

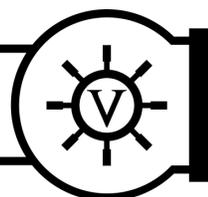
# The Pony Psychology Series

## Saddlesoap Opera

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PONY FICTION VAULT



"...*THE BEST NIGHT EVER!*"

The disheveled Ponyville ponies, Princess Celestia and Spike burst into laughter. The Grand Galloping Gala hadn't turned out the way they'd hoped, but they'd managed to salvage the night anyway. All was well.

Princess Celestia excused herself to go and manage the dozens of shocked and outraged guests still lurking in the grand ballroom a few stories above, leaving the six ponies and their dragon companion to enjoy each other's company - and some more doughnuts - before returning to their enchanted apple coach and making the trip back to Ponyville.

Rarity's would-be paramours had seen the fiasco in the ballroom, but a few more dainty bats of her long eyelashes and a tiny peck on the more reluctant stallion's nose convinced them to pull the coach once again. Soon enough, the group was back at the Carousel Boutique, carefully removing the damaged remains of their Gala dresses while Spike snoozed in a basket of yarn. The mayhem at the Gala was still the hot topic of conversation.

"When the Princess and I walked into the ballroom, I thought I was going to have a heart attack!" laughed Twilight Sparkle, her horn glowing as she magicked the starry cloak off her shoulders and into a neatly folded square.

"Aww, cut us some slack, Twilight," said Rainbow Dash, unceremoniously shaking a golden laurel wreath from her multi-coloured mane. "You can't even turn around without somethin' gettin' in your way in that palace! Cloudsdale's buildings are made with tons of open spaces - how's a filly supposed to *manoeuvre* in Canterlot with all those statues and columns and crowds and stuff everywhere?" She flapped her wings, hovering in midair for emphasis. "No wonder we made such a mess!"

"Fluttershy's lil' *stampede* mighta had somethin' to do with it, too," added Applejack as she switched her Gala hat for her standard headwear. "Shucks, fer a second there, I thought everypony was gonna chalk what happened up to plain ol' bad luck. But then - yeehaw! Bird n' bunny rodeo!"

In the corner of the room Fluttershy blushed, her rosy cheeks matching the colour of her mane.

"O-oh my... was it really that bad...?" Fluttershy's voice seemed even meeker than usual. Her wings twitched nervously.

"It was quite the scene, dah-ling," said Rarity from behind a changing screen. The glow of the unicorn's horn was faintly visible through the screen's golden silk, as was the magicked brush taming the tangles in her coiling purple mane. "But I can hardly fault you, now can I? After all, a moment earlier I was shaking apple-flavoured frosting all over the place like some hyperactive foal!"

"Yay, frosting!" added Pinkie Pie, springing out of her piled Gala clothes like a Colt-in-the-Box. "It's okay, Fluttershy - I'll bet those animals were all stuffy-wuffy boring types, just like all those ponies in the ballroom. I mean, seriously, who can resist the pony-Pokey? It's just not natural! It's like totally the funnest song EVER! *Yooouuuuuu reach your right hoof in...*"

"STOP!" said Twilight, cutting off Pinkie before her song and dance could fully begin. "Um, I mean... we're all pretty tired from the Gala, and we wouldn't want to... to... *cheapen!*... Cheapen the pony-Pokey with low-effort dance moves." Twilight smiled nervously, her eyes silently begging Pinkie to swallow her excuse.

Pinkie pondered for a moment, still teetering on one hoof in mid-dance-step. "You're right, Twilight!" she said at last. "A great song like that calls for maximum energy!"

Twilight sighed in relief, and the other ponies did likewise.

"Well, I thought that entrance was *awesome*, Fluttershy," said Dash after a moment. "You were pretty tough facing down that dragon up on the mountain, but I'd *never* seen anything like that from you before. Or *heard!* I didn't know you had it in you!" Dash nudged Fluttershy with an elbow, but the yellow pegasus didn't react in the slightest. "Say... are you okay?"

Fluttershy was standing stock-still, her eyes staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. Dash's words... *I didn't know you had it in you...* still echoed in her ears, pulling her down a long and winding path of memories.

• • •

*She was a foal again, and her earliest memory was of staring up at her mother's vivid yellow flank. The mare's cutie mark was a snarled jumble of multi-coloured speckles, like a childish scribble. Slowly, like clouds moving, the patterns would twist, coil and knot, sometimes even changing colours. As a foal, she'd thought it was pretty. It wasn't until much later that she learned what it meant... and why it was the reason that her father had left them.*

*It was maybe a year later, and her mother was scaring her. She had woken Fluttershy up in the middle of the night, all hissing whispers and fear-widened eyes. That stare - that wild-eyed stare of a mother fearing for her offspring - pierced Fluttershy to her core, planting seeds of fear and doubt that would haunt her the rest of her days. The mare hustled her foal down the spiral ramp in the middle of their home, all the way to the basement, where the clouds were so thin they almost sagged under the tiny pony's hooves. Dragons, her mother had insisted. There were dragons on the hunt, and they needed to be very still and very quiet until they went away. Fluttershy fell asleep listening to her mother softly crooning a lullaby, panic edging her every word.*

*She was still a foal but older still, and she was reading about sewing. The winter was coming, and without the bits to buy warm clothes, Fluttershy had no choice but to make scarves, boots and padded saddles for her and her mother. A shaft of light from the setting sun reminded her that it was time for her mother to take her medicine. The older mare's cutie mark was now a featureless slate-grey circle, but the scribbled patterns were faintly visible around its edges. She didn't want to take the pills. They made everything grey, she said. They made her dull. She needed her wits, she said, in case the dragons come. Gently, kindly, and for the thousandth time, Fluttershy reminded her mother that there are no dragons in Cloudsdale.*

*She was home from the last day of school before Summer vacation, but she wasn't happy. Spending so much time caring for her mother had chipped away at her study time, and her grades had slipped badly. Her flight skills were even worse. Her teacher had told her she would have to repeat the grade next year - and that meant no Summer Flight Camp until the year after. As Fluttershy walked into her home, she instantly knew that her mother was off her meds again. The place was in disarray, and she could hear her mother's paranoid muttering coming from the upper story. As she trotted up the ramp, she stepped on the torn remains of her favourite stuffed toy - Angel the Rabbit. Her mother would later tell her that she'd had no choice; Angel had been spying on them for the dragons.*

*It was almost exactly one year later, and two pegasus stallions in heavy white smocks marked with red crosses were pushing her mother out of the house. You can't take me away, she screamed. I'm all she's got. I have to keep her safe, she said. She accused them of working for the dragons. Divide and conquer, she said. Split us up so you can eat us one by one. Softly, firmly, and for the very last time, Fluttershy spoke to her mother. She told her that the dragons didn't bring the doctors; Fluttershy had asked them to come. She was sick, and these ponies were here to help her. In an instant, the fear in her mother's gaze was replaced by burning rage. "You ungrateful, blank-flanked little BUZZARD!" her mother howled as the stallions dragged her away by her back legs. Her front hooves dug furrows*

*into the clouds, releasing rumbles of thunder. "You NEED me! You'll see! You don't know anything about ANYTHING! You've never even seen the GROUND! When I get out, you'll still be right here! You're gonna wait for me, and-"*

*"You're... going to... LOVE ME!" Fluttershy's demure green Gala dress was in tatters, her heart was pounding in her chest, and her lungs were burning from the exertion of hours spent chasing the palace's menagerie. Her cutie marks tingled and itched. As her quarry ran to and fro through the ruins of the grand ballroom, she closed her jaws on a passing squirrel, and wrenched it off its feet. A sick, dark impulse urged her to bite down until she heard a snap, but it was cut short by a shrill whistle from Twilight Sparkle. Realization spread through Fluttershy like a splash of cold water; the tingling in her cutie marks vanished. She dropped the squirrel. As the ponies galloped down the stairs together, she thought to herself: "I have something you didn't, Mother. Something rare and special. Something that will keep my hooves on solid ground, even when I'm flying. I'll never end up like you did, Mother..."*

• • •

"...Never."

"What?" Rainbow Dash tilted her head in confusion at Fluttershy's sudden statement.

"N-never... never better, Rainbow Dash. Thank you."

"...Oh. Okay then!"

Slowly, warmly, and for the thousandth time, Fluttershy smiled at her fellow pegasus.

Pinkie Pie was so very, very tired.

She had woken up tired yesterday, too. She had yawned into her punch glass during yesterday's party. She had dragged herself into bed with barely a shred of energy left after the last guest had left. And with the dawning of a new day, she felt as if the sun had risen the instant she'd shut her eyes.

Thoughts of her old home floated through her mind as she fought not to fully wake up. The gloomy routines of rock farming had been her entire world for the better part of her childhood, and it had taken a multi-coloured atmospheric extravaganza to make her realize that there could be more to life than a weathered face prematurely aged from pushing rocks and meal after meal of stone soup.

At times like this, when sleep did little to purge her weariness, she couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if she'd missed seeing the Sonic Rainboom. Would she still be there, on the farm? Would her sister still have left home when she did? Without opening her eyes, she rubbed a front hoof across the faint rock-pushing callus still present on the end of her nose.

Eventually the insistent glow of sunshine became too bright to ignore, and she crawled out of the quicksand-like embrace of her plush bed and plodded over to the mirror standing against the wall opposite her bedroom door. Pinkie looked at herself in the mirror, and instantly regretted it.

Yesterday had been just the tip of the iceberg; the past few days had been particularly party-intensive, with a seemingly-endless array of reasons for her and her friends to let their hair down. The toll all that partying had taken was undeniable.

She looked terrible. Her unruly magenta mane hung limply around her face, and her wide blue eyes were ringed with rose-coloured circles much darker than her carnation-pink hide. Fatigue seemed to radiate off of her like steam off of freshly-baked cupcakes. She could count on her hooves the hours of sleep she'd gotten this week.

Pinkie violently shook her head while blowing a raspberry, briefly turning her head into a noisy pink tornado. When she stopped and faced the mirror again, her eyes were a touch brighter.

"Awww... who's being a little-miss-gloomy-hooves?" she said to her reflection. "C'mon - let's see that *smile!*"

She willed the corners of her mouth to rise, but the results were scarcely satisfactory. It was not her usual winning smile. It wasn't even a grin. It was closer to a grimace - maybe even a *rictus*.

She let her mouth flop down into an exhausted frown. Her eyebrows dropped as well, and her mane and tail drooped slightly. She trotted closer to the mirror, and put one front hoof on either side of the washbasin resting in front of it. She unceremoniously dunked her face into the cold water; the shock made her heart race. With a supreme effort, she arranged her dripping face back into something resembling friendliness.

"Ooohh... you're a *toughie!*" she said to the mirror, droplets scattering off her face as she spoke. "When I feel down, there's one thing that *always* cheers me up - *A PARTY!*" She spread her front hooves wide, releasing a burst of confetti from nowhere in particular.

As the colourful paper scraps settled onto the wooden floor, Pinkie stayed on her hind legs, front hooves still raised, waiting for the laughter to come. The fun, joyous, silly-filly surge of energy that helped her leave every other reveler in Ponyville in the dust.

Nothing happened. She let her hooves drop.

She took a deep breath. "I said..." She darted under her bed, pulled out a party horn, and blew a deafening honk at the mirror. "*A PARTY!*" Again, she felt nothing. The horn fell out of her mouth. She sat down heavily.

*Why are you even still doing this, Pinkamena?* she silently asked her reflection. *What's the point?* She scowled at the mirror. *Why don't you stop lying to yourself? You know what's wrong: you're all partied out. You can jump and shout and dance and prank until pigs fly, but deep down you're all partied out.* Tears streaked down her cheeks. *You shoulda paced yourself. Maybe one a week - two if there's a holiday. But no - you partied and partied like there was no tomorrow. And now there isn't. You're worn out. Whatever that Sonic Rainboom put in you is used up. And what's left behind? What will they all say when they see you like this?* She gritted her teeth as a bitter surge of loathing rose up from the empty places inside of her like a snake slithering out of its den.

"Gloomy-hooves..." she muttered at the mirror. "Wallflower... stick-in-the-mud..." She started to shake as her voice rose in volume. "Tired old mare...! Dull-as-dishwater party-poofer! *STUPID! BORING! ROCK-FARMER!*"

Outside, the sky above Sugarcube Corner filled with a shock of colour as Rainbow Dash surged into view from above. The speedy pegasus neatly perched on the second-story

windowsill of Sugarcube Corner, and pulled open the window with her mouth. She stuck her head inside, and called out:

"Hey, Pinkie...! You wanna go-*ohmygosh!*"

"*YOU'RE WORTHLESS!*" Pinkie screamed, and smashed her forehead into the mirror with punishing force; a spiderweb crack spread across the glass. "*YOU'RE NOTHING!*" Her face struck the glass again. Shards fell into the wash basin, revealing the mirror's wooden backing. A thread of blood spilled down Pinkie's face from a cut on her forehead. As she drew back for another strike, she finally noticed the sky-blue pegasus staring at her in horror from the open window.

"R-Rainbow Dash! Good morning!"

Pinkie resumed her typical jolly manner in the blink of an eye. This time her forced smile was so wide it made her jaw hurt worse than her forehead. Her mane had perked into its usual frizz... except for a strand of forelock pasted to her face by the blood still oozing from her cut.

"P... Pp..." Rainbow Dash tried to speak, but her mouth felt numb; this was *so* much worse than walking in on Pinkie's little "party" a few weeks ago. *Why me?* she wondered.

"Ooooh! Are we playing a guessing game?" Pinkie's voice was almost sickeningly shrill and perky. "Let's see... starts with P... OOH! Is it PARTY?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head, and hopped into the room. Averting her eyes from Pinkie's wide, gleaming gaze, she took a deep breath and forced the words to come out.

"P-Pinkie... I saw what you did. I... I heard what you *said*. Did something happen? Are you okay...?" Rainbow Dash waited for an answer, but she heard nothing. She looked over at Pinkie Pie, but the pink mare had vanished... because she was suddenly right next to her. Dash yelped in shock.

"Don't tell anypony about this, Dashie! *Please!*" Fresh tears welled up in the earth pony's eyes. "I was just a little sad, is all! It doesn't mean anything! Everypony gets sad, right? EVERYPONY! I mean, if you didn't get sad, how would you know when you got happy - right? *RIGHT?*"

Pinkie had her front hooves wrapped around Dash's shoulders; her forehead was pressed against the pegasus'. Dash could feel her friend's blood moistening the orange streak of her forelock, and smell her hot, perpetually-sugary breath.

"D-Don't worry, Pinkie... I won't tell!" Dash was struggling to get free now, flapping her wings and skating her hooves on the smooth wooden floor. "I promise!" Pinkie let go, and Rainbow Dash surged backward. She crashed into Pinkie's bed, and fell in a heap next to it.

"Oh, thankyouthankyouthankyou! I *knew* I could count on you! You'd never break your promise, would you, Dashie? After all, losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend..." In a split second, Pinkie had scooped up Rainbow Dash, and cupped the pegasus' face in her hooves. "...*FOREVER*."

"You can c-count on me, Pinkie!" Rainbow Dash forced a smile, and nodded as much as Pinkie's grip would allow.

Pinkie Pie released her, and waved her hooves for joy. "YAAAYY! You're the best, Dashie!" Pinkie gasped in realization. "We should throw a PARTY to remind everyone how awesome you are! I'll go start getting ready!" With that, Pinkie took off down the stairs like a frizzy pink cannonball.

Rainbow Dash sat on the bedroom floor curled up in a ball. She wanted to fly away, but she was shaking so badly she was worried she'd crash. Not since Rarity's confidence-crushing display of her magicked gossamer wings before the Best Young Flyer Competition had one of her friends upset her so profoundly. The burden of her new secret felt like a pair of cement saddlebags on her back.

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As the party in her honour rolled on, the weight moved from Rainbow Dash's back to the pit of her stomach. Pinkie Pie was totally normal again - for Pinkie Pie, anyway. Laughing and giggling, hopping about, singing and dancing, gobbling up pastries; even the cut on her forehead was invisible beneath her dark pink mane. There wasn't even the faintest hint of the wailing, despairing, self-destructive Pinkie she'd seen before. Whatever had upset her was - apparently - gone.

But what Rainbow Dash had seen still haunted her, and she couldn't let any sign of her worries show or she'd risk breaking her promise. So she had to smile and laugh and celebrate right along with her earth pony friend, even though she felt like a ball of stress covered with a light dusting of hide and feathers.

As Pinkie Pie juggled a quartet of frosted petit-fours, she glanced across the room at her pegasus friend. During the whole Photo Finish fiasco, Twilight Sparkle had proven she

couldn't keep a secret when it counted, but Pinkie felt she could trust Rainbow Dash. She had barely said a thing about what she'd seen on Pinkie's last birthday, and she'd shown no sign of blurting out what she'd seen today to any of the party guests. Pinkie felt relieved that it had been Dash who had seen her outburst.

*You're the one, Rainbow Dash,* she thought to herself. *You'll understand. You've got to.* With a dramatic flourish, Pinkie dropped the miniature cakes into her gaping mouth, and gulped them down.

"Ta-DAAHHH!" The party guests stomped applause and cheered; Pinkie felt nothing.

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It was after the party and after hours, and Sugarcube Corner's main floor was empty of ponies save for Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash. Dash had insisted that as the guest of honour and the party organizer, the two of them would handle the cleanup on their own.

The pair tidied up the balloons, streamers and other party paraphernalia in silence for a time, but soon Rainbow Dash couldn't hold her tongue any longer. She trotted over to the archway leading into the kitchen, where Pinkie was busying herself pouring the dregs of the punch down the drain.

"Pinkie..."

The word seemed to echo. Now that the silence was finally broken, Dash wasn't sure how to continue. "Are... are you sure you're okay?"

Pinkie answered without turning around. "Of course, silly! Why wouldn't I be okay?" Her tone was slightly - just *slightly* - lower and slower than usual.

"You *know* why, Pinkie." Dash rubbed the back of her rainbow-maned neck with a hoof. "Look, I'm not all that good at all this kinda thing, but I wouldn't be a very good Element of Loyalty if I didn't watch out for my friends. And I *hate* losing. So if something's wrong, I want you to tell me, okay?"

Pinkie Pie's shoulders heaved for a second, and she let out a tiny whimper. "I'm not happy, Dash."

"What...?" Rainbow Dash trotted closer.

Pinkie turned, suddenly almost nose to nose with Rainbow Dash. Her eyes were shining with tears. "*I'M NOT HAPPY!*" she wailed, and threw her hooves around the pegasus' shoulders. She buried her face in Dash's multi-coloured mane, and sobbed. Blindsided by the outburst, Dash could only hug the earth pony back.

"I *TRY* to be happy, Dash! I try SO hard! And I try even harder to make everypony around me happy, too. But lately I just feel so *EMPTY* inside! And it makes me wanna cry, but if I do then everypony will know there's something *WRONG* with me! And they'll just try to get the happy, silly-filly, fun Pinkie back! But I don't *WANT* to party, Dash! Sometimes I... I want... I just..." Pinkie collapsed against her friend, coughing out wracking sobs between gasped breaths. "I don't want to party, Dash. Oh, please, *PLEASE* don't hate me..."

"*Pinkie...*" Tears of her own stung Rainbow Dash's eyes. Her expression turned stern. "I don't hate you. No pony hates you! Everypony loves you! And we won't stop loving you just 'cause you get a little sad! If you wanna cry, then you go right ahead!"

At a loss for words, Pinkie simply obliged. She wept in her friend's embrace for what felt like hours, unleashing emotions that had been devouring her from the inside for years. Bit by bit, the flood of tears slowed to a trickle, and finally stopped. "Th-thank you, Dash." Pinkie sniffled. "This means so much to me. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there. You're the best!" Pinkie smiled a tiny - by her standards - smile.

"Guilty," chuckled Rainbow Dash, relieved to see a touch of brightness back in her friend's demeanour.

Pinkie chuckled back, but then turned serious. "I... I still don't want anypony else to know about this, okay Dash? Not yet, anyways."

Rainbow Dash nodded firmly. "I'm sure all of our friends would feel the same as I do, but a promise is a promise, Pinkie. This'll be just between us - flyer's honour!" Dash solemnly raised a hoof. Pinkie Pie's smile widened to its customary broadness, and her colour seemed to brighten. She hugged her pegasus friend one more time as Rainbow Dash turned to leave.

Outside, the sun was creeping behind the horizon as Celestia's duties gave way to Luna's. Rainbow Dash trotted a few paces, and then took to the air. She was only just above Ponyville's skyline when she felt a twinge in her back; helping her friend had felt good, but it had also been extremely stressful.

And there was still that complex rain squall to orchestrate tomorrow, followed by the High Altitude Vertical Sprint Semifinals, and then her duties teaching pegasus foals about proper cloud-busting techniques... Rainbow Dash shook her head.

*No problem!* she thought to herself. *If I can do a Sonic Rainboom and catch four ponies while pulling a thousand G's, I can handle ANYTHING!* But the knots in her muscles stayed where they were.

Though she was almost blinded by condensation on her goggles, Rainbow Dash could tell she was in the lead. The air currents were clean, undisturbed by anypony ahead of her. With a last burst of speed, she felt the tingling splash of the storm cloud that acted as the finish line for the Cloudsdale High-Altitude Vertical Sprint Semifinals, and let out a shout of triumph as she heard its thunderclap signal her victory. The other contestants scattered at the sound. Some shouted praise up at Dash, and some sneered in an unsportsponylife fashion.

Crowds of pegasi watching the event cheered and whistled, flapping their wings and stomping applause on whatever hard surfaces they could find - clouds were scarcely noisy enough. The event's announcer tapped his microphone for silence, and spoke: "We have a winner - contestant 23 and last year's Best Young Flyer, Rrrrainbow Daaaaaash!" The crowd's cheers surged once more. "Everypony wish her the best of luck for representing Cloudsdale at the finals next week! You can do it, Miss Dash! *We're all counting on you!*"

Having finally shed her upward momentum, Rainbow Dash arced down toward the stadium to receive her trophy. She was only a few seconds' flight from the podium when a flare of pain lanced across her shoulders and into her wings. Her supracoracoideus muscles were suddenly agonizingly taut, pulling her wings far too high for a safe glide.

*Oh, no... not a muscle cramp! Not now!* Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth, fighting against the pain, and willed her wings to keep working for *just... a bit... longer...*

Her four hooves all touched cloud, but it was a very near thing. She skidded sideways on the puffy surface, coming to a halt, panting, in front of the announcer at the podium. Taking her emergency landing and upraised wings for a flourish, the crowd cheered all the louder. As Rainbow Dash said a few words of appreciation for her trophy, she hoped the crowd would also take the quaver in her voice and the droplets inside her goggles for signs that she was crying for joy.

An hour later, Rainbow Dash stood alone under a personal miniature downpour. The single purloined cloud's rain soothed her aching wings enough that she could - with extreme care - lower and fold them. But she could feel that the problem wasn't gone. Her back was still an ocean of tension, and her wings hadn't been this sore since she'd first fledged. She needed help.

• • •

Fluttershy trotted over to her cottage door; the insistent, pounding knock had been startling, but she recognized it. Her suspicions were confirmed as she opened the door. "Why, hello Rainbow Dash. So nice of you to come 'round. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She smiled and stood aside to allow her friend to enter.

The rainbow-maned pegasus trotted inside, and paced around the living room silently for a moment before turning to face Fluttershy. "I need some advice on how to relax."

Fluttershy's perpetually-concerned expression deepened. "Oh, my. Are you feeling stressed?"

Rainbow Dash mentally reviewed recent events:

*It was a week ago, and she was peering into the second-story window of Sugarcube Corner, watching in mute horror as one of her best friends screamed and smashed a mirror with her pink, tear-streaked face.*

*It was five days ago, and she was smacking a walleyed mailmare with a rolled-up scroll, shouting at her - again - to stop delivering her letters coming from a Griffin she'd cut out of her life. The grey pegasus cried, and she felt like a monster.*

*It was three days ago, and she was so wrapped up in cloud busting that she knocked the floor right out from under a cotton candy vendor pegasus' kiosk. She had to pay for the crashed stand.*

*It was yesterday, and as she felt her cramping wings lose more and more lift she briefly wondered if she'd feel the impact before dying when she struck the ground at terminal velocity.*

She shook her head. "N-no way...!" she blustered. "I've just been workin' really hard on the weather lately, and I figured Equestria's top flyer deserved a little R and R, you know?"

"Well, when Rarity and I visit the spa, I always come out feeling just *wonderful*. Maybe we could pay Lotus and Aloe a visit?"

"Nahh, I can't afford that place! I mean, I'm not a fancy dressmaker or a... wait. How can *you* afford to go there, Fluttershy?" Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow.

"Oh! Um, I bring them plants for their lotions and mixtures, so they give me a discount, and I... I have some bits stashed away from... *an inheritance*." A look of grief passed over

Fluttershy's features, but it quickly vanished. "But, anyway, if the spa's a no-go, maybe I could help you myself."

"Really...? Okay. What do you have in mind?"

• • •

Rainbow Dash lay on her belly on top of a soft pillow in the middle of the cottage's living room floor. The birds and animals had been gently shooed out, the curtains were drawn, the lamps were low, and herb-scented beeswax candles provided the only other illumination. The peace and serenity in the room was almost tangible.

Fluttershy was in the kitchen, scrubbing her hooves. She dried them on a towel, and trotted up behind her fellow pegasus. "*Now, just take slow, even breaths, and let your mind drift.*"

With her trademark gentleness, Fluttershy straddled Rainbow Dash's back, lowered her smooth, unshod hooves toward the space between Rainbow Dash's wings, and STABBED HER WITH A BURNING ICEPICK.

That's what it felt like to Rainbow Dash, anyway. "Ow-ow-ow-OWW!" Rainbow Dash instinctively bucked, sending the yellow pegasus tumbling. Fluttershy quickly righted herself, and rushed to Rainbow Dash's side.

"Oh my *goodness!* I'm *so* sorry, Rainbow Dash! I didn't know you had so much tension there!" Fluttershy looked devastated by the prospect of having hurt her friend.

"It... it's okay, Fluttershy," winced Dash as she tried to catch her breath.

"It most certainly is not...!" insisted Fluttershy. "With that many knots in your back, you're more vulnerable to fatigue, sprains, pulls - you could even *cramp up in mid-flight!*" Rainbow Dash chuckled nervously under her breath. "Wait right there," Fluttershy continued, "I'll be right back." She trotted over to the front door, opened it, and took to the air.

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a sprig of some plant or other in her mouth. She set it down in front of Rainbow Dash. "Here... eat a couple of these."

Rainbow Dash sniffed the reddish-purple berries doubtfully. They smelled sweet and faintly spicy, like glazed gingerbread. "Dessert? Isn't this more Pinkie Pie's style?"

"It's not a treat - it's medicine," said Fluttershy. "Just one or two should do it - and make sure you swallow the seeds."

Rainbow Dash shrugged, and bit a couple of berries off of the twig. The taste matched the scent - the berries were almost cloyingly sweet - but as she chewed, a faint tingle spread through her mouth. She swallowed the mouthful, and the tingle spread down her throat. In a few seconds, the feeling subsided. She stood still for a moment, and then started tapping a hoof impatiently.

"Are you sure that was medicine, Fluttershy? I don't feel a thing."

"*Exactly.*" She motioned at the pillow. "Please... let's try this one more time?"

Rainbow Dash hesitantly sat back down on the pillow, and tried her best to relax. Even more gently than before, Fluttershy got into position and lowered her hooves toward Rainbow Dash's back.

"Careful, Fluttershy... go easy on me-ee-eeeeooohmygoshhhh... ."

Rainbow Dash's eyes crossed, and then closed. Her hooves stretched out in all directions. A warm, soothing fuzziness crept into her consciousness, crowding out her restless thoughts. She let out a long, pleasure-filled sigh. The sensation of Fluttershy's hooves kneading her back was positively *heavenly*. The warmth and weight of Fluttershy's body on her hindquarters was no torture, either; her wings slowly rose. She blushed slightly, but at this point she was almost beyond caring about the *faux pas*. She couldn't remember ever feeling so *good*.

If Fluttershy knew why Rainbow Dash had "spread," she clearly didn't mind. She wrapped a front leg around one of Rainbow Dash's erect wings, and worked at the tender flight muscles with her other hoof. When she let it go the wing flopped down like wet cloth, too relaxed to even fold. She moved on to the other side. Rainbow Dash moaned softly.

Fluttershy took her time with the massage, kneading from the back of Rainbow Dash's head to the base of her tail. She went so far as to massage Dash's cutie marks - something even Dash knew that Lotus and Aloe would charge extra for.

By the time Fluttershy stood, Rainbow Dash was so relaxed she could hardly move. Her eyelids drooped, but she wasn't paying much attention to what she saw, anyway. She felt like every moment of stress in her life - every secret and crisis and obligation and frustration - was just some story that happened to some *other* pony; somepony without a

kind, gentle, indulgent friend that smelled of blossoms and whose hooves were just *magic*.

"*Poor buz'zard... glad 'm not herrr...*" she slurred.

"What was that?" asked Fluttershy.

"*Nuffin...*"

Rainbow Dash curled up on the pillow, and slowly sank into an utterly blissful sleep. As the last of consciousness left her, she could have sworn that she felt Fluttershy's feather-soft lips brush across her cheek in a tiny, tender kiss.

• • •

The sun was slightly higher when Rainbow Dash finally opened her eyes. Blearily, she realized that that meant she had been asleep for nearly twenty-four hours. She had to get moving! There were plenty of duties calling. She felt a little weak as she shakily stood - she was still fantastically relaxed, but there was also a strange *blurriness* to the sensation.

"Fluttershy...?"

Rainbow Dash looked around, but her friend was nowhere to be found. Eventually, she spotted a note addressed to her on a nearby end-table. She unfolded it, and recognized Fluttershy's delicate mouthwriting:

*Dash - had to go and count the new Swifts and Starlings.*

*Feel free to help yourself to the food in the pantry.*

*Hope you feel better!*

- FS

Rainbow Dash smiled, and sighed; she *did* feel better. She felt like she could take on all of Equestria! And it was all thanks to Fluttershy... and those berries.

Rainbow Dash's gaze fell on the tiny fruit, still sitting where Fluttershy had put them. She looked around, cautiously, and then picked up the bunch with her mouth as she trotted over to the door.

A short time later, Fluttershy returned to her now-empty cottage. She called out as she trotted from room to room; she searched until she was sure Dash had left. Returning to the living room she looked around, cautiously, and then nuzzled the pillow Rainbow

Dash had slept on, inhaling her friend's unmistakable scent of healthy sweat and rainwater and sighing a shuddering sigh.

• • •

Rainbow Dash had to work at top speed for the rest of the day to catch up on her weather duties, and she still barely finished in time. Princess Celestia had made a special request to honour her younger sister's first birthday in Equestria in a millennium, one that had required extreme effort from dozens of residents of Cloudsdale: the Princess had wanted a rainbow by moonlight.

The display went off without a hitch; the custom-blended extra-reflective pastel colours came out somewhere between a daytime rainbow and an aurora, and the two alicorns had both expressed their satisfaction and appreciation. Buoyed though she was by that double helping of Royal praise, Rainbow Dash was sore, stressed and exhausted all over again by the time she finally got home to Cloudsdale.

Her eyes stung from rainbow residue, her wings were tired from flying all day, and her legs were stiff and aching from hours of cloud-clearing. She trotted sluggishly over to the snow-cloud in the kitchen, and peered inside of it.

There was little one could consider edible in the Cloudsdale-style icebox - Rainbow Dash was not the most prolific cook. There was only a small bouquet of wilted flowers, a pair of rock-hard sugar cubes... and the berries from Fluttershy's cottage.

*Why not...?* wondered Rainbow Dash. *I hurt all over - of course I should take some medicine!*

Without any further thought she snapped up the remaining berries, spitting out the bitter twigs and leaves. She trotted over to her bedroom and flopped down on her belly on the pile of pillows she used as a bed to wait for the berries to take effect. She didn't have to wait long.

*Mmmmmhh...*

Smooth, velvety lethargy slowly crept through Rainbow Dash's body, dissolving the knots in her muscles and the stress in her mind. Even without a pair of skilled hooves on her flanks, the feeling was *glorious*.

*Skilled hooves...* thoughts of her soft-spoken friend slowly rose into her awareness, crowding out whatever musings were there before. In her mind's eye, Rainbow Dash saw

strands of pink mane dangling in front of her eyes from above, and felt a soft, smooth mouth nibble at her ear. Rainbow Dash felt her wings stir.

She shook her head slightly, and frowned. *Hey...!* she chided her imagination. *Cut that out! I'm no filly-fooler, no matter what the rumours say!*

But her fantasy didn't listen; the sense-memories were too closely-linked. The phantasmal Fluttershy marked a trail of kisses from her ear down her neck, while those delicate hooves played across her wings... and her shoulders... and her ribs... *and her cutie marks.*

Moaning in surrender, Rainbow Dash rolled on her back, reached up with her hooves, and moved to kiss the thin air.

• • •

The next afternoon, Fluttershy was tending to her flower gardens outside, pulling up weeds and munching on the more palatable ones, humming softly to herself. She picked up a watering can with her mouth, and gave the thirsty plants a drink. Then, a voice from behind her broke her out of her reverie:

"Fluttershy?"

She turned around, and saw Rainbow Dash standing on the path to her cottage. The sky-blue pegasus looked tired and disheveled, with her mane tangled and her flanks shiny with sweat, as if she'd just won a race - not unlike the way Fluttershy had often pictured her in private moments. Her heart, for lack of a better word, fluttered.

"Oh! H-hello, Rainbow Dash. What's up?" she said, her voice slightly muffled by the can's handle.

"I need you." Rainbow Dash's tone was gravely serious. Fluttershy dropped the watering can.

"Uh... uh... O-o-of c-course," she stammered. "How can I help?"

"The weather teams have been workin' even harder lately, and I'm under a ton of... *stress.* I've tried to take it easy, but you know me - my only speed is *top speed!*" Fluttershy nodded appreciatively. "Anyway, I dunno if you're busy or anything, but I wondered if you could... you know... like before..." Rainbow Dash did her best to conceal the desperation in her voice.

"Oh, Certainly!" replied Fluttershy, doing her best to conceal the elation in *her* voice. "Come right in!"

Minutes later Rainbow Dash was sprawled on the same pillow as before, surrounded by the same scented candles, and trying not to bounce in anticipation. She heard Fluttershy finish washing her hooves, and trot up behind her. Before the pegasus could lay a hoof on her, Rainbow Dash cringed theatrically.

"Wait...! I'm feeling really *tense*. And I don't wanna buck you again! Do you have any more of that... *medicine?*" Rainbow Dash knew that she'd done a poor job of hiding the hunger in her voice, but she didn't care.

"Of course. I'll be right back!"

"Great! I'll be here!" The minutes until Fluttershy returned felt like *days*. Rainbow Dash started nervously tapping her front hooves on the wooden floor. Finally the yellow pegasus came back, carrying another sprig of berries in her mouth.

Rainbow Dash all but lunged for them, pressing her lips to Fluttershy's as she bit berries off the twig. Fluttershy blushed.

"Thanks!" said Rainbow Dash around a mouthful of berries. "Okay... do your stuff!" She flopped back down on the pillow.

The second massage was as good as the first; Rainbow Dash positively *melted* beneath Fluttershy's hooves. But it was the haze of euphoria from those *wonderful* berries that spurred her to mutter: "Ooohh... yeaahh... tha'ss... sssooooo goooood..."

Rainbow Dash writhed under Fluttershy, her eyes half-closed and her mouth hanging open in chemical bliss.

Fluttershy's heart felt like a hummingbird in her chest. Her she was, with the filly of her dreams like putty in her hooves. As if her words weren't proof enough, Rainbow Dash's body language couldn't be clearer: she was in *ecstasy*. All because of her! It was time for Fluttershy to be *assertive*. It was time for loss of control, screaming and hollering, and *passion*.

She took a deep breath, shifted alongside Rainbow Dash, and took the pegasus' face in her hooves. "I love you," Fluttershy said, and kissed her. After a brief moment of wide-eyed surprise, Rainbow Dash kissed back.

Woohoo! Fluttershy thought to herself.

• • •

Rainbow Dash woke up feeling like she'd just crashed through a hedgerow backwards. She had a throbbing headache, and her limbs were wracked with pins and needles. She raised her head, and felt the hoof wrapped around her neck flop down. *Wait... hoof...? What the buck?*

With a start, Rainbow Dash realized that Fluttershy was sleeping cuddled right up against her, her back leg still draped across her hindquarters. The two of them were in Fluttershy's bedroom. Rainbow Dash snapped into full alertness; she couldn't even remember what had happened for most of yesterday, but from the looks of it, things had gone *a lot* farther than she'd wanted them to.

*Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh...*

With excruciating slowness, Rainbow Dash inched out of Fluttershy's embrace, crept off of the bed, and slinked out of the cottage. The rush of wind as she took to the air usually exhilarated Rainbow Dash, but now it just felt cold.

*What's wrong with you, Dash? You played with your best friend's feelings and ended up in bed with her, all to get some stupid berries...? Get your head in the game!* She grimaced, pounding the sides of her head with her front hooves. Guilt over what had happened hung on Rainbow Dash's shoulders like a leaden yoke, but there was another feeling beneath it all that made her feel even worse:

She still wanted more berries.

• • •

Early that evening, Twilight Sparkle trotted into her library home without a care, only to be stopped at the doorway by her diminutive dragon assistant. He was standing with his arms folded, swishing his meaty tail with a look of annoyance on his face.

The purple unicorn leaned forward slightly, meeting Spike's emerald gaze. "Hey, Spike! Something wrong?"

"Yes...!" he snapped. "It's hard enough for me and *him*," - Spike gestured to the brown owl currently snoozing on a nearby perch - "to keep all these books in order when it's just *you* leaving stuff everywhere whenever an idea gets into your head, but when one of your

friends comes 'round while you're out and turns the place upside down as well, *it's just too much!*"

"One of my...?" Twilight looked past Spike at the half-tidied archival maelstrom in the library. "Whoa! Spike, who did this?"

"Rainbow Dash! She barreled in here without saying a word, and started tearing the place apart! She didn't stop until I demanded to help her find what she was looking for."

"*Demanded?*" Twilight raised an eyebrow.

The dragon sighed, releasing a tiny puff of green smoke. "Fine, *begged.*"

"So what was she after?"

"*Super-Naturals.* I asked if someone had gotten into the Poison Joke patch again, but she didn't answer. She just flipped through the pages, read one entry, and then took off!"

"I'm sorry, Spike. You know how impulsive Rainbow Dash can be sometimes. Why don't I help you clean all this up?" Twilight trotted over to the lectern where Dash had left the herbal.

Her eyes fell on the open book as she magicked it into the air. She squinted at the entry occupying both pages. *Why would Rainbow Dash need to look up... oh, no!* Twilight let the book fall. In a blaze of white-hot magic, she disappeared.

"Okay! Bye! And thanks for all your help!" muttered Spike sarcastically as he stooped to pick up the fallen book.

• • •

"*FLUTTERSHEY!*" Twilight bellowed. "Have you been giving Rainbow Dash Palfrey's Nightshade?"

Twilight had appeared in the cottage's living room in a sudden flash of magic. Her horn was painfully hot, and still leaking motes of energy; she'd teleported point-to-point all the way from the library.

Fluttershy cringed behind a loveseat; only her long pink tail was visible.

"\*Squeak\*... *H-how...?*"

"There is no time for you to be timid, Fluttershy! It's not a common plant, it obviously doesn't grow in Cloudsdale, and you're the only one of us other than me who knows anything about herbalism! Come on - Dash's LIFE may be in danger!"

The yellow pegasus' head popped up from behind the chair. "*What...?* What do you mean?"

"Did you give her the Nightshade or not, Fluttershy?"

"Yes, for her muscle aches! But it's not dangerous! It's just a little painkiller, as weak as White Willow Bark! I've used it for the bunnies' aches and pains plenty of times - even Angel's! And rabbits are *much* smaller than a pony!"

"But they're *not* ponies, and Palfrey's Nightshade is *definitely* not weak! Rabbits are just mostly immune to it! ponies *aren't!* Even a *couple* of berries can have *terrible* effects on us - addiction, delirium, paralysis... even *death!*"

"*Celestia forgive me...*" Fluttershy's eyes filled with tears. "Is... is she going to...?" Even the *thought* of losing Dash made her heart leap into her throat.

"Not if we find her. She looked up the plant in the library - I think she's trying to find more on her own. It's too dangerous for me to teleport into underbrush and there's no time to gallop, so I need you to fly me there. I'll try to lighten myself a bit." Twilight's horn lit up once more.

