

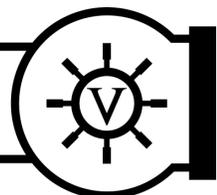
# Hard Reset

Eakin

## Table of Contents

If at First You Don't Succeed...	2
...Die, Die Again	15
You Didn't Really Think It'd Be That Easy, Did You?	30
Perfect Run	52
Closure	63

PONY FICTION VAULT



Here's the thing about pain.

Pain hurts.

Pain hurts a lot.

Most ponies don't understand that I deal with this kind of thing frequently in my line of work. "Oh, Twilight Sparkle lives in a library and spends all her time with a nose in a book," they probably say. "She's a spoiled rotten little Princess' pet," they probably say. "She couldn't possibly know what pain is. Not like us, we like to run into things and smash our faces into walls. What could hurt more than that?"

Well guess what? Unless those ponies have channeled the raw energies of creation through their forehead, and had it blow up in their face? They don't know what the buck they're talking about.

I groan. It's the only appropriate reaction to the army of overweight earth ponies that have apparently decided to tap dance—poorly—around the inside of my skull.

"Well that didn't work," says Spike. My friend. My number one assistant. And right at this moment my tormentor. All I can do is groan again in response.

I planned all of this out so carefully. I double checked all my calculations, then I triple checked my double checking.

The day started out so well, too. Back in Canterlot again, after too many years. Well, three years. Three too many, even if I've spent them in Ponyville making the greatest friends I could ever hope to know.

On the other hoof, how many of these books could I have read in three years? At least a couple thousand, easily. That's why I'm glad to be back here in the Canterlot Library, suddenly finding myself with unfettered access to every single dusty old tome of ancient wisdom in the archives and restricted sections by royal decree. It's only for a few days, but a part of me wishes it could last forever. There's just so much new magic to try out here, and I want to test every single bit of it.

Come on, don't tell me that if you had access to a spell that claimed to let you manipulate the flow of space and time, you wouldn't try to cast it.

“I am never casting another spell that claims it will let me manipulate the flow of space and time,” I say, definitively as I can manage through the mana hangover. Because seriously, ow.

“Did it at least do anything before it exploded in your face? Or between when it exploded in your face and when it exploded in your face again?” Spike asks. He seems earnest. I’m never completely sure when he’s being sarcastic. A spell can’t explode in the caster’s face twice, *obviously*. Although if it could I bet it would feel a whole lot like this.

“I don’t think so, Spike. I don’t understand, Starswirl the Bearded was supposed to have personally crafted this spell for viewing alternate timelines but it doesn’t seem to have actually done anything,” I say. There’s no chance I got any detail of the spell wrong. That probably sounds a little arrogant. But I checked and double checked and even quadruple checked every element of this spell. From the circle of chalk that I drew around me, now faded and broken, to the finest details on each rune I inscribed, now wiped away by the torrent of arcane energy that I pointed, channeled, and directed through them.

Fine. It was an experimental spell. Hardly more than a working theory than anything even with all of the notes Starswirl left pertaining to it. You have to expect this sort of setback when you’re dealing with theoretical spellcraft, right? I just need to redouble my efforts, study even harder, forsake all material desires and comforts until I master—”

“Uh, Twilight? I think it’s about time for us to grab lunch, don’t you?” suggests Spike. Silly dragon. Just because it’s... wow, 3:00 PM? Already? My treasonous stomach is rumbling, to an extent that I can no longer ignore. You win this round, biological necessities.

Spike and I leave the castle and go wandering through Canterlot. It’s an endlessly fascinating city, full of museums, history, and stories of the past.

It’s also full of other ponies. A long time ago I wouldn’t have considered them worthy of my attention. Now, thanks to my advanced friendship training, I can confirm that there is in fact a world outside of my own head. Most importantly at the moment, a few of those ponies can make an excellent rosepetal and daffodil salad with hay fries. There are maybe three establishments that know how I like it made, all conveniently within a half-mile radius of Canterlot Castle. What are the odds?

The odds are, in fact, 7.3 to 1 after you take into account Canterlot zoning ordinances and the economics of the surrounding neighborhoods. Don’t ask me whether I’ve done the math. I always do the math.

We're in no real rush, so after a long meandering stroll we get our food from the furthest of the three, The Grassy Knoll, and sit down at a table out on the sidewalk. It's a nice day, the salad is delicious, and there's a cool breeze blowing through my mane. The grumpy mood I hadn't even realized I was in is lifting. I glance over at Spike, munching away on a sapphire across from me. I'm reminded, yet again, that he knows me better than I know myself.

I lean over and give Spike a quick peck on the cheek. He coughs on a shard of gemstone and squirms. "Cut it out, Twilight. What was that for?" he asks. He's so cute when he gets all embarrassed, it's almost too easy.

"Just because. Thanks for all your help at the library today. I don't know what I would do without you."

Now he's blushing and mumbling something under his breath about mushy, sappy unicorns. I just chuckle and go back to eating my salad, watching the ponies around me going about their day to day business. Most of them are students or professors from one of the nearby universities, if I don't miss my guess. They're all wrapped up in their own thoughts and conversations, and there are plenty of near-collisions where neither party notices they're on course to walk into one another until it's almost too late. Not that I'm one to talk. I once walked into an open pit, complete with flashing lights and warning signs, just because I had my nose buried in a book.

In my defense, it was a *really good* account about the finer points of fungal reproduction.

Sure, today started out a little rough but now that I've got a full stomach and a little bit of perspective it's looking up again. My friends are probably on the train from Ponyville right now, and they'll be here in a couple hours. I'm not sure Mom and Dad are looking forward to having all five of them stay over for the night, but they say they've been wanting to spend some time getting to know them for a while so I'm sure everything will work out. Plus, Shining and Cadence said we could use their apartment while they were out of town so there's extra space if we need it.

I tell myself to stop looking for problems to solve. Stop worrying all the time. I'm in the greatest city in Equestria on a gorgeous autumn afternoon with the whole rest of the day wide open to enjoy. It's going to be great.

"Hey, Twilight? Do you hear that?" asks Spike.

I listen. Dragon ears are pretty sensitive. I don't hear any... wait, yes I do. There's a noise, an undertone, distinct from the regular sounds of ponies bustling about the city. A raspy, humming sound carried along on the crisp afternoon breeze.

"It sounds like something's buzzing. What is that?" I ask. Looking up, I can see dark shapes moving in the sky between the rooftops. From down here they look like pegasi but the silhouettes aren't quite right. They're a little too angular to be ponies, and I can't make out any wings. The way they're moving is subtly off, too. They aren't moving like ponies. I get the impression of an insect—no, a swarm of insects, though I couldn't say why that particular word comes to mind.

Somepony a few tables over screams at the top of her lungs. The iced tea her waiter was bringing over a moment ago clatters to the ground. The waiter himself is halfway through a transformation, still partially enveloped in the glowing green field of magic passing through him. When the wave passes, what remains isn't a pony at all, but a twisted mockery of one.

"Changeling!" screams somepony at the top of her lungs. It takes a moment to register that it's me.

The monster hisses and before the mare's scream has faded from my ears it bursts into action, catapulting itself towards her. She can't even react before it slams into her and she falls over, upending the table she's seated at as the changeling wraps its fanged jaws around her neck. The table topples over and blessedly obstructs my view of what comes next, but the way her scream degrades into a sick gurgling sound before it's suddenly cut off for good leaves little to the imagination.

Her scream is replaced by others up and down the street as the swarm descends. This is impossible. There are at least eight reasons why this should be impossible. First off—

"Twilight, we have to get out of here," says Spike, derailing my train of thought. I nod and we turn to run. By unspoken agreement we head in the direction of the palace. If there's one place in the city that will be well protected, that's it. We gallop as fast as our legs will carry us, and I try not to hear the cries of desperation from the ponies around us as changelings fall upon them. A loose cobblestone flies over my head, only inches from my horn. I didn't see who threw it but it strikes the front window of a boutique on the corner, which shatters and sends jagged glass flying everywhere. I don't think I'm cut, but I don't think I would notice if I was either.

We're still a quarter mile from the castle gates when a half dozen changelings drop out of the sky and into our path, barring our way. They advance on the two of us cautiously, rather than trying to overwhelm us by rushing in. Did they remember us from last time?

Spike and I turn to retreat the way we had come, but there are more changelings back that way. Some of them have finished off the ponies they had initially attacked and they begin turning their attention back to us, moving to block that avenue of escape.

"Twi, over there," says Spike. He nods his head in the direction of an alleyway wedged between a grocery store and a bowling alley. From here I can't see where it goes, or even if it dead ends a few yards in. But there aren't any changelings between us and it.

"OK, on three, we make a break for it," I say. In the corner of my eye I see Spike shake his head.

"No. You get to the castle and I'll keep them from following you. Get to the Princess and... I don't know. Magic something up. You'll figure it out, you always do."

"I'm not leaving you here."

"Hey, I'm a dragon. They aren't going to get me without a fight. In fact, I bet I can take the whole army by myself. You better hurry and figure out a solution to all this before I beat them all down with one claw tied behind my back, right?" He tries to put a brave face on it, but he can't hide how scared he is.

I can't answer right away, but I don't have the luxury of time, either. Some of those changelings are getting pretty close. Everything about this is wrong. But that cold, logical, detached part of my mind tells me that he's right. "I love you so much, Spike." What else is there to say?

"I love you too, Twilight. Tell the others how much I love them too, OK? You know, in case I'm not done beating up changelings by the time they get here," he says. I wish I could hug him, one more time, but those things would be on us in a moment if I did. I almost do anyway.

I bolt for the alleyway. Spike is screaming taunts at the monsters in the street. I feel a burst of heat from behind me and the whole world is colored green as he lets loose a burst of dragonfire. Almost there. An unpony shriek fills the air, but cries of pain and fear are universal and I know that the fire found its target. I can't look back to confirm.

I round the corner and I'm in the alleyway. It isn't a dead end, thank the Princesses. There's a literal light at the end of the tunnel. I tune out the noises coming from behind me. I can't think about that, not now. Have to get to the palace. Have to stop all this, somehow. Fix it. I burst into the street ahead and find...

A dozen more changelings, all looking at me.

They don't hesitate like the last group did. One of them pounces before I can think of a new plan. A reflexive burst of magic knocks it back, but the others take the opportunity to surround me. I try to watch them all as best I can, but it's only seconds before one tackles me to the ground. There's an out. There has to be. I can teleport away, somewhere safe until I can figure out my next move.

I'm assembling the necessary components of the spell in my mind when a jolt of pain sweeps in and obliterates everything else. One of those things just drove their gnarled imitation of a hoof into my side and I swear I feel three of my ribs cracking, each one a distinct concerto of agony. Now it hurts to even breathe, and I'm worthless. It's all I can do to look up at the palace, so close and yet impossibly far away. I can see the pegasi of the royal guard darting about, knocking changelings from the sky. The swarm is too thick. They're falling back, slowly giving ground. I can sense that it's only a matter of time until they fall. Then my view is obscured as one of the changelings walks up to me, studies me.

It changes into me, or an imitation of me at least. It's still studying me, trying to figure out my twitches and mannerisms when two more changelings step into view. One of them makes a dry heaving noise, and it takes me a few moments to realize that it's supposed to be laughter. I want to blow them apart, to take some of them with me, but every single twitch I make is agony. I'm just not strong enough to fight through it.

I never expected my life to end this way.

Any fear the changelings had of me is gone now. I can't see the ones biting at my flank, but I can feel their fangs tearing away. Through my fading vision, I can see one of them standing above me, until it lowers its head and I feel pressure tighten around my neck. There's more pressure, then the worst pain I've ever felt, then everything is over.

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This isn't fair, being dead isn't supposed to hurt this much. My eyes are already closed, but I squeeze them shut even tighter.

It hurts as much as having that spell blow up in my face earlier this afternoon.

Actually... It hurts exactly that much, no more, no less, and in exactly the same way. My throat and ribs feel fine, but oh Celestia my head...

“Well that didn’t work.”

That voice, I’d know it anywhere. I thought I’d never hear it again. I can ignore the pain for this. I snap my eyes open and sure enough there’s my number one assistant standing there, unhurt.

“Spike!” I half say and half moan. The word sounds slurred as it leaves my mouth. I’m pretty wobbly on my hooves, is that because of blood loss? But it can’t stop me from lunging for him and wrapping him in the biggest hug I can manage. It hurts but it’s worth it. “I love you so much Spike, I’m so glad you’re OK.”

“Geez, what did that spell do to you? I’m fine,” he says sounding mostly surprised and annoyed. How can he be like that after what just happened?

I take a good look around. I’m in the library. The restricted section, to be specific, exactly where I’d been a few hours ago when the spell blew up in my face. In fact, I’m standing in the remains of the circle I’d drawn up to cast it, still smoldering with occult power.

Did the spell work? Did it actually show me an alternate timeline where Canterlot gets invaded by changelings? I’ve used divination spells to try to see the future before, but I’ve never felt anything like that. It was so real...

“Twilight? Do you think maybe you could put me down now?” asked Spike. I comply, letting him back down onto the floor. I glance at the clock, which reads 3 PM. None of it was real, after all. I’m OK. It’s all going to be OK. I lower Spike to the floor and my stomach rumbles. I’m hungry again. Spike can tell. “Want to head over to The Grassy Knoll and grab a salad or something?” he asks.

“NO!” I shout more forcefully than I should. “I mean... let’s just grab something quick from the kitchen. No need to walk down into town.” I don’t want to admit the real reason I don’t want to go into town. It sounds ridiculous, even as I play it back in my head. I should tell somepony what I saw, probably. But not right now. Right now I don’t want to be away from Spike for a moment longer than I have to be. I think he’s noticed me hovering, walking a little closer to him than I usually do, but I don’t care.

It's only a few minutes walk to get from the library to the kitchen. Chef Amuse Bouche greets me heartily, and asks what he can get us to eat. I let him know that we're only looking for a few snacks to tide us over until dinner. He doesn't have to trouble himself, I'm happy to make it.

He refuses, as he always does. I usually can't stand being fawned over like this, treated differently just because I happen to be the Princess' student—maybe I make an exception when access to rare books is on the line; don't judge me. But it's clear that the chef takes the greatest pride in what he does, and the idea of allowing merely 'good' food to be made in his kitchen by anypony appalls him to his core. It takes only seconds before two plates are ready. Emeralds embedded in a block of quartz for Spike, and a lily-and-azalea sandwich for me. I thank him, and even Spike looks up long enough to mutter something vaguely resembling 'thank you' through a mouthful of crystals before we move into the dining room.

The food is phenomenal, of course, and gone too quickly. There's no rush to get back to the library though. After what I saw earlier I find that I just feel better about everything, like I just got a second chance. Colors are richer, music sounds sweeter, and all is right with the world. Spike and I sit and chat about nothing in particular for nearly an hour, and I'm hanging on every word.

Maybe that spell was the best thing that could happen to me. I'm like Palomino Scrooge from *A Hearth's Warming Eve Carol*, given a dark vision of a potential future so I can better appreciate what I have. I'm so happy I don't even care how overwrought and melodramatic that probably sounds.

There's a deep rumbling, and the castle shakes to its very foundation. A plate vibrates its way off the table beside us and crashes to the floor, breaking into a dozen pieces. A concerned murmur is making its way through the other ponies in the room.

"Everypony, please remain calm," the guard's voice rings out through the room. "The situation is under control, but we need you all to remain here and stay away from the windows."

The castle shakes again. No pony believes the guard's lie, but none of them know what to do either. I ignore the warning and head for the nearest window. Not knowing is worse than any horror that could be out there. The guards shout out to me to stop but they don't move to restrain me.

I shouldn't be able to recognize the dark shapes crawling along Canterlot's streets from this distance, but I can. Changelings. Was that what the spell was supposed to be, a warning? Did I waste it? Could I have stopped this?

"Twilight," comes a voice from across the room. I spin around. It's exactly the voice I need to hear right now. The voice that can fix all of this. The voice that can do anything.

Standing there in the doorway, flanked by a squad of royal guard ponies on either side, is Princess Celestia.

"Come quickly, my faithful student, there's no time to lose. We have to get to the Elements of Harmony if we're going to stop this invasion," she says. She turns to go without waiting for a response and begins to trot towards the center of the castle.

I spare just a moment to tell Spike to stay put before I follow her. This is what I should have done in the first place, gone to the Princess. Maybe she could have stopped all this before it happened. Everything will be fine now. Except...

"Princess, how are we going to use the Elements of Harmony without my friends? They won't be here until later tonight, and by then it might be too late," I say. For a moment, the Princess seems a bit surprised. I could have sworn I told her my friends were coming into Canterlot tonight.

"Astute as always, my faithful student. I've used the Elements on my own once before, and I'm sure with both of us here we'll be able to cobble something together and save Equestria," says Celestia. I suppose that makes sense. I can feel that the Princess is concealing something, putting on a brave face to avoid telling me and the guards around us that she's just as surprised by this invasion as we are. That's probably it.

The sounds of battle grow louder as we get closer to the vault. I even notice a few glimmers of magic from Celestia's horn as we walk. She must be reinforcing the wards around the castle, bless her.

We're almost at the entrance to the vault when we hear a hissing sound from the ceiling behind us. The guards spin around before I can even register the sound in my mind, and a changeling drops from the ceiling. It doesn't even reach the ground before it's obliterated by blasts of magic from a half a dozen unicorns, leaving nothing but an ugly scorch mark on the rug behind us.

"The changelings are getting too close, Twilight. The guards and I will stay here and make sure you're safe while you open the vault door. I did show you how to open it,

didn't I?" asks Celestia. I nod. After the last changeling invasion, Celestia showed both Luna and I how to access the vault in case she was ever incapacitated. There's no time to waste. I dash ahead of my escort, and lowered my horn to meet the locking mechanism, ready to unseal the ornate door behind which the most powerful artifacts in Equestria are housed.

I hesitate.

Something about this isn't right. Most of my mind is screaming at me to open the door to our salvation, but I can't shake the nagging idea that none of this adds up.

"Hurry up Twilight!" calls Princess Celestia from down the hall. She's right, isn't she? There isn't time to waste with this nonsense. Unless...

"Actually, Princess, I think you should open the door. I'll stay with the guards and keep an eye out for intruders," I say. Surely, the Princess will gallop over and open the door, and all my fears will turn out to be a ridiculous flight of fancy.

"Twilight, I command you to open that door," hisses Celestia. Or at least the thing that looks like Celestia.

