had to get done and potential ways they could do them. Along with them were budget charts, lists of pros and cons to every potential decision they could make, lists of things their friends liked, and side notes on how to get them to stop fighting.

While it was all well compiled, it just made Sunset realize how much work they had to do, and how little time they had to do it.

They started with one of the few things the girls had decided on before splitting up and called the number of an ice sculpture Pinkie recommended. Unfortunately, six ice columns and an ice pedestal took nine-hundred dollars out of their budget. Sunset had cringed when she heard the price, but since it was key to their theme, she had agreed.

Sunset flipped over their notes considering hiring a florist to provide them with real holly and mistletoe. It was a sound idea, but Sunset wanted to see what their funds would look like after catering and music, the latter of which still hadn't been decided.

And, of course, there was still the lack of promotion. Sure, everyone knew the dance was on Friday, but Lyra had been on point by saying Sunset hadn't done anything so far to give anyone a reason to go. Aside from the flock of princess hopefuls, it was going to be an empty dance if they didn't get the word out. So, Sunset and Twilight had marked time tomorrow to make posters and fliers. That was on top of their individual efforts to try and get their friends to talk to one another again. And studying for finals which started Wednesday.

Sunset stopped and groaned, pressing the papers against her face. "Yep, it's going to be one of *those* weeks."

She continued down the road, opposite of her new home. The path was so familiar to her, she wondered if she would have gone down this way if she hadn't had a purpose, instead, just doing it out of habit. But, she had a reason to

return to the factory one last time. While it had never been a home, she still had things in there she valued.

Clouds swirled above her, bringing a frigid wind that threatened more snow. Sunset picked up her pace and arrived at the blue door. She steeled herself, rolling her shoulder before slamming into it. It budged, but only slightly. Sunset took a step back, then ran forward, throwing her whole body into it. The door finally gave way with a terrible screech, and Sunset fell onto the checkered floor.

She lifted her face in time to see a large cockroach scuttle away into a crack in the wall. Her skin crawled and she stood up. “I picked a great time to move out.”

Upstairs, she flicked on the lights, watching a rainbow run across her wall. She unzipped her backpack and started piling her belongings in, her laptop, her favorite clothes, the empty picture frame, and finally, Princess Twilight.

“Thank you,” she squeaked as Sunset dropped her in.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sunset took the wall lights down last, returning the room to its dim, single-bulb state. Sunset turned it off and left, slamming the door behind her. She didn’t stop to think of all the good times she had spent in there. There were none. She went into the kitchen and picked the fern off the table. Its leaves were starting to brown, but it was nothing some water and actual sunlight couldn’t fix.

Backpack filled to the brim, Sunset left the factory for good, hopping on her motorcycle and riding away without a glance back. Would she miss her independence? Yes. But having a hot shower to look forward to everyday trumped everything from her previous independent experience.

Sunset made it to the suburbs before the snow fell and the roads froze again. She parked by the curb in front of the house and quickly unfolded the tarp to cover her baby. When it was secure and protected from the snow, she lugged her overstuffed backpack up to the front door and paused.

Do I knock, or just walk in? She *did* live here... but just walking in felt so... intrusive. She was technically a guest. Would just walking in unannounced be rude?

She raised a fist and gently pounded against the door. *Better safe than sorry.* A minute passed before Selena pulled the door open.

“There you are, Sunset! I was starting to get worried! Where have you been?” She ushered Sunset inside.

“I stayed late trying to organize the school dance, then I went back and got some of my things from my old place.” Sunset’s cheeks turned red. “Sorry I worried you.”

Selena breathed softly. “Well, I suppose you’re still used to total independence.” She crossed her arms. “Still, while I’m not your mother, I *would* like to at least know where you are. For peace of mind more than anything.”

“That seems fair.” Out of courtesy, Sunset slipped her boots off and left them by the front door. She admired the Christmas tree standing in the back corner of the living room. Decorating it had been surprisingly fun, even if Sunset didn’t have any personal ornaments.

Blue and white lights were coiled around it with strings of popcorn and silver ribbon between them. Multi-colored bulbs hung from the branches along with golden rabbits, hats, little Christmas boxes, toy trumpets, and a plethora of other knick-knacks. A star shone proudly from the top.

“So how was school?” Selena asked as Sunset walked by.

Sunset paused. “It was... good all things considered.” Heck, even with the rest of her friends still fighting, the fact that Twilight was talking to her again was *wonderful!*

“That’s good to hear. Well, dinner should be ready in an hour.” Selena moved into the kitchen while Sunset headed upstairs.

At the top, she found the study door open, and the room inside appeared to be the emporium in miniature, with weird items lining the shelves, and a general mystical atmosphere. Artemis was seated at the desk, tinkering with a ship in a bottle of all things.

He glanced up at Sunset for a second, then went back to adjusting the mast with a tiny set of tweezers. “Hello, Sunset, how are you?”

“All right. What are you doing?”

“Indulging in a new hobby.” He pushed the mast a little too far, and it toppled over. He bit his tongue and grunted. “Little devil is a lot trickier than one would think.”

Sunset wasn’t sure why, but she cracked a smile and continued on her way. Trixie’s room door was open as well, and its only occupant lounged on the bed, headphones over her ears and notebooks scattered everywhere.

Trixie caught Sunset’s eye and gave her the smallest of smiles, hardly more than a muscle twitch. Sunset returned it and moved on to her room. Trixie no longer treated Sunset like she was the scum of the earth, but Sunset was sure they were still some ways off from being friends. In fact, Sunset wasn’t sure if Trixie was still going to hold Sunset to her promise of leaving after fixing all her mistakes.

Still, in the interim, it was nice to not have Trixie spitting venom at her every two seconds.

Once inside her room, Sunset unpacked her bag and sorted through her items. She put the picture frame on the nightstand, the fern by the window, and the Princess on top of the dresser. Sunset was about to hang the lights up, but felt that might be overstepping her bounds. She hadn’t even been here a week; perhaps covering the wall with lights was being too forward.

She stowed them under her bed, then flopped on top. She stood up and did it again, just to feel how soft the bed was. *Yep, totally worth giving up a little freedom.*

After a few minutes, Princess Twilight spoke up from her high perch. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“Well, I should probably study. But let’s face it, I’m going to ace everything anyway.”

“Someone’s a little overconfident.”

Sunset sat up and looked at her. “I’m the smartest girl in school, I have every reason to be confident.”

“Second smartest.”

“Don’t push it.”

Trixie stopped by Sunset's door and raised an eyebrow on her otherwise impassive face. "Are you talking to yourself?"

"... Yes."

Trixie continued to stare for a moment, then walked on. "You're weird."

Princess Twilight muttered, "Says the girl who speaks in third person."

Sunset snickered.

Tuesday: 12:00 P.M. Seventy-eight hours until the Winter Ball.

On the eve of the first day of finals, panic was beginning to set in amongst the students. Many lamented over their poor study habits and semester-long procrastination. They begged their friends to tutor them, or crammed as much knowledge in as they could during their free time.

It gave Sunset a warm feeling to know she wasn't among them.

Other students had taken a more analytical approach to their tests, and instead of complaining how much they had procrastinated, took measured steps to ensure success. Though, Sunset felt Twilight might have been taking it a little too far.

"What's your opinion on the End of Course Exams here?" Twilight had pinned down a rather intimidated looking junior and was bombarding her with questions while jotting the nervous answers on a piece of paper. "If you could rank their difficulty on a scale between 'fair' and 'exceptionally challenging' where would you put them?"

"Umm, I don't know," the girl said, trying to slide away from Twilight as subtly as she could. "Maybe somewhere in between?"

Twilight scribbled on her notepad. "I see. And do you think the material given in class was enough to prepare you for the tests?"

"I-I don't know... maybe?"

"And from what you know about private institutions, would you say the exams overall are easier in the public school system or harder?"

"Umm, I... yes?"

"Yes, they're harder or yes, they're easier?" Twilight asked impatiently.

The girl's eyes became large and brimmed with fear. Fortunately, before she could be pressed any further, Sunset came and grabbed Twilight by the back of her collar, dragging her off.

"You... are impossible... on all levels," Sunset said in exasperation, ignoring Twilight's squirming.

"But, I need to know how prepared I should be!"

Sunset stopped in front of the cafeteria door and let her go. "We built a hydroelectric generator from spare parts in two days. I think you're prepared for anything."

Twilight adjusted her collar. "You can never be too sure."

"You'll be fine. Let's focus on the matter at hand." Sunset pushed the doors open. The cafeteria was in its usual state of noisy chatter with the overbearing stench of reheated frozen pizza. The Spectacular Seven were still scattered across the tables, and none of them had noticed Sunset and Twilight walk in. Derpy was the first to approach them, handing them both pamphlets with a cute, hand-drawn face of herself.

"Vote for me for Princess of the Winter Ball!" She pointed to the pamphlet Twilight was examining. "If elected, I promise longer snack and lunch times, and mandatory muffin Fridays!"

Sunset met Derpy's focused eye. "You *do* know princesses don't have any political power, right? It's just a title."

Derpy blinked. "It is? Then how come you got to make all the rules when you won?"

"Because I was a manipulative jerk who could play with the student council like they were marionettes."

"Oh." Derpy held a finger to the air. "Then my first act as princess is to give the role more political power in the school!"

Twilight opened her mouth, but Sunset rested a hand on her shoulder and raised an empowering fist. "Right on, Derpy."

Looking pleased with herself, Derpy skipped into the hallway. Just as she left, Rarity approached them, wearing her exaggerated smile.

“Sunset, Twilight! So good to see you girls! Here!” She handed both of them a flyer similar to Derpy’s, only it was a headshot instead of a drawing, and had a list of Rarity’s achievements written at the bottom. “You’ll be voting for *me* of course, won’t you?”

Sunset shrugged. “I guess. I mean, you’re the only—”

“Wait a minute!” Applejack shouted, marching over.

And here we go again.

“Don’t assume they’ll be votin’ for you. *Ah’m* running for princess too!”

Sunset and Twilight facepalmed while Rarity exclaimed, “You are?”

Applejack crossed her arms, looking smug. “That’s right. *Ah’m* gonna prove to you that a ‘country bumpkin’ can be a princess.”

Rarity huffed. “I never said they couldn’t, but considering it’s *you*, I’ll believe it when pigs fly!”

Twilight stepped between them. “Girls, I think you’re escalating this to unhealthy levels. I understand you all said some hurtful things to each other, but more competition isn’t going to resolve this.”

Rarity flipped her hair. “Trust me, it won’t be a competition.”

Rainbow stepped over. “She’s right, because *I’m* going to run and wipe the floor with both of you!”

Sunset raised her head to the universe. *You’re doing this on purpose!*

Twilight looked flummoxed. “You’re running for princess? Why?”

“Let me guess,” Rarity said, “to prove a tomboy like you can be feminine?”

Rainbow tilted her head to the side. “What? No, I’m just doing this so you two won’t win. And so I can make it mandatory that everyone comes to school sporting events.”

Sunset said in a deadpan tone, “You don’t get political power when you win.”

“Lame!”

Twilight massaged her forehead. “You’re really going to stoop to sabotaging each other just to win a dance?”

Rarity waved a hand. “Oh, of course not, *I’d* never stoop so low. Especially when I have you two to help me win.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

Applejack swatted Rarity’s shoulder. “And what if they want to help *me* win?”

“Hey, what about me?” Rainbow shouted.

“What *about* you?”

Twilight threw her arms out. “Girls, we’re not picking sides! And you’re supposed to be helping us put on the dance otherwise, there won’t *be* a princess!”

Applejack raised her hand. “Don’t worry, Ah’m still catering the event. Ah’m reliable like that.” She winked.

Rarity slid in front of her. “Well, *I’m* available to do more than just that. And don’t forget, I’m making you both dresses for the event.”

Rainbow pushed her way to the front, violating Sunset’s personal space. “Oh yeah? Well... I’m awesome! I can do anything they can do!”

Sunset took a large step back. “Applejack, you’re still on catering. Rainbow, you’re loud and obnoxious; you’re on promotion duty. Rarity, we’ll take you up on those dress offers, and you can look over the aesthetic plans of the dance.” She clasped her hands together. “Now, is there any way you can all work togeth—”

“*No!*”

“Didn’t think so.”

Rainbow slid close again. “So, which one of us are you going to help?”

“None of you! This whole thing is stupid!”

“Well, you have to at least *vote* for one of us,” Rarity said. “I say it should be the one who helps the most.” The other two nodded in agreement.

Sunset gaped at them, her eye beginning to twitch. “You’re all stupid.”

Twilight gently pushed Sunset back. “We’re not going to drive you further apart by picking only one of you to be princess.”

Rainbow frowned. “Then what do we get out of helping you?”

“A *dance!*” Sunset’s voice cracked.

“Don’t worry, Sunset,” Rarity said, “I plan on helping you even if I don’t get anything out of it. That’s what *good friends* do for each other.”

Applejack rolled her eyes. “Oh, here we go.”

Sunset ground her teeth so hard, she was surprised sparks weren’t flying off. A vein in her temple was fit to burst, and a scream rose in her throat. She closed her eyes, straightened her back, and exhaled through her nose. “Twilight,” she said calmly, “we’re leaving.” She turned on her heel and walked out of the lunch room, sparing no glance back.

Twilight hurried in her wake. “Sunset—”

Sunset held a hand up, silencing her. She waited until they were a good distance from the cafeteria, and there were no other students around. Then, Sunset stopped and slammed her boot into the nearest locker, leaving a sizeable dent.

Twilight jumped from the sudden racket. “Sunset!”

“Don’t worry, it’s Dexter’s locker.”

Twilight pinched the bridge of her nose. “Okay, well... I wasn’t prepared for that.”

Sunset leaned against the locker and sighed. “And it’s only going to get worse at this rate. If any of them win, we lose.”

“This school *really* takes these dances too seriously.”

“Mmm.” Sunset closed her eyes. *What now?* This added a new layer of complications to everything. The easiest thing she could do to defuse some of the tension was make sure they all lost. Still, that only solved part of the problem. And how did she do that without resorting to her old methods of underhanded tricks?

She glanced sideways at Twilight and cringed. “I... think I have a plan.”

“Really? What is it?”

Sunset cringed again. “You have to run for princess.”

Twilight’s eyes devoured her head and her voice cracked at the highest octave. “*What?*”

“Listen, when it comes down to it—and when I’m not interfering—the princess ballot is a popularity contest. Rarity has the highest chance of winning, and if she does, Applejack and Rainbow will have more reason to spite her... though it might give them something in common.” Sunset shook her head. “But, there is *one* student who could beat Rarity, hands down.”

“And that’s *me*?”

Sunset groaned. “Technically... it’s Princess Twilight. Surprisingly, a lot of the students are still riding the high from the Fall Formal and they haven’t gotten it through their thick skulls that you and she aren’t the same person.” Sunset raised a finger. “But, we can use that to our advantage. The Princess is the one who united the school again and... beat me in a landslide.” Sunset swallowed the bile in her throat. “The point is she, and by proxy, you, are a hero around here. If you run for princess, people will vote for you in a heartbeat.”

If Twilight had been a pony, this would have been the part where her ears folded against her head. She looked at Sunset with wide eyes. “But, I’ve been trying to get people to *not* associate her with me.”

“I know, I know.” Sunset placed her hands on Twilight’s shoulders. “We’re not going to tell people you’re the same person, we’re just going to use her popularity to help you win.”

“But I don’t want to be a princess—that’s *her* thing. And this feels a little manipulative.”

“Please, Twilight,” Sunset begged. “If you beat those three, that’ll at least prevent this from escalating further.”

Twilight held her hands up. “But if I win, won’t they be mad at me instead? This is kinda like going behind their backs.”

Sunset shook her head. “It’ll sting for a bit, but none of them have any issues with you. They’ll get over it since you’re still their friend.”

Twilight nibbled on her lip, an action Sunset found more and more endearing every time she did it. “All right,” she said. “I’ll do it for our friends... and for you.”

Sunset pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Twilight. I promise I’ll make all of this up to you.”

Over Sunset’s shoulder, Twilight whispered, “Dance with me.”

Sunset pulled away. “What?”

Twilight’s entire face was red. She played with her hair, looking Sunset in the eye only to jerk back to the floor a second later. “Sunset, would you... I mean... I would like you...” She inhaled and said in one breath, “Would you go to the ball with me?” She added in a smaller, quivering voice, “As a date?”

“Yes!” Sunset said so fast, she might have beaten the curse. “Yes, of course I will!”

Twilight smiled, frowned, smiled again, then shrank into herself, switching to a frown once more. “You mean it? You’re... not going to take it back later, are you?”

“No!” Sunset took her hands. “I promise, we’ll go to the ball together and we’ll dance, just the two of us.” She squeezed Twilight’s hands. “I swear, I’m not going to hurt you again.”

The lunch bell rang, making them both jump and break apart. Twilight put on a goofy smile. “Okay. It’s a date.” She giggled.

“Yeah,” Sunset said breathlessly, “a date.” She savored the butterflies dancing in her stomach. Students began filling the halls. “Come on, we should get to class.”

Twilight bobbed her head, still smiling. “Class. Yes, let’s go... do that thing. Class.” She giggled again.

Sunset rolled her eyes and took Twilight by the hand. Somewhere down the hall, their fingers interlocked.

Tuesday: 3:00 P.M. Seventy-five hours until the Winter Ball.

Twilight ran off after class, claiming she had to gather supplies, leaving Sunset alone in her walk back to her locker. Along the way, she found Fluttershy scribbling on a piece of paper against her locker door.

“Fluttershy!”

“Eeep!” Fluttershy jumped and hastily stuffed the paper in her pocket. “Oh, Sunset, it’s you.”

“Sorry if I scared you.” Sunset eyed the crumpled paper but decided not to press Fluttershy about it. “How are you doing?”

Fluttershy sighed. “Okay, I guess. Rainbow won’t let me spend time with any of the other girls, and Pinkie won’t answer any of my calls.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Fluttershy shifted from foot to foot. “In fact, I know how hard you’re trying to make everything better. So, umm, I kinda had an idea. It’s silly, but—”

“Fluttershy!”

“Eeep!” She jumped again as Rainbow popped up from behind. “Oh, Rainbow.”

“Come on, I’m running for Princess of the Winter Ball and I need your help.” She looked at Sunset with a small amount of contempt. “Since no one else is going to help me.”

Sunset creased her brow. “I’m not taking *any* of your sides because this shouldn’t be happening in the first place!”

“Fine, but I’m not thanking you in my acceptance speech.” Rainbow tugged Fluttershy along. “We’ve got work to do, ‘Shy.”

“But, Rainbow!” Fluttershy was dragged off despite her protests. She looked back at Sunset with wistful eyes.

Sunset turned to go, but something caught her eye on the floor. It was the piece of paper Fluttershy had tried to hide. She picked it up and uncrumpled it, finding a set of incomplete lyrics and notes.

“Hey, Flutter...” But she and Rainbow were already gone. Sunset looked over the lyrics, eyes growing wider the further she read down. “This is really good,” she whispered. She hummed the unfinished melody to herself, filling in some of the blank spots. Even incomplete, it stirred Sunset’s heart. Was this the idea Fluttershy tried to tell her about?

Reading them again, something clicked inside Sunset's brain. "Crap! We still don't have any musical entertainment!" She safely stowed away the lyrics and hurried to her locker, trading her bag for her mountain of notes.

"Let's see here... uhh, jazz bands, rock bands." She flipped through the notes. What would be perfect for a dance like this? Her eyes hovered over 'Canterlot Orchestra'. *Well, that'd be good for slow music the second half of the dance.* Perhaps she could get a band *and* the orchestra?

The universe took a small pause in its hatred of her and had Vinyl Scratch walk by, grooving to the music in her headphones. Sunset facepalmed. *Duh, D.J.* "Hey, Vinyl!"

Vinyl kept moving, deaf to Sunset's calls. Sunset jabbed her in the shoulder to get her attention. Vinyl stopped and turned around, removing her headphones. "Oh, hey, Sunset."

"Hey, listen, I know it's kinda last minute, but I need you to D.J. the ball."

It was hard to read Vinyl with her shades on. They stared in Sunset's direction, with Sunset unable to tell what Vinyl was thinking behind them. She shrugged and said, "Sure, why not?"

"Because you'd want to see me crash and burn like everyone else?"

Vinyl's eyebrow arched above her glasses. "I mean, you were terrible, but I'm not a cynic like everyone else. Besides, you look like you've mellowed out."

Sunset cracked a smile. "Thanks. So, how much?"

"Two-hundred an hour."

"*Two-hundred an hour?*" Sunset pulled at her hair. "You've gotta be kidding me!"

Vinyl shrugged, but Sunset saw a smile pulling at her lips. "Hey, business is business."

Sunset ran the numbers through her head and huffed. "Fine, deal. You're only playing for two hours though. Hopefully, I can get the Canterlot Orchestra to fill up the rest of the time."

“You’re getting the orchestra to play?” Vinyl lifted her glasses in interest, revealing her magenta eyes.

“Hopefully.”

“Octavia plays as a backup for them now. I *might* be able to ask her for a favor.”

Sunset’s face lit up. “Really? Vinyl, that’d be great!”

“Yeah.” Vinyl turned and stroked her chin. “*Buuut*, I dunno, she might still be mad about what you did to her last year.”

Sunset wilted. “Oh, right.”

“Yep, those were some *pretty* bad photos you took.” Vinyl’s eyes flickered back to Sunset.

“Ugh, fine, how about fifty bucks to not mention my name?”

“Deal.” Vinyl shook Sunset’s hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, Sunset.” She slid her glasses down and put her headphones on.

Sunset took off in the other direction, grumbling. “I hope that orchestra doesn’t cost too much.” When she got to the gym, she found it still devoid of Twilight. Sunset sat on the bleachers and looked through her notes again. “Need to make posters, call the florist, we can start blowing up balloons Thursday.” She felt the paper in her pocket. She needed to finish Fluttershy’s song and find someone to sing it at the dance.

If she can bring the school together with music, then so can I!