Fluttershy's face took on a stern, determined expression that she'd once used to stare down an adult dragon. "*Let's go.*"

• • •

Rainbow Dash leaned against an oak tree, giggling.

The berry patch had been right where the book said; a whole clearing full of luscious little orbs, literally ripe for the taking. She'd flitted from plant to plant across the field, snapping up the plumpest berries. Reddish juice stained her nose and chin.

The customary tingling in her mouth and throat was more like numbness now, and the same un-feeling was slowly creeping into her limbs. She vaguely felt her wings unfolding, hanging limply by her sides. But the rush was there as well, bigger and more intense than ever. It coloured *everything* in shades of wonder and delight.

"Nabad, huh, tree...?" she slurred giddily, nudging the oak with an elbow. "Bellyful o'happy in t-ten sec'nds f... fl... fffff..."

Her eyes rolled upward, and she collapsed.

• • •

*Rainbow Dash lay on her back, dozing in a field of flowers. The sun was high in the cloudless sky, and the soothingly warm breeze smelled of blossoms. It was an utterly peaceful scene, and for once Rainbow Dash was content to stay still and enjoy it. A shadow passed over her face; she half-opened her eyes, and saw Fluttershy leaning over her. Rainbow Dash spoke:*

*"Shy... I'm sorry I... I used you, like that. I didn't know you felt that way about me. I didn't mean to hurt you-" Fluttershy put a hoof to Rainbow Dash's lips.*

*"Shhh... it's alright, my love. I forgive you. It was my fault, anyway - giving you those nasty berries." Fluttershy was leaning on Rainbow Dash's chest now, her soft hooves pressing down with surprising weight. "But now you don't have to worry about any of that. You just have to do one thing..."*

*"What's that?" asked Rainbow Dash. As Fluttershy leaned in to kiss her, Rainbow Dash felt the first drops of a rain squall falling.*

• • •

"**BREATHE!**" screamed Fluttershy as she compressed Rainbow Dash's ribcage with her hooves in a hard, stomping rhythm. She took another painfully deep breath, pinched the pegasus' nostrils with her hooves, clamped her lips over her mouth, and forced air into the unconscious pegasus' lungs once more. Tears dripped from her eyes onto Dash's face. *Please, oh Celestia, PLEASE breathe...* She jerked her head back up, and turned to Twilight Sparkle. "Anything?"

Twilight sat nearby, using a spell to detect Dash's vital signs. She shook her head. Tears slid down her cheeks as well. Fluttershy went back to pressing on Rainbow Dash's chest.

The pair had flown faster than Twilight had ever seen Fluttershy travel, slaloming between trees barely above ground level in a fairly convincing rendition of Rainbow Dash's *Sonic Rainboom: Phase One*. They'd spotted Rainbow Dash's distinctive colours at the edge of the berry patch almost instantly. She was flat on her back, not moving... and not breathing.

Twilight had used a spell to force the unconscious pegasus to purge her stomach contents, and then directed Fluttershy to start trying to resuscitate her while she Scryed her vitals. Things didn't look good; even with the berries out of her stomach, there was still too much toxin in Rainbow Dash's bloodstream.

*Poison in her blood...* Inspiration briefly brightened Twilight's expression, but then just as quickly faded. *No... I couldn't...*

Fixated though she was on keeping the guttering spark of her love's life flickering, Fluttershy noticed the look on Twilight's face. "What is it? *What?*" she demanded.

"While I was researching Nightmare Moon... I studied a lot of books about forbidden magic," Twilight admitted anxiously. "I think Black Magic could destroy Rainbow Dash's tainted blood, and replace it with clean blood, but..."

*"Then do it!"* Fluttershy shouted, and sucked in another breath to share with Dash.

"No! It's not that simple! Black Magic can't create - only destroy and steal! If I wanted to put clean pegasus blood into her... it would have to come from *somepony else.*"

Feeling the weight of passing seconds like boulders piling on her back, Fluttershy faced Twilight Sparkle and unleashed the terrible, transfixing force of The Stare.

"Save her. Do it. Do it *NOW.* And even if you have to take *every last drop* of my blood, don't you *DARE* stop, Twilight Sparkle. Do you hear me? *DON'T YOU DARE!*"

Helpless to resist, Twilight nodded, closed her eyes and started gathering an orb of slithering blackness at the tip of her horn. She could cast most of the spells she knew silently, but this little-used enchantment called for an incantation. Tears streamed from her glowing eyes as she half-sobbed the cruel words, her voice taking on an otherworldly echo:

***"Foulest lords of filth and mud, scour this pony of her blood.  
Bleakest darkness, woe and strife, fill her up with stolen life.  
Hateful spirits, heed my call: one shall rise...  
AND ONE SHALL FALL!"***

A wave of crackling blackness erupted from Twilight's horn, engulfing the two pegasi. For half a dozen yards in every direction the plants withered and crumbled, poisoned by the unnatural magic. Twilight Sparkle staggered, sickened by the residual Black Magic

boiling off of her purple hide. As her swimming vision cleared, she looked over at the other two ponies in the clearing.

Rainbow Dash was sitting on her belly, slowly stirring into consciousness. Fluttershy was curled around her, pale and immobile. As Rainbow Dash's eyes flickered open, she noticed her stricken friend. She put her lips to the yellow pegasus' ear, and whispered something Twilight couldn't quite make out.

Fluttershy's ears twitched, followed by her wings. Slowly, weakly, she opened her dark-circled eyes, and looked up into Rainbow Dash's teary gaze. The two shared a smile, and then a hug.

Twilight stared, agog. Somehow, both of them had survived the spell. She was overjoyed, but also deeply confused. It was impossible; *nothing* could endure that much Black Magic! Well, nothing except...

Twilight considered the scene before her once again, taking in the warmth of her friends' embrace and the joy in their eyes. She blushed, and chuckled awkwardly.

"Oh. Oh! Uhh... \*ahem\*... well! I'll... just give you two a moment, then..." she said, and vanished in a burst of clean white magic.

Fluttershy pulled away from the hug first, and spoke: "Rainbow Dash... did you really mean what you whispered to me?"

Rainbow Dash smiled warmly. "Absolutely! While that dark, cold magic was all around us, I could feel you offering me life - *your* life. And when I took it, I saw myself the way you see me. I could *feel* how much you loved me. And I could see that it stopped the magic from eating you up. It was like I saved you while you saved me. It was... *awesome!*" Rainbow Dash chuckled. "I'm no filly-fooler... but you're no filly. You're a grown mare, you love me, and I... I..." Fluttershy cut her off with a kiss.

• • •

On a dirt road at the crest of a nearby hill, out of earshot but well within eyeshot, the Stetson-shaded eyes of an orange earth pony took in the sight of the two pegasi's passionate embrace and narrowed, filling with stinging tears. The pony gritted her teeth, and lashed out with a muscular back leg; the tree behind her cracked from roots to canopy.

*"You buckin' liar, Dash... you said you weren't that way..."*

By the time the sun rose, Applejack was already hard at work. Sweet Apple Acres was right alongside the Carrot family's holdings, and Applejack made it a point of pride to try and get started ahead of them each morning.

She stood near the property line picking through baskets of freshly-bucked apples, looking for bruised or worm-eaten ones and casting them aside to nourish the soil. While she worked, the Carrot family's middle daughter trotted nearby, carrying a sizeable bunch of carrots in her mouth. Applejack knew her - an earnest pony, if a little soft-bodied. She flashed a neighbourly smile. "Mornin', Carrot Top," she said.

"Hw'dy, Ah'le-j'k," said the yellow earth pony through the mouthful of stalks, before stopping and putting them down. "Shore is a nice day, ain't it?"

"Shore is," replied Applejack, tossing a brown apple away.

Carrot Top looked at the orchard spread out behind Applejack, and whistled. "Golly... it must be an *awful* lotta hard work to buck that many apple trees. Makes me glad our carrots pull outta the ground so easy!"

"Shucks, nothin' wrong with a little hard work," replied Applejack. "*Maybe if ya did a little, ya wouldn't be so pudgy!*"

As Carrot Top's jaw dropped in shock, Applejack realized that she'd spoken that last part, rather than just thinking it.

"Well, *ah never!*" Carrot Top huffed. "You Apples shore do have sharp tongues!" Her tone was indignant, but the blush across her face and the shine in her eyes betrayed her hurt feelings.

"Aww heck... I'm sorry I called y'all pudgy... *out loud.*" Applejack pressed a hoof to her mouth so fast her steel shoe almost split her lip.

"Well, *buck you too!*" shouted Carrot Top as she galloped off, and then briefly returned to snatch up the bunch of carrots. Once the yellow earth pony was a fair distance away, Applejack could hear her sobs echoing in the crisp morning air.

Applejack shook her head in disbelief. *Tarnation! What's wrong with me today?*

• • •

Two hours later, Applejack sat awaiting breakfast at a picnic table near Sweet Apple Acres' newly-rebuilt barn. Her little sister Apple Bloom and her brother Big Macintosh were sitting with her, while old Granny Smith creaked her way through preparing a pot of oatmeal with applesauce over a nearby fire. The process was agonizingly slow, but the younger Apples knew the taste would be worth it. While they waited, Applejack recounted her odd experience with Carrot Top.

"...but then I said 'out loud,' right after! I tell ya, she was fit to be tied - an' rightly so! I don't know what came over me, Big Mac. Pretty peculiar, huh?"

"Eeeyup," said the sizeable red stallion, chewing on a piece of straw.

"I'm gonna hafta go apologize after breakfast. Can't let a slight like that drive a wedge 'twixt us neighbours. Shewt... won't half be awkward, though. *Almost as awkward as when I spotted you an' the Mayor foalin' around behind the cider shed th'other da-*" both of Applejack's front hooves slammed into her mouth this time, and a blush spread across the bridge of her nose.

Big Mac partially inhaled the straw, and coughed it back out spasmodically.

Apple Bloom raised an eyebrow. "Foalin' around? Whut, like wrasslin' or somethin'?" she asked.

"Somethin' like that," managed Big Mac once he'd cleared his throat. He mussed the tiny yellow filly's red mane with a broad hoof. "Y'see, fixin' the barn after them Parasprites ate it up was mighty costly, and the Mayor offered us a break on our taxes if I'd..." - he racked his brain for a euphemism - "...go fer a *play date* with 'er." He smiled nervously.

Applejack could feel further ill-advised commentary welling up in her throat like a sour-apple burp. "*I gotta go!*" she blurted, and galloped away from the table.

"Soup's on, everypony!" said Granny Smith, turning toward the table at length and noticing the empty spot. "Well, peel n' core me... where's Applejack gone off to?"

Big Mac and Apple Bloom both shrugged.

"...Can I have her oatmeal?" asked Apple Bloom.

• • •

Applejack trotted down the dirt road between Sweet Apple Acres and downtown Ponyville, lost in thought. It wasn't a state she found enjoyable. She was far from unintelligent, but she'd always preferred action to thoughts. Action *got things done*. Too much thinking often just complicated matters.

The walk did little to quiet the turmoil in her mind. She still couldn't believe the things she'd said earlier. It was as if the moment a thought had occurred to her - no matter how foolish or mean-spirited - she couldn't help but voice it.

Applejack paid little attention to her progress, and soon she was in the middle of Ponyville. The bustling morning crowds created a blurred din of conversation, hoofbeats and miscellaneous noise that finally snapped Applejack out of her musing. She'd gotten as far as the Carousel Boutique; as Applejack looked up at the looming, garish pagoda, a look of inspiration crossed her Stetson-shaded face. She trotted into the shop.

"Mornin', Rarity. I need some advice, and I reckon yer the pony I wanna see."

The pale unicorn's eyes shone as she turned away from pinning a skirt's hem and faced her earth pony friend.

"Oh, I *knew* this day would come!" She trotted over to Applejack, magicking a measuring tape to hover along with her. The tape started snaking around Applejack's body while she continued: "I'm thinking something in satin - oh! *Green* satin, to go with your eyes!"

"Rarity..."

Rarity and the slithering tape measure paid her no heed. "...And we'll want to do something about that sun-damaged mane, of course. Not to mention those *hooves!* Have you *ever* had a pedicure?"

"Rarity...!"

"Now, as for the shoes, if you *must* go shod, ferrous metals are *so* passé. I have a set of *gorgeous* etched and lacquered Equinium plates studded with San Caballo emeralds that are to *die* for! They're Jacques Farrier originals-"

"*RARITY!*" Applejack shouted so loudly that her hat fell off.

The tape measure dropped lifelessly to the floor. "...Yes?"

"I *ain't* here fer no apple-pickin' *makeover!* I just need some advice."

"Ah. I see... my mistake," she said, and took a quick but deep breath. "Well, if you're not here for *fashion* advice, then whatever is the matter?"

"...I've been havin' trouble keepin' my mouth shut."

Rarity stifled a smirk.

"I *mean* it! This here's a serious problem! Anytime a thought comes to me, or I answer a question, or *anythin'*, the full-on, unvarnished *truth* just comes *bustin'* outta me. I don't know what to do!"

"Really? You can't hide *anything*?"

Applejack shook her head.

"...What do you think of this dress?" asked Rarity, pointing a hoof at the piece she'd been hemming.

"It's nice... *if yer client's a Manehattan street-trotter.*" Aww, dang it! Applejack stomped a front hoof.

Rarity's white hide couldn't conceal the enraged flush in her face, but her voice stayed under rigid control. "*I see. And my coiffure?*" She shook her head, and her coiling purple locks danced around her face and neck.

Applejack gritted her teeth. "*It's always made me think o' bailin' wire.*" Shewt! "Rarity, please!"

"Oh." Rarity snarled - a small, barely-audible, dainty, fillylike snarl. She was advancing on Applejack now, and the earth pony was backing away, deeper into the shop. "*So tell me... why did you come to me about this, instead of Twilight?*"

Applejack's rump hit the shop's back wall. She cringed. "I... I'd rather not say... *that I was less worried about makin' you mad than her.*" Applejack looked away, unwilling to meet the unicorn's gaze.

Rarity gasped. "*I knew* it! Even after that slumber party at the library, you *still* don't like me!"

"Naw, Rarity, that ain't it... it's just that Twilight's magic is so much stronger than yours; I wanna stay on her good side! I like ya just fine..." Applejack's eyes widened; she felt what

was coming. Hot blood rushed to her ears and cheeks. *Please, no...* she silently begged, *whatever's doin' this, please don't make me... not to her!* But the urge was irresistible.

"...I especially like them toned hindquarters o' yours. Heck, wiry mane or none, I'd have a roll in the hay with ya any day o' the week!" Applejack stomped her front hooves and grimaced as if in pain, every muscle in her face tightening, but the words kept coming. *"It'd just be a tumble, though - nothin' serious... 'cause I'm in love with Rainbow Dash!"*

Applejack thrust her head into a nearby bin of fabric remnants, and unleashed a half-muffled scream of frustration. *Stop it! BUCKIN' STOP!*

The righteous indignation drained out of Rarity like grain from a cracked silo. She stared, her eyes wide and her jaw hanging open to an undignified degree. *"Applejack...! You... you're a..."*

Applejack jerked her head out of the bin, and stared daggers at the unicorn. *"A... what?"*

*"A... a... a-attracted to other fillies. I had no idea!"*

Applejack looked away. *"That was kinda the point, sugarcube. I didn't wanna go tellin' everypony 'bout my romantic pro-clivities. T'ain't no pony's business. Especially not yours, ya big gossip."* She winced. *"Sorry."*

Rarity took the involuntary jab in stride. *"No... I'm sorry. I'm sorry I... pried, Applejack. I didn't expect to drag quite so much out of you. But scarily magical or not, I really think Twilight is the one you should talk to about this; it's somewhat outside of my area of expertise."*

Applejack nodded glumly.

*"Oh, and as long as we're being so candid, you should know I don't think any less of you, dah-ling. There's absolutely nothing wrong with being that way. Lots of ponies are... different. In my line of work, especially. Why, if I told you half of what I've heard about Photo Finish...!"* Rarity laughed, and then frowned. *"Ah. That did sound a bit gossipy, didn't it? Well, don't worry. If you'd rather stay in the paddock, I promise I won't tell anypony."*

*"Thanks..."* muttered Applejack anemically.

*"...Just so we're clear though: I'm flattered, but I'm just not interested. Personally, I love the co- come right in! Welcome to Carousel Boutique!"* Rarity trotted over to the newly-

arrived pony standing in the front doorway, cutting herself off in midsentence and seamlessly switching to customer service mode.

Applejack stooped to retrieve her hat as she trotted out of the shop.

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Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash hovered along at pony shoulder height, weaving their way through the streets of Ponyville. Dash was carrying a fully-loaded picnic basket, the handles between her teeth.

"You're going to *love* the view once we get to the hill," said Fluttershy softly. "It's so different from an aerial view. You can see Cloudsdale in the distance, and on a clear day like this one, even Canterlot!"

"*Mm-hmm... smm'nds wmm'br'fhl,*" said Rainbow Dash, before colliding with a shock of pink that seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Silly filly!" giggled Pinkie Pie. "You shouldn't talk with your mouth full!"

"Oh! Hello, Pinkie," said Fluttershy. "What's up?"

"Birds," replied Pinkie Pie, casting her gaze skyward. "But anyways, I need to borrow Rainbow Dash for a bit. I have-" Pinkie paused for a fraction of a second. "-some *ceiling decorations* that need hanging, and only Equestria's top flyer is up to the job!"

Pinkie Pie cast a quick sidelong glance to Rainbow Dash; for a tiny moment her carefree mask slipped, and the desperation and sadness peeked through. *Please*, she mouthed silently.

Rainbow Dash stood, dusting herself off. "...S-sure thing, Pinkie Pie! One Rainbow Ribbon Extravaganza, comin' right up! Fluttershy - can you go on ahead? This won't take long, and I'll catch up with you just like *that!*" Dash clopped her front hooves together.

"Certainly, Rainbow Dash. Helping others comes first. I'll see you at the hill." Fluttershy smiled, picked up the basket, and trotted off.

Pinkie Pie mouthed a quick *thank you* as she and Rainbow Dash headed for Sugarcube Corner. Her eyes were already shining with tears.

• • •

Applejack watched the exchange between Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy from a half-block away. The sight of Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy next to each other summoned up a surge of bitter resentment that made her heart ache; it seemed she couldn't even hide the truth from *herself*.

The orange earth pony raised an eyebrow as Dash and Pinkie parted ways with Fluttershy. *Now what could be important enough to leave her wuunnnderful new fillyfriend for?* wondered Applejack, sarcastically. Casting aside her plan to visit Twilight for the moment, she followed the pair at a discreet distance.

Sugarcube Corner was closed for a few days while the Cakes went to Fillydelphia to negotiate about opening a franchise there, but Pinkie and Dash went inside anyway. A few moments later, Applejack crept into the bakery as quietly as her steel apple-bucking shoes would allow.

There was no sign of the pair on the main floor, so Applejack slowly climbed the stairs. At the upper landing, she could hear faint voices coming from behind the closed door to Pinkie Pie's room. Bit by tiny bit, she inched closer.

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Pinkamena Diane Pie shuddered in Rainbow Dash's embrace, her face buried in the pegasus' shoulder to silence the noise of her sobs.

"I'm sorry, Dash..." she whimpered. "I know I said I'd be okay, but it's just so *quiet* in here without the Cakes! There was nopony to talk to, and nothing to do, and all I could think of to fill the space was throwing a party! *Again!* But I can't do it, Dash. I just can't. I'm so tired..." she wept against Rainbow Dash's sky-blue hide once again.

"Shhh... it's okay, Pinkie," said Rainbow Dash reassuringly, stroking the pink pony's half-sagging mane with a hoof while - unseen by Pinkie - she frowned and rolled her eyes. Truth be told, *it was pretty far from okay*. Rainbow Dash could think of *dozens* of things she'd rather do than delay a picnic brunch with her new (and first!) fillyfriend to go and console an emotionally-unstable compulsive reveler. Of course, Fluttershy presented a whole other host of complicated emotions for Dash, but she was far less likely to burst into racking sobs. Dash's wingjerk reaction was to leap out the window and leave Pinkie to her own devices, but she just couldn't bring herself to ignore a friend in need like that. It felt... *unnatural*. She had to help Pinkie; she *had* to.

So here they sat in the middle of Pinkie's bedroom floor, while she hugged and Pinkie cried. Lost in a haze of emotion, Pinkie didn't notice as her Pinkie Sense made her knee start to pinch.

• • •

Applejack slinked up to the closed door, and pressed an ear to it. She could finally make out what the ponies on the other side were saying:

*Thank you, Dash. I really needed this. I was so... lonely.* Pinkie sounded breathless.

*No problem. I do kinda feel bad about lying to Fluttershy, though.* The guilt in Rainbow Dash's voice was unmistakable.

*Oh, but you can't tell her, Dash! I... I don't want anypony to know I'm... like this!* Pinkie's voice held shame and fear, smoothly blended. Applejack knew the feeling well.

*I told you, Pinkie - there's nothing wrong with you! Sheesh! Everypony has feelings like that! After Applejack and I got in that fight over the running of the leaves, and we went off alone, she-*

"NO!"

A kick from Applejack's powerful back legs exploded the door inwards, reducing it to scattered splinters. She turned to face the ponies inside the bedroom. They were cringing on the floor, still wrapped in a close embrace. Applejack loomed over them, her studded shoes leaving tiny divots in the wooden floorboards as she approached. Rage throbbed in her veins like liquid fire.

"You two-timin' *snake!* You *said* you weren't that way! You *swore* you wouldn't tell - you gave your *word!*"

"*Wha- Applejack!* What are you doing here?" Rainbow Dash hopped to her hooves, standing between Pinkie Pie and the enraged orange earth pony.

"*I'm fixin' to beat the blue right offa your worthless hide,*" snarled Applejack, grimly pleased that she'd had no difficulty saying those words... because that meant they were *true.*

"Hey...! Wait, you don't understand. This isn't what it looks lik-"

"LIAR!"

Applejack lashed out with a front hoof, and smashed a tempered steel-shod hoof into Rainbow Dash's cheek. The blow sent the light-bodied pegasus sprawling. Pinkie Pie screamed.

Rainbow Dash struggled to get back onto all fours. She spit blood onto the floor, and shot Applejack a teary but fierce glare. "You wanna mix it up? *Fine by me.*" With a flick of her wings, she lunged at the earth pony.

Pinkie Pie sat with her back to the corner of the room, curled into a ball. She watched in horror as two of her best friends tore into each other like wild beasts. This was no school-field scuffle; they were playing for *keeps*. And it was *all her fault*. Shuddering, Pinkie slowly fell onto her side. Tears noiselessly dripped from her wide blue eyes. She wanted to whisper her grandmother's song... but she couldn't remember the words.

The fight went on for minutes on end, Rainbow Dash's speed and agility pitted against Applejack's strength and endurance. Soon Applejack's hide was speckled with crescent welts from Dash's darting jabs, and Dash was covered in angry horseshoe-shaped bruises. Both were bleeding in several places.

"*I wasn't gonna tell her!*" Rainbow Dash shouted, and slammed her forehead into Applejack's nose; the earth pony staggered back, and Rainbow Dash followed.

Shaking her head, Applejack spun on the spot, and unleashed a devastating back-legged kick as Dash drew near. Rainbow Dash sailed backward, smashing into - and through - a closet door. Coughs and a groan echoed from inside a moment later.

"*Stop... buckin'... LYIN'!*" Applejack punctuated each word with the heavy stomp of a hoof as she stalked toward the ruined closet. "Yer nothin' but a lyin', cheatin' *BUZZARD!*"

Applejack threw open the remains of the closet door, and pulled the dazed pegasus up off the floor, bringing her up almost nose-to-nose. "*I hate myself fer lovin' you!*"

Applejack froze. She hadn't meant to say that, but she'd meant it as she'd said it. She let Rainbow Dash drop, and took in the scene around her: The room was in shambles; everything fragile was broken, and everything sturdy was pockmarked with hoofprints. Her happiest, silliest friend was huddled in the corner, wide-eyed and weeping in fear. And the pony she loved was lying on the floor in front of her, beaten and bloody.

*Oh, Celestia...* Applejack dropped to her knees, and wept.

She didn't care that other ponies could see. She didn't care what she'd revealed. She didn't care what they'd think. She surrendered herself completely to the terrible, merciless *honesty* that had plagued her all day, and cried right there on the floor. She had no sense of how much time passed; she cried until her sides ached and her eyes burned.

Applejack cringed as she felt a hoof on her shoulder. She looked up, and saw Rainbow Dash's bloodied, split-lipped smile and her friendly, bruised eyes. Without a word, the blue pegasus pulled her into a hug. Fighting back fresh tears, she returned the hug.

"I'm sorry, Dash... I'm so sorry! It hurt... it hu-urt so *bad* to see y'all with *h-her*. And then you and *Pinkie*-"

"All I did with Pinkie..." Rainbow Dash cast a glance at Pinkie. The earth pony, sitting up now, silently nodded. "...is what I'm doing right now."

Applejack pulled back from the hug, and turned to look at Pinkie Pie. Pinkie Pie was sitting nearby, watching the two other ponies. Applejack realized this was the first time she'd ever taken a good look at Pinkie sitting still without silly props, party lighting or a coating of icing in the way. The pink earth pony's sadness and exhaustion seemed so *obvious* without those distractions. How had she never seen it before?

"B-but... you were gonna *tell* her..."

"I was *going* to tell her that after the Running of the Leaves, out there in the woods, you asked me something *very* important, and I had to say no, even though I knew it would hurt you. And it made me feel *really* sad to let you down like that - as sad as Pinkie feels sometimes."

Applejack hung her head in shame. "...Shewt. I am such a danged *foal*."

"Nobody's perfect," said Pinkie, trotting over and joining the hug.

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Judging by the sun, it had been more than two hours; Fluttershy was pacing in a circle at the top of a hill on the outskirts of Ponyville. Anxious, needling thoughts crawled through her mind like spiders.

*Where is she? She's way too fast to take this long on a tiny errand! Did something happen? Is she alright? Should I try to find her? But what if I do, and she comes here? She'll think I stood her up! And what if she's fine? What if she was just waiting for an excuse? Is she mad*

*at me about the Nightshade? Does she hate me? Is all of this just a big prank to get back at me? Is Pinkie Pie in on it? Maybe they're laughing at me right now...*

Fluttershy gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and violently shook her head. She flopped down in the grass, and turned to look toward Ponyville. "Where *are* you?" she whispered mournfully.

Unnoticed by the yellow pegasus, faint, tiny, multi-coloured dots slowly appeared around the edges of her butterfly cutie marks, swarming lazily like a cloud of gnats.

• • •

Back in the Carousel Boutique, Rarity magicked the final ribbon on a purplish-grey unicorn foal's party dress into a wide bow.

"There we are - absolutely *fabulous!*" she beamed. The foal giggled, prancing to and fro in front of one of the Boutique's many mirrors and admiring herself. Rarity turned to the blonde-maned grey pegasus who had brought in the foal. "Now... If there's nothing else you require, shall we settle up?"

The pegasus nodded, removed her saddlebags and rummaged around in them with her hooves. Her golden eyes slowly veered in separate directions as she concentrated. At length, she produced a paper bag, and set it on a counter.

"Sweep the range!" she said warmly, putting the bags back on and escorting the foal out of the shop.

"Umm..thank you! Come again!" Rarity called after them. She magicked open the bag, hoping - *desperately* hoping - that there would at least be enough bits inside to cover the cost of the dress.

"...Oh."

Rarity magicked out one of the freshly-baked muffins, and glumly took a bite. Anxiety about her shop's future still nagged at her, but she couldn't stay mad at the pegasus; the muffins were the first real food she'd had in two days.

Rarity scowled at the pony in front of her.

*Such an awful sight!*

That unhealthy physique, so lean the ribs nearly show. Those tired eyes, baggy and heavy-lidded. That dull, lifeless mane, hanging sadly like so many dark willow branches. Those hooves, as rough and worn as any earth pony's. And those shining, lovely cutie marks, mocking the whole with their perfection - the exception that proves the rule.

*Terrible. Just terrible. You won't sell a thing looking like that.*

She turned away from her bedroom mirror. Her horn ignited with purple-white energy as she magicked a hairbrush, makeup compact, powder puff, hoof file and polish, eyelash curler, hairspray bottle and perfume atomizer into the air.

As she worked on making the best of herself, Rarity noted that some of her cosmetics were starting to run low. They seemed to be running out faster and faster lately - it was taking more effort to maintain her striking looks. Soon it would be time for another shopping trip. The thought - which once would have hummed in her mind like a cheerful song - now filled her with dread. *What will I do then?* she silently asked the room.

• • •

An hour later, she was back to the unicorn her friends knew and loved: bright-eyed, curly-maned, gorgeous - and ready to spread fabulousity. She trotted down the stairs, and into the kitchenette in the back of the Carousel Boutique. Carefully, methodically, she searched through every cupboard and shelf, on the off chance that she'd missed a small package of food during any of the previous searches. There was nothing.

She magicked open the icebox, and surveyed the frozen wasteland inside. More nothing, with the sole exception of a single stale muffin - the last remains of a client's somewhat feeble-minded attempt at barter. The bag of muffins had bought the grey pegasus' daughter a party dress that could have sold for two hundred bits.

Rarity would have turned the offer down, but - well, no. She wouldn't have. And she didn't. She magicked the muffin in half, and floated one piece over to the table. She sat down glumly on the kitchenette's lone chair.

*There's always a reason, she mused as she took a bite of the dry, chewy muffin. A bad harvest, a delayed repayment, a sick relative, or plain old poverty. How fabulous would I seem if I turned them down? How quickly would they turn on me? The pretty, talented unicorn with the knack for fashion and the gem-sensing horn. How quickly would they realize how easy it is to hate me?*

Her experience with the Diamond Dogs had driven that point home. Needy, whining, stuck-up, spoiled ponies were a living pony Hell, worth trading a mother lode of gems to escape from. She'd felt clever at the time... until she'd realized how close to her standard manner she'd been.

*But what do I do now? She wondered. Bilking that dragon didn't work. Banking on marrying rich didn't work. No Photo Finish-backed career. No Aerial Ballet contract in Cloudsdale. And soon, not even the tools to maintain my looks. What do I do when I run out of things to distract them all with?*

She took another bite, and winced. Oh, how she was getting *sick* of the taste of muffins.

"*I deserve this,*" she muttered.

She heard the sound of hoofsteps in her dress shop's entryway. Rarity quickly gulped down the rest of her breakfast in one dreadful swallow, and came trotting into the shop's main room. She readied her customary greeting:

"Hello and welcome to Carousel Boutique! How can I be of - *oh!* Good afternoon, ma'am. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know why I'm here, Rarity." The Mayor of Ponyville stood in the open doorway, backlit by the brighter light from outside. She stared over her gold-rimmed pince-nez at the white unicorn.

Rarity swallowed. "Ah... yes. The matter of my taxes."

"Yes. In recognition of what you and your friends have done for Ponyville this past year, I have given you several extensions. But you can't ignore this any longer. I haven't seen a bit from you since before the last Winter Wrap-up. You need to pay what you owe."

Rarity's lower lip quivered. "B-but Mayor...! If I *had* the bits, I would have paid you already!"

The older earth pony scoffed. "*Please*, Rarity. Don't lie to an elected official. We have a keen sense for falsehood. Your *work* -" the Mayor gestured at the various complete and in-progress fashion masterpieces on display around the shop "- is some of the finest in Equestria! This is not exactly a flax-weaver's hovel, to say the least."

"But it's *true!*" Rarity's voice raised in pitch. "I can't afford to pay you, Miss Mayor! I *can't!*" She turned away.

The Mayor narrowed her eyes and frowned. "...I see. I suppose you wouldn't be the first wealthy pony to be bad at holding onto her gold. And at this rate, you won't be the first to find that it cost them their property."

Rarity choked back a sob. "N-no...! Not my Boutique! *Please!*" She still couldn't bear to look the Mayor in the eye; it had taken a supreme effort just to voice her objection.

"Oh, now don't get upset..." The Mayor slowly grinned. "Perhaps there is some... *other* way you could settle your debts. I've had my eye on your... *assets*... for a long time, you know." The Mayor's tone was as sweet as fresh honey. She chuckled. "If you do me a little *favour* from time to time, I'll consider your taxes paid."

Rarity shuddered. So it had finally come to *this*. Her finances were all but gone, her debts were mounting, and she had nothing but half of a stale muffin left in the icebox - yet she had never even *considered* it.

A surge of outrage burned hot on Rarity's cheeks, but she forced it down. *What will it be - your morals or your home?* she asked herself. The rage slowly drained away, replaced with an empty, sinking feeling the likes of which she'd hadn't felt since she'd hung in midair above the Cloudiseum, the evaporated remnants of her temporary wings floating in the air like so much glitter.

*I thought so.* Rarity turned to face the grey-maned beige earth pony, willing her eyes to stay tear-free. *Be brave, Rarity - the least you can do is try to take it like a mare.*

The Mayor was loosening her cravat. Rarity let out a tiny whimper. *Try harder!* She mentally chided herself.

"If... if that's what it takes to keep my shop, M-Mayor," said Rarity at length, her voice trembling ever-so-slightly, "then I w-will do as you ask."

"Oh, I *am* glad to hear it," said the Mayor, letting her cravat and collar drop and stepping toward the pale unicorn.

Rarity help up a warding hoof, and cowered. "*Please...! Be gentle with me,*" she whispered, closing her eyes tightly.

If the Mayor heard her, she showed no sign of it. She had angled her approach to walk past Rarity, and she was now standing in front of one of the shop's tall mirrors. "Why don't we start with... something in silver and sapphires? I wear a 14 neck."

Rarity opened one eye, momentarily dumbstruck. Eventually, she spoke: "...*Beg pardon?*"

The Mayor gestured at her bare neck with a hoof. "A necklace. Size 14."

"*Oh?... OH! Y-yes, of course, Mayor! S-sapphires... to go with your eyes! Just... just w-wait right there, and I'll get some beauties - I won't be a m-minute!*" Rarity was shaking all over as she trotted into the shop's back room.

Once she was out of the Mayor's sight, she collapsed onto the plush carpet and curled up into a ball. She breathed in short, ragged gasps, trying to push down the adrenaline surging through her system. Her eyes were wide, staring at nothing.

*Oh, Celestia! I thought she... I almost... I was going to...* a brief surge of nausea threatened to cost Rarity her meager breakfast. She gritted her teeth, rolled onto her knees, and then stood. She took a slow, deep breath.

"*I deserve this,*" she whispered to the empty room.

• • •

The next afternoon, Fluttershy sat immersed up to her shoulders in the steamy water of the broad wooden hot-tub at Ponyville's finest and only spa, her long pink mane wrapped up in a soft white towel.

Rarity had planned to skip the costly outing this week, still shaken as she was from the encounter with the Mayor. But she just couldn't bring herself to deprive her friend of a treat. So, Rarity sat in the water opposite Fluttershy, similarly wrapped up and nodding absently while the yellow pegasus continued her anxious, disturbing, meandering anecdote.

"- covered in horseshoe-shaped bruises from head to tail, and splattered with *blood!* I was horrified, just *horrified!* I knew something bad had happened to her when she didn't show up to our picnic! I *knew* it! She told me that she got tangled in ceiling garlands and crashed into Pinkie Pie while she was carrying an open box of horseshoes for a party

game, and then tumbled down the stairs, taking the box with her. I trust Dash, but I don't know... something just felt *wrong* about that story..."

Aloe, one of the spa's graceful earth pony proprietors, trotted over with a small bowl of perfumed salts and dumped them into the tub. *More money I don't have*, thought Rarity. *One bit for the salts. Three bits for the tub time. Five for the facial. Six for the pedicure. Four for the sauna. Four for the mud-bath. Eight for the massage... oh, Celestia - what will I do next week?*

"Rarity...?"

Rarity snapped out of her reverie. "Yes, sorry. I'm listening. Do go on."

"I said, what do you think? I hate to sound suspicious, but I can't help but have my doubts. She just seemed so... *distant*." Fluttershy shifted uncomfortably on the submerged bench inside the tub. Her flanks were itching again.

Rarity frowned. "Well, there's only one other way to get covered in horseshoe-shaped bruises, now isn't there?"

Fluttershy gasped. "Y-you think somepony *beat her up*...? But who? And why wouldn't she tell me?"

"I'm sure I have no idea, dah-ling..." said Rarity, but her thoughts wandered back to a few days prior, when a certain rugged orange earth pony had stood in her store, shamefully blurting out a confession of love for Fluttershy's rainbow-maned fillyfriend. The echo of Applejack's steel-shod hooves stomping on her shop's floor rang in her ears.

Fluttershy's expression darkened. "*You're lying*."

Rarity's jaw dropped. "Wh-what?"

Fluttershy waded closer to the white unicorn, narrowing her eyes. "You're lying. I know I'm not the most sociable pony, but I'm not a foal. You look away when you lie. And your tone of voice was just like when you told me how *happy* you were that Photo Finish made me a model. You're *hiding* something. *Don't* lie to me, Rarity. What do you know? *Who hurt Dash?*"

Rarity started sweating - and not from the steaming-hot water. Her back was pressed into the hot-tub's wall; Fluttershy's nose was now an inch from hers.

"P-please, Fluttershy...! It's not that I... that is, I didn't actually... I mean... I *promised* not to say-"

"*WHO DID IT?*"

Fluttershy's wings spread behind her, sending bathwater splashing in all directions. Her insistent, piercing stare filled Rarity's veins with ice.

"*It was Applejack...!*" Rarity squeaked, and plunged down under the water. When she surfaced, the yellow pegasus was nowhere to be found. Rarity's pounding heart sank when she realized that she'd just sold out a good friend on nothing but a strong hunch; it sank still further when she realized that with Fluttershy gone she would have to put *both* of their makeovers on her already-sizeable tab, and Fluttershy wouldn't even be there to appreciate it.

She dragged herself out of the tub, and headed behind a changing screen to brush her mane.

• • •

Twilight Sparkle trotted around the main floor of her library home, magicking a broom to sweep in her wake and humming a little ditty that seemed to get stuck in her head every so often.

"*Grr...* can't a dragon have a nice afternoon nap in peace?" groaned Spike from his basket-bed nearby. "I wish you'd never *heard* that song! Now I'll *never* get back to sleep." Spike rolled over, and quickly started snoring.

The purple unicorn paused. "Now that you mention it, I have *no idea* where I first heard tha-"

A knock at the door cut her off. "Who could that be?" she wondered.

Twilight opened the door, and Rarity all but bowled her over in her haste to enter.

"It's a *lovely* day outside, isn't it?" asked Rarity, idly trotting around the library's main room and examining the occasional book cover.

Twilight regained her hoofing, and dusted herself off. "Um... yes, yes it is."

"I do *so* enjoy a sunny day," said Rarity, a faint sheen of sweat appearing on her brow.

"Me... too...?" Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Those pegasi do a *fine* job on the weather here." Rarity giggled anxiously.

"They sure do...?" Twilight tilted her head slightly, her brows knitting.

"Oh!" Rarity continued, finally noticing the magicked broom still following her fellow unicorn. "I see I've caught you in the middle of some chores. *Terribly* sorry to bother you... I'd best be on my way." Her left eyelid twitched.

"It's fine," said Twilight, letting the broom come to rest. "Rarity... is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No, no...! There's no need to put yourself out. *I'm not worth it*. Why don't I make you a new sunhat to apologize for wasting your time?" Rarity trotted toward the door, humming nervously.

Twilight magicked the door shut before Rarity could leave. "*Wait!* What did you just say?"

"...A new sunhat!" Rarity smiled too-widely. "A filly's got to take care to avoid sunburn-"

"Not that," said Twilight, frowning. "*Before that.*"

"I..." Rarity sagged. "...I'm not worth it. *I don't deserve your help.*" She turned away.

"*Rarity...!* Why would you ever think that? You're one of my best friends. *Of course* you deserve my help! Now tell me: *what's wrong?*" Twilight bore down on the cowering white unicorn, her tone firm but her eyes full of sympathy.

Some floodgate inside of Rarity shattered and her miseries poured out. She spoke faster and faster, until it was almost hard to follow her.

"Oh, Twilight... I don't know what to do! I'm beautiful and talented and cultured, and everypony *despises* me for it! I *know* they do! So I do my best to buy them off with scandalously low prices at my shop and luxurious outings, and it's costing a *fortune!* And the stress is just *devastating* me, and maintaining my fabulousity just costs *more*, but if I let myself go I'll be *ugly* as well as hated, and... and... and I'm *ruined!* I have so many debts, and I don't have two bits to rub together - at this rate, I'll be totally destitute within the week!" Rarity grimaced as if in pain, but forced a few more words out: "Please... I

know I deserve this, but I want your help. I *need* your help! Oh, please! *Please!* PLEEEEEEEEEZ!"