"The real Celestia has never commanded me to do anything," I say. It's a soft and simple truth. The kind that can effortlessly cut through a thousand interwoven lies. The sort of fact that makes up the very bedrock of my own existence and self-worth.

Not-Celestia smirks. It's an arrogant expression that doesn't fit the face of the mentor I know and love. She nods to the ponies beside her, and all but one of them transform back into their true forms. More changelings. The one unfortunate pegasus guard who just thought he was protecting his regent is overwhelmed before he even knows what's happening. All I can offer him is a quick prayer that his demise is relatively painless as I look away. "You really are a clever one, aren't you, Twilight Sparkle?" asks Not-Celestia. "A pity. I could have saved a few hours if you'd opened this door for me. I've left plenty of other ponies alive for future snacking. You, I think, are too dangerous to join them. You seem annoyingly adept at seeing through my veils."

"Queen Chrysalis, we meet again," I say. Really? That's the best line I can come up with? I chide myself and promise to do better next time. As if there's going to be a next time. I was even given a warning that this was about to happen and I wasted it, couldn't recognize it for what it was. I stopped Chrysalis from using me to open the door to the Elements of Harmony, but in the end I failed again.

“For the last time, yes. Lucky for you I’m too busy to stretch this out,” says Chrysalis. She nods to her honor guard and they charge. I’m pinned to a wall before I know it. By some unspoken signal the changelings stop. Maybe they can communicate on a frequency ponies can’t hear? Could be a useful avenue for future research, not that I’m likely to get a chance to pursue it. Chrysalis steps into the center of my vision, and the world is tinged green as she wraps a field of magic around my head.

“Goodbye, Twilight Sparkle,” she says. There’s a wrenching sensation as my head twists of somepony else’s accord, and the last thing I feel is the blood vessels inside my neck snapping and bursting before absolute darkness falls.

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“Well that didn’t work.”

The library. Again.

I get the feeling that my day is going to get a lot worse before it gets any better.

I grab Spike in a magic field and yank him off of his seat and out the door, nearly bowling over an unfortunate librarian in the process. I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know if the Changelings are going to come again. I don’t know who to trust if they do. But right now I have to get out of there.

I know it’s the cowardly choice. So many ponies will die, but there’s nothing I can do that will save them. Maybe I can get word out to a military base somehow, and they can come reinforce the city. It’s a long shot, but I don’t know what other options I have.

Spike is shouting at me to slow down and stop as I drag him through the streets, ignoring the looks the other ponies are giving me. They don’t know what might be about to happen, and even if I had time to do so I wouldn’t take that innocence away from them. Besides, who knows which one of them might be another changeling in disguise?

The closest encampment I can think of is Fort Trottingham, about two and a half hours away in the town of the same name. Lucky me there’s a shuttle leaving in that direction in just a few minutes. I buy two tickets at the station, tossing a hoofful of golden bit coins onto the counter and running off without waiting for change. It’s only after I’ve boarded the train and collapsed into a seat that I finally stop.

I withdraw my magic and let Spike go. He's not happy with me. "What in Tartarus was that about Twilight? Where are we going all of a sudden?" he asks. I wish I had a better answer than the turth.

"Spike, I just need you to trust me," I say. The train shudders as it starts to pull away from the platform and I have a chance to glance around. It's an awfully full train for the middle of the afternoon. That's good. Fewer ponies who will have to endure the fate I've seen for this city. Ponies who don't know how lucky they are yet.

"Did that spell do something to you? Here, let me check your pupils," says Spike. He brings a claw up to my face but I swat it away. I know what spell madness feels like, and this isn't that.

"No, I'm... the spell didn't do anything to me, I promise. It just showed me what was going to happen. Not just showed me, I lived it. Changelings invaded Canterlot. Are going to invade Canterlot, in less than an hour. I tried to fight them off but they..." I trail off. I don't want to remember those last couple minutes if I can help it. "...After they got me I was back in the library and I thought it was just a crazy dream. But then it happened again. It was different, I tried to make it different I mean, but it turned out the same and then I was back at the library again. It always makes me go back to the library."

"Even if that's true, we can't just run away. Let's tell the Princess what happens. She can help."

"No, don't you get it? They've already gotten to her! We can't trust anypony," I hiss under my breath, trying to keep myself under control. I glance around to make sure no pony else has noticed us, and when I look back at Spike I can tell that he's evaluating me. No, why beat around the bush? He's judging me.

"Look Twilight, I know that what happened at the wedding last year was pretty bad, but maybe we can talk about this rationally instead of—"

"I'm not crazy!" I shout, loud enough that the statement is counterproductive. There's a clatter from the seat across from us, ceramic on ceramic. When I turn my head to see where the sound is coming from, I see two stallions and a mare staring intently at the spilled cup of tea in front of them. They're focusing very hard on looking in any direction except mine. "We can talk about this more when we get to Trottingham. Let's just... not... until then."

I turn to look out the window rather than face Spike again just now. I can imagine what he's thinking. It's true that I've tended to overreact a few times before. Maybe more than a few times. But this isn't like that. He'll see that I'm right, of course, once it's too late to do any good. Until then, I'd rather just stare out at the world going by than say anything.

The countryside is beautiful. Every tree is an explosion of colors, even as the flowers look to be getting ready to wilt away and die. They die every year, and then come back. Temporary and yet permanent at the same time. Funny how I've never noticed it before. I've always been wrapped up in my own thoughts. Now that I desperately want to be anywhere other than inside my own head, though, I find the world suddenly worth observing.

My newfound appreciation for the unexceptional doesn't last for all that long. Soon enough we're only a few miles from Trottingham. I'm busy running through arguments in my head trying to figure out the best way to phrase 'help me save everypony from the hostile shapeshifter invasion' to the ponies I'll need assistance from, when the interior of the train is suddenly bathed in a harsh and unforgiving light. A moment later the entire carriage vibrates as if something massive has just slammed into us. A dozen ponies, too curious to respect the social protocols that usually govern relations between passengers, climb over each other to cluster around the windows on the far side of the carriage. I don't need to. Through their craning necks I can see a wall of white crackling fire and magical energy that seems to expand as it races towards us. Everything in its path disappears into the blinding light as it carves a path through the surrounding countryside.

I'm a scientist at heart. I don't normally deal in hunches and intuition. But I somehow know, without any explicit evidence yet also without any doubt, that this wave of unfathomable power started in Canterlot. I also know that it won't stop before it devours our train and all of Equestria beyond. I barely even have time to squeeze my eyes closed before it's upon us, burning away everything I know and any hope I carried with me of changing the future.

“Well that didn’t work.”

The pain isn’t that bad when you’re expecting it, or maybe it’s just being overshadowed by the sensation of hopelessness I’m wallowing in. Can’t fight, can’t escape, can’t warn Princess Celestia of what I know. Anypony could be a changeling. Say the wrong thing to the wrong pony, and it’s all over.

That’s not exactly true either, is it? It’s never going to be over. Not as long as this spell holds out. I’m just going to keep reliving it over and over again. I can’t even bring things back with me, other than information.

Other than information.

No, that’s an insane idea. There’s no way it could be that simple.

Or maybe it could be. Simple doesn’t mean easy. Lifting a mountain is simple in theory, just wrap a sufficiently sized telekinesis field around it and lift really, really hard. Maybe exploiting a time loop to carry information from one iteration to the next in the hopes of gradually manipulating the timestream to my advantage to dramatically alter the outcome of events qualifies.

It’s also possible that all the ‘saving the world’ stuff I’ve been doing over the last few years has dramatically shifted my outlook on what sort of things can be considered simple. Maybe seriously considering time travel as the most practical solution to a problem you’re facing is on a checklist somewhere of ‘Signs that You Should Take a Step Back and a Long, Hard Look at Your Life.’

“Twilight? You feeling OK? That looked like it hurt,” said Spike.

“It did,” I reply. I stand, shaking off the aftereffects of the spell more quickly than I did last time. “Spike, forget the spell. I need you to go find everything you can in this part of the library about changelings. Quick as you can.”

“Changelings? But Twilight—”

“I’ll explain later,” I say. Odds are I won’t but I’m going to need every second I can get to figure out the best course of action from here on out. That means research, hardcore research.

Spike returns a few minutes later and I go to work. I'm getting maybe a single new fact about them for every twenty pages I read, and most of that's unverifiable rumors. I'm shaken out of my hyperfocused stupor by Spike a couple of hours later. I'm annoyed by the interruption but considering that the library around me is on fire, it's hard to fault him for his decision. I blink a few times as the intense heat registers in my brain for the first time. "Twilight, changelings are attacking the palace. We've gotta get out of here," he says.

I nod to him. "You're right, Spike," I glance up at a support beam above us that's nearly burned through. I put the many years of trigonometry and geometry lessons I've had towards a far more morbid purpose than they were ever intended for. "Tell you what, there's one more book I want to take with us when we go, it's not far from here. I think it's in the stacks over that way," I wave a hoof vaguely towards the stacks. "Look for a book called, uh, *The Secret to Defeating a Surprise Changeling Invasion*."

"Somepony wrote a book like that? Why didn't you ask for it earlier? I'll be right back," he says. Gullible to the end. I hate lying to him, but I'd hate letting him watch this even more. I double check my math and scoot one step to my right, followed by two steps backwards. The beam above me crackles and snaps loose from its moorings, swinging straight towards my face.

Oh Celestia, please let me be right about this.

• • •

"Well that didn't work."

Wanna bet?

All of this is just a big puzzle, and I'm good at puzzles. You can't solve a puzzle without all the pieces though, so now that I've made up my mind to take advantage of being mortality-challenged I'm off to gather data. Breaking it down, there's four major problems that I know of. First, Chrysalis replaced or will replace Princess Celestia somehow. I have to either neutralize her or prevent the takeover in the first place. Second, there's a whole plague of changelings on its way here. Third, the changelings must've been laying the groundwork for this invasion for a while now so they've probably replaced a bunch of other ponies too, and right now I can't tell which ones. Finally, in about three hours the world blows up, and I have no idea why.

Well, puzzles that are easy to solve aren't any fun, right?

Last one first. My first time back after taking that support beam to the face I drop everything and head to the top of the highest tower in the castle and lock myself in, under the cover story that I want to take a nap. Instead, I use the vantage point to look out over Equestria and just observe.

It's a nice day, bright and sunny. The skyline is marred only by a single dark patch off to the northeast. It would be easy to think it was just a storm cloud if I didn't already know better. Still, for it to already be that size when it must be over a dozen miles away—based on the average airspeed velocity of an unladen changeling—that swarm would have to have more changelings than... than... than a thing that has a lot of changelings in it.

I'm not good at metaphors, OK? Poetry in general is lost on me. When I try to turn a phrase it usually ends up in an impossible, non-euclidean shape. I've always been that way. In fact a former tutor of mine, during a moment in frustration after I tried to rhyme the word "pony" with itself four times in a single stanza, once told me he was revoking my poetic license.

Threat of the imminent invasion aside, there isn't much else to see. I think I can just make out Ponyville on the horizon, and a little trail of steam moving across the fields between us. That might even be the train with my friends on it, due to get here at 6:30 sharp just in time for a late dinner. Very late, the way things have been going so far.

The swarm of changelings grows closer and they'll be attacking any moment. I close the shutters of the windows, both to avoid being spotted and avoid looking down at the city when they arrive. The idea of my own death I'm coming to terms with. The scale of what happens to everypony else I can't even begin to wrap my mind around. Just enduring the awful noises that float up this high is terrible. I try distracting myself by reading, but I can't. Finally I just cower against a wall and try to block out as much of it as I can.

I came up here for a reason though. At 5:40 I throw the windows open. If I close my eyes, I can block out the sights of burning buildings and little multi-colored shapes in the street fleeing for their lives before the little black shapes fall on them and they stop forever. If I cover my ears I can block out their screams, too. What I hadn't accounted for was the smell, burning roofs and plants and bodies all mixing together in an awful cocktail of death and pain drifting right up into my unsuspecting nostrils.

I throw up. I just need to get the smell of burning flesh out of me. Wish I'd thought to bring a glass of water up here with me, but I didn't. The minutes tick by horribly slowly. 5:53... 5:54... Maybe nothing of interest will happen this time.

Three minutes later I turn out to be very wrong. The entire castle shudders, and I look out the window to try to figure out where the blast just came from. Nothing out in the distance looks all that different. Then I look down. The first bits of the wave of light that consumed the train I took to Trottingham in another life are peeking through the castle masonry. It's shaking and trembling in time with my own knees. So whatever this thing is, it comes from inside the castle? It takes its time as it disintegrates the castle walls and the tower I'm lurking inside tilts and falls into the expanding ocean of energy below. My horn tingles. Whatever this energy is, it's something I've felt before though never with this kind of intensity.

At least it's quick. I've barely even felt my eyeballs start to boil before everything is over.

• • •

“Well that didn't work.”

I've got a lead on the origins on the Wall of Horrible Shiny Death, as I've come to think of it. I spent the last three loops observing it from different places within the castle, and I should have enough information to triangulate it. The wall came from within the main body of the castle, and it wasn't from the library. I'm more or less sure of the general place it's coming from now. The palace vaults, where the Elements of Harmony are stored.

I don't want to believe that the Elements could ever do something like this, but they're the only thing I can think of that could be this powerful. They were created to counter disharmony after all. It's plausible that in the presence of enough disharmony, like say a city being sacked and pillaged by changelings, and without any bearers around to channel them they might counter it explosively. It would explain why Celestia left them out in the middle of nowhere during the aftermath of Luna's rebellion, at least.

I never realized how close the city must have come to total annihilation during the changeling attack on my brother's wedding, or during Discord's escape. It's a little unnerving that the power my friends and I wielded through them could be such a double edged sword. Or maybe it's some kind of interaction with the time spell instead. I've read everything I can lay my hooves on pertaining to the Elements, but mostly I've just learned how little anypony actually knows about them.

Making a beeline for the vaults, I find them unguarded. Anything that can break through the vault's defensive enchantments wouldn't be slowed down by a few royal guards anyway, so why bother? But I know the way around them. Pressing my horn against the

lock and visualizing the series of runes that serve as the pass code, I'm relieved when the vault door trembles and pulls aside. Inside are hundreds of treasures from ancient ages and an incalculable amount of wealth in gems and gold coins.

Well, probably not actually incalculable. You would just need to take enough random samples of a fixed volume from the heaps of treasure to figure out a statistically significant average value of the treasure per cubic meter. Then calculate the treasures total volume which if we assume the shape of those heaps can be approximated as cones would be given by the formula—

No! Focus, Twilight, you're here for a reason!

The Elements are right where I expect to find them, propped up and on display on a pedestal in the center of the room. As I get closer I can feel the buildup of seething magical energy within them. They feel mad; mad enough to do something rash. The Element of Magic even gives me a little shock as I reach out and touch it.

“Easy fella, I'm just trying to help,” I say and immediately feel like an idiot for talking to a magic crown. I run every test and magical diagnostic I can think of, but all they can do is repeatedly confirm that, yes, there's about to be a very big boom.

It's 5:15 and I've made absolutely zero useful progress. Chrysalis will be here any second. I get a really, really stupid idea. If it's some kind of energy build up, maybe I can vent it somehow? I've tapped into them before, and I would only need to release just enough energy to prevent a larger explosion. Plus I'm in the middle of a war zone; it's not like there's a shortage of targets.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I grab all six Elements and try to work out a feasible configuration for wearing them all at the same time. After nearly choking myself trying to put on five necklaces at once, I settle for wearing four of them as bracelet around my forelegs. Loyalty and Honesty on my left, Generosity and Laughter on my right, and Kindness worn as intended. I wonder if somepony with too much time on their hooves and a dirty mind would read anything into that.

The ambient field of magic they're giving off makes my teeth chatter and my fur stand on edge. I can't quite see straight, either. If I'm going to do this I better do it fast. I walk unsteadily through the halls of the castle and find the nearest balcony I can overlooking the city, the sky dark with changelings zipping to and fro battling the royal guard.

I try to cut through the tempest of magic raging inside me and center myself. When I look up again I'm more confident than ever. Know why? Because the bonds of friendship transcend time and space. Even though my friends are riding a train right now and unaware of what's happening they carry with them a part of me in every one of their souls, just as I carry a part of them in mine. They're absolutely here, in spirit, and I'm not about to let them down. No power based on something so good and so pure as friendship could ever harm me. I feel the same spark in my heart I did the moment I realized that the five of us were destined to become best friends, and as I reach for it I'm more sure than I ever have been of anything that this is definitely going to work.

• • •

“Well that didn't work.”

So apparently even when your intentions are good misusing the power of friendship can not only hurt you, but can make every particle in your body explode at the same time. There's probably a decent friendship report buried somewhere in that observation but I'm in no mood to uncover it right now.

Maybe I'll table the Elements of Harmony explosion thing for the time being. If I stop the invasion, that'll probably stop whatever disharmony buildup is going on with them anyway. I have more fruitful avenues of investigation to pursue. First, can I save Princess Celestia?

The first place I check is the throne room, which is empty. That's unusual in and of itself. Afternoon court should be in session, and if Chrysalis had already replaced Princess Celestia she'd almost certainly be here administering it. The next place to check is the Princess' private quarters, and I strike paydirt.

The Princess' room is guarded not by the usual pair of guards, but by nearly thirty of them. All thirty guards are the same in appearance, too. Not just similar, exactly the same, like some impossible set of identical trigintatuplets.

I walk up to the closest one. “I'm Twilight Sparkle. I need to see the Princess. Now”

His expression doesn't change at all. “Sorry, nopony sees the Princess right now,” he says. His mistake. Ponies in the palace who are telling me I can't do something usually at least have the good graces to be embarrassed at denying something to Celestia's personal protégé.

“Ha! Nice try, you pathetic little changeling nuisance. That’s right I know exactly what you are. You didn’t count on me being able to teleport did you? How do you think you’ll stop me now?”

I disappear into thin air, triumphant.

• • •

“Well that didn’t work.”

Oh, right. Teleportation-proof bedrooms. Forgot about that. I rub the spots on my flank where the changelings’ spears pierced me, still haunted by phantom pains that are slow to fade. I can’t fight my way past thirty changelings. Only a Princess could.

Better to just face it; I’m stumped. It’s well past time to consider our other Princess, I suppose. Time to wake up Princess Luna.

I march down to her bedroom. There are four guards in front of her door instead of the usual two. And they’re all identical. And they’re identical to the thirty guards I just encountered.

Still, four changelings are better than thirty, right?

I charge.

• • •

“Well that didn’t work.”