The doors opened again, and Twilight stuck her head in. “Good, you’re here.” She entered, pulling a small wagon of arts and crafts supplies behind her, but Sunset attention was mostly focused on her hair. Instead of wearing it down like usual, Twilight now held it in a tight bun with two tresses hanging down to frame her face.

Sunset stood and met her in the center. “That’s a new look,” she said, flicking one of the bangs.

Twilight blushed. “Y-yeah, I tied my hair back since we’d be working with paint and stuff.”

“I like it.”

“Really?” Her blush rose to her ears.

“Yeah, I think it works for you. And, it distinguishes you from the Princess.”

Twilight patted her bun. “Then I guess I’ll keep it for a while.” She wheeled the wagon around. “So, I got all the supplies we’ll need to make as many posters as we can, both for the dance and... me running for princess.”

Sunset frowned. “You know, this is a lot of work for just the two of us.”

“Glad you think so, too.” Twilight smiled. “Because I asked a few people to come and help us. They should be here any minute now.”

“Twilight, besides our friends, who in this school would want to help me?”

“You’ll see.”

As they laid out the construction paper and paints, the door opened again, and in walked Flash, Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo. Sunset stared at them, then at Twilight. “You got all of them to help with the dance?” she whispered.

“It wasn’t that hard.”

Flash crossed his arms and grinned. “Contrary to what you might think, not *everyone* wants you to fail.”

“Yeah,” Apple Bloom spoke up, “we wanna help you make a really good dance.” She added in a surly voice, “And because this is the only way we could hang out together.”

“What do you mean?” Sunset asked.

Sweetie sighed. “Since our sisters and Rainbow are fighting, they won’t let us play together.”

Scootaloo tapped the toe of her shoe against the ground. “I mean, Rainbow is still the coolest person ever, but I wanna hang out with them, too.” She gestured to her fellow mischief makers.

Sunset rubbed the back of her head. “Yeah, I’m sorry you got dragged into their stupid drama. But, I appreciate the help.”

The door opened for a third time, and to Sunset’s surprise, Trixie walked in. She stopped and raised an eyebrow at Sunset’s befuddled expression. “What? Is Trixie not allowed to be here?”

“No, it’s not that.” Sunset shrugged. “I just didn’t expect you of all people to show up.”

Trixie crossed her arms. “Don’t take this the wrong way. Trixie is just here to make sure you don’t screw anything up.”

“Swell.” Sunset looked at her six volunteers lined up in front of her and cleared her throat, a sudden lump forming in it. “Thank you, all of you.” She turned her head and wiped away a tear. “Now, we’ve got a lot of work to do, so let’s get to it!”

Wednesday: 11:00 A.M. Fifty-five hours until the Winter Ball.

Pencils scribbled. Students sighed. The clock ticked the seconds off. Tiny noises filled the otherwise all-consuming void that came with finals.

Sunset sat in Miss Cheerilee’s class, taking her second final, English. She had already completed her hardest one, history with Mr. Noteworthy. Compared to that one, Sunset flew through Miss Cheerilee’s.

The multiple choice questions were all finished, leaving Sunset with only the short answers to complete, though Miss Cheerilee had left almost a full page for each response. She clearly was expecting anything but *short*.

There were two questions on Shakespeare, then two more general critical analysis questions before a final passage where Sunset had to correct all the grammatical errors. It was child’s play, but Sunset took her time to make sure her answers were all well-thought out.

Finished and satisfied with her work, Sunset closed the booklet and brought it up to Miss Cheerilee’s desk, being the first to finish. Miss Cheerilee didn’t look surprised at all and gave Sunset a nod and a smile.

Sunset returned to her desk and pulled out Fluttershy’s song. It was mostly finished, but still needed two more lines before the reprise of the chorus. Sunset tapped her pencil against her head, imitating the proposed melody. “Together we stand, as the rain begins to fall...” she said softly. *What comes next?*

Outside, some of the clouds shifted, allowing the sun to peek through for a moment. A ray of light hit Sunset’s desk, and she lifted her head up. She looked

back to the paper and inwardly cried, *brilliant!* It took all her willpower not to stand up and cheer at the flash of inspiration. She wrote it down and kissed the paper. Now all she needed was someone to sing it at the dance.

One-by-one, students around her finished their exams as the last minutes of the period ticked away. Sunset packed her bag, bracing herself for the next part of her plan. *Heh, to think I'd be the one to come up with a scheme to fix a friendship.*

The bell went off, drowned out by the collective sighs of the class. While everyone hurried off to lunch, Sunset took a detour back toward Twilight's locker, where she was already pulling out her violin. Her hair was still tied back in a bun.

"So, are you ready?" Sunset asked.

Twilight turned around, her eyes apprehensive. "I don't know, Sunset. I'm having second thoughts."

"What? Haven't you performed in front of an audience before?"

"No, I have." Twilight held her violin case close to her chest. "Just... I've never done a solo performance before."

Sunset rested a hand on Twilight's shoulder. "It'll be fine. Just close your eyes and pretend no one else is there. You're just practicing in your room."

She gave a trembling nod and followed Sunset to the cafeteria. The hallway was lined with all the posters and flyers they had worked on yesterday, boasting that the Winter Ball would be the best one yet. Sunset had been bold and advertised the Canterlot Orchestra on a few of them. Now she just hoped Vinyl would help her deliver.

Inside the cafeteria, Sunset caught snatches of conversations, most of them about the tests students had just gotten out of, or the one they still had to cram for. A few of them were about the ball, and while Sunset didn't hear the full dialogue, she did hear a few students say they were interested in going.

Sunset brought Twilight to one of the middle tables that was, thankfully, still empty. She moved a chair on top of it and gestured to Twilight.

Twilight opened her case up and pulled out her violin and bow. She tuned both of them then climbed up onto the table. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“Nope, but we’re gonna try anyway.” Sunset gave her a thumbs up. “Go on, knock ‘em dead, Sparky.”

Some of the chatter died away when Twilight sat down, sitting higher than any of the students. She tucked the violin under her chin and took a deep breath, closing her eyes. She started with a few practice strokes on each string, catching everyone’s attention. When most of the cafeteria had fallen silent, Twilight began her arrangement of “Carol of the Bells.”

Sunset stepped back and admired Twilight. She looked elegant playing her violin, all of her features relaxed and steady. Around her, the entire cafeteria was mesmerized by her playing, enraptured by every chord—every rise, every fall.

Twilight reached the last few chords and finished with a flourish. She opened her eyes, and her cheeks reddened. “My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I’m running for Princess of the Winter Ball.”

The cafeteria erupted in loud cheers and applause, and Sunset pulled out the flyers advertising Twilight, handing them out to anyone trying to get past to talk to her.

The princess has nothing on this Twilight. Eat your heart out, loser.

Rarity marched up to Sunset looking torn between impressed and offended. “Sunset, is *this* why you weren’t voting for any of us? You were going to vote for Twilight?”

“No, I wasn’t going to vote for any you because I didn’t want to pick a side.” She jerked a thumb up to Twilight. “But now that she’s running, I don’t have to.”

“That’s...” Rarity pressed her teeth together. “Understandably fair. I can’t say I’m surprised that you’d vote for her over us, but I *am* a little peeved.”

Twilight got down from the table. “I’m sorry, Rarity, really.” She gave Rarity her largest puppy-eyes. “No hard feelings?”

Rarity pursed her lips for a moment. “Well... since it’s you, Twilight, I suppose I can’t stay mad.” She held her hand out. “May the best girl win.”

“Of course!” Twilight shook it. “So I can still come over for a fitting tomorrow, right?”

“Ooooh, sorry, darling, but something important came up, and I’m booked for the rest of the week.” Rarity found an interesting spot on the ceiling to look at.

“Oh... Okay.”

Sunset narrowed her eyes. Before she could say anything, Rainbow flew over, her face scrunched into a mutinous scowl.

She glared at Twilight. “*You’re* running for princess, too? *Why?*”

Twilight cleared her throat. “To, uhh... oh! To prove that beauty and intelligence can go hand-in-hand, and that nerds can be princesses, too.”

Sunset smirked. *Just like we rehearsed.*

Rainbow rolled her eyes. “We proved that at the Fall Formal. Princess Twilight was a pretty big egghead for a princess.”

Twilight scowled. “Well, that was her. Besides... it doesn’t count if you’re from another world.”

Rarity tutted. “At least she has a better excuse to run than you do, Rainbow.”

Rainbow opened her mouth, but Sunset clapped a hand over it. “Aaaaaand, we’re done here. Twilight is running for princess and that’s that. If you want to win, Rainbow, go tell all your jock friends to come to the dance.” Sunset turned around and gave her a light shove. “Rarity, I’ll see you this evening for my fitting. Come on, Twilight, let’s go study for tomorrow.”

“Okay!” Twilight quickly packed her violin away and hurried after Sunset.

Wednesday: 5:00 P.M. Forty-nine hours until the Winter Ball.

Sunset waved as Twilight and her dad drove off. Today had been relatively easy since they had ordered everything else. Mistletoe and holly cost more than Sunset would have expected.

In her hand was a draft of the schedule for the dance. Of course, there was one more event she had to plan for. She turned and ran back to the front steps,

catching Flash and the Canterlot Motley Crew before they left. Trixie had departed as well but promised to tell her mom of Sunset's evening plans.

"Listen," Sunset said to the remaining four, "I need one more huge favor from you guys."

Flash nodded. "Sure thing. What is it?"

Sunset pulled the paper from her pocket and handed it to him. "I need you to play this song at the dance."

He took it, and the other girls crammed their faces next to his. Flash looked skeptically at it. "You wrote this?"

"Not all of it. Fluttershy did most of the work."

He nodded. "Yeah, this seems a little too... *bright* for you."

Sunset crossed her arms. "I'll ignore that. So, can you do it?"

"Well, it doesn't look that hard to learn. But do you really want me to sing this?"

"No, I want them to sing it." She pointed to the CMC.

"Us?" they cried in unison.

"Yes, you." Sunset uncrossed her arms. "Rarity told me you girls can sing when you're not trying to put on a show or do anything dramatic. I need you girls to sing this from the heart."

Sweetie shook her head. "After that last video we made, they'll laugh us off the stage. Besides, we don't sing *that* good."

Apple Bloom slapped a hand against Sweetie's back. "Are you kiddin'? You sing great, Sweetie Belle! It was me and Scootaloo wailing like cats."

"Hey, I sing just fine, thank you," Scootaloo said. "But I'm still confused. Why do you want *us* to sing this?"

"Two reasons." Sunset held up two fingers. "One, because the students here will eat up any song thrown at them."

Flash nodded his head from side-to-side. "Well, you're not wrong there."

"And two, because if you three sing a song like this... it might be enough to get your sisters to stop fighting."

The CMC looked at each other with wide eyes. “You really think so?”

“I’m *hoping* so. If those three stop fighting and make up, it shouldn’t take any effort at all to get Pinkie to apologize and make friends with them. Then everything will be back to normal, and I can stop pulling my hair out.”

A gleam of hope filled their wide eyes, and they brought their heads together for a huddle. It was a five second discussion ending with the three of them beaming up at Sunset. “We’re in!”

“Excellent!” Sunset pulled out three copies of the song. It was great to be prepared. “Better start practicing; you’ve only got two days.”

Apple Bloom saluted. “Don’t worry, Sunset, we’ll have it memorized by mornin’!”

Sunset gave them all a thumbs up, then walked off for the parking lot, wresting her helmet free from her backpack.

“Hey, Sunset!” Flash called. “You’re doing a great thing. For what it’s worth... I would have voted for you this time.”

The heat rising from Sunset’s cheeks repelled the cold air. She looked over her shoulder and smiled at him, fighting back a tear. *Let’s just hope it works.* She put her helmet on for extra insurance that nobody would see her cry.

Flash took the CMC home while Sunset drove over to Rarity’s boutique. Inside, she found a handful of other girls sitting on the couches, looking through the fashion magazines. Sunset didn’t doubt Rarity’s skills as a seamstress, but sometimes she forgot Rarity *owned* a business.

Rarity walked out from the back with Carrot Top, holding a yellow ball gown wrapped in a plastic cover. “I’m sure you’ll turn quite a few heads with this,” Rarity said, turning the dress over.

“Thank you, Rarity!” Carrot Top waved as she headed for the door.

“Of course, darling! Please, come again!” She clapped her hands together. “Sunset, you’re just in time! Come, come, I’ve already laid out some designs for you.” She took Sunset by the hand and led her beyond the curtain.

A tornado had gone through the backroom, tossing fabrics, swatches, and mannequins everywhere. Sunset had to navigate her way to the stage with supreme care.

“Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to clean up after my last customer.”

“No problem.” Sunset hopped up onto the stage and looked at the trio of reflections behind her. They all looked tired and a little disheveled. One of them had a splotch of glitter on her cheek. Out of compulsion, Sunset scrubbed it off.

“So—” Rarity shuffled over, holding rolls of fabric and construction paper “—here are a few ideas for dresses based on what the theme of the dance is. It was hard finding the perfect blue that complimented your hair. If it was just red, it’d be no problem, but the golden streaks you have make it a touch more complicated, though I do love a challenge...”

Sunset let her go on while she looked through the sketches. They were all nice, blue or white with wintry patterns, and even a gold one similar to the dress Carrot Top had carried out. Sunset bit her cheek, flipping through them a second time.

“You don’t like them?” Rarity’s excited glow faded.

“They’re nice... but none of them, you know, *pop*.”

Rarity crossed an arm over her stomach and propped the other arm on top of it. “Pop, hmm? Well, what did you have in mind?”

Sunset took a seat, dangling her legs over the side. “I don’t know. It’s an ice castle theme and all, but none of these are really *me*. I can’t see myself wearing any of them.”

“Not you, huh?” Rarity stared off into space. Then, a smile slowly worked its way onto her face, small at first, then splitting from ear-to-ear, then, her mouth was open, filling the room with soundless joy. She rushed over to her desk, nearly tripping on a roll of red.

“*Ideeeeeaaaaa!*” She grabbed several colored pencils and scribbled like mad on a fresh piece of paper. “You want to ‘pop’, Sunset? My dear, I’ll turn you into a *firecracker!*” She sketched and colored so fast, Sunset swore smoke curled off the pencils.

“Voila!” She turned around and held it out, eyes sparkling with triumph.

Sunset leaned forward and grinned. “Oh yeah, that’ll do.”

“Stage! Now!” Rarity commanded with a finger. She grabbed her measuring tape and red glasses. “You’re going to have the second best dress, right next to mine!”

Sunset held her arms out. “You mean well, so I’ll ignore that.” Her eyes narrowed. “By the way, don’t think I don’t know what you did with Twilight.”

Rarity paused. “To be fair, dear, I did her a favor. Disassociating her from me for anything having to do with the dance will ensure that both of us will run a clean race without harming the other.” Her face turned red. “And... it stops the temptation of giving her the worst dress possible to ensure I win.”

She ran the tape down Sunset’s arm. “On a brighter note, I’m so glad you two are talking again!”

Sunset smiled, her entire body relaxing in response. “Yeah, it’s great. She’s been a *huge* help with the dance.”

Rarity moved down to Sunset’s leg. “Sorry I couldn’t have been more helpful,” she said, guilt layering her words. “I got more girls than I thought I would asking me for dresses and... well, I suppose I’ve been trying to avoid *them* as hard as I could.”

Sunset’s smile reversed and her shoulders tightened. “Rarity—”

“I’ll make up with them when they give me a proper apology!” With the finality of Rarity’s tone, Sunset knew it was pointless to keep pushing.

Rarity made her way back up and measured Sunset’s bust. When she pulled the tape away and examined it, her scowl deepened. “Two more inches,” she grumbled as she hopped off the stage. “Not fair.”

Sunset cleared her throat. “So, do you think you can do this in less than a day?”

“Sunset, you insult me.” Rarity picked up a needle and some thread, and looked over her shoulder, her inspirational glow having returned. In fact, Sunset swore Rarity had *actually* been glowing for a moment. “Give me an hour.”

Thursday: 2:00 P.M. Twenty-eight hours until the Winter Ball.

Sunset was glad she had taken that extra time to study with Twilight. Their Advanced Trigonometry test was surprisingly *brutal*.

Sunset turned the page in the booklet, finding six more long equations. She rubbed her eyes and decided to take a quick mental break. She stole a glance at Twilight, who had her face nearly pressed into her paper while her hand raced at incredible speeds.

You know, it wouldn't surprise me if she was actually an android. Sunset twirled her pencil in her hand as her mind wandered back to the dance. Pinkie had returned to school that day, but had said she'd be unable to help with the preparations since she would be making up the tests she missed after school. To Sunset's immense relief, Vinyl had confirmed the Canterlot Orchestra's appearance at the dance. During lunch, Sunset had walked past the music room, where Flash and the CMC were practicing their song. Sunset rubbed her hands together. Everything was coming along perfectly.

She stopped and bit her lip. *It's too perfect. Which means something bad is going to happen.* She sank in her seat. Was it too much to ask for just *one* of her plans to work out without any hitches?

Calm down; nothing's happened yet. This plan can still go smoothly. You make the perfect dance, your friends get together again, you dance with Twilight, then you finally kiss her! Everyone wins! Sunset crossed her fingers.

Sunset looked at the clock and found she only had half-an-hour left to finish the test. She steeled herself and plunged back into the equations and theorems. Not a minute had passed before Twilight got up and handed in her test. She sat down and pulled out a large book.

Totally part robot.

Thursday: 6:00 P.M. Twenty-four hours until the Winter Ball.

Sunset tried not to laugh as Twilight collapsed against the front of the stage, gasping for breath.

“No more balloons, please.”

“Flash, let her have a turn with the helium tank.” Sunset tied the knot on a white balloon and let it drop to the floor.

“Okay!” Flash said in a high-pitched voice, making the CMC laugh.

Trixie looked down from her spot on the ladder near the door and rolled her eyes. “Immature children,” she muttered, resuming her hanging of the ornamental bells.

Twilight took over the helium tank while Flash sang “Jingle Bells” before his voice returned to normal. Balloons drifted around the ceiling, snowflakes drawn on their faces, identical to the few lying on the ground. Some of them were tangled in the streamers and silver snowflakes hanging from the rafters. The bleachers had been pushed back, and lights ran along all the walls.

All-in-all, Sunset thought it was coming along nicely. The florist and ice sculptures were due to arrive tomorrow at three, giving Sunset just enough time to put on the finishing touches.

The door swung open, hitting Trixie’s ladder and almost knocking it over. Trixie used the doorframe to steady it and scowled. “Hey! Trixie is working up here!”

Lyra, wearing her casual business suit, a clipboard in her hand and a smile on her face, ignored Trixie and walked right up to Sunset. “Wooooow,” she said, looking around the room. “This is coming along nicely! And according to my records, you haven’t gone over budget yet!”

‘Yet’ being the keyword. Sunset tried to work even a small smile onto her face, but her jaw muscles refused to cooperate. “What do you want, Lyra—”

“Madam President!”

“... What do you want, Madam President?”

Lyra made a sweeping gesture with her arms. “Just came to see how everything was progressing before the big event. Ticket sales have *really* gone up this week, and I’d hate to have the student body disappointed by a lackluster dance.”

“Don’t worry; your dance is going to be freaking fantastic. Just wait until tomorrow night.”

“That’s great to hear!” Lyra swung her arm, then put it around Sunset’s neck. “Because if it isn’t, remember...”

Sunset threw Lyra’s arm off and started pushing her toward the door. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, banned from everything, will of the students, and all that crap. Everything is going to be *spectacular*. Now, get out so we can work.” Sunset pushed her through the door and slammed it shut, gripping Trixie’s ladder so she wouldn’t fall over.

“Thanks,” Trixie said.

“Mmhmm.” No sooner had Sunset reached the center of the room again, did the door fling open once more, nearly knocking Trixie over for the second time.

“Would you watch the stupid door?”

Sunset turned around, surprised to find Pinkie, her nose red and her eyes droopy. She sniffled then said, “Hey, this looks nice so far!” She spun around to take it all in, stopping and wobbling for a moment. “Bad idea, still dizzy.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Pinkie.”

Pinkie pulled out a hankie and sneezed into it. “Silly, Sunset, you practically *did*! I just texted a few simple instructions! You did all the work!”

No kidding.

The door opened yet again, this time knocking over the ladder and leaving Trixie to dangle from the doorframe.

“Trixie hates all of you! Also, *get Trixie down from here!*”

Flash ran to help, while Applejack walked up to Sunset. “Well, soda’s all nice and tucked into the fridge for tomorrow, and Granny Smith is workin’ on all the snacks and appetizers.” Her eyes narrowed in Pinkie’s direction. “I’ll make sure she properly sacrifices to the harvest gods this time.”

Pinkie stuck a finger out. “Aha! I knew.... that was sarcasm, wasn’t it?”

Applejack slowly clapped her hands. “Guess she *can* learn somethin’.”

“Hey, I already apologi-i-i-*achoo!*” Pinkie quickly jerked her head away.
“Ahem. I already apologized for that!”

“Yeah, and then you threw a pizza at me!”

“You threw one at Rarity!”

“That’s not the point!”

“Yes, it is!”

Sunset grabbed both of them by the back of the hair and slammed their heads together. They both held their foreheads and danced in place.

“Sunset, what did ya do that for?” Applejack whined.

“To get both of you to shut up!” Sunset inhaled slowly, regaining her composure. “Look, you girls are best friends. You did a few mean things to each other, but are you really going to let this ruin your friendship completely? Come on, Applejack, she said she was sorry. And it’s not her fault the rest of the school took what she said out of context.”

Applejack crossed her arms and looked down at the ground. Her shoulders fell, and her expression softened. “Yeah... I reckon you’re right. Guess Ah got a little too caught up in being mad at everyone again. Sorry, Pinkie, Ah know it wasn’t really your fault.”

Pinkie smiled and threw her arms out. “Apology accepted!” She leaned forward.

Applejack jumped back. “No! Ah mean, sorry, Pinks, but you’re still sick.”

“Oh yeah,” Pinkie coughed into her sleeve. “I should be all better by tomorrow night!”

Sunset took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair. “This went better than I thought. So, A.J, what are the chances of you making up with Rarity and Rainbow?”

Applejack scowled. “Rarity, none. Rainbow, some, if she’ll accept my apology first.”