"You're...? But Rarity, you're one of Ponyville's liveliest lovers of luxury! You still smell of perfume from the *spa!* If you don't have any money, how are you-"

"All on *credit!*" she wailed. "Fluttershy *loves* to go to the spa, Pinkie Pie keeps holding birthday parties for ponies we hardly know, Sparkler and I go shopping, Lyra looks forward to the symphony... I can't let them down. *I can't!* They'll turn on me!" A wave of dizziness passed through Rarity; she staggered.

"Rarity!" Twilight darted forward to support her falling friend. "Are you alright?"

Rarity shook her head. "I'm fine... fine. Just a little hungry, is all."

"You've even been skipping *meals* just so you can afford to indulge your friends?" Twilight's eyes shone with tears. "Rarity, that's *terrible!* You don't need to *bribe* your friends! We love you for *you!*"

"*Sure* you do... when I'm churning out *dresses* for you! But as soon as I want something for *myself*, you'll change your tune! If I'm not *giving*, I'm *worthless* to you!"

"*Enough!*" Twilight's horn glowed; a wave of magical force slapped Rarity across the face. The white unicorn stared in shock, gingerly rubbing her pink cheek with a hoof. "Get a *hold* of yourself, Rarity! This isn't like you!"

"Well maybe I've just grown up," she whimpered. "Maybe I finally noticed everypony staring daggers at me whenever I live it up a little. I'm better off using my bits to make *other* ponies happy." Rarity sighed.

"*Nopony* will be happy if you end up on the street, Rarity!"

"Then what can I *do*, Twilight? It's too *late!* I don't have the bits to buy *hay!*"

"Well, I can help you with *that*, at least. If you need money that badly, I know just what you should-" A crash from outside derailed Twilight's train of thought. "What the...?"

"...What?" begged Rarity. "What should I do? *Please*, Twilight!"

Twilight's attention snapped back to Rarity. "Right! You... you ought to-" More crashes rang out, followed by a chorus of shouts. Curiosity overwhelmed the purple unicorn. "I'm sorry, Rarity. This will just take a second."

She magicked open the door... and then stared out in disbelief.

• • •

"Did you hear that?" Rainbow Dash trotted over to Pinkie Pie's bedroom window; she still limped slightly as she moved, and her body was covered in adhesive bandages. "It sounded like Applejack."

The damage to the room from Rainbow Dash and Applejack's fight was still only partially repaired. Pinkie Pie looked up from the delicate task of gluing a vase back together without the use of opposable digits. "I didn't hear any-*uh-oh!*" Pinkie's tail was shuddering back and forth. She raced over to join Rainbow Dash at the window.

In the distance, a blurry shape in the sky drew closer: it was a yellow pegasus, struggling to carry a flailing orange earth pony. The breeze carried the faint sounds of the earth pony shouting, but neither Dash nor Pinkie could make out any words.

And then the pegasus let the earth pony drop.

"*Oh my gosh!*" Rainbow Dash surged out of the open window, aching to take to the air with far less than her usual speed and grace.

"Wait for me!" shouted Pinkie, galloping toward the stairs.

• • •

Applejack groaned, the smashed remains of the flower stand shifting around her as she struggled to get back to her hooves. Next to her, the stand's shocked earth pony proprietor put a hoof to her brow, and fainted. Applejack shakily looked upwards. "You crazy filly - you coulda *killed* me!"

Fluttershy alighted a few feet from the ruins of the stand. "I am *not* crazy. And maybe now you'll think twice about beating up innocent pegasi next time."

Applejack scowled. "I *told* you - it weren't no *beatin'!* It was a fight! A real, two-sided hoof-em-up!"

"You hurt Rainbow Dash!"

"So you pick me up like some griffon on the hunt and drop me over the middle o'town? I dragged your craven hind-end up a mountain *backwards*, you *ungrateful little buzzard!*"

Fluttershy gasped; a single tear slid down her cheek. Her wounded expression suddenly darkened, and without another word she lunged at the orange earth pony.

• • •

Twilight stared in frozen shock at the scene before her.

On the street in front of the library, Fluttershy and Applejack were pummeling each other while Rainbow Dash tried to pull Fluttershy away and Pinkie Pie tugged at Applejack. The dirt road was littered with the broken remains of a destroyed flower stand, several smashed window-boxes and an overturned display of liquid herbal soaps.

"*You don't deserve her, ya lunatic!*" shouted Applejack, pounding an elbow down between Fluttershy's wings.

"*I am NOT CRAZY!*" Fluttershy shouted back. She jabbed a hoof forward, striking Applejack in the gut.

"Stop it! *Please!* There's been enough fighting!" begged Pinkie Pie around a mouthful of Applejack's blonde tail.

"*You stay outta this!*"

Applejack lashed out with a back leg, shoving Pinkie Pie away. The rose-hued earth pony landed heavily on her side, and burst into tears.

"Fluttershy! Cut it out!" said Dash, the pegasus' pale pink tail between her teeth.

Fluttershy turned to face the blue pegasus. "You *lied*, Dash! I saved your *life* and you *lied to me!*"

Dash spit out Fluttershy's tail. "I only *lied* because I thought you'd go off your cloud - like you did at the Gala. *And you did!*" Dash shouted. "Why did you have to make everything so *complicated?*"

The deeper meaning behind Dash's words was plain. Fluttershy stared at her in frozen, wounded shock. "*Dash...! You... you don't...*"

Applejack took the opportunity to tackle her.

"I *need* to know, Twilight!" said Rarity from behind Twilight, desperation colouring her every word. "I don't know how long jewelry will tide the Mayor over..."

"All of you, stop - that's enough!" cried Twilight, but the din of the shouting match outside drowned her out.

Applejack hefted a dazed Fluttershy above her with her front hooves, and turned toward one of the few undamaged kiosks left in the area. "Lessee how *you* like it!" she growled.

"No - *don't!*" interjected Dash, but she held back from physically stopping the earth pony.

"Just a hint? *Pleeeez!*" Rarity was groveling on the floor right next to Twilight now.

Twilight gritted her teeth. Her horn ignited with the glow of magic. "*I... said... that's...*"

**"ENOUGH!"**

A blaze of light and a magical thunderclap emphasized the word as the deafening pronouncement echoed off the nearby houses. Windows in the closest buildings cracked from the noise.

Applejack let go of Fluttershy, and they, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Rarity silently fell onto bended knees, their eyes downcast.

Twilight Sparkle rubbed the back of her neck with a hoof. "Whoa... that was a lot louder than I expect-" she looked down, and noticed the long, regal shadow she was casting... and its wings.

The purple unicorn pivoted in place, and looked up into the stern visage of the Royal alicorn of the Dawn. She stood in the middle of the library's main room, backlit with majestic morning light. Her pastel-hued mane and tail flowed silently on invisible solar winds.

"P-Princess Celestia...!"

"*Twilight Sparkle...*" Celestia's tone was as hard as diamond. "What is the meaning of this *shameful* display?"

Twilight cringed. "Princess... I'm so sorry! My friends were... it was... they didn't... I tried to-" The Princess cut her off.

"I am shocked and appalled to see such *chaos* caused by the bearers of the Elements of Harmony. How *dare* you all make such a mockery of your duty?" The Princess stomped a gold-shod hoof, and thunder rumbled from the clear sky.

The ponies cowered; Pinkie Pie wept. Fluttershy hid her face, trembling. Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Rarity turned away in shame.

Twilight Sparkle took a deep breath, and faced her teacher. She swallowed. "Princess Celestia... please don't blame them. I will take full responsibility for their actions."

The pale ghost of a smile seemed to cross the Princess' features, but it quickly disappeared. "...So be it, then. Twilight Sparkle - you will come with me. The rest of you ponies - return to your homes *at once!*"

Princess Celestia's horn blazed white with magic as she spoke; in a blinding flash she and Twilight vanished, leaving the room dark and empty of life save for Rarity at the doorstep and Spike in his basket - sound asleep through the whole exchange.

• • •

As the glow of magic faded, Twilight found herself in Princess Celestia's private study in one of the tallest towers of Canterlot's Royal Palace.

It was a round room, furnished with comfortable sitting pillows and lined with shelves of ancient tomes. The rear window afforded a beautiful view of the eastern skyline. The Princess was seated by that window, magicking a teapot to fill the shallow porcelain cup on the table beside her.

"Princess Celestia... I can't tell you how sorry I am..." Twilight looked away, and noticed that the door out of the room was flanked by a pair of Royal Guard pegasi.

Princess Celestia magicked up the cup and took a slow, thoughtful sip of her tea. Her eyes were closed, her face a serene, unreadable mask. She set down the cup, turned toward the guards, opened her eyes, and softly said two words:

*"Kill her."*

PART ONE: REBIRTH

Twilight Sparkle floated in a blank white void, unaware even of herself.

A sense of up and down returned to her first, followed by a feeling of weight and, eventually, the sensation of a cold floor underneath her prone body. She heard a bird trilling in the distance, and closer by she could hear the whisper-faint rustle of feathered wings moving. She drew breath - a deep, heaving gasp that seemed to take *hours* to fill her lungs - and smelled old books and hot tea; the smell of home.

"Spike...? Owlowiscious?" Twilight's voice was weak and thin. "I had a *terrible* dream..."

A soft, matronly voice answered her. "I am sorry, my student... *but it was not a dream.*"

Twilight's eyes snapped open.

She was in Canterlot, in the private tower-top study of Princess Celestia herself. She was lying on her side on the smooth stone floor. The Princess sat nearby, looking down at her. Twilight lurched to her hooves, and backed away from the spot where she'd lain. A dark red stain marked the ancient white stone. Her gaze darted from the stain, to the Princess, to her own side, where the last hair-thin remnant of a fatal sword-wound was fading into invisibility. Twilight's eyes widened. Her pulse quickened as her most recent memories crashed back into focus. She gasped.

"Y-you... you told them to...!" Twilight looked behind her, but the pegasus guards were gone. She and the Princess were alone. "Why?" she demanded, her voice cracking. "*How could you?*"

Princess Celestia still sat on a broad velvet pillow in front of the tower study's window. She regarded her student with an uncharacteristic look of sadness on her regal features. "I am so sorry to have put you through that, Twilight Sparkle. It pained me more than you can imagine. But some lessons can't be taught from a book; they can only be *experienced* first-hoof."

Twilight scowled. She fixed her stance, took a deep breath, and:

"*WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! This is CRAZY! They stabbed me! Was this a punishment? Would you rather I didn't stick up for my friends? What in pony Hell was killing me and bringing me back supposed to teach me?*" Twilight panted, shaking with

fury. As the echoes of her tirade faded, Twilight remembered who she was speaking to; she backed down slightly, blushing. "... *Your Majesty*," she added sheepishly.

Celestia fought away tears. "Oh, Twilight... my dearest, most faithful student. This was no punishment. I could *never* raise a hoof against you in anger. It was all I could do to give the order. But try to understand... the lesson was that you brought *yourself* back."

Twilight stared, and then frowned in frustration. "*I brought myself back?* That's *impossible!* How could I have used magic while I was *dead?*"

"You didn't *use* magic, Twilight Sparkle. You *are* Magic."

Twilight's tilted her head. An array of outraged, dumbfounded and shocked expressions crossed her face in quick succession. "*I... I don't... what do you...*" She staggered, her knees suddenly weak.

"*Please*, Twilight - have a seat. A cup of tea will do you good." Princess Celestia gestured with a wing toward the pillow next to hers. She magicked the teapot resting on the low table between the pillows into the air, and poured a fresh cupful.

Twilight numbly trotted across the room, and flopped down onto the pillow. She shakily magicked up the cup, and took a small sip. It was the Princess' personal blend, imported from Xiao Ma; as upset as she was, Twilight couldn't deny that it was delicious.

The two sat in silence until they had both finished their tea. Twilight spoke up first:

"What *is* this, Princess? What did you mean?"

The Princess let out a tiny sigh. "Twilight... it's time I told you more about the secrets of the Elements of Harmony - the secrets that no book has ever detailed. The secrets of their *power...* and of the *burdens* that they press on their bearers."

A sudden knock at the study's door caught both ponies' attention. A cultured Canterlotter stallion spoke up from the other side:

"Begging Your Majesty's pardon... the Tsarevna of Stalliongrad and her retinue have arrived."

The Princess sagged, but when she spoke her voice carried the full weight of her nobility:

"Very well. Direct them to the Main Hall. I will be there shortly."

"As You wish, Your Majesty."

Princess Celestia turned back to Twilight Sparkle. "I'm sorry, my student. You need to hear these things, but it would be unfair to my subjects to put our private discussion ahead of affairs of state like this. I hope you understand."

Twilight bit back her frustration, and forced a smile. "...Of course, Princess. I understand."

Celestia smiled. "Good. Please... if you head to your old chambers, I will be there as soon as I can. We can continue our talk then."

• • •

After the Princess departed, Twilight Sparkle slowly trotted down the tower's winding stairs, across several broad hallways lined with tapestries, paintings and ancient suits of barding, and out into the early evening air. She trotted up the exterior steps of her old tower home, and magicked open the blue wooden doors.

The place was almost as Twilight had left it, but the room's tall burgundy curtains were drawn, covering the west wall's picture window and leaving the room somewhat gloomy.

A deep purple alicorn with a pale blue mane sat at a desk in the middle of the library-like chamber's raised study; open books on history, science, poetry, magical theory and astronomy sat on the wooden table's surface, as did a small clockwork orrery, a pot of ink and several quills, a sheaf of parchment, a half-eaten bowl of dried flowers, and a well-worn abacus.

"Oh... *it's you*," said the alicorn, magicking a blue-framed pince-nez off of her face and setting it down on the cluttered table.

"*Princess Luna...!*" said Twilight. "I didn't expect to find you-"

"-*in my own room?*" interjected Luna, raising an eyebrow.

Twilight froze, momentarily dumbstruck. "But... this wasn't-"

The alicorn interrupted again. "-Not my *original* room, of course. That was in the old Royal Castle. But my sister had this tower built *just for me* when this palace was constructed. She set it aside from the noisy hustle and bustle of the palace's main halls so I could sleep through the day in peace, filled it with books on all of my favourite topics,

made sure it had a commanding view of the night sky, and put in an hourglass counting down the time until my... *release*. She kept it pristine and ready to use for more than nine centuries. I suppose she thought it would help to *appease* me. A *welcome-home present* for her poor, misguided little sister."

Luna stood, and trotted over to the purple unicorn. She was taller than Twilight, but thinner. She had a lean - almost gangly - build, her feathered wings almost totally covering the sides of her slender torso. But even so, her presence was only slightly less overwhelming than Celestia's. At a distance, she seemed a bookish recluse; up close, she was a Goddess of the Night.

"Of course, all that changed when *you* came along. She gave you this place without a second thought. She thinks I don't know, but I was *watching* from up there - every single night." She loomed over Twilight, casting a darker shadow over her in the already-dark room. "I moved in here yesterday - I haven't gotten around to telling her. I trust she won't mind that I spoiled her *surprise*." Luna looked down her nose at Twilight. "But where *are* my manners? Was there something you *wanted*?"

Twilight shifted from side to side, uncomfortably. "P-Princess Celestia told me to wait for her here. She wanted to tell me more about the..." Twilight lowered her voice. "... *the Elements of Harmony*."

Luna chuckled. "Ah... I see. So she hasn't told you about the curse, yet."

Twilight's jaw dropped. "*The curse*?"

"Oh *my*, yes. Magic that powerful doesn't come without a *price*, you know. The Elements force their bearers to become living embodiments of their virtues - and *no* mortal pony can be expected to personify such a *perfect* state. The ones that try are *slowly*. *Driven*. *Mad*."

Twilight's eyes shone. "*That can't be true...*" she whispered, but her thoughts darted back to the last she'd seen of her friends: a fierce brawl, punctuated by screams, shouts and tears.

"*I'm sorry*," said Luna, her tone making it abundantly clear that she wasn't.

Luna's revelation stripped Twilight of what little endurance her resurrection had granted her; she slid down onto her knees, and hot tears slid down her face. "*What have I done...?*" she whispered.

Behind the two ponies, the setting sun shone into the room through the thin gap between the curtains. The shaft of light fell on them both.

• • •

In the palace's opulent Main Hall, Princess Celestia sat at the head of a vastly long wooden table surrounded by visiting dignitaries and local gentry. At the far end of the table sat the Tsarevna of Stalliongrad. The demure scarlet unicorn's long golden-yellow mane was restrained by a simple gold wire tiara, and a similarly-designed yoke adorned her long neck.

The two heads of state were discussing trade routes, importation laws, and the synchronization of the lengths of their respective seasons. Celestia paused in mid-sentence as a warm yellow glow flashed across her eyes, bringing with it a flicker of insight; she stifled a gasp.

The Princess stood, spreading her wings for silence. The room obeyed in a heartbeat.

"Прости, Царевна," said Celestia, switching to her visitor's native language as a sign of respect. "но я должна вас покинуть. *Тысяча извинений!*"

Without waiting for a reply, the Princess gave a slight bow and trotted out of the room.

• • •

"*Shhh...* there, there... it's alright. Don't cry..." Luna rested a sapphire-shod front hoof across Twilight's heaving shoulders. Her voice was as soft and gentle as crescent moonlight. "*I know...* I know what it's like to be swept up in my sister's plans. To be a *pawn*. You couldn't have known what you were getting yourself - and your *friends* - into..."

Twilight sobbed in despair, covering her eyes with her hooves; she knew that the alicorn was being insincere, but the thought that she had *condemned* the first friends that she had ever made her heart break nonetheless.

Luna grinned a small, vindictive grin. "...And when they're gone, you'll have to live with that you did to them forev-"

A blinding explosion of sunlight erupted in front of the two ponies. In its wake appeared Princess Celestia, her full resplendent glory unrestrained.

Luna hopped backward and cringed, averting her sensitive eyes from the Princess' searing light. "B-big sister...!" she stammered from behind the shade of one of her wings. "I found the room you made me! It's *wonderful*-" Celestia cut her off:

"Little sister, you go too far." Celestia stomped a gold-shod front hoof; the curtains jerked open and let in the full light of the sunset. "I *know* you haven't forgiven me for... *what happened*... a thousand years ago, but Twilight Sparkle *isnot* to blame!"

Luna gritted her teeth. She leapt to her hooves and faced her sister, her eyes streaming and squinting nearly shut from the glare. "*Isn't she?* It's right there on her *flanks*! She's the Sixth! The Spark! She's the one you picked to use the Elements because you were too *afraid* to do it again!"

"*ENOUGH!*" Celestia's voice echoed off the vaulted ceiling. "Your quarrel is with *me*, sister. If you are going to let hatred back into your heart, *then direct it at me alone!*"

Luna's lower lip quivered. "*You know I can't...*" she whispered. She spread her wings, and took off toward the door. The scattered possessions on the tabletop glowed, hovered, and swarmed after her like so many startled birds.

As the door slammed behind her sister, Celestia let her blazing glow subside. She trotted over to her protégé, who was still sobbing curled up on the floor, her hooves covering her face.

"I am sorry you had to endure that, my student," said Celestia, her voice softening. "My sister has a great depth of feeling, but she has never had much skill at expressing it. It sometimes pushes her to make... *unwise*... decisions." Celestia looked over to the large, gilt hourglass nearby for a moment.

"*Is it true?*" asked Twilight, her voice barely above a whisper. "Are the Elements of Harmony what's making them suffer? Are they all going to... to..."

The white alicorn sat down next to her student. "Yes... and no. What is making them suffer is the *lack* of an Element, Twilight Sparkle. The five lesser Elements yearn to unite in Harmony - to support and foster the *sixth*."

"Magic..." whispered Twilight.

"Yes, my student. They *need* you. Not just your presence, but your wisdom. Your guidance. You give them *purpose*. Without you, the Elements' urgings stretch them beyond their limits, and they collapse like an arch missing its keystone. Magic is at the

heart of friendship, Twilight. It's what turns familiar faces into lifelong companions. Magic is what makes it... *complete*. As bearers of Elements of Harmony, your friends represent that companionship, and *you* represent that Magic."

The possibility of hope bolstered the purple unicorn. "A *keystone*... So I can help them, just by being there for them?" She frowned. "But I do that *all the time!* At least one of us has some crazy crisis once a week - or more! I'm *always* helping them!"

"You mustn't just *wait* for trouble to come to you, Twilight. Some problems lurk beneath the surface. I have watched you every day. I have seen how much time you still spend alone in your library. Friendships are like gardens - they can grow wild and messy if they are not tended to."

Twilight looked away in shame. "I know... but sometimes it feels like there's never enough *time*."

Something in what Twilight said seemed to cut the Princess deeply; she shed a single crystal-clear tear. "Oh, my most faithful student. *You have all the time in the world, now.*"

Twilight's brow furrowed in thought for a moment, and then a look of inspiration dawned on her features. "Princess Luna said '*when they're gone*, you'll have to live with that you did to them *forever*'... did she mean...?"

Celestia took a slow, deep breath. "Yes, Twilight. Just as the Elements have pushed your companions to personify their chosen virtues, you too have become like Magic: versatile, powerful... and *eternal*."

The confirmation struck Twilight like a physical blow. "I... I'm... *immortal?*"

"Yes. Like we alicorns, you are as much Magic as flesh now, and precious little in this world can do you any lasting harm. The Elements will grant your friends health and long life, but you will live as long as you care to, the centuries passing no harder than the minutes. It is a great gift, but also a great burden."

Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. Her head swayed drunkenly for a moment; her eyes rolled up, and she knew no more.

• • •

*Twilight was sitting in a wheelchair in Ponyville, watching Pinkie Pie from afar, when a clumsy delivery-mare dropped the majority of a moving wagon's contents on top of her. A falling anvil landed squarely on her unprotected skull... but she was only dazed.*

*She was in her library, focusing on an untested spell to grant earth ponies wings. As the spell engulfed her fellow unicorn an overload of magical feedback exploded, sending Twilight tumbling. She landed poorly, and her neck twisted at an unnatural angle... before it popped back into alignment.*

*She was in a field of lush purple-red berries, channeling foul Neighcromantic energy in an effort to save one friend's life by stealing the essence of another. In her haste and her concern for the two pegasi, she hadn't even bothered to worry about the years of life the spell would cost her... or would have cost her, that is.*

*She was standing on the edge of the Ponyville spa's hot-tub. A riot of frizzy pink mane and blue eyes burst from the bowl of sponges next to her, and shrieked:*

**"FOREVER!"**

• • •

Twilight awoke with a start, jerking into a sitting position.

She was in a huge, soft bed, covered in luxurious silken sheets and pillows in various shades of pastel pink, blue and green. The bedroom was enormous; its purple and blue marble walls soared to a vaulted ceiling that was almost out of sight. The windows reached from the floor to that same lofty height, bathing the room in warm morning light. The walls were decorated with antique oil paintings of unfamiliar alicorns, tapestries depicting the moon and stars or pony victory over griffons and dragons, and the occasional relief carving of a stylized sun.

*Celestia's personal bedroom!* Twilight hopped out of the bed, and hurriedly magicked its sumptuous sheets back into order.

"Calm down, my student. You could have kept resting, you know."

Twilight pivoted, and saw the Princess sitting on a pillow near a sizeable hearth. She had spread a row of six decorated cards in a semicircle on the floor in front of her. The rest of the deck sat nearby.

"Oh! Um, good morning Princess." Twilight trotted over, a feeling of awkwardness stiffening her gait. The revelations that had driven her to faint still weighed heavily on her mind; she had so many *questions*. The first one that came to mind, though, was: "What are those?"

As Twilight drew nearer, she could see that the cards were labeled in the festive glyphs of cursive pony writing: *The Foal*, *The Tradesmare*, *The Charger*, *The Jewel*, and *The High Ritesmare* were turned to face her, and *The Enchantress* faced the Princess.

"This is the Equestrian Tarot. In ancient times, ritesmares would use cards like these to read ponies' fortunes. These six cards in particular represent the Elements of Harmony... and they will show you how to save your friends."

## PART TWO: RESTORATION

The golden pegasus-drawn chariot cut through the clear morning skies over Ponyville, and arced down into the town square for a landing. Its lone dark-maned purple unicorn occupant hopped down onto the street, and nodded appreciatively to her chauffeurs. They whickered proudly, and then took off once more.

The unicorn trotted purposefully through the streets of Ponyville - she was a mare on a mission. As she turned a corner, she almost bumped into a frizzy-maned pink earth pony carrying a fireplace bellows in her mouth.

Pinkie Pie let the bellows drop and unleashed a tremendous gasp, the force of which propelled her several feet upwards.

"*TWILIGHT!* You're back!"

Twilight Sparkle smiled, and gave a tiny nod. "Hello, Pinkie."

"Wow! Wowie-wow! You were gone for *two days*, and now you're back! This is great! Super great! *Super-duper* great! You know what this calls for...?" The speed with which Pinkie spoke left her nearly breathless.

Twilight held up a front hoof. "Wait, Pinkie. I'm pretty tired. Why don't you and I hold off on the party for now, and just go get a grain smoothie? You know... a nice, quiet, casual chat. You can catch me up on what's happened while I've been gone. My treat?"

Pinkie Pie's enormous smile shrank to a more modest grin. "...Okie dokie."

A few minutes later, Pinkie Pie and Twilight Sparkle sat atop a grassy hill on the outskirts of Ponyville, facing the town. Pinkie Pie noisily sipped her smoothie through a complicated purple curly-straw.

"Everypony was so scared after seeing Celestia get all-" Pinkie Pie looked around cautiously, and lowered her voice. "-*grumpy*, that we pretty much *galloped* straight home. No pony even *tried* to keep arguing, or fighting, or anything." Pinkie Pie took another loud sip. "We haven't really seen each other much since then... well, at least *I* haven't seen anypony."

Twilight nodded slowly. "That might be for the best... it seems like things were getting a bit... *heated*, before. Maybe everypony *needed* a chance to calm down."

Pinkie Pie frowned. "Yeah..." She perked up suddenly. "Wait...! You have to tell me what happened to *you!* The way you both *poofed* away, I thought you were gonna end up *banished* for sure!"

Twilight looked away. "The Princess... taught me a lesson. One I needed to learn. It was..." She trailed off; words failed her.

Pinkie Pie's brow knitted in worry. "*Oh no!* So she *did* punish you! I *knew* it! Did you get *burned? Beaten? Battered? Baked? Sliced? Diced? Sliced twice? Covered in mice? Given lice? Sliced thrice? Over-spiced? Put on ice?*" Pinkie's hooves clapped to her cheeks in horror; she gasped for breath.

Twilight Sparkle shook her head vehemently. "No! It was nothing like that! ... It was still pretty scary though. Even here in Ponyville, everypony knows me as the Princess' student. When she got that angry, it felt like she might stop being my teacher. I was *terrified* of that. It felt like - I don't know - like if I wasn't her protégé, ponies wouldn't even recognize me... like I'd be *nopony*. *I know there's more to me than that, but the image that's built up around me is so strong, it's as if...*"

Pinkie's pale blue eyes were wide and watery. "... *as if you can't help but try to live up to it?*" she whispered, uncharacteristically still and quiet.

Twilight nodded. "But things turned out alright. She was a lot less mad than she seemed, and the more I thought about it, the more I knew that you all would still know me - *and care about me* - no matter what I was... or wasn't."

Pinkie Pie bit her lower lip, and sniffed back tears. "*H-how did you...?*"

Twilight smiled. "Like I said... the Princess taught me a lesson. I realized that I've been taking all of your friendships somewhat for granted, and I decided to do something about it. Once I made that decision, it all came down to a mix of observation, deduction, and a little magic. For example: you have dark circles under your eyes, you breathe quickly and shallowly even when you're at rest, and you blink a lot. It's obvious to anypony who actually *looks* at you that you're *exhausted*. Clearly, what you need is some leisure time. Maybe a *party*."

Pinkie's heart sank like a stone. "But..." Tears slid down her cheeks. "N-no... it *can't* be... I thought... I thought you..." she sobbed.

Twilight put her front hooves firmly on Pinkie's shoulders, and stared deeply into her eyes. "Pinkie... *what is a party for?*"

Pinkie sniffled. "F-for... fu-un..." she whimpered.

"That's right. So if you haven't been having any fun... *you haven't been partying.*"

Pinkie's eyes nearly crossed in confusion. "I... I haven't?"

"Most certainly not. And as Ponyville's primary pony party purveyor, it is your precious purpose to party properly. Right?"

Pinkie wiped her eyes with a foreleg. "Y-yeah..."

"Well, then! *Clearly* you don't have to even *try* to have another party until you can do it justice. A party's not a party if the party-pony's heart isn't in it. The only party you need to work on... is one in *here.*" Twilight pressed a hoof to Pinkie's chest. "The rest of them can wait as long as they have to."

"*Oh, Twilight... thank you!*" she squeaked and pulled Twilight into a hug, giggling through her tears.

The party balloon cutie marks on Pinkie Pie's flanks drew into sharp relief, brightening until they almost glowed.

***The Foal** is unflinchingly merry,  
Her world full of laughter and song.  
But that life of joy has made her wary  
Of speaking up when things go wrong.*

• • •

Soon after, Twilight Sparkle trotted and Pinkie Pie bounded down the dirt road on the edge of Ponyville; ahead, the vast spread of farm-pony plots spread out for miles. They turned down the path to the closest farm: Sweet Apple Acres.

The pair skirted the edge of the property, heading for the farmhouse. Farther down the lane, they spotted a Stetson-wearing orange earth pony speaking to her fiery-maned neighbor.

"Just give me a second, Pinkie," said Twilight, trotting on ahead.

Pinkie Pie nodded. While she waited, she surreptitiously jabbed a nearby tree with a back leg, and snapped up the resulting fallen apple.

"...I know it musta stung ya somethin' fierce, and I really *am* sorry, Carrot Top." Applejack turned slightly away, crossing her front hooves anxiously. "Can ya forgive me?"

"You Apples ain't never been anythin' but fine neighbours in the past. Apology accepted." The yellow earth pony smiled, and then trotted away.

Applejack let out a sigh of relief, which she sucked right back in with a gasp as her gaze fell on the purple unicorn approaching her.

"Peel 'n' core me! *TWILIGHT!*" Applejack surged forward and took up Twilight Sparkle's front hooves in her own. "Shewt, I worried y'all were *never* comin' back!"

"It's good to see you, Applejack."

"So what happened? I ain't ever *seen* the Princess so mad before. Shucks, I figured we were all bucked fer sure!" Applejack winced. "Pardon m'language."

"Princess Celestia just reminded me of my duties." Twilight sagged. "It can be ... *difficult*... sometimes, being her pupil."

Applejack released Twilight's hooves. "Yeah...?"

Twilight nodded. "Having powerful magic is something I was born with, but that hasn't made it easy. Even at the School for Gifted unicorns, everypony knew I was... *different*. The Princess hadn't taken a personal student in something like a hundred years, and it made me stand out no matter how hard I tried to blend in. Sometimes, I *wished* I was just... normal."

Applejack projected an air of nonchalance, but her words betrayed her:

"Huh. That sounds *familiar*-" She stomped the ground. "*Rough!* That sounds rough."

"It was, but after a time I came to realize that I couldn't change who I was, and that the *ponies who care about me wouldn't want me to lie to myself*. They would like me the way I am. Just like how I like you the way *you* are, Applejack."

The orange earth pony froze, and then swallowed hard. "*The way...?* Wh-what way d'you mean, Twilight?" A sheen of sweat appeared on Applejack's brow.

"You *know...*" said Twilight coyly. "...Strong. Hard-working. Forthright. Honest. Proud. The very *model* of a dependable earth pony - the backbone of Equestria." She smiled. "I'm *honoured* to have you as a friend."

Applejack blushed. "Yer too kind! But, what about..." Applejack waited for her free-willed mouth to force her to blurt out the rest of the shame-inducing sentence... but no urge came. She stayed quiet.

"What else matters?" asked Twilight sunnily. "Would anything else change those things I mentioned?"

Applejack slowly smiled. "...No - I s'pose it wouldn't. Would'ja care fer some fritters?"

"Absolutely-"

"*YUM!*" exclaimed Pinkie, suddenly appearing from behind Twilight.

Applejack and Twilight laughed, and Pinkie soon joined in. As the three headed for the farm, Applejack leaned in close and whispered to Twilight: "*How did ya know?*"

"AJ..." Twilight whispered back. "I attended an *all-fillies* school; Pinkie's not the only one with a *sense* for some things."

When the trio trotted into the farmhouse, the apple cutie marks on Applejack's flanks shone riper and redder than the finest produce from her farm.

*The Tradesmare labours without tiring,  
Her honest words a bond of honour.  
Not one for plots or conspiring,  
Secrets weigh heavy upon her.*

• • •

Twilight Sparkle hopped out of the pink and purple hot-air balloon's basket onto the pliant white cloudstuff that served as building material for pegasi. She smiled; the spell that allowed wingless ponies to walk on clouds was working as well as ever. She turned back to the balloon's other two occupants.

"I won't be long. Will you two be okay waiting here?"

"You bet!" said Applejack and Pinkie Pie in unison.

While Twilight trotted over to the cloud-mansion's front door, Applejack turned to Pinkie.

"Say, while we got a minute... I wanted to tell ya how *sorry* I am 'bout wreckin' yer room th'other day, sugarcube. ...And scarin a yellow stripe up yer back with m'hollerin'. ... And whuppin' the tar outta Dash while she was tryin' to help you. ...*And kickin' you.*" The orange earth pony rubbed a front hoof across her other foreleg sheepishly.

"Aww, that's okay," said Pinkie, smiling. "Fixing everything in my room was like solving a great big jigsaw puzzle. I *love* puzzles!"

"Oh. Uhh... well, great, then," said Applejack, a look of consternation on her face.

Meanwhile, twilight knocked on the door. After a lengthy delay it slowly creaked inward, and a fatigued blue pegasus with a colourful mane peered out.

"Twilight?" said Rainbow Dash, her voice scratchier than usual. "Awesome! Come on in."

Twilight followed her friend inside, but then stopped in the entryway. Her jaw dropped.

The interior of the house was a disaster. Creased and dog-eared weather planning charts were strewn across the floors and pinned up on the walls. Used dishes were piled up in corners and on what few chart-free surfaces remained. Here and there, hoof-tracks in liquid rainbow stained the floors.

Rainbow Dash was struggling to don a heavy pair of tinted protective goggles attached by an array of straps to a saddle holding a brass tank labeled with a multi-coloured exclamation point. A row of seven metal nozzles jutted from the rear of the tank. Stiffness, fatigue and the last of a few unhealed bruises had robbed Dash of a fair measure of her range of motion; with nearly every bend and flex, she winced in pain.

"I was just - *nng!* - getting ready to go out and put up a rainbow, but I can *totally* make time to hear how things went down - *rrg!* - with the Princess."

Twilight trotted over to the blue pegasus, and magicked the rainbow-spraying rig into a better fit. "Have you been taking extra weather shifts, Dash?" Twilight tried to sound casual, but the concern in her voice showed.

"Thanks! Yeah... I've been doing a few odd jobs, covering for sick pegasi - that kind of thing. The gang hasn't really gotten together since you, y'know, *left*, and I hate to feel like I'm wasting time."

"What about Fluttershy?"

Rainbow Dash gulped. "I, uh, I haven't seen her either. After that fight outside the library, I figured I'd give her a chance to calm down." She ducked down and picked up the control bit for the rainbow tank with her mouth. She gave it an experimental bite, and a tiny spritz of colour puffed out of the nozzles. "*Sho terr ree... wha' hff'ned?*" she said, muffled by the bit.

Twilight rubbed the back of her neck with a front hoof. "Well, the whole thing was pretty *complicated*, right from the start. It felt really *awkward* to be stuck in the middle between you guys and the Princess. She's been so *kind* to me - *I owe her so much that it felt wrong not to take her side, even though I felt like she was being unreasonable*. You know what I mean?"

"Yhh!" Dash spit out the bit, and turned away. "...I mean, sure, yeah - I guess so." She looked up at a complex cirrus pattern diagram pinned on the wall. "So... what did you do?"

"I called her on it. I realized that *standing up to somepony and saying how you really feel isn't the same thing as betraying their friendship*. Sometimes, the best way you can have somepony's back is to face them down." Twilight paused. "Does that make any sense?"

Dash sighed, and the gesture seemed to release weeks of pent-up tension along with her breath. She turned back to face Twilight; the lenses of her goggles were misty. "...*Totally*. Thanks, Twilight. ... For coming by, I mean!" Dash smiled.

"Any time, Dash. I'd better go, though - I don't want to keep you from your work!"

"Yeah..."

Dash shifted side to side. "You know... maybe I should take a break." She tugged at the release strap, and the rainbow rig dropped to the floor.

"Great! AJ and Pinkie are outside - I'm gathering up the whole gang. You can come along!"

"Cool!"

As Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash trotted out into the sunlight, Dash's multi-hued lightning-bolt cutie marks shone like polished glass.

*The Charger races ever forward,  
Full of vim naught can dispel.  
Loyal, stubborn and straightforward,  
She'd follow a friend to Pony Hell.*

• • •

Rainbow Dash led the way back down to Ponyville, while her unicorn and earth pony friends followed in the balloon. As they descended through the sparse cloud cover, the sounds and smells of Ponyville rose up to meet them: Fresh baking. Blossoms. Hoofbeats. Songs. The balloon's basket touched down outside of Carousel Boutique. Near the ostentatious shop's front entrance, a unicorn covered in layers of patched but well-sewn rags was magicking a hammer to nail up a wooden sign on the door lintel:

**F O R S A L E:  
FABULOUS SHOP FULL OF  
DRESSES, ACCESSORIES  
AND THE LIKE. IF INTERESTED, PLEASE  
SEE STORE OWNER AND PROPRIETOR,  
RARITY**

The three ponies climbed out of the balloon, while Dash alighted on a nearby fencepost. Twilight Sparkle trotted toward the shop, but then paused and turned to face the others.

"This looks bad... but I think we got here just in time." She pondered for a moment. "You'd better wait here... I don't think she'd want everypony to see her like this."

Twilight's three companions nodded and murmured in agreement.

While Twilight trotted toward the unicorn in the homeless wretch ensemble, Applejack turned to Rainbow Dash. Dash noticed, and hopped down off of the fence to face her eye to eye. "Dash, I-" Rainbow Dash cut her off unintentionally with her own start: "AJ, listen-"

"You go," said Dash.

"I just wanted to say that I hope there ain't no bad blood between us. I was in a powerful odd way these past few days, and I weren't thinkin' none too clearly. I can't believe what a foal I was. I know y'all don't... *see me...* like I see you, but If I lost you as a friend as well, I'd just..." Applejack looked down in shame.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Yeah, well I didn't really try too hard to talk you down, either. We're still cool. And plus, Fluttershy kicked your butt - that's punishment enough in my book!" Dash gave a wry smile.

Applejack gawked, her heartache momentarily forgotten. "She sure as sugar *did not!* She bushwacked me, an' pulled me offa th'ground before I could peep. No *way* that's fair!"

"Oh? Does your 'no wings' policy go for ambushes, too?"

The two ponies stared each other down, forehead to forehead. Pinkie Pie was about to intervene, when the two both smirked, snorted, and broke out laughing.

At the same time, Twilight Sparkle trotted over to the rag-swaddled unicorn. She heaved a deep, theatrical sigh as Twilight approached, and sat down heavily on the path in front of the shop's door.

"You're too late," she muttered. "It's all over... I haven't a bit to my name. All I can do is sell my -" She choked up. "*-beautiful shop...*"

"Rarity, I *tried* to tell you earlier," said Twilight, kneeling down next to her dejected friend. "If you need money, *why don't you sell some gems?*"

Rarity gasped. "Oh, I *couldn't!* I could *never* be so greedy as to deprive my customers of the finest in jeweled fabulosity! You might as well ask Applejack to sell her... *rope... thing.*"

"Lasso."

"Whatever."

Twilight sighed in exasperation. "*And I was doing so well...*" she said, under her breath.

"Beg pardon?"

"Nothing..." Twilight looked around.

A twinkling from a nearby trash bin caught her eye. She trotted over to it. "Wait... what about *these* gems? Did you throw these *away*?" She stirred her hooves through the trash; it was mostly gemstones and fabric remnants.

Rarity wrinkled her nose. "Of course, dah-ling. They're all *flawed*. Who would want *them*?"

Twilight magicked up a smooth red sphere. "...What's wrong with this one?"

