

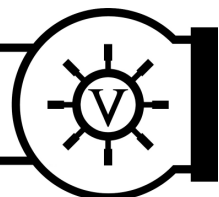
Eternal

device heretic

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Dreams Coming True All Over The Place + Melancholia + Your Humble
Servant and Loyal Subject, Twilight Sparkle + Memories of Waning +
Perfunctory + A Dragon in the Library + Twilight Ambushed + Rarity, by
Accident + Conversations In Dreams + Silly Filly

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A candle burned on the writing table, filling the room with a gentle amber glow. It had been much, much taller when its wick had first been lit by a gentle whisper of magic, and around its simple wooden candlestick lay several worn-out quills and several rolls of parchment sealed neatly in vivid purple wax.

There was one last open parchment, though. Nothing was written on it – yet, of course. This was the most important letter of all, a summary – no, a research note – no...

Twilight Sparkle stared at the virginal scroll, quill suspended in midair above it as it had been for the last twenty minutes.

This was still hard. There was so much to write about, and yet nothing of consequence – just volumes upon volumes of gossip, goings-on, and... just *stuff*. As she ran over recent events in her mind, they struck her as mundane and, more importantly, less pressing or fulfilling than these missives had been in the past.

She sighed and wandered over to the window, looking down on what had once been the small town of Ponyville. Now, of course, it was a bustling city, and still growing. The rail hub to Canterlot had brought more ponies of all the tribes to Ponyville from the outlying regions of Equestria, and those ponies had found in Ponyville a warm and welcoming embrace. Now Ponyville was spoken of in the same sense as Fillydelphia and even, in certain contexts, Manehattan.

More faces meant more energy meant more going on; yet for some reason, in the middle of everything, there were Twilight Sparkle and her friends. *This* meant, inevitably, that things were less and less about Twilight and her friends and more about each of them, individually, and the ponies they were dealing with at the time. This, too, was worthy study, and interestingly had only bound Twilight and her friends together more tightly as they were increasingly thrust into the center of events by ponies coming to Ponyville... ponies full of dreams. Dreams which seemed to come true here more often than anywhere else in the magical land of Equestria.

Twilight cast a melancholy gaze at the dress in the corner, and thought: *Dreams are coming true all over the place.*

There were a great many things of dire importance to say, weren't there...

A rush of words suddenly spilled into her mind, and she even felt a nonsensical urge to stifle herself from blurting them out. Not, of course, that anyone was around to hear them; Spike had long ago left for Rarity's and would not return anytime soon. Fitting a dragon was tricky business, and Rarity's enthusiasm for the challenge was exceeded only by Spike's unending patience for being fussed over by the unicorn for hours on end. The thought brought a quiet, strained smile to Twilight's face.

Still, though, no need to be... childish. To gush. To whine. Dignity was a privilege of those who chose to be dignified; it was a choice of how to react to things, not something that you just *had*, inherently. And Twilight Sparkle, Arch-Mage of Equestria, had dignity in droves. Especially in communication with –

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My most noble Princess,

Princess Celestia gave a small sigh at the show of formality.

My most noble Princess,

As I have previously related, the happy event of Fluttershy's marriage will be taking place in three days, and as her friend, I have been pleased to be heavily involved with the planning. In her own words –

"Who better to plan," Celestia sang along to the familiar tune with a weary smile, "than the All-Team Organizer."

'Who better to plan than the All-Team Organizer?' Although of course I have left that responsibility in the capable hoofs of Zecora's brother for several years now, which has significantly smoothed the introduction of our zebra population into Ponyville traditions. But Fluttershy is always pleased to remember old times...

Celestia scanned the remainder of the letter with a growing sense of unease and (ah! A pang of guilt stabbed her heart!) disinterest. While she swelled with pride at Twilight's accomplishments and was, of course, pleased at the role she and her friends had taken in Ponyville, Celestia had quietly charted how this had drawn her protégé's attention more

and more away from the personal relationships and more and more into the intricacies of politics – which, in essence, were personal relationships writ large.

Not that Twilight had disappointed in this area of study by any stretch of the imagination. Celestia had been thrilled to find Twilight's essays and commentaries circulating the Canterlot court, voraciously consumed, commented upon, and argued over by prominent statesponies, completely independently of any meddling on Celestia's part. They were works of great insight and clarity, founded in Twilight's studies of friendship and from there expanded upon elegantly into visions of a society where everypony is welcome and everypony can pursue their uniqueness in peace.

Celestia let her gaze fall on the small presentation stand of first editions of Twilight's commentaries on civic policy; for all that they tended towards the dry, they were nevertheless driven by a desire for social harmony, understanding, and acceptance. *The Pursuit of Harmony* was a personal favorite, a thin red book between the thick covers of Twilight's more technical works. It had struck Celestia as very personal, almost like a wish wrapped as loosely as possible in Twilight's typically dry and verbose prose.

Celestia was deeply, deeply proud of her little pony.

And yet, at the same time... she had been glad to hear that Twilight had been called upon to be involved in her friend's wedding.

The Magic of Friendship was not, of course, *magic* the way unicorn telekinesis or Twilight's more spectacular gifts were, except insofar as it empowered magic through, for example, the Elements of Harmony. Understanding the interaction of emotional states and magic was a very important part of anypony's magical education, and emotional instability was always a volatile combination with a powerfully magical pony. Friendship – love – was more magical than magic, more real than reality. It both anchored a pony to reality and set them free; it both made you a part of society and put you in touch with yourself. It was fundamental to all thinking beings; even animals loved, in their way. Robbed of that love and understanding, ponies' souls wasted into meanness and selfishness in a vain pursuit of creating for themselves the happiness and peace that only others could give them through real friendship. Celestia knew this as well as anypony did, bowing only – perhaps – to Twilight Sparkle, her most faithful stu –

Not... student. Not anymore. Associate. Colleague?

In any case...

The Magic of Friendship had freed Luna. The Magic of Friendship had ended Discord. The Magic of Friendship incarnate in Twilight and her friends had made Ponyville in particular but – and Celestia wondered how much Twilight realized this – Equestria in general as harmonious and wonderful a place as it had ever been.

Celestia realized she had let her eyes drift over whole paragraphs without actually reading their contents, feeling another little stab of guilt. Once upon a time –

Well, first of all, and it had to be said, once upon a time Twilight had been in the habit of writing shorter notes, more often, that were less about the business of Ponyville or her magical research and more about herself.

But more importantly, once upon a time Twilight's letters had engrossed her; she recalled fondly the many occasions when Spike's little burst of green, sweet-smelling fire had appeared in front of her, often to the surprise and consternation of one of Celestia's other guests, and she had pored over the dragon's chickenscratch handwriting eagerly, savoring her student's emergence into adulthood and real joy with her friends. Even the letters drowned in fear or sorrow had been, in their way, a joy in the alicorn's heart; a small burst of vicarious freedom into a life unburdened by the responsibilities of royalty.

And she had been able to write back, knowing that she was still, even if from a distance, part of Twilight's life. She could advise, and console, and even now and then catch wind of a scandalous rumor or have some quiet pleasure in realizing that Twilight was trying to keep a secret from her.

Now, though... Celestia's eyes flickered wearily to her own sets of quills and scrolls. Nowadays her – Celestia's – letters in return read, when she thought about it, like requests, or policy decisions. Letters from a monarch to a talented, intelligent statespony. Which, of course, Twilight was, but...

The very idea filled her heart with a deep melancholy.

Of course, she had invited Twilight's other friends to write to her as well – although at the time, it was just to give the poor unicorn some room in her head to get the idea that this was a long-term field research project – observations and reflections on *her real life* – rather than a daily assignment like it had been when Celestia was personally training Twilight's emerging magical potential. No more, 'practice until you can control three objects in the air at once, for tomorrow morning,' more 'be self-aware, be outgoing, and above all, be thoughtful'. Eventually the young unicorn had gotten the idea.

It had been nice to have personal correspondence with Twilight's friends. Celestia had nurtured relationships with them independent of Twilight, but took pains never to be *quite* as involved with them. They were Twilight's friends, and Celestia's acquaintances. That was best.

Celestia sighed, letting the long parchment slide down out of her immediate vision. Twilight had gotten older, and things...

It had started with that *dragon*, hadn't it...?

Yes, in a way, it had. Although Twilight had learned a valuable lesson about understanding that some ponies had hidden strengths, Celestia had taken the opportunity to make Twilight her agent. As her personal student, Twilight was easily the most capable nearby pony to handle the problem.

...and, yes, it had been a bit of a challenge for her. That was good. But Celestia should not have gotten in the habit of using Twilight as a cat's paw.

That was the downside of Twilight's skill; she was spectacularly useful – and if Twilight couldn't deal with a situation, then surely at least one of her friends was in a position to. But useful tools get –

Tools? Celestia chided herself for even making the metaphorical comparison.

– useful tools get worn down faster than those left on the workbench.

Celestia grimaced through yet another stab of guilt and raised the end of the parchment to read her protégé's conclusion. The princess smiled gently as she noticed the quillwriting getting looser and decidedly more irregular, and had a vision of Twilight yawning and dozing off as the quill scratched across the paper, surrounded by a flickering pink light.

... which of course has been an immense hassle since Rainbow Dash and Applejack have not yet returned with the specifics of what will be necessary to repair it. Although knowing them, they will probably come back with things either completely repaired, or things will be much worse, their return heralded by squabbling all the way. Whatever happens, rest assured that I will take care of it with all haste.