“No, it didn’t, but I have a good feeling about my next try. I just have to remember to spin right, juke left, duck the spear, grab changeling C by the neck and swing it into D so he’s off balance and can’t make a killing strike, then jump, duck again, roll under changeling A, and when I come up be ready to smack changeling B in the face rather than trying to sweep the leg. Eighth time’s the charm, right?”

Spike looks confused, and I don’t think he’s quite sure how to respond. He wasn’t the last six time either and it’s only gotten more complicated since then. That’s just fine. I give him a gentle pat on the head before I head off to try again, humming a jaunty tune as I go.

• • •

It's the little things that really make life worth living. Or reliving, as the case may be. Things like the look on changeling's face while he watches the adorable filly who he thought he and his three friends were going to stomp instead beat the everloving ichor out of said friends without even breaking a sweat. The noise he makes in the moment he realizes that he's next. The squishing sensation when I body slam him into a wall and he collapses.

Good times.

Nothing stands between me and Luna's bedroom doors now. I push them open and look into the room.

Well, I try to look into the room. Even though the hallway is brightly lit, none of that light illuminates the bedroom. There's a sharp line of demarcation right at her threshold where it just stops and everything beyond is pitch black. I step inside and I'm immediately plunged into total darkness. I try to look back out into the hallway just to reassure myself it's still there, but there's only darkness behind me. I could be a single step from the door or a mile from it, there's no way to tell.

I step gingerly across the room, careful not to bark my shin on anything. I can't hear anything other than the sound of my own breath. "Princess Luna? Are you in here?"

"Yes." The voice is the faintest hint of a whisper, delivered from so close my ear twitches as the gentle currents of air blow over them.

I find out that I can scream a lot louder than I thought I could.

"Twilight! Lower your voice, I'm right here," says Luna from somewhere nearby. I'm glad she finally ditched some of her more archaic speech patterns, but she's still really creepy when she forgets not to be.

I try to slow my racing heart. "Luna, could you turn down the dark a little?"

There's a little 'hmp' noise of displeasure from somewhere, but then the light from the hallway spills into the room brightening it ever so slightly. It's hard to make anything out but I can tell the Princess is right next to me now, and a little groggy from just having woken up. "It is not even four PM. What is the meaning of awakening us at this unFaustly hour?"

I get right to the point. "Princess, changelings are inside the palace. Celestia is in trouble and the city will be under attack any minute now. We need your help." I diplomatically

fail to mention that she was just about to sleep through the entire thing, just like the last time this happened.

It's clear from the expression on her face that she hasn't forgotten that either. She looks out into the hallway behind me at the four unconscious changelings, who reverted to their true shapes after I knocked them out. We leave them where they are and I have to trot quicker than usual to keep up with Luna as she stalks through the palace towards her sister's room. Guards and servants turn their heads, curious at what could drive the Princess from her bed this early. Not knowing who to trust and not wanting to give Chrysalis any warning that we're coming, we pass by without explanation.

We turn the corner and the pack of identical guards are still standing there in front of Celestia's bedroom door. Luna glares at them and begins to walk forward. "Move," she says without stopping to wait for them to do so.

Instead they hiss at her and crouch down, ready to fight.

"Twilight, I will handle this. Aid my sister and I will join you momentarily," says Luna as her horn begins to flicker with an angry glow. I nod, and a quick teleport later I'm standing on the other side of the changeling pack. They charge towards Luna, leaving me unmolested as I open the door. Before I step inside I hesitate, though. Sure, Luna's powerful but she's not invincible. Maybe I should stay out here and help her, despite what she said.

While I'm considering this a spark of dark magic flies out of the melee and strikes a nearby wall. The wall twists and warps as space and time rend themselves apart at her command, opening up an inky black gash in reality. Tendrils of solid darkness strike out from the places between dimensions and wrap around three changelings at the edge of the mob. They barely have time to scream before the tentacles retract just as quickly and yank them back through the portal. It seals shut leaving no evidence it was ever there at all.

She'll be fine.

I step through the doorway and into the middle of a war zone. The blistering heat is almost a solid force in its intensity. The bed is shredded and chunks of mattress have been gouged out and scattered over the room. The archway leading out to the balcony is blocked, covered by some sort of heavy webbing. Celestia is crouched in the splintered remains of her writing desk, scratched up and bleeding but not seriously hurt. All her focus is on pouring forth a blast of magical energy from her horn. Over on the other side

of the room, another Celestia stands by the fireplace doing the same thing, The magic energy comes smashing together in the center of the room, evenly matched.

“Twilight! She’s a changeling! You have to help me stop her,” says the Celestia by the fireplace, shouting to be heard over the spells crashing against one another.

“She’s lying, Twilight,” says the one by the desk. “She’s the changeling, not me!”

Although I’m not a match for either one of these two on my own, my magic should be enough to tip the balance one way or the other. But how am I supposed to tell which one’s the real Celestia?

“Can’t you tell she’s lying? Think of all the special times we had together, everything I taught you. Can’t you tell that it’s me?” asks the first Celestia. She can’t turn to properly face me, but she’s looking in my direction with pleading eyes.

“Twilight, I understand. She’s an excellent liar,” says the second one. “We can’t let her lead the invasion she’s planning. If you aren’t going to choose me, blast us both.”

Blast them both? I can’t do that. I can’t knowingly blast Princess Celestia with my magic.

“Do it! Blast us both, for the sake of Equestria,” she commands.

Of course. The real Celestia would put the protection of her ponies above her own well being. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. I spin around on the Celestia by the desk and channel a surge of magic in her direction. She doesn’t have anything left to block it with, and the impact breaks her concentration enough for the real Celestia’s magic to overwhelm hers and deliver the knockout blow. The fake Celestia gives a cry of pain and collapses into a heap.

The real Celestia lets her magic slow to a trickle and peter out. She stands there for a few moments panting before she falls to her knees.

“Princess!” I dash over to her and kneel down in front of her trying to see her face. “You’re hurt.”

“I will live, thanks to you. I know that must have been a difficult thing to do,” she says.

“I knew you had to be the real one, Princess.”

Celestia nuzzles my neck and pulls me close to her for a hug. After everything I went through to get to this moment, this makes it all worth it. With the help of both Princesses and Chrysalis gone there's no way the changelings can invade now.

One little detail nags at me as I look back at the fake Celestia. Shouldn't she have reverted to her changeling form by now?

Celestia's hooves wrap around me even tighter and push me to the ground. She leans further into the hug, bringing her head down and bites me on my back right between my shoulder blades.

I cry out for Luna to help me but the doors are closed and the soundproofing spells won't be so easily overcome. I try to fight back and squirm out of her jaws but she shifts her weight and pins me down. I feel her jaw muscles flex and suddenly there's a burning sensation emanating from where she's biting, spreading through my veins. I scream and thrash but it's useless. The burning is moving up my neck and face and I find that I can't think straight. I'm flailing around even though I can't remember why any more. I have to remember... something. My head hurts so much when I try to remember.

I gasp and open up my eyes. Oh thank goodness. How can there be anything to worry about when I'm in the safest place in the world? I'm right where I should be: with Princess Celestia.

I stop struggling and lay against her, exhausted but not sure how I got that way.

"Doesn't that feel so much better, Twilight?" she asks. I don't say anything but I smile up at her, drifting in a blissful fog. Why was I trying to remember, anyway? Thinking for myself is overrated. The Princess is so much smarter and stronger than a worthless thing like me. Everything will be better if I just trust her and do what she says. She mutters something to herself about how she can't believe ponies fall for that line every time but I don't really understand what she means by that.

"Twilight, do you love me?"

I feel like I've been yanked out of my wonderful repose and dunked in a bath of ice water. How can she even ask me that? Haven't I proven to her a hundred times over by now just how devoted I am? Well if I haven't proven my love to her yet then I'll just have to love her even harder, even if I could never hope to deserve the love of such a perfect creature in return.

“I love you Princess. I love you completely, deeply, utterly, and in every conceivable way. You’re the most important pony in the whole world to me,” I say looking her straight in the eyes as I do.

Celestia purrs and licks her lips. “Mmm... Yes you really do, don’t you? Thank you Twilight, I needed that. Now I need you to do something else for me. Will you?”

“Anything, Princess. Just tell me what it is.”

“It’s terrible, Twilight, Luna’s gone mad and become Nightmare Moon again. She’s coming to kill me. In fact she’s right outside fighting my guards,” says Celestia.

What? Luna wants to hurt Princess Celestia? I’m furious. I hate Luna. She’s a horrible monster. “How can I help?”

“I can’t fight her, not right now,” says Celestia. She stands up and walks towards her balcony. Suddenly not being able to touch her makes my whole world dark and cold. I’ll do whatever she asks, anything just for the chance to be near her again. “Stay here. When Luna comes in looking for me, I want you to kill her or die trying.”

Wow! The Princess must really love me if she’d give me an important job like that. I give her a sharp salute. “You got it, Princess!”

She smiles and pushes the webbing to one side, walking out onto the sunny balcony and spreading her wings as she leaps into the air. Not a moment later the door to the hallway begins to open. I bet that’s Luna now.

I quiver with anticipation at the prospect of being able to follow the Princess’ command and die for her. I’m such a lucky little pony.

• • •

Luna will deal with the changeling guards just fine without my help. I open the door to Celestia’s bedroom and walk in. The heat’s not as noticeable as it was last time, maybe my own body temperature is just higher.

“Twilight! She’s—”

That’s as far as Chrysalis gets before I unload every spell I can think of into her smug changeling face.

Like before, my magic disrupts the target's defenses and creates an opening for Celestia. The beam of solar power throws Chrysalis into the wall and the impact knocks her back into her natural form before she drops passed out onto the floor. Celestia looks exhausted by the effort, but I don't go over to her. I go over to check on Chrysalis.

She's still breathing.

I could change that. The way I feel right now I could call up all manner of dark magics that draw unimaginable power from the caster's own anger or hatred or shame. Defenseless as she is right now she wouldn't be able to stop me. Maybe I could even live with myself afterwards.

Before I can decide one way or the other I feel a gentle hoof laid across my back. I turn to see Celestia looking at me with somber and weary eyes. I can tell she's reading me like an open book.

"She can't hurt you now, Twilight. You're safe."

I don't go to her, but I don't resist as she wraps her wings around me either.

Leaning against her chest, I feel like I understand something a bit better. Love, real love rather than that sick parody I felt before, isn't based on mindless, slavish devotion or obedience. It comes from mutual respect. I love Celestia, and I know she loves me back. That doesn't mean we let the other do whatever they want unquestioningly, and we're both better off for it.

Luna enters the room to find us like that, and the tension she's carrying drains out of her posture when she sees Chrysalis lying by the fireplace. My moment of peace is cut short when the memory of everything else that's about to happen comes crashing back in.

I give them the short version of what I know. About the time loop and the invasion and the Elements. When I'm done the princesses sit in silent thought for a few moments.

"I suspect you are correct about the Elements of Harmony, although it is not like them to behave in such a manner. I will go to the vault and see what magic I might know that can forestall the explosion you mentioned, at least for some time. With luck we can postpone it long enough for the bearers to get here," says Celestia.

"I will add my strength to that of our defenders, the better to protect the city until the others arrive," says Luna.

“What about her?” I ask, nodding over towards Chrysalis who’s still out cold.

“Nothing we can do to her will stop the attack from coming if it is already as close as you say. Not even killing her,” says Celestia with a pointed glance in my direction at the last part. “We will imprison her in the dungeons for the time being. Once the invasion has been stopped we will negotiate her surrender so the changelings can withdraw in an orderly way, rather than allowing them to turn wild and feral.

We agree on the broad outlines of the plan and then it’s off to put it into practice. There are only a few minutes left before the first invaders arrive and every second counts.

Celestia takes the unconscious Chrysalis down to the dungeons personally, with the promise that she’ll head straight for the vaults afterwards, while Luna and I head for the barracks to rally the royal guard. While they go to red alert and begin suiting up for the fight ahead, I pull some of their commanders aside and tell them everything I can remember about how the invasion happens. Numbers, times, places; nopony knows what little detail might turn out to be the most important.

Luna, an intimidating sight to behold all decked out in gleaming intricately carved silver armor, will be leading the counterattack herself. Her power is worth fifty guards all on her own. I want to join them, but Luna refuses. I’m to stay in the castle, and at 6:00 sharp Luna will return. Then we’ll both go down to meet my friends getting off the train assuming Celestia has successfully held back the Elements of Harmony for that long.

There’s a crash from somewhere down in the city and all the guards suddenly start to move and shout at once. A moment later I’m alone in the barracks, With nothing better to do I head back to the castle to meet up with Spike, who I’ve left completely in the dark about all this in my rush to get everything in place. I explain what’s go on to him, partly so he’ll understand and partly to make sure I didn’t miss anything.

The moment of truth gets closer, and by 5:55 we’re not even pretending anymore, just staring at the clock as it ever so slowly ticks away the seconds.

...5:56...

...5:57... I wince, expecting to feel a rumble that means I’ve failed again, but it doesn’t come.

5:58! Celestia did it! This is actually going to work. I hug Spike and bolt from the room to go meet Princess.

We both arrive at the castle's front gate at the same time from opposite directions. Luna's armor isn't gleaming any more. It's scratched and pitted and covered in what I can only assume are changeling fluids. She looks every inch like a warrior Princess straight out of legend, the same mare who led Equestria's armies into battle countless times over the centuries.

We stay on the ground but set a quick pace heading for the train station. The damage to the city doesn't look nearly as bad as I remember from other loops, and in the skies it looks like swarm's been fought to a standstill. They don't have to hold out too much longer.

There's barely any resistance on our way, certainly nothing Luna can't handle with frightening efficiency. We arrive at the train station exactly when we mean to, 6:28.

Waiting for this train is driving me up the wall. It should get here any minute now.

6:29...

6:30...

Aaaaaaaany minute now.

6:33...

6:34...

6:35...

So they're running a few minutes late. Big deal. The invasion's probably just thrown the schedule off a little, that's not surprising.

6:40...

...

6:50...

...

7:00...

Oh no.

## **You Didn't Really Think It Would Be That Easy, Did You?**

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The train never comes.

Luna gently suggests that we should head back to the palace as darkness falls. After all, she needs to raise the moon before she heads out to patrol the city for changeling activity. I let her lead me away, but not before casting one last look down the track in the vain hope that I might see the train around the bend in the mountain, just late after all.

I don't.

We walk back to the palace in silence. Luna keeps looking over at me and I can tell she wants to say something to me but can't find the words. Looking up at the skies, the battle above is still a stalemate. The area around the palace is safe, but some of the districts on the outskirts of the city have fallen to the changeling menace. For every enemy the guards strike down, four or five rise up to take their place.

As we get closer to the palace we find the streets clogged with ponies, refugees fleeing from parts of the city the changelings have already taken for the safety of the palace. Luna lifts me onto her back and soars over the crowd, already stretching nearly a block and a half from the front gates and growing even as we watch. Some guards hover over the walls and move to challenge us, but they back down when they see that it's Luna.

The crowd is being funneled through two little side doors, where a team of unicorn mages are checking each one to make sure they aren't changelings. It's slow going, and as I watch they manage to uncover one which is destroyed on the spot in a hail of magic. At the rate they're going processing this entire crowd will take weeks.

We enter the palace and Luna stops. "I must return to my duties now Twilight. Stay here, you will be safe."

I don't bother to reply as I begin to walk away.

"Twilight?" says Luna. I stop. "I'm sorry. I loved them too."

I just keep walking.

When I reach the great hall, Celestia is pacing back and forth, all hints of regal bearing and composure forgotten. Seeing her this way only makes everything else about the situation feel that much more unreal.

“Twilight, where are...” She trails off as she realizes that I’m alone. So alone. I just shake my head.

“Oh Twilight, I’m so sorry,” she says as she walks over to give me another hug. As if that would fix anything. I step forward, shoving her away and she rears back from me. I try to speak, but it takes a few tries before anything comes out.

“Did you... fix the Elements?” I’m finally able to get out.

Celestia hangs her head. “Only somewhat. Over the next few days I will be able to correct them permanently. They’re... I’ve never seen them like this before. Though it will be taxing I can keep them contained, but I was counting on you and your friends to... well...”

I understand her well enough. ‘To fix everything for her again’ is the phrase she’s looking for. I look up at her and want to scream at her, to condemn her for everything my friends must have suffered. I just want to blame somepony for everything that’s happening so I can stop blaming myself.

“They’re gone,” is all I can say. A million pictures are raging in my mind, thousands of possible ends that they might have suffered, most of them horrible. Because I invited them to come here on the worst day I could have possibly chosen. My fault they suffered, probably suffered terribly. “It’s late,” I say knowing that it really isn’t. “I’m going to bed,” I say as I begin to walk away.

“Twilight, wait,” she says and I do. “I heard the report about the train, Twilight. If it’s any comfort, I think... they likely died well.”

“Compared to what?” I spin around and spit out the question before I can think better of it. “Compared to what, Princess? Please, tell me all about your experiences with the best and worst ways to die. How many times you’ve felt death reach into you, permeate your whole being, and yank you away from everything you love and hold dear? Of the two of us, who do you think knows death better? You’ll probably never know it at all. But what about me? I’m uniquely credentialed after all. I’ve actually felt it, not just once but scores of times. Ask me how it feels Princess. You must be curious after all these years. Now’s your chance to find out.”

She doesn’t say anything for a long time. In fact she seems a little taken aback, but my glare doesn’t relent. Finally she collects herself. “Very well, Twilight. Please tell me what death feels like,” she says, almost but not quite keeping her voice from wavering.

“Awful, Princess. I’ve died so many times and every one has been awful. Even when I believe in what I’m doing, the last moment before I slip away is always the same. I’m always alone, Princess. No matter what I do, or why I do it, or where I am in that last moment before I slip away I always feel completely alone. More alone than I’ve ever been.” I walk back up to her, and lean in close. “All my friends died alone.”

I’ve never seen the Princess shaken this badly. I don’t want to wait for her to recover. I’m so tired. I turn away and leave to find a place to rest.

I don’t even make it to the quarters I usually use here in the palace. I find an out of the way room and lay down on the couch. Technically, I haven’t slept for weeks and right now I can feel every minute of it. I’m out cold before my head even hits the pillow.

My dreams are vague but intense impressions. Flashes of my time with my friends and of all the times I’ve died all mix together. Everything is tinged with regret and fear. After what seems like only a few moments I’m being shaken by some guard.

“Good morning, Ms. Twilight. The Princess asked me to see how you were feeling,” says the guard.