"It isn't *clear* - there's an inclusion all through it. I tried to polish it, but the problem was *inside* it."

Twilight stared. "*Rarity... this is a-*" Twilight's horn flickered brighter for a moment. "-thirty, maybe thirty-one carat cabochon-cut corundum crystal with a six-point asterism!"

Rarity stared blankly.

Twilight groaned. "It's a *STAR RUBY*, Rarity!" she shouted. "It's *INCREDIBLY* valuable!"

"*Valuable...?*" Rarity's hood-shaded eyes brightened for a moment. "But it isn't *perfect*!"

Twilight smiled. "*It's the imperfection that makes it valuable*. Yes, it's not as clear as it could be on the inside, but *when you look at it the right way, the worth of what's inside it becomes obvious*."

She angled the gem in the sunlight; the rutile inclusions in the stone caught the light, releasing a brilliant star-shaped gleam.

The star reflected in Rarity's eyes. "My *goodness...!* I... I never saw..." She swallowed. "How much...?"

"If you sold it in Canterlot, this stone alone could buy every book in my library." Twilight magicked up a blue diamond and a yellow sapphire from the bin, bringing them over to float with the ruby. "Add these as well, and you could buy every book in *Princess Celestia's* library!"

Rarity pulled back her hood; underneath, her purple mane was as immaculately-coiffed as ever. "Oh, Twilight...! I'm saved! My *Boutique* is saved!" She galloped in place, squealing and giggling. Her rags fell away. She magicked the blue diamond out of Twilight's arcane grasp, and slid its sharpest point down the sign she'd nailed up. Half of the sign fell away, leaving it reading:

**F O R  
FABULOUS  
DRESSES  
AND THE LIKE  
SEE STORE OWNER  
RARITY**

"Helloooo!" Rarity waved to her other friends, still waiting over by the balloon. "I have the most *wonderful* news! We simply *must* celebrate with a makeover - my treat!"

Twilight slapped a front hoof to her forehead. "Rarity..."

"What? Just because I've had some profound moment of realization about my personal value in others' eyes doesn't mean I can't still appreciate the *finer* things in life. I'm a pony of means and distinction!" She shook her head, sending her coiled mane bouncing. As she turned to trot over to her friends her jewel cutie marks glittered, bright as any star.

*The Jewel shines - a thing of beauty;  
The finest bounty of the earth.  
Sharing the wealth is her sworn duty,  
But she doesn't know her inner worth.*

• • •

The five ponies trotted down the lane leading away from downtown Ponyville and toward Fluttershy's home. Twilight took the lead, followed by Pinkie Pie and Rarity, with Applejack and a hovering Rainbow Dash bringing up the rear. As they neared the hilltop cottage, the group stopped dead in their tracks.

The cottage was dark, its windows boarded up. Every one of the bird and animal houses that normally surrounded Fluttershy's domicile was missing. Even with the leaves and grass lush and green all around, their absence made the area seem barren and desolate.

A stirring from a nearby den caught the ponies' attention; a small, purple reptilian crawled out into the late afternoon light.

"Twilight...? *TWILIGHT!* You're back! Thank *Celestia!*"

Spike came bounding over to his caretaker, his wide green eyes shining. As he drew close, a clanking chain unwinding behind him grew taut and he jerked backward, restrained by a small collar latched around his neck. "*Urrk!*"

The ponies shared a collective gasp. Twilight approached her dazed assistant, and magicked the collar off his neck. "Spike... what *happened* here? Where's Fluttershy? Why were you chained up?"

The baby dragon sat up, rubbing his neck. "She's still inside there! After you disappeared, she came and fetched me and Owlowski so we wouldn't be home alone. But something was *wrong* with her. After she told me what happened with the Princess, I thought she was just upset, but that wasn't it. She was all-" Spike mimed twitching and stress, his shoulders shuddering and his head darting all around "-weird and edgy. Not like herself *at all*. She started bringing all of her animals inside the cottage, and she kept raving about how the Princess was angry and how she had to keep them safe."

Twilight's brow furrowed in concern. "She was afraid of... Celestia?"

"Terrified! That's why I'm out here! I said if she was so worried, I could send a letter to the Princess so she could apologize. That's when she panicked, called me a spy, and chained me up out here." He reached into the den, and pulled out a water dish and a clay bowl of glittering stones. "I've been living on *gems and water!*"

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Spike... you *always* live on gems and water."

"Yeah, but these are *semiprecious!* Moss agate, garnet - even *quartz!*" Spike rattled the bowl of uncut stone for emphasis and stuck out his tongue in disgust.

"You poor thing," said Twilight, her mild amusement at war with her concern for her friend and her assistant. "Dash? I think we'd better both go have a talk with Fluttershy." Rainbow Dash nodded sternly.

As the two ponies trotted down the path to Fluttershy's door, Applejack turned away in silence while Rarity sat magicking daisies into a chain and Pinkie Pie experimentally swallowed a smooth rose quartz pebble from Spike's bowl.

Twilight knocked on Fluttershy's door with a front hoof; the only answer was a chorus of birdcalls. When a second knock produced much the same result, Twilight ignited her horn and magicked the lock open. She gently pulled open the door.

The interior of the cottage was packed from floor to ceiling with birdhouses, kennels, cages and boxes, all crowded with Fluttershy's animal friends. Dozens of tiny eyes shone in the shadows. Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle trotted into the cramped front hall single file, the sunlight from the open door casting one long, blended shadow ahead of them.

As the tall, horned, winged shadow reached the middle of the room, a piercing scream erupted from deeper inside the cottage:

"AAAAAALICOOOORN!!!" A streak of pink and yellow slalomed between the columns of caged animals, and shot up the stairs. Despite Fluttershy's frantic speed, Twilight caught a glimpse of the pegasus' speckled, distorted cutie mark.

"Oh no...!" Twilight gasped. "Dash... did you see her cutie mark?"

"Sort of..." replied Dash. "It looked like she's got some sorta *bugs* on it. Maybe she got fleas from all these animals?"

Twilight shook her head gravely. "It's not fleas, Dash."

"What do you mean?"

"When Apple Bloom and her little friends kept pestering all of us about getting their cutie marks, it inspired me to do some reading on the subject. If I'm right, Fluttershy has a *very* serious condition: cutie mark Decay Disorder."

Rainbow Dash's brow furrowed in worry. "What does that mean?"

"It's an inherited condition where emotional stress starts to *unravel* a pony's bond to their cutie mark. As the Mark loses its shape, the pony loses their sense of self. They can become irritable, withdrawn, paranoid - even delusional or violent."

"*Stress*? Oh my gosh... did I make this happen to her?" Guilt twisted Dash's features.

"No...! *No*," said Twilight emphatically. "Something else triggered it - something earlier. I'm sure of it." *Something like an Element of Harmony*, she mentally added.

Twilight headed toward the stairs, weaving around the cages. She magicked up an unoccupied wooden bird perch as she went. "Follow me, Dash! What's important now is that we help her."

The pair followed the sounds of Fluttershy's panicked ranting into her darkened bedroom. From the glow of Twilight's horn, a quivering pale pink tail was visible sticking out from under the bed. As they drew closer the light revealed Fluttershy's hindquarters, and a clear view of the ragged butterflies on her flanks.

Twilight looked away, sadly. "This isn't good. It *is* CMDD."

"What do we do now?" asked Dash, her voice full of concern.

"She needs magical treatment *immediately*," said Twilight. Her horn glowed brighter, and the top quarter of the perch broke free; Twilight discarded the rest. "I need you to pull her out of there, and hold her down."

Dash gawked. "Wh-what? Why? What are you gonna do?"

Twilight squinted in concentration; a tiny crackling sphere of purple-white energy formed at the tip of her horn. "I'm going to shock her."

"*Storm therapy?* No...! NO WAY! That's for madponies! She doesn't need *that* - she's just a little anxious!" said Dash, waving her front hooves in an outward sweep. "It's too dangerous! pegasi almost *never* survive it!"

"That's because you do it with *clouds* in midflight, and you usually fall. We're on the *ground* now - it's not the same!"

"I am NOT gonna help you zap her!" Dash interposed herself between Twilight and her fellow pegasus.

Twilight met her friend's determined maroon stare head-on. "Dash... when you overdosed on that Nightshade, Fluttershy was willing to stomp on your ribs and fill your lungs like party balloons because I told her it would help keep you alive. She *trusted* me. I *know* you trust me, too. *Please...* help me do this."

Rainbow Dash closed her eyes and sighed, hanging her head. When she looked up, she gave a tiny nod.

"NOOOO! Dash, DON'T! It doesn't WORK! They tried it on my mother and she DIED!" Fluttershy screamed and cried in terror as Rainbow Dash dragged her out from under the bed by her tail and leaped on top of her, holding her down. "*She's working for HER! She's trying to kill me, too!*"

"*Your mom...?*" Rainbow Dash's grip slackened slightly. "You never told me..."

Fluttershy bucked and thrashed around, nearly escaping Dash's grip. Her distraction broken, Rainbow Dash fought to get her back under control. Fluttershy continued to scream. "*I'm scared, Dash! Don't do this! I don't want to die! Let me go! Let m-MMNG!*"

Twilight magicked the perch's cylindrical wooden top between Fluttershy's jaws like a bit. Unable to speak, she wordlessly sobbed around the wooden gag.

Dash turned to Twilight. "Twilight... are you *sure?*"

Twilight nodded firmly. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "If I don't, she'll only get worse." She bent her head to touch the tip of her crackling horn to Fluttershy's damaged cutie mark. With a bright flash and an electrical *snap* Fluttershy violently convulsed, surging to her hooves and nearly bucking Rainbow Dash off of her back. The wooden perch split. As her seizing muscles loosened, Fluttershy collapsed in a dead faint. Rainbow Dash stood up, and backed away.

Before the two other ponies' eyes, purple-white motes of energy chased the swarming distortions on Fluttershy's flanks, consuming them in tiny flares before winking out themselves. As the last of the gnat-like specks vanished, her original butterfly cutie marks drew back into focus.

A few moments later, Fluttershy stirred. She half-opened her eyes, raised her head, and squinted to make out her friends in the dim light. She spat out the broken pieces of the perch. "*R-Rainbow Dash...? Twilight?*" Her voice was even softer than usual. "W-what happened? What are you doing here? I... I don't remember, I... it's so *dark!*" She struggled to get to her hooves; Rainbow Dash rushed over to support her.

"Twilight's back from Canterlot, and she came to thank you for taking care of Spike and Owlowiscious for her while she was gone. *Right, Twilight?*" Dash shot Twilight a stern sidelong glance.

"Thanks for your help!" said Twilight, taking the hint. "And thanks for covering your windows and bringing in some friends to help make Owlowiscious feel welcome!"

"Oh... um, you're welcome...?" said Fluttershy tilting her head in confusion.

"I *mean* it," insisted Twilight. "No pony asked you to do it, but you did your best in a difficult situation. I know *it isn't easy being a caregiver* - I have enough trouble keeping Spike, Owlowiscious and my books safe! But you did a *wonderful* job."

Fluttershy smiled weakly. "Thank you for saying so," she said.

"Twilight..." Dash shifted uncomfortably. "Could you go wait for us outside? I need to talk to Fluttershy. *Alone.*"

Twilight nodded silently, and trotted out of the room.

"Shy, I know you've been through a lot lately, but... I just wanna say... I mean you deserve to know, I..." Dash paced nervously, at a loss for how to continue.

"...*You don't love me,*" Fluttershy whispered.

"Yes!" Dash caught herself. "No...! I mean, you mean a *lot* to me, and I owe you *everything*. But..." she sagged. "*But I don't love you. I wanted to, and after those berries and that magic of Twilight's, I thought I did, but...*" Dash sank lower, her front hooves splaying. Her nose nearly touched the floor. "I'm sorry..."

Fluttershy trotted over and rested her head against Dash's shoulder. "I know. Maybe part of me knew from the beginning. But it just seemed so *real*... I couldn't admit it to myself. I wanted you to love me so *badly*. I'm sorry, too." She quietly wept into Rainbow Dash's multi-coloured mane.

Dash raised up her head and pulled Fluttershy into a hug. "Someday you'll find a filly to love you back," she said, fighting to keep her voice from cracking, "and they're gonna treat you right - or they'll hafta answer to *me!*"

Fluttershy laughed a small, teary laugh. The two held one another in silence for a long moment, and then went to go join the others.

As Dash led her down the stairs, Fluttershy's restored cutie marks were as bright and vivid as the butterflies that had once saved her life.

*The High Ritesmare, loved everywhere,  
Kindly helps her flock to grow.  
But without them soon sinks to despair;  
Alone she withers - a flower in snow.*

• • •

Twilight turned in a slow circle, surveying the interior of her library.

Inspired by a resurgent *desire* to party matching her *urge* to do so, Pinkie Pie had decorated the building in a matter of minutes. She and Applejack had provided food and Rarity had fetched a record player. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash had gathered a small bucket of raw rainbows, and painted the ceiling in garish colours. All things considered, the ponies had assembled a party welcoming Twilight home in record time.

In one corner, Rarity and Pinkie Pie were locked in a pitched cake-eating contest; the unicorn's progress was severely handicapped by her insistence on using silverware and taking small, dainty mouthfuls. Nevertheless, she seemed to have a surprisingly large appetite.

In the middle of the room Spike danced to the music, wearing his customary lampshade hat. Rainbow Dash danced along, turning aerial somersaults over the tiny dragon.

In another corner, Applejack and Fluttershy stood near the punchbowl. They seemed to be chatting, but Twilight couldn't make out what they were saying over the music.

"She's real... *graceful*... ain't she?" mused Applejack, her eyes following Dash's musical acrobatics.

Fluttershy nodded. She sighed wistfully.

"...She broke it off, huh?"

Fluttershy's lower lip quivered. She nodded again.

"Shewt, I'm sorry, 'Shy. ...Fer what it's worth, ya did make a nice lookin' pair."

Fluttershy turned slightly, letting her mane partially hide her face. "*Thanks.*"

Applejack cleared her throat. "Listen... I know we've *both* done some mighty regrettable things these past couple o' days, and well, fer my part, I wantcha to know I'm sorry. Sometimes *bein' in love* can make a pony do some foalish things." Her eyes still followed Dash's dance.

Fluttershy's face emerged from behind her mane. "Applejack... you...?"

Applejack nodded. "Since I first laid eyes on 'er. Though I s'pose you got me beat in that respect, bein' from Cloudsdale an' all."

Realization spread across Fluttershy's face. "She didn't tell me about the fight..."

"Uh-huh. If she'd explained the whole sorry business, she woulda had to tell ya how I felt, and she'd promised not to. Loyal to a *fault*, that pony."

Fluttershy and Applejack watched Dash in silence for a time. They both sighed at once.

Inspiration brightened Applejack's features. She turned and rummaged in a nearby saddlebag. She brought out a small metal flask, and poured a tiny splash of amber liquid into two punch glasses. The heady, medicinal scent of thoroughly-distilled apples filled the air around them.

"T'ain't right bein' down in the dumps durin' a party. Here... this stuff's worked pretty well fer me so far when thoughts o' that fine blue filly have gotten me down. To Rainbow Dash - Bottoms up!"

*"T-to Rainbow Dash!"*

Fluttershy picked up the glass in her front hooves and slugged back the shot in tandem with Applejack. After a moment of silent consideration, her eyes skewed in opposite directions, her face flushed, and she coughed violently.

"Woops!" Applejack chuckled, patting Fluttershy on the back. "Prolly shoulda warned ya - that stuff packs a mighty big kick! Big Mac says they oughta name it after me!"

*"...It's... nice,"* Fluttershy wheezed.

Meanwhile, Twilight Sparkle magicked up a bottle and a goblet, and began pouring. "Everypony - I wanted to say something!" Twilight's friends paused in their merrymaking, and turned to face her. "I would like to propose a toast to all of you: the best friends I've ever had."

"Twilight..." Rarity swallowed a mouthful of cake and raised an importunate hoof.

Twilight set down the bottle. *"Please, just let me finish.* I know I spend a lot of time with my nose in books, but that doesn't mean I'm not interested in what else is happening - or in *you.*"

"Twilight..." Applejack trotted forward.

Twilight magicked the filled goblet higher. *"Just a second.* You're all very important to me, and in the future I plan to pay you all a lot more attention. There's only so much time, after all, and I want to spend as much of it as I can with the ponies who mean the

most to me. Cheers!" As Twilight finished her toast, her six-star cutie marks, for lack of a better word, *sparkled*.

"TWILIGHT!" Pinkie Pie popped up next to Twilight like a frosting-daubed colt-in-the-box.

"For Celestia's sake, WHAT?" asked Twilight. She took a large gulp from the goblet.

Pinkie Pie grinned broadly. "That's hot sauce again."

• • •

Back in Canterlot, Princess Celestia watched her faithful student frantically drinking from the library's kitchen sink in the glowing reflections of a flickering curtain of magical sunlight. She smiled a small, dignified smile, and magicked the last of the tarot cards back into the deck.

***The Enchantress, though she'll live forever,  
Finds loneliness hard to defeat.  
Magic can hold one's life together...  
But friendship makes it all complete.***

*Note: this story takes place from the latter half of Rarity: Loss to the first part of Twilight Sparkle: Spellbound.*

*Princess Luna stood in the cool night air at the highest parapet of the Royal Castle of the pony Sisters, her dark feathered wings spread wide. The wind flowed between her feathers and tickled across her lean frame, forcing her to suppress a shiver. With a moment's focus, she ignited her horn.*

*The Crescent Moon rose up from the horizon at her behest, its silvery light faintly illuminating Equestria while an infinite blanket of stars sparkled into being across the smooth blackness of the sky.*

*A few moments later Luna's older sister appeared on the nearest parapet in a burst of fiery golden sunlight, the night winds playing at her rosy-pink mane and tail.*

*"Little sister... I can't let you do this!" the white alicorn's voice was righteous. Insistent. Indignant, even.*

*Luna sighed dejectedly. "Big sister, please try to understand..."*

*Celestia stomped, her bare hoof striking blinding golden sparks off the stone.*

*"I understand enough already to know you're upsetting the natural order, and breaking ancient laws. And why? Just because you want to prove yourself?"*

*"Stop talking down to me! You're not Father!" Luna reared, and slammed both front hooves down on the ancient stone. The resulting sparks were small and faint.*

*The taller alicorn's expression hardened. "No... I'm not. He's gone. They both are. And I'm glad they aren't around to see -" she gestured broadly with a hoof, "- this!"*

*Her older sister's words cut Luna like hydra fangs. With a cry of anguish and rage she spread her wings and lunged at her fellow alicorn, her horn blazing bright.*

• • •

The echoes of a millennium-old confrontation still rang in Princess Luna's ears as she jerked awake in her bed. Her pulse was pounding, and she was covered in a cold sweat.

Her dreams had been particularly vivid and upsetting of late, often driving her to wake well before sunset. Moving to a new bed chamber had done little to change matters, it seemed. She looked over to the drawn curtains concealing the library-like room's massive west-facing window; the insistent glow of the setting sun still shone from every edge. She scowled.

Sleep was an indulgence for alicorns. Luna knew that the magic inside her could sustain her for months on end with barely a moment's pause, but since her release she and her sister had returned to the unspoken agreement that it was best to divide the day and night between them. Celestia, it seemed, had mostly kept pretending to need sleep in her absence, as an equine touch to give the masses peace of mind.

Luna dragged herself out of bed and trotted over to her desk, where several half-read books still sat open to this or that page. She sat down on a lushly-padded wooden chair, and magicked three of the volumes into the air. She used a spell to divide her attention, and began speed-reading all three books simultaneously. The pages turned in unison every few seconds.

She was just about to replace *A Sociological Treatise on earth pony / unicorn Relations* with a different tome when the opening of the outside door caught her attention.

A young white unicorn with a vibrant fuchsia mane trotted in, magicking a feather duster, dustpan and broom along with her.

Luna turned back to her books. She magicked up an alliteratively-titled Astronomy guide and continued reading.

"Oh...! Begging Your pardon, Your Majesty," said the unicorn when she spotted Luna, "I'm just here to tidy up. By Your leave...?"

"Mm-hm," said Luna, her eyes still fixed on her books. As the unicorn busied herself about the room dusting shelves and sweeping the floors, Luna happened to catch a glimpse of the pony's cutie mark out of the corner of her eye: a crescent moon surrounded by tiny stars. Luna's eyes widened; the trio of books fell down onto the table.

*The Mark of the Moon Herd!* She gasped in disbelief and swooped over to the unicorn with a single beat of her broad wings.

"YOU!" she boomed at the unicorn. "Why are you *really* here? Did *she* send you? Did my sister notice that I found this place already? Is this her idea of a *peace offering*? ... Or are you a *spy*? Is that mark even *real*?" She jabbed a sapphire-shod hoof at the unicorn's

flank. The unicorn cowered in terror, covering her head with her front hooves and letting her cleaning tools clatter to the floor. She yelped in fright when she felt Luna's touch.

"ANSWER ME!"

The unicorn yelped again. "I-I-I'm ss-sorry, Y-your Majesty...!" she stammered. "I d-didn't even know You were staying here! I'm just a P-palace servant! M-my name is Moondancer!" She curled up tighter, too scared to even lay eyes on the furious alicorn looming over her. "P-please... *have mercy!*"

Luna felt guilt dissipate her rage. This was no spy of Celestia's; this was just a mortal pony frightened out of her wits - and bearing an unexpected coincidence on her flanks. After so long, it was no surprise that she didn't understand her heritage. Luna folded her wings and turned away.

"I'm... sorry," she said, somewhat awkwardly. "I... I misunderstood."

Moondancer peeked out from between her hooves. "Your Majesty...?" she squeaked.

"Your cutie mark bears the signs of an ancient pact between my Mother and a bloodline of unicorns. Your ancestors were the Moon Herd - Her personal attendants and bodyguards, and after her... *passing*, my own."

The unicorn shakily got to her hooves. "I had no idea!" she whispered, awestruck.

Luna turned to face her. "I fear there is much that has been forgotten in my... *absence*." A lump threatened to form in Luna's throat as a surge of strictly-controlled emotion partially broke free. She coughed softly. "We would that you acted at Our behest alone, and not that of the palace at large," she intoned, adopting the archaic Royal Vernacular. "From this night forth, We declare this to be so: Moondancer, lost scion of the Moon Herd, is the Royal Princess Luna's personal student and assistant!" She stomped a hoof; a faint rumble of thunder echoed in the vaulted room.

Moondancer stared. Her jaw dropped.

Luna felt the same guilt prod at her once more. She cleared her throat again and looked away, blushing faintly. "...*That is... if you would be so inclined*," she added.

Moondancer smiled, and nodded quickly. "Of *course*, Your Majesty...! I'd be delighted!"

Luna's expression brightened. "Splendid! I will teach you about magic, the stars, your ancestors and the ancient times, and you will act as my assistant in all matters. We begin your training tonight!"

• • •

*Princess Celestia's magic-warded form erupted through the ancient grey wall as if the stone was so much spun glass, sending fractured bricks scattering in all directions as she tumbled into the ballroom. She skidded to a stop and then shakily got to her hooves.*

*Seconds later, a similarly-warded Luna hovered through the same hole in the wall, her wings carrying her forward with terrible purpose.*

*"I don't... want to... fight you, sister," said Celestia between panting breaths.*

*"This isn't ABOUT what you want!" Luna bellowed. Her horn unleashed a dozen lashing tendrils of energy. "You're always the centre of attention - always the special one. Well, no more! When everypony sees what I've done, they'll have no choice but to notice me!" Luna advanced on her sister.*

*"When they see... what you've done... they'll think you're a monster," said Celestia mournfully. Her horn released pink extrusions of its own.*

*The streaks of deadly energy lanced out as the two alicorns' clashed. Parried beams of hardened light cut through the walls, ceiling and floor, leaving molten, orange-glowing holes in the ancient stone.*

*The Royal pony Sisters' battle lasted for hours, and took them from one end of the castle to the other. They left a trail of destruction in their wake.*

*Throughout the castle servants, courtiers and foreign visitors galloped about in a panic and dodged falling debris and stray magical bolts. The Sun Guard and the Moon Herd tried in vain to keep the evacuation sane and safe.*

*At length, Celestia gained the upper hoof. She flew toward the ceiling while gripping her sister in a half dozen energy tendrils, and then smashed her down into the floor. The flagstones gave way, and Luna disappeared into the shadowy depths of the Castle's basement.*

*Celestia fought to catch her breath as she let her spells fade. She staggered when her bare hooves touched down on the stone floor; the fight had been exhausting. Her horn was*

*painfully hot, and her flanks shone with sweat. Once the adrenaline surge of the battle began to fade, Celestia's stern expression softened.*

*She trotted over to the gaping hole in the floor. "Lu-lu...?" she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.*

*Faint, echoing laughter answered back, followed by a low whisper: "...The Vault..."*

*Celestia craned her neck, angling an ear toward the hole. "...What?"*

*Shadowy force erupted from the hole like a black geyser, sending Celestia tumbling. When she came to her senses a moment later, she gasped in abject horror at the sight before her.*

• • •

Princess Celestia mirrored her dream-self's gasp as she awoke. The dreams had been the same almost every night since her sister's return: that same terrible night, played out over and over. She would have simply forgone sleep, but she was reluctant to do so. Mundane habits and routines helped the never-ending parade of days and nights pass more smoothly, and helped keep her grounded.

...And of course, as before, while she and her sister were splitting the day between them she could pretend that it was scheduling and not anything *deeper* keeping them from speaking.

She rolled over in her opulently-appointed bed and tried to let her mind settle, but it soon became clear that her night's sleep was over even if the night was not. She slipped out from under the pastel-hued covers and got out of bed. In the darkness of her expansive personal chambers, her silhouette seemed small and gangly. Her dainty unshod hooves clicked softly on the stone floor.

Her horn ignited as she magicked up the Regalia of the Day-Mare, lifting the golden yoke, tiara and shoes from their resting place on a nearby vanity and slipping them on. Thusly appointed, she trotted out onto her bedroom's balcony.

Although it was still three hours before Celestia would bring the dawn, the palace was a beehive of activity. Ponies rushed to and fro, consumed by their efforts to complete the last of the repairs after the riotous upheaval that was this year's Grand Galloping Gala before the arrival of the Tsarevna of Stalliongrad and her retinue the next afternoon.

In spite of the bleak mood the dream had put her in, Celestia couldn't help but smile when she thought back to the Gala. Her favourite - and only - student's friends were certainly a lively bunch!

And as for Twilight Sparkle herself, not a day went by that Celestia didn't thank her lucky stars that she'd found her. The young unicorn had such vast magical talent, and such a keen intellect, yet she was also so endearingly *awkward* around social situations, as if frustrated that ponies could not be read as easily as books. She was so *very* much like-

Celestia hung her head. The bleak mood returned in full force.

*Is that why I picked her? she mused silently. Is that why I gave her the Ivory Tower, out of any empty room in the palace? She spread her wings and gracefully took to the air. Is that why I arranged for her to be the one to seek the Elements?*

She banked sharply and alighted on the palace's roof. The moon had nearly set but the night sky was still deep and black, the stars staring down as if in judgement.

"*I missed you,*" she whispered to the moon as it slipped past the horizon. "*...I still miss you.*"

Celestia watched the last sliver of moon disappear and then turned her gaze to the stars. She watched them in melancholy silence until the time came for her to sweep them aside with a wave of dawn and day.

• • •

Moondancer stared in rapt attention at the shimmering curtain of shadowy moonlight floating before her. The magicked "screen" displayed a phantasmal night sky, with each of the major constellations connected star-to-star by gleaming silvery lines.

Princess Luna stood next to the display, pointing to starry patterns with her glowing horn.

"The... Pegasus," said Moondancer as Luna singled out the constellation.

"Good." Luna nodded slightly, and pointed again.

Moondancer narrowed her eyes in concentration. "The Water Horse...?"

"Yes - excellent. And this one?"

"That's - wait! Your Majesty, I think some stars are missing from the chart. Is that part of the test?"

"What...? Where?" Luna surveyed the illusory display in dismay.

Moondancer pointed with her horn. "Shouldn't there be four bright stars around the moon?"

Luna winced and looked away. The star chart wavered and then vanished.

"Those... those were not actually stars," she said softly. "They were part of my *prison* - the keys that unbound me when the time came."

"*Oh...*" said Moondancer. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty..."

Luna shook her head, willing away an upwelling of sadness. "It's alright, my student. You couldn't have known." She looked over to the drawn curtains; their edges were brightening. "Besides, it's daybreak. You've learned enough for one night, I think."

Fatigue struck Moondancer hot on the tail of the realization that she'd spent the entire night under the Princess' tutelage. She stifled a yawn. "Yes, Your Majesty. By Your leave...?"

Luna nodded, and the young unicorn smiled warmly and backed away for three paces before turning and leaving the Ivory Tower.

In spite of the depressing memories Moondancer's question had stirred, Luna couldn't help but smile slightly as she thought about her new student. She was so polite and earnest, but also lively and witty, with an excellent memory for names and a strong sense of decorum. Why, pale her mane a bit and she could be a younger-

Luna's smile dissolved.

She trotted over to her cluttered table and sat down heavily in her chair. Habit or not, putting the masses at ease or not, promising student or not, she wasn't going to sleep today. Her realization a moment earlier had robbed her of any hope that she wouldn't dream about the confrontation with her older sister again, and she didn't want to face that.

She magicked a narrow pair of magnifying pince-nez glasses onto her nose, and focused on the tiny print of an open volume of Encyclopaedia Equestria.

• • •

Princess Celestia returned from Ponyville to her tower-top personal study in a flash of white-hot magic. She felt the accompanying presence of her faithful student, but she held the unicorn frozen in the spaces between spaces for a moment, buying herself some time to sit down near the window and prepare herself for what was coming.

"You two!" she barked at the Royal Guard pegasi flanking the study's only door. "Do *not* forget your orders: do it *quickly* and *cleanly*. If you fail me in this endeavour, I will be severely... *disappointed*."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the guards shouted in unison, snapping to attention.

Celestia took a slow, deep breath, and let out a soft sigh. She knew that, judging from the fracas between Twilight Sparkle's friends which she had interrupted, she could no longer delay explaining the secrets of the Elements of Harmony to her.

She knew that her student's skeptical, probing intellect would jump too quickly to the implications and complications of what she was about to tell her, and fail to stop and let her heart take in the sheer *gravity* of the fact itself.

She knew that it would take a profound, life-altering shock to shake Twilight Sparkle from her usual investigative manner.

She knew that long ago her Father - peace and joy to Him, forever - had taught her and her younger sister a very similar lesson about the significance of the sheer power that was the birthright of alicorns.

None of those facts made what she had to do next any easier.

She released Twilight Sparkle from her stasis; the unicorn flashed into being in the middle of the study. Celestia magicked up a teapot to fill the shallow porcelain cup on the low table beside her.

"Princess Celestia... I can't tell you how sorry I am..." Twilight looked away, and noticed that the door out of the room was flanked by a pair of Royal Guard pegasi.

Princess Celestia magicked up the cup and took a slow, thoughtful sip of her tea. Her eyes were closed, her face a serene, unreadable mask. She set down the cup, turned toward the guards, opened her eyes, and softly said two words:

"Kill her."

• • •

*Princess Luna chuckled as she bore down on her fallen older sister. How small and weak the bruised and battered older alicorn seemed now!*

*"Have you had enough?" Luna asked, her voice deep and resonant. "Yes? Maybe you should have thought of that before dropping me into the Vault!"*

*Princess Celestia stirred, and shakily got to her hooves. She spat out a mouthful of sparkling blood and stared defiantly into the blazing turquoise eyes of the towering, pitch black, Equinium-barded monstrosity that until moments before had been her small and skinny younger sister.*

*"Oh...! Still not backing down?" Luna tittered. "What next? Will you tell me you aren't afraid of me?"*

*Celestia's lower lip quivered. "You know I can't..." she whispered.*

*"That's right!" Luna boomed. Lightning lanced between clouds in the night sky; Celestia cringed backward. "Mother's war-mantle won't let you! With the Mantle of the Nightmare, I AM fear!"*

*Luna's flowing, starry mane snaked out of its own volition and cupped Celestia's chin. "I tried to get you to see things my way peacefully, but NO!" Her mane slapped her older sister across the cheek. "You had to be stubborn. Well now you're paying for it!"*

*Celestia's face contorted in a blend of fear and rage. Her horn ignited blazing white; Luna easily recognized the matrix of a teleportation spell forming. She smirked.*

*"That's all you can do, big sister? Run away? You know I can track you."*

*"I'm not running," said Celestia gravely. "I'm going to stop you." She vanished in a burst of white-hot magic.*

*Luna concentrated for a moment, and soon located her sister: Celestia had reappeared two stories up... right outside the Chapel of Harmony.*

*Luna's eyes widened. "No...!" she shouted to the empty ballroom. "You wouldn't!"*

*Too shocked to teleport or even fly, Luna galloped up the winding stairs to the chapel. At the first landing she heard a blast of battle-magic blow open the chapel doors. At the second floor she felt the stone beneath her Equinium-shod hooves rumble. At the second landing she was almost blinded by a wave of searing golden light. As Luna climbed the last steps and stood in the entryway to the Chapel of Harmony, she gasped in shock at the terrible beauty of the towering, alabaster, Orichalcum-barded Goddess that stood before her.*

*"Little sister..." said Celestia, her voice deep and powerful, "...I am not afraid of you."*

*Six shimmering globes rose up in a halo behind Celestia, and began spinning in a circle faster and faster.*

• • •

*"...NOOOOO!"*

Luna jerked upright in her seat, for a moment unsure where - or *when* - she was. But reality quickly reasserted itself, and she realized that she had dozed off reading the encyclopaedia. She sighed in annoyance with herself and straightened her pince-nez. She hadn't fallen asleep while reading since she was a foal, and the unpleasant dream had only made the situation all the more embarrassing. She redoubled her efforts to get through the weighty tome.

She was only a few more pages into the *E* section of the encyclopaedia when the outside doors magicked open. *Is Moondancer back already?* she wondered. *It's not even sunset yet! Perhaps the Moon Herd blood is stronger with her than I thought...* She turned to the door, already feeling the gloominess fleeing her thoughts - and then her eyes settled on an entirely different unicorn. The gloominess redoubled its assault.

"Oh... *it's you,*" said Luna as the purple unicorn approached, only partially concealing her disappointment. She magicked the pince-nez off of her face and set it down on the cluttered table.

It was her sister's *favourite*; the straight-maned little show-off who'd been living in this very room only a few months earlier, and whose Elemental assault had shattered her Mother's Mantle right off of her hide. Pent-up loathing rose in Luna like a tide of bile. She narrowed her eyes.

She didn't care why the wingless, meddling brat was here. She didn't care that the unicorn was now the bearer of the Element of Magic, and thus as immortal as any

alicorn. She didn't care how upset her older sister might get. She still resolved to find a way to make the horrid little nag *hurt*.

• • •

Moondancer was unaccustomed to sleeping through the day. She stirred in her bed, beset by sad, disquieting dreams. She awoke just after sunset, and suddenly realized that the cries she'd been hearing were no dream. She trotted groggily to her small third-floor room's window, and nosed open the shutters. What she saw purged the sleepiness from her mind.

Princess Luna was in the gardens below, surrounded by scattered books and bric-a-brac from the Ivory Tower. She was standing before a gilt marble statue of Princess Celestia, looking up at the effigy and shouting through shuddering sobs.

*"I h-hate you! I HATE YOU! I didn't 'g-go too fa-ar!' YOU DID! Y-you won't even let me F-FACE you! You just h-hide behind your Regalia and play w-with your special little r-replacem-ment, while I... I... I WISH I'D STAYED UP THERE!"*

Luna's horn blazed; a violent eruption of battle-magic detonated the statue, sending smoking shards raining in all directions. Luna collapsed onto her knees and wailed in despair.

Moments later Moondancer emerged from the front door of the servants' quarters and cautiously trotted over to the weeping alicorn.

"...Your Majesty?"

Luna turned her head aside and wiped her eyes with a wing. She sniffled. "*What do you want?*" she whimpered, her voice slightly muffled.

Moondancer knelt down next to the Princess. "Begging Your pardon, Your Majesty," she said gently, "but did something happen between Yourself and Princess Celestia?"

"Only what *always* happens," Luna said bitterly. "I tried to stand up for myself, and she made me out to be the villain for it." Luna's shoulders heaved; she gritted her teeth, holding back fresh tears.

Moondancer couldn't help but rest a comforting hoof across Luna's shoulders. She blushed at the inexcusable breach of protocol. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty..."

The two sat in silence for a long moment, until Moondancer spoke once more: "Your Majesty... if I may ask..." She swallowed. "...did the Royal pony Sisters clash about the night? Do You still want to make it last forever?"

Luna closed her eyes, and heaved a slow, long-suffering sigh. "... *I never did*," she whispered. "That wasn't even why she banished me in the first place."

Moondancer's head tilted in confusion. "But, Your Majesty... the legends!"

Luna scoffed. "The legends were written a generation after the fact, by ponies who weren't even there." She frowned. "...And my sister was content to let history turn me into a monster... and her into a saviour. When I was finally set free, I was so enraged that I decided to give them what they feared so much."

The pale unicorn's features twisted in sadness. "*Oh, Your Majesty...! That's... terrible!*"

Luna nodded, fighting to keep from choking up again. "She was a cruel, unforgiving, manipulative *tyrant*." The alicorn turned to stare into her student's eyes. "Tell me... what does that make you think of her?"

Moondancer's lavender eyes unfocused for a moment, staring at nothing. "*I... I'm sure She did what She thought was right...*" she said softly, her voice monotone and distant.

Luna pounded her front hooves on the flagstones, snapping Moondancer out of her reverie.

"*THAT* is why we clashed!" She shouted. "She used the Elements of Harmony to make a reversed copy of our Mother's war-mantle so she could face me. And because of that Regalia, everypony can't *help* but love her!"

Luna looked up into the moonless, starless sky. "I *seethed* with hatred for her when those *commoners* shattered the Mantle of the Night-Mare, but the moment I laid eyes on her without it, I was *forced* to forgive her. You can't *imagine* the effort it took to speak as I did just now... even to a *statue* of her!"

Luna's student gasped softly. "Your Majesty...!"

Despite her best efforts, fresh tears slid down Luna's indigo cheeks. "Even though I'm free from the moon, I'm still trapped... drowning in my hate because the one who deserves to bear it is always hidden behind *a beautiful lie!*"

A white flash flickered behind the pair, followed by the jingling clatter of falling metal. A youthful, gentle voice spoke up:

"Not *always* hidden, little sister."

Luna turned around; her jaw dropped.

• • •

Princess Celestia stood bare in the cool evening air, the six golden relics of her Regalia lying in a circle around her. Without their power she stood a scant few inches taller than her younger sister, and her unmoving mane and tail were the pale pink of the dawn.

"F-Forgive me, Your M-Majesty...!" stammered Moondancer to Luna, blushing copiously and averting her gaze. "I mustn't s-see Your Royal Sister like this!" She galloped off toward the servants' quarters in embarrassment.

Luna conquered her shock and narrowed her eyes. "How's your *pet unicorn*?" she sneered.

Celestia took the jab in stride. "Twilight Sparkle is resting in my chambers."

Luna scoffed. "What *is* this, big sister? What are you *planning*?"

Celestia winced. "Oh, Lu-lu... I'm not planning anything."

Luna rolled her eyes and then cast her gaze down toward the stone beneath her. "*Right.*"

Celestia continued: "Spring is almost over - I don't want another season to go by with this... this *distance* between us. We've hardly spoken since your birthday, and even then we mostly just made small-talk about the night-sky rainbow I arranged. After what happened today, I decided to give you *what you want.*"

Although she was still suspicious of her sister's motives, Luna couldn't help but take the bait. She faced her sister. "What I *want*? What do *you* know about what I want?" She advanced on the white alicorn. "You think you can make everything *all right* by just showing me your real face, *Celly*? *YOU SENT ME TO PONY HELL!*"

Luna's horn flared and a wave of purple-blue magic hurled Celestia backward into a nearby pillar; the ancient stone cracked from the impact, and Celestia collapsed in a heap at its base. Luna stalked after her sister.

"All I wanted was to make Equestria a *better* place! My spell was *perfect*! The seasons, the plants, the animals - even the water and the air - I made a whole *forest* into one self-sustaining system, *ever-free* of the need for care! I could have done the same for the whole *world*! And you *BANISHED* me for it! You left me to *rot* in the cold and the dark for *A THOUSAND YEARS!*"

Luna unleashed another magical blast as her sister struggled to stand. Celestia smashed *through* the pillar this time. Once again Luna pursued her fallen sister, batting aside falling stonework with flashes of magic.