'Rest assured' was another familiar phrase. Twilight assured her princess quite often that things were in capable hooves, as if Celestia had any doubt.

With that concluded, I present you my sincerest greetings and hope that you and your sister are well.

Your humble servant and loyal subject,

And then, Twilight's increasingly illegible signature.

Humble servant and loyal subject.

Celestia pursed her lips and looked around her private chambers guiltily. True it may be that Twilight was by no stretch of the imagination her student anymore, but... every time she read "humble servant", it was like a knife in her heart.

"Dear Princess Celestia, Today, I learned a very important lesson about friendship... Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle."

The words rose, unbidden, to Celestia's mind, and she slowly shut her eyes, waiting until her throat didn't feel so tight.

Are we *well*. What a... what a *silly* thing to say, honestly...

Hmm.

Celestia felt a need which, over the last thousand years, had come more and more rarely: the need to consult somepony else. Even more unusually, she knew who she wanted to talk to immediately, but could not clearly express why.

Rising from her bier elegantly, Celestia quickly donned her royal attire and trotted, perhaps a little faster than she meant to, through the bright corridors of the palace, acknowledging the polite nods of castle folk gracefully and enduring the exaggerated expressions of attentiveness from the guards with her usual patient smile.

Eventually she reached a conveniently flaring archway and spread, with serene grace, her pearl-white wings, soaring up into the dark stone tower that was her sister's. She landed with the slightest *click* on an inlaid stone moon on a balcony and paused for a moment, looking up at the early evening sky.

The moon was... waning. That... might make this harder. Or at least, more unpleasant than it had to be.

"Luna?" Celestia trilled. "May I speak with you?"

The balcony was isolated from Luna's rooms by an elegant midnight-blue curtains inlaid, magically, with silver stars and sapphires enchanted such that it appeared as a hazy, midnight-colored smoke. From beyond this (somewhat showy, in Celestia's opinion) portal came her sister's voice.

"Oh? Celestia...? Of course, please... come in," Luna purred.

Celestia gently parted the curtain and entered Luna's chambers. They were on the waning cycle of their monthly change, just as their mistress was, and like her, they were growing darker. Shadows deepened in the corners of the room and the blues and whites which, in fuller times, were bright and merry were now fading, becoming muted and sullen. But that all meant the gems that encrusted the ceilings were shining all the brighter –

Celestia's mind reeled back, reflexively and completely against her will, to that thunderous night when those gems had whirled around her raging sister in a furious storm, beautiful and terrible –

– like the very stars in the sky. But unlike *that* night, their light was bright and cold, like they were on country nights in winter, not low and menacing as they had been... harbingers of the coming storm.

"You always pause, when it's waning time," Luna said from one of the shadowy corners, half-hidden in the darkness. Her voice was... strange. Inscrutable, as it always was when the shadows loomed.

"I..." Celestia said, momentarily startled. "I don't mean to," she said, firmly.

Luna emerged, looking melancholy but, nevertheless, smiling gently. "I know you don't, sister," she said quietly. "But you pause, nevertheless."

Celestia smiled, faintly. She had been afraid of this; the waning time was always hard on Luna, and she was inclined to be harsh. It was something she had forgotten in her sister's absence and had been a stumbling block in renewing their relationship when she returned.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have remade this room," Luna continued, prowling through the dark, airy chamber. "But ponies always seem impressed by it; and even you, sister, must admit that it is... quite beautiful."

"It is," Celestia conceded.

Luna shook her head – small, now, like her; she was little bigger than any mare, unlike her regal size at full moon – and made a soft *tsk*. "It grieves me, then, that we have such painful memories of it." She paused a moment, looking up at the glittering ceiling, and smiled. "Forgive me, I know I'm letting waning time get the best of me," she said, the darkness dispelled from her voice with the slightest hint of effort. "Today is the worst day, in its way."

"It's quite alright, Luna," Celestia said. "I understand."

There was, for the tiniest moment, a flicker of amused doubt in Luna's eyes; but then it was gone, replaced by genuine interest and pleasure at her sister's presence. "May I ask what you wish to talk about?"

"It's..." Celestia paused, considering how to phrase her worries.

"Twilight," Luna said.

Celestia was suddenly roused from her contemplation. "Hmm? What?"

"Twilight," Luna repeated, nodding towards the door, under which a rich amber glow was barely visible through the mystic haze. "I was going to ask if it was about moonrise, but..." Luna grinned, her face alight with amusement, "I suspect this is about Twilight Sparkle, is it not? Please," she continued, suddenly all charm, "Do sit down."

Celestia frowned ever-so-slightly at being caught out by her sister's little game, but lay on the lounging sofa Luna had indicated. "I am concerned about her, yes."

"*Concerned* about your prize Arch-Mage? Whatever for?" Luna asked, in a slightly more sly tone of voice than Celestia was entirely pleased with.

"Her letters, recently..." Celestia began, suddenly very keenly aware that there had only been three in the last few months. "Have been... less... more..."

Luna's sly expression dropped in the face of Celestia's uncertainty, replaced instead by wariness and concern.

"They have been... perfunctory," Celestia declared, finally.

"Perfunctory!?" Luna gasped.

"Yes."

"My goodness," Luna replied.

"Indeed," Celestia said, nodding knowingly. "And upon reflection, I am worried that I may have..."

"Yes...?"

"...entirely inadvertently, obviously..."

"Go on."

Celestia frowned. "I may have... exacerbated the situation."

Luna paced for a moment, looking thoughtful. "How so?"

"I am terribly proud of everything she's achieved," Celestia said hastily. "Academically, of course, and... personally. She is a truly special mare."

Luna nodded. "You have every right to be a proud mentor and confidant," she agreed solemnly.

"But I fear I may have allowed my professional relationship with her to take precedence over our personal relationship."

"Oh?"

"I'm afraid so," Celestia said, sadly, and sighed. "When she writes, it is always a long list of, well, goings-on. News, current events. Which is fine in its way, but it's never about... *her*, it's always about what's going on. I'd like her to feel that she can talk to me about how *she* is dealing with things. Some of what she and her friends do is, after all, very dangerous and stressful work for anypony."

Luna tossed her head gently from side to side. "Ah, well... maybe she's just too used to writing those incredibly boring books," she said.

Celestia gave her a harsh look, but let it fade immediately.

"I'm just having a go at you, sister, fret not," Luna said, chuckling. She wandered over to a tall cart upon which a tall, silver carafe and some tumblers sat. "Would you care for a drink, sister...? Nothing strong, I assure you. Lemonade and tea."

"Thank you," Celestia said. She waited for Luna to return with the sweet, cool drink and sipped it elegantly. "I came to you because..." She paused.

Why did she come to Luna? Granted, she was a good friend of Twilight Sparkle's – that relationship had been a bit of a, ha, nightmare for awhile, but was straightened out in good time... they had collaborated on research, of course... and Luna was, after all, especially beloved in Ponyville and visited there often.

Still, though. Now that she was here, talking to Luna about it, Celestia felt a little silly. Worrying over nothing that probably just pass, in time, like as not.

"Because I'm your sister, whom you trust and love above all other confidants?" Luna prompted, with an exaggerated tone of hurt and a comically pathetic expression.

"Of course you are, Luna. But –"

"Perhaps because Twilight and I have spent *soooo* much time together? Long hours over a hot runestone, piercing the greater mysteries of magic?" Luna continued, teasing this time.

"Well, yes, but –"

"...Because I've been to Ponyville in the last three months for a reason other than state business...?"

And that was Luna on the wane. She said it casually, as if it was nothing of consequence, but the unspoken accusation was apparent in every syllable, all the more cutting for not being said.

"Luna!" Celestia snapped, but immediately her tone softened. "I'm sorry," she continued.

"No, you're not," Luna said, taking a step forward towards her reclining sister. "And neither am I. I meant it, and I'll stand by it. Who else is going to tell you..." Despite her defiant pose, Luna suddenly looked awkward, as if she didn't know what to say next.

"Tell me what, sister?" Celestia said calmly, taking a sip, but keeping eye contact over the tumbler's rim.

Luna looked at her warily for a second, then said, "Tell you what you know, in your heart. You've been neglecting your student –"

"She's *not* my student anymore, Luna."

"She's *always* going to be your student, I think," Luna said, somewhat sadly.

Celestia didn't really understand what Luna meant by this, so she addressed the rhetorical point. "Twilight was the one who brought up the question of whether she was really a student to me anymore. She was proud – *I* was proud to declare her studies more than complete. And the Academy named her an Arch-Mage in recognition of her many, many achievements. Calling her a student at this point would belittle her and everything she's done."

Luna shrugged, as if this were a matter open to discussion. "If she's not your student, what is she, then?"

"She is still my protégé," Celestia replied coolly, "and my dear friend."

Luna smiled enigmatically. "And yet, both you *and* she stumble over how to address each other."

Celestia narrowed her eyes, but said, pleasantly, "So it is your opinion that I have been... *less attentive* of Twilight, personally, that I ought've?"

"That's *your* opinion. It's my *observation*, sister," Luna said, stepping back and lowering herself onto her bier. "I know it hurts to hear," she said sympathetically, seeing a pained expression leap across Celestia's features. "I appreciate that both you and Twilight Sparkle are very busy ponies, but who can make time for one another if not two of the most powerful mages in Equestria? One of whom," she said reproachfully, tapping a hoof in front of her to emphasize her point, "is that land's ruler, by day?"