It would be rude to tell him to go run himself through with his own spear, wouldn’t it?

I only groan. The Princess probably needs to talk to me. Canterlot is under siege, and thousands of ponies need my help. I’m not so petty that I would leave them hanging. Heh, what would Rainbow Dash think of me if I did?

Nothing. Because she’s dead.

The thought comes unbidden, but is immediately followed by more guilt for what happened to her, and all of my other friends. I invited them here. It’s my fault they were on the train in the first place. I should have been there with them. I should have died there with them, and gone on to whatever comes next.

What does come next? I’ve never really thought about that before. My friends were all good ponies. I hope I’d deserve to go to wherever they went.

No time to consider it right now. I force myself out of bed and follow the guard to the dining room, where both Princesses are quietly munching on pieces of fruit. I don’t think either of them have slept since I’ve last seen them. Luna hasn’t even taken off all her armor. She’s all scratched up from fighting the night before. It’s deeply unsettling to see a Goddess bleed.

“Luna, Celestia,” I say. I think we’re all too tired for formalities. They both nod to me and go on eating. “Do you have any idea what might have happened to my parents, Princess?”

It’s Luna who answers me rather than Celestia. “From what I saw last night their neighborhood was among those infested by the changelings, but they may have gotten out. Perhaps they are among the refugees coming into the castle.” She cleans the last bite of fruit from her plate and picks up her helmet. “I apologize for my abrupt departure, but the battle outside goes on and I cannot be away any longer.”

Celestia lifts some of the scrolls beside her and passes them to Luna. “Please give these to Spike, sister, and have him send them to the front,” she says. I smile. That’s just like him, always finding a way to help out. I wonder if anypony’s told him what happened yet. If not he should hear it from me.

Luna departs and leaves me alone with Celestia. An awkward silence descends over the room, occasionally interrupted by the scratching of quill on parchment as Celestia writes something down.

I finally end it. “Princess, I’m sorry that I snapped at you yesterday. What happened to my friends wasn’t your fault.”

Celestia puts the scroll she’s writing on down onto the table. “You have nothing you need to apologize for. This day has been trying for all of us, and worse for you if you have relived it so many times due to this spell you say you cast.”

“About that, can you do anything to make it stop somehow? Not that I want to die, but am I going to be stuck in this loop forever?”

Celestia squints across the table, examining me for something. “I can sense it, I think. I’ve never heard of a spell doing what you describe but at the same time... well for lack of a better term you aren’t quite as real as you used to be.”

“I’m not real?” Great. Because what I really need right now is an existential crisis on top of everything else.

Celestia smiles. “You are very real, Twilight, don’t worry. There just seems to something about you being held apart from the rest of you. I cannot make any promises, but I will certainly do everything in my power to assist you once things have settled down.”

I would have preferred something a little more certain but that will have to do for the moment. “Princess, what should I do now? How can I help?”

“I need to attend to the Elements, but I’m sure a talented unicorn such as yourself can find something useful to apply yourself towards. Why don’t you help out in the courtyard? You must have picked up quite a bit of practice spotting changelings by now, put it to good use. Don’t leave the castle grounds. We’ll meet back here for dinner this evening.”

That sounds perfect. A task to help me keep my mind busy, see Spike, and maybe spot my parents. I could really use a bit of good news.

• • •

Luna doesn’t make it back from her patrol.

Reports from some of the other guards say that there was an ambush. Hundreds upon hundreds of changelings leapt out from every direction at once through alleys, windows, rooftops, even up from the sewers. There was panic and confusion as Luna tried to hold the ranks, but even she was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. There wasn’t even a body left to recover, just the bloody and twisted remains of what had been her glorious silver armor.

The mood in the palace is subdued, to say the least. News and rumor intertwine as ponies tell one another what they know and what they’ve heard. Some of them refuse to believe it. If I hadn’t heard it straight from one of the two guards who was there I wouldn’t have believed it myself.

The changelings left two guards alive intentionally. They wanted us to know.

It’s after ten at night, or what should be night, but the sun still hangs in the sky. I find Celestia on the balcony outside her bedroom just staring straight up into it. Now I’m the one with nothing to say and I just sit with her.

I said plenty last night. I have never, ever regretted anything as much as I regret saying what I did. It’s echoing through her head right now, I can tell.

“I wasn’t ever supposed to raise the moon again, Twilight,” she says. “Maybe as a favor, or if she was sick, but not because she was gone. I waited so long for her to come back, and I only had her again for three years.”

“I know,” I say, leaning against her. She isn’t soft and yielding like she usually is. She’s rigid, every muscle fiber in her body stretched taut.

“It’s not real yet, in my head. As long as the sun’s still up, I can tell myself she’s just running late. Probably overslept again, that’s so like her. When I do this, then it will be real. I just wanted a few more minutes, just to hold on a little bit longer. Selfish, right?”

“No, it isn’t. Everypony understands. Take as long as you need.”

Celestia’s horn glows, and without any fanfare or glory the sun sets and the moon rises. I turn to look into Celestia’s eyes, and I get to watch something inside of her just sputter out and die.

Without a word she stands and turns to go. I follow her. I really don’t think she should be alone right now. We go down the stairs and through the throne room, through the main hall, and down again into the dungeon. The guards scatter as Celestia walks up to the only cell that holds a prisoner and opens it.

“Hello, Princess. Come to talk?” asks Chrysalis. She’s bound in heavy chains against the wall, but from her smug grin you would think she was right where she wanted to be. Maybe she is. “I see you even brought your little pet student. How’s my invasion going? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, I can feel everything my swarm is doing out there. I’m probably better informed than you are.”

“You won’t win, Chrysalis. We’ll push you out of our city. We’ll wipe out every last one of you. You lost the minute Twilight uncovered what was supposed to be your surprise attack,” she says with a confidence she can’t possibly feel. “Even if we can’t do it alone my reinforcements are already on their way.”

“Which ones will get here first do you think?” asks Chrysalis. “The battalion from Trottingham coming from the north, or the one from Manehattan approaching from the west? I’d say they’re both about three days away, maybe two if they hurry. You don’t really think that Canterlot is the only city my children have infiltrated, do you?”

“It doesn’t matter if you know they’re coming. They’ll crush you.”

Chrysalis’ smile fades. “Yes, I don’t deny you have the advantage in that matchup. But if it looks like we’re losing, what do you think we’ll do to this city before we go? We haven’t killed very many ponies yet, in the grand scheme of things. Just enough so the rest would panic. We’re keeping most of them nice and snug in cocoons, all wrapped up and ready for transport. We’ll take half this city with us when you force us to retreat.”

My heart surges. If they aren't killing the ponies they capture then maybe—

“Is that hope I taste? Sweet, but not very filling. Make no mistake Twilight, your friends are dead. I refuse to take chances where the Elements of Harmony are concerned.” Her smirk returns in full force. “Would you like me to tell you the order we killed them in?”

I want to lunge for her but I keep my cool, for the Princess' sake if nothing else.

“Give me a reason not to kill you, Chrysalis, because right now I'm finding it very hard not to,” says Celestia. I can tell she's serious, and that's not a line she would cross lightly.

Chrysalis turns her head and taps a hoof to her chin, drawing out an exaggerated 'hmmm' sound. They were really thorough when they restrained her; there are even chains running through the holes in her legs that slide and rattle as she moves. “Well besides the fact that I have several lieutenants any one of whom is more than capable of taking over command at a moment's notice, if you kill me you won't even get to hear my offer of surrender.”

“Surrender? You want to surrender?” I ask.

“Well, your Princess makes such a compelling case for how doomed I am. Of course, it wouldn't be unconditional,” says Chrysalis.

“What are your terms?” asks Celestia.

“First, we want to live openly in Equestria. No more hiding in the shadows, trying to stay on the run from your guards.”

“That could be arranged, in principle, if you were to agree to be bound by certain laws and restrictions,” says Celestia. I shudder. Who would want to live next door to a changeling?

“Splendid! See how easy this is? Next, we would get to keep all the ponies we currently have cocooned here in Canterlot.”

“No way!” I shout but Celestia doesn't answer. She can't seriously be considering this, can she?

“Keep in mind that most of them have been ensnared for nearly a full day now. Plus, well, they say an army marches on its stomach. They've been fed on heavily, far more

frequently than most minds can sustain. Most of them likely aren't all there mentally any more."

Celestia still says nothing so Chrysalis continues. "Finally, we want tribute. A few hundred ponies a year or so. You can pretend we're friends and you're giving us a gift if you want. That is something you ponies do, right?"

"Absolutely not," says Celestia finally drawing the line. "I will not barter with my subjects' lives."

"Think about it. You'll lose far more if you don't agree."

"You have my answer."

"Aww... that's a shame. I know how you see us, but I've always thought we would make a good team if we put aside our difference. Your magic and armies, our information gathering and subterfuge abilities, think of the possibilities. Griffin pride is almost as tasty as ponies' love, and I know there's no love lost between you and the Empire.

"As if I would ever agree to work with you, or your hive."

"Is it the bug thing? If it's a question of aesthetics we can be flexible on that point. Maybe you'd prefer this form?" There's a flash of green magic and when it clears it's Luna chained to the wall. "I'll even let you call me little sister if you want to."

The temperature in the room spikes what must be fifty degrees in the space of a single second, and Celestia's eyes ignite with white-hot fury.

**"YOU DARE?"**

Chrysalis just laughs, a cruel laugh that doesn't match the body it's coming out of.

"Wow, sis, you are *spicy* when you're angry."

Celestia lets out a scream of the rawest agony I've ever heard and there's a flash of bright white light. I half expect to wake up back in the library having been incinerated but when I see again I'm still alive and in the jail cell. More surprisingly, so is Chrysalis. Celestia has vanished.

"All that and she still won't kill me. You ponies are all the same; pathetic wretches."

“It’s because she’s better than you, Chrysalis. You wouldn’t understand but she’d never kill a helpless prisoner, even one as disgusting as you. Because it’s wrong. That’s strength, not weakness,” I say. I don’t know why I bother. Something like her could never wrap their mind around that idea.

“Last I checked, my species wasn’t the one well on their way to being lunch, so maybe you don’t know as much about strength as you think. Why don’t you go find where your pretty pony princess teleported off to?”

Maybe I should. Celestia needs me now more than ever. Before I leave though, there’s one more thing I need to say.

“Hey, Chrysalis?”

“What now?”

“I’m not better than you.”

Celestia taught me dark magic for a reason. I reach into the blackest parts of my soul and dredge up all the awful things that have been piled onto me over the course of the day and pour it into a spell; a spell that won’t only kill but will cause the maximum amount of suffering in the process. I can’t cause as much pain to her as she’s inflicted on me, let alone on Celestia. But I sure can try.

It’s actually a little disappointing that the cacophony of the spell in these tight quarters means I’ll never know if she had time to scream or not. All I know is that when I’m done there’s nothing left of the changeling queen. Or the chains. The wall isn’t looking so hot either.

I should have done that back in Celestia’s bedroom, even if it wouldn’t have saved Luna.

There’s nothing more that needs to be done here so I head up, up, up to the highest balcony. I lean over the railing and I can see what I think might be my parent’s house, the roof top covered in something organic looking. My Mom and Dad may well be in there right now, hanging in cocoons from the ceiling of my childhood bedroom. I lean further over and imagine that I can see the wreckage of the train that became my friends’ tomb.

I lean all the rest of the way over and let go.

Even if the Elements never explode and we repel the invasion, my world’s been destroyed anyway. This future has nothing left for me.

• • •

“Well that didn’t work.”

I get up with a sigh. As usual I start to head for Luna’s room to wake her up. Halfway there I stop, so suddenly that a chambermaid walking behind me accidentally bumps into me and drops the stack of towels she was carrying.

After apologizing and helping her pick them back up again I wonder what, exactly, my plan is now. I don’t even know if I could get out to the train before the attack, much less how I could do it with enough time to wake Luna, save Celestia, and prevent the Elements from exploding. Doing the same thing I did last time will only get me the same result, and that result wasn’t acceptable.

What would be acceptable? What if I end up in a timeline where my friends and family make it, but half of Canterlot burns? Would I really be fine with that?

I turn back towards the library. By the time I’ve gotten back there Spike is halfway through reshelving the books I used to cast the spell in the first place.

“Spike, just leave that for now. Let’s go for a walk.”

We leave the palace, and I remember the last time we just went walking like this, back when I was naive and unaware that a cloud of doom was hanging over my head. Maybe I can recapture just a bit of that.

“Hey Spike, I’ve been thinking...”

“You’re always thinking.”

“More than usual then, wise guy.” I glare at him but he flashes up a cherubic grin, the perfect picture of innocence. Yeah right. “Say something bad was going to happen in Ponyville, and I couldn’t save everypony. Do you think there are some ponies that I would have to save, and others I could try to save, but if I didn’t it wouldn’t be the end of the world? Not that I don’t like them or they aren’t important, but if I had to choose.”

“Geez Twilight, why would you be thinking about something like that?”

“Oh, you know me, always thinking about some crazy idea. But seriously, what do you think?”

“Hmm...” Good, he’s taking this seriously. I was worried it might be too weighty for his young mind, but I need somepony to bounce my own thoughts off of. “Eh, you’re Twilight Sparkle. You’ll find some way to save everypony.”

“Thanks Spike, but if I couldn’t and I had to choose somepony who would die how would I do that?”

“You know, if I’d known that Starswirl had been researching a ‘Turn Twilight Sparkle Into A Total Downer’ spell I wouldn’t have helped you cast it.”

“Spike, would you just be serious for one second? I’m trying to have a real conversation with you here.”

“I am being serious. You have to save everypony. Look, some ponies have to be on the list, like the Princesses or our friends, right?”

I nod emphatically. Now we’re getting somewhere! “Yes, exactly.”

“But take Applejack for example. You can’t save her but not save Big Mac, Granny Smith, and Apple Bloom, right?” he asks.

I frown, but I see where he’s coming from and I agree.

So now you saved Apple Bloom, and Sweetie Belle too since the same goes for her and Rarity. Now you have to save Scootaloo, I mean those three are inseparable. And think how much they would freak out if you didn’t save Cheerilee, or one of their classmates. Well, they might be fine with you not saving Diamond Tiara, but Filthy Rich is a pretty good guy and he certainly wouldn’t be fine with it—”

“—and it all spirals out from there,” I finish for him.

“Pretty much.”

“But that doesn’t help. Like I said, it’s impossible.”

“Eh. That’s never stopped you before,” he says. Then he looks over at the storefronts we’re passing. “Hey, Glittering Gems and Gorgeous Gewgaws! Can we stop Twilight? Can we can we can we please?”

I'm slow to track the change of topic. "Sure Spike, you go on ahead." I watch him run towards the jewelry store, thinking about what he just said. From the mouths of baby dragons.

"Hurry up, Twilight," says Spike. He stops and waits for me to catch up with him. When I do he doesn't keep going right away. He just stays where he is for a second, looking contemplative. "Um... Twilight... If you did have to make a list. I'd be on it, right?"

"Are you kidding? Who do you think I saved the very first spot for?"

He brightens right up again, and dashes into the jewelry store.

I join him inside a moment later. The proprietor, Ruby, is a red—shocking, I know—unicorn mare and a friend of ours who's always happy to let Spike take any scraps or filings that are left over after she cuts the raw gemstones into the shapes she needs. The little guy munches them up like popcorn. Naturally, he's a big fan of hers.

"Hi Ruby! It's Spike!"

She chuckles. "Really? Are you sure? I think you might be one of those other baby dragons who's always coming by my store."

"No, it's really me! Wait. Ha ha, Ruby, very funny."

She laughs out loud this time at his angry little pout. I can't blame her; it is pretty adorable. "How are you, Twilight?"

Oh not bad. Just trapped in a time loop and getting ready to be murdered, again mind you, by an angry swarm of changelings. "Oh you know, same as always," is what I actually say.

"I hear you."

You really don't.

"Hey, your parents' anniversary is next month right?" she asks.

"Mmm-hmm," I say. My attention's drifting to the same spot it always does. A pair of dangly amethyst earrings that I've wanted for years. The perfect color to complement my coat. The perfect shape to complement my cutie mark. My dream earrings. Oh, and way *way* outside of my price range.

“Come in Twilight, Equestria to Twilight,” says a voice nearby. I look up and see Ruby looking at me, half annoyed and half amused. “You didn’t hear a word I just said, did you?”

“I’m sorry, Ruby, I didn’t mean to ignore you like that. I just really like these earrings.”

“Want to try ‘em on again?”

“The last time I tried these earrings on, I wrote an eleven page report on why Princess Celestia should let me sell a kidney so I could buy them from you.”

“Well, whatever it takes to get the sale right? Give me a second, I’ll go grab Spike his gem scraps, then maybe we could work out a payment plan or layaway sort of thing. You don’t really need to eat every day, right?”

Ruby walks into the back where her tools and workshop are. I look down at the earrings again, and I suddenly realize that there’s a huge unexplored upside to this whole time loop thing. It wouldn’t really be stealing. I’d just be borrowing them. Without permission. Not for long though. Just until the end of the world.

Before I can think better of it, I’ve grabbed a cobblestone from the street outside and dragged it in here. I lift it and bring it down hard on the glass case as Spike watches, gaping. The glass shatters.

“Hey! What’s going on out there?” asks Ruby’s voice from the back. In one smooth motion I scoop up Spike and the earrings in my magic and teleport away to a nearby park.

I let Spike down and slip the earrings on, checking my reflection in a nearby pond. Oh wow, they’re even prettier than I remember them.

“Twilight, what the buck was that?” asks Spike. My first instinct is to chide him for his language, but then I realize I probably don’t exactly hold the moral high ground right at this moment. “You just stole those!”

“Technically, Spike, when you do it during a war or natural disaster it’s called looting.”

“Do you see a war or natural disaster that I don’t?” he asks, gesturing broadly at our surroundings. There’s a mother and her foal having a picnic on the next hill over. Out on the waters of the pond, a duck quacks picturesquely.

“Well, you know, I figured I’d start early. Avoid the rush.”

Spike gasps. “Oh my goodness, I just figured it out. You cast a time spell, you’re asking angsty hypothetical questions, you’re flagrantly disobeying rules and authority like you don’t even care about the consequences...”

My blood runs cold. He couldn’t possibly have figured it out, could he have? That’s not a conversation I’m ready to have right now.

“...That spell made you revert into a teenager!”

Huh. I guess he really couldn’t have possibly figured it out.