"And then... *THEN*... you let everypony think that just because we both left the moon where it was while we fought, I was trying to *take over!*" Luna was all but screaming now, tears soaking her face. "*Why, Celly? WHY?*"

Celestia struggled back onto her hooves, already recovering from injuries that would have crippled or killed any mortal pony. She took a deep breath, and:

"*BECAUSE I WAS ANGRY!*" Celestia's horn ignited and a chunk of broken pillar twice her height flipped into the air and smashed down onto her younger sister. Luna partially crumbled the stone with a spell before it struck, but she was still left buried under a pile of rubble. Celestia loomed over her.

"You wouldn't listen - you *NEVER* listen! You thought that just because you were well-read, you had all the answers! You wouldn't even *CONSIDER* the idea that you could be wrong! But you *WERE* wrong, Lu-lu! That forest was an *ATROCITY!*"

Celestia's horn flared once more, and the pile of rubble exploded from the inside. Luna sailed through the air and cried out in pain as she crashed down hard on the age-worn flagstones.

"Did you even *look* at what you made? Did you see the clouds blindly spitting out lightning at random? Did you see the plants choking the life from each other's roots in competition for soil and water? Did you see the animals *eating each other?*" Celestia's voice cracked. "Lu-lu... it was *horrific!*"

Luna groaned, and staggered back onto her hooves. The two bruised and battered alicorns stared each other down.

"Don't talk to me about horror," Luna snarled. "I spent *ten centuries* without food, water or even *air*, living on magic alone, with nothing but *HATE* to keep me warm, while you sat on your throne and *laughed!*"

"*THAT'S A LIE!*" Celestia shouted, tears in her eyes. "I *DIED* the day I banished you! I regretted it the instant it was done. Not only that, but I used the Elements of Harmony in anger, and all six of them *wracked* me for it! It was *months* before I even had the strength to leave the ruins of the Castle - Equestria had nearly fallen to civil war by the time I moved the capital here!"

"*It didn't stop you from keeping the Regalia...*" muttered Luna.

Celestia looked down, her anger draining away. "The masses needed a Princess they could look up to," she said sheepishly. "I had to give them one."

Luna sighed in frustration, similarly losing her grip on her fury. "Why are you doing this, Celly? Why tell me these things? Do you want me to tell you that you were right all along? Do you want me to apologize? *What do you want from me?*"

Luna's harsh tone struck Celestia like a knife-edge across a marionette's strings. She sat down heavily on the flagstones. Her wings drooped, and tears wet her face. A sudden surge of feeling boiled up in her, and she wailed:

"*I want my sister baaaack!*"

She covered her eyes with her hooves and started crying like a lost foal, gasping out deep, heaving, undignified sobs, her usual decorum nowhere to be found.

Luna backed away slightly, profoundly shaken by the sight.

"I missed you, Lu-lu. I missed you *so much!*" Celestia bawled. "I was afraid to face you while you still wore our Mother's Mantle, so I abandoned our subjects, and condemned my best student and her friends to bear a burden that nearly killed *me*, just so I could see your real face again!" She crawled toward Luna on her belly, sniffing and trembling. "You're the only real family I have left in the world... I would have done *anything* to set you free sooner!"

"*S-Stop it...*" whispered Luna, struggling to keep the quaver out of her voice. How many times had she dreamed of this while she'd been alone on the moon - her proud older sister, bowing and scraping before her, begging for her regard? How often had she practised her most harsh and scathing replies? But now that it was happening, she

couldn't seem to summon up the schadenfreude that had helped pass the time during her banishment. In fact, the memory of her previous fantasies almost sickened her.

Celestia crawled closer, reaching for Luna's front hooves with her own. Dust marred her pristine white hide and her rosy mane and tail. "*Please, Lu-lu... please forgive me...*" she grovelled. "*I know I don't deserve it, but pleeeez...*"

Luna yelped softly at her sister's touch. She tried to back away further, but her rump struck a large stone planter. "It's a *trick*... y-you're trying to..." Luna bit her lip, her face contorting from the effort of holding back her emotions.

"*I'm sorry, Lu-lu! I'm s-soooooorry!*" Celestia's teary eyes seemed as wide as the moon. Luna felt her resolve crumbling.

"*...Damn you, Celly!*" Luna whimpered, and pulled her older sister up into a hug.

The Royal pony Sisters wept wordlessly for a long time, sharing their first genuine embrace in more than a millennium.

At length Luna smiled slightly and muttered: "You're pathetic, Celly."

Celestia stroked her sister between her wings with a bare hoof. "I love you too, Lu-lu."

Luna heaved a long, slow sigh. "...All right. *Maybe* I should have researched the ever-free spell more thoroughly." She quickly added: "...I still haven't forgiven you, though," but the malice had left her voice.

Celestia sniffled and smiled behind Luna's head, and said: "I know, Lu-lu... but I'll do whatever it takes to help you to."

"All right then... you can start right now."

"*Anything.*"

"Stop calling me *Lu-lu.*"

The alicorns laughed together for the first time in more years than even they could remember. They both ignited their horns and cast their eyes skyward, and the moon rose into the blank night sky. An infinite blanket of stars sparkled into being in its wake.

PART ONE - SIMPLE PRESENT

"Learn lots, muffin!"

Ditzy Doo hugged her precious foal from behind on the street in front of Ponyville Elementary and peppered the top of her head with kisses until the little unicorn squirmed to get free.

*"I will, Mommy! C'mon, leggo - I'm gonna be late!"*

Ditzy released her, and the blonde-maned lavender filly cantered over to join her friends on the way into the schoolhouse. Ditzy waved at her happily as she went.

Once her pride and joy disappeared from sight past the open double doors, Ditzy spread her wings and took to the air, heading back to the Post Office. She gathered up the day's post in her saddlebags and began her morning rounds.

Letter by letter, parcel by parcel, she began working her way from one end of Ponyville to the other, waving and smiling at the ponies she passed by and apologizing to those she accidentally ran into. Most took it well. Most.

"Watch where yer goin', *Derpy Hooves!*" The chocolate-brown pegasus shook the dust from his wings and his sand-coloured mane as he stooped to retrieve the newly-purchased dumbbell he'd dropped during the collision with Ditzy.

Ditzy winced upon hearing the mean-spirited nickname, but she said nothing. Her oldest friend - the unicorn Colgate - had often told her that a pony's life is too short to hold grudges, and she'd taken the advice to heart. She silently collected the letters that had spilled from her bags and resumed her rounds.

A few minutes later she happened to glance at a shop window and caught a glimpse of her faint reflection. She stopped dead in the air, folding her wings and landing heavily. She approached the window like an earth pony approaching the edge of a cliff.

*"Oh, no..."* she said under her breath as she angled her head down and toward the glass, examining her scalp in dismay. *"No, no, no!"* She twisted to check the base of her tail, and saw the same problem there. *"Nooooo...!"*

She trotted in place and murmured anxiously, her uneven gaze darting from the window, to her tail, to her still-half-full mailbags and back again. She bit her lip.

"*Sowwy...*" she said to her mailbags, and took to the air.

• • •

A few minutes later Ditzzy Doo sat on a plush chair with her chin resting on the curved lip of one of the sinks in Carousel Boutique's cosmetology room. Her relief at finding the place otherwise devoid of customers was almost palpable. She sighed, and her eyes half-closed in relaxation.

The shop's elegant white unicorn owner stood next to her, flanked by a hovering magicked dye brush and bowl of mane bleach. Her own lustrous purple locks were wound into a tight bun and protected from accidental splashes by a diamond-patterned bandana.

"As I've often said before, I do *so* wish you'd let your natural colour grow out, dah-ling," said the unicorn, stirring the brush in the bowl of bluish paste. "It's so rare to see such a *dark* mane around these parts."

"Uh-uh," said Ditzzy, emphatically shaking her head. "Yellow."

"Yes, blonde does seem to suit you, I suppose," the unicorn conceded, "but don't you find it a bit plain? You could look so *exotic* - like you'd stepped out of the pages of Puledria Vogue!"

"*Yellow*," she repeated firmly, her voice tinged with something not unlike fear. After a moment she looked down, and added: "*...Dinky doesn't know.*"

A long, uncomfortable silence passed between the two ponies, until thoughts of the magazine the unicorn had mentioned reminded Ditzzy of something.

"Here!" she said, and pointed a hoof at the wrapped flat rectangle sticking up out of one of mailbags sitting nearby. The unicorn magicked up the package and tore away its wrapping, revealing a glossy magazine with a lean, long-legged, dark-maned, huffy-looking orange pegasus on the cover.

"*Oh!* Speak of the pony Devil - the latest issue! *GRAT-zee!*"

"*GRATzee-EH,*" corrected Ditzzy reflexively.

"Ah - yes. Of course. My mistake." The unicorn's features jerked in confusion. "Wait. Ditzzy... you speak Puledrian?"

Ditzzy shook her head. "Uh-uh."

"But... how did you...?"

Ditzzy smiled and shrugged. "Dunno!"

The unicorn sighed and set down the magazine on a nearby table. "Oh, Ditzzy. You really are quite... *unique*," she said, and started painting the bleach into the pegasus' blue-black roots.

• • •

Once her mane and tail were back to their customary vivid blonde, Ditzzy flew down Stirrup Street at pony head level, making an earnest - though somewhat unsuccessful - attempt to avoid bumping into passersby, trees, fences, walls and the like while she rushed to continue her rounds.

Delivering the mail was an enjoyable profession for Ditzzy. She'd been the town's mailmare for as long as she could remember - though that was only about six years - and the job's routines suited her.

She could take the same route every day so that she didn't get turned around, and everypony was always happy to get their mail. If only they'd write a little bigger and clearer...

She alighted on a bench on the side of the street, setting down her mailbags. She retrieved the offending letter from her mouth with her front hooves. She tilted her head and squinted, trying to maneuver the letter's address into the clearest part of her distorted field of focus.

A sudden shout from around a nearby corner broke her concentration:

*"Hey...! I'm WALKIN' here!"*

The voice was harsh and boisterous, with a faint hint of a big city accent. Something about the sound struck a deep and unsettling chord in Ditzzy. For some reason, it reminded her of the awful free muffins that had made her sick the week before. She

angled her head and ears to listen better, distractedly letting the letter slip from between her hooves.

*"I'm sorry, I'm sorry'... why don't you just watch where yer goin', DOOFUS?"*

Ditzy shifted uncomfortably on the bench. The voice sounded mean, certainly, but that alone shouldn't have been enough to disturb her so much - she had, after all, been the direct target of a great deal of harsh words over the years. So, why did simply hearing that voice set her teeth on edge?

As if in answer, a deafening roar pierced through the ambient noise of downtown Ponyville.

Ditzy Doo's golden eyes widened; it was a griffon's roar. Not a Manticore or a dragon or an Ursa - *a griffon*. She couldn't remember ever meeting a griffon, but she was utterly certain nonetheless. The realization deepened her discomfort. She started trembling. She tried to swallow, but her throat was suddenly dry.

All at once, the afternoon breeze filled with the sounds of a filly's fearful weeping.

If the griffon's voice had struck a chord, the pitiful whimpering broke a string. A sudden surge of pain lanced its way through Ditzy's brain.

Disjointed images and sensations exploded forth from the neglected depths of her memory, crowding out her conscious thoughts in an agonizing jumble.

She clapped her front hooves to the sides of her head, gritting her teeth. Her wings and tail thrashed spasmodically.

*"...Muffins..."* she groaned; her eyes rolled upwards, and she tumbled off the bench.

• • •

The first thing that came back to Ditzy was pain. Her head throbbed with it, and her right wing ached from folding wrong underneath her.

Ditzy's eyes flickered open to a view of the grassy verge underneath the bench. She was lying on her side partially hidden by the grass and the bench, and further obscured by the mailbags sitting where she'd left them.

With a start she realized that she had no idea how much time had passed, but judging from the sun and the shadows, it wasn't time to fetch Dinky from school yet. She sighed in relief.

She struggled her way back onto her hooves; the effort made her headache worse. Everything seemed off-balance, as if the world were tilting to and fro. She shook her head, trying to clear it of the strange and unsettling feeling. She staggered forward a few steps to the nearby street corner.

The sound of a door slamming rang out, followed by a high-pitched cry; Ditzzy swayed as she turned to see the sounds' originator. She frowned at what she saw, her nose wrinkling in disgust. Her eyes slowly narrowed and veered into proper alignment.

A female griffon was standing in front of the nearby Sugarcube Corner. Her front talons had dug furrows into the earth and her wide golden eyes were shining with tears. Noticing Ditzzy's stare, she hastily sniffled and rubbed a forelimb across her eyes.

"Wassa matter - you never seen a griffon before, *blondie?*" she sneered, covering her heartache with a layer of anger. She stalked over to Ditzzy, narrowing her eyes. "Take a picture, it'll last longer!" She swung a talon toward Ditzzy's face in a back-pawed slap.

Fast as a striking serpent, Ditzzy deftly parried the talon with a front hoof and followed through with a blow of her own. Her hoof clopped against the point where the startled griffon's beak met her downy face, and knocked the hybrid beast off her feet.

"\*Chrr-wit\* *sque'k irr \*caw\*-rowr!*" Ditzzy snarled, her voice a jumble of growls and squawks.

The griffon lay on her side frozen in mute shock for a moment and then hopped back onto all fours, glowering. "You take that back!" she growled. "My mom is a *SAINTE!*" The griffon surged forward with her talons extended.

Ditzzy spread her wings and threw herself upward out of harm's way, only to drop down and stomp all four hooves squarely on a nerve cluster between the griffon's broad wings. The strike made, Ditzzy hopped off of the griffon's back and landed a few feet away.

The griffon squawked in pain and surprise as her wings convulsed and then flopped down uselessly on either side of her tawny frame.

"*Mrr-\*cheep\* irr grrll \*awwk-bk'kaw\*!*" taunted Ditzzy, a wicked grin spreading across her face.

"SHUT UP!" roared the griffon, the anger in her tone losing ground to pain and humiliation. She locked eyes with Ditzzy for a long moment; their golden gazes mirrored each other.

Realization and recognition slowly crept across the griffon's features. She looked away. "Ehh, whatever. I don't have time for this!" she hastily huffed, and turned to slink away down the street. Her wings were still out of commission, and even walking made her wince with every step of her front paws.

As the griffon disappeared around a corner Ditzzy shook her aching head once more; her eyes returned to their usual misalignment, and her scowl vanished. "Umm... sowwy!" she called after the griffon, smiling nervously and backing away toward her mailbags.

• • •

A few minutes later the griffon sat on a hill on the edge of town, gingerly flexing her aching wings.

*I shoulda seen it sooner, she thought to herself. That voice... those eyes. It's her! It's gotta be her. But how? She's dead. I saw her die!*

She cautiously spread her wings to full extension and gave them a few gentle flaps.

"...Doesn't matter," she said out loud. "Not once Uncle finds out, anyway..." She chuckled.

With a pump of her wings, she took to the air.

• • •

As she did with all traumatic events, Ditzzy tried to forget the meeting with the griffon - but the disturbing exchange was etched into her memory. Day after day, her thoughts returned to it. Why did seeing the griffon make her so angry? How did she know how to speak its language? And how did she know how to fight?

Never once in all her years in Ponyville could she remember raising a hoof in anger, but when she'd felt threatened her response had come with the swiftness of a deeply-ingrained reflex. She had been Ponyville's mailmare ever since the accident had robbed her of her memories. But who had she been before that? For whatever reason, she'd never thought about it before.

Ditzzy sat at her kitchen table staring down at a fresh bran muffin, lost in thought.

"Muffins..." she muttered.

"...Mommy? Eat up - it's time to go!" said her foal from across the table.

Ditzy shook her head. She pushed aside her musing and gobbled up her breakfast in a couple of bites.

"Okay! C'mon!" She trotted over to the little unicorn and stooped to let her climb onto her back.

The tiny filly let out an excited squeal as Ditzy leaped out of the open window and took to the air.

• • •

With no mail today and Dinky Doo dropped off at a weekend Junior Magic-Users Day Camp, Ditzy decided to take a short flight through town to clear her head.

She soon came to an open square, where a performance of some sort was apparently about to begin. Ditzy flew over and hovered up at the back of the gathering crowd for a better view.

*"Come one, come all - come and witness the amazing magic of The Grrreat and Powerful TRRRIXIE!"*

The coach in the middle of the square blossomed open to reveal an ostentatious stage. Moments later, a deep blue unicorn wearing a flashy magician's ensemble appeared on the stage in a puff of smoke.

Ditzy's eyes widened. She slowly sank down and landed.

With a hearty boast and a flourish, the unicorn called forth a pyrotechnic display.

At the first flash and bang, Ditzy lunged sideways, tucking into a roll and landing with her back to the side wall of the closest shop. She counted five heartbeats, her wings tense, waiting for a break in the spell onslaught to begin a headlong charge. After a moment of bemused confusion, she came to her senses. Pain throbbed dully in her head.

"Silly..." she chided herself. "S'just fireworks..." she forced herself to chuckle, but deep down she knew she hadn't misunderstood - she hadn't understood at all. The noise had

set her body in motion before she'd even realized what was happening; putting hard cover between her body and the unicorn had felt as natural as breathing.

Getting to her hooves, Ditzzy trotted away from the square with fresh concerns added to the weighty thoughts that the griffon encounter had piled onto her.

At length Ditzzy came to Ponyville's Library. She looked the hollow tree up and down and then trotted up to the front door. She wanted answers; it seemed like the perfect place to look. She knocked, but there was no answer.

Ditzzy opened the door, and trotted into the Library's main atrium.

"H-hello...?" she called out. No pony answered - the room's only occupant was a stand displaying a checklist of magic tricks, and it wasn't talking.

Ditzzy shrugged and started browsing the shelves. She stopped at the International section and spotted a volume titled *Get Going: a Great Geographical Guide to Geography*. She picked up the book with her mouth and set it down on a table. She nosed it open, and started flipping pages.

The page for the Isle of Mythos made her pause. She looked at the illustrations of skies full of griffons and frowned. She felt the same unexplained hostility rising once more. Snippets of griffon language floated into her awareness, none of them pleasant. She flipped a few pages to avoid letting her anger build too much.

She stopped again when she reached the entry for Puledria. She remembered the elegant white unicorn's magazine, but more memories followed. Words and phrases came together and danced through her mind. "*Si... parlo Puledriano,*" she muttered, her eyes widening in shock as soon as she'd spoken. She flipped ahead several more pages.

She got to the San Caballo entry. She felt her mental lexicon broaden once again. "*¡Yo hablo Caballo también...!*" she said with growing surprise and delight. "*¡Fabuloso!*" She flipped further through the book.

"*Сталлионград? Нет проблем!*" She snickered at the page for Stalliongrad, waving a front hoof dismissively. The language felt like second nature.

Nearing the end of the book, she flipped to the entry for Xiao Ma. "*小马太? 太棒了!*" she said, and broke into excited laughter.

Ditzy's smile widened until it threatened to escape the confines of her face. After six years, she had uncovered part of her past - she was a translator! Well, no wonder she liked handling letters! And as for knowing how to fight? Not every place was as peaceful as Equestria. A pony on a diplomatic mission had to know how to take care of herself. It all made sense!

"I *am* a clever pony!" she whispered to the empty room, her splayed eyes shining with pride.

Ditzy clopped her front hooves together and flapped her wings for joy, hopping from one rear hoof to the other. She took to the air and flew out the Library's still-open front door, giggling happily. For the moment, her elation at recovering such a useful talent pushed aside her woes and worries with a wave of wonderment.

The rush of wind from her departure stirred up a sheaf of pages that had been wedged in the shelf next to the geography guide; the papers spilled out onto the floor. Among them was a poster depicting a blank-flanked, black-maned grey pegasus filly with her face twisted into a vicious scowl. Beneath the picture, the largest word on the poster read:

## WANTED

• • •

Gilda the griffon soared through the skies above Ponyville, her face locked in a serious frown.

*Can it really be her?* she mused. *I mean, she's just a PONY. There's no WAY she could have lived through that fall. If I tell Uncle and it turns out I'm wrong, he'll have me plucked! But still - that voice! Those eyes! And those moves...* She rubbed her bruised cheek with a talon.

Gilda skirted the edge of Cloudsdale's floating suburbs and headed for the weather manufacturing district. *'Course, if I'm right, Uncle's gonna...* Her stern visage faltered for a moment as her conscience gnawed at her. In her mind's eye, the grey pegasus slowly brightened into a bluer shade, with a multi-hued mane. *Why?* begged the phantom pegasus, her ears drooping and her maroon eyes shining with fear as a shadow fell over her...

Gilda shook her head. The imagined pony's colours faded. *Too bad! She shoulda thought of that before she decided to be lame! They all shoulda! Stupid ponies! Stupid, sucker-*

*kicking, flip-flopping...* She rubbed a forelimb across her eyes - because the wind was making them water. Just the wind.

She came to a small but stately cloud-built restaurant half a sky-block from the storm factory. She landed on the doorstep, took a slow, deep breath, and walked in.

• • •

The next ten days passed in a pleasant whirlwind. Ditzzy felt better than she had in years, and nothing could bring her down.

She witnessed an Ursa Minor's depredations with the same giddy half-interest with which she watched its magical defeat. Not even an ominous cover of dragon exhaust over Ponyville could draw her thoughts away from her new memories for long. Even as she swept away the ashen clouds with her wings, she softly sang songs in a wide array of languages.

Her thoughts were so diverted by reclaiming a piece of the puzzle of her past that she forgot to deliver Ponyville's newest rain schedule requirements to Cloudsdale, which led to the need for a substantial downpour to make up for a missed shower.

She blithely went through the motions of assisting the ponies clearing up loose branches and other potentially-dangerous items in preparation for the storm, but her preoccupation was obvious.

"Bit for your thoughts?" asked a soft, dignified voice from behind her.

Ditzzy turned to see her friend Colgate. The streaked-maned blue unicorn was magicking together a pile of sticks.

"Nuffin'," said Ditzzy, poorly concealing her good cheer. "Jus' thinkin'!"

"You are not 'just thinking,' Ditzzy. You're practically *glowing*."

"Really...?" asked Ditzzy, somewhat surprised.

Colgate raised an eyebrow. "You are not a subtle pony," she said. "Go on, tell me - what's up?"

"I remember stuff!" Ditzzy said, grinning broadly.

The unicorn's expression brightened. "That's *fantastic!* When I pulled you out of that lake six years ago, you could barely remember a thing! Something's come back to you?"

"Yeah! I'm a translator!" Ditzzy beamed.

Colgate stared blankly. "...A translator."

"*Yup!*" Ditzzy's tone was as bubbly as her flanks. "I can talk in all kinds'a languages, an' I can fight, too!" She kicked at the air with her front hooves, the jabs lightning-quick. Despite the grace of her strikes, Ditzzy stumbled slightly. She righted herself and giggled.

"Do you remember anything else? Your family? Or what happened to you?"

Ditzzy shook her head, undaunted by the admission.

Colgate nodded slowly. "...I don't want to burst your bubble," said Colgate gently, "...but maybe you should try to remember more about your past before you celebrate. I have a very old friend here in town who I think may be able to help you..."

"Nah, iss'okay," said Ditzzy, waving a hoof. "I'll get it."

"Ditzzy, *please.* I have a bad feeling about this. I know you have time - Dinky's with her friends at Berry Punch's for that 'rainy-day party.' As a favour to me, please do this."

Ditzzy's off-centre gaze met Colgate's, and the pegasus recognized her Serious Stare - the particular deep, sad-yet-determined look that her unicorn friend only wore when she was discussing matters of grave importance.

"...Okay," said Ditzzy.

• • •

The dark-maned brown earth pony took several minutes to even acknowledge the two visitors to his cluttered workshop. As he paced to and fro, Ditzzy noticed that he had the same cutie mark as Colgate: a golden hourglass.

He was caught up in musing to himself about the contents of a basket of fruit the school had given him as a thank-you for judging a recent science fair.

"...Cherry pits, too! *Full* of the stuff! In the wrong hooves, a gift like this is a veritable chemical warfare project! Fitting prize for judging a science fair, I suppose." He idly

picked up a pear from the basket by its stem with his teeth, and dropped it into a nearby waste paper bin. "Minus the seeds, though, I must admit those apples *are* pretty delicious - 'Colgate?' Hullo! How have you been?" The earth pony stressed Colgate's name in an odd fashion.

"Hello, Doctor. I'm well, thank you." Colgate gestured to her friend. "This is my good friend Ditzzy Doo. She's been having some trouble with missing memories, and I suggested that she come and see you. Ditzzy Doo... this is The Doctor."

Ditzzy smiled nervously and waved a front hoof. "Hello, *Doktah*," she said, unconsciously mimicking her friend's upper crust Canterlotter accent.

"Trouble, eh? Made you think of me straight away, did it?" The Doctor asked Colgate with a wink and a wry smile. He turned to face Ditzzy. "Pleased to meet you, miss. I'm sure I'll be able to get to the bottom of - *phwoar!* That's a great trick! Wish I could do that - I could read two things at once!" Ditzzy looked away, blushing. The Doctor cleared his throat. "Sorry... they're lovely eyes, really. I mean it. Let's take a peek behind them, shall we?"

The Doctor trotted over to a nearby table and picked up an ornate metal rod in his mouth. He pointed the object at Ditzzy, and its tip buzzed and glowed green. Ditzzy cringed, but she felt nothing.

The Doctor set down the tool, examined it for a moment, and spoke: "Did you know that you've had your skull fractured?"

Ditzzy shook her head.

"Well, it's healed now, so I wouldn't worry about it. Didn't notice anything too odd inside it, either. A few scars, nothing much. I've seen worse. If you can't remember something, it may be because you don't want to."

Ditzzy frowned and shook her head. "Uh-uh! I *do* wanna! I wanna *know!*" Her wings flapped emphatically.

The Doctor's cheery expression shifted to a look surprisingly similar to Colgate's Serious Stare. "...All right," he said gently, "if you're certain." He pointed to the floor in front of him with a hoof. "Sit down here. Face me."

Ditzzy trotted over and sat down. Her off-kilter golden eyes met The Doctor's pale blue gaze.

He sat as well, and slowly raised his front hooves to rest on the sides of Ditzzy's head.

"Try to relax," he said softly. "Open your mind... think back... baaaack... that's it - let yourself go wherever your memory takes you..."

Ditzzy gasped softly; she felt her thoughts streak through her time in Ponyville in reverse, all the way back to her first clear memories, and beyond. She closed her eyes, and surrendered to the recollection.

*She was a young filly on the cusp of marehood, but she still lacked a cutie mark. Her short mane and tail were poker-straight and pitch-black. She was crouching next to a massive male griffon; he looked like a mass of corded muscle lightly sprinkled with fur and feathers, and several ominous scars marked his hide. Both of them were perched on a low-hanging cloud above the majestic city of Canterlot. They were looking down at the city's expansive Post Office. On the steps of the building, a sandy-maned purple unicorn stallion was chatting happily with a golden-maned grey unicorn mare. The stallion was Marked with a brass shield; the mare, an open sack of envelopes.*

Ditzzy twitched. She felt her heart rate start to increase.

*"This one's been sticking his horn where it doesn't belong, Dezi," rumbled the griffon. "He's interfering with Flock business, trying to root out our earners in Canterlot. Guardsponies usually get the hint - even the wingless ones. But this one's a cub-scout. He's going to be made an example of." She nodded gravely.*

Ditzzy's head began to pound. Behind her eyelids, her eyes veered into proper alignment. They flicked to and fro in rapid saccades.

*Time whipped past in an indiscernible blur. It was night now, and she was oh-so-quietly opening the Canterlot Post Office's second floor window. She slipped inside, silent as a shadow.*

At some point, Ditzzy had started holding her breath. She gasped for air now, almost hyperventilating. The pain in her head worsened.

*Time skipped ahead once more. She was on the Post Office's main floor. She was short of breath, and her body ached from exertion. Her hooves were covered in dark, damp stains. She was standing over a huddled mass on the stone floor. As the memory sharpened, she saw that it was the broken remains of the unicorn couple. The stallion was stretched protectively across the mare, but both were bloody, unmoving, and oh. So. Quiet.*

"No..." Ditzzy whispered; it was less a statement than a plea. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

*Their silence seemed to infect the room, draining it of even the slightest sound. And then, when the quiet was almost absolute...*

"No...!" Ditzzy repeated through gritted teeth, her tone desperate.

*... the air filled with the sounds of a foal's fearful weeping.*

"NO!" Ditzzy lashed out with her front hooves, sending The Doctor tumbling. "NO, NO, NO, NOOOO!" She spread her wings and screamed the denial over and over, her head and tail thrashing back and forth.

"Ditzzy...!" Colgate took a step toward the pegasus but Ditzzy hopped back, her teary eyes wide and wild.

Ditzzy wailed in anguish and fell to her knees. "...I'm a bad pony!" she sobbed. Tears soaked her cheeks.

The Doctor had gotten back to his hooves. He approached Ditzzy. "No - *Ditzzy*, no. Please... your memory is still in pieces. You need to-

"NO!" she shouted. "Don' touch me! No more! *I don' wanna!*" Ditzzy leaped to her hooves and galloped over to the door. "*I DON' WANNA!*" She shoved it open and fled into the worsening rain.

Colgate moved to follow her, but The Doctor held up a warding hoof. He sighed. "Don't. Give her some time. She won't listen... not in the state she's in." He slowly shook his head. "The poor thing... I'm not surprised it hurts her to look back. Some things..." He turned to look out the back window, where an odd, narrow blue shed sat in the middle of the yard. "...*Some things are just too painful to relive.*"

Colgate touched a front hoof to The Doctor's shoulder. "You know, it's not too late to help her... not for us, anyway. Not for *you*..."

The Doctor turned away from the unicorn. "I can't. I won't. Not here. My help only brings more trouble in its wake. I won't put ponies through that. One *storm* is enough." A rumble of thunder punctuated his statement.

Colgate sagged slightly and sighed, and then trotted toward the door. "That's the funny thing about the storms here, Doctor," she said without looking back, "*they only come when they're needed.*"

• • •

The rainstorm began in earnest as Ditzzy plodded aimlessly through the puddle-strewn streets. Her soaked wings hung limply at her sides. She shivered against the wet chill, but inside she just felt empty.

"...*bad pony... 'm a bad pony...*" she muttered over and over. The rain soaking her face concealed the steady trickle of tears down her cheeks.

She turned a corner, and saw a pair of menacing-looking pegasus stallions peering into the front window of her Post Office home.

One, the smaller and leaner pony, had a slicked-back black mane, a tawny hide, and four aces for a Cuite Mark. He was chewing on a toothpick. The other, far larger and bulkier than his associate, had a shaggy blue mane, a blue-grey hide, and brass horseshoes on his flanks as well as on his hooves. The pair spotted her, and turned to face her. They trotted over.

Aces whistled in amazement. "Dezi... it really *is* you!" He smiled, revealing more than one gold tooth. "I almost didn't recognize ya with that mane and tail. Me and Stomper have been lookin' for you all over this town ever since we heard you was still alive - ain't that right, Stomper?"

The hefty pegasus nodded. "All over," he agreed, spreading his wings in an expansive gesture.

Ditzzy made no reply. Her misaligned eyes stared hollowly at the pair.

"It's nothin' personal, Dezi - ya know that right?" continued Aces. "I always thought o' you as the little cousin I never had. But the boss ain't forgiven ya for whatcha did. Ya went too far, Dezi. He wanted you done in then, and he still does now."

"He still does," echoed Stomper, nodding again.

"It'll be easier on all of us if ya don't run," said Aces. "You've lived one pony Helluva lot longer than most ponies the boss points a claw at - why doncha just come along

peacefully and take what's comin' to ya?" He grinned wickedly, and shook out his wings slightly, readying himself for the inevitable chase.

Ditzy heaved a slow, shivering sigh. "...*Okay*," she said softly.

Aces stared; the toothpick fell from his slack jaws. "...Seriously?" he managed at length, his eyes casting about for an ambush or some other ploy.

Ditzy nodded meekly, her splayed eyes downcast. "*I'm a bad pony*," she whispered.

Aces' smile returned. "Well then... why don't we take this inside? If we keep standing out in this rain, somepony's gonna catch their *death*."

• • •

The Doctor paced around the main room of his workshop-cottage, his face locked in a frown.

*This has nothing to do with me*, he thought to himself. *And no pony - no one - else is meddling from the outside, either. It's just the proper course of events unfolding.*

A crack of thunder shook the wooden building. The Doctor turned and looked out the back window once more. The blue shed sat out in the rain, as pitiful as an abandoned puppy. The Doctor shook his head and turned away.

*I did stir up those broken memories, though - who's to say what might have happened if I hadn't done that? I wouldn't be meddling, not really. More like setting things right. I could be subtle - I'm sure I could! There's a first time for everything...*

The Doctor gritted his teeth and stomped a front hoof, annoyed by his shameless attempt to manipulate himself. "Is it the mane? Is that it?" he asked the empty room. "Even a few lifetimes later, am I still swayed by a bottle-blonde in distress? Is that why I'm even *considering* putting this wonderful, peaceful world at risk just to help one filly?" No answer came from the assorted trinkets and devices littering every flat surface. The Doctor sighed in surrender.

He trotted over to the far corner of the room and nudged aside an empty, vaguely dog-shaped metal shell covered in dents and burn marks. He pressed a hoof to the exposed floor, flipped over a loose board, ducked his head down into the hole, and retrieved a small metal key in his teeth.

The Doctor headed over to the back door and ventured out into the rain. He approached the blue shed, and unlocked its door with the key.

"I don't suppose *you* would be willing to explain things to Celestia when all pony Hell breaks loose?" he asked.

No answer came from the blue shed.

The Doctor shrugged. "Ah well... worth a try."

He slipped through the shed's open door and disappeared in the shadows of its deceptively large interior.

• • •

Stomper didn't know much, but he knew how to kick.

The brass-shod front-hoof blow came within a hairsbreadth of fracturing Ditzzy's jaw; as it was, it still sent her tumbling across the Ponyville Post Office's main room, a mist of blood escaping her lips. Pain clawed its way across her neck and jaw, but Ditzzy didn't cry out. She stayed similarly silent when Stomper unleashed another few kicks, this time to her ribs and haunches.

"Aww, come on," said Aces from his spot perching on the Post Office's counter, "if yer gonna play along, ya could at least make some noise - keep things inn'aresting. The Boss said we gotta do you slow - you wamme to get *bored*, here?"

"You want I should break her wings, Aces?" asked Stomper, hovering a hoof over Ditzzy's back. "Dat always makes you laugh."

Aces waved a font hoof dismissively. "Nah - wha'did I just say? We gotta make this last. Save that fer later. Jus' keep on beatin' on her for a while. No - *wait*..." Aces looked out the window at the falling rain. "I got a better idea..."

A few minutes later Ditzzy found herself stretched out on her back and upside down, tied to the counter's torn-off top plank with packing twine. Stomper had dragged her out the back door and slid the board up close to the downspout from the Post Office's gutters. Stray drops from the heavy flow of rainwater wet Ditzzy's mane and face.

"If you wanna do any beggin' or cryin', now would be a good time," said Aces with a leering grin. His wings rose slightly. They folded again when Ditzzy stayed silent. "...Fine. Stomper - give 'er a drink."

Stomper levered up the board and slid it forward. Ditzzy's face plunged into the freezing torrent.

Cold, gritty rainwater flooded Ditzzy's mouth and nose; she tried not to panic, but the reaction was instinctive. She thrashed as much as her bindings would allow, her head and body jerking against the twine. The fear of drowning dredged up the memory of her arrival in Ponyville - the earliest memory she could clearly recall. Images flicked dream-quick through her consciousness.

*The impact with the lake's surface was devastating; it felt like striking a wet brick wall. She sank under the water in a daze, the disorientingly-hard landing and the cold easing the pain of her injuries. Her lungs still held breath, but she grew more and more tempted to simply let it out. The cool pressure of the water all around her seemed to wash away her pain and fear. It would be so much easier to just give in. A few small bubbles escaped from between her lips. As she hit the silt-covered bottom of the lake, her blurred gaze fell upon an odd, narrow blue shed resting on the lakebed...*

The board slid back and Ditzzy coughed spasmodically, gasping for breath. Aces chuckled. He nodded to the downspout, and Stomper pushed the board forward again. Ditzzy mentally lunged for the memories this time, frantic to escape the terrible present.

*The shed's door opened, and a familiar dark-maned brown earth pony stuck his head out. For some reason, the water didn't seem to reach him or the open door. With a start, she realized that it didn't fully reach her, either - her head was inside of the air bubble now surrounding the shed. The siren's call of the water broke, and she hungrily gasped in a few breaths. The earth pony smiled slightly, and shook his head in dismay. "Now that I get a better look, that is a bad one, no doubt about it," he said, and she knew he meant the deep gash in her forehead. "You likely won't remember this little chat for a long time - in fact... I'm counting on it."*

Stomper pulled Ditzzy back once again. Despite the ache in her lungs and the exhausting remnants of panic wracking her limbs, Ditzzy almost objected. She'd only just remembered that she'd first met The Doctor at the bottom of a lake, and her curiosity about the rest of the encounter was intense. The present was all pain and horror, and it was such a compelling memory - almost as if he were speaking to her here and now, instead of so many years ago.

Thinking as quickly as conditions would allow, Ditzzy realized what she had to do.

"N-no more...!" she spluttered, summoning up every buried bit of hurt and humiliation from six years of clumsiness and confusion. "Pleeeez... please stop!" Her anguished tone positively dripped with helplessness and despair. One of her veering eyes met Aces' gaze.

Aces licked his lips. His wings snapped to full extension. "...Give 'er some more, Stomps," he breathed. "*Make it a good one.*"

Stomper obliged.

*"I know you think you've done something terrible," continued The Doctor, "but not everything is as it seems. If you're remembering this, then please... please... finish remembering what happened before this. No matter how scared it makes you, or how much it hurts, or how much you think you deserve whatever's driving you to summon up this memory, trust me: you must finish remembering." He sat down in front of her and rested his front hooves on her shoulders. His blue gaze seemed to drill right into her.*

Ditzzy spasmed against her bonds; her heart was beating faster and faster. Stomper looked to Aces for direction, but the smaller pegasus shook his head.

*"Can you hear me? Do you understand? You must. Finish. Remembering." She tried to focus on his face, but her head throbbed and her eyes felt strange - like they were pointing in different directions. Nevertheless, she struggled to answer him. "M-musst... ff-finish..." she whispered weakly. "Good! Brilliant!" said The Doctor. He cast his gaze up toward the water's surface. "I only hope that's enough - I really must dash, I'm afraid, or things will get... complicated." He trotted back inside the blue shed with the briefest backward glance, and then shut the door. The shed warbled and glowed from its roof, and then it slowly vanished. The air pocket collapsed in its wake, leaving her once again struggling to hold her breath and watching a string of seven large, silvery air bubbles float lazily toward the surface. Riddled with pain and barely conscious though she was, the bubbles were the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. She felt a tingling warmth on her once-blank flanks. A moment later, a pair of blue hooves wrapped around her as somepony started pulling her upward. "Musss'... fin'shhh..." she muttered, releasing more bubbles as she neared the surface. "Muhh'... ff'ns..."*

"MUFFINS!" she screamed around a mouthful of water as the latest round of torture finally finished.

Aces let out a slow whistle. "Whoops! She's off her cloud. Give 'er a minute - s'no fun if she ain't all there."

Ditzy coughed a wet, throaty cough as she fought stay conscious. She knew her respite would be terribly short; if she was going to do as The Doctor asked, she would have to do it now. Forcing her mind to clear as much as she could, she did her best to reach inward for the same state The Doctor had brought her to in his workshop. Fear and guilt chewed at her heart but she pushed on, determined to reclaim her past, no matter what it entailed...

**PART TWO - PAST IMPERFECT  
SIX YEARS AGO**

Bright Eyes swept a lock of straight black mane out of her eyes and stood up straight as the Director trotted into his richly-appointed office; she'd been waiting in front of his desk for the past half-hour, but she was far too excited to be annoyed. She'd graduated from the Academy yesterday, and it was time to find out where she'd be assigned.

The older rust-coloured unicorn stallion trotted past her and sat down at his desk. He calmly magicked around some scrolls and parchments on the lacquered wood surface before clearing his throat and speaking:

"Let me be blunt, Miss Eyes: nopony - no pegasus, no earth pony, not even any unicorn - has ever finished their training before at such an early age. You've created something of a... sensation."