Celestia looked towards the door. Twilight was fading from gold to deep red, and soon it would pass from purple into Luna's shimmering night. The poetry of the situation was not lost on her, but in her poor humor she found it irritating rather than something to reflect upon.

Luna smiled, gently. "And let's be honest, if there's somepony – *anypony* – who goes out of their way to find ways to be busy, it's you two, sister," she said.

Silence reigned over the princesses for a moment while Celestia considered matters.

"Has Twilight spoken to you of this?" she asked, eventually.

"Of course not."

"What do you mean, 'Of course not'?"

Luna actually giggled. "Twilight Sparkle? Say a *word* against you?"

There was a pause as Luna's mirth died in the face of her sister's bowed head.

"I had hoped," Celestia said solemnly, "that if she did have a problem, she would feel comfortable speaking to me about it."

The silence, this time, was awkward, and lasted much, much longer.

"...you should go to her," Luna said, quietly. "I think... she wants you to."

Celestia compared the mental list of things ponies were expecting of her to Luna's earlier comment about timekeeping. Luna was cutting deeper than she knew; immediately Celestia's mind was filled with so many memories of boring, pointless audiences that could just have easily been afternoon tea with her brilliant, precious stu- with Twilight.

Who was her own mare now, not the little filly who trailed in Celestia's wake so cheerfully, all those years ago.

"I suppose I could stop by in the next few days –"

"That is not what I meant," Luna stated firmly. Again, she clicked her hoof irritably in front of her. "This is a good time. Dear Fluttershy is marrying that stallion, Macintosh, very soon now. There is a standing invitation for us to attend."

"Oh, I couldn't impose."

"I am sure that they would think of it as anything but an imposition," Luna said calmly. "Indeed, I suspect that they would be pleased for you to be there. I intend to go myself."

"That's not what I meant," Celestia replied. "I meant on Twilight. She is apparently planning everything..."

"Of course she is," Luna purred.

Celestia smiled. "So I would hate to distract her with some personal issues in this stressful time."

Luna gave her older sister a rather more patronizing look that Celestia was used to. "Is that not the root of the issue, dear sister?"

"I suppose it is," Celestia responded ruefully.

"Let us drop the pretense that you are here for any reason than to be told to do what you already want to," Luna said, slyness slipping back into her voice. "As you have pointed out to me before, this is the real reason ponies seek out advice."

"I suppose you're right, my dear sister," Celestia said, smiling.

"If it makes you feel any better, think about how *vital* it is for the *good of Equestria* for the Sun Princess and the Arch-Mage to remain such... *close associates*," Luna continued, with exaggerated pomposity, waving a hoof in the air with supreme arrogance.

Celestia sipped the sweet tea, taking the opportunity to reflect on her behavior. "I never intended to..." She trailed off, finding herself unwilling to actually admit that she had been negligent of her favorite... student. Associate.

Twilight.

"The thought never crossed my mind," Luna replied airily. "She owns some of the fault, if you want to know my heart on this matter. She takes such pride in being..." Celestia raised an eyebrow, causing Luna to smile slyly. "Diligent. She likes being seen to be working hard for those she cares about. And she rarely comes right out with things, these days."

"Oh?"

The shadows around Luna seemed to deepen for a moment. "No, sister, she does not. You should bear that in mind, when you speak with her."

Celestia looked away from her sister, sadly. "I am truly sorry to hear that."

Luna leaned forward, the shadows slinking away. "Oh, Celestia..." she said, shaking her head. "I'm sure that Twilight is just... she just needs your personal touch. A lot of responsibility on a young head. We both know all too well how *that* goes."

Celestia smiled faintly. "I suppose we do."

Luna got up and slowly walked up to her sister. "Fear not, sister. I am certain all will be resolved, in time," she said, and nuzzled Celestia in the gentle way they they had grown to share together again, since her return. Celestia nuzzled back, reflexively, but her thoughts lingered on her heavy heart.

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"Twilight Sparkle!"

Celestia heard her voice ringing out through the library – *Twilight's* library – and let her ears follow the hollow echo down the stairs. The twinkling residue of magic winked out around her.

"Hmm..." she murmured, stepping in off the balcony. The library was dimly lit, the windows not taking in the early afternoon sunlight through the tree's broad boughs – and my, weren't they broad. Once, Celestia had been able to descend straight down onto the balcony, but no longer, it seemed.

The landing opened onto Twilight's study, full as it ever was with stacks of books, several telescopes, a truly impressive array of chemistry equipment – some of which, Celestia now had time to notice, was jerry-rigged from cookware – along with several more arcane devices for Twilight's magical experimentation. It was immediately apparent that, despite her many other responsibilities, Twilight had never given up on stargazing, and Celestia idly wondered how much of Luna's fondness for Twilight was explained right there.

Stacks of scrolls and books surrounded the writing desk, as well. Celestia saw the distinctive red leather binding of Pageturner's *History of Equestria* and the proud, golden script of Goldenhorn's *Equestrian Colonies and Diplomacy*. The scrolls were equally interesting, sealed with brightly colored wax and marks of dignitaries, scholars and statesponies from across Equestria and beyond. Celestia was impressed – even she didn't hear from some of these ponies.

"Twilight?" Celestia called out again.

"Just a minute!" came a reply from behind the door to the main room of Twilight's home. Celestia waited patiently, until she heard the stairs being climbed. For the look of the thing, she backed onto the landing again.

The door handle swiveled – without the distinctive red hue of Twilight's magic.

"Hello, Spike," Celestia said, warmly.

"Oh, hi, Princess," Spike said happily, then the bit dropped and his eyes went wild. "P-P-P-Princess!? Princess Celestia!" He dropped down into a low and impressive bow. He was slightly taller than a grown pony now, long-limbed and decidedly spikier, especially in the crests near his ears.

"Ah, Spike," Celestia said warmly, "I can always count on you for suitably dignified greeting."

"Uh, thanks," Spike replied, rising awkwardly. He raised what, for the sake of simplicity, could be called his eyebrow. "Does Twilight know you're here? She didn't say anything to me," he asked irritably. "She never tells me anything."

Despite the lance of anxiety she felt at hearing this, Celestia maintained her composure. Spike was always a grumbler. "I'm sure her busy schedule just gets away from her, Spike," she said. "I have to chase mine all across Equestria some days."

"Like today, I guess," Spike said knowingly. "So what needs doing?"

"Doing? Why... nothing, Spike."

"So..." he trailed off, looking around awkwardly. "So, then what... brings you to Ponyville...?" he asked, confused.

Celestia raised her eyebrows in shock. Spike *assumes* she's here to hand out assignments! As if she needs a reason to see her dear friends!

He completely misinterpreted her look, however. Whether that was good or bad, Celestia found herself unable to tell. "Oh! Of course!" he said, slapping his forehead. "The wedding! You would be invited, of course... duh..."

"That's right," Celestia lied. "I was hoping you and Twilight could spare me some room until the happy event."

"Oh, well, shouldn't be a problem," the dragon said. "C'mon, let's find Twilight! I'm sure she'll be thrilled to see you!" He ambled out, tail dragging behind him. Celestia followed him, giving her protégé's study one last, affectionate look, taking in all the detail she could so that she could recall later the sense of pride she felt seeing it.

The Library's main room, once a spartan living area that also served as a de facto meeting place, was much more impressive than it had been when Twilight moved to Ponyville. The interior had undergone beautification, with the shelves cleaned and polished, the books properly sorted and the spaces in the shelves filled by Twilight's discerning hoof. The furnishings were immaculate rosewood pieces upholstered in rich purple, special gifts to Twilight after one of her adventures in... Phillydelphia, wasn't it? And a beautiful silver lecture podium that Celestia had given her as a gift several Hearth's Warming Eves ago.

Not for the first time, Celestia felt a pang of regret as the memory of a homey, cheerful little town library flashed across her mind's eye; but she above everyone else was in a position to know that things change. After all, she remembered when this was just a tree.

But still, a hint of loss nagged at her. It was all for show. If this house had belonged, for example, to Rarity, Celestia wouldn't have given the rich furnishings a second thought. Everypony made their immediate environment reflect their inner personality, and Rarity's love of creating beautiful things had always extended to her home and boutique – always spectacular and elegant.

But Twilight's study put paid to the lie that was the library. Her study was as rough and cluttered as it had always been. The chair was a creaky old one Twilight had sheepishly explained was once her grandmother's, and she had always loved as a filly; the table was stained and marred with the side effects of a hundred experiments. Above all, the books, her favorite books, were not shelved neatly, nor shiny and well-kept – they lay about her bed, battered from wear.

This room was a little lie – the lie of prestige, the lie of dignity. Just a little lie, but... a lie, about who she was, for the benefit of other ponies.

A lie that Celestia was far too familiar with. She sighed.

"Is something wrong, Princess?" Spike asked cautiously, from the door.

"Hmm?" Celestia was stirred from her thoughts, and blinked. "Oh... no, Spike. I was just thinking about how things change."

"Oh, don't get me started!" Spike said, shutting the door again. "Change, change, change. Maybe it's the wedding, but..." the dragon descended into unhappy grumbling as he tossed himself in a chair in the corner, which was slightly more worn than the others. Little snatches of green smoke leaked out of his mouth.