“Don’t do it, Twilight! Don’t dye your mane all black and start calling yourself ‘Darkness Nightshade’ again. It doesn’t sound nearly as cool as you think it does,” he begs.

“Spike, I thought we agreed never to speak of that again,” I say. Because... yeah. Not my proudest moment.

“I have to tell the Princess!” says Spike. He turns and runs off towards the palace.

“Darkness Nightshade is a perfectly respectable name in some cultures, I’ll have you know!” I call after him.

He’s probably not coming back here. Oh well. I look back down at my reflection. These earring really do look good on me. You know, maybe there’s something to be said for this whole ‘looting’ thing...

• • •

When the changelings arrive, they discover one who would stand against them. A lavender unicorn in absolutely phenomenal amethyst earrings and a hoofband of intertwined platinum and crystal, wearing a slinky black cocktail dress I thought would make my flank look good. I wrong about that last bit, though. This dress makes my flank look *spectacular*.

She’s also hauling several shopping bags full of things that she may not have, if you want to get really technical, ‘paid for.’

The changelings think I’m some sort of high society easy target, and three of them dive down at me.

I'm not sure when exactly they realize their mistake. Maybe it's when I blast one of them on the approach. Or maybe it's when I reach into one of my—for a legally questionable definition of 'my'—shopping bags and pull out the baseball bat that I use to knock the second one out of the sky. Either way, the third one pulls up at the last second before coming around for another pass.

That's when I pull out the duct tape. I toss it in the changeling's direction before letting my magic do the rest, unspooling it and wrapping it around the changeling's body and wings. When I suddenly tighten it again, the changeling's dive turns much steeper and it crashes to the ground stunned. The last thing it sees is me casually wandering over, baseball bat hovering beside me before I lift it up to deal the killing blow.

Eew, I got changeling splattered all over my new dress!

Rarity probably wouldn't approve of accessorizing a dress like this with a baseball bat, but even if she didn't she'd have to agree that I am pulling it off.

Sticking to the shadows and assaulting changelings that are patrolling two or three at a time, I rack up a pretty respectable body count. Fifty changelings down already. Will it save Equestria? No, almost certainly not. Is it satisfying? Oh, you better believe it is.

I feel the ground rumble and shake. The time has come, the Elements are giving way. I see one more pack of three. I reach into my bags, almost depleted at this point. Why did I even take a rock climbing harness? I don't rock climb. Who cares, it can be converted into a pretty respectable straight jacket.

That immobilizes the first changeling, and the second goes down when he turns to look right where my bat is swinging. I chance a look up towards the castle, and sure enough the Wall of Horrible Shiny Death is spreading outwards, ready to burn up all of Equestria rather than see it compromised by disharmony. All that's left in my bags is a scrap of eggroll from the mediocre Chineighse restaurant I... uh... borrowed my dinner from. Tossing it into the air it catches the changeling's attention and it lunges to grab the morsel. Its lunge to grab it exposes a vulnerable neck. I bring Home Run—did I mention that I gave my bat a traditional Equestrian name? he's earned it—down with all my might. I only have a moment before the Wall takes me, but it's enough.

Score to beat? Fifty-three changelings.

• • •

The bell over the door to Pony Joe's donut shop jingles as Spike and I walk in.

“Hey Pony Joe, how have you been?” asks Spike. He waves at the big earth pony stallion wiping down the counter.

“Well, if it isn’t my two favorite customers. Haven’t seen you in awhile, thought you were living in Ponyville these days.”

“We’re just visiting for the week, but what visit would be complete without one of your donuts?” I say. I really did miss this place. It was my favorite haunt back in my academy days. “Actually Joe, I have a more serious question. You know most things about donuts, don’t you?”

“That’s what my cutie mark tells me.”

“To the best of your knowledge, do you know if there’s ever been a toxicological study done to determine the LD50 of frosting and chocolate sprinkles for a mare of my size and weight?”

“I don’t even know what some of those words mean.”

“Excellent, then this will be groundbreaking original research,” I say and open up my saddle bag, removing a piece of parchment and a quill for record keeping. Sure my notes won’t survive, but if I’m really doing this then I’m doing it right. “Joe, I need a random assortment of four dozen donuts, and make sure you thoroughly document your selection methodology.”

Joe rolls his eyes. “Whatever you say, Twilight. Coming right up.”

Spike and I take opposite seats at one of the diner’s booths. When I look over at Spike I’m shocked to see he’s actually crying with happiness.

“Twilight, I don’t say this enough to you, but you are the greatest boss I’ve ever had.”

“Spike, I’m the *only* boss you’ve ever had.”

Before he can say anything else the conversation is interrupted by Joe placing a platter in front of us stacked with a veritable mountain of donuts. Plus two cups of coffee, even though we forgot to ask.

“For science!”

## DONUT TOXICITY EXPERIMENT FINAL REPORT

**Subject:** Twilight Sparkle, Unicorn, F

**Donuts Consumed:** 23

**Variety:** 4 Original Glaze, 2 Strawberry Frosted (w/ sprinkles, rainbow), 1 Strawberry Frosted (w/o sprinkles), 3 Maple Glazed, 4 Cruller, 3 Jelly Filled (powdered), 3 Jelly Filled (glazed), 3 Traditional Cake.

**Cause of Death:** Inability to flee attacking changeling due to stomach cramps

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Remember when I said my high score was fifty-three? Eighty-seven. Take that, everypony. To be fair, the chainsaw helped a lot.

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“More tea, Twilight?”

“Certainly, Queen Chrysalis. Could you...”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

After all the life and death struggles I’ve been through, it’s weirdly comforting to know that I can always just walk into the throne room, explain to my mortal enemy that I know everything that’s happening but don’t have any plans to stop her, and be offered tea and scones in return.

Of course, it would more comfortable if Chrysalis hadn’t first adhered my body to a nearby wall with some weird green gunk that she hacked up from I-don’t-want-to-think-about-where, but I’m a glass half full sort of pony. It’s not like I can really expect her to trust me, and if things start to turn really bad I can still teleport away.

The queen levitates a cup up to my face so I can lean forward and take a sip. It’s good tea. “So Shining Armor has always talked in his sleep?” she asks, prompting me to continue what I was just saying.

Fate of a kingdom hanging in the balance or not, what kind of little sister would I be to pass up the opportunity to swap some embarrassing stories about my big brother?

“Since I was a little foal. That’s how I learned about his crippling fear of beagles.”

Chrysalis giggles, which is a bit disconcerting coming from a giant bug monster. “No wonder he looked so freaked out when I asked him if he ever thought about getting a dog once we were married! Oh, did he ever tell you what he secretly wants to do when he retires from the guard?”

“What?”

“Be in a mariachi band.”

“Shining? No way. You’re pulling my tail.”

“I swear it’s true! He and some of the other guards have the whole thing all planned out, and they even have secret practice sessions together every other week. He confessed the whole thing when I caught him wearing the hat one evening.”

“You know, a couple months ago he left town for a week saying that he had some ‘important training exercises’ he couldn’t talk about down in Mexicolt. Do you think...”

The queen and I share a laugh, and for just a moment the animosity between us is forgotten. When we stop a moment later she actually looks a little embarrassed. “You know Twilight, despite everything that’s happened between us you’re not such a bad pony. I wish more ponies could be like you and look past, well, what we are. Maybe things could have been different.”

What can I say to that? This is a side of the queen I never even knew existed. Before I can find the words to reply she stands up from the table and regains a bit of her menace. “I... have to go. I should probably just kill you now, but I don’t really feel like it. I’ll figure something out later.” She walks away. The gunk she stuck me in doesn’t really allow me to turn my head to watch her but I hear the throne room doors slam shut as she leaves.

I’m left alone with some turbulent thoughts. Have I been going about this the wrong way all along? Could it be that Chrysalis is only so full of hate and lashing out at us because she needs a friend? Sure, the changelings have done some awful things to ponies, but if I’m being completely honest we aren’t blameless either. Maybe it doesn’t have to be that way. Is that why the Elements of Harmony have gone haywire? Because they’re trying to get me to create harmony between our species, and stop this bloodshed before it starts? Changelings are shunned and hated, of course they would resent that. Maybe they aren’t the real monsters. Maybe the real monsters... are us.

My epiphany is interrupted when Chrysalis' face pops back into my field of vision.

“Hi again! So I did some thinking and changed my mind about that whole ‘not killing you’ thing. Thanks for the chat, but I’m just gonna go ahead and lay some eggs in your brain now.”

Or maybe not.

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I’ve been staring at my parents’ front door for the last ten minutes.

Pretty dumb to waste time like that. I’ve only got about an hour before the changelings get to the city. I shouldn’t be wasting it. Maybe it would be better to leave and come back next loop.

No. I’ve put this off for much too long already. I have to find out what they’ll say, though I doubt I’ll like it. All these loops spent on weird little impulses and distractions have just been another way to avoid doing what I’ve been most afraid of ever having to do. What I’d forever regret not taking the opportunity to do now.

I knock, and a moment later I hear somepony coming to the door. It opens.

“Hi Mom.”

“Oh, Twilight, come in. Are your friends here already? I wasn’t expecting them for a little while but I can put something out while dinner’s cooking.”

“It’s just me, Mom. I was hoping I could talk to you about something,” I say as I step inside. It’s been a while, but everything in the house is just like I remember it. A wonderfully familiar scent fills the house. Mom must be roasting beets, my favorite. We head into the family room and settle onto the dark green velvet couch. The springs are totally shot from all the time Shining and I spent bouncing up and down on it as foals who thought we might grow up to be acrobats, but it’s still quite comfortable. There’s a pitcher full of ice water and some glasses already set out for company.

“What did you want to talk about?” asks Mom.

You can do this Twilight. You practiced this in your head a dozen times just walking over here. Sure, that ended with a dozen different ways it’s probably going to blow up in your face, but try not to think about that part.

“Mom, do you remember Star Gazer? My friend from way back?” It seems like a safe enough place to start.

Mom smiles as she recalls the memory. “The only filly you actually asked me to invite to your birthday party every year. Of course I remember. You haven’t mentioned her in years, though. Whatever happened to her?”

I pick up a glass of water from the coffee table. There are persistent little ripples in the water from my trembling hooves. I take a big sip and put it back down. “There was a class we took together at the academy. We were studying for the final in my room one night, sitting next to each other comparing notes from the lecture, that kind of thing. Then she looked up at me to ask me some question and she was just... so pretty. The way her mane was falling over her eyes, and the light from the lamp danced over her face. I kissed her.”

Mom raises an eyebrow, but if she’s about to say anything I cut her off and plow ahead. I need to finally get this out of me.

“She freaked out. She shoved me away and knocked me off my stool. Remember when I came to Hearth’s Warming dinner with a twisted ankle? That’s how I really got it. I didn’t slip on any ice. She was so mad. I’ve never seen a pony that mad before. She called me... she called me a freak and all sorts of other awful things and she said she never wanted to see me or talk to me again. I don’t want to keep lying to everypony anymore, Mom. I like mares. I mean I like them like them. Romantically. I always have, and I’m so sorry I never told you but I just couldn’t.”

There it is. Now I’ll know for sure. Will she scream in my face that she hates me too? Tell me to get out, that I’m no longer welcome in her house? Or maybe she’ll just give a condescending little pat on the head and tell me that ‘oh honey don’t worry someday you’ll meet the right stallion and we’ll clear this whole misunderstanding right up’ but while she’s saying it she’ll look at me like she doesn’t even recognize who I am any more and—

“Yes, dear. I know.”

“You... know?”

“Yes, and so does your father. We found out a few months after you moved to Ponyville. I was cleaning up in your room and I found a box under your bed. Full of... magazines.”

Whoops.

“...Well it didn’t take a pony as smart as you to connect the dots.”

I sit there in stunned silence for a few seconds. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Well we talked about it and decided that we didn’t want it to feel like we were accusing you of anything or pressuring you. We didn’t know about what had happened between you and Star Gazer. You’d just gone off to start a whole new life in Ponyville and we figured when you were ready to tell us you would, maybe once you had a marefriend who you wanted us to meet,” she says as she takes a sip of water herself. I might as well have just told her that I preferred the taste of raspberries to blueberries for all she seems to care.

“What about those little comments you made about how you wanted grand foals before you were too old to enjoy them?”

“I still do, but I hear they’re doing some incredible things with magic these days. Plus, with two uteruses you’d be able to give me twice as many, right?”

*“Mom!”*

She chuckles. She’s saying something about an article she read last week discussing mare/mare fertility treatments but my mind is elsewhere. I’m looking back over the last two and a half years. Every time I made sure not to brush up against somepony or thought twice before I reached out to touch them, or the times I changed the wording of one of my friendship reports so that the Princess wouldn’t get the wrong idea. Or more accurately the right idea. All the times I convinced myself I needed to keep what I felt repressed and under control or everypony would reject me again.

All that time, Mom and Dad knew, and they didn’t even mind?

While I, on the other hoof, only even came over to tell them the truth because I knew that in two hours nothing I told them would matter. I’m a coward, not mention a terrible daughter.

Mom stops talking when she notices the tears welling up in my eyes. “I thought.. I thought you wouldn’t..”

“Wouldn’t what? Wouldn’t keep loving you? That is never going to happen, Twilight. Certainly not over a little thing like this,” she says as she reaches across the couch to pull me into a hug. I lay there bawling with my head in her lap while she strokes my mane like I’m a little filly again. “Shh... It’s OK Twilight. Everything’s going to be OK.”

I'm going to make sure she's right. No more running away from it. I won't live in a future where my parents don't get to watch me walk down the aisle to marry whatever mare turns out to be the pony of my dreams, while my best friends look on and Princess Celestia officiates. I don't care if it's impossible. Somehow, I'm going to make everything OK again.

I rise from the floor before Spike can say what I know he's about to.

I have a good feeling about this loop, but I need to get started right away. I've put a lot of thought into this over the last few loops, a lot of time making little tweaks and changes just to see what will happen. There are lots of ponies who I need to say the right thing to at the right moment, and lots of odds and ends I'm going to need for supplies.

I flit through the palace, teleporting from place to place laying the groundwork. A half hour of intense work later I'm winded but satisfied. I wish I'd been able to build up my physical capacity for magic a little over all those loops but the workouts never stuck. I guess that's the tradeoff for being able to shrug off the bad stuff.

I head for Luna's room. There are those four changelings again. I remember when they were anything other than a speed bump for me. My magic takes care of them so quickly I don't even have to break stride. I throw open the door to Luna's bedroom.

"Hey, Luna! Wake up!"

I don't actually bother to go in. That whole shroud of darkness thing is really creepy, even after this many repetitions.

Luna emerges after a moment, yawning.

"What is it, Twilight?"

"Time loop, changelings attacking the city, kind of a long story."

Luna's eyes go wide as she catches sight of the unconscious guards. I've found that leaving one of them laying directly in her line of sight speeds up this whole exchange rather effectively.

"No!" she cries. "I will accompany you, we must warn Celestia."

"Actually I need something else. I need you to fly out to meet the train my friends are on, and fly them back here." I've worked this out. If I send Luna to meet the train she can get my friends here before six, but only if I get her to leave now.

"I'll tell Celestia, you need to go now."

“But how do you know that—”

“Time loop! Go!”

It’s pretty impressive what kind of things you can get a pony to do if you tell them you’re in a time loop. I should remember that if I ever get out of this but need a favor done sometime.

I practically push her down the hallway until she gets the idea and takes off. She can really move when she wants to, and in a minute she’s just a spot on the horizon. Problem one dealt with. Moving on.

Celestia’s room is next, and I’ve got seventeen minutes until Chrysalis overpowers her for good, which obviously I’m not going to let happen.

The dozens of guards are still there. I remember all the trouble they gave me when I started all this looping business, and how I thought I’d never get past them without the power of a Goddess at my back. I’m not the same mare I was back then, not really. I’ve learned a lot and paid for those lessons in blood, sweat, and tears. I’ve learned even when she’s pushed far beyond the point where she should break down, there are some convictions my mentor will never abandon and that’s given me strength when I needed it most. I’ve learned that I have an incredible family who loves me and accepts me, and that love is helping me to accept myself in turn.

On a much more practical note, I’ve also learned about a dozen ways to mix household cleaning supplies into small explosive charges. For the record, I wouldn’t really recommend learning explosive making via trial and error. The error parts tend to be as painful as they are visually impressive.

I touch my horn to the magically sensitive cord that serves as a fuse on a half a dozen of my homemade devices, one by one. Once they’re all sparking and hissing I wait for just a moment before flinging all of them into the hallway and ducking behind a corner.

I experience the explosion as a wave of pressure forcing its way through me. I think I might have mixed this batch a little on the strong side. When the dust starts to settle I step into the hallway, stepping slowly and carefully over the now torn and uneven ground. There’s a few stragglers left alive, but none of them are in any condition to get in my way.

If I survive this, I’m going to have to answer to some very angry maids.

I open the door to Celestia's room, and there are the two of them locked in combat. Chrysalis doesn't even get to begin her little deception before a bolt of my magic to her gut causes her to gasp out the breath she'd been planning to twist into a lie. Celestia seizes the moment, and the changeling queen is defeated.

I wish I could just kill her, but for now I need her alive. My working theory is that the Elements will be able to operate on the entire swarm through her connection to them, otherwise this whole plan is going to be a bust.

"How are you feeling, Princess?"

She rises to her hooves, a little bit weak but unbowed. While she's recovering I take the time to bind Chrysalis with the ropes and chains I brought along for just that purpose. "I'll manage," she says once she's ready. "What is going on?"

I fill her in on everything. The invasion, the Elements, the time loop, everything I've tried so far to fix it.

"Interesting. I did not realize Starswirl had developed such a spell. I will attend to the Elements, then. They can't be allowed to destroy the city,"

"I know that's your first instinct, but it's not the right one. Do you think you'd be up to projecting the shield spell over the city? Otherwise the changelings will wreck it before the Elements get the chance to."

"If I must, but I do not believe I would be able to do both at the same time," says Celestia.

"Trust me Princess, the shield spell is more important right now. I have a plan. Just make sure you leave an access point in the shield Luna will be able to bring my friends through."

"How many times did you say this plan has worked over all these loops?"

"Oh, it hasn't ever worked yet, but this time line feels lucky."

Celestia doesn't look all that reassured, but her magic lights up her horn and a glance outside confirms that the whole city is wrapped in the safety of a giant bubble, tinting the outside world a golden yellow as opposed to my brother's purple barrier.