Bright Eyes forced back the blush threatening to colour her cheeks and nodded seriously. "I don't know about that, sir," she said. "I just want to be the best I can be in Her Majesty's service."

The Director smirked. "Well, you're off to a fine start." He magicked up a lengthy scroll and perused its contents. "Fluent in seven languages, exemplary grades in tactics and procedure, top of your class in both grounded and aerial combat... and you broke the time record on the obstacle course while nursing a sprained fetlock."

"It was only a minor sprain, sir," she insisted, letting just a little bit of pride colour her voice.

"Nevertheless, your records suggest that you'd make an excellent addition to any operation. There's just one thing..."

Bright Eyes swallowed; her excitement shriveled. She'd dreaded this possibility. "...My cutie mark," she said softly.

"Or lack thereof, yes," agreed the Director. "Most of our trainees have their Marks before they even apply - it's a testament to your potential that you were admitted before you got yours. But it's highly unusual for an active agent to lack an appropriate cutie mark. Unheard of, even. The right cutie mark is a sign of... *reliability*."

"With all due respect, sir," Bright Eyes said, her voice under rigid control, "have I *ever* shown any sign of letting any of my trainers down?"

The Director looked into her sharp golden eyes for a long, silent moment. "...No. Which is why I've decided to recommend that you be assigned to Special Operations."

Bright Eyes stared. "*R-really...?*"

The Director nodded. "There's a mission in the works for which I believe you are uniquely qualified - blank flank and all. You'll report to Canterlot Intelligence Airborne Division HQ first thing tomorrow morning for your orientation - if you're interested, that is." He smiled.

"Absolutely, sir!" she replied, barely containing her elation. "Thank you, sir!"

Once she had excused herself and demurely trotted back out into the hallway, Bright Eyes let out a hooping cheer of triumph. She clopped her front hooves together and flapped her wings for joy, hopping from one rear hoof to the other.

• • •

The next day, Bright Eyes stood in the cloud-built briefing room of CIA's temple-like headquarters. Her designated trainer had just explained the nature of her assignment.

"Undercover work?" All at once, Bright Eyes realized why the Director had given her this assignment.

"That's right," the trainer continued. She was a lean, scarred mint green pegasus mare with a cropped emerald mane and tail. Her cutie mark was a stiletto resting on top of a domino mask. "Organized crime has been all but wiped out in Canterlot, but the skies are a different matter. Weather racketeering, rainbow smuggling, even pony trafficking - the clouds hide a multitude of sins, and they threaten to rain down onto the streets. We need ponies on the inside."

Bright Eyes nodded, her eyes narrow. "And that's where I come in."

"Yes. Currently, we have our eyes on a particularly vicious griffon crime boss in Cloudsdale by the name of Giovanni."

*"Gio the Claw..."* whispered Bright Eyes.

"Correct. No pony's ever been able to infiltrate his organization, but you may be able to change all of that. Your talent and your lack of a Mark will match up well with the cover

identity we've been assembling." The trainer pushed a small stack of papers across the low table next to her.

Bright Eyes examined the papers. "Desiderata 'Dezi' Cavallino..." she muttered, trying on the false name for size. "A born member of *La Mandria Nostra*, fresh in from Puledria..." She slid aside the dossier, revealing travel papers, a rap sheet, and even wanted posters bearing her sneering likeness. She raised an eyebrow. "How did this all get assembled so quickly?"

"The unicorn division. Horns aren't as functional as wings, but they're great at solving logistical problems."

"Of course. When do I get started?"

"As soon as you've memorized the dossier. The longer we wait, the less secure your identity will become. We want you in, made, and out with evidence before The Claw knows what hit him."

Bright Eyes saluted firmly. "Yes ma'am! I won't let you down!"

• • •

"*Vaffanculo, POIANA!*"

Bright Eyes pivoted in place and smashed a front hoof across the jaw of the pegasus who'd just nipped at her hindquarters; the sizable stallion stared in cross-eyed confusion for a moment before collapsing in a dazed heap.

Another member of the flock of pegasi sitting around the small but stately cloud-built restaurant smirked, giggled, and then broke into peals of laughter. The rest soon joined in.

"I guess that's one way to teach Big Wing how to treat a filly!" said the first pegasus to laugh. "Dezi... you're awright!" The crowd murmured various approving comments.

Bright Eyes smiled a self-satisfied smile. *She was in.*

• • •

The next day, Bright Eyes was seated at a low table in the back of the restaurant. It was evening, and the dark sky outside dimmed the translucent white walls.

The towering half-avian form of Gio the Claw sat opposite her with his back to the wall. He looked down at her with eyes the colour of molten gold - the same shade as hers.

"*Buon appetito, Dezi,*" he rumbled, gesturing with a claw at the agnolotti piled on a ceramic platter in the middle of the table. A smile spread across his sharp beak.

After only the slightest pause she brushed a straight lock of black mane off of her face and pinched one of the delicate, doughy bundles off the plate with her lips.

With the first bite, she realized that she was eating Puledrian *griffon* cuisine. *Agnolotti di Lombrico*, if her memory of her multicultural studies served her right.

She started chewing the earthworm-filled pasta and forced herself to smile back, crushing down her revulsion to the pit of her stomach.

*This is a test, she told herself. Gotta be strong. Griffons respect strength. Don't let him see you sweat...*

She swallowed the mouthful, suppressing a shudder as it slid down her throat. Her host chuckled, apparently impressed, and speared up a morsel on a claw.

While the unnatural food slowly made Bright Eyes' innards clench and twist, Gio offered her a muscular talon. "You're a tough one, and the word on the wind is that you're not afraid to get your... hooves... dirty. There's a place for you in my Flock, if you'll take it."

Bright Eyes' delight made her aching stomach lurch; it took a massive effort to resist throwing up right then and there on one of the deadliest creatures on feathered wings.

"I accept," she said through gritted teeth, holding forth a front hoof and letting his talon close around it.

• • •

It was two weeks later, and Bright Eyes was crouching next to Giovanni, perched on a low-hanging cloud above Canterlot's majestic rooftops.

She had endeared herself to the crime boss and his Flock more and more over the past fortnight, laughing, gambling and drinking with the underlings and accompanying the higher-ups on their less unsavoury errands.

And now she was next to The Claw himself. They were looking down at the city's expansive Post Office.

On the steps of the building, a sandy-maned purple unicorn stallion was chatting happily with a golden-maned grey unicorn mare. The stallion was Marked with a brass shield, and the mare with an open sack of envelopes. Effortlessly, Bright Eyes' training unraveled the subtle and unsubtle cues of their body language; it was obvious the two unicorns were very much in love.

"This one's been sticking his horn where it doesn't belong, Dezi," Gio growled. "He's interfering with Flock business, trying to root out our earners in Canterlot. Guardsponies usually get the hint - even the wingless ones. But this one's a cub-scout. He's going to be made an example of."

Bright Eyes nodded gravely, but she couldn't take her eyes off of the mare's smiling face. The unicorn's happiness reminded her of everything she'd resigned herself to doing without in her pursuit of a career in Her Majesty's service: a safe home, a stallion and foals of her own, and - in all likelihood - the luxury of someday dying of old age.

Bright Eyes turned away. She knew that maintaining her cover was vital, and she knew that she might have to pay a terrible price if she broke it, but the thought of letting innocent ponies pay that price instead made her feel ill. She couldn't let the hit go through. If she returned to CIA and delivered her evidence, the unicorns would be dead before the ink on the arrest warrant even dried. If she stayed undercover, they'd be just as dead. She had only one choice:

She had to find a way to warn them.

• • •

Late that night, once the streets and skies of Canterlot were all but deserted, Bright Eyes glided through the cool air as gracefully as a hunting hawk. Around her hips hung tactical saddlebags - a narrow black belt strung with several miniature pouches filled with useful equipment.

She came to the Canterlot Post Office's second story balcony, and oh-so-quietly used a mouth-pick from her belt to unlock the window. She slipped inside, silent as a shadow.

Bright Eyes unconsciously stroked a wing against the unsigned letter tucked into her belt. The word on the wind was that the hit would go down tomorrow night; if she could leave the letter tonight, the unicorns would be long gone by then.

Shadows painted the hallway black; Bright Eyes moved forward with aching slowness, straining her ears for any sign of whether the unicorns were awake.

If she hadn't been focused so intently on her hearing, she might have missed the tiny creak of a pastern-strung wire garrote pulling taut behind her.

Bright Eyes let her front legs buckle and lashed out with a lightning-swift double-back-leg kick at an upward angle. The blow struck her would-be assassin in the throat, causing him to choke and gurgle while flapping his wings. The wire between his front hooves made him stumble.

Bright Eyes turned to face the pegasus and wrapped her front hooves around his head. Acting on ingrained combat training she pumped her wings and rotated laterally with a savage wrench; she heard and felt a wet snap from the stallion's neck.

The pegasus collapsed on the wooden floor, his head twisted at an unnatural angle.

Bright Eyes started shaking as she looked down at the body; she had sparred and trained for countless hours, but she had never fought for her life before. Never taken a life before. The stark reality of the mission she'd so readily accepted crashed over her like a tide of ice water. She'd just killed a pony, and she might have to do it again. Her stomach lurched.

But, before her conscience could drive her nausea any further, the fact of the slain stallion's presence drove a vital thought into the forefront of her mind:

*Something's wrong - the hitponies are here tonight! And there could be more...*

No longer trying for stealth, Bright Eyes galloped to the office's only bedroom and kicked open the door. There was no pony inside. She turned on her hooves, spread her wings and flew down the stairs - before colliding with another pegasus hitpony flying up to meet her.

The two tumbled down onto the landing in a mass of flailing hooves and flapping wings.

"You messed up!" Bright Eyes growled as she struggled to get the filly into a hold. "They aren't here!"

The filly chuckled through gritted teeth as she fought back. "...Wrong," she whispered, and gave a wicked grin.

Bright Eyes hazarded a glance down the stairs; she saw a still, silent huddled mass in the middle of the main floor. "NO!" Fury seared away Bright Eyes' crisis of conscience. Swift and powerful as a rushing river she bent, leaned, hooked and jerked, and the filly's left hind leg dislocated. A shriek of agony shattered the hitpony's sadistic smile.

Bright Eyes cut off the shriek with an enraged cry of her own and a fierce front-hoof strike to the assassin's face. And another. And another. She kept kicking and kicking, screaming and screaming, until her breath came in ragged gasps, her legs burned and her hooves felt wet.

She stood up and slowly stumbled down the stairs, leaving the filly's remains on the landing. She was short of breath, and her whole body ached. Damp, dark spatter reached from her front hooves halfway up her legs. She left a trail of red hoofprints behind her. Her hooves slipped on the smooth stone floor at the bottom of the stairs, forcing her to sit down heavily. When she held up her blood-soaked front hooves and looked at them her nausea came back with a vengeance; she lurched forward and vomited.

Once she had recovered somewhat, Bright Eyes shakily stood and approached the shadowy mass on the stone floor like an earth pony approaching the edge of a cliff. She silently begged to be wrong, but as she drew near the awful truth was undeniable.

It was the broken remains of the unicorn couple. The stallion was stretched protectively across the mare, but both were bloody, unmoving, and oh. So. Quiet.

She was too late.

Bright Eyes gritted her teeth, fighting back tears. *Damn you, Gio*, she silently cursed. *Damn me.*

The silence in the room was all but total, but then all at once, the air filled with the sounds of a foal's fearful weeping.

Bright Eyes gasped. "No...!" She cantered after the sound. It seemed to echo from every wall.

She came at last to the rooms in the back of the Post Office, where a storage area had recently been converted into a nursery. A cradle in the centre of the room faintly shone with magic; it had been enchanted to amplify the cries of the newborn unicorn foal inside.

Bright Eyes slowly trotted up to the cradle. Guilt stabbed at her as she looked down at the crying infant.

*"W-well aren't you a dinky little thing?"* she whispered, a smile spreading across her mouth even as her lower lip quivered.

The upset foal was tiny - her lavender form was barely longer than of one of Bright Eyes' flight feathers - and her silky mane was a pale straw blonde. Her eyes, shrouded through they were by tears and half-closed lids, were the same vivid golden colour as Bright Eyes' - the shade that had inspired her parents in naming her. Thoughts of family twisted the blade of guilt in her heart and summoned up needles of sadness to join it.

"I... I'm s-sorry," she said, feeling the stinging tears in her eyes finally escaping, "b-but your mommy and daddy... th-they... they aren't..." She choked up, briefly unable to continue. She swallowed and forced herself to keep talking, making her broken voice as soothing as she could.

"..They aren't going t-to be there for you anymore." She started gently rocking the cradle with a front hoof. "S-some very bad ponies took them away from you. And they'll try to hurt you if they find you."

The foal slowly began to calm down. She shifted under her blanket and gurgled.

"But I'm not going to let that happen. I lost my parents when I was little, too, and it n-never stopped hurting. I couldn't save your parents, but I promise I'll keep you safe - even if I have to raise you as my own." Bright Eyes wrapped the blanket around the nearly-sleeping foal in a bundle, and gripped it with her teeth. She gingerly trotted back up the stairs, past the hitponies' bodies and down the hallway, and smoothly took wing into the night.

*First thing's first, though,* she thought to herself. *I'm going to take that monster down.*

• • •

The roar of the night wind in Bright Eyes' ears did nothing to silence the cacophony in her head. Every trainer's voice and every finely-honed instinct was screaming at her to report in, deliver her evidence, and release the foal to foster care or extended family.

But this wasn't like the Academy's lessons, where following procedure solved every problem. Even in her short stint as a member of his Flock, she had learned that Gio the Claw had his talons in a lot of pies; he was unlikely to see the inside of a dungeon, even if

a memory projection spell showed him ordering a hit right to her face. And the reach of the griffon's minions extended farther still. The foal would never survive in the system or with family. If she wanted her to live and Gio to pay, she knew she would have to make it happen herself.

Ahead, the bucolic tableau of Ponyville spread out on the rolling hills below. *Maybe...* Bright Eyes thought. *Maybe I'm still blank for a reason. Maybe this is what I need. A small town... a quiet town. Nothing special, nothing dangerous. If I make it through this, we could disappear there. Start over. I could be a librarian, or a translator... or a mailmare.* The painful thought fractured Bright Eyes' fantasy. *Stay focused, filly,* she ordered herself. *You're not there yet.*

A short distance from the far edge of Ponyville, the furthest outskirts of Cloudsdale's aerial suburbs hung silently in the still night air. Bright Eyes banked and slowly spiraled downward until she came to a small copse of trees near the well-travelled road back to Ponyville. She set down the sleeping foal's bundle at the base of the largest tree, in plain sight of the road.

"I know I promised," she whispered, "but just in case, somepony is sure to find you here if I... if I don't come back. Just sit tight, okay Dinky? If things work out, I'll be back before you even wake up."

With one last long look at the sleeping infant, Bright Eyes spread her wings and took off toward Cloudsdale.

• • •

"But *Unnn-cle...*! I don't *like* fish!" The young griffon pouted, her talons folded across her ruffed chest. The array of artfully-arranged fillets on the plate in front of her was untouched.

Giovanni let out a tiny growl. Despite its minimal volume, the sound echoed off of the restaurant's cloud-walls. "Your father - my brother - asked me to look after you while he's away in the old country, and I'm a griffon of my word. Fish is *good* for you. You're a growing griffon, Gilda - you need your vitamins. Don't you want to grow up big and tough like your Uncle Gio?"

"*Yeah...*" muttered Gilda, looking away sullenly.

"And don't you want to finally show all those pegasi who's the fastest Junior Speedster before your last year is over?" Giovanni continued.

"Yeeeahhh..." Gilda whined. "But there's this *one*-"

Giovanni pounded a talon on the table. "*\*Awrk\*-rowr!* No buts! Eat up!"

The steel in Giovanni's tone made it clear he would brook no refusal; Gilda started gulping down the fillets.

The griffons' meal passed in peace and quiet for a few minutes... until a dazed pegasus stallion crashed through the cloud-wall separating the private room from the restaurant at large.

Giovanni stood up, his wings spreading in surprise. His niece's jaw dropped.

A moment later the double doors to the main room swung inward and Bright Eyes strode firmly into the private room. As the doors swung shut behind her, the doorway afforded a brief glimpse of a room littered with beaten and bruised pegasi.

"*Gio...*" Bright Eyes snarled.

Giovanni silently cursed the sound-baffling properties of cloud-walls. He craned his neck, releasing an ominous crack. "*Dezi...*" he rumbled. "You seem *upset*."

"You *knew*, didn't you?" Bright Eyes said. "You sent them early because you knew I'd try to stop them."

The massive griffon chuckled. "You're young, *Dezi*. And the honour code of *La Mandria Nostra* is famous, even this far from Puledria. I'd hoped you were above such an... *outdated...* notion. It would appear I was wrong."

"*Honour?*" Bright Eyes shouted. "You think that I tried to save them because of the *Briglia*? You destroyed an entire family because a guardspony was *annoying* you! You're a sick Buzzard, and I'm going to take you down."

Giovanni scoffed. "And then what? You think you can take over my Flock so easily?"

"Your Flock can go buck themselves," said Bright Eyes, her golden eyes narrowing. "*I just want you dead.*"

Gilda spread her wings, swooped in front of her uncle and charged Bright Eyes. "You'll have to go through me, first!" she yelled.

Bright Eyes deftly dodged the young griffon's reckless charge and clopped a rear hoof across her face. "*\*Chrr-wit\* sque'k irr \*caw\*-rowr!*" she sneered, smoothly switching to the guttural griffon language. Gilda tumbled into a table and upended it, landing in a daze.

"*Grr-\*keek\*!*" Giovanni raced over to his fallen niece and gently stroked a talon across her face. He turned to face the grey pegasus, rage burning in his eyes. With a hawk-like cry, he lunged for Bright Eyes.

• • •

It took every ounce of Bright Eyes' focus to keep Gio's talons from splitting her open and his beak from crushing her bones.

She had learned how to deal with larger opponents at the Academy - how to exploit leverage and angles to use their weight against them - but The Claw was easily twice as heavy as the largest stallion she'd sparred with; every time she fought against his mass it felt like her legs were going to pull out of their sockets.

The fight took them into the restaurant proper, out the front doors, onto the cloudy front lot, and into the open air. Bright Eyes pounded on the griffon with her hooves, angling their edges forward for minimum surface area, but her strikes barely put a dent in the beast's hide. She was faster than he was, but she couldn't get in, strike and pull back without leaving herself open to a swipe of those lethal talons.

After a few minutes they parted, landing on an empty stretch of cloud on the outskirts of Cloudsdale.

"You're a quick one, Dezi," Giovanni panted, "but it's only a matter of time until I *taste your heart.*"

"Over my dead body," Bright Eyes said, her sarcasm shining through the ragged fatigue in her voice.

The two clashed once more, their movements a blur of flapping wings, striking hooves, and slashing talons. Bright Eyes managed to catch Giovanni off balance, and crashed a hoof across his beak; the blow left a hairline crack in its wake. Pain and anger lent Giovanni extra speed, however, and the griffon managed to grab the pegasus' leg as she drew it back.

Giovanni swung Bright Eyes by that leg in a wide circle, and smashed her down onto the cloud. The impact momentarily dazed her, and before she could react Giovanni had closed his talons around her throat.

"I could bite your head off right now, little pegasus," he hissed, "but you've made me mad enough to want to make you suffer. Here's a little trick you ponies might not know... it's called *strangling*. I'll do it nice and slow so you can pay attention..." Giovanni tightened his grip, his scaly talons slipping over one another around Bright Eyes' thin neck.

Bright Eyes' golden eyes bulged; black curtains danced around the edges of her vision. She knew she only had a few moments of useful consciousness left. Her hooves scabbled against the griffon's talons, unable to find purchase.

"Awww... tough time to not have any digits, hmm?" Giovanni smiled, and squeezed harder. "What are those stupid hooves *good for*, anyway?"

"...this," Bright Eyes whispered soundlessly, and thrust her rear hooves between Giovanni's hind legs. The griffon squawked in pain and shock, his head lowering and his grip on Bright Eyes' throat slackening.

She took the opportunity and swung her head upward, driving her forehead into the bridge of Giovanni's fractured beak. The griffon winced from the impact, staggering back on wobbling legs.

Bright Eyes followed, scrambling to her hooves and hopping to rest her front legs on Giovanni's shoulders. "*This is for all the ponies you've hurt!*" she shouted, and unleashed another head-butt onto the top of the griffon's beak. The fracture widened into a noticeable crack.

"*This is for being a bad influence on your niece!*" She pounded her forehead into the griffon again.

"*And this...*" She punctuated every phrase with another headbutt. "*Is for leaving! A foal! With no PARENTS!*" Giovanni's damaged beak finally shattered under the assault.

The griffon hurled Bright Eyes off of him with a back-paw slap. She landed on her back a few feet away. Giovanni writhed and howled an endless stream of distorted obscenities in his native tongue, his talons clamped over the bloodied remnants of his broken face. The cloud-stuff around him was speckled crimson.

Bright Eyes rolled onto her side. She knew she ought to press her advantage - put the foul beast out of his misery while she had the chance - but her limbs wouldn't respond. She felt as if her mind was a hundred miles from her bruised body.

"UNCLE!"

The cry had come from above; the young griffon flew down and landed next to her stricken relative, her eyes wide with horror. A moment later she turned to face Bright Eyes, her face a mask of vengeful rage... but then she froze. She stared at the pegasus in horrified silence.

*W-wha-? Why... why isn't she...* Bright Eyes felt hot wetness spill down her nose. She looked up, her eyes crossing, and gasped softly at what she saw:

The last head-butt had driven a sizable shard of beak into her forehead.

She shakily sat, and reached up with her front hooves. They felt numb. Clumsy. With no small effort, she got a grip on the shard and eased it out of the gash in her face. She let it drop to the cloud. It seemed to fall in slow motion.

*Ss'a bad w-wound, she mentally slurred. Might be b-brain da-amage... Gotta get to a d-doctor...* She stood and staggered drunkenly to one side, her wings flapping in an opposing rhythm. *G-gotta... uhh...*

Bright Eyes' golden eyes veered in opposite directions, and she tumbled off the edge of the cloud. She vaguely saw the smooth blue surface of a lake rushing up to meet her as she fell.

• • •

The next few years passed by in a streaking blur, one prominent event bleeding into another:

*A blue unicorn was helping her clear the water from her lungs, and asking for her name. In her addled state she reflexively tried to give her cover identity, without really knowing what she was saying: "Uhhh... D-dezi'duhhh..." The unicorn smiled. "Hello, Ditzzy Doo - I'm Colgate!" While the unicorn was leading her down the road to Ponyville, Ditzzy jerked to the side and staggered over to a copse of trees, where a precious bundle still sat undisturbed. "Dinky..." she whispered, and nuzzled the tiny foal's cheek with her own. The motion left a faint smear of blood on the foal's blanket.*

*She was shivering with fever in a soft bed, and Colgate was feeding her soup with a magicked spoon. Dinky slept next to her, her tiny hooves wrapped around a foal bottle. "She's adorable," said Colgate. "My friend Berry Punch has a foal the same age." Ditzzy smiled weakly. Her injuries were skillfully bound, but her eyes still wouldn't focus right. "So... are you from Cloudsdale?" Colgate continued. Ditzzy frowned and muttered "...I dunno..."*

*Ditzzy was speaking with an elderly stallion in front of the Ponyville Post Office. A fresh scar marked her forehead, and Dinky was sleeping in a basket between her wings. The old pegasus shuffled off his saddlebags. "Great timing!" he cackled, and shakily took to the air. "I was gonna retire tomorrow, anyway! San Caballo, here I come!"*

*She was sitting in a plush chair with her chin resting on the curved lip of one of the sinks in Carousel Boutique's cosmetology room. "Yellow," she said to the shop's elegant young unicorn proprietor, and pointed a hoof at her blue-black mane. The unicorn sighed in dismay. "For the record, I want you to know that I am only going through with this crime against fabulousity because you're my very first customer."*

*She was trying to make her rounds in good time, but her wings still wouldn't move like she wanted them to and her eyes made it hard to fly straight. She bumped into nearly every animate and inanimate surface in Ponyville as the years passed by, and she soon forgot what few shards of a less-clumsy past remained. "Sowwy," she'd say, a front hoof rubbing the back of her blonde-maned neck as the stares of annoyed townspoonies bored into her, "I'm not a clever pony."*

*She was waving excitedly to Dinky Doo as the little unicorn came bounding out of the schoolhouse at the end of her first day. "MOMMY!" Dinky squealed in delight as her eyes fell on Ditzzy. The young filly leaped into her mother's waiting hug. "Love you, muffin..." Ditzzy whispered, feeling the same oddly bittersweet warmth she always felt when she held her precious foal.*

*"I love you too, Mommy..."*

### PART THREE - FUTURE PROGRESSIVE

"MOMMY!"

Bright Eyes' eyes snapped open, their gaze as straight and keen as a hunting hawk's. She looked in the direction the cry had come from.

Stomper was trotting back out into the rain from the interior of the Post Office. Dinky was hanging by her tail from his broad mouth. Her little hooves were galloping in the air in a vain attempt to get free.

"Y'hh wurr right, Ace'z," said Stomper around a mouthful of tail. "Thrr WZZ s'mpwny th'rr."

"Thought so." Aces smiled. "So what's all this, Dezi? You got a unicorn foal? How'd that happen? Where's the father? Awww... did some Screwhead ruffle yer feathers and then take off?" Aces batted at Dinky with a front hoof, making the tiny unicorn spin. She squealed in fear.

Bright Eyes tensed against her bindings, her every muscle straining. The layers of packing twine holding her down creaked and groaned, digging into her hide. *"Don't... you... TOUCH HER!"* The twine snapped and Bright Eyes surged back onto her hooves.

"Whoa - easy there, Dezi!" said Aces hastily, his expression silently begging Stomper to intervene.

Bright Eyes surged forward as fast as a lightning bolt and smashed both front hooves into the end of Stomper's nose. He dropped Dinky and staggered back, groaning.

Dinky Doo stared up in disbelief as her mother twirled and landed gracefully facing Aces.

*"DINKY! GO INSIDE!"* she barked. Thunder rumbled from the stormy sky. The young filly obeyed, galloping through the open back door.

Aces shifted into a fighting stance. "Guess ya changed yer mind about playin' along, huh Dezi?" he sneered.

*"That's not my name,"* Bright Eyes snarled, and tackled the stallion.

The rhythm and flow of hoof-to-hoof combat that Bright Eyes had learned so well came back to her like an old friend; she quickly got the upper hoof over Aces' dirty but predictable fighting style.

She managed slide around behind the stallion, slip a front hoof under his wing, and lever it over his back. He teetered along with the motion, falling on his side. She pressed her hoof down on Aces' wings, pinning them both. She ground down with her hoof and Aces yelped in pain, digging at the muddy grass with his hooves.

Stomper had recovered and was drawing close, but Bright Eyes shot him a warning glare that emphasized the hold she had on his associate. Stomper stayed back.

She turned back to her helpless foe. "You like seeing wings get broken, Aces?" Bright Eyes hissed in his ear. "How'd you like a nice, *close look*?" She shifted again, putting her weight on the stallion's wing joint.

"\*Nngh!\* P-please, Dezi... I told ya - it was just business!"

"*Business*? You foal of a mule." Bright Eyes stomped on Aces' wings; the long, hollow bones creaked, but stayed unbroken. Aces cried out.

A pony of action over thought, Stomper pounced at Bright Eyes while she was momentarily distracted. The two slid into a mud puddle, kicking and wrestling.

With the memory of fighting a full-grown griffon still fresh in her mind, Bright Eyes found dealing with a pony of Stomper's size almost restful. She flexed and shifted and slid, keeping him off balance, and unleashed darting jabs on every weak spot she could think of. His namesake kicks were slow as falling trees in comparison.

Bright Eyes slipped to the side and thrust a rear hoof against the base of Stomper's thick skull; the stallion pitched forward into the mud, down for the count. She stood in triumph for a brief moment - letting the rain cool her aching muscles and rinse the mud from her grey hide - before Aces plunged a letter opener into her left deltoid.

Bright Eyes screamed in pain and fell onto her knees.

"S'always gotta be the *hard* way witchoo, huh?" Aces panted, rain spitting off his lips. His bruised wings were half-raised. "Well, you think the water was bad? Just you wait, Buzzard. I'm gonna do things to ya there ain't names for... and I'm gonna make that little foal o'yours *watch*!" He ducked his head into the box he'd retrieved from inside during Bright Eyes' fight with Stomper and pulled out a second letter opener.

Bright Eyes scowled. "I was willing to kill for 'that little foal of mine' the instant I laid eyes on her," said Bright Eyes. "What do you think I'd do for her *now*?" She gripped the opener sticking in her shoulder and wrenched it free; the wooden handle between her teeth muffled her cry of pain. She stood, favouring her unhurt front leg, and assumed a combat stance.

The two pegasi circled one another in a slowly widening spiral, each daring the other to make the first move. They stopped and locked eyes once they'd put a good ten paces between themselves. Both hoofed at the ground and spread their wings. As a flash of lightning brightened the rain-dimmed yard, they charged.

They streaked past one another in a heartbeat, skidding to a halt on the muddy ground.

Aces turned first, wheeling around to face his quarry. His right side was streaked with crimson from the long slash along his throat, the flow too fast for the rain to wash away. He tried to speak, but no sounds escaped his lips. He collapsed.

Bright Eyes' right cheek was marked with a thin cut weeping red down her jaw. She dropped the bloody tool in the mud and limped back toward the Post Office.

"*Dinky!*" she called out as she stepped inside. "*Where are you?*" After a moment the young filly slipped out from under a pile of unsorted letters.

"*M-mommy...*" the foal whimpered. Her lavender cheeks were streaked with tears.

Bright Eyes sighed in relief. "*Oh, thank Celestia.*" She pulled the foal into a hug and then sat her down in front of her. She kept her front hooves on the unicorn's shoulders. "Dinky... why are you home? Why aren't you with your friends at Berry Punch's?"

Dinky sniffled. "Miss P-Punch's roof started leaking, so she brought us all home."

Bright Eyes sighed. "All right... I want you to listen to me very carefully, Dinky. Okay?"

"Y-you're hurt," said Dinky, her voice shaking.

Bright Eyes gently jerked Dinky with her hooves. "*Please, Dinky. Listen to me.*"

Dinky swallowed and nodded, her face twisted with anxiety.

"Good. Now... I want you to go up to your room, and shut the windows and door tight. And I want you to hide under your bed and not make a sound. And if anypony but me or

Colgate tries to get you out from under there... I want you to zap them as hard as you can. *In the head.*"

Dinky's teary eyes widened. "B-but Miss Cheerilee says it's bad to zap ponies... *really* bad! She says-"

"*I DON'T CARE!*" Bright Eyes shouted, louder than she'd planned to. Dinky cringed. Bright Eyes held her close again, tighter than she meant to. "...I'm sorry. I know zapping ponies is wrong, but there are some very bad ponies around here right now, and they want to hurt us. I'm going to make them go away, but until I do you need to be brave, okay? Can you do that for me?" She put Dinky back down.

Dinky was shaking all over now, but she silently nodded.

"Okay. Now, get upstairs. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The little unicorn trotted up the stairs and sealed up her room. She pulled her favourite blanket off of her bed and took it with her as she scrambled underneath it. She wrapped the stained, frayed fabric around herself and huddled in the dark, listening to the thunder and the rain.

• • •

Bright Eyes stalked out into the back yard and approached the mud puddle where Stomper was only just beginning to stir. She retrieved some of the twine she'd broken and bound all four of his hooves together. The job done, she shook him with a hoof.

"*Huh...?*" He blearily opened his mud-caked eyes.

Bright Eyes loomed over him. "Stomper... I want you to flap back to The Claw, and give him a message for me. Tell him it's time to end this. Tell him that either he comes to the fields south of Ponyville and faces me himself, *tonight*, or I keep taking down mooks like you and the late mister Aces over there *until he runs out*. It's his call."

"He'll kill ya, ya know," Stomper said, but his tone was far from certain. His gaze kept veering past Bright Eyes and settling on Aces' body.

"Go. *Now.*"

Stomper struggled his way into the air and clumsily took off for Cloudsdale, his hooves still tied beneath him.

• • •

Bright Eyes trod down the street with as heavy a gait as her wounded leg would allow, her sharp eyes full of purpose and her rain-soaked mane hanging straight and heavy down the side of her face.

She came up to Berry Punch's house and pounded a hoof on the front door.

The magenta earth pony opened the door, and then gaped in shock at the sight of the bloodied pegasus before her.

"*Hello, Berry.*" Bright Eyes locked eyes with Berry Punch; the weight of her golden gaze seemed to push the earth pony back. Bright Eyes followed her inside.

The house was modest but well-kept, apart from the scattered pots and pans collecting drips falling from the ceiling.

"You put my foal in harm's way just now, Berry. I know you didn't mean to, but you *owe me* anyway." Bright Eyes' tone was low and level - rigidly controlled - with none of Ditzzy Doo's lilt or foalish mispronunciation. The sound made Berry Punch shudder.

"R-really...?" Berry Punch chuckled nervously. "I'm s-sorry, Ditzzy Doo. How can I make it up to you?"

"I need a splash of your special reserve on these cuts and a swig of it in my belly. And some first aid. *Now.*"

Berry Punch only hesitated for an instant before cantering off to fetch gauze, adhesive bandages and a clay jug marked XXXX.

The liquor stung fiercely on Bright Eyes' wounds and went down her throat like flaming ice. She stood as still as a statue while Berry Punch bandaged her, letting the drink spread warmth through her body and feeling the knots in her muscles ease just slightly.

With her ministrations complete, Berry Punch backed away from the grey pegasus, her movements betraying more than a little fear.

"*Wh... what happened to you?*" asked Berry Punch softly.

"Mailmare business," answered Bright Eyes. "Nothing that concerns you... but I wouldn't open my door to any unfamiliar pegasi for a while, if I were you. Thanks for the help." She trotted to the door and left without another word.

Berry Punch stood for a long, silent moment in the empty living room, and then shakily poured herself a belt of the liquor. She gulped it down in one shuddering swallow before trotting up the stairs to check on her foal.

• • •

Colgate magicked open her door and immediately leaped forward to hug the pony before her.

"*Ditzy!* Thank Celestia! After you ran off I thought... I worried you'd... *oh!* You're hurt!"

Bright Eyes pushed her friend back, breaking the hug. "It's nothing. Now... I don't have much time. I need you to promise me that if anything happens to me you'll take care of Dinky. She's back at the Post Office."

Worry creased Colgate's features. "Ditzy... what-"

Bright Eyes pressed her front hooves to Colgate's shoulders and stared her down. "*Promise me, Colgate.*"

Colgate sniffled back tears. "I promise."

Bright Eyes softly sighed. "...Thank you. I tried to run from my past. Hide it from everypony - even myself. But that ends tonight. I know who I am, Colgate. If I see you again, I'll tell you all about me. But for now, if I don't make it, just tell Dinky that I..." Bright Eyes paused, pushing the words through the lump forming in her throat. "...tell her that I died fighting to keep her safe."

Colgate choked back a sob. "Ditzy, please... if you're in trouble, I can help. *The Doctor* can help. We could-"

"*NO!*" Again, the word came out louder than Bright Eyes expected. "No. I already owe you and The Doctor a debt I can never repay. And nopony else is going to pay the price for my actions. Never again. I have to do this alone. *I have to.*"

Colgate's Serious Stare reflected in the pegasus' golden eyes. The unicorn slowly nodded.

"Thank you, Colgate," Bright Eyes whispered, "for everything." And then she took off into the stormy sky.

• • •

The Apple family's massive son paced worriedly around the kitchen in Sweet Apple Acres' farmhouse, his broad hooves clopping out a steady cadence on the wooden floor. His sister was long overdue to return from helping the town prepare for the storm.

When a knock sounded at the kitchen door he crossed the room in a heartbeat.

"AJ...?" He pushed open the door, but found an entirely different blonde pony standing out in the rain.

It was the town's addled mailmare - *Ditzy? Derpy?* - but she looked different. *Very* different.

Her frazzled mane was now rain-slicked and straight, and her googly golden eyes were now keen and focused. Her grey hide was marked with several fresh bandages. All in all, the effect was profoundly flattering - she looked as tough as a rodeo pony and as dangerous as a bird of prey. Momentarily forgetting himself, he simply stared at her in silence.

"*I want you to nail me,*" she said.

The ever-present stem between the red earth pony's lips dropped to the floor.

"*Wh... wha...*"

"You do farrier work on the side, right? Well I need to get shod - fast."

The earth pony cleared his throat. "...Oh. Right. O'course. I think I got a nice thin brass set that would suit a pegasus like yerself just fi-"

The pegasus held up a front hoof. "No. I want steel. The thickest, *toughest* steel shoes you've got - like the ones you wear at harvest time."

The earth pony raised an eyebrow. "What's a nice filly like yerself need apple-buckin' shoes for?"

The mailmare frowned. "You've got a reputation for being a pony of few words. Surely you'll understand if I want to keep my reasons to myself?"

The earth pony shrugged and trotted past the pegasus and out into the rain. "Fair enough. Follow me."

• • •

The studded steel shoes made Bright Eyes' hooves feel enormous; they hung down like ballast sacks as she flew across the plains south of Ponyville, and sank into the mud as she landed in an open meadow.

Her golden eyes darted back and forth, scanning the stormy skies for any sign of her foe. Minutes passed by with agonizing slowness, but finally she picked out the dark shadow of the griffon's massive form on the grey backdrop of the cloud-cover.

Bright Eyes focused on her breathing, willing herself to stay calm and ready. Thunder rumbled from the sky as the griffon drew closer. Her innate weather-sense picked up the charge in the air. *Perfect*, she thought.

Giovanni flew down in a wide spiral, alighting perhaps twenty paces from Bright Eyes. She got her first look at him in six years; time had not been kind.

His hide was marked with even more scars than she remembered, and he was missing the occasional flight feather. His sunken eyes burned with barely-contained fury. Most prominent, however, was his beak.

The shattered upper surface was now held together with metal staples, and a shaped piece of dull steel took the place of the portion that couldn't be saved. Combined with the scars on his body, it lent the griffon a patchwork appearance, like some nightmarish rag-doll.

"Long time, no see," said Bright Eyes. "You look good."

Giovanni narrowed his eyes. "*Dezi*." He shifted slightly, widening his stance. The seams in his beak whistled as he spoke, lending his voice an incongruous lisp. "My nie'shh told me you were dead. And then she told me you were shh'till alive. She wa'shh right the fir'shht time."

Bright Eyes smiled. "Before we do this, there's something you should know."

"Oh...?" Giovanni began slowly stalking toward the pegasus.

"My name isn't Desiderata. It's Bright Eyes... *and I'm CIA.*"

Giovanni paused. His eyes widened. "You..."

"That's right. You let a Royal agent into your Flock. And if you hadn't been such a sick, twisted monster, I might have done things by the book and let your bloodsucking lawyers get you off."

The griffon growled. Bright Eyes stood her ground, and goaded him further.

"...But instead, things got a lot more personal. You had an innocent family murdered on a whim... *and I broke your bucking face.*" She put every ounce of sneering mockery she could muster into that last jab, hoping to push the griffon into doing something rash. It worked.

Giovanni's deafening roar echoed even over the white noise of the rainstorm. As he sprinted toward Bright Eyes, his talons flexing and his tail lashing, a bolt of lightning streaked down in the distance and split the tallest tree in Ponyville.

Bright Eyes parried his downward slash with the edges of her shoes and then hopped backward. Giovanni pressed after her, snarling with each swing of his hooked talons and each snap of his mutilated beak. She responded to every strike with a steel-shod kick.

His blows were wild and brutal, lacking the feral precision Bright Eyes remembered. But he was still just as large as he was the last time they'd fought, and shod or not, she'd spent six years letting her skills go to seed. Bright Eyes knew she couldn't hold out long against his assault. *Please, Celestia...* she silently begged. *Just let me make it long enough...* She hazarded a glance skyward.

The overcast sky showed no sign of lessening its downpour, but more importantly, a charge was building in the clouds overhead. Bright Eyes could feel it in her bones. *It's coming... just... about...*

**NOW!**

She dropped, slid and rolled, and then spread her wings. With one flap she leaped into the air and flipped on top of the griffon. Her hind legs rested on his plated beak and the crested crown of his head. She reared, stretching out her metal-clad hooves to the stormy sky with a mighty shout. The sky reached and shouted back.

Bright Eyes' world turned white as the lightning struck. She vaguely felt the impact with the ground, and sensed the painful heat in her hooves, the rattling pace of her pulse, the cold mud soaking her wings and the fierce ringing in her ears, but those concerns seemed so far away.