And I know that won’t happen anytime soon, so back to Plan A. She clapped her hands together. “All right, guys, I think that’s enough for today. Tomorrow,

we have all the big stuff coming in and only three hours to get it ready, so go home and get some rest.”

Twilight walked over, a balloon in her hand. “This is surprisingly more fun than it should be,” she said, her voice filled with helium.

Sunset snorted, then burst into a fit of laughter, holding onto Twilight to keep herself from falling. “You sound so ridiculous!”

“Do I really?” Twilight smirked.

“Yes, it’s adorable!”

Twilight’s smirk melted into a goofy smile. “R-really?”

“Yes, yes, now stop, you’re killing me!” Sunset wiped tears from her eyes. When she regained her composure, she found Pinkie and Applejack had moved on toward the CMC, looking abashed at Applejack’s presence.

“I hope she goes easy on them,” Twilight said, her voice returning to normal. “They were just trying to spend time with each other.”

Sunset cleared her throat, hiding the last of her laughs. “I’m sure Applejack won’t hold it against them.” She looked back at Twilight. “Sparky?”

Twilight looked up and fiddled with her left tress. “Yeah?”

“I just wanted to say thanks for all the help.”

A warm smile lit up Twilight’s face. “Of course.”

Sunset hesitated, her arm briefly locking up before she forced herself to take Twilight’s hand and give it a gentle squeeze. “And I promise, I’m going to dance with you tomorrow, right here.” She cradled the warmth inside her heart, letting it flow through her entire body.

Twilight squeezed back, making Sunset’s heart jump into overdrive. “I can’t wait.”

Kpok 39: Miracle Worker I—Victory Road

Teachers were wise enough to know that on the last day of school, there was little point in trying to get students to pay attention to anything. With finals done, the ball only a few hours away, and the holidays next week, students had no focus left to spend on classroom instruction.

Even Mr. Noteworthy passed on making an attempt. He handed out everyone's grade, then left them to their own conversations while a war documentary played on the projector. Naturally, Sunset had received an A, but it had been an A well fought for.

Rarity had received a B, and while Sunset thought that was a notable accomplishment, Rarity seemed put-out.

"I know it's passing, but I was really hoping to get all A's this semester."

"Well, maybe I can tutor you next time," Sunset offered.

A smile turned Rarity's cheeks into dimples. "That would be most appreciated."

The bell rang shortly afterward, directing them to their next class. Periods were shorter today to fit all of them in before winter break. In Miss Cheerilee's class, Sunset received not only an A, but an A+. She settled down in her seat, admiring the shiny black letter while listening to the mingling moans of disappointment and cries of success.

A few minutes into the period, Luna came over the intercom with the last morning announcement.

"Good morning, students. I hope you're all reaping the rewards of your hard studying this semester. First, a reminder that, even if it is the last day of school, all rules are still enforced. Which means no snowballs inside the hallways."

Sunset held her report card over her mouth to conceal her curling lips. She had witnessed Snips and Snails carry their snowball fight from the steps of the school and into the rotunda, where a stray slush ball hit Luna in the back of the head.

"Second, as you're all aware, the Winter Ball is tonight at six o'clock. Tickets are still on sale and can be purchased at the door. Voting for the Princess of the

Winter Ball shall take place in sixth period. As another reminder, the position of princess is just a title... there are no political powers that come with it.”

Sunset facepalmed.

“That is all. Please, enjoy your dance and your holidays. School resumes the second week of January, so I expect to see you all then. Good day.”

Chatter bubbled up again when the intercom ceased to spit static. Sunset sat alone in the front, quietly contemplating her winter break. It had dawned on her in the past few days that she would be spending Christmas with someone whether she wanted to or not. Before, Sunset had opted to spend the holidays by herself, curled up in a warm coffee shop until she was kicked out. Begrudgingly, she would send Flash a gift just to keep up the facade of caring for him.

Now, a (mostly) loving family surrounded her. How was she to fit in with the Lulamoon’s traditions and ceremonies? Should she get a gift for each of them? It certainly seemed appropriate seeing as they had already done so much for her. But then, she would need to get something for all her friends as well.

Sunset’s wallet sobbed. Even if she didn’t have to buy her own food now, she was sure she didn’t have enough money to buy something for nine people.

Tis the season to be dead poor. Falalalala lalalala.

Sunset sat with Twilight, Applejack, and Pinkie, all of them watching as Rainbow took center table and wailed away on a guitar. Fluttershy kept crouched near the closest pillar, her hand on the amplifier.

“I wasn’t aware Rainbow knew how to play the guitar,” Twilight said.

Applejack shook her head, shoulders bent forward and arms crossed below her midriff. “Rainbow is a girl of many talents. Most of them involve being loud or obnoxious.”

Sunset’s finger tapped along to Rainbow’s solo. “That’s a fair statement.”

Rainbow hopped on one foot toward the edge of the table, then jumped off, flipping the guitar in the air as she fell onto her knees. She caught the guitar and gave it a final strum before bowing her head to the tremendous applause.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but like the instance with Rarity, Sunset thought she saw Rainbow glow as the last chord faded away.

“Thank you, thank you.” Rainbow soaked in the praise like a sponge, waving her hands at her adoring crowd. “Vote for me for princess!”

Applejack tilted her chair back, balancing on the back legs. “Y’all know she stole your idea, right?” she addressed Sunset and Twilight.

“Yep,” they said together.

“What about you, A.J?” Pinkie asked. “Are you going to do anything to wow the crowd?”

“Eeenope.” Applejack picked up an apple and balanced it on her finger. “The only thing Ah can think of doing is givin’ everyone free apples, and that seems like more of a health statement than anything. Add to the fact that it’s also bribin’, and Ah don’t bribe to win.” She took a bite out of her apple and chewed thoughtfully. “Nah, Ah put mah name out there, that’s all Ah really can do. ‘Sides, with Twilight runnin’, ain’t much reason to put up a fight.”

Twilight played with her fork, testing the pointed ends on her pinky. “No hard feelings, right?”

Applejack waved her apple. “‘Course not. As long as you beat the primadonna and the glory hog, Ah couldn’t care less.”

Sunset pressed her fingers together. *Believe me, that’s exactly what we’re hoping to do.*

Before Twilight returned to her seat, she danced over to Sunset’s desk and hopped from one foot to the other while stars fell from her eyes. “Sunset, Sunset, look! I got all A+’s!”

“What?” Sunset snatched Twilight’s report card and gawked at the single line of A+’s. “But you came in two months late, how do you have grades this high?”

Twilight plucked the paper with the tips of her fingers. “Because unlike you, I *study*. I’m also not afraid to do a little extra work to catch up and stay ahead.”

Sunset puffed her cheeks out, glaring at her own four A+'s and two regular A's. *Stupid smart Twilight.*

Ms. Vector stood from her desk, a stack of papers in her hand. "All right, now that you've got your grades, here's the ballot for the Winter Ball Princess. I'm sure I don't have to tell any of you, but you can only vote once."

When the slip of paper landed on Sunset's desk, a bark of laughter jumped out of her throat. At least fifteen names were crammed onto it, including Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Rainbow, Derpy, Roseluck, and even Flitter.

Sunset checked off Twilight's box and turned the paper over. Now, she just needed a majority of the school to do the same.

Twilight needed to win.

The CMC needed to sing.

And Sunset needed to make sure everything ran smoothly. Once again, all of Sunset's hopes relied on the outcome of a dance.

She sincerely hoped this was the last time it happened.

School had let out not with a bang but with an excited murmur. Perhaps because most of the students would be returning to campus in a few hours for one last school activity.

Inside the gymnasium, Sunset marveled at the completion of the decor. Six pillars of solid ice flanked the center of the dance floor, while on the stage stood a crystal podium. Live holly wrapped around the pillars, their red berries contrasting beautifully against the blue ice. Mistletoe hung from strings lined between the pillars.

A light mist fell off the pillars and draped the room in a tickling chill—cold enough to give goosebumps, but not enough to make one shiver. It would be perfect with the amount of dancing bodies that would soon occupy the space.

Against the wall, the multicolored lights glowed, and when Sunset turned the main light off, they reflected onto the pillars and bathed them in a rainbow.

"Excellent." Sunset cackled and flipped the lights back on. "Everything is coming along nicely."

Pinkie spun around in the middle of the floor. “Woohoo! This is gonna be the best ball ever!”

Flash stepped in from the hall. “The janitor said the air conditioning in here should be set for tonight.”

Twilight pulled out her buzzing phone and checked the screen. “Applejack says all the food is ready and prepared for transport.”

“Trixie just got a text from Vinyl,” Trixie said. “She’ll be here around 5:30 to set up.”

Perhaps it was preemptive, but Sunset leaned against the wall and let out a sigh of relief. “Well, team, we did it. We put together a high budget ball in four days.”

Sweetie threw her hands in the air. “Yaaay! It’s gonna be so great! I can’t wait to sing in front of everyone!” Her eyes dilated. “I have to sing in front of everyone,” she said in a scratchy whisper.

Apple Bloom roped an arm around her. “Hey, Ah told you, me and Scoots are gonna be right there beside ya!”

“Yeah!” Scootaloo got on Sweetie’s other side. “The three amigos, right?”

“R-right. Three amigos.” Sweetie’s downcast eyes managed to convey less confidence than her voice.

Sunset braced herself to give a pep talk when a hand tapped her shoulder. She pivoted and found Principal Celestia smiling down at her.

“This all looks quite impressive, Sunset. In fact, it might be some of the best decorations I’ve seen in a while.”

“Ehehehe.” Sunset’s tongue tied itself into a knot. Sunshine warmed her stomach, different from the kind Twilight filled her with, but still pleasant and nerve-wracking. Sunset flopped an arm toward the others. “They helped.”

Celestia bowed her head in their direction. “You’re quite lucky to have such dedicated friends.”

Sunset’s tongue knot tightened.

“Well, I just came in to see how the decorations looked before tonight.” She leaned in toward Sunset. “And to say how proud of you I am. You’ve come

quite some ways this semester, Sunset. I hope to see you make even greater strides in the future.”

The warmth in Sunset’s stomach was fit to melt her from the inside out. Her tongue finally unraveled and she spat out, “Thank you, Princess!”

Celestia quirked an eyebrow. “Princess?”

“Principal!” Sunset said quickly. “Thank you, Principal Celestia. That all meant a lot.” *More than you’ll ever know.*

Celestia gave her one more radiant smile, then retreated beyond the doors. Sunset stared after her, letting the warmth fade away before she addressed the group.

“Okay, guys, we’ve got about an hour to go home and get ready, so make it quick. I want all of you lined up again at 5:15, got it?”

“Got it!” Everyone hurried for the door, displaying confident grins on their way out.

Sunset turned to follow them, but paused and looked back, placing a finger on her chin. Everything looked great, but something still felt missing. *Lights, decor, theme. It’s got everything.* Sunset pondered the sight for a minute longer but ultimately decided there was nothing she could improve upon.

Entering the central hall, Sunset found Twilight pretending to examine the trophy case. Sunset stepped up behind her, and two girls made of gold stared at them from the water polo cup.

“It’s going to be a great dance,” Twilight said, barely moving her lips. She looked like a perfect golden doll. “But, is this really going to bring our friends back together?”

“It has to.” Sunset saw the flame of determination in her own eyes. “It’s the only plan I’ve got. Otherwise, Rainbow, Rarity and Applejack won’t speak to each other the entire break.”

Twilight straightened up, her back making a tiny *pop* as she moved to examine some of the photos. Her eyes fell on the trio of Sunset in her victory poses. “Past victories?”

Sunset stared at the last one, her skin prickling and stomach churning at the sight of her own maniacal expression and cold, power-hungry eyes. “Past failures.” She balled a fist and turned away, the only actions she could take to stop herself from lunging at the picture and tearing it in half. Celestia had just praised her; Sunset didn’t want to ruin it with vandalism.

Warm, slender fingers curled around Sunset’s wrist before making their way down to her fist. It softened and uncurled, allowing ten digits to carefully wrap around one another.

“So... uh,” Sunset worked her tongue before it could knot itself again. “I’d offer to pick you up, but I’m guessing you don’t want to ride a motorcycle in a dress... while it’s snowing.”

“No, that would be... problematic.”

“Yeah, figured.” She inclined her head toward Twilight. “So, I’ll meet you in here? 5:15?”

“Yes. Yeah, that sounds good.” Twilight slowly and methodically pulled her fingers loose of Sunset’s, though none of the digits wanted to part from their partners.

“Sparky,” Sunset called as Twilight touched the front door. “Are you sure...” Sunset bit her lip. “Are you sure you want this? Want... me?”

Twilight gave Sunset an even measure with both of her eyes. “Yes. I’m sure.” She wilted like a shaded flower. “But, only if you want me.”

“I do!” Sunset cleared her throat. “I just... I want to make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Twilight held her knuckles up to her mouth and smiled. “I think I’ve got a pretty good idea.” She pushed the door open and walked out into the lazy snow.

Sunset put on the last of her mascara and took a step back from the mirror. *Someone should call the police and the fire department because, not gonna lie, I look hot!*

She hurried out of the bathroom and into her room to get a good look at herself in the full-body mirror. She spun around once, then drank in her fiery

image. The dress Rarity had designed was sleeveless and backless, held together by the choker in the front. It washed over her in waves, the top part a crimson red with slanting ruffles ending just above her hip. The second layer extended down her body and was orange, with the third yellow, both of them slanting as well, covering more of her right leg than her left.

Her hair was done up in a high ponytail that curled at the end, and she had two large tresses that turned into ringlets. She borrowed a pair of red heels she had found in the closet to complete her stunning, flaming look.

“Rarity, you’re a mad genius,” Sunset whispered.

“You really do look beautiful,” Princess Twilight said.

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere,” Sunset said, putting her earrings on. Downstairs, she could hear Artemis and Selena gushing over Trixie’s dress and taking photos.

“Okay, just one more! Smile, sweetheart!” Artemis laughed. “Oh yes, that’s a keeper!”

“You look so beautiful, sweetie, but why don’t you have a date?” Selena asked.

“Because Trixie doesn’t need a date!”

“Good, then I don’t need to beat anyone with a stick,” Artemis said.

Sunset examined herself one last time, twirling again. She breathed through her nose to steady her excited heart and rolled her shoulders. *Okay. We can do this. Everything is going to turn out all right. By the end of tonight, all your friends will be together and everyone will be happy.*

Her thoughts drifted back to her dream from a week ago. *Friendship isn’t always easy, but...* She clenched a determined fist. She knew what it was now. Maybe she didn’t know everything about it and maybe she never would. But she knew its worth.

She nodded with resolve, something warm burning in her heart, making her feel light and free. With one last look at her amazing dress, she slipped on her evening jacket, grabbed her purse and flicked the light off.

“My, my, don’t you look stunning!” Artemis said, looking at Sunset through his camera as she came downstairs.

Reaching the first floor, Sunset appraised Trixie’s dress. It was slim and form fitting and, of course, blue, with white ribbons on the sleeves and around the middle. Her hair was also done up in a ponytail.

Trixie looked Sunset up and down. “It suits you.”

Sunset smirked. *Probably the closest I’ll get to a compliment.*

Selena straightened Trixie’s neckline. “Both of you look gorgeous. Are you excited? I know how hard you’ve been working on the dance.”

Sunset shifted her weight to one side. “I am, but... I dunno, something feels like it’s missing. Like...” Sunset circled her hand through the air. “Like it needs a little more *ambiance*.”

Artemis pulled on his goatee. “Ambiance, you say? For a winter themed dance? I think I can help with that!” He was gone in a puff of smoke and back in another before Sunset could say anything. In his hands was a small white jar with snowflakes painted on the sides. “Go on, open it,” he said, handing it to Sunset.

Taking it in one hand, Sunset opened the lid and a small flurry of snow flew out. She marveled at the fine powder, watching it fall to the floor. “Snow?”

“Not just snow, the *perfect* snow!” Artemis threw his arms out. “Cool but not cold, firm enough to make snowballs, but soft enough so they don’t hurt! It’s every child’s dream!” He tapped the jar. “Guaranteed to last all night. *That* should give you your ambiance.”

Sunset rotated the container in her hand. “It doesn’t look like much.”

“Well, much like you, my little pony friend, looks can be deceiving.” He winked.

She popped the lid back on. “Thank you, Artemis.”

He snapped his fingers to open the front door. “Think nothing of it. Now, come on, off with you two!” He gave Trixie one more kiss on the forehead. “Have fun, but not *too* much fun.” He nudged them out the door.

“Both of you come straight home when it’s over,” Selena called after them.

“Yes, Mom,” Trixie said. Sunset saw the subtle roll of her eyes. They got into Trixie’s buggy, and drove off down the road, across the thin layer of snow.

“Thank you for the ride, Trixie,” Sunset said. She kept the snow jar firmly in her lap.

“Meh,” was her only response for most of the trip. When they were a few blocks from the school, she said, “Trixie supposes she should thank you for *not* ruining this dance. Though, the night is young.”

“I’m not about to ruin the dance I helped create.” Sunset drummed her fingers on the lid. “Thank you for your help this week as well. I appreciate it.”

Trixie blushed. “Like Trixie said, she was just there to keep an eye on you. But, you’re welcome.”

The school came into view, and Sunset’s stomach clenched. Once more, there was the feeling that *something* was about to happen. She locked her jaw. This time, she would make sure it was something *good*.

Twilight began to have second thoughts about the situation.

Not about going to the dance, or going to the dance with Sunset. But preparing for the dance with Cadence.

She stood behind Twilight, running a comb through her hair while singing, “Twilight’s got a daaate, Twilight’s got a daaate, Twilight’s got a daaaaaate!”

“Cadence!” Twilight’s shoulders shook a little harder every time Cadence got to ‘date’. “Please just hurry, I’m going to be late at this rate.”

Cadence giggled. She set the comb down and grabbed Twilight’s hair, rolling it into a bun. “Yes, I know you’d hate to be late for your date.”

Twilight narrowed her eyes. “That was on purpose.”

“Quite a contemplate. No need to exaggerate. I’m just trying to make you look pretty for your mate on this date so tonight will be great.”

“You’re trying way too hard now.”

“I debate. My rhymes are innate. Now, hold still so I can put the pin in straight.” Cadence picked up the starburst pin on Twilight’s desk and stuck it in

her hair to help hold the bun together. “And now, you’re ready for your dance of fate!”

Twilight stood, picked up the hem of her gown, and hurried into the hall to use the full mirror. She gasped at the pretty girl staring back at her, wearing an elegant dress of varying blue hues. An afternoon sky blue began at her middle and turned to night at the gown. White stars of various sizes lit up the hem. Along her arms were blue gloves also adorned with stars, and to complete her look, a collar hooked onto her dress, giving her an appearance of regality.

Cadence popped into the frame next to Twilight and jumped up and down, clapping her hands together. “Ooooooh, you look so cute, I can’t stand it! You’re going to knock Sunset off her feet!”

Twilight thoroughly examined her dress from every angle, making sure everything was in place and even. “Does this mean you’re done rhyming?”

Cadence pinched Twilight’s cheek. “I can’t just abate something so great—”
“Please stop.”

“Oh, fine. No more cute rhymes,” Cadence pouted. She took Twilight by the arm and led her back to her room. “I’ll just paint your face as a substitute.”

Twilight squirmed. “On second thought, go back to rhyming!”

“Too late!” Cadence pushed her back into the chair and pulled out her make-up kit. Out of her handbag of horrors, she drew a brush, eyeliner, lipstick, and blush. “I don’t know why you’re so opposed to this. You used to love having makeovers.”

“That’s because it was just between us—I never planned to go out looking like a circus clown.” Twilight squeezed her eyes shut as Cadence approached with the liner.

Cadence tsked, rolling the liner down Twilight’s eyelid. “You’re so dramatic sometimes.”

Wonder where I got that from.

“I’m not going to make you look like a circus clown. I’m just going to bring out your natural features. A little color here, a little blush there... a little makeup to cover that pimple—”

“Pimple? What pimple?” Twilight sprung out of her chair and grabbed the hand mirror on her bed. “Where? I don’t see it!” She whipped her head back. Cadence was snorting into her hand. “*Cadence!*”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! It was just too easy!” Cadence cleared her throat and raised a hand. “I swear, I’m done messing with you for the remainder of the night.”

Twilight set the mirror down and took a deep breath. *Relax. She means well. At least one of us is having fun.* She sat down and closed her eyes. “Please just finish so we can leave.” The longer Twilight stayed in the house, the more likely her nerves would explode.

Cadence took her brush and dusted Twilight’s cheeks a faint pink. “I’m really glad you and Sunset made up. I bet she’s looking forward to this as much as you are.”

The bristles of Cadence’s brush made Twilight bite the insides of her cheeks like she could scratch the surface that way. “Yeah,” she said in a muted voice. Her heart had nearly burst when Sunset had hugged her in the halls on Monday. And whenever they held hands, Twilight had to pinch herself afterward to make sure it hadn’t been a fantasy.

‘Glad’ was only one word in Twilight’s vortex of emotions. ‘Apprehension’ was another.

Sunset seemed sincere in all of her actions and words this week, and Twilight wanted to believe in everything she did and said. But Sunset had also seemed sincere in everything she did up until *that* moment. She still wouldn’t—or couldn’t—explain it, and it made Twilight keep her guard up just a fraction, waiting for the sucker punch she hoped wouldn’t come.

Still, ‘attraction’ was also floating in the vortex. For as much as Sunset confused and befuddled her, Twilight was still drawn to her like a magnet. Perhaps that confusion was part of the reason Twilight was drawn to her. Sunset was the greatest puzzle she had ever faced, and Twilight needed to know how she worked.

There was also the burning desire to kiss Sunset’s lips.

Two pink fingers snapped in between Twilight's nose, making her go cross-eyed. "Huh?"

Cadence took her by the hand and stood her up, grinning voraciously all the while. "All right, let's get out of here; you clearly have Sunset fever."

Looking into the hand mirror again, Twilight was glad the pink blush hid her embarrassment. She let Cadence lead her downstairs, where she was greeted by a bright flash of light.