"What do you mean, Spike?" Celestia asked, trying to keep her worry out of her voice.

"Well, I mean," Spike started, huffing irritably, "Everything's all different now. Ponyville's huge, and everypony's famous or important or rich or something... I can't even remember the last time everypony was here together..."

Celestia walked over to him and gave him a warm smile. "I'm sorry to hear that, Spike. But everyone will be together for the wedding, won't they?"

"Hopefully... AJ and Dash are still off." Spike crossed his arms and sunk into the chair and looked away. "And Twilight! Twilight..."

"Yes?" Celestia asked, carefully. "What about Twilight?"

Spike looked up at Celestia, eyes weary. "Oh, just... busy. You know. And since some dragon around here is her assistant, I'm busy, too... all hours of the night, sometimes."

"I see," Celestia said.

Spike sighed. "The wedding is making me crazy," he said. "Twilight's got me running back and forth all day and night..."

"She is lucky to have such a loyal assistant, then," Celestia replied fondly. "Maybe now that I'm here, I can help out and take some of the load off of your shoulders."

"Really? Feel free!" Spike said, sitting back up. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to complain right away after you've gotten here, but this has been too much for me. Between working for Twilight and helping at Rarity's, I'm..." The dragon's cheeks flushed crimson into Celestia's knowing smile. "Okay, so maybe I bring it on myself a little," he admitted. "But I'm still glad you're here."

Spike stood up and ambled back over to the door. "Come on, Princess... I'm sure Twilight is at Sweet Apple Acres, making sure all the napkins are the same length or something."

"Spike..." Celestia murmured. He turned and gave her a questioning gaze, and she spread her wings.

"Oh," he said, embarrassed. "Right."

• • •

The descent onto Sweet Apple Acres, especially in the early summer, was always a pleasure for the Princess. It was, in a quiet way, a masterpiece of the earth pony tribe, showing the subtle, unsung strength of their natural tenaciousness and attachment to the land. Rolling fields of blossoming apple trees greeted the princess, and through her connection to the sun, she felt their grateful embrace of its life-giving warmth. She inhaled deeply and enjoyed a quiet moment of serenity.

Spike tapped her shoulder and pointed towards the south lawn of the yard, but he didn't need to. There was an amazing bustle and commotion going on as the entirety of the Apple family prepared the south lawn for the wedding. Tables were being laid out and carefully clothed, in the sure knowledge that tomorrow would be a beautiful day – although next Wednesday would be a good day to stay inside.

"Do you see Twilight?" Celestia asked Spike.

"No," he replied, shouting over the wind of their movement. "I think she's inside the barn, that's where they're setting up the, er," he stammered for a moment. "The hoe-down."

Celestia smiled broadly and, with careful grace, alighted down near the barn.

Such was the intensity of the set-up that only a very few ponies noticed her arrival. They greeted her with stunned politeness, and she, in return, gave them beatific smiles and urged them not to let her interfere with the goings-on.

Inside the barn was a cluster of ponies, all with intense expressions, nodding furiously in a big huddle in the center, but only one voice. Celestia smiled to hear her beloved protégé Twilight Sparkle in full organization mode, being obeyed without question by Apple family stallions twice her size.

"Red Delicious, have you and Red Gala been down to Sugar Cube Corner and gotten the trifles? Yes? Good. In the icebox? Great, thanks – now why don't you go out and help with the tables... right. Golden Delicious, Apple Fritter, you two set up some crates and set up the cider station. Here, see, right here. Granny Smith told me to use the crates from the rear of the barn, but – right, try to keep the nice side pointed out..." And so on, for a good ten minutes, as clusters of ponies – tending towards yellow and red – marched off in every direction as if Twilight was still behind them barking orders.

"She's really something," Spike remarked. Celestia gave him an odd smile – it was as if he was advocating for her, for some reason.

"She always has been, Spike," Celestia replied, hoping that her tone of voice conveyed her utter confidence in Twilight, and stepped forward.

Only Apple Bloom remained with Twilight, who was sitting on her haunches poring over a long scroll and sounding off commands rapid-fire. Celestia cleared her throat, and Apple Bloom looked up in astonishment. Twilight continued chattering as Celestia smiled at Apple Bloom, who began frantically tapping Twilight's shoulder.

" – and after that, we can get the musicians in for tuning – yes, yes – *what?*" Twilight snapped, then followed Apple Bloom's pointing hoof into the cheerful smile of Princess Celestia.

"Prnsiz!" The gears in Twilight's mind hopped a cog, and the expression of shock came out like a stifled sneeze. Apple Bloom, bowing hastily, made herself scarce, stammering explanations.

"Hello, Twilight Sparkle. I hope I'm not intruding...?"

"No, no, of course not!" Twilight said, standing up. Delight was etched on every inch of her features –

Etched. Yes... that was the right word. The smile was *perfect* – practiced, reflexive. Twilight's eyes were wary and nervous, dancing about the building, looking everywhere but at Celestia. "Well, I mean, I didn't expect you, of course, but –"

Celestia lowered her head in a gentle invitation for a familiar nuzzle. "I'm sorry, my dear, I so rarely drop in unannounced these days, don't I..."

"Uh, yeah," Twilight replied, chuckling nervously. She carefully approached the princess and accepted the gesture of close friendship. "I... is there something you need from me? Only I'm a *little* tied up at the moment."

Again, Celestia's heart suffered a sharp stab of sorrow as somepony she cared about expected her to be here handing out work. Although perhaps pang was not quite the word; pangs don't drain your reserves of emotional control quite that quickly. "Not at all, Twilight," she said, a little more subdued. "In fact, is there anything I can do to help...?"

"Umm," Twilight looked around urgently. "No? I think the Apple family have everything in order."

"I must confess myself deeply impressed by your organizational skills, Twilight," Celestia said, surveying the bustle of the preparations. "Once again," she added, pointedly.

"Oh, well, the Apple family has a strong tradition of celebrations, really," Twilight said, nervously. "I'm just keeping everything in order and taking care of some preparations they don't usually have to make – for the pegasus ponies and so on..."

Celestia gave her protégé a beaming smile. "I am pleasantly unsurprised to find you excelling once again, my faithful –" she caught herself just in time. "I'm sorry," she said. "My dear Twilight Sparkle."

"Were... were you expecting a report on friendship from this...?" Twilight asked, nervously. Her smile was somewhat glassy, now. "I could, if... if you wanted, I mean, there's... this is a big deal! I mean, when you wrote that you were pleased that I had agreed to do this, I – well, I thought you *might* mean that, but I wasn't *sure* –"

Celestia, with an effort, managed to prevent her face from falling. Ah, the knife – and it twists, too!

"No, Twilight. I'm sorry, I seem to have... given you the wrong impression," the Princess said, cringing internally. "I am pleased to accept Fluttershy's invitation, as is my sister. I had just hoped you and I could spend –"

"*Luna* is coming, too? *Princess Luna*!?" Twilight said, shocked.

"She told us she was coming last week, Twilight," Spike said. "Remember?" he added, sourly, remembering the indigestion. Luna was not quite as good at dragon messages as Celestia, and for some reason Twilight didn't remember things she experienced in dreams – Luna's preferred method of magical communication.

"Oh, right," Twilight said, calming down. "Right. We have the – right." She rubbed a foreleg across her forehead. "I'm terribly sorry, Princess – you're really not seeing me at my best... preparations, and –"

"I may be to blame for that," Celestia said with a chuckle that she didn't feel. "I'm afraid I've ambushed you. Tell me, do you think you have some room to spare for me overnight? Otherwise, I may have to go to Cloudsdale –"

"Of... of *course* I have room! For you! Room for you, the princess!" Twilight stammered. "Please, take the bed, I'll pull out the spare – much too small for you, don't worry about

it," Twilight said as Celestia opened her mouth to protest. "And, and... yeah! I'm probably going to be here late in any case, so, uh, don't wait up!"

"I had hoped we could talk, Twilight –"

A hunted look appeared in Twilight's eye. "Why? Have I... have I done something wrong?"

"No, not at all," Celestia said. "I just want to talk." This did not seem to alleviate Twilight's worries. Celestia knew her protégé quite well, and could only imagine the nightmares she was inflicting on herself. "Chat. Over tea, maybe? I brought some of that herbal tea you like..."

"Oh," Twilight replied, sounding only very slightly relieved. "Yes, that would be... nice. But, um, perhaps after the wedding? If you can stay –"

"Of course I can stay. I came here as much to see you as to be at the wedding." To put it diplomatically.

Twilight gave a feeble smile. "Good! Good, that's... that's... good," she said. She seemed to slump, physically.

"I'm sorry, Twilight," Celestia said earnestly. "I didn't mean to put extra pressure on you."

"Don't worry about it. Please," Twilight replied. "I can take anything you give me, Princess, believe me," she added, proudly.

Celestia favored her with an affectionate smile. "That is no excuse for me to give you everything I can, my dear," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll get out of your mane and be trouble for somepony else for a little while." With that, she spread her wings wide and, with a mighty thrust, leapt into the sky.

Spike scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "But we don't have a spare –"

Twilight rounded on him, fiercely. "Would you just...!" she started, then relaxed. "Just... make sure that the thing we set up for Princess Luna seats two, would you? And run home and make the bed up for the princess. The good linen."

"Sure thing, but –"

"Just do it, okay!?"

• • •

A beat of wings, the sound of air rushing past...