The magic continues to flow from Celestia's horn as she maintains the spell. "It is done. Luna will be able to enter at the usual spot near the train station without disrupting the

shield's integrity," she says, voice a little bit strained by making the effort so soon after her battle with Chrysalis. "We can keep the changeling queen here at the palace. I'll bring her to the throne room and keep an eye on her from there."

"Thank you Princess. I'm heading down to the vault to bring the Elements up, then I'll go meet them there."

We go our separate ways, and I'm able to open up the vault without incident. The Elements are right where I know they'll be, nice and quiet with no invasion getting them all riled up yet. When the changelings who are already inside the city reveal themselves that will start to change, so I'm still on the clock.

I leave the Elements with Celestia, along with the bound and struggling Chrysalis. Outside, the first edge of the changeling swarm has discovered the wall in their way, and are battering at it with all their fury. The shield is holding.

It's nearly five by the time I get to the train station and see Princess Luna approaching in the distance. My heart soars when she gets close enough to make out that she's carrying five different colored ponies along with her. She dips low under the mass of changelings slamming into the shield and opens a way through, sealing it up again after she enters.

Luna glides over and lands, dripping with sweat and panting. My friends drop off of her back and rush up to me. There's always time for a group hug.

Applejack is the first to speak. "Twilight, what the hay is goin' on around here? A whole buncha' changelings come swooping in out of nowhere while we're riding the train, and just when I'm thinkin' we're done for who shows up to help us but the Princess here. Pulls our hay bacon outta the fire and tells us you sent her 'cause there some time thingy going on?"

Rainbow Dash interjects herself into Applejack's explanation before I can reply. "Then she grabs us all and she takes off and we're flying, like, super fast and believe me I know fast so when I say it was fast you know that it was *fast*. We went like a hundred miles in forty-five minutes."

"She made me leave my party cannon on the train, though," says Pinkie, clearly disappointed that she's not able to throw herself a 'Welcome to Canterlot' party on the spur of the moment.

"I am sorry that we could not bring it along, but the weight would have been too much," says Luna.

“It’s fine, Princess. While we were flying I got out a book and wrote down everything I remember about every party I’ve ever thrown, see?” Pinkie pulls a giant book bound in false leather. The title on the cover reads *Pinkie Pie’s Party Canon*. “Unfortunately I accidentally ripped out one of the pages when we hit some bumpy sky, so that brunch we had last week retroactively never happened.”

“Girls, I am so glad to see you. You have no idea. But we don’t have time to talk or for me to answer all your questions, we need to get to the palace. So...” I take a deep breath. “A time loop, three hours, whenever I die, changelings, Chrysalis, I think about a month, somewhere around a hundred, yes, yes, no, 5:57, all of them, yes even the squirrels, Spike’s fine, no just me, you don’t want to know, the Elements of Harmony, I don’t know, yes, no, yes, and three tea kettles. Those are the answers, in order, to the questions you were going to ask.”

My friends are too confused by that to ask anything else, even Pinkie Pie. I gesture for them to follow me and they do, but as we leave the station changelings begin to crawl out of the woodwork. Chrysalis must have figured out what we were up to and is making her last ditch attempt to stop us.

This is where it’s all fallen apart on the last couple of loops. The swarm of changelings manages to take one of us out, or bog us down long enough that the Elements overload eventually although it usually does take longer when only part of the invasion force is attacking the city from inside.

The seven of us charge the changelings, and I focus on playing support. I’m always in just the right spot to lend a hoof, or block a strike, or knock out an attacker coming at my friends from their blind spot. Still, the numbers are against us. Every changeling in Canterlot seems to have us in their sights.

Then before I know it we’re standing in front of the palace, having come through the whole mob and out the other side unscathed. Luna sends us on ahead, joining the squadron of royal guards in the courtyard to hold them off.

We sprint into the throne room, and Chrysalis is right where we left her as are the Elements. We each grab the one attuned to us.

“Well, I can’t say I understand exactly what your deal is with that loop thingy you were talkin’ about, but looks like it’s all workin’ out pretty well for us. If you’re right it’ll all be over, hope ya did everything ya were hoping to with the extra time,” says Applejack.

Hmm...

• • •

I wonder if I'm a terrible pony.

Do all those timelines I died in still exist? I'm not egotistical enough to believe the universe revolves around me after all. Is there a timeline out there where right before my moment of triumph I ditched my friends, leaving them confused and getting them eaten by changelings? Did I create this whole universe I'm in now when I did that, including all the ponies who are going to die when the Elements blow up again? Am I responsible for that?

Then Princess Luna rolls over, draping one of her legs across my side, and nibbles on my ear. The philosophical quandary seems a whole lot less pressing than it did a moment ago.

"Well Twilight, that was unexpected. Although not unwelcome," Luna whispers.

The mattress we're sharing is bare; in the low light given off by the blue flames in the lamps I can see the sheets and blankets we tossed and scattered around the room. There's even a pillow stuck to the ceiling, and I haven't made up my mind about whether that should be physically possible or not.

I roll over to bring our chests together and snuggle as deep as I can get into her furry coat. The pounding of my heart is in contrast to the quiet and steady rhythm of hers, and I lay against her for a little while as mine slows to match hers beat for beat, the timing just a bit off so each one is its own little call and response. Then I look up at her face and wordlessly press my mouth up against hers. The first kiss is gentle, appreciative, but as she kisses me back I start to amp up the passion to let her know that I'm not finished with her yet.

When she figures out my message she breaks the kiss with a laugh. "Twilight Sparkle, you are positively insatiable! It's five-thirty, you do realize that I need to get up to raise the moon shortly, correct?"

She's not getting away that easily, not when I'm running on the better part of a decade's worth of repressed lust. My mouth moves to the little sensitive place on her neck that I've been putting to such good use for the last forty-five minutes or so and she gives an involuntary little yelp.

“I want you to show me another trick first, Princess Luna.”

“I think it would be fine if you just call me Luna, Twilight.”

“Luna it is then,” I say. I’ve addressed her informally before, but I take a moment now to enjoy the way her name feels against my tongue. It’s almost as much as I’ve enjoyed the way all the rest of her feels against my tongue.

“I suppose we have time for one more. Which trick have you enjoyed the most so far?”

“I think my favorite so far is the one with the weather vane,” I say and blush at the memory. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at one of those the same way again.

“I know just the thing then,” says Luna as she leans back down to begin kissing me again.

Am I a terrible pony? Maybe, but even if I am this was worth it.

• • •

“Applejack, there’s nothing I want more than to finish this now,” I say. I’m right back where I was two loops ago, standing with my friends wielding the Elements and staring at a bound and gagged Queen Chrysalis.

There’s only a few minutes to go until six, and I can feel the energy in the Element of Magic boiling right up against the breaking point. All six of us nod to one another and a rainbow of light weaves through the Elements, connecting them and us to one another, the other five begin to glow and are lifted off the ground, wearing expressions ranging from Fluttershy’s look of serene peace to Rainbow’s wide grin that manages to make her look cocky even with her eyes closed. They’re working just like they always have.

Mine though... mine has changed.

Every time I’ve used the Element of Magic before it’s been like floating gently on a river, feeling a powerful current propel you towards wherever you want to go. But this is more like falling into raging rapids that yank me from place to place and throw me into jagged rocks. And also the river is made of fire.

I try to scream but I can’t open my mouth under the enormous pressure. I start to feel and see pieces of all of those other time lines, all of them pausing just long enough for me to remember them before the pieces stab themselves into my body like so many shards of glass.

This can't be happening. I remember what Celestia said back in that other timeline, about how I wasn't quite real and a piece of me was held apart. If I'm not in harmony with my own body and soul, could it be that the Element of Magic is rejecting me?

No. This cannot be happening. This isn't fair. The Elements are supposed to mend and fix things, but this feels like being torn in half. I should be bursting apart as the time lines continue to fill me up, even as I think there's no way I could contain any more. They build on one another like notes making up an impossible chord until just when I think that the pain is about to drive me into total madness there's a final thrum of power and the chord resolves.

The pain stops in an instant and I'm falling into darkness. I can't die now. I can't go back without the hope of this loop ending someday, the hope that the Elements might be my salvation.

I can't...

Darkness takes me.

• • •

"Twilight, it worked!"

Here's the other thing about pain.

It's not the most pleasant experience, but there's no better reminder that you're alive.

When I sit up I'm not in the library but instead still in the throne room, surrounded by Celestia and all of my friends.

"Wow, what happened with your Element there Twilight? You look horrible," says Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow Dash, there's hardly any need to add insult to injury after what she just went through," says Rarity. "Although you certainly do look like you've seen better days, darling."

"Yeah! All of our Elements were like *whoooosh* but yours was all *errrrrrrrrrrrr whammo kablooie* and then giant rainbow explosion!" says Pinkie complete with sound effects. "Can you show me how to do that with mine?"

It's hard for me to put into words, and a lot of it I don't really remember. The parts that I do remember make me suspect that's a blessing.

"But it worked? The changelings... where's Chrysalis?" The spot where she had been tied up is scorched and charred, and there's no sign of her.

Celestia shakes her head. "Nothing more than ash now. The full force of the Elements was too much for her to withstand, but it flowed into her and through her connection to her swarm."

"What happened to the rest of the changelings?" I ask. The distinct lack of panic around me makes me optimistic.

Celestia smiles. "Something amazing. Many of them were blown away again, and I have ordered a search team dispatched to discover where to. However the majority were transformed. Those that had been imitating ponies became the mask they wore. As far as we can tell they are as much ponies as if they had been born that way, though of course we're investigating it more thoroughly. They remember their life as changelings, but no longer have any of the same biological or magical properties. Quite a few of my little ponies will wake up tomorrow morning to discover that they suddenly have an identical twin brother or sister, and I am inclined to welcome them into the herd with open arms."

Wow. I didn't know what the Elements would do but I hadn't been expecting that. That's actually kind of dubious, morally speaking. Forced permanent magical transformation isn't exactly smiled upon under most circumstances. Still, if the alternative was genocide...

Just another reminder that there's a very good reason they aren't called the Elements of Niceness.

"Oh my goodness, I'm going to have to throw like a million billion 'I'm Glad You Aren't An Evil Bug Monster Anymore' parties! This is gonna be epic!" says Pinkie Pie. Always focusing on what's really important, that one.

Celestia goes on. "I am a little concerned about you, however. You were out cold for almost an hour. Whatever the Elements did to you was powerful and completely unfamiliar to me."

No... They didn't... Did they? Did they really?

"Princess, can you tell if I'm real?"

“Twilight, have you been reading philosophy books without proper supervision again? Because we’ve talked about that.”

“That isn’t what I mean. In another timeline you told me that you could feel the spell that was causing the loops. You said it made me a little less real, or like a part of me was separated from myself. Can you feel anything like that now?”

Celestia walks around me, examining me carefully from every angle while my friends look on. She even goes so far as to prod me with her horn a couple of times.

“As far as I can tell you are completely, entirely real and every bit of you is right here as it should be.”

They really did. The nightmare is over. No more loops, no more deaths, I’m just plain old Twilight Sparkle again, just as I should be. The joy and relief I feel propels me to my hooves.

“I can die! Did you hear that, girls? I can die now! If I’m in an accident or somepony murders me, everything about me will just cease to exist forever. Isn’t that great?”

My friends don’t seem to share my enthusiasm for some reason, and all five are glancing at each other hoping somepony else will say something first.

“Um... well... If you’re happy about it, then I’m sure all the rest of us are happy that you’re happy. Isn’t that right?” prompts Fluttershy. The rest of them all nod and agree.

I really hope Celestia’s not wrong about this. “You know, I’d like to be sure. Maybe I should die again just as a test.”

“NO!” shout all five of my friends in unison.

Oh, right. I guess I didn’t really think that through all the way.

My stomach rumbles, and that reminds me that there’s somewhere I need to be for dinner. Somewhere I’ve been trying to get to for a very long time.

“Well, we’ve all had plenty of excitement for today, but if you girls are still up for it I think we should head over to my parents’ and get something to eat. Mom’s roasting beets, and I know they can’t wait to meet all of you.”

They smile and nod, and with a goodbye to Celestia we all leave the palace as a group, chatting away and laughing as we talk about all the things that happened that afternoon, as if we weren't all together for the whole thing. They fill me in on the fight between Luna and the changelings on the train, and I give them a few carefully cherry-picked details about some of the other loops I went through.

Some ponies think the future just happens, but I've found that not to be true at all. It's something we grow and shape with every choice we make. Sometimes, if we're really lucky, we manage to get one where everything turns out OK in the end.

Life's a lot more complicated than 'happily ever after.'

I've been laying awake in my bed all night, as for the third time in a row rest proves elusive. It gives me a lot of time to ponder things like that, not that I ever seem to find any meaningful answers.

The sunrise is just peeking over the horizon. With a sigh, I admit defeat and get up to start yet another day. As I head downstairs I hear noises coming from the kitchen. Spike's already up and about.

I walk into what can charitably be described as a disaster zone. Every pot and pan that I own is dirty in the sink or filled with some batters or ingredients. The responsible party is the little purple dragon happily mixing away, pausing every few moments to taste something and sprinkle some spice or another into the concoction.

"Spike, what's going on?" I ask.

He jumps a little at the sound of my voice before looking around. "Good morning Twilight! I was going to surprise you with breakfast when you woke up, so, uh, surprise?"

"That's a sweet thought, Spike, but you do know that you're cleaning all of this up, right?"

"Deal. Hey, wanna see a new game I made up for cracking eggs?" He picks up an egg from the countertop and stretches his arm as high as he can above the bowl. "You see how high up you can crack an egg and still get it to land in the bowl."

I sigh and go over to the refrigerator to take out another basket of eggs, because I'm pretty sure I know exactly how this is going to end.

"Are you watching?" asks Spike. He squeezes his claw and rather than cracking gently and sliding into the bowl it explodes, covering Spike and the countertop with raw egg. Fantastic, what I really wanted to do today was disinfect my entire kitchen.

"Well that didn't work."

The basket of eggs I was carrying plunges to the floor and breaks open, forgotten. I can't breath all of a sudden, and I feel a chill pass over me. I'm too overwhelmed by a surge of irrational terror to think at all, and my whole world is spinning out of control.

“Twilight, are you OK? Talk to me,” says Spike.

It’s several minutes before I can say anything or do anything more than just stand there trying to pull myself together. “I’m fine Spike, just please don’t use that phrase again,” I say in a voice that communicates that I’m anything but fine.

I stare down at the eggs broken and oozing all over the floor.

It’s been a long couple of weeks.

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The night we used the Elements, the night I broke out of that Celestia-forsaken loop, I was on top of the world. My friends and I were back together and we all went straight to my Mom and Dad’s place for dinner. Mom wasn’t going to let a little something like a hostile army attacking the city wreck her dinner party, and everything was ready for us to sit down by the time we got there.

Before we did, I proposed a toast. To friends, to family, oh and by the way have I ever mentioned that I’m gay?

That made a few waves. My mother jumped up and rushed over to hug me, nearly making me spill my wine. I’m glad she did, because it gave everypony else at the table a moment to gather their thoughts and shut their gaping jaws. Once they got over their disbelief, they were quick to congratulate me as well. I can’t believe how terrified I had been of that moment for so long. Fear makes you do stupid things.

My parents and my friends got along just like I thought they would, although there was at least one moment where Rainbow Dash, after a couple glasses of wine, challenged my dad to a hoof wrestling contest... and won. She was actually pretty modest about her win, although modest for Rainbow Dash still means at least three victory laps around the house.

I wish that dinner could have gone on forever, but soon the day began to catch up with everypony and it became hard for them to stop yawning. Those things are seriously contagious. We all went up to the guest bedroom we’d be cramming into for the night. That’s when the real fun started.

Not *that* way! Get your mind out of the gutter.

We talked. Gossiped, really, and the main thing everypony wanted to know about was how my loops had worked, and what I had been doing. I steered well clear of some of the darker stuff, and stuck to the ones that had been goofy and fun. My story about the time I had blown up part of Canterlot Mountain and then ridden the resulting rock slide on a telekinetic surfboard was a popular favorite, as was the loop where I had played a rousing game of ‘stop hitting yourself’ with a restrained Queen Chrysalis. That was fun right up until the part where she had gotten loose and snapped my neck like a brittle twig.

The conversation eventually turned to suggestions about what I should have tried, from Monday-morning quarterbacking—“*Dear, couldn’t you have found some sort of super changeling fighting spell in the archives somewhere?*” Like I didn’t spend any loops looking for one, come on—to practical, down to earth suggestions—“*Um... If it had been me I think I would have used some of the time to learn Prench. It’s such a beautiful language.*”—to somewhat less than plausible—“*Discord versus Sombra, cage match, winner takes all and you charge like a hundred bits for a ticket. Doesn’t that sound awesome?*”

We talked late into the night but one by one sleep claimed us, and I embraced my well deserved rest.

I didn’t wake up the next day until almost noon. I wasn’t the last one up either, Pinkie and Rainbow Dash were still sound asleep as I crept out of the room and downstairs.

Mom and Applejack were in the kitchen doing some of the dishes that had been left out the night before. When Mom heard me enter she turned to greet me.

“Well good morning, sleepyhead. Your friend Applejack here was just filling me in on everything you went through during that dreadful time loop. I’m so glad you’re back with us all now,” she says. I’m suddenly glad that I kept the worst of it to myself, otherwise I’d be looking at a DEFCLOP 1 level maternal panic attack right now. The worst parts of the loops, how they made me feel, that’s something I won’t ever share with other ponies. “So, I guess you’ll be heading back home to Ponyville tomorrow? That was your plan, right?”

It had been, but plans change.

“I actually thought I might stick around for a few more days, what with everything going on around here. The Princess might need my help. And I’d really like to spend a little more time with you and Dad. I know that sometimes I get absorbed in my studies, and I haven’t always been the best daughter to you—” My heartfelt confession is interrupted as Mom sticks a scone in my open mouth. Mmm, raspberry.

“None of that now, Twilight. You’re absolutely perfect just the way you are and I won’t hear a word to the contrary. Of course you’re welcome here for as long as you’d like to stay.”

I really do have a stinging rebuttal about personal space and respecting me as an adult instead of sticking food into my mouth to make me stop talking, I swear I do. But it’s a really good scone, so instead I just smile and nod.

Applejack excuses herself from the room to wake up the others so we can make the most of what’s left of the day. She’s just a little bit misty eyed as she walks away.

Spike and I spend the afternoon giving the grand tour of the city to the others, For some reason, Spike vetoes my all museums all the time program and insists on planning the route himself.