"Oh, look at my baby girl!" Night Light cooed. "Your mother is going to be so upset she missed this." He raised the camera again and snapped another photo, blinding Twilight a second time.

She rubbed the spots from her eyes. "This isn't my first school dance, Dad."

"Yes, but it *is* one of your last. And you look so beautiful." He held his camera up.

Twilight quickly shielded her eyes. "Dad, at least turn the flash off! I'm already visually impaired."

Cadence steered Twilight for the door. "We better get going. Twilight's got *dance* fever, and I wouldn't want to deprive her for too long. Give Shiny a big kiss for me, Mr. Night Light."

He chuckled. "Sure, but I don't think it'll mean the same coming from me. Have a great time, sweetie. I'll be there to pick you up as soon as it's over."

Twilight grabbed her jacket and purse off the coat rack and waved back before stepping out the door. She and Cadence hurried across the snow-dusted driveway to Cadence's cherry red car. They buckled in, and Cadence took a minute to let the engine warm up.

She put her hands over her mouth and squeed. "Your first date! And it's a *dance*! I'm so happy for you, ladybug!"

Twilight twirled a finger around one of her locks. "I'm excited but... really, *really* nervous."

Cadence's excitement dropped back to reasonable levels, and she turned in her seat. Her eyes shone with the sincerity and compassion of a true love expert. "Twilight, no date is perfect, let me tell you that now. Don't lower your

expectations, but don't assume everything is going to go the way you think it is." She put her hands on Twilight's shoulders. "Now, with that said, everything is going to be fine. From what you told me, Sunset is really trying to make up for what happened. She just needed time to sort her feelings, and now, she's ready to lay it on the line. Or the dance floor in this case."

With a steady breath, Twilight calm the raging storm in her stomach. Cadence was right. The hand holding, the look in her eyes, the determination to fix everything that was broken. It couldn't all be another act. Sunset felt *something* for Twilight.

Twilight refrained from telling Cadence the other part of her nervousness came from possibly becoming Princess of the Winter Ball.

Instead, she pulled Cadence into a hug and said, "Thanks."

"Of course, ladybug." Cadence broke it off and put her hands on the wheel. "Now," she said, shifting into reverse, "let's get you to my future sister-in-law!"

"Cadence!"

"Not sorry!"

Sunset paced the rotunda, pulling her phone out every ten seconds to check the time, and cursing whenever another minute had passed.

Maybe Twilight changed her mind. Maybe she doesn't want to give me another chance. Sunset gripped the sides of her head and groaned. *Calm down! It's only 5:21, she's just a little late!*

The doors opened, and Sunset's hopes rose like a roller coaster, only to drop back down when she saw it was just Flash. He stepped to the side and held the door open, letting Rarity in. She brushed the snow off her gown and waved to Sunset.

Sunset waved back and admired Rarity's dress. It was large and pink and reminded Sunset of theater curtains. Yellow frills broke the dress into four sections, each decorated with gemstones. The top half was a pink, lacy v-neck, with sleeves that ended above her elbows. Long white gloves took up the rest of her arms.

She and Flash walked up to Sunset, arms linked together. Flash wore his best suit, and while it always pained Sunset to admit it, he cleaned up pretty well.

“I know I already said it, but that dress is *stunning* on you!” Rarity said, breaking off from Flash to circle around Sunset. “I impress even myself sometimes.”

Flash cleared his throat and avoided eye contact. “You look good, Sunset.”

The praise only made Sunset’s stomach flounder more. “Thanks. You both look great as well.”

Rarity returned to Flash’s arm and gently pulled him along. “Well, we’ll see you inside. Don’t take too long.” She winked.

As she walked away, the front door opened again, and for a second time, Sunset’s heart rode the roller coaster of disappointment. Pinkie bounced up to her, close to her healthy, hyperactive self, though her nose was still red. She had on her costume from Halloween. Sunset supposed it *did* make a decent ball gown too.

“Are you ready for tonight, Sunny?” Pinkie sniffled loudly and smiled.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Pinkie leaned a little closer, pressing into Sunset’s personal bubble. “Waiting for Twilight?”

Sunset took a tiny step back. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“It’s written on your face!” Pinkie hopped up and down. “Oh, this is so exciting! I can’t wait to see you two d-a-a-*achoo*! Dance!”

“Wait a second.” Sunset’s gears turned, making loud clicking noises. “You knew Twilight liked me, didn’t you?”

Pinkie looked at the ceiling with an innocent smile. “Maaaybe.”

“How long?”

“Since Halloween when Maud found you two sleeping together in the kitchen.”

Ponyfeathers. “Well, you could have said something.”

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “Because her gravitation towards you, wanting you to be her partner in the science fair, showing the most concern whenever you were

in trouble, or just the way she looks at you weren't dead giveaways already. Yep, I probably should have let you in on this big mystery a while ago. I didn't hint that *someone* might want to ask you to the dance or anything."

Sunset's jaw slackened. "Did... did you just use sarcasm?"

Pinkie smirked. "Noo, of course not." She turned and skipped down toward the gym.

Sunset stared after her, jaw still hanging open. *I'm proud of you, Pinks.* She had just enough time to recover before the door opened once more. This time, Sunset's heart rose and didn't come back down.

Twilight walked across the rotunda, her dress hanging just off the floor. She stopped a foot from Sunset, gazing open-mouthed at her figure. Sunset drank in all of Twilight's image—a true princess wrapped in a cloak made from the sky and stars. Having her heart in her throat made it extremely difficult to breathe.

Neither of them spoke. They might have spent the whole night standing and staring at each other. Sunset wouldn't have minded. But, she regained her composure and said, "So, gonna stand there all night?"

Twilight inhaled loudly, roused from her stupor. "Yes—no! No, let's go into the dance. Yes."

Sunset laughed and held her arm out. Twilight looped hers through it, and together, they walked off.

Kpok 40: Miracle Worker II—Shine Like Rainbows

A little after seven, the dance was in full swing. Students filled the gym, talking, laughing, eating, and dancing to their heart's content. The main lights were out, leaving the wall and the strobe light as the only source of illumination. Music pumped through the entire building as Vinyl played her turntables, rocking her head to the beat.

Sunset stood near the stage, a mic attached to her head and a clipboard in her hand. So far, everything was running smooth enough. The room felt a little warm, but she chalked that up to collective body heat. All of her friends were here; Rainbow, Applejack, and Rarity made sure not to cross paths. The rest of Flash Drive had arrived with their instruments, and she had seen the CMC running about a few minutes ago.

In the back, Twilight stood near the food tables, a cup of punch in her hands. She gently swayed back in forth in time to the music. Sunset volunteering to run the ticket counter first was the only reason she wasn't dancing with Twilight yet.

Well, I think I've earned my dance. Sunset set the clipboard on the stage and made her way to Twilight. She scooted around the dance floor, keeping to the back wall. Halfway down, she found some of the lights were out and a few more were flickering.

Sunset's throat rumbled. *Faulty wiring probably.* She picked one of the flickering ones and made sure the bulb was tightly screwed on. The flickering stopped, and the unlit ones came to life. Sunset smiled. *Much better.*

All of them blinked, then went out completely.

"Seriously?" Sunset fiddled with a few of them, but they refused to come back on. She refrained from kicking the wall and tapped the button on her headset. "Flash, the back wall went out!"

Static crackled before she heard Flash's voice. "What happened?"

"I don't know! Some of the lights were out so I tried to fix it, then *all* of them went out!"

"All right. Be over in two seconds."

True to his word, Flash broke out of the swirling vortex of human bodies. He wiped a line of sweat from his forehead. “Even with the ice, it’s still warm in here.” He went to work examining the lights, fiddling with the bulbs and running his hand across some of the strings. He followed them back to the outlet and stooped to unplug it and plug it back in. Nothing happened.

“Well,” he said, standing up, “my theory is, there’s a fuse blown somewhere in there. If not that, then these lights have just decided to kick the bucket.”

Sunset huffed. “Let’s hope it’s the former.”

Flash set the plug on the floor. “If we got an extension cable, we could run it from the other wall. But the cables are in the maintenance closet.”

“No problem; I’ve got a key.”

Flash looked at her curiously. “You have a...” His expression dropped to a nonplussed stare. “Of course you do.”

Sunset waved a hand as she walked off, heels clicking against the floor. “Hey, I haven’t used it for anything in months.” She detoured to the punch bowl, where Twilight was still doing her impression of an upright pendulum. “You know you’re off beat, right?”

Twilight stopped and took a sip of her punch. “I kinda stopped listening a while ago.”

Sunset rubbed the back of her neck. “Listen, I know, you’re not having the best time—”

“What?” Twilight’s eyes caricatured. “No, no, no! I’m having a great time, honest!”

“Twilight—”

“No, really!” Twilight smiled with a force that couldn’t have been healthy for her cheeks.

Sunset took Twilight’s free hand. “I promised to dance with you, and I’m going to keep that promise. I just have to fix the lights, then it’ll be you and I making fools of ourselves. Okay?”

Twilight turned down her smile. “Okay.”

After tracing her thumb against Twilight's palm, Sunset hurried out into the hallway, where the music could still be heard plain as day. She followed the blue carpet that had been rolled out down the corridor until she reached the lockers, then quickly found hers.

"All right, where are you?" Sunset reached her arm into the back, past the snow jar and her textbooks. Her nails scratched the cold metal of the locker, and she shuddered at the unpleasant chill that ran down her spine. "Aha!" Her ring finger traced over something small and rigid: her copy of the master key.

She closed the locker and flipped the silver key through her fingers. Having a key that could open every lock in the school had proved invaluable during her tenure as queen tyrant. Planting evidence, sneaking into the computer lab for video editing, looking at student files in Celestia's office.

Sunset strangled it, letting the teeth bite into her fingers. Maybe she'd never be absolved of her guilt, but at least she was using her powers for good now.

The maintenance closet was far enough so that Sunset no longer felt the bass vibrating in her teeth. She stuck the key in the lock and twisted, opening the door. She slipped in, keeping her foot in the crack just long enough to find the light switch. The closet wasn't big, but there was enough room for Sunset to fully stretch her arms.

She stepped inside, the door closing behind her with a soft *click*. Her eyes wandered the shelves, scanning over light bulbs, buckets of paint, boxes of nails, and more. Taking up some of the leg room in front of her was the wheelbarrow from the cleanup of the Fall Formal.

To her left on a lower shelf was what Sunset desired: an orange extension cord. She threw the coil around her shoulder and turn to open the door, only for the handle to stick.

"What?" Sunset wiggled it again, but it refused to fully turn. "Oh no!" Sunset jiggled it harder, flashbacks of the weekend prior drifting down on her like snow. "Dammit!" Sunset twisted around. "Where's the key?"

In the lock outside.

Sunset brought her leg back to kick the door, and paused halfway through, resulting in an upset of her balance. She grabbed one of the shelves for support

and took a deep breath. *Auto-locking door. How could I forget that? Okay, don't panic yet.* She tapped her headset. "Flash, can you hear me?"

Static screeched into Sunset's ear. She endured it for several seconds before common sense kicked in. "Okay, guess I'm out of range. Still, don't panic yet." She pounded her fist on the door. "*Hello? Can anyone hear me? Anyone?*" Her cries sounded infinitely loud in the small space she occupied, but unless someone else was randomly wandering the halls, not a soul would hear her.

Sunset paced back and forth, turning every three steps. "Okay, okay, locked in a closet away from the dance with no communication. You've been in worse spots before." She paused. "Actually... when the dance ends, everyone goes home, and it's the weekend... and winter break." She pulled her hair. "Which means, who knows when maintenance will come back?"

Now seemed like a perfect time to panic.

Before she could go full freak out, Sunset spotted a tool bag lying on the ground with a hammer inside. She looked at the hammer, biting her tongue in delirious glee. *Smash the door open and get more detention for property damage, or, stay stuck in here until you possibly starve to death.* Sunset weighed the options on her hands, looking up at the ceiling. Celestia would be disappointed, but at least Sunset had a good excuse this time.

She reached down for the hammer, stopped, and looked up again. A vent was positioned right over her head. *Or, climb through the vent and break out that way. Cliché, but I'll take it.* Securing the extension cable over her shoulder, Sunset climbed up onto the back shelf, pressing her body forward to keep it from tipping back.

"I suppose this is akin to getting shoved in a locker." She caught herself after tripping on an old lightbulb, and reached the vent, pushing it open. "My apologies to nerds everywhere."

Twilight had moved approximately four steps since talking to Sunset. It had only been to let someone else get to the punch bowl. One hand held her empty cup while the other was cradled close to her chest, Sunset's touch still lingering on her palm.

She groaned. *When did I become so sappy? Moondancer would be hysterical if she saw me right now.* Deciding there was enough punch sloshing around in her stomach, Twilight threw her cup away and moved to the far wall, where the lights weren't working.

A sigh rose up in her throat, but she forced it back down. *Remember what Cadence said. It's just a little hiccup. Sunset will be back and we'll have fun.* Twilight watched the fluctuating mass of bodies writhe and convulse, limbs flailing and bodies swiveling to a fast techno beat. In hindsight, Twilight knew she should have expected something like this. Sunset was in charge of the dance; a lot of her night would be spent making sure everyone else had fun.

"Hello, Twilight."

"Ah!"

"Ah!"

Twilight swirled around, almost getting tangled in her dress. She straightened out and found Fluttershy looking like a frightened deer. "Oh, hi, Fluttershy. You startled me."

Fluttershy wore a long jade dress with lighter vine patterns on the hem, and an orchid in her hair. She softened from her rigid stance and laughed. "Usually it's me saying that." Twilight was surprised she could hear Fluttershy over the music volume. "Are you having fun?"

"It's... nice," Twilight said, wishing she had her cup to fiddle with.

Fluttershy giggled again. "I tried to come talk to you earlier, but..." Her cheeks turned scarlet. "A lot of guys keep asking me to dance. It's fun but, I'm not used to this much attention."

Twilight twirled a finger into her hair. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. Sunset wants everyone to have a good time."

"Where is Sunset?"

"She went to go fix the lights," Twilight said, her sigh finally breaking free from her chest.

"Relax, sugarcube," a voice came from Twilight's other side. "Ah'm sure she'll be back in a jiffy."

Twilight gave a half-hearted nod in Applejack's direction, then did a double take upon seeing her outfit. She wore a sparkling red dress with her hair done up in ringlets, her hat completely absent. Even with her initial introduction, Twilight never saw Applejack as a dress wearing girl, yet she pulled it off very well.

Meanwhile, Fluttershy backed up and hid her face behind her bangs. "Umm... hi, Applejack."

Applejack cocked her head. "Hey, 'Shy. What's wrong?"

Fluttershy steadily emerged from her soft pink shell. "You're not mad at me?"

"Now why would Ah be mad at you?"

"Well," Fluttershy started in a dour voice, "if my animals didn't get into Pinkie's punch, she wouldn't have made that comment about you worshipping apple gods, then you wouldn't have suggested Rainbow didn't like boys, then Rainbow wouldn't be mad at everyone and we'd all be friends." Tears welled up in her eyes. "It's all my fault."

Applejack held her arms out. "Aww, sugarcube, come here." She pulled Fluttershy into a hug. "It ain't your fault how we reacted. Don't go thinkin' for a second you're to blame."

Radiant warmth bloomed in Twilight's chest, chasing the shadows of disappointment away. At this rate, all her friends would be back together by the end of the night.

Applejack broke the hug and patted Fluttershy on the shoulder. "Come on, how about you, me, and Twilight go dance for a bit?"

Fluttershy wiped her eyes and nodded. They turned to the dance floor and saw Rainbow emerge from it wearing a long baby blue dress with soft, cloud-shaped shoulder pads.

"There you are, Fluttershy, I was wondering where you went." Her grin fell as she looked at Twilight and Applejack. "I hope you two are hungry, 'cause you're going to be eating my dust tonight."

"That analogy doesn't really work here," Twilight said flatly.

Rainbow waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter. Point is, *I’m* gonna be princess this year! Isn’t that right, Fluttershy?”

“Well, umm...”

Applejack scoffed. “Please, you got as much a chance as a chicken learnin’ to fly.”

“Oh yeah? Then what does that make *your* chances?”

Twilight stepped between them. “Girls, we shouldn’t be fighting like this. It’s just a silly title.”

Rainbow crossed her arms. “Says the girl who has the highest chance of winning. You know, behind me.”

Applejack massaged the spot just above her eye. “Twi’s right, Rainbow. Ah don’t feel like wastin’ energy fightin’ with you anymore. Truce?”

“Gee, A.J, that sounds really nice, but...” She took a step back and threw her arms up. “I should really get back to my *date Thunderlane* first.” She jabbed a finger in Applejack’s direction. “Suck it, Applefat!”

Twilight and Fluttershy each grabbed one of Applejack’s arms as she tried to throw herself at Rainbow. *I hope your plan works, Sunset.*

“Great plan, Sunset. Let’s climb through the air vents! Really top notch idea!” Sunset gagged and coughed out a lungful of dust. She pressed her lips together. *I should stop talking.*

Sunset shimmied her way through the tight vent. She had to scooch herself forward like an inchworm, dragging her dress through dust while cobwebs found a new home in her hair.

All this to fix some stupid lights. Why’d I have to be a perfectionist? She finally came upon another vent opening, one that dropped into the hall. *Thank you!* She wrapped her fingers around the grate and wriggled it loose, setting it aside. *All right, easy now.* She scooted forward, crossing the gap first, then letting her legs dangle over it. She slowly eased herself down but knew she had no choice but to drop.

Sunset let herself go, landing on her back; the poof of her dress cushioned some of the fall. Still, her tailbone ached, and she felt disgusting. She forced herself up and started dusting herself off, lamenting at the state of her dress. It was more gray than anything else.

Cord around her shoulder, Sunset made for the maintenance closet first, snatching her key out of the lock, then went to her locker. She pulled out a lint roller and used up three rolls cleaning her dress. It didn't look perfect, but it was at least presentable again. After taking the cobwebs from her hair, Sunset finally returned to the dance.

Better enjoy this while it lasts. Rarity is gonna kill me when she sees this. Sunset took the plug for the lights and connected them to the extension cord, then plugged that into the working outlet. The lights sparked to life, glittering in the dark. Sunset sighed in relief. *There. Now—*

"Yo, Shimmer!" Vinyl called. She gestured for Sunset to come over with a finger.

Sunset's sigh melted into a groan. She trudged over to Vinyl's set up. "What?"

Vinyl examined her through her tinted glasses. She opened her mouth, then shook her head and closed it. "Listen, I just got a text from Octy—"

"Who?"

"Octavia. She said they got a flat tire and might be a little late."

Sunset seized up. Her throat constricted, making breathing and talking nearly impossible. "How late?" she choked out between clenched teeth.

Vinyl shrugged nonchalantly. "An hour, maybe two."

"Two hours? The dance will be almost over by then!"

"Sorry, ain't much I can do about it. I *can* keep playing, but you'd have to pay me for overtime."

Sunset's voice cracked. "Of course!" Her eye made a violent twitch. Vinyl slipped her headphones back on, signaling the end of the conversation, and Sunset stomped away. "Perfect, just perfect! I promised an orchestra, and now, I have no orchestra. It's going to be one of *those* nights, isn't it?"

A sudden crackle of static made her jump. “Uh, Sunset? We might have a problem,” Flash said in her ear.

Sunset looked to the ceiling. “That was a rhetorical question!” She jammed her finger against her headset. “What?”

“I think the room is too warm. The pillars are starting to melt.”

“Melt?” Sunset jogged over to the nearest pillar. Sure enough, there was a puddle of water at the base, and when Sunset ran her hand down it, it was drenched. She wiped it on her front, relieved that it took some of the dust stains away.

“Okay, I’ll go adjust the temperature, you start getting ready for the song.”

“Got it.”

Sunset scanned the crowd. “And if you see Twilight, tell her I said soon, okay?”

“Uhh, sure.”

Amidst the intertwining bodies, Sunset couldn’t find her star-studded date. She hoped Twilight was still here and hadn’t left due to neglect. As Sunset turned for the door, Lyra strode down the court to intercept her.

“Hey there—”

Sunset held a hand out, and Lyra ran straight into it. “Nope. Not in the mood for your bullshit.” She pushed Lyra away and stormed out.

Down the hall and back to her locker, Sunset snatched the master key again and picked up the snow jar. *Now’s probably the best time to use this.* She closed the door with as much force as she could. Somewhere down the hall, there was a loud, “Eeep!”

Sunset scrunched her nose. “What is Fluttershy doing out here?” She hurried toward the noise and turned a corner, finding not Fluttershy, but Sweetie Belle huddled against the wall.

“O-oh, hi, Sunset,” she squeaked.

“What are you doing out here?”

Sweetie wiped her eyes. “Just getting some air. It’s kinda warm in there.”

Sunset took a knee in front of her. “Come on, kid, what’s really going on?”

Sweetie bit her lip and looked away. “I... I’m scared to sing.”

“What? Why?”

“What if people laugh at us?” Sweetie buried her head in her arms. “Last time, it was just online and people just left mean comments. But now, they can make fun of us in person.”

Sunset put a hand on her shoulder. “Sweetie, I’ve heard you girls practice this week. With a voice like yours, no one is going to laugh at you.” Sunset grinned. “And even if they do, I’m sure your sister wouldn’t mind tearing them apart.”

Sweetie giggled lightly. “Do you really think a song is going to make them stop fighting?”

“With a voice like yours to sing it, yes.” Sunset stood up and pulled Sweetie to her feet. “Now, go and clean your face; you’re on soon.”

“Okay.” Before she left, Sweetie wrapped her arms around Sunset’s middle. “Thanks for trying so hard, Sunset.” She backed up and looked at the small dust stains now on her dress. “What happened to you?”

“Long story,” Sunset said. She waved Sweetie off. “Go on, it’s almost showtime.”

They parted ways, Sunset heading back to the gym while Sweetie made a quick trip to the bathroom. Sunset made her way backstage; Flash and his band were setting up their instruments. She kept to the shadows and came to the door labeled ‘staff only’, unlocked it and stepped inside, making sure to take the key with her.