Celestia soared above Ponyville, indulging – for once – the sheer joy of flying. It sometimes amazed her how much flapping her wings a little could still make her happy as anything; after more than a thousand years, you'd think the fascination would wear off. But no; it was like... love, perhaps. The initial rush was impassioned and furious – it had found an incarnation in pony form in the pegasus Rainbow Dash. But then it matured into the soft, ever-present, and boundless love, a quiet joy that is always there but rarely dominates you the way the passion does. It is a part of you; you are not consumed by it.

Instead she was consumed with thoughts of Twilight Sparkle, anxiety drifting on a sea of relaxation, letting it remain isolated from the rest of her mind while she picked it apart.

Well, she seemed... normal. For Twilight, anyways, as an important day approached. And she had been... honest and straightforward enough; perhaps out of surprise more than anything, but Luna's mysterious warning about Twilight becoming reticent seemed to be...

Celestia smiled. Perhaps Luna underestimated Celestia's bond with Twilight. Perhaps *Celestia* underestimated Celestia's bond with her beloved... protégé.

That pause, there, the pause that wanted to be filled with the word "student", still nagged at Celestia's mind. But that was why she was here, wasn't it? Everything would be better once the two of them had some time to talk – in fact, little dialogues were already appearing in the back of her mind: some where she was apologetic and sought Twilight's understanding, others where Twilight was the one seeking guidance and Celestia talked it out with her. The little scenes comforted her, reinforcing her confidence that, in the end, everything would work out.

It would all be fine.

Yes. Definitely.

But the memories of Twilight's glassy smile, and the terror in her eyes when Celestia asked to talk, gnawed at Celestia ravenously.

To take her mind off things, Celestia spent the remainder of the day paying visits to certain prominent Ponyville locales, as well as stopping by a few of her favorite old spots

around town. She was an old hand at knowing where to go and what to do, even just by walking around a town idly, to influence things the way she desired – go to *this* shop rather than *that*, speak to this pony *first*, mention idly that the Appleoosa settlement is coming along *so* well, and in need of sturdy ponyfolk within earshot of some bored-looking young stallions...

And for all that they were... *perfunctory*, Twilight's letters were the most thorough information Celestia could have asked for.

She felt uneasy every time she realized she was using the troubling letters in exactly the way they were intended – Twilight, the loyal, dutiful agent, serving up the town of Ponyville to her grateful Princess. Lucky for Ponyville, then, that Princess Celestia had no intention of doing anything but let things be as they were going to be – always a wise decision, amongst rulers.

Gentle touches, here and there, just to keep things on track, she thought, and –

"Princess Celestia! Oh, my *stars*!" shrieked Rarity.

Celestia was startled to find herself in the doorway of Carousel Boutique.

"Oh, Rarity, I –" she said, summoning her attention back with a blink. "Hello."

"My lady," Rarity said, bowing deeply.

Celestia takes the opportunity to look around the immaculate boutique. Somehow, she had expected it to be a riot of activity, but instead...

"My word, Rarity, you certainly do keep a clean workspace! You must be swamped with work at a time like this..."

Rarity chuckled haughtily, then remembered who she was speaking with and stifled herself. "Ahem. No, ah, my lady, actually, business has died down a little in the last few days –"

"I'm sorry," Celestia said. "I had assumed you would be doing dressmaking for the wedding."

"Oh, I *did*, yes." Seeing Celestia's blank expression, Rarity smiled nervously. "Have you... been involved in many weddings...?"

"I have had the pleasure of attending a great many," Celestia replied, "but I have never been involved in the arrangements, no."

"Well..." Rarity said, slowly, picking her words carefully. "The wedding is *tomorrow*, so... well, if I was still working on those commissions *now*..." Her eyes widened in horror. "What a nightmare! It would represent a real failure as a purveyor of fine garments! Ah, the shame!" The white unicorn paused, mid-swoon, and chuckled nervously. Celestia smiled beatifically.

"But of course we have Twilight Sparkle to thank for keeping everything on track," Rarity continued, graciously. "She really *has* outdone herself. Everything is going over *sooo* smoothly, and of course I would never have been able to personally work on the dresses without her suggestion that I take on apprentices... ha! Me, apprentices! It's... oh, Princess," she gasped, favoring Celestia with a thankful expression of truly stunning sincerity, "Sending Twilight here was the best *possible* thing –"

Celestia let Rarity gush, smiling placidly and feeling, once again, the unsettling feeling that she had come to precisely the right pony without intending to. Her intuition was drawing her to ponies for some reason, stewing in the back of her mind, and she was bound to find out what it was eventually if she followed it.

"Rarity," she said, quietly, as the unicorn spilled over herself expounding on the myriad ways that Twilight had arranged a most spectacular wedding and made it all happen without a hitch. "Is Twilight well, in herself?"

Rarity paused, and looked taken aback. "I'm not sure... I know what you mean, Princess," she said cautiously.

Rarity struck many people as a gossip, and they were quite right. You couldn't get anywhere in fashion without having a very sensitive ear to the ground. Celestia had been around enough ponies to know that gossips tended to be either thoughtless boors (and a thousand years as ruler of the court at Canterlot presented a fair share of those to choose from) taking pleasure in spreading malicious rumors, or very clever ponies who watch carefully and spread information around as it needs to be known without being said too loudly.

The hesitation to speak about her friend spoke to Rarity's discretion – and made Celestia feel safe confiding in her. "I will tell you frankly, Rarity, that I have grown worried about Twilight Sparkle recently."

"Oh, my – I... well, there's been the wedding, of course... she really threw herself into that," Rarity said, blushing scarlet as she feared she had been praising the very thing worrying the Princess.

Celestia smiled. "If she wasn't working as hard as she could, I'd be *really* worried."

"I suppose that's true, that's true... but..." Rarity gave the doors and windows a quick, cursory glance. "She's *really* thrown herself into it. *Far* more so than usual, even when she is getting a... workaholic mood, shall we say. And her other work, too – her correspondence with, well, with you, I assume..."

Celestia's heart panged a bit as the pathetic stack of recent letters sprung to mind. "Among many other ponies," she managed to say.

"I wish I could say more, Princess, but it's been a *terribly* busy time for all of us here. We haven't... spent much time together. Strange, that..." she trailed off, distantly. "But... I'm glad you're here to see her," Rarity added, with glassy brightness.

"I... see," said the princess, and smiled. "Thank you, Rarity. I know I can trust you to keep this between us." The two ponies held eye contact for a heartbeat, and a lot of information was modulated on that gaze, hidden in shadows in their eyes and the tiniest of gestures. It boiled down to:

Something's really wrong this time, Princess.

I know. I'm here, my little pony. Don't worry.

There was a knock on the door, which made Rarity jump, squeaking in surprise. She immediately blushed and raised a hoof to her face, demurely. "Oh, forgive me, princess... I'll just go see who it is." Celestia chuckled in a friendly way, making Rarity smile in return.

It was Spike. "Oh, Princess, good – Cheerilee told me she saw you come in here just a minute ago..." he said, sauntering in. "I've been looking for you – I wanted to tell you that I've prepared the bed for you. At the library."

"Thank you, Spike," Celestia replied warmly. "I appreciate your hospitality."

"Ah, well, anything for you, Princess," he said earnestly. "And, uh, Twilight sent a message, as well – er... '*Dear Princess, please forgive my distressed state earlier. I did not intend to convey anything but the deepest pleasure at your arrival, and regret any*

inadvertent misunderstanding my emotional state might have caused. I am happy to extend hospitality to you, as ever, and look forward speaking with you further when an opportunity arises. Your loyal servant, Twilight Sparkle.' There," Spike read from a card, tripping over "inadvertent misunderstanding". "Man, she really can write a mouthful these days..."

Your loyal servant. Celestia closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Rarity cleared her throat genteelly and caught Celestia's eye. The princess nodded.

"What?" Spike asked, looking from Rarity to the princess, confused.

"Spike, would you be a dear and bring up those reams of fabric that arrived last week up from the basement? *Thank* you," Rarity cooed. Celestia raised a hoof to stifle her laughter as Spike visibly melted at this show of affection and, with a hasty salute, wandered off towards the basement.

Once the cellar door shut, Rarity met Celestia's eyes. "I'll swear he spends as much time here as with her. Not that I mind, of course. I've tried to ask him if something was bothering Twilight many times, but..." She shrugged.

"Don't worry," Celestia said, with a sigh. "Please tell Spike I'll see him at the Library. It's been a long day, and I need my rest for tomorrow."

• • •

Celestia slept... and dreamed.

A vast, green field rolled underneath her, tall to her knees, blown by a cool wind that rushed through the grass with a gentle whisper. The sky above was a shimmering haze of black and midnight blue, wavering and flowing like ink in water. The moon – a slim, razor crescent – hung high in a sky filled with sparkling stars, a thousand thousand points of radiant light. Celestia watched the sky, until –

"Ah," Celestia said. "I'm glad you're here, sister."

Luna stepped next to her. In dreams, she stood as tall as Celestia, her mane and tail blending in with the night sky, billowing in the gentle wind. "Forgive my intrusion, sister," Luna said, her voice unearthly and beautiful, but with the clear tone of somepony who is eager to ask questions.

"Not at all."

"May I ask if you find Ponyville to your liking?" Luna asked, politely.

"I always do... although..." Celestia paused, her eyes pained. Changes, changes...