Bit by bit the white before her eyes faded to black, and she knew no more.

• • •

Colgate galloped into Ponyville's southern fields, her horn gleaming with a divination spell. Dinky Doo sat on her back, gripping the older pony's streaked mane between her jaws and huddling tight against the chill of the rain.

*You might have wanted to handle things alone, Ditzzy, Colgate thought to herself as she squinted against the rain, but there's something you need to learn about my kind: we have a serious tendency to meddle when our friends are in danger.*

The pair soon came to the meadow where the lightning had struck; a grisly sight awaited them.

The body of a massive griffon lay near the centre of the field, speckled with faintly glowing embers. Here and there along the mass, faint wisps of smoke curled up between the raindrops.

Not far from the grim remains, a grey pegasus lay on her back in the mud, silent and still.

"Oh, no..." Colgate whispered.

"MOMMY!" Dinky leaped off of Colgate's back and galloped over. She pressed her front hooves to her mother's chest and shook her. "Mommy! Wake up!" She nuzzled against the pegasus' cheek. "Please, wake up! You gotta wake up!"

Colgate trotted up behind the little unicorn. "Dinky..." Colgate reached out a front hoof.

"NO!" shouted the foal. "She's gonna be okay!" Her voice cracked. "She *s-said* she'd come b-back! She said she'd make the bad P-ponies go awa-ay!" Dinky stomped her tiny hooves on her mother's ribcage. "You w-wake up, Mommy! *You wake up right now!*" The foal's nub of a horn glittered, releasing spark-sized motes of magic. For a brief instant, the faint image of a caduceus inside a bubble flickered into being on Dinky's flank, and then vanished.

The pegasus coughed.

Dinky stared down in wide-eyed shock as her mother stirred beneath her. It wasn't until she felt a weak-limbed hug close around her that she reacted.

"...*M-Mommy...*?" Dinky whispered through her tears, as though speaking too loudly might wake her from this dream-come-true.

The pegasus pulled back slightly, and opened her eyes. They stared glassily at the air on either side of the little unicorn's head. "*I wub you, Muffin!*" she slurred, and leaned back in to hug Dinky.

Dinky giggled joyfully. "*I love you too, Mommy!*"

Colgate took a gentle step forward. "Ditzy...?"

"Hi, Colgate!" Ditzy released her foal and shakily stood up. She swayed, and flapped her wings to correct her off-kilter balance.

"Ditzy..." Colgate repeated. "Are you... are you *all right*?"

Ditzy nodded enthusiastically. The motion made her stumble somewhat. "Yup! *Lever getter!*"

Colgate frowned. "...Beg pardon?"

Ditzy smiled broadly. "Lever getter! I wheel shine!" She trotted in place for a moment, her steel shoes adding heft to each step. "Ooo... rut my proves keel levy!"

The blue unicorn sagged. "Ditzy... you told me you remembered who you were. Do you?"

Ditzy pondered the question for a moment before answering. "...Yup! My same is Ditzy Doo! 'Mm a mailmare! I de-quiver the whale!"

"Yay!" said Dinky, hugging her mother's front leg.

Colgate sighed. "*Oh well...*"

The blue unicorn lagged behind as the trio slowly trotted down the road back to Ponyville, not wanting her mourning over what might have been to intrude on the mother and foal's happiness.

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Gilda the griffon perched on the clouds above the meadow, peering down at her Uncle's remains and the ponies' discovery of the clumsy, confused pegasus.

Next to her, a lean purple pegasus stallion with a crossed leg and baseball bat marking his flank drew close.

"The Claw didn't have no cubs," he said hesitantly, "and yer father's back in Mythos. And Aces was The Claw's right-hoof pony. If any... *anyone's* gonna get revenge, it's... it oughta be-"

Gilda cut him off. "*This is over.*"

"Huh?"

The griffon wrapped a scaly talon around the stallion's throat and jerked him close, his forehead resting against her own. "You got a hearin' problem, dweeb? This is over. There ain't gonna *be* any revenge. That pegasus is spending the rest of her life a few feathers short of a wing and my Uncle is dead. This trash is *done with*. Ponyville's off limits from now on. It's got nothin' we want. You got that?"

The pegasus nodded as much as Gilda's grip would allow. She released him.

"*Nothin' we want...*" she repeated softly, and turned her gaze to a classically-designed cloud-house floating on the Ponyville side of the outskirts of Cloudsdale. She sighed.

## EPILOGUE

"There we are - absolutely *fabulous!*" the elegant white unicorn beamed.

Dinky Doo giggled, prancing to and fro in front of one of Carousel Boutique's many mirrors and admiring her fancy new party dress.

The unicorn turned to Ditzzy. "Now... If there's nothing else you require, shall we settle up?"

Ditzzy Doo nodded, removed her saddlebags and rummaged around in them with her hooves. Her golden eyes veered wider as she concentrated. At length, she produced a paper bag, and set it on a counter.

"Sweep the range!" she said warmly, putting the bags back on and escorting Dinky out of the shop.

"Umm... thank you! Come again!" the unicorn called after them.

Ditzzy and Dinky trotted through the streets of Ponyville until they came to a long, mansion-like house. They headed around the side of the building, and approached the doors to a storm cellar. Ditzzy opened them, Dinky trotted down into the dark, and Ditzzy followed.

At the bottom of the stairs they trotted into an unfurnished cellar, empty save for one feature:

An odd, narrow blue shed.

The shed's door opened, and a dark-maned brown earth pony stepped out. He was wearing a tuxedo, and a fine dress cut for a full-grown pegasus was slung over his back.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "Are you two ready for your visit to the first-ever Grand Galloping Gala?"

Ditzzy's splayed eyes slowly shifted, focusing as sharply as a hunting hawk's. She smiled, and said:

"*Allons-y.*"

## PART ONE - OBSCURITY

The Typical and Commonplace Trixie trotted glumly down the cobblestoned streets of Canterlot, her deep purple eyes downcast. The azure unicorn's silvery blue mane and tail were tied back in modest queues, and a rough, dark blue linen cloak slung across her shoulders protected her from the mild chill in the early evening air and the faint drizzle falling from the slate-grey clouds.

Trixie blended seamlessly into the bustling crowds heading home for the night, standing out no more than a blade of grass in a meadow. She was one of them, accepted on first glance and passed by without a moment's thought.

Oh, how she *hated* it.

Once, not so very long ago, she had been a showpony - a magician. Stomped applause had been her food, *oohs* and *aahs* her drink. She had dazzled crowds of haughty fellow unicorns, slack-jawed Mudhooves and flocking Buzzards alike. With the merest exertion of her magical talents, she had unleashed *wonders* upon the stage. She had shown the foalish masses what *greatness* looked like.

She had been a *somepony*.

Ponies had known her name - and cried it out loud in glee as she'd passed by. She'd been adored. She had lived a life of well-deserved luxury, riding the wave from town to town and gig to gig, the last bit from one spent as the first bit from another came in.

But *then...* then she'd brought her show to Ponyville.

In the months since the disastrous destruction of her home and livelihood in that backwater burg, she had been condemned to a fate worse than poverty, worse than failure, worse even than public humiliation:

Anonymity.

She could deal with hecklers. Bad reviews came with the business, and a great performer knew how to either let them slide or put the neigsayers in their place. But the questions, *oh horror*, the questions. Those were a different matter. They were devastating.

*Who are you? How do you spell that again? Are you new round these parts? Oh, are you a showpony or something? Why haven't I heard of you, then? Why aren't you doing a show now?*

Each new face void of recognition felt like a sandbag crashing onto her back. Fame was fickle - every showpony knew that. What was worshipped one day could be forgotten the next night. Fads and sensations came and went at frantic speed, their passing unmourned.

When those two little *morons* in Ponyville taunted an Ursa into attacking the town, they'd done worse than give a certain purple showoff the chance to upstage her: they had made her yesterday's news. Without the clout to secure gigs in permanent venues she'd been reduced to taking odd jobs to save up for a new stage-coach, working for her obvious inferiors like some feckless common labourer. Like a *nopony*.

Trixie realized that she'd stopped moving. Ponies passed by on either side of her, not sparing a single glance her way. She frowned, pushing down a surge of wretched self-pity.

Just then, a fuchsia-maned white unicorn filly trotting behind her and magicking along a large collection of boxes and parcels failed to spot Trixie, and the hovering cargo plowed right into her. Trixie tumbled off her hooves and sprawled on the muddy cobbles.

"*Oh my!*" said the filly, her violet eyes wide. "I'm *terribly* sorry!" She set down the boxes and approached Trixie. "I didn't see you there!"

"*Of course you didn't...*" muttered Trixie bitterly under her breath, her pride hurting more than her body. She struggled her way back onto her hooves. "My fault, I'm sure," she said, louder and more sarcastically.

"Not at all!" continued the young unicorn. "Please, let me make it up to you. I was just on my way to have breakfast before delivering these boxes - would you like to join me? My treat?"

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "*Breakfast...*? It's an hour after sunset, you know."

The unicorn blushed. "Ah... yes. Well, I only woke up a short while ago. You see, I'm actually a servant of..." - the unicorn looked around, as if checking for eavesdroppers, and lowered her voice - "...*Her Royal Highness, Princess Luna!*"

Trixie drew closer to the white unicorn. A Royal servant - this could be her chance to start rebuilding her connections! "*Ree-aaally...?*" she asked, a hint of her former scintillating glory creeping into her voice.

The unicorn nodded. "My name's Moondancer." She offered a front hoof.

Trixie took it, shook it, and faked her most sincere smile. "Trixie. Lead the way, Moondancer. Breakfast for dinner it is!"

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A few minutes later, the two ponies sat half-surrounded by boxes at a corner table in a small eatery a few streets away from the Royal Palace.

Moondancer, Trixie was relieved to discover, was not as dull-witted as most menial ponies. She was still no match for Trixie's keen mind, of course, but it was refreshing nonetheless to converse with a pony of some intellect.

"...Your cutie mark, you say?" said Trixie, taking a sip of her wheat smoothie.

Moondancer nodded. "Her Majesty says the Moon and Stars are the mark of a bloodline of Her ancestral servants - the Moon Herd." The unicorn leaned, craning her neck to peer at Trixie's still-muddy flank. "You know, now that I see it, your cutie mark actually looks pretty similar...!"

Trixie looked down at her own hindquarters; the mud partially covered her comet-trailing magic wand cutie mark, making it somewhat resemble a crescent moon and star. Acting on a sudden impulse, she made a show of magicking off the mud to conceal the more subtle weaving of a quick illusion spell. Hidden multicasts were foalsplay for a magician of her skill.

When the glow of her horn faded, the resemblance was uncanny. It wouldn't stand up to thorough scrutiny - truly faking cutie marks was impossible - but Trixie suspected that Moondancer was not the suspicious type.

"Why, I think you're right!" said Trixie, feigning surprise. "We must be distant cousins!"

Moondancer giggled and clopped her front hooves together in delight. "That's *wonderful!* Almost all of my relatives live far away. What are the odds I'd bump into a cousin right here on the streets of Canterlot?"

"*I know!*" gushed Trixie, laying it on as thick as she could. "It's like... it was meant to be." She smiled broadly. "We should celebrate!"

"What do you mean?"

"You bought the meal - why don't I buy the *cider*?"

Moondancer frowned. "Oh, I shouldn't. I still have to deliver these parcels to the Palace, and later I have to meet with Her Highness... my day's just starting."

"*Awww...* now, don't be like that," pouted Trixie. "One *little* drink won't kill you."

Moondancer bit her lower lip. "Well... if it's just one..."

• • •

"*Shhhure She's powerful, \*hic!\* bu-but She's also just so... vulnerable, you know?*" slurred Moondancer.

Trixie nodded, and then magicked her latest empty glass over to the far side of the table to join its dozen-odd brethren. As expected, a seasoned showpony like herself had a far superior tolerance for strong drink than that of a simple chambermaid. *That's it*, she silently told herself. *Keep her talking. Make nice. Get an in. Tonight the servants' quarters... tomorrow, the Royal Auditorium!*

"*Sometimes Shee gets this, this look, and it's sooo sad! If it wasn't sush a no-no, I'd wanna give 'Er a biii-iig hug every time I see 'Er like that!*" She laughed, and a deeper flush spread across her already-rosy cheeks and nose. She lowered her voice. "*Course I kinda did do that once, I guess...*"

Trixie raised an eyebrow. "*Ohhh...? Whaddyamean?*" She cleared her throat, and forced the slur out of her voice. "*\*ahem\**... What do you mean?"

Moondancer pressed her front hooves to her cheeks and shook her head. "*Oh, nooo...! I can't tell ya! Iss' jussst... scandalous!*"

Trixie's breath caught in her throat. *A scandal? A ROYAL scandal? Could it be - one of the Royal pony Sisters dallying with a common serving-filly? Imagine the leverage gossip that juicy could give!* The thought filled Trixie with a feeling not unlike the sensation that had passed over her when she'd first mastered the simultaneous triple-cast, perhaps best summed up as:

*JACKPOT!*

"Awww, c'mon," Trixie goaded her, chucking her shoulder with a hoof. "You can tell cousin Trixie!" Trixie's horn glowed, and the piles of boxes and parcels around the table rearranged themselves into a semicircular barrier between the two ponies and the rest of the restaurant.

"Okay... but this'ss jusst between us, right?" When Trixie nodded, Moondancer blushed harder. She leaned across the table, gesturing for Trixie to meet her in the middle. Trixie did so; both unicorns' front hooves rested on the tabletop, and their noses were only inches apart.

"A few weeks ago, the Royal Sisters got inna fight 'cause of what happened wayyy back in th'day..."

"Go on..." said Trixie softly, clamping down on her excitement.

Moondancer magicked up her glass and took another sip of cider. "And I gave Luna... *Oh!* I mean, Princess Luna, a hug 'cause She was mad about bein' banished, and about how She couldn't do anythin' about it. Well... not until Princess Celestia showed up all... all... *Oooh!* I can't! I can't say it!" Moondancer's front hooves trotted in place on the table; her blushed deepened by several shades.

Trixie's curiosity and the hard cider in her system overcame her patience. With a furtive glance out of the gaps in the parcel-wall around the table she ignited her horn and focused on Moondancer's flushed features.

Smooth, feathery tendrils of nearly-transparent magic snaked out from Trixie's horn like pale ink spreading through water. As the spell enveloped Moondancer's head the white unicorn's eyes grew wide and her pupils dilated. She gasped softly.

"*It's all right,*" purred Trixie, her voice resonating through the magic now sinking into Moondancer's cider-dulled mind. "*You can trust Trixie...*"

"*Trust... you...*" Moondancer's eyelids half-closed; she sagged, her front hooves splaying on the tabletop.

Trixie grinned a self-satisfied grin. She'd only ever used the maresmerism spell on assistants and volunteers before. "*Yesss... that's right... you can tell Tried-and-True Trixie anything...*" Trixie leaned in closer, looming over the white unicorn. She was close

enough now that her hot, cider-scented breath tickled across Moondancer's horn as she spoke. "*Luna was mad, and she couldn't do anything about it. And then...?*"

Moondancer was breathing faster and the flush in her cheeks was spreading, but her voice was a dreamy monotone as she spoke. "*And then... Princess Celestia arrived in the courtyard... and She was...*"

"Yes...?"

"*She was... naked!*"

"W... Wh-" Trixie almost lost control of the spell. She indulged in a frown before snapping back to her enchantress routine. "*...Why was that scandalous? The Princesses almost never wear clothes.*"

A flicker of resistance shone in Moondancer's dimmed eyes. "*B-because... she... N-no...! Don't... don't wanna say...*" She shook her head, and her horn glittered with a feeble counterspell.

Trixie scowled and poured more energy into her spell. The tendrils phasing through Moondancer's head brightened and thickened, fiercely gripping her like ghostly lavender talons. A shudder passed through Moondancer's body, and a single tear escaped her left eye. The sparkles around her horn snuffed out.

"*You want what Trixie says you want...*" Trixie whispered harshly, the resonance in her voice now lending it a sinister growl. "*...And Trixie says you want to tell her!*"

Moondancer whimpered and squirmed in Trixie's magical grasp, but to no avail. Her muscles soon slackened once more, and with one last soft moan her face lost all expression. "*Yes, Trixie...*" she muttered weakly.

Trixie smiled a self-satisfied smile. "Good. Now, *tell Trixie about Celestia,*" she said, her voice returning to its earlier soothing purr.

Moondancer swallowed. "*P-Princess Celestia was... n-naked... because She t-took off the Regalia of the Day-Mare. W-without Her Regalia, She was just Princess Luna's big s-sister - just a r-regular unicorn, but with wings. I couldn't see her like that... I'm not worthy. It was just... wrong!*" Moondancer shuddered again, and blushed deeper.

"You're telling me that Princess Celestia is so big and impressive because of her jewelry?"

"Y-yes... Princess Luna said that no pony can hate Her when She wears the Regalia. Only I love her."

The half-mad seeds of a grand scheme began to bloom in Trixie's cunning mind. Perhaps if she'd had more gold to her name, if her jobs of late had been less demeaning and dull, or if she'd drunk less cider, she would have dismissed the idea out of hoof. But instead...

"No pony can..." Trixie trailed off, and then addressed Moondancer once more. "*Trixie says you want to sleep now, my informative little helper. You have a nice, long nap, and when you wake up, you'll only remember a strange dream you had about a Great and Powerful unicorn named Trixie...*"

"Yes, Trixie..."

"And smart, too," Trixie quickly added. "*Trixie is also smart. ... And pretty.*"

"Yes, Trixie..." Moondancer's eyelids drooped and then closed, and she slid down to nestle her head on top of her folded front legs. In moments she was snoring softly.

Trixie magicked open the wall of parcels and headed for the door.

"Hey...!" called out a passing serving-filly. "Is your friend okay?"

Trixie grinned and shrugged. "Some ponies just can't hold their cider. You know how it is."

Without another word, Trixie trotted out of the eatery and back onto the muddy streets.

• • •

An hour later the Focused and Driven Trixie was snaking her way between artfully-cut topiary and the graceful marble statuary of the Canterlot Sculpture Garden, approaching the Royal Palace walls yard by painstakingly-slow yard. Rain still drizzled lightly from the dark grey clouds, but enough moonlight still shone through for her to find her way. The damp air was heavy with the scents of night-blooming flowers.

*This is insane*, she thought to herself as she skittered between two bushes and rested out of sight for a moment. *The stresses of being lowered to labouring like an earth pony have clearly driven Trixie mad!*

Despite her slow progress and the chilly, damp night, Trixie's heart was pounding and sweat shone on her blue hide. Her stomach hadn't been this full of butterflies since her first time on stage.

Somewhere ahead, she could hear the rhythmic hoof-falls and metallic clacks of a patrolling Royal Guard. She pulled her cloak around herself. Her horn ignited and she slowly faded into soundless invisibility. She trotted as quickly as she could past the golden-armoured grey pegasus, straining to keep herself unseen and unheard.

In her haste she brushed a flower-filled urn as she passed, and the terracotta vessel tipped over and smashed behind her. The guard stopped and turned to face the sound, his wings raised in surprise.

It was only then that Trixie realized that she couldn't conceal the raindrops falling onto her cloaked form.

Icy panic splashed down her spine; *What has Trixie done?* she silently lamented. *A Great and Powerful magician, doomed to languish in a dungeon! Or banished to darkest Pundamilia! Or both! And all because of some half-baked cider-fuelled scheme!* Trixie dropped down flat on the stone path and cringed, waiting out the seconds before the guard would notice her and have her clapped in irons.

It took quite some time after the guard checked the urn and moved on for Trixie to remember to breathe.

Trixie released the spell and her breath at the same time. The adrenaline draining out of her system made her legs wobble as she struggled her way back onto her hooves. *Trixie knew she was too cunning to be caught so easily!* she blustered unconvincingly to herself. *Trixie knew it all along.*

She sidled up to the towering white outer wall of the Palace and cast a quadruple-strength variant of the sticky-hooves spell she used in feats of *legerdesabot*. She reared up and pressed her front hooves to the wall... followed by her rear hooves.

Trixie crept up the vertical surface slowly and carefully, concentrating on keeping the glow of her horn dim enough to avoid attention. Her legs were aching by the time she finally made it to the balcony of the tallest, most ornamented tower.

*Trixie could still turn back,* an imagined voice of reason offered. *Trixie doesn't have to do this. Trixie could...* She frowned as she heaved herself up over the edge of the balcony and onto its smooth floor. ... *Could what?* she countered to herself. *Continue to work her horn*

*off in obscurity while showponies like Blacksteed and Hoofdini steal all the glory? Stay a nopony doing nothing, and slowly forget the sound of crowds cheering her name...? No. Never. Trixie would rather die!*

Trixie shivered slightly, and felt a drop of moisture slide down her cheek. A moment later she realized that it wasn't from the rain. The sincerity of that last thought had taken her by surprise.

Her horn glowed softly as she conjured a sizeable black velvet sack. She magicked it aloft and stared through the entryway into the expansive chambers inside the tower.

"Okay, Trixie," she whispered. "Showtime!"

• • •

The Royal Princess Luna stood in a wide clearing in the gardens of the Royal Palace, tapping a hoof impatiently. Sunrise had been scheduled for nearly ten minutes earlier, but the moonless sky was still dark and Princess Celestia was nowhere to be found.

Luna was about to take flight and go looking for her older sister when a young seneschal trotted up and bowed on bended knee.

"Your Highness," said the mint-green unicorn, his eyes downcast, "Your Royal Sister requests Your presence in Her bed chamber."

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Did my Royal Sister say why?"

The seneschal shook his head. "She did not, Your Highness."

"Very well. You may go."

Luna took to the air as the servant departed. She flew between the Palace's spired towers and landed on the balcony of Celestia's room. Immediately, she noticed muddy hoofprints leading from the tower wall, up and over the balcony's edge, and into the room.

"Celly...?" Luna asked, her voice full of concern.

"I'm here, Luna." The voice that answered from deeper in the shadows of the unlit room sounded small and youthful, without Celestia's usual regal tone.

Luna trotted inside, but soon stopped dead in her tracks.

Celestia was standing in the middle of the room, unornamented and unshod. Without the power of her Regalia she was barely taller than Luna herself, and her rose-coloured mane and tail hung motionless.

It was only the second time in the past millennium that Luna had seen her sister's true form, and as before the sight stirred up ancient memories and emotions.

"*Celly!* W-why aren't you... why aren't you w-wearing..." Luna winced, angry at herself for letting her agitation put a quaver in her voice.

Celestia put a front hoof to her lips, calling for silence, and nodded her head at the hallway door, where the light from torches in wall sconces cast the shadow of pony legs through the crack at the bottom of the door. Somepony - a servant-filly most likely - was eavesdropping.

"I am feeling... *unwell*," Celestia said, and gestured to the polished wooden vanity where her Regalia usually sat overnight - now empty.

Luna's jaw dropped and her wings spread in silent shock, but she forced herself to play along. "*O-oh!* I... I'm sorry to hear that, Sister! When did you first *take ill?*"

"Some time in the night," Celestia answered, her voice weak with feigned illness. "I'm afraid that I won't be able to perform my Royal duties in my current state. You will have to act in my stead, Sister."

"*WHAAHH?*" Luna gasped. "Celly, you *can't* be serious! I... I haven't... I mean, it's been more than..."

Celestia smiled and chuckled softly, faking a slight cough. "Oh, my dear Luna. Traditions have changed surprisingly little in the past thousand years. You'll find holding court and raising the Sun as natural as flying - I'm sure of it. Besides... the public needs to see you more often, anyway."

Luna struggled to get a firmer grasp of the past few minutes' developments. "Very... very well, Sister. I will do as you ask. In the meantime, should I send for a *physician* to help diagnose your... *condition?*" Luna mimed shading her eyes with a hoof and looking around as if hunting.

"I appreciate the thought, but that won't be necessary, Luna. It's just a case of Alicorn Flu. *I'll be right as rain in a few days*, you'll see. Of course, I mustn't be disturbed until then. Even the *smallest* exposure to this illness would spell certain doom for any mortal pony." Celestia smiled a mischievous smile. Beyond the hallway door, the sound of a silver platter being dropped in surprise and hastily picked back up echoed off the stone walls.

Luna slowly shook her head in wonder. Celestia's social acumen never failed to amaze her. Even in a crisis like this, she was calm, confident, and mindful of spinning events to her advantage. Despite how implausible her reassurance seemed, Luna found herself believing Celestia when she said the matter would take care of itself.

"As you wish, Sister," said Luna. "I hope you feel better soon." She turned to leave via the balcony, but then paused and turned back. "It was good to... to *see* you, Celly." She smiled.

Celestia smiled back as her younger sister took off to go and bring forth the dawn.

"*You too*," she whispered.

• • •

The Shaky and Anxious Trixie sat on the dirt floor of her modest shack on the outskirts of Canterlot, staring down at the bulging black velvet sack.

Her heart had started pounding the moment she'd entered Celestia's room, and even now, several hours later, it had showed no signs of slowing down. If the contents of the bag weren't what Moondancer had said they were... if she'd misinterpreted drunken ramblings, and done what she'd done for no gain...

She fiercely shook her head. "Well...?" she asked herself. "Only one way to know, right?"

She removed her dusty cloak, patted the dust from her hide and magicked a brush through her mane and tail before sitting back down in front of the bag. No sense meeting one's destiny unkempt, after all.

She took a slow, deep breath, and magicked open the sack.

Even in what little daylight shone through the shack's window and the holes in its roof, the six Orichalcum relics shone like jeweled mirrors. They were exquisite works of art, and more than deserving of the label priceless - that much was obvious. But were they really...? *Could* they really...?

As hesitantly as if she were stepping into a pit of vipers, Trixie reached out a front hoof and slipped it into one of the gleaming golden shoes.

Trixie yelped in surprise as the relic clamped tight, adjusting itself to fit her hoof snugly. The metal felt cold and heavy, but it also positively *seethed* with magic. A broad grin slowly spread across Trixie's face.

She magicked the other three shoes upright and then hopped into them. Like their companion, they changed shape to create a perfect fit. Trixie laughed softly. The feeling of flowing magic was stronger now, sending pins and needles up her legs.

She magicked up the peytral and thrust her head through it, settling the armoured yoke around her neck. She gasped as it tightened itself; the pins and needles feeling spread over her entire body, and dizzying warmth soon joined it.

Trixie levitated the jeweled tiara and held it before her. Her wide-eyed stare reflected in its faceted amethyst ornament. She swallowed, closed her eyes, and put it on.

In a nearby meadow, a young rabbit was busying himself with morning *silflay*, nibbling at the dew-moistened grass. The day was shaping up to be a warm and restful one, free from worry.

It was, that is, until a shack a dozen yards away exploded in a blinding purple-white maelstrom.

• • •

Fluttershy hummed softly as she waited in line outside the windmill on the northeast edge of Ponyville, a sack of wild grains poking out from one of her saddlebags. Thoughts of fresh-milled flour and its conversion into nutritious pancakes danced through her head.

Suddenly, a cry rang out from the east. The yellow pegasus joined the other ponies in line in turning to face the sound, her brows knitting in concern.

A cloud of panicked birds erupted from the nearby woods and swarmed toward Ponyville, followed soon after by a small stampede of squirrels, mice, chipmunks and other forest creatures. Some of the queuing ponies fled before the commotion, while others took cover. Fluttershy, however, stood her ground.

"*Oh, my!*" said Fluttershy to the advancing throng. "What's wrong, all of you?"

Before any of the terrified animals could pause to answer, a series of rhythmic crashes sounded from the woods and a massive shadow spread forth to cover the trees, the windmill, the cringing ponies, and Fluttershy herself.

The pegasus slowly backed away. Her eyes widened and her ears drooped as she stared up in shock at what had cast the shadow. A tiny squeak escaped her lips.

• • •

Rainbow Dash and Applejack trotted side by side out of the park on the north side of Ponyville, hotly debating the results of their latest athletic endeavour.

"Bein' '*ahead by a wing*' don't even make sense...!" Applejack insisted. "Yer wings are right in th'middle o' yer body!"

"True," said Rainbow Dash, "but I *slid* over the finish line. *Sideways*. And my wing *totally* crossed before you did."

"*Shewt!* If I'd a known we were gonna count stuff like that, I'd a thrown mah *hat* across the line!"

Rainbow Dash hopped forward and turned to stare her earth pony friend down. "*Hey!* Hats are *not* the same thing as wings!"

"And just what's wrong with mah hat?" countered Applejack, flicking the brim of her Stetson with a front hoof.

"Nothing! That's not what I - *rrgh!*" Rainbow Dash turned aside in annoyance, and spotted a familiar pegasus trotting toward them. "*Ah!* Maybe Fluttershy can settle this. Hey, 'Shy! Do wings... *whoa.*" As Fluttershy approached, Rainbow Dash trailed off.

Fluttershy was almost sleep-trotting, her hooves dragging as she moved heedlessly forward. Her eyes were wide but empty, as glassy as those of a porcelain doll. Her mouth was locked in a thin, off-kilter smile. She stopped moving as Rainbow Dash and Applejack cantered over to her.

"Are you okay, 'Shy?" asked Rainbow Dash, her voice tinged with worry.

"*Oh, yes, Rainbow Dash,*" answered Fluttershy in an airy whisper. "*I'm just fine. Wonderful, really. And it's all thanks to Her!*"

"Her?" blurted Rainbow Dash and Applejack.

"Oh, yes," continued the yellow pegasus dreamily. "I'm much happier now. She changed my life! I don't know how I ever carried on without Her." She smiled wider, but her gaze stayed hollow.

"What are you talking about?" said Rainbow Dash frustratedly. "I saw you yesterday, and you didn't say anything about meeting... about a new... 'Shy, what the hay's going on?"

"I'm a mite curious too, sugarcube," added Applejack. "You're actin' *awful* strange."

"*I'm just fine*," she repeated. "*You'll understand once you meet Her, I know it. She's just so... so...*" Fluttershy sighed euphorically.

Rainbow Dash inhaled for an incredulous tirade, but a sudden crash cut her off. Another crash soon followed. Then another. And then a massive shadow fell over the three ponies.

"*There she is now*," Fluttershy said, and smiled adoringly as her two friends looked up and past her in terror.

• • •

Twilight Sparkle stepped out of Ponyville's bookstore with a satisfied grin on her face. Spike was sitting on her back, examining the tome she'd just purchased.

"I don't get it, Twilight," said Spike. "We live in a *library* - why do you need to go and buy books?"

"Oh Spike," Twilight answered, "you can *never* have enough books."

"That's easy for you to say!" said Spike, slipping the book back into Twilight's saddlebags and folding his arms. "You don't have to clean them all u - *uhh... uhhhrrrr... .*"

"Spike...?" Twilight craned her neck to peer at the baby dragon. As she did so, the area darkened as the market square fell under a shadow.

"*Urrr... .*" Spike was looking up in frozen shock at the enormous presence looming up behind the bookstore. Twilight followed his gaze. She gasped softly.

"*Urrrr... ssa!*"

A gargantuan bear seemingly made of starry night sky towered over downtown Ponyville, its scintillating purple hide contrasting sharply with the pale ivory shade of its huge claws and fangs.

"*It can't be...*" whispered Twilight, her voice crawling with fear. "*An Ursa Major!*"

"*Don't be scared,*" said a familiar, gentle voice from nearby. "*There's nothing to worry about...*"

Fluttershy trotted into view from behind the Ursa, and stopped a few feet from one of its scythe-taloned paws. She was soon joined by Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity and Pinkie Pie. Behind them, past the Ursa, a throng of townsponies was following along. All of them - even the endlessly-effervescent Pinkie - had the same staring-at-nothing look in their eyes and the same beatific smile on their lips.

"What's wrong with all of you?" shouted Twilight. "We need to run! *NOW!*"

"*Don't be silly!*" said Pinkie Pie. "*This is the best party ever!*"

"*No need to go runnin' about,*" agreed Applejack. "*You'll see things our way by and by.*"

"*Indeed,*" added Rarity. "*Panic is so unseemly.*"

"*Just go with it,*" said Rainbow Dash. "*It'll be awesome!*"

Twilight backed away a few paces and slowly shook her head. "N-no... I... I don't understand... I..."

The terrible beast leaned forward over the shop, bringing its cottage-sized head down to within a few yards of the terrified unicorn. She would have cringed, but for the sight of the pony standing on top of the blue starburst marking the Ursa's forehead.

"So... *beautiful...!*" whispered Spike.

She was a unicorn, but nearly twice Twilight's height, with a rich cerulean hide and a flowing mane and tail that shone and reflected like quicksilver. Her gleaming spiraled horn came to a needle-thin point. She wore shining golden finery on her hooves, neck and forehead. A pair of delicate, silvery, enchanted gossamer wings stretched out from her back like rainbow-tinted silk banners. An aura of divine majesty and might radiated out from her like heat haze from a mirage. Her cutie mark, standing out in vivid relief on her flanks, was a star-topped wand trailing the glow of magic.

Twilight's eyes widened. "*Oh, no...!*"

"Oh, *yes,*" said the awe-inspiring unicorn before her as she hopped down from the Ursa's muzzle. Her voice echoed through the still afternoon air as she spoke. "For shame - have you already forgotten what you were told? You will NEVER... have the amazing, show-stopping ability... of *THE GREAT! AND POWERFUL! TRIXIE!*"

Trixie reared, threw her head back, and laughed a booming, triumphant laugh. Thunder rumbled from the clear sky in response.

## PART TWO - OMNIPOTENCE

The Great and Powerful Trixie had never before felt so utterly, supremely triumphant.

Leaving her parents, three sisters and four brothers behind to pursue her passion for magic, taking the stage for the very first time, mastering Clopperfield's Flying earth pony trick - nothing compared to towering over the unicorn who had so thoroughly outperformed her, showing her up with an even grander feat of beast taming, turning her own friends and neighbours against her, and seeing the helpless, panic-edged awe in her eyes.

Trixie could sense it: Twilight Sparkle knew she was beaten. How sweet it was.

The enthralled throng crowded closer, closing off all avenues of escape, and Trixie stepped forward.

"Trixie is going to enjoy hearing you stomping applause with the rest of her new *audience*," she gloated, and ignited her horn as she channeled magic through the Regalia.

Waves of light streamed off of Trixie's hide, and her eyes began to glow. The divine aura surrounding her intensified; the assembled ponies knelt reverently, the Ursa Major's affectionate sigh stirred Trixie's mercurial mane and tail, and the baby dragon sitting on Twilight Sparkle's back dropped off and sat on the ground in an enraptured daze.

The purple unicorn backed away before Trixie's radiance, but she only made it two paces or so before bumping into a wall of genuflecting ponies.

"*Don't fight it,*" Trixie purred. "*Surrender to Trixie.*"

"N-no...!" Twilight Sparkle gritted her teeth and forced herself to look away, but a pair of pale pink hooves suddenly gripped either side of her face from behind.

"Silly filly!" said Pinkie Pie cheerfully, jerking Twilight's head back into facing the resplendent creature before her. "Trixie is *that way!*"

Tears streamed down Twilight Sparkle's cheeks as the unrestrained glory of the Regalia washed over her. Her horn glowed, which elicited a chuckle from Trixie.

"You think you can overcome the *astounding* majesty of The Great and Powerful Trixie with your feeble, small-town magic? Not this time, my arrogant little-"

Twilight Sparkle and the pink earth pony straddling her back vanished in a burst of white-hot magic.

Despite all the tricks, illusions and spells Trixie knew, mastery of the infamous "Wink Out" had always eluded her. The realization that even with the power of a Goddess she had still just been upstaged robbed her victory of no small portion of its savour.

Trixie's features twisted into a mask of outraged fury. "Find them!" she bellowed at the congregation surrounding her. "*FIND THEM NOW!*" She stomped an Orichalcum-shod hoof. The assembled ponies galloped off in all directions.

Trixie turned to face the remainder of Twilight's friends. "And you four - in the meantime Trixie wants you to find two *other* ponies..."

• • •

Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie both tumbled out of a white starburst of magic as if kicked from a speeding coach. Singe marks speckled their hides, and both were smoking slightly.

Pinkie Pie recovered first, gathering up her frizzy tail and blowing out the glowing ember at its tip.

"*Wheee!*" she squealed, galloping in place. "That was *fun!* We should go back and let *Trixie* have a turn!"

Twilight staggered back onto her hooves and looked around. Pinkie's extra weight had thrown her spell off course; she'd tried to get to her library, but instead they'd ended up in the field behind the schoolhouse.

"*P-Pinkie...*" Twilight said, still out of breath from casting the spell, "Trixie's *done something* to the townspies, to our friends... and to you. You're not thinking clearly."

"Aww, that's crazy. I feel *great!*" Pinkie replied. "You just need to give Trixie a chance - like I did with Zecora!" Pinkie's glassy stare made her unsettlingly-wide smile all the more troubling.

"That's not the same thing!" Twilight insisted. "You were judging Zecora before you got to know her!"

"But now I *know* Trixie, and I think she's *super-duper fantastic!*"

Twilight sighed dejectedly. "I'm sorry, Pinkie. I'll find some way to help you all - *I promise.*" She turned and galloped away, heading for the Library. The confused pink earth pony shrank in the distance behind her.

... And then popped out in front of her from behind a hedgerow. "...Help us what?"

Twilight yelped in shock, and took off at a still-harder gallop. Pinkie followed with a relaxed, bouncing gait.

Despite taking a winding, roundabout route to the Library, Twilight found the pink earth pony waiting for her around every corner and behind every object large enough to conceal her - and behind some much smaller than that. It was no use; Pinkie's logic-shattering pursuit was inescapable. Eventually, only a few paces from the Library's front door, Twilight fell to her knees in exhaustion.

"I don't get it," said Pinkie, staring down at her panting unicorn friend. "You told me I had to work on the party *in here.*" Pinkie pressed a front hoof to her chest. "Well, Trixie makes me feel like there's a whole *bunch* of parties in here. *Don't you want me to be happy?*" Her sky-blue eyes seemed to expand, gleaming with the threat of incipient tears, and her lower lip quivered.

Twilight grimaced as if physically struck by Pinkie's words. Days of gentle, supportive talks had only barely held off the earth pony's depression, but now she had recovered the happiness she'd lost and more - at the cost of her free will. *What will happen to her if I undo Trixie's spell?* The thought brought tears to Twilight's eyes. A brute-force magical solution was no longer an option.

"Okay, Pinkie," she said softly, "you win. Let's go see Trixie."

Pinkie's deafening cheer and ribcage-compressing hug covered and drowned out Twilight's small, heartbroken sob.

• • •

The Mayor of Ponyville trotted up to the lectern at the side of the auditorium's wide stage and cleared her throat. The large audience of townspies quieted their chatter and looked on expectantly.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," said the Mayor, "it is with great pleasure and a deep sense of honour that I am able to announce to you all that effective immediately, I am turning

over the office of Mayor to a pony eminently more suited to the position: *The Great and Powerful Trixie!*"

Taking her cue, Trixie unleashed a pyrotechnic display and uncloaked herself, giving the impression that she had Winked In on the stage's upper level. She spread her gossamer wings, letting her puissant aura shine through them. The wide-eyed crowd cheered, whistled and stomped applause with wild abandon.

"Trixie accepts your offer," she said without a trace of humility. "It is, of course, well-deserved!"

The assembled ponies responded with more overjoyed applause.

"As your new ruler," Trixie continued once the stomping died down somewhat, "Trixie will grace you all with regular performances of her incredible magical skills. To make room for this in Trixie's busy schedule, the old Mayor will act as Trixie's deputy to handle all the boring Mayor-ish paperwork and such." Trixie looked down at the older earth pony. "Isn't that right?"

"Oh, I'd be *delighted* to!" gushed the Ex-Mayor.

"Obviously." Trixie turned back to the crowd. "And now, before Trixie's inaugural show, it's time for... *the opening act!*"

Just as Trixie ignited her horn to set the proceedings in motion, the doors at the back of the auditorium swung open to reveal an excited pink earth pony and a morose, teary-eyed purple unicorn.

"Well, well, well...!" sneered Trixie. "Come *crawling* back, have you? Come closer, then - come bask in Trixie's *awesome* glory!"

Twilight wordlessly plodded forward like a pony condemned. She stopped a few paces from the stage and cast her gaze up at Trixie's glowing form.

Trixie grinned triumphantly and released the Regalia's full power once again. As her divine light bathed the auditorium everypony fell on bended knee...

Everypony that is, except for Twilight.

Trixie frowned. "*Kneel before Trixie!*" she commanded. The masses obeyed, bowing lower and muttering worshipful praise. But Twilight stayed on her hooves, squinting up at Trixie's radiance with narrowed but undaunted eyes and whispering:

"...No."