It was a plain narrow space with a ladder at the other end and the air conditioning control panel on the wall. The switch was stuck between the hot and cold symbols, and the temperature read 65°. Sunset turned it down to 60° and flipped the switch to cold. Or at least, she tried to. It stayed resolutely in the middle. Sunset put more force into it, but it refused to budge.

Growling, Sunset set the jar down and put both hands around the little switch. She jerked it to the left, only to hear a *snap*, and fall to the ground. In her hand was a portion of the toggle, the rest of it was still between hot and cold.

“You know,” Sunset said, all the emotion drained from her, “this doesn’t even faze me. Ha, I’ve become so angry, I’ve come full circle back to calm.” She stood up and looked at the broken thermostat, tapping her foot. Emotionally stunted or not, Sunset still needed to get the air conditioning on. She would need something strong to move what remained of the switch.

She pointed to the jar on the floor. “Stay.” When Sunset was sure it wasn’t going anywhere, she hurried from the back room, snuck out from the backstage, and briskly walked into the hall. She hurried to the maintenance closet and unlocked the door. This time, she used a small plank of wood to keep the door from closing on her while she rummaged through the tool bag.

“Let’s see...” She pulled out a flathead screwdriver. “You’ll do.” Key in one hand, screwdriver in the other, Sunset backtracked from the closet to backstage.

“Sunset?” Flash called as she put her hand on the knob. “We’re about to start in a minute.”

“I know, I just have to fix the A.C, but you’re good to go.”

Flash adjusted his guitar strap and loosened his shoulders. “Okay. But, are you sure you should be going back there?”

“Someone has to fix this stuff.” Sunset stepped in and closed the door behind her. She paused for a moment, then shrugged it off, turning her attention to the thermostat. She stuck the screwdriver into the space next to the toggle and pulled against it. Even with the additional force, it stayed jammed.

“Come on, you stupid thing!” Sunset grunted. She dug her heels into the ground and pulled harder. Outside she could hear Vinyl’s beats dying down. “Crap, I’m gonna miss it!” She gave one last desperate tug and stumbled backward as the screwdriver came out.

Something clicked, and a second later, Sunset could hear a whirring sound in the walls. She checked the switch and saw it was finally at cold. Sunset punched the air, then grabbed the snow jar as Flash Drive’s drummer counted off the beat.

She hurried up the ladder, the jar tucked in her arm. The higher she climbed, the more she came to regret not grabbing a flashlight. The rafters were dark; the only illumination came from the ladder chute she had just emerged from.

Still, she could hear the air conditioning unit humming loudly, and followed the noise to the machine.

“Do you really think any of this will make a difference?”

Sunset froze, her heart sputtering at the sight before her. It was faint, but Sunset could see the outlines of her body against the darkness. Her demonic eyes glared at Sunset in avarice.

“A little music. A little snow. How cute. Do you think any of them will care?”

Sunset tightened her jaw, moving her foot back. “I...”

“No one will remember this. No one will thank you. You struggle in vain, Sunset.” A set of teeth appeared underneath the eyes, jagged and hungry. *“You can’t pay back your sins. You’ll wander the darkness forever!”*

Her body shook, rattling the lid of the jar. Sunset bowed her head while the demon chortled. *Is all of this pointless? What if this doesn’t work?*

From down below, the voices of the CMC floated into Sunset’s ears. Her heart swelled at their sweet voices, mixing together to make a beautiful harmony.

“Together we stand,

“As the rain begins to fall.

“And holdin’ our head up high,

“As the sun shines through it all.”

Sunset raised her head, fire igniting her eyes. She pressed the jar close to her chest and leaned forward. “You’re wrong!” With a fierce cry, she charged forward, plowing through her demon’s shadow. Sunset skidded to a stop and looked back, but found she was alone again.

Her breath quivered and came out in loud pants. She took a second to gather herself, then returned to the air conditioner, feeling around the machine for the intake latch. As she moved around, her dress snagged on something. Sunset, however, didn’t notice until a step too late, and a loud *shrrriip* made her stop and groan.

The bad news was part of the orange layer of her dress had been torn off. The good news was she wasn’t revealing anything. The better news was, she had

snagged her dress on the lip of the intake latch. “And Sunset said, let there be snow.”

Sunset quickly opened the latch and took the top off the snow jar. She tipped it over and poured the snow down. The dazzling flurry of soft powder kept falling no matter how hard Sunset shook it. Sunset flipped it up and looked inside, finding it was still filled to the brim.

“So that’s what Artemis meant.” Sunset continued to shovel it into the machine. “Well then, more snow for everyone.” When she felt there was enough snow to blanket the gym, she walked back to the ladder. Disappointment weighed her steps and sat heavy on her shoulders. The song was over. Still, perhaps she’d be able to see everyone’s reaction when snow began to fall. She reached the ladder, and halfway down, Sunset’s foot slipped and she failed to catch herself in time.

Once again, her dress broke most of her fall, but the collision against the floor still left her dazed. She stared up at the ceiling.

“I’m just going to lay here for a second.”

Twilight broke to the outskirts of the dance floor just as Sunset disappeared backstage, a screwdriver in her hand. *What is she doing now?*

“Twilight!” Rarity hurried over, holding up her dress for better maneuverability. “Have you seen Flash anywhere? One second we were dancing, and the next, he was gone.”

“Umm...” Twilight’s eyes flickered to the curtains. “I’m sure he’ll pop up soon.”

“I hope so. We were having such a delightful time.” Rarity scrunched her nose and put her hands on her waist. “And why aren’t you dancing with Sunset?”

“Well, you know...” Twilight wrung her hands together. “She’s been busy so far, so we haven’t had a chance yet.”

The music faded out, replaced by Vinyl’s voice. “Alrighty, party people! Before we crown our new princess, here’s a special performance from Flash Drive!”

The crowd gave an honest, though surprised cheer as the curtain opened up, revealing Flash and his band, along with three microphones at the front of the stage.

“I didn’t know Flash was performing,” Rarity said with a hint of irritation.

The crowd’s cheers fell into scattered applause and snickers as Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, and Scootaloo took their positions in front of the microphones.

Rarity stared, open-mouthed. “What are they doing up there?”

Twilight pressed her knuckles against her lips to hide her smile. “You’ll see.”

Sweetie adjusted the mike and brought it closer to her height. “Umm, h-hi, everyone.” Her voice shook, and her eyes darted around the room. “W-we’d like to sing a song written by a g-good friend, and finished by another. It’s dedicated to their friends in the hopes that they can come together again. We hope you like it.” She took a deep breath and nodded back to Flash, who nodded to the drummer.

“One, two, three, four!”

A soft, steady beat came from the drum, while Flash started strumming on his guitar before the bass jumped in. It was Apple Bloom who took the first verse.

“Once... upon a time,

“You came into my world and made the stars align.”

Sweetie Belle took over, her voice no longer shaky, but rich and confident.

“Now, I can see the signs,

“You pick me up when I get down so I can shine.”

The instruments came into full effect as all three of them sang, *“Shine like rainbows, ohohoh.”*

Twilight turned back to Rarity, finding her mascara forming a black river down her cheeks.

“Oh my goodness,” she whispered, holding her hands to her chest. “She’s so beautiful.” Her eyes widened. “Wait, I think I know this song!”

“You do?” Twilight asked.

Fluttershy ran over and clutched Rarity’s arm. “Rarity, the lyrics I showed you last month—”

“Yes, darling, I know!”

It was Scootaloo’s turn to sing. *“Friends, you are in my life,*

“And you can count on me to be there by your side.”

Sweetie took over again, a broad smile on her face. She looked completely at home on the stage. *“And when the music comes alive,*

“We sing our song to lift us up so we can shine!”

The entire band sang in a unified voice, *“And the sound that we hear in our hearts,*

“Makes a crescendo!

“And the light that ignites in the dark,

“It makes us all glow!

“And shine like rainbows, ohohoh.

“We shine like rainbows, ohohoh.”

Rainbow wandered over and poked Fluttershy in the shoulder. “Didn’t you show me something like this a while back?”

“Yes!” Fluttershy looked torn between excited and mortified.

Rainbow looked back to the stage. “Man, I didn’t know Scoots could sing like that.”

“Together we stand,

“As the rain begins to fall.

“And holdin’ our head up high,

“As the sun shines through it all.”

Applejack wandered over, tears spilling from her eyes as well. “Would ya look at that. My little sister is growing up and has a voice like Ma.”

“And the sound that we hear in our hearts,

“Makes a crescendo!

“And the light that ignites in the dark,

“It makes us all glow!

“And shine like rainbows, ohohoh!

“We shine like rainbows, ohohoh!”

Then, the whole room was singing, led off by Pinkie.

“Shine like rainbows, ohohoh!”

“We shine like rainbows, ohohoh!”

“We shine like rainbows.”

A wild roar of applause engulfed the room before the last chord faded. The Motley Crew took a bow, smiles and tears on their faces, while their admirers threw corsages and flower petals at their feet.

Rarity pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed her face. “They were all so beautiful.” She turned to Fluttershy. “Your song was beautiful!” She looked at the rest of her friends. “You’re all so beautiful!” She broke into more tears.

Applejack pat her on the shoulder. “Come on now, Rares, Ah’m sheddin’ enough tears already.”

“Oh my gosh, Fluttershy!” Pinkie bounced over and pulled Fluttershy into a full body hug. “Was that *your* song they sang? It was *amazing!* I didn’t know you could write music!”

“W-well, sometimes,” she said, squirming in Pinkie’s grip. “But, I hadn’t finished that one yet. And I have no idea how they got it.”

“It was Sunset,” Twilight said, wiping away a few of her own tears.

Rainbow leaned forward. “Sunset did this?”

“Yes. She was hoping something like this would...” Twilight went cross-eyed as something small and white drifted down in front of her. It was followed by another, then another. She looked up, finding hundreds of snowflakes twirling down from the ceiling.

Applejack held her hand out. “Is this snow?”

Pinkie stuck out her tongue, letting several fall into her mouth. “Yep!” She smacked her lips. “Sure tastes like snow!”

“How on earth is it snowing?” Rarity asked.

Twilight broke out in a grin. She didn’t know how, but she knew Sunset had something to do with it.

Everyone in the room was now marveling at the falling snow, jumping up and down and gathering as much as they could before they flung it at someone. Pinkie quickly imitated them, grabbing a handful from the floor and throwing it at Rainbow.

“Ack! Pinkie!” She caught some snow for retaliation, but Pinkie twirled out of the way, letting the snow clump hit Rarity.

“Rainbow!”

Rainbow held her hands up. “Sorry, I was aiming for—ah!” She shook the snow out of her hair and gave a surprised look to a mischievously giggling Fluttershy.

Twilight joined in, throwing a spatter of snow at Applejack and receiving a face-full in return. As the snow fell, their snowballs grew bigger and bigger, and their laughter grew louder and louder.

Sunset stepped into a white wonderland full of laughing students. The mood was contagious, and while Sunset didn’t laugh, it quelled her bad mood. She stepped through the snow, ducking under a poorly thrown snowball. *Everyone’s having a good time, but where are—*

“Sunset Shimmer, what have you done to my dress?”

Well, I lived a... decent life. Sort of. She swiveled and found Rarity marching toward her, flames in her eyes. “Now, Rarity, I can explain...”

“You have dust and dirt stains all over it, and it’s torn! How could you do this to me?”

Applejack swooped over and put an arm around Rarity’s shoulders. “Go easy on her, Rarity, Ah’m sure she has a good explanation.”

“Does climbing through the vents to get out of a locked closet count as a good explanation?”

Rainbow walked over with the others, an impressed grin on her face. “Sounds like you had your own party tonight.”

“You have no idea,” Sunset deadpanned. She looked at their collective smiles, (save for Rarity, who looked ready to tackle Sunset) the snow in their hair, and pointed a curious finger at them. “So, are you guys... friends again?”

Applejack gave her ringlets a tug. “Well... maybe not officially.” She looked over to Rainbow. “But Ah’d like to be.”

Rainbow rubbed the back of her neck. “Yeah. Maybe we... *I’m* holding too much of a grudge. School isn’t much fun unless I’m with you girls, even if Sunset isn’t terrorizing us. No offense.”

“Shut up.”

Rarity relaxed and took a collective breath. “I agree with Rainbow. We all said and did some hurtful things to each other but... I don’t know. There’s a certain bond I feel with you girls that I don’t feel with anyone else. Perhaps it’s time we forgive and forget? Start completely anew?”

Applejack dipped her head. “Ah can agree to that.”

“Woohoo!” Pinkie cheered. “The Spectacular Seven is back!”

Sunset beheld all of them. It had worked. Her plan had actually worked. Her friends were friends again. A lump swelled in her throat and hot tears ran down her face.

Twilight put a hand on her arm. “Sunset, are you okay?”

She stomped a foot into the snow and shouted, “You’re all so *stupid!*”

“Aww!” Pinkie held her arms out. “Sounds like someone needs a group hug!” They all piled around Sunset, locking her in a warm embrace that made her cry harder.

“I hate all of you!”

“We love you too, Sunset!”

They stood locked together until the hum of a microphone grabbed their attention. The main lights came on, showing Celestia and Luna standing on stage.

“Everyone, it’s time to announce this year’s Princess of the Winter Ball!” She waved an envelope. A cheer went up through the room.

Rainbow stepped out of the hug. “So, we’re all cool, right? No hard feelings when I win?”

Rarity clicked her tongue. “No hard feelings on *whoever* wins.”

“Right, right.”

Celestia tore the envelope open. “And this year’s winner is...” She pulled the card out. “Twilight Sparkle!”

“*Really?*” Rainbow shouted over everyone else’s ovation.

“Yes!” Sunset cried, grabbing a fistful of air and pulling her arm down. She saw Twilight hadn’t moved from her spot and gave her a gentle nudge forward. “Go on, you won!”

Eyes wider than an owl’s, Twilight made her way up to the stage and stopped in front of the icy podium. Celestia handed her the crown and she accepted it but didn’t put it on. She stepped over to the microphone and cleared her throat, bringing calm to the approbation.

“T-thank you for this.” She looked down at the white crown, a blue gem in its center. “The fact that you all voted for me does mean a lot, but...” She lifted her head, a sharp resolve in her eyes. “I think it might have been for the wrong reasons.

“Some of you might not realize it, but I’m *not* the same Twilight Sparkle from the Fall Formal. In a hard to explain way, she and I are two separate people that just happen to look alike. I’m... well, I’m not a princess. Again, I’m honored so many of you voted for me but, I believe a real princess shouldn’t be decided by a popularity vote, but by their actions and dedication to the school... and to their friends.”

Twilight held the crown up. “I believe there is one student here who is more deserving of this crown than anyone who ran. She persevered in the face of adversity. She spent all week organizing this dance for you, making sure everything was perfect.” Twilight softened her voice. “And tonight, she sacrificed her own enjoyment to make sure everything kept running smoothly.”

Sunset’s eyes contracted to pinpricks. *No... no, no.* She took a step back, wondering how far she was from the door.

“She’s shown all the qualities of a good leader. Maybe she has a few faults, but she’s trying her hardest to fix them.” Twilight locked eyes with Sunset. “Sunset Shimmer, could you come up here, please?”

There was no jolt. There was no tickle. There was no subversion of her will whatsoever. And as much as Sunset wanted to jump, scream, and dance with joy, she was frozen in the snow with the entire school watching her. Her head was ready to float away, and the world tilted to one side. She might have fallen over if Rarity hadn’t nudged her shoulder.

“Go on, darling,” she whispered.

Sunset’s legs restarted and carried her toward the stage. The room was deathly quiet, making each footstep an avalanche. Hundreds of eyes haunted her as she walked, judging her, criticizing her, demanding to know why, once again, she was stealing something that didn’t belong to her.

She did not deserve this crown. She did not *want* this crown. It never left her line of sight as she moved forward. The blue gem stared back at her, an eye of her demonic half.

Come and rejoin me, it said seductively. *Come and take back your lost power*. But power was the last thing Sunset wanted. She was free—finally free of her penance. Her debt had been repaid. Yet, the universe continued to insult her, mock her, then tempt her to fall back into darkness.

Run away, her brain commanded. But she couldn’t run. It wasn’t the curse that spurred her on, but she couldn’t stop her advance up the stairs.

After a thousand-year march, Sunset stopped in front of Twilight. Twilight smiled at her, but Sunset’s jaw locked, rendering her unable to return it.

“I hereby forfeit my crown to Sunset Shimmer,” Twilight said. She held the crown out to Sunset.

Sunset’s entire body trembled. Her breath was shallow, and she couldn’t work her arms.

Twilight pushed the crown closer. “It won’t hurt you,” she whispered. “Nothing is going to happen, I promise.”

Sunset looked up into Twilight’s eyes and found solace in the starry universe behind them. It was just a crown. It wouldn’t hurt her; it was nothing more than

plastic. She raised her hands and took the crown, then raised it over her head. She shut her eyes and brought the crown down, hoping beyond hope that Twilight was right.

The searing pain never came. Electricity didn't strangle her body. Black talons didn't dig themselves into her mind. Sunset opened her eyes and looked down at her hands, still pale and plain. Her eyes moved up to Twilight, still smiling at her.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Twilight said, stepping back and gesturing to Sunset, "your true Princess of the Winter Ball!" Twilight started the applause, closely followed by the rest of their friends, then Celestia and Luna.

Flash blew a whistle with his fingers, then joined the applause with the CMC. Trixie gave Sunset a rare smile and began to clap as well. The next thing Sunset knew, the entire crowd was clapping and cheering for her, and new tears rolled down her face.

She stepped up to the mike, wiping her face. "Thank you," she choked out. She cleared her throat and continued, "I really don't know what to say." Her hand moved to the crown sitting atop her head. "Actually, I do know what to say. I don't deserve this crown. Not after everything I've put you all through. I tried my hardest to make you all miserable for almost three years, and one dance won't fix all that. But, I hope it does at least help me say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the lying, the intimidation, and the blackmail.

"I've learned a lot in the past few months. About being kind and loyal, being generous and laughing with your friends instead of at them, about being honest." She laughed weakly. "I learned a lot about honesty. But, I learned it all from having a great group of friends, something I tried to deprive you all of. So, I'm sorry for that too." Sunset squared her shoulders. "I think the biggest lesson I've learned is friendship isn't easy... but it's worth fighting for!" Had Sunset looked down at herself, she would have noticed the faint golden glow she gave off.

Pinkie leaped into the air with a shout of, "Whooo!" prompting the rest of the audience to applaud again.

The back door opened, and in walked several people lugging large instruments, led by a familiar face Sunset recognized as Octavia.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Canterlot Orchestra is here!” Sunset cheered, the last of her apprehension draining away.

Octavia raised her eyebrow at Sunset, then shot a scathing look to Vinyl, who just smiled and shrugged. Octavia rolled her eyes and led her band up to the stage while Sunset ushered everyone else off.

“Sunset Shimmer.” Octavia’s voice caught Sunset just before she got to the stairs. Sunset sighed and turned around, watching Octavia approach from the other side. She leaned her cello case upright and kept a hand against it. “Why am I not surprised to see you with another crown?”

Sunset was glad most of the students had begun to whisper excitedly among themselves. She smiled sheepishly at Octavia. “You just missed the part where I apologized and told everyone how great friendship is.”

“I’m sure.” Octavia set her case down and started pulling her instrument out. “Well, we’re already here, so I guess we’ll play. But I’m only doing this because Vinyl asked me. And because we want to get paid.”

Sunset shrugged. “Fair enough.” She couldn’t expect everyone to believe she had changed. In fact, she’d still be happy if no one else in the room had really accepted her apology. She had still made it, and she had six girls that already embraced her with loving arms. That was more than enough.

Speaking of which...

Sunset got off the stage and cantered over to her waiting friends. Rarity was the first to run up and give her a hug.

“That was a great speech, darling!” She looked over to Twilight. “And that was a very touching gesture you made. I’m so proud of both of you.”

“Pfft.” Rainbow blew air out the side of her mouth. “It was totally sappy.” She grinned. “But, it was the best kind of sappy.”

Sunset stepped up to Twilight. “Thank you, Sparky.”

Twilight folded her hands behind her back. “You’re welcome.”

An arm pulled itself around Sunset's shoulder and pulled her close to its owner. "Wow, Sunny!" Lyra sang in Sunset's ear. "That was quite a speech, and this has been quite a ball!"

Sunset grabbed Lyra's wrist and brushed her off. "So glad you enjoyed it." Her happy bubble was already deflating. "Now, either get to the point or go away."

"Well, the dance was a great hit!." Lyra wiggled a finger. "Buuuuut, while you didn't go over budget, you still spent quite a lot of money; money which, so far, doesn't seem to be made up for with the revenue." She sighed, trying her hardest to look sad. "And if you remember our agreement...."

"You gotta be kiddin' me!" Applejack shouted. She threw an arm out. "Y'all are gonna ban Sunset after all this?"

Lyra shrugged. "Listen, I don't make the rules, I just enforce them. We had a great turn out, but so far, the profit revenue isn't meeting the cost, so we're losing money. And if the dance wasn't a budget success..."

Rainbow rolled up her sleeve. "Oh, I'll give you a 'budget success.'"

"What seems to be the matter girls?" Celestia walked in between the two parties, Luna right behind her.

Lyra's eyes dilated. "Oh, uh, nothing, Principal. Just a little talk."

Pinkie pointed a finger. "She has a petition to ban Sunset from all the school activities if this dance didn't go well, but it *did* go well, but since it didn't make enough money anyway, she still wants to ban Sunset!"

Luna raised an eyebrow. "A petition to ban someone from school activities?"

"Yeah!" Rainbow jumped in. "More than half the school signed it, and she was going to give it to you since you wouldn't be able to say no with that many signatures."

"Oh?" Celestia looked from Lyra to Sunset. "I see now. And did President Lyra mention that *that* particular clause came from the last edition of the rule book which is ten years outdated? The current one abolished such a rule for instances similar to this one."

Seven pairs of eyes glared at Lyra. "No, she didn't," Twilight growled.

Lyra continued to smile, sweating bullets the entire time. “Really? Huh, I wonder how I could have made such a mistake.”

“A mystery for the ages,” Luna said. “Come, sister.” She turned for the snack table. “I think these girls have *much* to talk about now.”