"You, too, remember it as it was," Luna said, finishing her sister's unspoken sorrow.

Celestia frowned. "I know you are powerful here, but we agreed that you wouldn't watch my thoughts –"

"I do not need magic to know how you feel, sister," Luna interrupted, reproachfully. "I feel it too. It is the sorrow of the long-lived to see something they love submit inevitably to change..."

"But it is their joy to watch it grow," Celestia finished.

"A wise saying," Luna said, "from a wise pony." The sisters smiled – Celestia had said this to Luna many centuries ago... about... what? Somepony – it had been a pony.

"The dream world is a bad place for memory," Luna said, softly, seeing her sister's expression of mental distress. "They are both powerful and vulnerable to being lost or changed, here."

Celestia sighed. "So it is." She took a few steps forward, for something to do while she thought.

"At least Sugar Cube Corner stands eternal, and unchanged," Luna said. As the sisters shared a moment of laughter, Luna allowed the dark aura of power around her to melt away and she emerged from it, small as life, a gentle smile on her face.

"You fear for Twilight Sparkle," Luna said, matter-of-factly.

"What? Yes, I do, but..."

Luna threw her head upwards. A faint image, its colors faded, of Twilight Sparkle stammering to her mentor, was suspended in the sky above her. As Celestia looked, the image of Twilight turned away, eyes watching over her shoulder warily. There were no secrets in dreams, especially in the presence of their mistress.

Celestia, unthinking, reached out and touched the image, which was at once suspended in the sky and right next to her. It distorted weirdly around her hoof. "She seemed... frightened of me," Celestia said. "As she has not been since she left my tutelage. And she seems to be avoiding me – as politely as she can. Of course, she is *very* busy..." She moved her hoof in a motion that, on the real Twilight, would have been an affectionate brush of her cheek.

Luna smiled enigmatically. "And her friends...?"

"Also worried, of course. They could hardly fail to notice her barricading herself in work."

"You spoke to...?"

"Rarity. And Spike."

"Ah," Luna said, knowingly.

"It's not like she hasn't done this before," Celestia murmured. "I sent her to Ponyville when she was in a similar mood –"

"Worked up over a mare of our mutual acquaintance, as I recall," Luna's voice cooed from behind her. Celestia looked around hurriedly, seeing nothing. Luna's appeared next to her, close to her ear. "Do you suppose she's found another dire threat to Equestria...?" the younger alicorn whispered slyly.

"Luna!" Celestia said sternly.

"Maybe... she's hiding a lover from everypony," Luna continued, snickering. "Some proud stallion, or," and here she raised an eyebrow suggestively, "a lovely mare. Very open-minded, our Twilight."

"I very much doubt she would get involved with anypony she'd want to hide from her friends," Celestia said, with forced calm. "Or from me." For some reason she felt put on the spot, although in the haze of dreams, she couldn't put her hoof on why. "At least, I should hope not," she continued, defensively.

The Moon Princess, her features dark and mysterious, tittered laughter. It hung in the air even after she stopped, like the long echo of bright, brassy bells. "Forgive me, sister," she said, grinning darkly. "Only teasing."

However catty Luna could be in the real world, from time to time, that was just... emotions. Here in dreams, she was both mistress, powerful and knowing, and a reflection of the dream-world's subjectivity. Celestia closed her eyes and tried to remember that Luna was probably not being this hostile, just teasing – but the realm of dreams made Celestia's anxiety reflect on her perception of Luna, making her seem sinister and enigmatic.

Celestia opened her eyes. Luna, her appearance no longer tainted by whispers of malice, stood in front of her, looking amused but unthreatening. "This is serious. It's worse this time."

"Yes. Yes it is," Luna said, walking past Celestia up out of the grass and into the sky, her mane blending into the sky seamlessly. She reclined in mid-air, looking calm.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Celestia frowned. "Is that all you have to say about this?"

Luna pursed her lips and rolled her eyes. "Well, there is *one* thing..."

"Yes...?"

"Have you wondered... if you're overreacting...?" Luna said, the barest hint of teasing in her voice.

"I *hope* I'm overreacting," Celestia said, firmly. "I *hope* all this is just a product of overwork."

Luna's expression softened. "That's not what I meant," she said gently. "As you point out yourself, Twilight has done this before." She stood, and began pacing around the sky restlessly.

"It's worse than that. You said so yourself."

"Well, that doesn't mean you can't still overreact to it. A broken bottle is worse than a spilled one, but you are still overreacting if you weep over it."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"I am merely touched by your devotion to Twilight Sparkle, sister," Luna replied. The elder pony didn't rise to this, merely watching Luna prance across the sky, smiling a little smugly.

"Do *you* think I'm overreacting?" Celestia asked, eventually. "It was your idea I come here –"

"Ha! It most certainly was not!" Luna said, laughing merrily. "I thought we understood that you came to me to be told to do what you wanted to do in the first place."

"Fair," Celestia conceded. "Still – do you think I'm overreacting to all this?"

"No, sister, I don't. In fact, I think you're *underreacting*," Luna said.

"What?"

"I just wanted you to think about how you were taking all this. Think about how you feel," Luna said, irritably, as if Celestia wasn't getting the joke and she was growing tired of explaining it.

"About...?"

"About all of this," Luna said, waving a hoof. "About Ponyville. About the wedding. About all the ponies bustling about. Above all, about Twilight Sparkle." She tapped in front of her, making a gentle bell sound. "There is quite a bit unresolved between you. More than I think you realize."

Celestia was going to retort, but shut her mouth again.

"Think about... how you act. How you *treat* ponies," Luna continued, insistently.

"Luna, I..." Celestia frowned. "I don't understand."

"Isn't this *fun*?" Luna said, delighted. "I get to be the mysterious, wise sister for once!" She trotted in place, excitedly.

Celestia smiled gently. "I suppose you're owed a turn."

Luna smiled enigmatically. "I'll see you tomorrow, sister," she said, and leapt towards the moon, which was her cutie mark, which was –

• • •

Celestia woke up.

It was still deep in the night, and the slim crescent of the moon shone the barest light on Celestia in the bed. Slowly, she raised her head and blinked away the haze of sleep.

Afterwards, speaking in dreams always felt like an *experience* rather than a conversation, as if it had been inflicted on her, rather than having been participating. She waved her head irritably. The chat with her sister had not calmed her in the least; but she put part of the blame for that on Luna –

No, that was being unfair. Luna was just... being Luna. Showing off a little for her big sister. Celestia quietly hoped she'd grow out of it soon – what's a few decades between alicorns, in the long view...?

A little sound made her look down, and in the dullness of sleep she thought of baby Spike, who had slept at the foot of Twilight's bed for so long. But no, he had given the princess his evening salutations and wandered off to sleep in his own room.

On the floor at the foot of the bed, covered by a thin blanket, lay Twilight Sparkle, mouth open, tongue hanging out.

Celestia didn't know whether to cry or bark out laughter. She looked so ridiculous...! And at the same time...

"Oh, Twilight..." Celestia murmured.

She could read the story without the words, so to speak; her mind alighted with a vision of an exhausted Twilight, running on autopilot, arriving to find Celestia occupying her bed. The princess heard the unicorn's muttered grumbling and felt the magic as Twilight summoned the blanket and pillow to herself and plopped onto the ground, huffing.

Sleep laid heavily on her head, but Celestia gently summoned her magic and lifted Twilight up into the bed, sliding over just a little bit to make room. Twilight, feeling the familiar sensation of the bed underneath her, curled into a habitual sleeping pose.

There. Silly filly...

She lowered her head again and let sleep wash over her.

Celestia awoke, again. Something was jostling her –

She had put her foreleg over Twilight, just as she had done with Luna as fillies and – indeed – had done with Twilight, a few times. Twilight was shrugging at it and whimpering.

Celestia tried not to take it personally. Twilight was just having a bad dream – that was all.

She lifted her leg off of Twilight and curled it under herself, watching the unicorn squirm and fret in her sleep. The alicorn gently nuzzled her student and, to her pleasure, saw Twilight calm down a little. It was nothing on Luna's dream magic, but a little physical contact never hurt.

When it became apparent that Twilight wasn't going to wake up or, better yet, reveal any dramatic secrets in her sleep, Celestia smiled down on her protégé and went back to sleep.

When she woke for the third time, in daily rhythm with the rising of the sun, Twilight was long gone.

The Pattern + Tea and Argumentation + The Question + Arrival at the
Wedding + Twilight's Mask + A Memory of Perfection + Fairy Tales +
Feats and Marvels + Somepony is Missing + Falling Through Thin Ice +
I Promise, My Faithful Student

• • •

The *first* time it had happened, it was... necessary. Even now, she clung to that – to deny it would be to deny everything she had become.

The second time it had happened, it was necessary *at the time*. But it had started the pattern. Patterns were more important than initial causes, in the end; a single event is just that – an event. A second such event is a *line*, a trend, with directionality and purpose. Where does it lead?

The *third* time... the third *event*... shows where it leads. For now. And it had *hurt* – only a little, at the time, but the wound had been deep. It had cut out everything.

But it was okay. She could fix things, even now... if she was good enough. The circumstances were right, and if she put everything in order, it would all turn out okay.

And she *was* good enough. She *had* to be.

• • •

A memory:

Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual.