My friends enjoy the afternoon, but they don’t know what they’re missing at the Canterlot Museum of Ancient Pottery Fragments. Soon enough, it’s time for them to meet their train back home. I’ll be joining them again before too much longer, but still squeeze each and every one of them a bit tighter than I have to when I hug them goodbye. The memory of losing them is just too fresh to do otherwise.

With my friends well on their way to what will hopefully be a completely uneventful train ride, I turn and head towards the palace. What I end up walking into is pandemonium. While I’ve been enjoying my friends’ company Celestia has been struggling to find a way for the city to absorb tens of thousands of changelings that the Elements transformed into ponies. I grab a passing bureaucrat and have them bring me up to speed. Most of the efforts seem to be focused on finding permanent homes for the new ponies out on the frontier, and then getting them there. The migration is going to take weeks, and those ponies have to stay somewhere in the meantime.

Not all of them want to go. Some of them took the forms of ponies who passed away, feeding off the residual love of families, widows, and widowers who couldn’t let go. For them, this is a dream come true for everypony involved. A second chance with the ponies they loved even if they aren’t really the same pony.

At the same time, since Celestia made her decree there’s also been a grassroots upwelling of protest. Ponies screaming once a changeling, always a changeling, Elements notwithstanding. Demands that ponies who had once been changelings be marked or branded somehow, so they could be identified on sight.

And caught in the middle, a group of confused and scared ponies who never asked for any of it.

Celestia catches sight of me, and beckons me over as she speaks to a minister of some department or another. I reach her just as she finishes speaking and dismisses him. “Twilight, are you free for the afternoon? I could use your assistance here.”

“Of course Princess.”

“Good, and I apologize for this in advance,” she says and moves a sheaf of papers twice as tall as I am over to us using her magic. It drops in front of me.

It’s menial forms and paperwork, thousands upon thousands of pages of it.

I love her so much sometimes, I don’t even know how to properly express it.

“You can count on me, Princess,” and she can. I find a little out of the way desk to work at and start processing the forms. Hours later it’s over too soon. I fill out the very last form in triplicate and crack my neck to one side. Leaving the last pages on the top of the stack in the desk’s ‘Outgoing mail’ box, I realize that the sun has gone down and there’s nopony else in sight.

Making my way through the palace, I happen to stumble upon Princess Luna heading from dinner to some other business elsewhere.

“Oh, hello Twilight Sparkle. I did not realize you were here,” she says.

“Princess, can we talk? Privately?” I ask. She nods and turns to lead me to a quiet room elsewhere in the palace.

“Um... Princess, I don’t really know how to say this. I mean it was kind of just a whim at first, but now I can’t stop thinking about the time... I mean it wasn’t an actual time because technically it never happened now, but—”

“Twilight, is this about how we slept together in the other timeline?”

My jaw drops. “Wait, but how could you... paradox... impossible... wibbly-wobbly...”

“I cannot see into the other timeline directly, if that is what you are trying to ask. However after everything that happened yesterday I was concerned about you, so I checked in on you overnight. Your dreams were... informative.”

Oh. Right. She can do that. I work my mouth trying to say something, but nothing comes out.

“Twilight, there is no shame in what we did. I looked like I was very much enjoying myself, and I’m certain you were as well from the way you cherish that memory,” she says. When I still don’t answer she gives me a soft smile. “Come over here, Twilight.”

I trot over to where she’s sitting and let her wrap me up in her legs and wings. This feels so good. I never want what I’ve seen happen to her to happen again. I hold on to her for a few minutes reveling in the sense of tranquility that’s been missing from my life for so long.

“Twilight,” Luna whispers to me, “do you think you’re in love with me?”

I pull back from her so I can look up into her face. She really is beautiful, and I remember how empty I felt when I heard she was gone. But at the same time...

“No.”

The bottom drops out of my heart as I say it, but it’s the truth.

“Thank you for being honest, Twilight. You are a beautiful, phenomenal mare and I consider it an honor to call you a friend. But loss, pain, and lust can cloud the mind to the truth in these matters. I am proud that you were able to see through that.”

“Please don’t die again, Princess.” I bury my face into her chest again as I start to snuffle. “I can’t handle losing anypony else again. I thought maybe if I fell in love with an immortal pony I wouldn’t have to worry about losing them but...”

“...but fear is no basis for such a wonderful thing as love,” she finishes for me. How am I ever supposed to find it, then? Fear and loss is all I can think of these days. I guess there’s nothing more to say. I turn to go and open the door.

“Twilight? One more thing,” Luna says and I stop to face her. “Even if it is not true love, you are still welcome in my bed any time. I’ll even provide the weather vane.”

I blush and let out a little *meep* sound and Luna laughs while I close the door behind me. It’s late and it’s been a turbulent day, but rather than using the quarters here at the palace I struggle through the long walk to my parents’ house. I don’t know what I’ll do if I don’t stay close to ponies who love me right now.

My parents are already in bed by the time I get home. I use the last of my energy to climb the stairs up to my old bedroom before I collapse on a bed that's too small for a full grown mare. I'm supposed to be using the guest room, not my old bedroom. But right now I'm exactly where I want to be.

When I wake up the next morning and stumble downstairs, I find my parents both waiting for me.

"Twilight, we need to talk," says Dad.

If there's any phrase a parent can say that strikes more fear into a child's heart, I don't know what it is. Did they realize that I'm keeping things from them about the loops? Did they hear about Luna somehow?

"The Princess put out a royal edict this afternoon, asking for volunteers to quarter some of the ponies who used to be changelings. Just temporarily, while they find places to relocate them to. Your mother and I volunteered our guest room."

Oh thank Celestia, it isn't about anything that I... wait, WHAT?

"You're taking care of a changeling? Why? I have told you about how many times they murdered me, right?"

"Well you did get better. Celestia says that they're perfectly respectable ponies now, thanks to you and the other Elements. Besides, think about what a good example it will set if the Element of Magic and an ex-changeling are living under the same roof for a few days."

I'm sure there's a completely reasonable objection I could raise without sounding like I'm contradicting Celestia or being an intolerant bigot. As soon as I think of it I'll stop standing there gaping like an idiot.

"He's arriving this afternoon, if you want to help us get ready,"

"This afternoon?"

"That's what I just said."

My head is spinning. A changeling, or at least a former one, in my parents' house. I mean, sure I was helping Celestia find homes for them only yesterday, but that was because none of those homes were *my parents' house*.

“I’m gonna... I think I’ll... I need some air,” I say as I rush for the front door. I have to get out of here. I’m going for a walk. A very long walk. Mom and Dad don’t try to follow me.

It takes me eight blocks before I’ve even started to calm down. Why would they do this to me? Don’t they know how much those things put me through? Well, no they don’t because I’ve been careful not to tell them the worst of what happened to me. Shut up rational part of my brain, I’m trying to be indignant here!

I walk halfway across the city until I stumble upon the same park where Spike and I teleported during that loop where I stole the earring and went on a killing spree. Simpler times. What if I get one of the changelings I killed during that loop? Would they remember me? No, that’s ridiculous, but what if they do anyway? What if this was Chrysalis’ backup plan all along, revenge on me from beyond the grave?

Easy, Twilight. Are you listening to yourself? That’s ridiculous. I’m ridiculous. Not only that, but I can feel myself spiraling more and more out of control. Getting worse. No more of that. Hey, I suppressed something way bigger than this for years and that was probably healthy, right?

I wander a little further afield, trying to find something that makes my life make a little bit more sense.

I walk for hours, trying to stay ahead of my thoughts. I have an awfully quick mind though; I can’t outpace them. Everywhere I go, there they are. I thought a change of scenery might help me, but I’m coming to realize that I’m the problem. I fixed the whole world, fixed a whole kingdom, but never fixed myself.

As the sun begins to set I turn towards home. I’m tempted to just run for the hills, but if this changeling thinks he’s going to have free reign over my parents, he has another thing coming.

I arrive home about an hour so before when I know my parents will be having dinner. There’s a wagon full of stuff sitting out in front of the house bearing supplies marked with the Royal Canterlot Seal. The changeling must already be here.

I walk into the house, and the first pony I run into is Mom, helping to sort and unpack the boxes that have already been unloaded.

“Welcome home, Twilight.”

“Where is it? Where’s the changeling, Mom?”

“Twilight! Where are your manners? I’ve met him and he’s a perfectly normal pony. Be nice.”

“But... but he’s...”

“A good pony,” Mom insists, “we’ve been chatting with him, and he seems nice.”

He seems nice. Sure, that’s totally the standard you want to apply to a suspicious stranger who not two days ago was trying to invade your city and you’re now inviting into your home. I trot over towards the living area, and glance inside.

My father is helping the treacherous monster, who just happens to look like a completely ordinary orange pegasus with some sort of candy shaped cutie mark, move his things into their home. My childhood home.

This will not stand.

“Oh, were you about to greet our new guest, Twilight?” says Mom’s voice from behind me. I forgot how sneaky she could be.

Dad and the thing that’s pretending to be a pony look up as she says it. So much for the element of surprise. “Hi Twilight, didn’t realize you were there,” says Dad.

I ignore him. I only have eyes for the changeling. “Have you met Butterscotch yet? Butterscotch, this is our daughter Twilight Sparkle.”

The thing calling itself ‘Butterscotch’ gets a good look at me for the first time, and freezes up. I knew it. That isn’t some pony greeting another. He knows that I know. And now I know that he knows that I know. “Hi,” is all he manages to say to me.

I walk up to him, and thrust a hoof into his chest. “I know what you really are, and I’ve seen what your kind can do. You’re a monster. You always will be. You might have fooled my parents, but you haven’t fooled me.”

Butterscotch opens and closes his mouth a few times without saying anything.

“Twilight Sparkle! Get over here this instant, young lady!”

I glare at ‘Butterscotch’ for just a little bit longer before walking away to face my mother.

“I taught you better than that, Twilight. If I ever see you treat anypony like that again—”

“Mom! He isn’t a pony! He’s a changeling. He’s one of *them*. I’ve watched them murder ponies at the drop of a hat, mom, innocent ponies. Including me, if you even care.”

Mom doesn’t rise to the bait. Instead she looks at me. Judging. Evaluating.

“Twilight, have you told me everything about this time loop thing you were in? I’m starting to worry about you.”

I scream in frustration and retreat up to my bedroom. They won’t see. They won’t see how much danger they’re in and if, no, when something goes wrong I won’t be able to go back and save them. I can never go back again. I tried for so long to get out of that loop but I forgot how it felt to be constantly hurled ahead in time. How did I live like this?

Fifteen minutes later, my thoughts are interrupted by a pounding on my door.

“Twilight, dinner time,” says Dad.

As much as I want to ignore him, I won’t let my parents eat alone with some changeling. They might end up on the menu if I’m not there. Have to protect everypony from the monsters. Can’t rest, can’t rest ever again. If I do I might miss something and then who’s going to correct it? Nopony, that’s who. The world is so full of darkness, I can only hold it back by never letting my guard down. How did I ever stand living like this, where everything I do is so bucking *permanent*?

I come downstairs to the dinner table where Mom, Dad, and ‘Butterscotch’ are all sitting waiting for me. I sit directly across from the changeling, the better to watch him. We begin eating. Mom’s gone all out today. Salad, three entrees, plenty of sides. It makes me sick the way she’s trying to impress the thing in front of me.

We eat in silence, which is just fine with me. I’m watching the changeling, and from the way his eyes dart over to look at me every few second I can tell he knows it.

“These potatoes are delicious, ma’am,” the changeling says. “Actually they kind of taste like hubris used to.” No sooner than the words leave his mouth does ‘Butterscotch’ realize his mistake. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to suggest that you or your family were—”

“Stop with the lies, you freak!” I shout as I put my front hooves up on the table and stand up on it. Proper etiquette is the last thing on my mind right now. “You recognized me the very first time you saw me, didn’t you? I could tell. What’s your plan? Are you still working for Chrysalis?”

“No! I swear I’m not, I want to put that behind me, really.”

“How do you know me?”

“Every changeling does!” he shouts. I back away, confused. “Back then, geez it feels like it was a lifetime ago but when I was a changeling I was supposed to infiltrate the garment district. The original Butterscotch is a tailor who runs a shop there, I copied him.”

“That doesn’t explain how you know me.”

“I told you, every changeling would know you. I had standing orders to kill you on sight, OK? We all did. Of course I recognized you, Chrysalis burned your image into our brains.”

Mom and Dad are looking on, shocked. Dad’s fork hovers halfway between his plate and his mouth, forgotten bites of salad sliding off of it.

“I knew it. You are a monster. I’ll be doing the world a favor when I kill you,” I say and my horn starts to glow. All those loops gave me plenty of experience killing changelings, even when they look like ponies. Time to put it to good use.

“Twilight, I’m sorry. Please don’t kill me. I’m sorry, OK?”

“Sorry isn’t good enough! I watched ponies beg for mercy a hundred times and your kind never gave it to them.”

“Don’t! You don’t know what it was like to have the queen in your head. She was too strong. We didn’t have any choice. You don’t know what it felt like to be controlled like that!”

I stop, my horn still glowing, deadly blast of magic ready to be unleashed.

I do know what that feels like. The memory can’t be suppressed, and I remember what it was like after she bit me. How she made me fight Luna. How she made me scream with joy at being ripped apart by the Princess’ dark power because I was doing my Queen’s will.

I cancel the spell and dash for the bathroom, only barely reaching it before a wave of nausea catches up to me.

When I come back out, I've purged all that bile and hatred and I just feel hollow. I look down at Butterscotch, cowering on his knees terrified of me. I don't see a monster in disguise any more. Just a pegasus trying to navigate a world that's suddenly been turned upside down for reasons he doesn't understand.

I gather all my courage for what I know I have to do. It isn't going to be easy.

I lean down. I embrace him.

I forgive him.

I had no idea how full of anger I was until I feel it leaving me in that moment.

He flinches the moment I take him in my arms, and I can't really blame him after the way I've treated him.

I hold him for quite a while. Mom and Dad are still watching from the table. I think they're afraid that if they move they'll break the spell of the moment.

"You know," I say without letting go of him, "full disclosure, if you were in the garment district there's a better than even chance that there's a timeline out there where I beat you to death with a baseball bat the other day."

Then the most wonderful thing happens. Butterscotch starts to laugh. Maybe just because it's such an absurd thing to say he can't help it. Maybe because he's so tired of being sad and afraid he'll take any excuse to feel something else.

Either way it's contagious, and before long we're both laughing together and hugging earnestly. We needed that more than either one of us would have been willing to admit. By the time we pull apart, I'm happy to count him as a friend.

• • •

I'm glad to be going home to Ponyville this evening.

Not that I haven't loved being here and seeing my parents again, but it's not home in the same way Ponyville is. Not anymore.

I'm in the middle of packing up my things with Spike's help when he hiccups and coughs out a burst of green fire. A letter materializes in the air above me, and I snatch it before it can hit the ground.

*My Faithful Student,*

*I have been looking into the spell which created that time loop and I have made a significant discovery. Please report to my study immediately.*

*Princess Celestia*

“Spike! Forget packing, we have to go to the palace right this instant,” I say. Who knows what sort of discovery the Princess could have made.

Spike isn’t quick enough for my taste, so he ends up wrapped in my magic being dragged along as I run out the door.

“Mom, Dad, I’m going to see Celestia,” I call out before I remember they went out to lunch an hour ago.

I make record time running to the palace, and head straight for the Princess’ study. When I push open the door, the room is dark. That’s odd. The letter said to come here right away. I figured she would be—

“SURPRISE!”

The lights suddenly come on, and the room is full of ponies. My best friends, Princess Celestia, and my parents are front and center. Draped over them is a banner that reads THANK YOU TWILIGHT.

I’m too surprised to move for several seconds, but then it dawns on me what’s happening and I can feel my mouth pull itself into an irresistible grin.

“You guys! You didn’t have to—”

“Try being immodest for once in your life, Twilight. You earned it, and we wanted to,” says Rarity.

“Well thank you,” I say. This sure beats another stained glass window. I look around. Even Butterscotch is here, and he raises a glass of punch to me in acknowledgement when we make eye contact.

“Present! PRESENT!” shouts Pinkie Pie.

“You got me a present, too?”

“Oh, um, well I thought we were saving that for the end but if you want to open it now...” says Fluttershy, hovering forward holding a little box in her hooves.

I didn't even know they made Elements of Harmony themed wrapping paper.

Pinkie is vibrating with excitement. I'm afraid that if I don't open the present now she may actually start to drill her way into the floor. I shred the wrapping paper with my hooves rather than just ripping it off with magic. It's a jewelry box. A ruby red one.

I know what this is, or at least what I hope it is. For just a second I don't dare to open it, but I can't resist for long.

The perfect amethyst earrings. My perfect amethyst earrings.

“I can't accept these. They cost—”

“Significantly less than it would have cost to rebuild the city had you not stopped the changelings. I'm sure the royal coffers will manage,” says Celestia.

“I don't know what to say. Thank you Princess. Umm... you didn't tell Ruby about the timeline where I stole these, did you?”

“The timeline where *you did what?*” asks Ruby's voice from the back of the room.

Smooth, Twilight. Really smooth.

“We gotcha a little something too, sugarcube,” says Applejack. She holds out their gift. There's a ribbon tied around it, but they haven't bothered to wrap it.

After all, a baseball bat has a pretty distinctive shape.

I laugh and they hoof it over so I can get a better look. They even had the words HOME RUN burned into the wood.

“You do realize that now you have to learn how to actually play baseball, right?” asks Rainbow Dash. “Oh, and your Mom said I was supposed to tell you not to threaten Butterscotch with it.”

We laugh again and the party moves into full swing. My first priority is finding Ruby and apologizing. She's a little annoyed, but it was in another timeline and she just got paid a pretty nice sum of money for the earrings in question so it doesn't take much before she

waves it off and forgives me. She helps me put in the earrings and Rarity is at my side in an instant to evaluate how they look on me. Of course she's gushing with compliments.

I introduce Ruby and Rarity to each other, and Rarity knows a networking opportunity when she sees one. They start talking shop while I move on to speak to the other guests. How much everypony else knows about the time loops varies. I was straightforward with the official story, although Celestia requested I not disclose how the loop began. I'm peppered with questions and requests for stories all afternoon.

Finally, I find a quiet moment to make my way over to Princess Celestia.

"Hello, Twilight. Enjoying the party so far?" she asks.

"I am, Princess. I know that what you wrote in that letter was just to lure me over here, but have you made any progress on figuring out what that spell was? Or why Starswirl was researching it in the first place?" I ask.