Celestia nodded. “Congratulations, Sunset. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Oh, we intend to,” Sunset said, a thin line of malice layered on her voice. Her eyes never left Lyra. “So, that part just slipped your mind, hm?”

Lyra took a step back, holding her hands up. “To be fair, I didn’t think you’d call my bluff!”

Rainbow rolled her other sleeve up. “I knew it was BS. All right, so which do you like the taste of more, the floor or the wall?”

“As your president—”

“Viva la revolution!” Pinkie shouted.

Sunset held her arm out, halting her friends’ advance. “Thank you, girls. But I don’t think a beat down is necessary.”

Lyra lowered her arms a little. “Wait, you’re not mad?”

“Oh no, I’m absolutely livid,” Sunset said calmly. She nodded her head to one side. “If not slightly impressed that you knew I wouldn’t go crying to the principal.” From the corner of her eye, she saw seething anger still boiling beneath Twilight’s rigid exterior. “But, as much as I’d love to kick your ass across the dance floor, I’m not going to continue this cycle of aggression. I made your life miserable, you made my life miserable. Let’s call it even now.”

After a brief hesitation, Lyra relaxed her whole body. “Really? Wow, Sunset, that’s pretty big of you. Now I kinda feel bad.” She cleared her throat. “Of course, I *was* doing it on behalf of the students. It’s my duty to carry out their wishes to the best of my ability.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Still, after tonight, I’m sure they won’t mind you attending the rest of the school functions with a great attitude like that. So, water under the bridge?” She stuck her hand out.

“Of course,” Sunset said, her voice still calm. She shook Lyra’s hand and took a step back.

Lyra turned to Twilight. “Sooo, Miss Sparkle, care to elaborate on what you meant when you said you weren’t the same Twilight Sparkle?”

Slap!

Lyra staggered back, cradling her face with both hands. She stared blankly at Twilight.

Sunset’s calm mask broke, and she grinned wildly. “I never said *they* were even with you.”

Rendered speechless and with a large hand mark across her cheek, Lyra walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

The Spectacular Seven burst into triumphant laughter, with Applejack and Rainbow praising Twilight and punching her shoulder.

Sunset leaned in. “What happened to, ‘taking the high road’?”

“‘The world isn’t all sunshine and gumdrops’,” Twilight said with a deviant smile. “Sometimes, you have to be demanding.”

“I’m a terrible influence on you.”

The orchestra began to play, and the lights grew dim again. A soothing waltz began, and students around them partnered up with their dates to dance. The music dispelled the last of the negative energy Lyra had delivered to Sunset, leaving only a happy bubble in her stomach and a fluttering heart.

She held her hand out to Twilight, the strobe lights gliding over them. “May I have this dance, Twilight?”

Twilight’s face lit up brighter than any Christmas tree. Her smile was small and shy, but had it contained any more joy, Sunset was afraid Twilight might explode. She gave her hand to Sunset. “Yes, you may, Princess.”

Their friends broke into giggles and quickly scattered, leaving the two alone in the middle of the dance floor. Their fingers curled around each other’s, while Sunset kept her other hand around Twilight’s waist. They stepped together in time with the music, rotating and making small dips.

Sunset wasn't sure if her heart had stopped, or if it was beating so fast she couldn't feel it anymore. The close contact with Twilight made her entire body tingle like she had stuck her finger into a socket. The electricity spread to her cheeks and made her smile.

"I thought you said you couldn't dance?" Sunset said playfully as they turned again.

"Cadence gave me a few lessons." They pulled apart and came back together. "I thought you said you didn't dance?"

"Never said I couldn't."

Snow swirled about them, catching the revolving lights and turning into multicolored fairies. The rest of the room melted away until it was just Sunset, Twilight, and the music.

"Twilight," Sunset said softly, "about all those things I said on Thanksgiving..."

Twilight stared up at her with fear and hope.

"I didn't mean any of them."

"Then why did you say them?"

Sunset let out a slow breath. She took a moment to savor the lack of pressure on her throat. "The Elements of Harmony left me with a parting gift the night of the Fall Formal. They gave me a penance that demanded I had to do whatever anyone *asked* me to do and tell the truth to any question."

Twilight's curiosity turned to horror. "You were cursed?"

"In a nutshell." It was so nice not having to give a direct answer.

"But then... all those things you did..." Twilight's horror fell to discouragement.

"A lot of them weren't done by initial choice. You guys said 'please' so I had to do it." Their dancing had slowed to a simple back and forth pacing. "But, they never said I had to enjoy it. It was more like a shove to get me out of my solitude. And I came to like just about everything I had to do. It wasn't the most orthodox method, but... it did push me down the road to friendship."

Twilight was silent, her eyes processing this new information. She blinked. “But then, at Thanksgiving—”

“You asked me to lie, remember? When you asked me how I felt about you, I was still under the compulsion to lie.”

Twilight blinked again. “Wow, that... explains just about everything. Wait, is it still active?”

“Nope. I’m not sure when it wore off, but it’s gone.” Sunset smiled. “I’m doing this purely because I want to.”

They made a small rotation. “Magic and curses,” Twilight mumbled. “A few months ago, I would have thought you were crazy.” Her eyes rose to Sunset’s. “So then, how do you really feel about me?”

Sunset opened her mouth, then closed it. As she gazed into Twilight’s eyes—her big, stupid, adorable, violet eyes—Sunset realized she didn’t need to repeat what she had said to Rarity. Instead, she closed the distance between her lips and Twilight’s.

It was not like when Sunset had kissed Flash. Back then, it had been wilder, more passionate, even if the passion had been forced on her end. She had kissed him with all the force she could muster, working her way around his mouth to make sure he was satisfied.

But this...

It was softer, less passionate and more curious. Less aim for contentment and more for understanding. Kissing Twilight’s soft lips, Sunset found there was actually a purpose. She *wanted* to do this. She grabbed Twilight by the waist and pulled her a little closer. Twilight made a small noise of surprise but didn’t back away.

Sunset didn’t invade Twilight’s mouth just yet; she kept it simple, tilting her head up and gently kneading Twilight’s lip. Their eyelashes fluttered against each other, making smaller kisses of their own. Sunset peeked an eye open to see Twilight’s back foot popped into the air.

They had stopped moving. Snow began to pile on top of their heads. It didn’t matter anymore though; nothing around them mattered anymore. Sunset pressed against Twilight’s mouth a little harder to tell her that nothing mattered

but that moment. She didn't care if Twilight looked like her mortal enemy. She didn't care about winning or losing. She didn't care about the snow falling on them. She didn't even care if her friends were ogling them from around the room, secretly cheering at the spectacle. All Sunset cared about was Twilight.

Finally, they broke apart, their first desperate breath visible in the cool air. Their hands and arms were still wrapped around one another. Both of their faces were scarlet.

"That... that was... um," Twilight fumbled, apparently having forgotten how to use her tongue.

"Y-yeah, that was..." Sunset found she couldn't finish the sentence either. But, looking into each other's eyes, an understanding passed between them. The kiss had said everything that needed to be said.

Off to the side, Rarity and Pinkie were jumping up and down, squealing in delight. The others nodded and smiled in satisfaction. Flash's face was red and fluctuated between surprise, interest, and disappointment.

"Well, that... explains just about everything."

Sunset brought her attention back to Twilight. Her face was still glowing from the kiss. With the red in her cheeks, it looked like she had coals in her mouth. "Have I ever told you, you're cute when you're flustered?"

Twilight giggled, starting at a higher pitch, then bringing it back down to its regular octave. She led them into their next dance, another slow waltz. "So, does this mean we're dating?"

Sunset grinned. "Do you want us to be dating?"

"Very much so, yes, please," Twilight squeaked.

Sunset laughed, lifting a hand under Twilight's chin. "Only because you asked so nicely." She pulled Twilight in for a second kiss.

Kpok 41: Rising Sun

The room was dark and quiet, and a warm breeze blew from the vent. Outside, the snow had finished falling, leaving a perfect blanket over Canterlot.

Sunset slept peacefully, tucked under her blankets, her hair wildly spread across her pillow. She floated in bliss, her body tired but light, for the weight she had carried for so long was gone. She turned over and curled herself tighter. All was as it should be, even in her dreamworld.

A buzzing sound on her nightstand pulled her from her dreams of strawberry ice cream and flying motorcycles. She cracked an eye open to see her phone vibrating. “Uuugh.” She reached over, pushing aside her new crown, and flipped it open. “Hello?” she said groggily.

“H-hi, Sunset,” Twilight’s voice came through in an apologetic whisper. “I’m really sorry for waking you up.”

“Again,” Sunset added.

“... Again,” Twilight agreed. “I just wanted to make sure one more time. We *did* dance together at the ball, right?”

Sunset smiled in spite of her ornery mood. “Yes, Sparky, we danced.”

“And then, we... *kissed*, right? I didn’t dream that?”

“No, Twilight. We kissed. We’re dating. I promise it wasn’t a dream.” *Even if it feels like one.*

“Okay. I just... wanted to make sure, you know? Umm, I’ll let you get back to sleep now.”

“Good night, Twilight.”

“Good night, Sunset.”

Sunset flipped her phone shut and turned over again, getting comfortable. She could understand Twilight’s disbelief; it was a lot to take in. Sunset just wished Twilight had waited until the morning to bug her about it.

She let out a dreamy sigh. Still, it was a great feeling, if not an odd one, waking up and knowing Twilight Sparkle was her girlfriend. It created a warm bonfire in Sunset’s stomach. Twilight was her girlfriend, her friends were back

together, the school (hopefully) didn't hate her, and she had a warm house to live in. Perhaps the universe had finally cut her a break.

Sunset closed her eyes and drifted off, smiling at her change of luck. Her phone rang again, and she slammed a hand over it before answering.

"Sparky, listen to me," she said in a calm but demanding tone. "Yes, we danced, yes, we kissed, yes, we're dating. Anything you think happened at the dance, happened, but I swear, if you call me again before the sun comes up, I will take it all back."

"Sorry, sorry! I just... I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Just go to sleep."

"Good night."

"Good night."

"Good morning, Canterlot!" Cadence's voice rang out of the radio. "This is your Mi Amore in the Morning! I hope you're all having a lovely day so far! If not, maybe I can help with some soothing love songs! But first, a shout out to my favorite girl in the world! Happy birthday, Twilight! I hope you have a special day with your *special* friend!"

Sunset fought the urge to roll her eyes. From behind his morning paper, Artemis let out a snicker. Cadence ended her monologue and played the latest love pop song by someone named Countess Coloratura.

Christmas Eve served as another normal morning in the Lulamoon household. Sunset had gotten up and joined everyone downstairs for breakfast. Artemis and Selena had cooked pancakes, eggs, and bacon, or in Sunset's case, tofu bacon which she found quite enjoyable. The radio played in the background as they ate. As Sunset had found out a week ago, the Lulamoons rather enjoyed Cadence's station.

She supposed she couldn't fault them. Cadence could be entertaining at times, and it was fun to listen to whiny teenagers complain about their love lives to her. Cadence could give out sound advice, however. Sunset supposed the only thing that really irked her were the songs. She never could stand songs about how wonderful love was, or how bad breakups hurt.

While today was Christmas Eve, it was also Twilight's birthday, as Sunset had only found out a few days ago. Twilight had tried to tell her it wasn't a big deal, but Sunset wanted to do something special for her, girlfriend or not.

Luckily, Sunset remembered they had two passes to the Canterlot Aerospace Museum. While they had gotten together at the dance, Sunset hesitated to call it a proper date. So for Twilight's birthday, Sunset would treat her to a real one by taking her to the museum. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Artemis had suggested buying her something out of the emporium. He seemed to get a kick out of Sunset dating another girl.

With her breakfast finished, Sunset excused herself from the table to get ready. She still had a few hours, but she planned to make full use of the bathroom and shower. However, when she got to the top of the stairs, she found Trixie already at the bathroom door with a change of clothes in hand.

"Trixie wants to wash up before you hog the bathroom again," she said with mild annoyance. Of course, most things Trixie said were in mild annoyance, so Sunset knew everything was fine.

Sunset made an exaggerated gesture for Trixie to go in. When the door closed, Sunset muttered, "She's lucky she can teleport." With the shower occupied, she went to her room to read.

Since Selena was a writer, an abundance of books filled the house, a lot of them penned by her. She ranged from short children's stories to young adult novels. Sunset particularly enjoyed the series about a wizard and his girlfriend and their adventures around the world. She often stopped to think about how much of it might be based on true stories.

During her stay, the Lulamoon's had tried their best to integrate Sunset into the family dynamic and make her feel welcome. She played board games, watched movies, and took part in the family magic shows put on by Artemis. She even tried a little fencing with Selena.

And while they still weren't best friends, Trixie accepted Sunset's presence in the house and made an effort to be friendly. If she had any lingering resentment toward Sunset, she took it out during game night.

So, Sunset no longer felt like a stranger in their home, just the estranged cousin that had to live with them for a while. She did her best to not be a burden, helping out with chores when she could, and keeping to her room when there wasn't a family activity.

She stretched out on her bed and looked at the ceiling. She still hadn't put her ornamental lights up, feeling she still wasn't *that* comfortable with her new living arrangement. Turning her head, Sunset's eyes fell on the picture frame, now holding a photograph of her and her friends on the night of the dance. They were huddled together, giving the camera their largest smiles. If one looked closely, they could see Sunset and Twilight's hands locked together.

Sunset smiled, then cringed, remembering the aftermath of the dance. While the rest of the night had gone off without a hitch, cleanup had been a long nightmare. Sunset hadn't counted on shoveling snow out of the gym or trying to move the ice pillars before they finished melting. She also had to explain to Celestia how she had gotten up to the air conditioning unit.

There was a day of detention waiting for her when break ended.

All things considered, it was worth it seeing as she had accomplished everything she had set out to do. She let out a short yawn, then picked up the book sitting on her nightstand. She had taken a break from Selena's works to read *The Wizard of Oz*. It was even better than Rarity had described it.

Sunset got a few pages in before Trixie knocked on her open door. "Shower's all yours."

"Thanks, Trix." Sunset marked her page and got up. While she tried her hardest to make her presence barely noticeable, Sunset did have one guilty pleasure: long, hot showers. After going several years without them, she thought she deserved it.

At one in the afternoon, Sunset pulled into the parking lot of the Aerospace Museum downtown. She tripled checked she had her ticket in her pocket, knowing that, with her luck, it could have easily flown out on the drive over.

She stowed her helmet in the space under the seat, then made her way to the front entrance. Seeing Twilight was nowhere in sight, Sunset guessed she was early.

The museum was three stories high and painted chrome to give it a futuristic appearance. Two large domes sat on the east and west sides; one of them had a large telescope pointed to the clear sky.

Sunset took a seat on the front steps and enjoyed the sunlight. It had been sunny all week, melting the remaining snow and returning Canterlot to its normal state.

Three voices caught Sunset's attention, and from around the corner came Twilight, Shining, and Cadence. Sunset's heart sank. *I hope this didn't turn into a double date.*

Twilight waved and ran up to Sunset, hugging her and giving a quick nuzzle. When she pulled away, Sunset realized Twilight was wearing a pair of thick glasses.

Sunset bit her lip to hold back her laughter. "Happy birthday, Sparky. Those are new." She tapped one of the lenses.

"Actually," Twilight said, moving to adjust them, "they're kinda old. I ran out of contacts before my new dosage got here, so I had to use these today." Her cheeks reddened. "They're not bad, are they?"

"No, no," Sunset said, helping to straighten them. "I think it works for you. You look more adorkable than usual."

"Really?" Twilight brightened up. "Then, maybe I'll keep them." She squinted her eyes. "I might have to update the prescription though."

"Ahem," Shining coughed, making the girls jump apart. "Before you two go off on your own, I'd like to have a word with Sunset."

"Shining..." Twilight warned.

Shining raised a hand and put on an easy-going smile. "Relax, it's just a little talk, I promise."

Sunset rolled her eyes and hopped down the steps, leaving Twilight alone to pout. Shining's smile faded into a neutral expression as Sunset came close.

“So, how’s everything going, Sunset?”

“Everything’s going pretty great,” Sunset said with a relieved laugh. “In fact, I haven’t felt this good since... I can’t remember when. Guess I have you to thank in some small part.”

The corners of Shining’s mouth tipped upwards. “Just doing my job. Or at least attempting to. I’m glad everything worked out for you, Sunset.” His mouth reset to a thin line. “Now, about Twilight.”

Oh no, here it comes.

“She seems to still be under the delusion that I don’t know you two are dating. According to her, you two are just ‘hanging out’ today.” Shining made quotes with his fingers. “Now, she can tell me whenever she’s ready; I’m not going to say no. But, if you hurt her again, Sunset, I promise you, there will be consequences. I’ll—ah!”

Cadence pulled Shining off to the side, keeping a firm grip on his ear. “All right, that’s enough of that.” She came back over and smiled at Sunset. “Don’t mind him, he’s just playing the role of the protective big brother. You’ll get used to it.” She held up a finger, stopping Sunset’s response. “But, he does have a point. I think you’re a good girl, Sunset, and I think you’ll treat Twilight right. Now, most first relationships don’t make it to happily ever after, so I won’t ask you to make any vows.” The shining light left her eyes, a cold warning replacing it. “But, if Twilight comes home a sobbing mess or with shattered ideals of love because of something you did, just know that I can break your heart into so many pieces, you won’t be able to find them all.”

Sunset stared, eyes wide, mouth closed, and a shivering wind swirling in her stomach. “Understood,” she said hoarsely.

“Good.” The warmth returned to Cadence’s eyes, and she gave Sunset a friendly hug. “Have fun, you two!” She waved and winked to Twilight before linking an arm around Shining and walking off down the street.

The cold wind dispersed, though it had left a lasting impression on Sunset. She had to admit, she respected Cadence for being able to shake her up like that.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and Twilight appeared at her shoulder. “What did they want to talk to you about?”

“Oh, they just wanted to see how I was doing,” Sunset said with a wave of her hand. It felt good to lie again. Though she swore she wouldn’t tell deceitful lies, white lies went for miles.

Twilight scrunched her nose in suspicion, and Sunset gave it a little tweak. She moved her hands around Twilight’s waist and said, “Don’t worry, it’s nothing.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Sunset pulled her closer. “It’s your birthday, just relax.” She leaned in for a kiss, and Twilight closed her eyes in anticipation.

“Oof!”

“Ow!”

They both flinched back. Twilight’s glasses were askew and pressed closer to her face. She took them off and wiped them on her shirt.

“Sorry,” Sunset said. “That’s going to take some getting used to.”

Twilight slipped them back on and leaned up to try again. Sunset navigated carefully around Twilight’s glasses and graced her lips with a tender kiss. When Sunset pulled away, Twilight made a high-pitched giggle, a sound that had become quite common to Sunset.

“Shall we go in?” Sunset gestured with a hand.

Twilight took it and led her up the steps and to the front entrance, skipping the entire way.

No matter how happy and nice Sunset got, she would never skip.

“There’s so much I want to see!” Twilight said after handing the receptionist their tickets. “There’s a black hole exhibit, and a 3D viewing of the known galaxy in the planetarium, and a lecture on the sustainability of life on Mars, and a collection of moon rocks that you can *hold!*” Twilight squeed. “We get to hold rocks from *space!* Oh, oh! And then there’s all the fun attractions like the Gyrosphere and the *rocket launch simulator!*” Twilight took both of Sunset’s hands and jumped up and down. “Can we go on it? Please, please, please!”

There wasn't a jolt down Sunset's spine, but after feeling one every time someone said 'please', it still tickled. "Twilight, it's *your* birthday; we can do anything you want to do."

"Eeeeeeee!" Twilight jumped harder, her glasses flopping against her nose. "What do we do first? Oh, I should have made a list! Umm, moon rocks! Let's go touch moon rocks before all the little kids break them!" She pulled Sunset down the main hall, Sunset laughing all the while.

With it being Thursday and Christmas Eve, the museum was reasonably devoid of people. Sunset was glad, one, because she never liked crowded areas, and two, Twilight could talk all she wanted without fear of being told to shush. Like in the case of the planetarium, where she gave full commentary to the stunning 3D visual tour of the galaxy. There had been a narrator, but with the number of facts Twilight spat out, Sunset felt he was redundant and unnecessary.

"... And that's why, even if Betelgeuse *were* to explode in our lifetime, it would take six-hundred years before anything *catastrophic* would hit earth. And at worst, it would be some extra ultraviolet radiation. *But*, the explosion would be bright enough to see, even in the daytime, so that would be fun to watch."

Sunset tossed her pair of 3D glasses into the bin as they exited the planetarium. Twilight's enthusiasm was infectious, and Sunset couldn't wipe the smirk from her face. "You really get a kick out of this stuff, don't you?"

Twilight did her impersonation of a bobblehead. "It's all just so exciting! Astronomy was my first scientific passion! My dad bought me my first telescope when I was six!" Her shoulders fell with the deflation of her excitement. "My first dream was to be an astronaut and go to space."

Sunset frowned. "What happened?"

Twilight pointed to her eyes. "My vision is too poor, even with corrective lenses." She sighed. "Plus, astronauts have to go through a ton of physical training and... I can barely run a mile." She gestured to the exhibition hall they

were in, posters on the walls and models on the ceiling. “So, I’ll have to settle with books and computers.”

“Hey, it’s not all bad.” Sunset squeezed Twilight’s hand. “There’s a lot you can do from here. Besides, how many discoveries have actually been made by astronauts? The scientists do all the work.”

“Yeah...” Twilight shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “But it’d be so cool to float in space or travel to another planet.”

“Well, take it from someone who’s already played the part of alien visitor: it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. You spend most of your time wondering how you’re going to survive.”

They paused in front of a fact chart for the Horsehead Nebula. “You’re from another world,” Twilight said, eyes filled with wonder. “I *know* that, but my mind still feels like it’s processing it for the first time. You act so normal... most of the time.”

Sunset arched a sarcastic brow. “Oh? Would you like me to start neighing and eating hay? Or maybe you’d like a ride on my back?”

Twilight gave her a playful shove. “Come on, I’m trying to be serious.”