It was early spring in the gardens of Canterlot. Around the small table where Celestia and Twilight sat, shrubbery was growing leaves and flowers were just now beginning to poke up out of the rich earth of the planters. In the distance there was the sound of the gardeners hard at work installing a new tree, a gift to the garden from Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack's fretsome voice occasionally barked an order or hissed in terror as –

"You Canterlot colts're manhandling 'er! Y'all are gonna break off the roots!" Her voice became a soft coo, and the princess watched the orange pony snuggle the little sapling tenderly. "There, there, hun, momma's here..."

"Colts? *Colts*? Listen, 'pardner', I've been working in these gardens for twenty years now and I don't have to take advice about the art of horticulture from a mere *farmer* –" snarled back a snooty voice. His thick Canterlot accent made "years" sound like "hyee-ahs" – as if he yawned out his words.

"Don't you *pardner* me, buddy! I *ain'tcher* pardner!"

"Well, my friend, *I'm* not your, your... *buddy*."

"Who says we're *friends*, pal? Ya wanna know about mah friends, I'll tell ya! One of 'em's settin' right over there with the Princess! Huh! How d'ya like them apples?"

Twilight chuckled nervously. "Are you sure you don't want me to... intervene?"

"Oh no," Celestia replied, laughing. "This is far too much fun."

"I just – I, er, don't want to offend Silver Shears," Twilight said, nervously.

Celestia leaned down conspiratorially. "I think you'll find that he is one of those ponies who goes out of his way to be offended, my dear," she said. "If you didn't offend him, he might have to take an afternoon off and wonder where his life had gone so wrong." Twilight laughed.

The two sat in the bare garden, smiling and listening to the farmer and the artiste snarl back and forth as the other ponies – Red Delicious and a Canterlot gardener, Snow Blossom – did their best to move the tree while giving each other shy, surreptitious glances.

"I was pleased to hear about the publication of your latest work, Twilight," Celestia said to fill the silence as Applejack and Silver Shears called a stalemate in order to focus, typically, on the much more important, transcendent issue of getting the little tree set properly in the ground, Applejack cooing and telling it not to be frightened of the unfamiliar soil.

"Oh," Twilight said, momentarily taken by surprise. "Um, I'm glad to hear it. Did you get the copy I sent you?"

"Yes, I did," Celestia replied. She affected a face of deep surprise. "First edition, signed by the author, no less. I'm a very lucky princess."

Twilight chuckled helplessly into Celestia's beam of pride. "I, er..." she said, pausing. "I intended to deliver it in person, of course. I hope you don't mind..."

"Oh no, not at all, Twilight. I know how it is... wasn't it that dam, again...?" Celestia, taking a sip of tea, praised herself for remembering.

"Umm, no. I think we've fixed that, now." Twilight mumbled, looking awkward. "It was that... thing. With the mayor. And the balloons."

Celestia set her cup of tea down and kicked herself, mentally. "Oh, right, right." She sighed, fondly. "I'm sorry, Twilight... but there really is no keeping track of you, sometimes. You work exceptionally hard."

"Would you like me to stop?" Twilight asked in a wry voice.

"I trust you to know what your limits are," Celestia said calmly.

Twilight looked confused. "Limits?"

"One pony can only do so much in a day, Twilight. You know that." Celestia sighed, all too aware of precisely how much any particular, just to pull an example out of the air, alicorn could manage in a day.

"Oh," Twilight said. "Right. Of course."

"In any case, I'm enjoying your latest work. Your insight, as always, is deeply impressive," Celestia said. "And your understanding of the true magic of friendship shows through. I'm very proud of you," she added, earnestly, "my faithful student."

Celestia reveled in the familiar title. She had always loved it – to others, it was just an acknowledgement of Twilight's dutiful nature, but for the princess, it was an expression of deep affection. It was private, and intimate – just for them.

Twilight blushed. "Thank you."

A stray thought struck Celestia, and she smiled impishly. The devil of mischief that dwelled deep in her heart couldn't resist prodding Twilight a little. "I very much suspect, my dear, that you never could have accomplished so much in Canterlot, shut away up in

your tower." Twilight looked up at her, startled. Immediately, Celestia cursed herself, feeling the bite of regret she always did for indulging the meaner part of herself. "Only teasing, Twilight," she said, forcing a grin. Twilight smiled weakly.

They sat in silence for awhile, again, Celestia feeling slightly off-balance. Twilight was taking the opportunity to inspect her hooves very carefully.

"Actually, Princess," she said, eventually, barely audible over renewed discussion of topsoil quality, "I had... I have been... meaning to ask you about that. Er. Something related to that."

"Oh?" Celestia looked down into Twilight's expression, which was a picture of nervousness, but determination shone in her eyes. "What is it, Twilight?"

"Well, um, not the tower, obviously," Twilight said, in a more determined, businesslike tone. "Because, um, well..." She trailed off, looking uncomfortable. Celestia waited calmly, sipping her tea, patient as the sun waiting out the night for dawn.

"I... don't know how to phrase this, exactly," Twilight admitted.

Celestia chuckled merrily. "Always a crisis for an author, I know."

Twilight smiled weakly, and sipped some tea. "Um. This has been on my mind for a long time, now, and, uh... I thought I should ask you about it in person, since we're here, rather than in a letter."

Celestia looked at her curiously. "You know I always have time for you, Twilight. Anytime."

Twilight's nervous smile got glassy for a moment. "Right," she said. "Right, but we're here, now, so, well... I'll just come out with it..." She nervously tapped a hoof in front of her, unconsciously. Celestia noticed this and gave her a warm smile, thinking momentarily of Luna.

"Am I," Twilight began firmly, then she shyed back a bit as if she'd frightened herself. "Really your student, anymore?" she finished, quietly.

The question hit Celestia like a thunderbolt.

"What? Of course you a –" Celestia began, then shut her mouth, her mind suddenly alert and reeling with thoughts, feelings... desires, hopes... plans. Twilight's accomplishments suddenly ran through her mind's eye, dizzily.

...Luna, weeping, cradled in Celestia's wings for the first time in a millennium...

...Discord, his mad eyes once again unseeing stone, cringing in the castle statuary...

...Celestia, proudly laying a badge of honor around Twilight's shoulders...

...Twilight, the center of attention, fearlessly and proudly lecturing famous wizards three times her age on magical theory, with Celestia, and Twilight's parents, gazing down from the rear of the Academy lecture theater bursting with pride...

...The little display stand full of books in Celestia's study, the name Twilight Sparkle proudly displayed on their spines...

...The bustling, prosperous *city* of Ponyville...

...The photograph hanging in Celestia's chambers, now faded and worn, of Twilight and her friends, hugging joyously...

Twilight was watching her mentor warily. Celestia smiled, sadly, and touched Twilight's hoof with her own. The unicorn started, as if she'd been shocked.

Celestia shook her head ruefully. What had she done, in her thoughtlessness – no, *selfishness*...? She had a right to be proud of what her precious, beloved student had done, but...

So did Twilight. This day was bound to come eventually.

The words – sorrowful, frightening, inevitable – cut their way through her heart and appeared in her mind, ready to be said. She closed her eyes and sighed, long and slow, then with solemn grace looked up at her beloved protégé.

"I suppose you're right, Twilight. You're *not* my student, anymore."

Twilight looked stunned.

Had she really expected Celestia not to acknowledge her achievements...? But then again, Twilight was always one to underestimate herself.

Celestia stood, melancholy warring with pride in her chest. "You have vastly exceeded my expectations, which were already almost impossibly high to begin with. You have done many times, in your youth, what many ponies wouldn't dream of accomplishing in a lifetime. Most importantly..." here, Celestia leaned down and gave Twilight a loving smile, "I have learned at least as much from you as you have from me. Calling you my student is... a vanity, on my part. Please, forgive me."

"I... what... what do you mean? Forgive you? For what?"

Celestia smiled. "I think it's long past time for you to get out from under my shadow, my faithful stu –" she stopped herself, and gave Twilight a knowing wink. "My faithful... Twilight Sparkle," she finished, a little awkwardly.

Twilight looked at the ground, pawing it nervously. Celestia knew this was a big moment, and let her – *former* – student take her time organizing her thoughts.

She felt a shadow of sorrow brush across her heart, but... things changed. It was inevitable.

"But you don't... cast a shadow, Princess," Twilight said, nervously.

Celestia looked down, as if she had to. "I suppose you're right, Twilight," she said, with a cheerfulness she only remotely felt. "But I suspect you're being a little too literal."

"Possibly," Twilight said, a tiny flame of her reflexive sarcasm shining bright in the depths of anxiety and, Celestia supposed, a little fear. This was... a transition. They were always hard.

They looked at each other for awhile, unicorn and alicorn, in a quiet, uncomfortable moment where, for the first time in a very, very long time, neither of them knew what to say.

Eventually Celestia's mind tossed up a card, desperately. "It's interesting you should bring this up," Celestia said, her voice picking up confidence as she gratefully turned her attention to something other than the rising, gnawing feeling of loss. "I was just the other day speaking with the Chancellor of the Academy, and he asked after you, wondering how your research was going."

"The *Chancellor*? Me!?" Twilight exclaimed, all forgotten in the face of rising awe. Celestia's discomfort melted away – there was something to transition to, now, and it was exciting and full of possibility.

Agh, but her chest was still so tight –

"Indeed," Celestia replied, smiling. "He was telling me – and this is an interesting fact, I hadn't realized – that they haven't raised anypony to the rank of Arch-Mage in almost fifteen years. Now I wonder why he might have mentioned that...?" Her eyes rolled, bemused, at Twilight's manic expression of unhidden glee.