"As far as I can tell, it was never meant to be cast. He meant it as a theoretical exercise, purely academic. It is far too dangerous to be put back in the library. I have copied the mechanical details into a new text, one with clear warnings. But I am now certain that you are outside of the loop."

"Starswirl couldn't possibly have known the Elements would break the loop."

"There is no mechanism within the spell itself to end the loop. Whatever killed you, be it injury, disease, or even old age would have returned you to that fixed point. I will not lie to you Twilight, you would have gone mad. Eternal life is not something mortal minds are designed to handle."

I sit down and think about the implications of that. How close I came. "Good thing I'm a bearer, then. What are the odds?"

"Perhaps not as long as one might think. Most unicorns would not be able to cast that spell at all. Starswirl took up the Element of Magic for a time back in his day, you know."

"He what? I've read everything there is on Starswirl the Bearded, and none of it ever mentioned that."

Something inscrutable passes across the Princess' face. "No, they wouldn't. The two of you were alike in many ways. Much more alike than you think actually. Perhaps I am

being overly poetic, but he may have been watching over you in some way through the Elements.”

“Watching over me? More alike than I think? What do you mean, Princess?”

That unreadable smile again. “A story for another time, I think. Luna would tell it better than I would anyway. I feel like some punch, would you like me to get you any?”

I shake my head and she walks away. Those sorts of conversations with the Princess always seem to leave me with more questions than answers.

The party winds down not long after, and I have to say goodbye to everypony so I can finish packing. My friends and I are all on the same train car home so we have a chance to chat a bit more intimately. It’s been months from my perspective since I last saw Ponyville. As we get closer I realize there’s something I want to clear up before we arrive.

“Girls, I would really appreciate if you would keep what I told you about me liking mares under wraps for the time being. It’s not that I’m ashamed of it, but being out is sort of new to me and I want to tell ponies at my own pace.”

All five of them suddenly go rigid, glancing back and forth between one another. No. They wouldn’t. I turn towards the worst liar of the bunch.

“Applejack...”

She gulps and her eyes go wide. “Hey there, Twi. Was there somethin’ you wanted to talk about?”

“Applejack, did one of you tell somepony what I said to you?”

She doesn’t answer for a second or two and I can see her wracking her brain to come up with something. Her face lights up as she hits on an idea.

“Twilight, Ah can honestly say not one of us told a single pony.”

There’s a loophole. I can tell and she knows it. I try to stare it out of her but it’s Fluttershy who breaks down crying first.

“Oh, Twilight, I’m so sorry! I swear it was an accident. Please don’t hate me forever!”

“Fluttershy, you told somepony?” I ask. Fluttershy isn’t a gossip, especially not with something she must have known was important to me. I might have expected Rarity to spill the beans, but Fluttershy...

“I didn’t tell anypony. But, you know sometimes when it’s just me and my little critter friends around the cottage I like to chat and tell them all about my day. I told them without thinking. I’m such a terrible friend!”

I relax. How can I stay mad at a crying Fluttershy? I’m sure I’ll be able to handle being the talk of the bunny warren for a few days.

“Don’t worry Fluttershy, if it’s just your animals—”

“I, um, forgot to mention that I was parrot-sitting for Rose at the time.”

Oh. That’s how.

“Rose found out I’m gay from her parrot?” I ask. I’m running through damage control in my head. Rose is a good pony, and I know her circle of friends pretty well. There’s a chance I can still salvage this.

“Well, I didn’t know the parrot was going to repeat what I’d said, of course, and Rose is a busy pony who lives pretty far away so when I was returning the parrot it made sense for us meet, um, at the market, on the busiest day of the week, in the middle of the morning when everypony comes out to do their shopping.”

I sit there and stare. The train is slowing down as it arrives at the station.

“So let me get this straight,” I say as my eye begins to twitch. “You’re saying that I was outed... to the entire town... by a parrot.” I wonder if the time looping spell would have covered dying of embarrassment. Too late to find out now.

“Sorry.”

My first instinct is to start screaming and ripping into her, Fluttershy or not. Her carelessness just exposed my most personal secret to the entire town.

You know what though? Maybe it’s better this way.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say and get up to start collecting my luggage.

“I know you must be so mad at me, if you want to scream at me or not be my friend anymore—”

I raise a hoof to cut her off. “Maybe I should be mad, and I guess I am a little, but this is fine. It’s like ripping off a bandage. This way everypony knows and if they have a problem with me they can just deal with it.”

We get off the train and sure enough I find myself on the receiving end of some curious looks, and ponies whisper to one another as I pass by. Some of the looks are more than just curious, and those tend to linger a bit longer. Maybe I should be taking notes.

Ponyville is a pretty open minded town and though a few ponies wave and say hi no pony stops me and Spike on our way to the library. It looks like no pony is going to make a big deal out of this after all.

“Hi, Twilight! Hold up.” A voice from above me causes me to stop and look up at the descending fuchsia pegasus.

So much for that.

“Hello, Cloud Kicker,” I say, greeting the town’s self-described lovable sex maniac. Just the pony I least needed to see right now. My front door is within sight, too.

“I heard the news. I just wanted to say...” Ugh. Here it comes. “...thank you.”

“Huh?”

“I heard all about what you did in Canterlot, with the changelings and everything. I have family in the guard, and if it weren’t for you some of them would be dead right now. Plus from what I heard about the time loops, you must have gone through a lot. You’re a hero, Twilight. So I wanted to say...” Cloud Kicker snaps into a sharp salute. “...thank you.”

Wow, that’s the longest I’ve ever seen Cloud Kicker talk without hitting on somepony. Maybe I’ve misjudged her, she might actually be a decent pony when she drops the act.

“You’re welcome.”

“Well, I know it’s kind of late and you must be eager to get home and unpack. I won’t keep you.” She lifts her foreleg and bumps my front hoof.

I continue on, with a lot to think about.

“Hey, Twilight?”

“Yeah Cloud Kicker?”

“Do you think we’ll be banging later this week, or not until next week? I know how far in advance you like to schedule things.”

There’s the Cloud Kicker I know.

“Just because I like mares doesn’t mean I’m desperate. I have a baseball bat and I know how to use it.”

“I know a lot of ways to use a baseball bat too, and I bet my ways are a lot more fun than yours.”

My face goes red. Cloud Kicker trots over and puts an unwelcome hoof over my neck like we’re chummy, all the time wearing that smug grin of hers.

“Think about it Twilight, who knows more about hitting on the mares in this town? Think about how much you’d learn if you let me take you under my wing? Or take you in any other sense of the word? I thought you liked learning. I could name four, no, five mares who would roll over for you in a heartbeat, once you learn how to ask.”

“Not interested.”

“At least let me tell you the best part before you say no,” says Cloud Kicker.

“Oh, hey Twilight,” comes a new voice from behind me.

I turn to the other pegasus. “Hi Cloud Kicker,” I say and turn back to Cloud Kicker who’s still got her foreleg over my—

Wait.

Back up.

Cloud Kicker, the one hanging on to me, is grinning like an idiot. I look at her. Then I look at the other Cloud Kicker, who’s waving and wearing the same idiot grin. Then back at the first one as my brain struggles to come to terms with a universe where this can be happening.

“Oh, Celestia. There are two of you now.”

“Isn’t it awesome? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised a changeling would borrow the shape of the most lovable pony in town, right? And then when you did your thing with the Elements, well...”

I saved Equestria. I broke out of a time loop where I died in a multitude of brutal and horrible ways. I stopped a war before it started.

If this is the price, it wasn’t worth it.

“So you see? We both really owe you big. There was this really impossible decision I’ve been trying to make for months that just got way easier. Oh, and tell me to go buck myself. I have an amazing retort for that now.”

I scream and sprint for my front door.

• • •

Over the next couple of days, life slowly drifts back towards something resembling normal. Ponies come by to see how I am and check books out from the library. My schedule has fewer and fewer blank spots each day as friends make plans and errands that need to be done crop up. An outside observer would think that I’m doing remarkably well, all things considered.

They would be wrong.

I can’t get used to the way things keep happening. Not even bad or weird things, just things like a casual conversation on the street corner with an acquaintance fill me with anxiety.

I can’t handle not knowing what’s going to happen. After all the loops I went through that I could predict down to the second, I can’t handle surprises anymore. I agonize over simple choices because whatever I choose can never be undone.

I’m afraid of Pinkie Pie. Terrified of her. I’m afraid of one of my best friends because whenever I’m around her I feel like I have to be constantly on edge, vigilant against her usual random and harmless antics. I hide how I feel from her and she hides how hurt she is when she notices anyway.

I'm spending more time at Fluttershy's than I used to. I like how serene it is, how nothing really happens. It's... nice.

All that would be bad enough even without the nightmares.

All the dark things I saw or felt that I never talk about come back to me then, when I manage to sleep at all. And my brain is ever so proactive at thinking up new ones too.

One night I dreamed that everypony in town was infected with that mind venom. Not changelings, my real friends who the Queen knew I would never raise a hoof against. I dreamed they chased me until they caught me, and whispered in my ears how good it would feel to serve the swarm as they dragged me before Chrysalis. I woke up screaming just as her fangs came down to break my skin.

Another night I dreamed I was waking up hanging in a changeling cocoon in the ruins of Canterlot Castle. That everything up until now had just been some dark escapist fantasy they fed me while they drained me dry.

If Luna hadn't shown up and told me it was a dream, I truly believe I would have lost my grip on sanity that night.

Maybe I really did, because I actually took Cloud Kicker up on her offer to teach me how to flirt. That only lasted about ten minutes before I remembered why I had turned her down to begin with, but it's not a good sign. Am I going to end up hopping from bed to bed, not because I'm looking for love but because I'm desperately afraid of being alone?

So by the morning I'm standing in my kitchen having a panic attack because of four little words from Spike, it's pretty obvious that I'm at the end of my rope.

I stare at the broken basketful of eggs for a long time while I recover from that freak out, long enough to take in every detail. Eggs are actually pretty interesting, structurally speaking. They're basically domes, and considering how flimsy the material of their shell is they can resist an impressive amount of compression. That's what they're best at: protecting their precious cargo from the constant, steady, crushing weight of the world around them.

Hit them with a sharp, violent trauma though? Well, the yolk and bits of shell in my coat speak for themselves. My telekinesis does fine manipulations pretty well. I think I could put a broken eggshell back together, fit the pieces together so tightly you would never suspect it had broken at all. It wouldn't be an egg any more, though. Just a dead and hollow shell.

“I didn’t sleep well, Spike. I’m going to wash off and go crawl back into bed.”

“Twilight, what’s wrong? You have to talk to somepony about this.”

“Talking isn’t going to help, Spike. I’m just broken. I’ll see you later.”

I run the shower until the hot water is all gone, standing there and letting it beat down on my neck and back until I can’t stand the cold. I get out and towel myself off. It takes me a few more minutes of sitting there alone on my bath mat just to work up the energy I’ll need to drag myself across the hall to my bedroom.

When I walk out of the bathroom I find five ponies standing on my landing.

“What are you doing here so early?” I ask, resenting the intrusion.

“I asked them to come,” says Spike. “You’re really scaring me, Twilight. Ever since we got back from Canterlot you haven’t been yourself. You haven’t written a friendship report in weeks, you hardly ever even read any more, and when I wrote a letter to the Princesses, Luna told me you’ve been having horrible nightmares.”

She told them about my dreams? That was way out of line.

“We aren’t leaving until you talk to us, really talk. Consider this an interval,” says Rainbow Dash.

“The word is intervention, dear,” says Rarity.

“One of those then.”

This is stupid. They don’t know what they’re asking for. It’s for their benefit I’m not talking to them. They were lucky enough that they only remember charging in at the last moment and making everything better. I don’t want to take that away from them.

“You’re better off not knowing. I’m sure I’ll be fine eventually. I was fine in Canterlot, right? We had fun there.”

“Or perhaps you were fine because we were having fun, and since we’re home it’s only now hitting you in its full force,” says Rarity.

Rainbow Dash must have decided this wasn’t working quickly enough, because a multicolored streak descends on me and lifts me off the ground.

“Hey!”

“You’re the one who decided she wanted to do this the hard way. I told you we weren’t leaving.”

She brings me down to the main sitting area and sits on my back. I try to struggle out from under her but it’s no good. The others come down the stairs and sit in a semi circle where I can see them.

“If you want to have a conversation this isn’t the best way to get me to cooperate, you know,” I say.

“Well, if you won’t talk to us will you please at least listen?” asks Fluttershy like I have a choice in the matter. “If you don’t mind I have something I’d like to say and I think the others might too.” They all nod. “I guess I’ll go first. Twilight, you know I love having you over to my cottage, and you’re always welcome there.”

“That’s right, I’ve come to visit you a lot since Canterlot. See? No problem at all.”

“Well, uh, no Twilight that’s just it. Sometimes when you’re over you do things that, well, they scare me a little bit. Sometimes you just sit in my rocking chair and stare at the wall for hours, or I’ll call your name and it takes four or five times for you to notice. Or when I try to tell you that it’s getting late and I need to go to bed but you just won’t leave, although I guess that one might be my fault if I’m not being clear enough, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy. I just have a lot on my mind right now. That’s all.”

“Oh, Twilight,” she says. She lowers her belly to the ground and scootches forward so I have nowhere to look but her face. At least it isn’t her weapons-grade stare. “Do you think that I, of all ponies, don’t recognize a mare who’s hiding herself away from the world when I see her? You’re acting like, well, me actually. The me from before I met you who was scared of everypony she met. That me wasn’t ever very happy, and I don’t think you’re very happy right now either. You’ve helped me so much, Twilight, please let me return the favor now and help you.”

“That’s... Thank you Fluttershy. If I thought that you could help I wouldn’t hesitate to ask you, I promise. But this isn’t something anypony can help me with. I just have to take care of myself right now.”

“Oh please, you call this taking care of yourself?” asks Rarity. Fluttershy moves aside to give her center stage. “You are a mess, Twilight Sparkle, and make no mistake about it.”

“Well, I just got out of the shower and I haven’t really had the chance to—”

“That isn’t what I’m talking about and you certainly know it. I suppose the nightmares would explain the bags under your eyes and how bloodshot they are, but your mane and coat look like they haven’t seen a brush in days. I don’t think you’re eating properly either are you?”

“I guess I might have skipped a meal here or there, but I’m just dieting,” I say. That isn’t true. I didn’t mean to skip those meals, I just sort of forgot about them.

“Dieting my flank! You’re positively wasting away, Twilight. Not to mention that you’ve blown off three of my invitations to the spa in a row. Otherwise you could be getting a massage while we talked about this.”

A massage certainly would beat being pinned to the floor and lectured like this. “Fine. I promise to take better care of myself, alright? Are we done now?”

“Ah think not, Twi. Pinkie Pie, why don’t you go next?” asks Applejack.

I hadn’t really taken a good look at Pinkie Pie before now, but now that I do I’m alarmed by what I see. The smile I’ve never seen her without is gone, and her whole demeanor is subdued. Even her mane is looking a bit flat and lifeless. She nods to Applejack and after a moment’s hesitation steps forward.

“Twilight, why don’t you want to be my friend anymore?” she asks.

“What? Pinkie, of course I’m still your friend,” I say.

“Yeah, but you don’t really want to be. Whenever I come up and talk to you, or try to give you a present or even just a hug you look at me like I’m some kind of freak. Like I’m scary and you can’t wait to run away from me. Why? Did... Did I do something horrible to you in one of the time things you don’t want to tell me about? Because if I did then I am so super sorry.”

“No, of course you didn’t Pinkie. You never did anything like that, and I know you never will,” I say. Have I really been this awful to all of them?

“Then why are you scared of me Twilight? I watched you march right up to Queen Chrysalis and not be afraid. You were super duper brave and awesome and she must have done all sorts of bad stuff to you. What did I do that could scare the pony who was brave enough to face that? Why am I so much worse than she was? I don’t understand.”

“Pinkie, it’s... complicated.”

“*THAT ISN’T A REASON!* We aren’t stupid, Twilight! Maybe we aren’t super duper smart ponies like you but don’t tell us that we’re too stupid to understand why you hate us all of a sudden and then act like it’s a reason why you don’t have to explain. That isn’t fair. You’re not being fair to us, Twilight. We just want to go back to the way things were before.”

I don’t get a chance to answer her before she runs away to find a corner of the library. Fluttershy flashes me a dirty look before she goes to follow her, and soon I hear quiet sobs coming from somewhere I can’t see. This is never what I wanted, damn it. I’m trying to protect them, not this.

“See why we’re doin’ this, Twilight? We want to understand, butcha gotta meet us halfway. Just tell us what happened, what’s eatin’ at you so bad. Do ya really think any of us would think less of ya?” asks Applejack, moving in for the kill.

“...I can’t. It hurts too much, Applejack. Please, it hurts so much. Don’t make me tell you. It’s better this way, if I’m the only one who hurts. I can protect you from what I saw. What I felt.”

Applejack scoffs. “Twilight, stop talking. For sure stop overthinkin’ everything, just for one second.”

We both go quiet. All I can hear is Pinkie crying, her sobs echoing through the now-quiet library. We sit there in silence for a bit, and the more I hear the more I want to burst into tears along with her. Just when I can’t feel any worse, Applejack speaks up.

“How’s it sound like you’re doin’ at protecting your friends from gettin’ hurt?” she asks.

That’s all I can take. I finally break, complete with undignified snotty tears and heaving sobs. Rainbow Dash must have moved off of me at some point because Applejack is able to pull my limp body up against her, and I lay there against her until I’ve cried myself out. By the time I have, all of my friends have gathered around me, ready to listen to what I have to say whenever I’m ready to tell them. I guess they’ve always been ready.

“I’m sorry. I was so alone. Every time. I always felt like I was so horribly alone,” I say, as if that should excuse how awful I’ve been.

“Hey, you can’t be saying you think I’d ever ditch a friend who needed me. Not cool, Twilight.”

“Indeed, you’re hardly alone anymore, darling.”

“It’ll be alright. If, um, if you want somepony to help you, I’m here for you for as long as you need me.”

“I’ll help too! We’re gonna make you feel all better again and then throw a huge-omungus party to celebrate!”

“Heh, sounds like ya couldn’t get rid of the five of us even if ya tried, sugarcube.”

I don’t want to try. I’d almost forgotten what being at peace was like.

“I’m not actually sure how to start,” I say.

“Well, isn’t that obvious?” asks Rarity. “All you have to do is go back and start from the beginning again, one more time. We’ll be with you every step of the way.”