“Well, ponies and humans have a lot more in common than you think.” Sunset wiggled her fingers. “The only real difference is, we walk around on four hooves and have magic. And we can weaponize friendship.”

“I bet that keeps your military budget low.”

“We’ll never have to build any nuclear bombs, I’ll tell you that much. Puts a whole new meaning on, ‘kill them with kindness.’”

Twilight turned back to the poster and got lost somewhere in the countless stars. “I know you’re from another place,” she said, her voice becoming misty. “But, what if you’re not actually from another dimension?”

Sunset tried to follow her line of sight and thought, and failed at both. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if Equestria isn’t in some parallel universe, but in *this* universe. Just, really, really far away.” She pointed to a random star. “There’s a billion worlds out there. Maybe your home is one of them. While the portal did

turn you into a human, maybe instead of taking you to another dimension, it just pushed you across space.”

Sunset stroked her chin. “Interesting theory, Twilight. It’s possible I suppose, but how do you account for all the mirror differences between our worlds?”

“Well, like I said—there’s a *billion* different worlds, meaning a *billion* different possibilities.”

“Fair.” Sunset rolled her hand. “Then how do you explain our ability to move the sun and the moon?”

Twilight jerked her head. “You were serious about that?”

Sunset rolled her eyes. “Yes, I was serious. Anything I’ve told you about Equestria so far has been true.”

“Oh.” Twilight’s attention returned to the poster, and for a while she said nothing. Sunset waited patiently, amused by the concentrated scrunch of her nose. “The only theory I have to explain that insults your entire species’ intelligence.” She sighed in defeat. “So, I’m just going to say ‘magic’ and leave it at that.”

Sunset steered her down the hall, patting her on the head. “You tried, Sparky. You tried.”

“You sure you want to do this, Twilight?”

“Y-yes, just hurry up before I change my mind!”

Sunset stood behind a rail while Twilight, shaking like a leaf with sweat pouring down her forehead, was strapped into the Gyrosphere. Sunset had never seen such a contraption before. It was spherical in shape with a chair on a central axis, surrounded by metal rings.

The operator of the stand brought the harness down and made sure it was firmly secure before heading to his stand. Twilight gave Sunset a compound look that said ‘help’ and ‘don’t you dare try to stop this.’

Sunset gave her a thumbs up.

The ride started with a jolt, and Twilight locked up, squeezing her eyes closed. The sphere rotated forward first, then diagonally, then backward, picking up speed with each change in direction.

Twilight made occasional squeals of, “Eeeeeee!” It was impossible to tell if they were out of joy or terror. The revolutions continued, with Twilight nothing more than a streak of purple color. After a full minute, the ride slowed to a stop, though her head continued to gyrate. She unstrapped herself from the ride and wobbled over to Sunset, duck-footed and teetering back and forth.

She reached the railing and slumped over it. Sunset patted her on the head. “Well, at least you know what astronauts have to go through.”

Twilight lifted her head up, mirth dancing in her eyes. “I wanna go again!”

“Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!”

“I regret buying you that cotton candy.” Sunset finished buckling her seatbelt and leaned back. Next to her, Twilight shook so hard, her entire seat vibrated. The two were strapped into the shuttle for the rocket launch simulator, fake monitors and sensors beeping around them. The virtual screen at the front gave them a view of a NASA launch site.

The shuttle door closed and the lights dimmed. Twilight bounced in her seat, words failing to escape her now. Speakers crackled around them, and on one of the smaller monitors, a man’s face appeared. “Captain, this is Ground Control. Are you ready to launch?”

“Sir, yes sir!” Twilight squealed.

“Good. Initializing final countdown in T-minus ten...”

Sunset’s seat shifted, and she found herself lying flat on her back, looking up at the vast sky. The shuttle started to vibrate, and at first, she thought Twilight had intensified her jitters, but quickly realized it was part of the ride. The rocket rumbled, ready for take-off.

Twilight reached out and pretended to click on the buttons. “Batteries at full power. All engines are go. Engaging primary thrusters.”

Sunset didn't say a word, choosing to let Twilight live out her childhood fantasy. She found it adorable, if not a little heartbreaking.

"Three... two... one... liftoff! Houston, we have liftoff!" The shuttle jumped from small vibrations to full on turbulence. Thrusters roared in Sunset's ears, almost drowned out by Twilight's cheering. Clouds rushed past the screen, and the sky became darker and darker as they climbed higher. Sunset could actually feel the pressure on her body as they ascended into the stratosphere.

"Detaching primary thruster," Ground Control said. The turbulence eased up, replaced by the softer pulse of the secondary thrusters. Space opened up to them, showering them with millions upon millions of small, glittering pearls. The pressure eased up, and Sunset could feel an artificial weightlessness settling over her.

The second thrusters gave them a final push out of the atmosphere and detached from the rocket. Sunset and Twilight floated in their shuttle, a hundred miles above the earth. The shuttle rotated, giving them a view of the blue orb, the sun sitting on its horizon.

"It's so beautiful," Twilight whispered.

Sunset silently agreed with her, and couldn't help but wonder what Equestria looked like from space. Her sudden homesickness manifested itself as a lump in her throat. *Stop. There's no point in getting sentimental over it now.* She reached for Twilight's hand and gently rested on top of it. *This... this can be home now. I've got Twilight, I've got my friends. I'll be fine.*

Their shuttle re-entered the atmosphere, and a red sheen tinted the outside world while gravity dragged them back to the surface. *Until graduation... I'll be fine.*

The sun settled down and became cozy in the western sky when Sunset and Twilight left the museum. Sunset had pushed any thoughts of her lost home or uncertain future aside. She still had plenty of time before she had to worry about that. She just wanted to live in the now.

Twilight shook her gift bag. "Thank you for the star chart, Sunset. Thanks for everything, really." She leaned up and kissed her on the cheek.

The sparks from the kiss jolted Sunset into a lopsided smile. “Well, you know. It was the least I could do. It being your birthday and all that.”

“This has been the best birthday ever!”

Yes! Point for Sunset Shimmer!

They stopped at the bottom of the steps, watching the rays of the sun become eclipsed by the office buildings of downtown. Twilight gave her bag another shake. “Guess I should call Shining.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “Or, you know, I could give you a ride home.”

Twilight locked up, but her eyes held that look of excitement similar to the one she had while on the Gyrosphere. “I couldn’t ask you to do that, you’ve already done a lot for me today. Besides, you only have one helmet, and I’m not letting you drive all the way across town without a helmet on,” she finished in a motherly tone.

Sunset just smiled and gestured for Twilight to follow her. They walked over to the parking lot, where Sunset’s bike had a whole row to itself. She opened up the seat and pulled out two helmets. One was hers, and the other was brand new, painted purple with a starburst on the side.

Twilight stared in awe. “That’s for me?”

“No, it’s for Rarity.” *I missed you, sarcasm!* “Of course it’s for you, dodo. Happy birthday.” She handed it to Twilight.

“Wow.” Twilight looked at the starburst, then looked at herself in the visor's reflection. She jammed the helmet over her head. “How do I look?”

“Like a poor imitation of me.” That earned Sunset another shove. “I’m kidding,” she laughed. “So, you want a ride or not?”

Twilight was silent under her helmet. “Go slow?”

Sunset smirked. “Of course, Sparky.” She hopped onto her bike and started the engine. Twilight wrapped her arms tightly around Sunset’s middle and scooted as close as she could. Sunset shuddered in delight before popping the kickstand up and riding out of the parking lot.

She stayed true to her word and went slower on the surface streets. At every stoplight, she shouted back to Twilight, “You doing all right?”

“Mmhmm,” would be her only response.

When they got to the freeway, Sunset slowly accelerated to 65 mph. She weaved through traffic with a devious grin, while Twilight doubled her grip around Sunset’s stomach. Sunset didn’t keep it up too long; Twilight had probably had enough thrills for one day. She retreated to the slow lane and remained there until the exit.

Ten minutes later, they parked in front of Twilight’s house. True to suburban conformity, her lawn looked just like all the others: dead from the winter cold.

Twilight stumbled off the motorcycle and lifted her helmet up, sucking in a deep breath of air. “Does it always get so warm in there?”

Sunset pulled hers off. “You get used to it.” She shook her hair out. “So, did you have fun?”

“I did...” Twilight furrowed her brow. “But you promised me you would drive slow.”

“That *was* slow. For me.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Shining was right: you are a speed demon.”

Sunset inwardly cringed, showing it with only a subtle twitch of her eye. *Yep, still stings*. She cleared her throat. “Shall I walk you to your door?”

Twilight held her arm out. “I would like that.” Arms looped together, they walked to the front door and faced each other. Twilight brushed some hair out from in front of Sunset’s face. “I had a really good time today.”

“I’m glad. I was trying to make up for the dance,” Sunset said, her shoulders drooping.

“You were doing your best to make sure everyone had a good time.”

“But I neglected you half the night.”

Twilight shook her head. “You still danced with me. And... we kissed. I’d say the night still turned out to be pretty great.”

“Oh?” Sunset pulled her closer. “Well then, I guess there’s only one way to close out tonight.” Sunset closed her eyes as they drew together. It was still an odd sensation to her: wanting someone else’s lips pressed against hers, wanting to intimately show her affection for Twilight.

Their lips brushed together when the lock on the door clicked and it swung open.

“Shiny!”

Twilight had jumped so far back, Sunset had completely lost her balance and lurched forward, falling face first onto the wood patio. It needed to be swept.

“What were you two doing?” Shining asked, his voice flat.

Twilight’s was unnaturally high. “Hugging! We were just hugging good night!”

Maybe it’s just this house. Sunset thought, her face still against the wood. *Maybe it just doesn’t want us kissing in front of it.*

“Uh-huh.” Shining made no effort to hide his disbelief. “Well, why don’t you two come inside for a bit; it’s cold.”

Sunset picked herself up and dusted her face off. “Actually, I should probably be heading home.”

Shining grinned and pointed a thumb toward the dark entryway. “Come on, just for a sec.”

Sunset looked to Twilight for confirmation, but only got a confused shrug. “Sure, I guess.” She followed Twilight into the dark house. Shining closed the door behind them, turning it almost pitch black.

“What happened to the lights?” Twilight asked. They flashed on.

“Surprise!”

Twilight jumped back at the chorus of voices, stepping on Sunset’s toes. Sunset played it off like a yell of surprise, but her foot was throbbing.

Gathered around the dining room table were Twilight’s parents, Cadence, Spike, and to Sunset’s surprise, the rest of the Spectacular Seven. On the table was a large white cake with purple frosting that read, ‘Happy Birthday Twilight!’

“You all threw me a surprise party?” Twilight whipped her head around. “Did you know about this?”

Sunset leaned against the wall, taking pressure off her toes. “I honestly had no idea.”

“Well,” Velvet said, “since you were going to be spending most of the day with Sunset, we figured it would be the perfect opportunity. Then, your friend Pinkie Pie called us with the same idea, so we decided to work together.” She pointed to the purple streamers and pink balloons hanging from the ceiling.

Twilight took her glasses off and wiped her eyes. “You didn’t have to do all that.”

Pinkie bounced over and embraced Twilight before dragging her out of the entry hall. “Of course we did! You’re our friend, and what kind of friends would we be if we didn’t help celebrate your birthday? Terrible ones of course!”

“It’s nothing *too* much, really,” Rarity added. “Just some cake, some ice cream, and a little socializing.”

Sunset and Shining joined everyone around the tables, while Velvet pulled out the candles and placed them in the cake.

Rainbow scrunched her face as she counted the candles off, then exclaimed, “Wait, you’re *turning* seventeen?”

“Yes?” Twilight answered, taken aback.

“But you’re a senior! Shouldn’t you be turning eighteen?”

Twilight tapped her fingers together. “I skipped the second grade.”

Night Light chuckled. “She could have skipped the third grade too, but we wanted her to stay around kids close to her age.”

With the candles lit, they sang happy birthday to Twilight, and she blew them out, a wide grin stuck to her face.

“So, what did you wish for?” Sunset asked while Cadence cut the cake.

“Silly, she can’t tell you!” Pinkie said, sticking her head in between them. “Or it won’t come true!”

Cadence handed out plates weighed down by thick slices of cake. “So, how was the museum?”

“Oh my gosh, it was so much fun!” If Twilight’s mouth hadn’t been moving, Sunset would have sworn Pinkie had been talking. “We got to hold moon rocks, and see stars, and I rode in the Gyrosphere four times!”

Rainbow snorted. “A perfect date for an egghead. I’ll bet you two got plenty of chances to make out.”

Sunset kicked her in the shin, but the damage had already been done. Velvet and Night Light gave Rainbow a curious look before turning it on a sunburnt Twilight.

“What’s this about a date and making out?” Velvet asked.

If Sunset could, she would have gladly switched places with Twilight. Watching her melt into a puddle under the sudden spotlight was almost unbearable.

“I... we... you see...” Twilight’s hands shook so much, her cake bounced along her plate. “I-I’ve been thinking—I mean not really *thinking*... I mean—I have... that’s to say—I’m... I’ve discovered that, well—”

“Your daughter’s gay and I’m dating her!” Sunset blurted out.

“*Sunset!*”

“I’m sorry, the suspense was killing me!”

Twilight dropped her cake onto the table (to Spike’s disappointment) and buried her face in her hands. “Yeah... I’m... not into boys. And Sunset and I are together.”

Shining pressed his hands against his cheeks. “Gosh, I had *no* idea!”

Cadence swatted him over the head. “What he’s *trying* to say is, we still support you and love you, Twilight, no matter what.”

Velvet stepped over and wrapped her daughter in a warm hug. “Exactly what Cadence said. Honestly, I saw it coming a mile away.”

Night Light frowned. “So, am I the only one genuinely surprised by this?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, dear.”

Twilight’s lower lip trembled. “You’re not mad, are you?”

Night Light came over and joined in on the hug. “At you? Of course not. I’m just upset that I’m the last to know things.” He looked over to Shining. “Do you have anything to tell us?”

Shining pretended to mull it over. “You know me and Cadence are dating, right?”

Cadence swatted him on the head again.

Night Light turned to Sunset, trying his hardest to look displeased. “Well, Sunset, since you’re dating my daughter, I have to dislike you on principle.”

Velvet swatted him on the head. “Ignore him, sweetheart. You’re always welcome here.”

Sunset smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Velvet.” She turned and gave Rainbow the evil eye.

Rainbow held her hands up. “What? I didn’t know it was a secret! You guys were making out at the dance!”

“I’m watching you, Shimmer.” Night Light wagged a finger.

Following everyone else’s lead, Sunset swatted Rainbow over the head.

Kpok 42: Shooting Stars

The attack of a savage pillow interrupted Sunset's sleep. It relentlessly assaulted her face while hissing, "Wake up, Sunset! It's Christmas, and Trixie wants to open her presents!"

"Wha—oof! Okay—ooof! Trixie knock it off, I'm up!" The pillow came down one last time. Sunset grabbed her own and swung at Trixie, catching her in the face. As Trixie raised her pillow high, Sunset hit her again in the stomach.

Trixie scored one last hit, then jumped back before Sunset could retaliate. "Hurry up and get dressed," she said, smirking in amusement. "It's already nine."

Once Trixie was gone, Sunset rolled out of bed and stretched. She didn't know why Trixie wanted her to come down; it wasn't like Sunset had any presents to look forward to.

Then again, knowing them... they might have gotten something for me. Sunset tried not to get her hopes up, but there was a flutter of excitement in her stomach. She switched from her pajamas to her sweats and quickly washed up in the bathroom.

Downstairs, the Lulamoon's were gathered around the Christmas tree, a moderate amount of presents at its base. The room smelled of fresh pine needles and gingerbread cookies.

"Merry Christmas, Sunset," Selena said, handing her a cup of eggnog.

"Merry Christmas," Sunset said kindly.

Artemis gave one of his presents a little shake. "Indeed it is! Come on, everyone, grab a present! They won't unwrap themselves!"

Trixie and Selena each picked up a colorfully wrapped box. Sunset strained her eyes to see if any of the presents had her name on them. Her heart sank after the first look through, and she drew up a chair to simply watch.

Artemis popped up in front of her, holding a small box that fit in his hand. "Come now, Shimmy, you didn't think we'd forget about you?" He held the box out to her.

Sunset took it with a guilty smile. “No, of course not. Thank you, Artemis.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. Trixie is the one who picked it out for you.”

“Daddy! You promised not to tell!”

Sunset held the present with some trepidation. For all she knew, inside was a firework, or an ink shooting something. She carefully took the wrapping off, finding a black jewelry box. Her fingers shook as she lifted the lid, and she held it a little ways from her face, just in case.

But inside, there was no prank or disgruntled note. Instead, Sunset found her cutie mark. The red and gold intertwined and danced around each other, shaping into a sun that stared up at her with a black cord attached. Sunset pulled the necklace out, feeling the weighted metal in her hand.

“It’s beautiful,” Sunset whispered. She wasted no time in throwing it around her neck. “Trixie, I don’t know what to say. This is amazing.”

Trixie looked away, returning to her own present opening. “Don’t get all sappy on Trixie. She only did it so she wouldn’t be in your debt.”

“In my debt? You let me come and live with you; I think that debt’s been repaid.”

Trixie put down the headphones she had just unwrapped. “No, Mom and Dad let you come and live here, Trixie just agreed to it. Mostly because she didn’t have a choice. That—” she pointed to the necklace “—is just Trixie’s way of saying... you know, thank you.”

Sunset closed her hand around the necklace. “Same to you. This means a lot.”

Artemis snapped a picture. “Ha! I knew you two would get along eventually. My instincts are never wrong.”

In addition to her necklace, Sunset received a cylindrical package from Artemis. She unwrapped it and opened the top, only to have rubber snakes spring out at her. She still didn’t find it funny but was glad everyone else enjoyed it.

Selena got an old-fashioned writing quill and an inkwell, while Artemis got a new robe. They cleaned up the wrapping paper and moved into the kitchen to

finish their eggnog. Cadence was on the radio again, her cheerful and affectionate voice less grating on Sunset's ears than before.

"Merry Christmas again, Canterlot! I hope your day is filled with peace, joy, and love! And a reminder to anyone going shopping today, be kind to the retail workers. I'm sure they'd rather be at home with their own families than standing at a cash register all day."

Artemis drained his cup. "Ah, the perks of having a family-owned business."

When their drink was done, they set to work on Christmas dinner. Sunset volunteered to assist with anything she could as her Christmas gift to them. Apparently, magic was not allowed in the kitchen, for not once did Artemis pull out his wand or levitate anything toward himself. He mostly took orders from Selena.

After Sunset had learned how to make mash potatoes, roasted asparagus, and macaroni and cheese that didn't come from a box, she retired to her room for a break. She sat on her bed and admired her necklace for a minute, tracing her finger over the smooth finish. She doubted Trixie knew just how much the symbol meant to her, but it had been a moving gesture all the same.

Sunset pulled out her phone, finding Christmas greetings from all her friends, including Flash. She took the time to reply individually to each of them, a warm fire kindling inside her heart all the while. She set her phone down and looked at the walls.

"I think now's a good time to put up the lights."

Sunset sat in the backyard, her stomach filled with Christmas dinner and pie. Across the yard, Trixie and Artemis were creating miniature gold, green, and red fireworks in the shapes of trees, bells, snowflakes, and other Christmas related symbols. A golden angel did a full lap around the yard before exploding into a shower of rippling sparks.

"I take it you had a good Christmas this year?" Selena asked once some of the noise died away.

Sunset paused in her clapping. "Yeah. I haven't had a holiday like this since..." She lowered her eyes. "Since I was back home."

“Do you miss it?”

“Immensely.” Sunset leaned back in her chair and looked at the first stars coming out for the night. “But, I’m stuck here for another two years. And when I can go home... I don’t know if there’ll be anything left for me to go back to.”

Her past was a mess and her future was a murky mystery. Sunset had come to enjoy living in each moment as it happened. She was tired of feeling guilty, and she had no desire to ponder what may be.

Selena rested a hand on Sunset’s. “I’m sure a smart girl like you will figure something out. I think you have the potential to do whatever you set your mind to. And in the meantime, you’re always welcome here.”

Sunset kept her face up. The fireworks must have been too bright because her eyes were starting to water. “Thank you. I really appreciate that.” She could see Selena smile from the corner of her eye. Across from them, Trixie made a cloud of white smoke before producing a gold shooting star.

When the show was over, everyone parted ways, Sunset retiring back to her room. As she pulled her phone out to text Twilight, there was a voice at her door.

“Trixie is still wondering something.”

Sunset turned and found her leaning against the doorframe, trying to look nonchalant. “And what’s that?”

“If you’re from some magical pony place, why has Trixie never seen you do magic? Aside from the Fall Formal.”

Sunset looked at the back of her hand. “I guess this body just isn’t made to handle magic. I don’t know why, but I lost all of it when I crossed over. I always thought it was because this world just doesn’t have any magic in it.” She looked curiously at Trixie. “But why can you do it?”

Trixie leaned forward and raised a hand into the air, curling her fingers. “Magic is in our blood. We are one of the last families to carry the secrets of the magical arts. We are the last descendants of the great Merlin!” She gave Sunset her infamous smirk. “You should feel honored, Sunset. You live among greatness.” With a theatrical bow, she departed.

Sunset paused in her amused chuckle. “Wait, who’s Merlin?”

Unsurprisingly, a massive crowd filled the mall the day after Christmas. Normally, Sunset would never step foot in the mall with this many people milling about. But, her friends were eager to get their post-holiday shopping done, so she reluctantly agreed to tag along. She could have taken advantage of her ability to say ‘no’ again, but, friendship compelled her to go. It was magic, after all.

Sunset joined them after grabbing a cup of coffee. Everyone gathered at one of the larger booths in the food court. It was a wonder how they managed to snag it with how busy it was.

“Oh, Sunset, that’s a very pretty necklace you’re wearing,” Rarity said.

Sunset took her seat next to Twilight, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks. Trixie got it for me for Christmas.”

Rainbow snorted. “Trixie got a present for you? So, is this the part where Twilight acts like the jealous girlfriend?”

“I am *not* jealous,” Twilight said defensively. She turned her head to Sunset. “Am I supposed to be jealous?”