Trixie flapped her wings and swooped down off of the balcony to alight directly in front of the unicorn.

"*KNEEL!*" she boomed, her voice cracking slightly from the effort. Her quicksilver mane and tail swirled around her.

"*NO!*" Twilight shouted back.

Trixie stared in disbelief. It was impossible - that streak-maned mare had *some* magical skill, yes, but the Regalia were arcane relics the likes of which she'd never seen. How could this small-town unicorn be so... *unfazed* by their power?

Trixie straightened, fighting down any outward sign of her disquiet. "So be it, then!" she barked. "If you will not admit Trixie's obvious superiority, then you are a fraud and a traitor, and should be dealt with as such. *Have her locked up!*"

"At once, O Mighty Trixie!" chirped the Ex-Mayor, whipping a front hoof upward in a salute.

Twilight's jaw dropped. "*WHAT?* Trixie, enough's enough! I don't know what you've done to everypony, but this isn't a game. They don't *want* this!"

"*Oh?*" said Trixie, raising an eyebrow. "All of you - who is the best pony?"

The unanimous cry of "TRIXIE!" shook the rafters.

"And how would you feel if Trixie left you all alone?"

A chorus of gasps, wails and begging denials rose up from the crowd. Some of the younger ponies burst into tears.

Trixie chuckled a self-satisfied chuckle. "There you have it - straight from the pony's mouth."

Twilight's expression darkened, but she stayed silent.

She remained silent as a pair of stallions dragged in an iron cage and shoved her inside, and as the cage was hoisted up by a chain to hang to the side of the stage.

"Well," Trixie huffed. "Now that that's over with, where were we? Ahh, yes - *the opening act!*"

Trixie ignited her horn, and magicked a pair of wooden marionette crossbars out from behind the curtains at the back of the stage. A moment later a pair of unicorn colts came into view, tied to the crossbars with gleaming strings.

The gangly mustard-yellow colt had been dressed up as a pierrot, and the chubby blue-green colt as a harlequin. Both had clownish makeup plastered on their anxious faces.

Trixie focused on the pair and the crossbars puppeteered them into a jerking dance.

"Take a good look, my assorted admirers," Trixie sneered, "at what happens to those who try to make a fool out of The Great and Powerful Trixie!"

The audience laughed and jeered as the strings pulled the colts through a series of midair capering antics.

"W-we're s-sorry, Trixie," stammered the Snips the harlequin.

"Yeah...!" agreed Snails the pierrot. "We totally didn't know you made up that story about the Ursa, eh?"

Trixie gritted her teeth and felt a faint blush spread across her nose and cheeks. "*Hmph!* It seems these two still haven't learned their lesson!"

Trixie put a hoof to her lips and let out a shrill whistle. A deep, rumbling growl answered back, and the enormous shape of the Ursa Major came into view through the Auditorium's open upper archways. It reached a wagon-sized paw in through one of the windows and reached for Snips and Snails. The colts struggled to get away, their legs galloping futilely in the air.

"*How made-up does it seem now?*" Trixie asked snidely.

The assembled ponies pointed and laughed as Trixie dangled the pair just out of reach of the Ursa's wicked claws. The pierrot and the harlequin squealed in terror. Their wide eyes filled with tears. The crowd kept laughing.

"Trixie, stop this!" shouted Twilight. "They're going to get hurt!"

Down in the audience, Pinkie Pie's gaze darted from the panicked, weeping colts, to the crowd, to The Great and Powerful Trixie, to Twilight's cage, and back again. She frowned. A glimmer of will shone in her pale blue eyes. "*That's not funny...*" she whispered.

Next to her, Rarity nodded in agreement. "You're *so* right, dah-ling," she whispered. "Those costumes are imported satin - it would be simply *tragic* if they were ruined."

"*Yeah...*" Pinkie Pie shook her head. "What? No! I mean it's not funny to laugh at ponies who are scared! Laughing is supposed to make your scaredy-ness *go away!*"

Rarity pondered this for a moment, but then her glassy eyes seemed to grow still emptier. "*I'm sure The Great and Powerful Trixie has a good reason,*" she muttered in a monotone.

Trixie strode over to Pinkie and Rarity. "Is there something you two would like to share with everypony?" she asked. "Trixie is curious what could be more *interesting* than her carefully-arranged object lesson!"

Rarity mumbled a nervous apology and turned away, but Pinkie met Trixie's gaze.

"*Y-you... You sh-shouldn't...*" Pinkie's ears drooped. Her knees were shaking. "*You shouldn't bemean!*" she blurted. The effort of forcing out those words left her brow shining with sweat, but the moment they left her lips it felt as though a great weight fell off her shoulders.

"Mean?" replied Trixie. "Don't make Trixie laugh! This is no more than those little idiots deserve!" Trixie looked up at the terrified colts with a satisfied grin, but then a sudden pain jabbed her belly. She hopped backward and peered at the ground, looking for the pony responsible, but no pony was there.

*Odd...* Trixie shrugged. "It seems our little *clowns* are too quick for Trixie's mighty Ursa Major," she said to the crowd. "Should we let her use her other paw as well?"

As the crowd cheered and stomped applause another, stronger pain stabbed Trixie's innards. All at once, she realized what the sensation was: hunger. She was positively *starving*.

She cleared her throat. "Maybe next time," she told her audience. She magicked the colts down to the ground. They huddled in a hug and wept on each other's shoulders. "For

now, The Great and Powerful Trixie desires a feast. There will be no magic show until Trixie is fed!"

Trixie watched the pony masses crowd about in disarray until a Stetson-wearing earth pony spoke up:

"Don't you worry none, Trixie! Sweet Apple Acres has got Ya covered! We'll fix up a banquet worthy of a Princess!" The crowd cheered.

"Well, be quick about it!" said Trixie. "Trixie *hates* to be kept waiting."

Twilight Sparkle looked down at Trixie from her spot in the suspended cage. Her eyes passed over the majestic blue unicorn's twitching belly, the beads of sweat on her brow, and the tension in her jaw. Twilight tapped a front hoof on her chin pensively.

• • •

A short time later the Fabulous but Famished Trixie sat at the head of a lengthy table in a grassy clearing at Sweet Apple Acres. Setting sunlight peeked through the farm's orchards and bathed the scene in golden warmth. Several dozen admirers and hangers-on milled about nearby, basking in Trixie's presence. Twilight Sparkle's cage sat behind and to the side of Trixie, under the shade of one of the larger apple trees.

One by one, the Ponyville members of the Apple family trotted out from the farmhouse and set out a sumptuous spread. Oven-fresh apple pies, turnovers, brioche, fritters, crisps and more spread a mouth-wateringly sweet scent through the air. Once the service was complete Applejack, Big Macintosh, little Apple Bloom and old Granny Smith stood back, puffed with pride.

"Dinner is served, Trixie," said Applejack proudly, and doffed her Stetson. "We hope it's to Yer likin'."

As Trixie inhaled the meal's intoxicating aroma, the pain in her belly intensified. It took a significant effort to keep from drooling on the tablecloth. "It looks... acceptable," she said loftily.

"I'm glad!" Applejack beamed. "I can truly say that this here's some of the finest bakin' that we've ever done - mah Granny's outdone herself! Why, it's even better than the stuff I brought to the Grand Gallopin' Gala!"

Trixie paused with her lips mere inches from a particularly plump and pomaceous pie and muttered:

"*What.*"

"The Grand Gallopin' Gala! It's this big to-do over in Canterlot!"

"Trixie *knows* what the Grand Galloping Gala is," said Trixie, her voice clipped and harsh. She was in shock; this country bumpkin Mudhoof had gone to a Gala? *Inconceivable!* She couldn't help but voice the question now gnawing at her: "How did you get invited to a Gala?"

"*Princess Celestia* gave her a ticket," Twilight piped up. "Since I'm Celestia's personal student, She gave them to all of my friends."

Trixie turned to face Twilight's cage. The purple unicorn's face was calm and guileless, but Trixie knew a con when she heard one. Her finely-honed showpony instincts had detected the subtle notes of smugness and haughtiness in Twilight's tone. Twilight was obviously goading her; trying to shock her with the revelation and make her lose control of the situation. Again. *It won't work!* she silently promised.

Turning back to the gorgeous banquet, Trixie off-hoofedly remarked: "How *wonderful* for you! Perhaps someday you'll find friends that don't need to be *bribed* to stand you!"

Twilight's jaw dropped. The fawning ponies surrounding the table chuckled and nudged one another.

"Now just an apple-pickin' minute...!" said Applejack. "That ain't how it is at all!"

"*Oh?*" asked Trixie. "Then just how is it? Why don't you tell Trixie - tell us *all* - how your *dear* Twilight Sparkle measures up against the inestimable magnificence that is *Trixie!*" Trixie's horn glowed, and she once again called forth the Regalia's full radiance. The herd of admirers knelt in the lush grass.

Applejack caught Trixie's display head-on; she slid back slightly, her hooves digging divots into the rich soil. She stood there, slack-jawed and silent save for the sound of her breathing, until Trixie spoke again.

"Well? Out with it! Say what you *really* think about Twilight Sparkle, now that Trixie is here!"

Tears welled up in Applejack's unreflecting green eyes. "*Tw... Twilight is nothin'...*" she whispered.

"Go on..." said Trixie, relishing every word, "and while you're at it, you can apologize for this mediocre meal, as well!"

Applejack's eyes brightened. A shudder passed through her, and she fixed her stance. She gritted her teeth, inhaled deeply, and then shouted:

*"Twilight is nothin' less than a perfect friend! ... And my Granny's cookin' is FAN-  
BUCKIN'-TASTIC!"*

Trixie snarled. "HOW D-D-D-DARE Y-Y-Youu...?" a fit of tooth-chattering chills forced Trixie to cut off her reprimand partway. She tried again, but the shivering soon became too intense for her to speak intelligibly at all. She staggered back from the table. Her herd of admirers began murmuring anxiously.

Fluttershy leaned out from the nearby tree behind which she'd been hiding from the large crowd. "*Oh... oh my!*" she said softly, "I think Trixie is ill. I have to help Her!" She slowly flew over to the stricken Goddess, her brows knitted in worry.

While the gathered throng descended upon the banquet despite the Apple family's protests, Twilight watched her pegasus friend gently lead Trixie down the path to her cottage. Twilight smiled a small but hopeful smile.

• • •

The Pained and Shivering Trixie ducked her head to fit through the door to the rustic cottage. Several small birds inside sang to announce her presence like a chorus of tiny heralds.

Fluttershy nodded toward a well-stuffed green divan in the cottage's living room.

"Please... just lie down there, and I'll get You a blanket," she said.

Trixie's shivering had worsened to the point that her gossamer wings were beginning to fray at the edges; she mentally released their enchantment and allowed them to dissipate before flopping down heavily on the divan.

The yellow pegasus soon returned with a patchwork quilt dangling from her jaws. She spread it over Trixie's shaking form, but it couldn't quite cover a pony of her majestic size. Despite her malaise, Trixie raised a quizzical eyebrow at her hostess.

"Um... oh," said Fluttershy sheepishly. "I'm sorry! I'll fetch You another quilt right away!" She darted off.

Alone once more, Trixie curled up under the quilt as best she could and indulged in an anguished grimace. The pain in the pit of her stomach was still there, but the thought of eating made her feel ill. Chills still wracked her, and every breath came in shuddered gasps. Her shimmering, mirrored mane and tail hung limply.

*What's happening?* She silently wondered. *Are the Regalia fighting me? Or did Celestia put some toxic ward on them to keep her treasures safe?*

"You won't win," she muttered. "*Trixie's in charge now!*"

"Yes, Ma'am. Of course, Ma'am," said Fluttershy from the living room doorway. She hovered over to the now-blushing Trixie with an additional quilt hanging from her front hooves. After some careful arranging, Trixie's silver-maned, tiara-topped head peeked out from a cozy cloth cocoon.

"Can I get you anything else, Ma'am?" asked Fluttershy. Her voice was as soft and caring as any nurse's. "Some soup? Perhaps some herbal tea?" She smiled warmly.

For a moment Trixie didn't know what to say. She could feel the Regalia's aura wafting out from her and she could see the enthralled vacancy in the pegasus' eyes, but somehow she sensed that Fluttershy would have behaved much the same if Trixie had been... what? Her *real* self? Her forgettable, lost-in-the-crowd self, stooping to telling outrageous lies and even committing high treason, just to get noticed...

Trixie's lower lip quivered. She looked away, desperately fighting back tears that seemed to have ambushed her out of nowhere.

"Oh! Am I bothering You, Ma'am? *I didn't mean to...*" Fluttershy hovered backward.

"N-No!" Trixie croaked around the lump in her throat. "*Stay!* That is... y-your common quilts are too thin for Trixie's liking. You will have to keep Trixie warm *yourself*." She still couldn't bring herself to look the pegasus in the eye.

"Are You... are You asking for a *hug*, Ma'am?" Fluttershy's caring tone was devoid of any hint of mockery or judgment.

"*O-Of course not!*" Trixie chided. "Don't be foalish! Trixie is simply c-c-cold!" a fresh bout of shivering seemed to confirm her statement.

Fluttershy silently hovered over, wrapped her front legs around Trixie's quilt-wrapped shoulders and rested her head against her mirrored mane.

Trixie couldn't help but rack her memory for the last time somepony - *anypony* - had held her. It had been *years*. Even back at home, Mother and Father had always been so busy. She'd been loved, yes, but with so many brothers and sisters there were only so many moments in the day, and somepony was always teething, or crying, or asking for help with their studies, when all she wanted was to be *seen*...

Trixie's shoulders shuddered, and not from her chills. Indeed, her symptoms seemed to be fading by the second. She sighed softly. She felt close - so *achingly* close - to some massive emotional release, some intense outpouring of... something... the flood of which she knew would wash away all of her tension and her fear and her -

"*WE LOVE YOU TRIXIE!*" An obnoxiously loud cry from outside broke the moment's spell. Trixie turned her head to peer out a nearby window.

A great many townsponties were gathered outside, clustered around the cottage's door and windows, stretching and craning to get a glimpse of their illustrious sovereign. In the back of the throng, a pair of earth ponies held up a hastily-scrawled banner that read:

ALL HAIL THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIX

A sense of exposure and vulnerability filled Trixie, reinforcing her emotional floodgates. Her pain and chills returned, further tainting the moment. "*Get off!*" she barked. She kicked herself free of the quilts. "Remember your place!" She shoved Fluttershy back with an Orichalcum-shod hoof.

The pegasus slid off of the divan and down onto the wood floor. She cringed. "I'm sorry, Ma'am!" she insisted. "*Whatever I did, I'm sorry!*"

Trixie sat up on the divan, letting her silvery mane and tail flow freely. She cast a stern, imperious glance at the assembled crowd outside. They responded with gasps and sighs of delight. Many waved. She turned to face Fluttershy.

"You can redeem yourself by preparing some soup for Trixie," she commanded.

"Yes, Ma'am! Right away, Ma'am!" said Fluttershy. She flitted over to the pantry to fetch some vegetables.

Trixie watched and listened as the pegasus chopped, poured, sprinkled and cooked as quickly as she could. The whole time, the pleasant smile never left her pale yellow face.

When the meal was ready at last, Fluttershy presented the bowl of nutritious vegetarian stew to her illustrious guest on a wooden tray.

"Here you go, Ma'am," said Fluttershy, slightly out of breath.

Trixie looked down at the tray somewhat dubiously. "Where's the spoon?" she asked.

"...The spoon...?"

Trixie sighed irritably. "Yes, you halfwit, *the spoon!* Do you expect Trixie to slurp her soup from the bowl like some common earth pony - or pegasus?"

"Oh! No, *of course* not, Ma'am!" said Fluttershy apologetically. "But, um..." Fluttershy's voice grew even softer than usual. "*I only have measuring spoons.*"

Trixie sighed a deeper, more impatient sigh. "Well, then go and find Trixie a spoon *worthy* of her! And make it fast!"

Fluttershy streaked out the front door at once, bowling over the half-dozen ponies closest to the door outside. Fluttershy explained the situation amid hasty apologies, and soon a rallying cry of "*SPOON! SPOOOON!*" could be heard echoing in all directions. Trixie rolled her eyes.

After a few minutes Fluttershy returned, her mane mussed and her breath coming in ragged gasps around the decorated sterling silver spoon clenched in her teeth. She trotted over and carefully set down the fine utensil on the tray.

With a muttered "It's about time," Trixie magicked it up and scooped up a spoonful of the stew. But a moment after tasting it she grimaced theatrically. "*Blech!*"

"*Oh, no!*" said Fluttershy. "Is something wrong?"

"This soup is *cold!*" said Trixie. "How *dare* you serve The Great and Powerful Trixie cold soup?"

"*B-But, I... You wanted...*" Fluttershy's brows knitted over her wide cyan eyes.

"*No excuses!*" Trixie shouted. "Fortunately for you, Trixie has changed her mind. Trixie now desires some tea." When the pegasus proved slow to react, she added a sudden "*NOW!*"

Fluttershy yelped, peeped out a quick "Yes, Ma'am!" and raced into action.

Trixie sat, brooding but regal, until Fluttershy finished her work.

The tray balanced on Fluttershy's front hooves as she flew over now held a teapot and a freshly-poured cup of tea. The scents of cinnamon, apple blossom and allspice filled the small living room.

"There you go, Ma'am," said Fluttershy. "Please be careful - it's still hot!"

Trixie magicked up the cup, blew on the tea, and took a small sip. As she did so, a diminutive purple dragon popped his head up over the far side of the divan. Trixie's small, startled gasp half-choked her on piping-hot tea.

She spat and spluttered in a profoundly un-Goddess-like fashion. Fluttershy yelped in surprise and hopped backward, dropping the tray and teapot as she did so. Spike winced and bit his lower lip, and then slowly ducked back down out of sight.

Trixie cleared her throat and turned to face Fluttershy. "Clean up that mess, you clumsy Buzzard!" she snapped, trying to burn away her embarrassment with hostility. Fluttershy squeaked in reply and darted away to find a rag.

"*Who let that dragon in here, anyway?*" Trixie added sulkily when Fluttershy returned.

Fluttershy - who was now busying herself trying to clean up the mess on the floor - tensed for a moment, and then gently, sweetly, but with a tone that suggested countless repetitions, said: "*Now, now, Mother... you know there are no dragons in Cloudsdale.*"

"*What...?*" said Trixie, raising an eyebrow.

Fluttershy looked up. Her empty eyes were shining with tears, but her smile was unshakeable. "*There are no dragons in Cloudsdale - n-not one,*" she said, and picked up

the tray - now piled with shards of broken teapot and a sodden rag. "Please... just try to relax."

Trixie stared silently as the pegasus flew off to dispose of the tray's contents. "Wh... wha..." she said to the empty room.

A small voice from beneath Trixie said: "*Yeah... she's got some issues.*"

Spike crawled out from under the divan. "Maybe You should have been a little less harsh with her," he said hesitantly, but the moment his gaze fell on Trixie he added: "...but I'm sure You had a good reason," and sighed adoringly.

"How did you even get in here?" asked Trixie crossly.

"I slipped past the crowd and squeezed in through a window," said Spike proudly.

Trixie sighed in irritation and got to her hooves. She crept over to the doorway to the adjoining room, and peered around the corner.

Fluttershy was huddled in a corner with her back facing Trixie. She was rocking back and forth, tightly hugging a small white rabbit and sobbing. "*P-Please don't hurt him, Mother,*" she whimpered. "*He isn't a spy... I s-swear he isn't... please...!*"

The rabbit locked eyes with Trixie over Fluttershy's shoulder and fixed her with an accusing glare. The Regalia may have stopped him from hating Trixie, but he was getting as close to doing so as he possibly could.

Before Trixie could say a word, the temperature in the room suddenly climbed to unbearable levels. She drew back from the doorway, her hide already shining with sweat. Despite the sweltering heat her shivers intensified, as did the pain in her guts. She barely made it back to the divan before collapsing.

"*H-help...*" she gasped weakly. "*T-Trixie... needs h-help...*"

Fluttershy was too far away and too upset to hear her, but Spike snapped to attention and saluted. If he felt the punishing heat, he showed no sign of it.

"*Yes, Ma'am!*" he said brightly. "Sometimes when Twi-" Spike caught himself in mid-sentence as the one eye of Trixie's visible through the strands of her limp mane narrowed menacingly. " - Uh, I mean, *the unicorn I live with,* needs help, she has me write a letter to Princess Celestia. You could try that!"

"Don't be a - no, wait!" said Trixie, a tiny touch of strength returning to her voice. "Little dragon, you will write the letter I dictate, and sign it with *that unicorn's* name."

"Sign it... but why?" he asked.

"*DO AS TRIXIE SAYS!*" she snarled. The effort left her breathless.

"*Yes'm!*" he chirped hastily, and produced a quill and scroll from nowhere in particular.

• • •

The Royal Princess Luna stood atop the raised dais at the back of Canterlot Castle's throne room, surrounded by dignitaries, courtiers, messengers and servants.

As her sister had suggested, Luna had found that little was different after her centuries-long absence, and that she'd remembered how to juggle affairs of state with little difficulty. Despite the endless formalities and insufferable nobles, she had to admit that it was nice to be the focus of everypony's attention for once. And she was managing it without the Mantle!

As she pressed the tip of her signet-shoe on the wax seal of a new anti-littering ordinance, a greenish flash from above caught her attention; she looked up.

A rolled-up scroll popped into existence in midair and plopped down before her. Intrigued, she waved aside the courtier yammering beside her, magicked open the letter, and quickly skimmed the highlights of its contents:

*Dear Princess Celestia ... strange happenings ... unfamiliar magic ... terrible symptoms ... counterspell ... come at once ... Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle.*

Luna magicked up a fresh quill from the many occupying a crystal vase at her left and laid out a fresh sheet of paper from the sizeable stack at her right, and wrote a quick reply to her sister's student.

• • •

"You just... *burn it?*" Trixie asked doubtfully.

"Yup!" said Spike. "And usually it only takes a - *\*URRP!\**" With a fiery belch, Spike received a reply to the letter he'd just sent off.

"Well...?" said Trixie impatiently. "Don't just stand there - tell Trixie what it says!" She struggled to lift her head and look down at the baby dragon.

*"Dear Twilight Sparkle,"* said Spike, reading from the scroll, *"We regret to inform you that Our Royal Sister has taken ill with Alicorn Flu in the past few days, and will be completely unable to attend to Her usual affairs until She recovers - hence Her diversion of Her personal correspondences to Us. Your problem sounds troubling, but We must ask that you try to research a solution on your own. We are too busy acting in Celestia's stead to come to Ponyville, and any contact with Our sister in Her present state would mean sickness and certain death for any non-alicorn - perhaps even for you. Harmonia Vobiscum. Alacorna Noctis, Luna Principissa."*

Trixie's jaw dropped. The frigid terror crawling down her spine did nothing to alleviate her fever. The room seemed to spin around her. *"It... it can't be..."* she said softly.

"Oh, don't worry," said Spike. "I'm sure Celestia will be fine."

*"Shut up!"* Trixie snapped. She struggled her way onto her hooves. "Trixie has to think..."

Vital or not, Trixie quickly found thinking all but impossible. The pain in her belly, the chills and the fever, combined with the letter's dire news about what they all meant, crowded out any chance of formulating an alternative to doing what she desperately did not want to do.

*"No choice... gotta go fast..."* she muttered, and ignited her horn. *"Gotta fly..."*

A faint cocoon of light began to form around Trixie's wracked form, but the spell matrix soon collapsed. Sickened as she was, she didn't have the strength to re-create the gossamer wings. *No! It's too far to go on hoof!* She silently lamented. *How can...* Unbidden, the memory of a cocky rainbow-maned blue pegasus popped into her head. **YES!**

Trixie staggered to the front door and opened it. The crowd waiting out in the crisp evening air cheered and stomped applause on sight of her.

*"Silence!"* she shouted. The throng instantly obeyed.

Trixie scanned the masses frantically, searching in the deepening dark for that unique multicoloured coiffure. And there she was - hovering up at the back of the crowd, with a white unicorn dangling from her front hooves.

"You!" Trixie called out as she pointed to the pair. "Approach Trixie at once!"

Rainbow Dash flapped over the crowd and set Rarity down before landing next to her. Rarity was carrying a sparkling formal gown with a matching saddle and wrap.

"Oh, I am *so* happy You noticed me!" gushed Rarity. "I have been working on this piece for *weeks*, and as soon as I saw You, I knew nopony else could do it justice!"

"*Uh-huh*," Trixie said, and then magicked up the saddle. She slipped it on but then turned it over, leaving the saddle resting against her belly and the straps spread across her back.

Rarity giggled demurely, hiding the *faux pas* behind a front hoof. "Oh, *no*, Milady - it goes the other w-"

"*Mm-hm*," Trixie said, and turned to face Rainbow Dash. "You there - you say you're a fast flyer, right?"

"*The FASTEST!*" said Dash proudly. "I mean, You saw me the last time You were here - oh, no hard feelings, by the way. Now that I know You better, I *totally* see where You were coming fro-"

"*I DON'T CARE!*" Trixie snapped. "Err, that is, *Trixie* doesn't care! Right now Trixie needs to get to Canterlot very, *very* quickly, so you will carry Trixie there."

"You got it!" said Dash. She flew up above Trixie and worked her legs under the saddle straps.

"Why are you going to Canterlot?" asked Spike from the doorway. "What about Celestia's fl-" A magicked zipper sealed Spike's mouth. Trixie smiled innocently.

Rarity looked up at Rainbow Dash. "You're going to carry an alicorn-sized pony all the way to Canterlot?" she asked incredulously. "That's *ridiculous!*" She faced Trixie. "I have plenty of friends in the carriage business - just let me ask around a bit, Milady, and I can see that You travel in the style to which somepony of Your grace and nobility is surely accustom-"

"*NOT. INTERESTED,*" said Trixie with menacing gravity. "Why don't you run along and push your tacky trash on somepony gullible enough to want it?"

A pink flush crept across Rarity's alabaster hide, focusing in an almost cherry-red shade on her face.

"*Trash...?*" she said in disbelief. "*Y-You think it's...*" Rarity turned up her nose and magicked up the rest of the ensemble. She turned on her hooves and trotted away. She was well-hidden in the depths of the crowd when she unleashed a pitiful wail perfectly blending outrage and despair.

Trixie's legs gave out.

She collapsed on the grass and Rainbow Dash, pulled by the straps, crashed down on top of her.

"*Oof!* Are you all right, Trixie?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"*Canterlot,*" whispered Trixie softly. "*Now.*"

• • •

Princess Celestia turned over in her luxurious bed and sighed a blissful sigh. It had been centuries since she had gone a day without having to manage any affairs of state or celestial bodies, and the break had been positively rejuvenating.

So, it was with a refreshed body and a relaxed mind that she met the sight of a pair of blue ponies crashing down on her balcony.

The two had fallen out of the night sky like a shooting star and torn a silken curtain from the balcony archway on their way inside. They lay on the smooth marble floor in a heap.

The smaller pony - a rainbow-maned sky-blue pegasus - wriggled free of the rich fabric and stood at attention. Her hide and mane were soaking with sweat, her wide eyes were unfocused, and she was breathing in short, desperate gasps. She saluted in something like Celestia's direction, and said:

"*P-p... pres... presenting... Th-The... Gr-great... and P-powerf-f-ffff...*"

She collapsed.

Celestia frowned, magicked the curtain off the second pony and wrapped it around the exhausted pegasus like a blanket. The alicorn turned to face the now-exposed unicorn at her hooves.

Trixie struggled free of the off-kilter saddle and sat up. She met the Princess' gaze with only minimal terror showing in her purple eyes.

"T-Trixie has c-come to..." She swallowed, silently chiding herself for letting so much fear creep into her voice. "...to demand a cure for the Alicorn Flu!"

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Oh, my little pony - have you caught my terrible sickness?" Her voice was soaking in honey-sweet sympathy and concern. "How can that be? I have been sequestered in my chambers!"

Trixie looked away. "You *know* how," she muttered. "Trixie is wearing your Regalia!"

Celestia put a pensive front hoof to her chin. "Hmm...! Why, *so you are!* I did wonder where those had got to!" She glanced over at Rainbow Dash's unconscious form for a moment. "But you sound like a Canterlotter - what were you doing all the way over in Ponyville? And why did you bring this hard-working pegasus with you when you returned?"

Trixie scowled. Her innards felt like she'd swallowed broken glass, her shivering made every breath a struggle, her fever made the room seem to swim, and not even a rampaging dragon could make her legs support her weight - and now her only hope for survival was toying with her. *Fine*, she thought to herself. *Trixie will play your game.*

"Trixie came to Ponyville... to get *revenge*," she said. "Trixie was made a fool of in that town, and the Regalia let Trixie get back at the ponies there. But then Trixie got sick, and Trixie used this pegasus to speed up the trip to come ask for a cure." She stared daggers at Celestia. "And then a *certain* alicorn started asking all sorts of *foalish* questions instead of saving Trixie's life!"

Celestia winced. "You had her bring you straight to me, even though you knew she'd be exposed to the Alicorn Flu by doing so?"

Trixie growled in frustration. "YES, OKAY! YES! Now, hurry up and-"

All at once, the darkness in the room seemed to deepen; the shadows splashed up the walls and across the floor and ceiling, and even Celestia's stark white hide dimmed. Soon, everything had turned completely, impenetrably black.

No... not black...

"Blind!" Trixie gasped. "*I'M BLIND!*"

Trixie heard Celestia let out a small, saddened sigh. "*More than you know*," she whispered.

"WHAT? *Trixie doesn't... Trixie...*" Tears welled up in Trixie's sightless eyes. Whatever internal floodgate Fluttershy had cracked ruptured violently. Trixie fell down on her side and wailed:

"*I DON'T WANNA DIE!*" She curled her head forward and sobbed between her useless front legs.

Trixie felt a strong but gentle field of magic wrap around her and lift her up. The magic turned her over and cradled her like a foal before setting her down on Celestia's soft bed.

"*P-Pleeeez...*" Trixie whimpered. "*I don't wanna die...*" She sniffled. "*I just w-wanted to follow my cutie mark... to use my s-special talent... is that so WRONG?*" She fell into another fit of weeping.

Celestia stroked Trixie's mirrored mane with a bare front hoof. "*Shhh... there, there. I know. It must be hard to have a cutie mark for thievery.*"

"Wh-what? *No!* That's not-"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Celestia. "My mistake. So it must be *vengeance*, then?"

"No!"

"Tyranny?"

"*NO!*" Trixie shouted as loudly as her sickness would allow. "It's magic! I'm a showpony! *A MAGICIAN!*"

"*Ohhhhh...!*" said Celestia in mock surprise. "But if you're a magician, how would stealing a dangerously-powerful set of enchanted relics and using them to ruthlessly and cruelly dominate ponies you hardly know make for an entertaining performance?"

"I..." Trixie turned away from the sound of Celestia's voice. "*...That wasn't part of the show.*"

"Then why did you do it?"

Trixie gritted her teeth. She rolled back in Celestia's direction, and shouted:

"*BECAUSE I WAS ANGRY!*" The Regalia glowed for a moment, and thunder rumbled from the night sky.

As the echoes of the thunder faded the chamber fell silent for a long moment. Eventually, Celestia softly said:

"*You don't have Alicorn Flu, Trixie.*"

Blind or not, Trixie stared in disbelief. "*I... I don't?*" she squeaked.

"No, my little pony. There's no such thing."

"*B-But... what about...?*"

Celestia pulled Trixie into a hug. "What you're feeling isn't sickness, Trixie - it's *punishment.*"

"*Punishment?*"

"Yes. I used the Elements of Harmony to create the Regalia of the Day-Mare, and the two share an unbreakable bond. When I... did something *regrettable...* many years ago, the Elements' disapproval fed back through the Regalia and made me experience the pain of the pony I had wronged. I have been watching you, Trixie, and the same thing has been happening to you each time you have violated the spirit of the Elements." Celestia set Trixie back down. "You are sick because you used the Regalia to be mean-spirited, deceitful, cruel, selfish and disloyal."

Trixie blushed. "*I wasn't!*" A shiver passed through her so strongly that she tipped over. "I mean, they had it coming!" Trixie's fever rose. "*\*Rrrgh!\* FINE!* It's true! I was a vicious, lying, *NAG!* Is that what you want to hear? I did *awful* things to ponies - even when they were *good* to me - and..." A brief instant of awareness flickered on Trixie's tear-streaked face. "*...And I probably deserved this.*"

Bit by bit, Trixie's fever abated. Her shivers settled, and the twisting pain in her stomach subsided. Feeling slowly returned to her limbs, and the soft glow of moonlight gradually illuminated the room.

Celestia gently reached forward with her front hooves, plucked the tiara from Trixie's brow, and slipped it on. She then took back the other relics one by one, until Celestia had returned to her usual divine splendor and the Mundane and Mortal Trixie lay revealed on the silken bedspread.

"*So I suppose it's off to the dungeon with me?*" asked Trixie morosely.

"Not at all," Celestia replied. "Where *do* I get this reputation?"

A touch of Trixie's customary vainglory returned. "Then... Trixie is *free to go*?"

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. You left quite a mess behind you in Ponyville - not to mention a confused and irritated Ursa Major! Did you really think you'd just trot off into the sunrise?"

Trixie looked away. "...Maybe."

Celestia chuckled demurely. "You remind me a great deal of myself a few hundred years ago, Trixie. Count yourself lucky for that. Now... I have to head to Ponyville at once. In the meantime, you will remain here, think about what you've done, and get some rest. Once things calm down, I'll come back for you." Celestia magicked Rainbow Dash's unconscious form onto her back.

"Oh, and Trixie?" Celestia added as her horn ignited with the white glow of a teleportation spell. "If you try any *disappearing acts*, I will be extremely... *disappointed*."

Trixie gulped.

• • •

Ponyville had seen better days, but the town still stood.

Ponies galloped to and fro, busily filling in pawprints, replacing broken windows, replanting flowers, and generally tidying up.

Applejack and Rarity led the repair teams - with wildly different priorities as to form versus function.

Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, respectively, took care of making and delivering refreshments, while Fluttershy tended to hurt and frightened animals in the area with the aid of Angel the Bunny and Spike, neither of whom had left her side since the evening before.

As was her wont, Twilight Sparkle took care of organization. Once she had returned from escorting the Ursa Major back into the woods, the addition of Princess Celestia's prodigious magical talents made the reconstruction go by all the faster.

The next morning Celestia called for the townspies to assemble in the auditorium.

"My loyal subjects," she stated from the podium adjoining the stage, "I would like to extend my deepest sympathies for the troubles you have all endured of late, and also express my admiration for the bravery and resolve many of you showed in facing those troubles." Celestia nodded deeply to the crowd, which responded with a wave of cheers and applause.

"Now, though," Celestia continued, "I believe somepony else has something to say to you all."

Celestia magicked open the stage curtains, and The... well, The Blue unicorn Trixie stood revealed. She trotted forward to the edge of the stage with all of the dignity that she could muster. The ponies in the crowd whispered and murmured.

"What's *she* doing here?" asked Rainbow Dash from the front row, sitting down and crossing her front hooves.

"Ya gonna do a trick?" added Applejack. "'Cause I bet ya could do a great *apple tree* impression..." she fixed her stance.

"*That's enough!*" snapped Celestia. In a heartbeat, the auditorium was as silent as a tomb. "Trixie - tell them why you are here."

"*Tr... Trixie... is...*" Trixie looked at Celestia, her eyes imploring. Celestia narrowed her eyes and nodded to the crowd. Trixie sighed in surrender. "Trixie is here to make amends for what she's done. It was wrong of Trixie to enchant you all with her glorious, radiant-" Celestia cleared her throat. "...*Trixie is sorry.*"

Trixie trotted over to the right side of the stage, where Twilight Sparkle and her friends occupied the front row. "*Trixie is sorry for having you locked up,*" she said to Twilight, biting off the words as if they were so much bitter ash in her mouth.

"And...?" Asked Twilight, pointing at the pink earth pony next to her with a front hoof.

Trixie faced Pinkie Pie. "...And for using humour for evil."

Pinkie smiled. "Aww, it's okay!" she said brightly. "No pony's perfec-"

"And...?" Applejack interrupted.

Trixie sighed. "And for trying to make you slander Twilight Sparkle." Applejack's frown remained. "...and your *Granny's* cooking." The frown disappeared, replaced by a happy grin.

"*And?*" said Rarity, raising an eyebrow.

Trixie gritted her teeth. "And for calling your wares tacky."

"*An-nn-nd?*" said Rainbow Dash, tilting her head as she drew out the word.

Trixie grunted in frustration. She trotted her front hooves in place. "*And for working you half to death just to save travel time!*"

Fluttershy stayed silent, but the one wide eye of hers that peeked out from between the locks of her rosy pink mane held more pain and sadness than any of her friends' voices.

Trixie looked away and bit her lower lip. "And for... for..." Trixie sagged. "Trixie is just sorry." After the forced ordeal of the rest of her speech, Trixie was surprised to find that she meant it.

"Apology accepted," said Twilight Sparkle. Her friends nodded in agreement.

"Well *good*," said Trixie, straightening once more. "Trixie is glad this is all over with."

"Not quite yet," said Celestia from behind Trixie. "There's still the matter of your *punishment*."

Trixie's ears drooped. "*What? B-But* Trixie did as you asked!"

"Apologies are vital things, but in the end they are still just words," said Celestia. "They lose their meaning if you don't act on them. I sent word to my Sister earlier - she'll know what to do with you." Celestia's horn ignited with the white glow of a teleportation spell.

"Wait - what?" said Trixie anxiously. "What's that supposed to *mea-aa-aan...?*" her voice echoed as she vanished in a burst of white-hot magic. The crowd cheered.

"Thanks again for helping us, Princess," said Twilight, once the hubbub had died down. "I don't know what we would have done without you!"

"Don't sell yourself short, my faithful student," Celestia replied, spreading her wings and hopping down off the stage. "You showed a great deal of wisdom in dealing with... *recent events*."

Twilight frowned. "But I just sat in a cage - I barely did anything! Trixie seemed so powerful, so imposing, so..." Twilight trailed off.

"...So much like me?" asked Celestia.

"That's not...! I mean, it was just in the way that she..." Twilight blushed and cleared her throat. "How did she do it?"

Celestia looked out one of the auditorium's upper windows, where the multi-coloured gleam of the stained glass windows in Canterlot's Royal Palace was just barely visible to her magic-augmented eyes.

"I'm sorry, my faithful student, but there are some answers I am simply not yet ready to share with you. Trixie is gone, and she will do suitable penance - I've seen to that." Celestia turned to face the unicorn before her and smiled. "The important thing is that you didn't give up hope - or give up on your friends - even when things seemed darkest. That is no mean feat, Twilight Sparkle; it may yet serve you well, and sooner than you think."

"Princess?"

Celestia looked back to the distant palace, and once more whispered:

"...*Sooner than you think.*"

## EPILOGUE

The Sullen and Sweaty Trixie set down her magicked squeegee and dunked her horn in a nearby bucket of soapy water. The water sizzled as her horn cooled, and Trixie hissed in a sharp breath. She raised her head once more and turned to look at the Palace's great hall - and its seemingly-endless supply of decorated windows. She sighed exhaustedly.

"Don't stop now," said the fuchsia-maned white unicorn at her side. "After these windows, there's still the library, the Ivory Tower, the observatory -"

"All right, all right!" Trixie interjected, adding a quick "*Sheesh!*" under her breath. She magicked up the squeegee and dipped it in the soapy water.

"It's funny, you know," said Moondancer while Trixie returned to her task, "I had the strangest dream about a unicorn named Trixie not that long ago, and then Princess Celestia assigned you as my assistant, and *your* name is Trixie! Isn't that weird?"

"*What are the odds?*" said Trixie in mock astonishment. She craned her neck, straining to magick the squeegee all the way to the top of a window depicting the defeat of Nightmare Moon.

"I know! It's like... it was *meant* to be." Moondancer smiled. "I'll never understand alicorns, though. I mean, I show up to work for Princess Luna late and *hung over* - and I swear, I *still* don't remember why I thought all that cider was a good idea - and Her Royal Sister gives me an *assistant* for the next six months! Don't get me wrong - I'm glad I get to spend more time studying with Princess Luna and less time doing chores for Her - but what kind of sense does that make?"

Trixie gritted her teeth. Her expression twisted into a scowl. The squeegee's smooth path across the glass wavered. But then, all at once, her face relaxed, her eyes lost their furious gleam, and she softly muttered:

*"...Trixie is sure Celestia did what She thought was right."*