“No.” Sunset reached over and swatted Rainbow over the head. “Ignore her. It’s just a present.”

“Well, speaking of presents...” Twilight reached down and pulled a purple wrapped box from under the seat. “Merry Christmas, Sunset.”

“Oh no, Twilight, you didn’t have to get me anything. And now, I don’t have anything to give you.”

Twilight shook her head. “You already gave me a present. Several, really. I’m not going to make you give me a gift for my birthday *and* Christmas.”

Sunset took the parcel and set it on the table. “Well, if you’re sure.” She leaned over and kissed her again. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me *just* yet,” Twilight said with a coy smile.

Curiosity piqued, Sunset undid the bow, then tore into the wrapping paper. It was a simple white box used to store clothes. When she took the lid off, she almost screamed. “Tw-Twi-Twilight... you didn’t,” she said in a mousy voice.

“I did.” Twilight sat up straight, a smug look on her face.

“Oooh, whatcha get, whatcha get?” Pinkie leaned over the table to get a better look.

With trembling fingers, Sunset raised the item from the package, savoring the smooth feel. It unfolded itself as it came out, a beautiful black swan made of leather. Long sleeves with silver spikes on the cuffs, and an embroidered S over the left breast pocket.

Applejack whistled. “That’s a mighty fine lookin’ jacket.”

Sunset didn’t have enough words to agree with her. Here, in her hands, was the jacket she had been pining over. One of the reasons she had resolved to get a job. She had forgotten about it over the last month with everything going on, but now, here it was. She ran her thumb over the material, then pressed it against her face to inhale the intoxicating aroma.

“Twilight,” she forced out, “how... when... *how*? It was three-hundred dollars!”

Twilight took a sip of her tea, still smiling. “I got it on sale. It was only one ninety-nine. It was an extra thirty to get it embroidered though.”

Sunset flung her arms around her. “Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! This is amazing!” She stood up and pulled her sweater off, ignoring the catcall Rainbow made. She donned her new leather jacket, the tailcoat falling just above her knees. It was perfect.

She took a pause in her jubilation and looked at Fluttershy. “Umm, this doesn’t bother you, does it?”

Fluttershy looked at her folded hands. “Well, I can’t stop you from wearing it.” She sighed and smiled, even if it was a little strained. “And it makes you so happy. I couldn’t ruin that for you.”

Sunset made a mental note to make it up to Fluttershy, then resumed her squeeing. She wrapped her arms around herself, careful not to poke her sides with her new spikes.

“Calm down,” Rainbow said, “it’s just a jacket.”

“It’s the best jacket *ever*!”

Applejack chuckled. “Well, Twi, Ah don’t think there’s any gift now that can top this one.”

Rainbow propped an arm up on the table. “Really? What about—” She laced her fingers together and repeatedly smacked her palms.

Sunset unraveled her arms and pointed to her cuff. “You know, these are for more than just decoration.”

Twilight tilted her head, her glasses falling to one side. “I don’t get it.”

“Nothing, sweetheart,” Rarity said. “Come, let’s get a move on before the mid-afternoon crowd comes in.”

Sunset took Twilight’s hand as they slid out of the booth, giving it an extra squeeze. “Thank you so much, Twilight.”

Twilight giggled. “You’re welcome.” She paused. “What did the gesture Rainbow make symbolize?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“I just turned seventeen!”

“And yet, you’re still the baby of the group.”

Rainbow pointed with her thumb. “Unless you count Pinkie. She was born on Leap Day.”

“I’m four!”

Sunset just nodded. “Yeah, that makes too much sense.”

They made their usual rounds starting with the higher end clothing stores for Rarity. Sunset never understood why Rarity went shopping for other clothes when she could just make her own. She assumed there was some fancy answer, but didn’t bother to ask. Instead, she amused herself by poking Twilight and discovering, to her eternal amusement, that Twilight was quite ticklish.

They followed Rainbow into the game store next, where she bought four different games, three of them with ridiculous amounts of blood on the cover, with the last one being a soccer game. She waved them in front of Sunset. “Reminds me, we need to get you into gaming.”

Sunset gave the covers a dubious look. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m into ‘Gore Crisis 3’.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it.”

After Pinkie dragged them to the party store so she could refill her supplies, they returned to the center of the mall. Once the little kids had their fun with it, Sunset and Twilight took their positions on opposite sides of the chess board.

“Don’t think I’ll go easy on you just because you’re my girlfriend, Sparky,” Sunset said, moving her first piece.

“I’d be insulted if you did.” Twilight moved her knight.

Rainbow slumped over on one of the benches. “Ugh, wake me when the egghead fest is over.” She managed to get a decent cat nap in, for the match lasted almost an hour.

True to her word, Sunset put up the best fight she could muster. She knew many of Twilight’s strategies now, and had counterattacks prepared. But that scenario went both ways, as Twilight was prepared to maneuver against any of Sunset’s gambits. The first half of the match was spent trying to set the other up to lose even one piece, but neither fell for any ruse. And while Sunset resolved to make sacrifices, she could never find an opportunity where the reward was worth the risk.

It was a cold war, with neither side willing to make the first declaration of attack. It could have gone on for another hour, but Sunset decided not to subject her friends to a long and boring game, and made the first move, using a pawn to take Twilight’s first rook, only for her bishop to move in and take Sunset’s knight.

The battle escalated from there with the casualties mounting higher and higher until the board was nearly empty. Sunset didn’t regret making the first move, but she was certain it was the reason she now found herself on the edge of defeat.

She had only two pawns and a knight left, while Twilight moved to corner her with a persistent rook and bishop, while her last pawn made its way to the other end of the board. Sunset knew when she had lost. Unlike Twilight, however, she never waved a white flag. She would go down fighting.

“Check.”

Sunset moved her king. Twilight moved her rook.

“Check.”

Or rather, Sunset would go down fleeing in an attempt to drag out her coming defeat.

“And, checkmate.” Twilight moved her bishop, leaving Sunset with no other options for her king.

Sunset crossed her arms and sighed. “Well played, Twilight. Well played.”

Pinkie clapped extra loud, waking Rainbow up. “Huh, wha? Is it over?”

“Yeah, it’s—” Sunset caught a glimpse of Rainbow’s face, and bit her lip. “Yep, it’s done.” She took a deep breath, fighting back her giggles. “Did you have a good nap, Dash?”

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason. Just curious.”

Scribbled onto Rainbow’s face in permanent marker were a monocle and a goatee.

Applejack turned and bit her knuckle, then twisted back. “You look well rested is all. Missed a good game though.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Rainbow stretched, not noticing everyone else's snickering. “So what now?”

“Well, usually the loser has to buy the winner ice cream,” Twilight said, looking expectantly at Sunset.

Sunset made a mock bow. “To the victor go the spoils.” She added in a whisper, “Just try not to spill any on me this time.” She looked over to Rainbow again and snorted.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Sunset said dismissively. “You had to be awake to see it.”

In addition to paying for Twilight, Sunset bought everyone ice cream, the only Christmas present she could afford for all of them. The girls kept Rainbow in the dark about her makeover until the server at the ice cream store pointed it out, and she checked on the back of a napkin dispenser. She got her revenge by shoving Pinkie’s face into her birthday cake ice cream.

Pinkie just licked it off and asked for more.

Twilight kept her arms tucked close with a tight grip on her ice cream. “So, do you girls have plans for New Years?”

Rarity tapped her spoon against her cup. “Not that I know of. Why?”

“Well, there’s supposed to be a meteor shower a little after midnight, and I was thinking we could all go watch it together?”

“That sounds like a—”

“Super, funerrific, fantastic idea, Twilight!” Pinkie threw herself onto the table in excitement and managed to knock over Sunset’s milkshake.

This time, Sunset moved like lightning and managed to throw her jacket up over her head before her strawberry treat spilled on it. “Ha *ha*! I win this round!”

“Darling, you’re covered in milkshake.”

“Yes, but the jacket is fine!”

As a warm gesture to Fluttershy, Sunset volunteered to help at the animal shelter the following day. She made sure to leave her jacket at home.

Spot greeted her with several loud barks and an excited tail. She spent several minutes rubbing his belly and reminding Fluttershy she was forbidden from telling anyone about her brief break in composure. She still had *some* image she wanted to maintain.

They did their usual tasks; Sunset cleaned and refilled the cages with Spot at her heels, while Fluttershy interacted with the pets. When Sunset was finished, she played fetch with a few of the other dogs. Spot tried his hardest to get the tennis ball, but the truth of the matter was, he wasn’t very big, leaving him outraced by the other dogs.

He was the perfect size to lay in Sunset’s lap, though. His tail swayed hypnotically while Sunset ran a hand down his back. Fluttershy sat next to them, running a brush through Fifi’s hair.

“Hey, Fluttershy, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

“Hm?”

“Your song, ‘Shine Like Rainbows’, well...” Sunset grinned sheepishly. “First, you’re not mad that I used it, are you?”

Fluttershy lifted her head, her face brighter than the sun. “Oh no, of course not. If it wasn’t for you, everyone might still be fighting. I thought I had lost the lyrics until I heard those little angels singing.”

Sunset breathed easy. She didn’t know why that had been a concern; Fluttershy didn’t have a mean bone in her body, let alone the capacity to hold a grudge. “So, when did you first write that?”

“A little after Halloween. I was just so happy we were all spending time together that a song came into my head.” She blushed. “I’m not very musical, but it was still fun to make.”

“I think you did a great job. Everyone loved it.”

Fluttershy’s face was pinker than her hair. “Thank you. You did a great job finishing it.” She put down the brush and let Fifi go. “Actually, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about, too.”

“What is it?”

Fluttershy pointed to Spot, a wide smile on her face. “He seems to really like you.”

Sunset scratched him behind the ears. “Yeah. I’ve kinda gotten a little attached to him, too.”

“Would you like to take him home?”

Sunset snapped her head up. “What?”

Fluttershy scooted closer, her smile even wider. “You have a nice home now, and he really connects with you, and makes you so happy. You should adopt him! Think about it, Sunset; you’d have a nice animal friend to come home to after school! And he’d go to a nice loving home!”

“Whoa, whoa, ‘Shy, calm down, I’m not saying no. You just caught me by surprise.” She looked at Spot’s torn ear. “I’d love to take him home, but, you know, I only just moved in with the Lulamoon, I don’t want to impose anything on them.”

“But it’s for a good cause. If they were willing to help you, I’m sure they’d be willing to help an innocent animal.”

Sunset had to admit Fluttershy had a point. “I’ll ask, Fluttershy.” She sighed. “Might have to beg for this one.”

“Please! Please, please, please, please, please, *please!*”

Trixie had her arms wrapped around Artemis’ leg, and looked up at him with wide, sorrowful eyes.

Sunset stood five paces away, smirking.

“Trixie, I understand Sunset’s reasons, but why do *you* want a pet?”

“Because I haven’t had one since Midnight ran away!”

Artemis looked at the ceiling and stroked his goatee. “Yes, ran away. Sad day.”

Sunset raised an eyebrow. “Who’s Midnight?”

Trixie finally let go of Artemis’ leg and stood up. “She was my black cat I had for five years. Then she went out one night and never came home.” She jumped up and down. “And I think it’s time for a new pet! I agree with Sunset about adopting this poor dog!”

Artemis shrugged his shoulders. “Listen, I’m not saying no, just—”

“Whoohoo!” Trixie ran upstairs. “Mom, Dad said we could have a puppy!”

He ran a hand down his face. “That’s how she got the cat, too.”

“What happened to the cat?” Sunset asked.

“It’s a long story involving a whip, a snake whistle, and an eagle.” He shook his head slowly. “And the last five of her nine lives. That cat did not know when to quit.”

It’s a good thing Spot’s an indoor dog.

Come the next day, the paperwork was filled out, the money was paid, and Spot came home with Sunset, making himself comfortable on her bed.

Trixie stuck her head into the room, looking at Spot with indifference. “When Trixie thought she was getting a new dog, she didn’t think he’d be so... mangy.”

Sunset scratched Spot’s back. “I think it adds to his charm.”

Trixie sniffed. “You would. You have a lot in common.” She walked away, though similar to Sunset, it was all an act. Later after dinner, Sunset would find Trixie petting and cooing over him.

“This doesn’t leave the house,” Trixie warned.

Sunset smiled and rolled her eyes. “My lips are sealed.”

At nine o’clock on New Year’s Eve, Sunset donned her jacket and gave Spot a big kiss on the head. He licked her cheek, then wandered off to find Trixie.

Downstairs, she gave both Selena and Artemis a warm hug. “Happy New Years,” she said.

“Same to you, Sunny!” Artemis said. “You’re going to be missing some tremendous fireworks, though.” A tradition for the Lulamoonies was to go up the mountain and create large-scale fireworks to bring in the New Year.

“Make one for me, then?”

“Of course!” He patted her on the head. “Now off with you! Go have fun!”

Sunset grabbed her keys and headed out. The sky was clear, promising a perfect view of the meteor shower. She started her bike, giving it a loud rev. No one was supposed to be sleeping tonight anyway.

It was a short ride to Canterlot Park, and Sunset was surprised to see it packed with blankets and people looking eagerly at the sky.

Guess Sparky isn’t the only star enthusiast in town. While the park was crowded, she found her friends had snagged the best spot. They waited for her at the top of a large hill, a picnic blanket spread out under the leafless tree.

They exchanged greetings and hugs; Pinkie blew on her noisemaker to say hello. Sunset took a cupcake from the snacks laid out on the blanket. She wiped some of the frosting and flicked it onto Twilight’s nose. “So, do you girls have any new year resolutions?”

Rarity picked up a slice of pizza. “Oh, the usual. Diet and exercise and all that.”

Applejack leaned against the tree. “Rarity, you’re as thin as a pencil. If you lose any more weight, you’ll disappear.”

Twilight wiped the frosting off and ate it. “I just want to maintain my perfect GPA. And get into Harvard. Or maybe Stanford. But I do want to travel the world, so I hope Oxford says yes.”

Sunset flicked more frosting at her.

“I just want to have the most amazing, mind-blowing summer *ever* before we go to college!” Pinkie said. She tossed a cupcake into the air and ate it whole.

Sunset took a large bite of her own cupcake. *Why does everyone have to bring up the future?*

Fluttershy asked, “Do you have any resolutions, Sunset?”

She shrugged. “Just keep being a good friend I guess.”

Rarity chuckled. “Don’t worry, dear. You’re already off to a great start.”

The hours passed by, filled with talking, laughing, and a little reminiscing. Applejack passed around bottles of cider as the year came down to its final minutes.

Sunset took a little sip, relishing the sweet taste. She looked around at the girls, measuring her love for each of them.

Applejack, with her honest nature and big-sisterly instincts. Sunset couldn’t imagine her without her southern drawl.

Rainbow caught her eye and grinned. Spirited and loyal. As obnoxious as she could be sometimes, Sunset admired her bravery, and was glad someone shared her competitive drive.

Fluttershy quietly nibbled on a celery stick. Her heart overflowed with love and kindness. Perhaps, she was the bravest one of them all.

Pinkie bounced up and down on the blanket, pulling out her phone every few seconds to check the time. Her optimism and cheer could be grating at times, but all she wanted to do was make her friends laugh. It was a trait Sunset was grateful for.

Rarity, dramatic sometimes, but what was life without a little flair? She was generous to a fault, and Sunset knew she could count on her whenever there was trouble.

And then there was Twilight, leaning comfortably against Sunset's arm. Curious and compassionate. She didn't care where Sunset had come from, she just wanted to help her go wherever she was going.

Princess Twilight may have pulled Sunset from the crater, but these six girls brought her back from the darkness.

Pinkie sprung up from her seat, confetti flying everywhere. "*Happy New Year!*"

Everyone rose and joined her. "*Happy New Year!*" They clinked their bottles together and let out whoops of delight, hugging and high-fiving one another.

Sunset pulled Twilight off to the side. She was a little hard to make out in the dark, but Sunset could still see her beautiful eyes. "Happy New Year, Twilight."

"Happy New Year, Sunset."

Their lips met in soft passion, Twilight moving her arms around Sunset's neck. Sunset tasted cider and smelled lavender, a wonderful combination.

"Come on, you two lovebirds!" Applejack called. "Ah think the show's startin'!"

They broke away, Twilight giggling and fixing her glasses. Sunset led her back to the blanket and sat down, taking Twilight in her lap.

Above them, the first meteor streaked across the sky. Another one quickly trailed after it, followed by three more. White lines struck against the blackboard of night, lasting only a second before they were erased. But they kept coming, one after the other, lighting up the New Year sky.

Sunset squinted her eyes. Against the mountain face, she could see fireworks bursting in the dark. Her smile widened, and she pulled Twilight closer, nuzzling her neck. The rest of the Spectacular Seven drew close as well, huddling together in the cold night air.

Sunset made a wish on the shooting stars that this one moment could last forever. She knew it was silly, but it was simple and genuine. It was a rare moment in time where everything was perfect. A happy sigh escaped her lips.

She would have to face the future soon, but for now, the present belonged to her and her friends.

Advent Moon

“Look, my lady, shooting stars.”

The window of the black limousine rolled down, and the young woman leaned out just enough so she could see the stars flying overhead.

Ephemeral flashes in the eternal dark sky. Beautiful for a moment, then gone forever. She smiled. Yes, that was quite lovely.

The night air whipped against her soft face, making her eyes water, so she retreated into the confines of her transport. She crossed one leg over the other, sitting up perfectly straight against her velvet seat. She raised the porcelain cup from the tray in front of her and gave it a small swish before taking a dainty sip, pinky out, no slurping.

When the tea was gone, she stared at the dregs sitting at the bottom and sighed.

Why do I sigh? I am home. I should be happy. She raised a pale hand to her blouse and felt the metallic object hiding underneath it. *Oh, that’s right. All the stars in the sky, yet mine is not here to greet me.*

The girl closed her purple eyes. Not all was lost yet. Perhaps she would be surprised upon her return home. Her heart fluttered with anticipation, but she kept her expectations low.

The limousine slowed to a smooth stop, and a moment later someone opened her door and offered a hand out. She took it and stepped onto the polished brick pavement, the night wind tousling her red hair, the purple end curls brushing her shoulders.

“Welcome home, Lady Moondancer,” her driver said with a bow.

Moondancer straightened the turquoise bow sitting neatly behind her head and smiled at him. “Thank you, Porter. Please, bring my things up to my room. I’ll be along shortly.” Her voice was light and refined, to the point where she sounded like she was prepared to burst into song.

Porter gave her another bow and began to pull her luggage from the trunk. Moondancer walked around him, her heels clicking against the floor. Here she was, home again—Canterlot’s most upscale living area, saved for the rich,

famous, and influential: the Upper Villa. Large luxury homes and mansions sat on the mountainside in neat, gated communities that overlooked the rest of the city.

And from the three-story manor that sat at the top, Moondancer could see everything: uptown, downtown, the suburbs, the industrial district, and even the Everfree Forest if she squinted hard enough.

“Oh, Canterlot, my elegant gem. My nascent throne, I have returned to you.” She cupped her hands over her breast. “But there is no fanfare, there is no jubilation. Instead...” she smiled and looked up at the last star falling across the sky. She spread her arms out. “You have the very heavens acknowledge my homecoming!” Her arms dropped and she sighed. “Yet still, my heart is heavy. For all the stars in the sky, the one I love most is not at my side.”

Moondancer turned and strode across the courtyard in measured, elegant steps. “To be fair,” she muttered under her breath, “I just said I was coming home tonight. I didn’t specify that I would have liked it if she were to greet me. But, it is New Years. She is with her family no doubt.”

She reached the end of the long driveway and crossed the stone threshold housing the large double doors to her home. The entrance hall greeted her with warm insulation and perfectly polished floors. Moondancer looked at her reflection and straightened her hair.

Footsteps sounded from one of the adjoining halls, and her maid, Lemon Fresh came out to greet her. “Welcome home, my lady! How was Paris?”

“Trés magnifique,” Moondancer said with a smile. “The house looks lovely as always.” She walked up the grand staircase, running her slender fingers across the banisters. “May I please have some tea brought up to my room?”

Lemon Fresh curtsied. “Right away, Lady Moondancer. I shall prepare your favorite.”

“You never disappoint.” Moondancer stepped lightly down the halls, admiring the tapestries and pieces of art she hadn’t seen in six months. Everything was exactly as she remembered it. She wondered if her father even bothered to come to this side of the house when she wasn’t here.

She paused at an intersection in the hall and looked left, up the tall flight of stairs. The top was shrouded in darkness, and a melancholy wind floated down and caressed her cheek. Her heart thumped in her chest, and her body leaned toward the stairs. She caught herself and inhaled sharply. As much as she wanted to go and visit, it would only drag her heart down even more.

“Tomorrow, after I’m settled and refreshed.”

Moondancer reached her room, her luggage having already arrived before her. She stepped around it, briefly admiring her four-poster bed and soft purple carpet. She continued onto her balcony, taking a seat at the small table. Tracing a finger along its surface, she was satisfied to see not a speck of dust.

“A new year, a new set of possibilities.” She folded her hands in her lap and waited for her tea. She didn’t have to wait long. Lemon Fresh was up two minutes later with a tray complete with a silver teapot and cup, a bowl of sugar, and a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“You spoil me, Lemon Fresh,” Moondancer said as her tea was poured.

Lemon Fresh smiled. “I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable when you returned, my lady.” She put in three sugar cubes and stirred before handing the cup to Moondancer. “Did you see the shooting stars?”

“I did.” Moondancer blew off the steam curling from her cup. “I even made a wish.” She took a small sip of her tea, savoring the flavor of jasmine. She looked out over the blanket of lights that made up Canterlot. “And I predict it shall indeed come true quite soon.” She set the cup down and reached into her blouse, pulling out a silver, heart-shaped locket. She flipped it open and stared at one of two pictures inside.

Twilight Sparkle looked up at her with a shy smile, her glasses falling down the bridge of her nose.

“Yes, soon we shall be together again, and I’ll allow nothing to hurt you.” She looked out across the city, feeling Twilight’s heart call out to hers. “You’ll not leave my sight again... my little star.”