"*Arch-Mage!? Me!?*" she gasped.

"Ah, but they can't make ponies who are still students into Arch-Mages, can they?" Celestia said, relief sneaking around the edges of her self-control into her voice as the unicorn dove headfirst into a frantic storm of pride and joy. Twilight failed to notice her tone; Celestia was reminded acutely of her expression on the day, oh, so long ago when –

Yesyesyesyeyesyesyesyesyes

– she had pointed to Twilight's newly-emblazoned cutie mark, and this whole ball of string had started rolling.

Inevitably onwards, spinning out, until –

No. No need to think about that.

She gave Twilight a beaming smile, a tear of fierce and loving pride leaking uncontrollably from one of her eyes, and the unicorn looked up gratefully at her, and the two of them wordlessly cleaned up the tea and wandered over to Applejack and Silver Shears, who said, at the same time –

• • •

"Sister? Are you alright?"

Celestia blinked. "What?"

The chariot soared through the sky, surrounded by just enough puffy, white clouds to give the still-blue sky of the early evening some cheerful texture. In front of the princesses, the pegasus Royal Guards flapped away with dutiful expressions and the selective deafness of a well-trained soldier assigned to stand, or, in this case, *fly* next to ponies who would, in all likelihood, talk about things that the Guards didn't need to know.

Luna gave her elder sister a deeply amused smile. New moon had come; Luna had waned completely, her stature reduced to a normal mare's, her coat dusky-black. Her mane was diminished, too, no longer a billowing field of stars but instead a gentle pale-blue, long and curled slightly at the ends as it had been when she was first freed from the Nightmare.

"You were somewhere else, I think," Luna prompted.

"Canterlot gardens," Celestia murmured. "Just a... happy memory."

"Happy?"

Celestia turned and looked down at her sister, whose smile nevertheless conveyed concern and amused disbelief. It was a very expressive smile.

"Bittersweet, anyways," she said, smiling – which made her realize she hadn't been.

Luna nodded, but said nothing more.

It was a warm, quiet evening over Sweet Apple Acres, the sort of early summer evening where it feels like the season is really starting to get rolling and is eager to strut its stuff, the air fresh and warm enough to make anypony want to just sit down, relax, and relish the sunshine. Even here among the clouds, Celestia and Luna were enjoying the intoxicating experience of a day which, by careful design, had been as perfect as any could be.

Every so often a group of pegasi flew by, nodding respectfully, as they descended towards the milling herd of ponies flooding in great streams onto the farm. The attendees either travelled up the famously dusty trail – this, Celestia understood, being something of a matter of pride amongst the Apple family for all it distressed the unicorn nobleponies to no end – or descended from the sky in little flights of two or three pegasi, flying in sedately, the younger amongst them snickering behind their hooves at the unicorns' discomfort.

Pale blue lights seemed to float amongst the growing crowd, around the crimson-dressed tables. Celestia looked down at Luna, who was nodding appreciatively at the moon lamps. Twilight and company must have been painstakingly charging them with moonlight for the last week – there were at least a hundred scattered around the south lawn, glowing only very slightly now. Come this evening the wedding would be lit as bright as day with stored moonlight.

"That must have been a lot of work," Celestia remarked idly.

Luna looked up at her smugly. "Twilight talked to me about it a few weeks ago, when I was in Ponyville to help her and Applejack with that map of the Everfree Forest. She needed my help, or they wouldn't have been able to do so many."

Celestia nodded. "Well done." She wondered if the little knife of regret she felt at being reminded of Luna's more attentive behavior towards Twilight had been by design.

"The night will be spectacular," Luna went on, a little giddily. Where waning time was a time of diminishing – a feeling that Luna described as a constant, nagging feeling of slowly falling – the new moon was a night full of renewal and the promise of the inevitable return to fullness, and Luna was accordingly tending towards the enthusiastic. "Plenty of stars on a nice, clear, new moon in the country."

Celestia smiled at her little – quite literally, at the moment – sister, who was smiling broadly. She looked around at the clouds and the landscape for a moment, then said, "Twilight should be very pleasant, as well."

"Will she?"

Celestia frowned. "Sunset. With the clouds, I mean."

"Do you?"

"Oh, stop it," Celestia said, tapping her sister with a hoof. Luna grinned up at her innocently.

The chariot descended gently onto the turf of Sweet Apple Acres a little ways off from the commotion. The princesses were immediately surrounded by a gaggle of the usual gossip rag jackals and journalponies, cameras flashing and a babble of voices asking a thousand questions at once. With practiced ease, the two princesses serenely strode past them as the Royal Guards started making very *intense* faces and herded the mob away.

This, though, had drawn the attention of various nobleponies, the inevitable second wave of ravenous attention-seekers. Celestia and Luna had been surprised when Spike told them how many ponies of note would be attending – it didn't seem like the sort of thing Mac and Fluttershy would like. But there were social obligations to consider; and besides, if Fluttershy didn't make it a society event, the attendees would have been about 90% Apples, and still a huge crowd in any case. The Apple family took celebrations seriously.

The other upside of making it a society do, had Celestia mused to herself, was that you could charge for drinks. Applejack and Mac would make sure those who didn't need to pay wouldn't, but their family's prize vintage would make sure those who *were* paying, kept on paying. "Unicorns just can't hold their cider," the earth pony mare had boasted once, not realizing Celestia and Twilight had been nearby, chuckling at her boasting.

Still, this presented the princesses with a familiar throng of upthrust, snooty faces, begging their pardons and asking after small matters. Unable to as easily dismiss this crowd as the media ponies, they graciously acknowledged a face here and there, ever-proud, ever-serene, smiling enigmatically with practiced ease; but no matter how royally they attempted to sneak away, another face appeared, all too pleased to see them. Despite their best efforts to part the waters, the crowd closed in around them, and the sisters shared a desperate, embarrassed glance –

"Thank you, noblemares and gentlecolts, for your *gracious* reception of the princesses," said a quiet voice which nevertheless cut through the cacophony with razor keenness, "But with your cooperation, I would like to show them to their seats." The crowd split, immediately, obedient to a sudden urge they didn't quite understand, and there stood Arch-Mage Twilight Sparkle, giving a tiny smile of satisfaction.

There was no avoiding the title. She wore a spectacular, midnight-blue cloak, classically styled but of contemporary cut – a gift from Rarity, no doubt – clasped by a simple but elegant brooch, a deep purple sapphire set in silver, styled after the Element of Magic.

"Twilight Sparkle. You're too kind," said Luna in her haughty but sing-song "don't scare the nobleponies" voice.

"This way, please," Twilight said, waving a hoof. The three departed from the mass of nobleponies, who milled around looking somewhat dazed and addressing each other as "Princess" regardless of whom they were talking to.

"Morningdew's Gentle Suggestion?" murmured Celestia. The two princesses could hardly have missed the whispers of magic surrounding Twilight's quiet words.

Twilight looked up at her with an expression of polite interest. "No, Princess, there were far too many mares in the crowd for that," she said. "It was a spell of my own."

"Effective," Luna said, admiringly.

"A little rude, all the same," Celestia said, but with the knowing smile of somepony who pulled similar stunts on a relatively regular basis. Twilight returned it with a distracted

smile of her own – honest, in all respects, except that it did not reach her eyes, which were tired and harassed. As Celestia looked, momentarily shocked, Twilight blinked and all sign of her fatigue vanished, replaced by eager helpfulness.

Celestia felt a little bolt of unease leap across her heart, but with a touch of mental effort she ignored it. Maintaining poise was appropriate in the circumstances, and after all, she *had* been up since... *before* the break of dawn...

...making sure all the napkins were the same length, or something, Spike's voice said from her memory. For some reason, the thought bothered Celestia intensely.

"I don't know about that," Luna said, speculatively, interrupting Celestia's thoughts. "Seems terribly useful... you'll have to show me – *us* – sometime, Twilight."

"Thank you, princess," Twilight said, calmly. "Perhaps we can discuss it at a later time."

Given the expression on her face as the two princesses caught each other's eye, even Luna thought this was weird. Who was this, and what had they done with Twilight Sparkle? They certainly had never seen how she reacted when asked about magic.

They approached a small wooden archway, carefully made and painted a rich red to match the table dressings, set slightly to the side of the tables, facing the stage where the marriage itself would be held. Sheer cloth, meant to discreetly screen the ponies inside from prying eyes, was suspended from it in a rough circle. There were two small reclining pillows underneath it – one large, black one and another smaller white one. Rarity would be behind that – always one for contrast.

"I hope you'll forgive me if it's cramped, at all," Twilight said, with a sincere tone of apology.

Celestia smiled. "Don't be silly, Twilight, it's absolutely fine," she said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Spike will be here shortly as well," Twilight said. "He is a *bit* too big for a table seat –" a hint of familiar wryness edged in on her voice, here, and Celestia felt an unbidden flush of comfort – "And of course, if you two should require *anything* at all, he would be happy to help." This had the tones of a statement that was true whether Spike realized it yet or not.

"Thank you, Twilight. I'm looking forward to everything."

Twilight smiled again, nodding. "I'm glad. Would you like me to ensure that you're undisturbed?"

"Between Spike and the Royal Guards, I suspect only ponies with truly pressing business will feel the need to... *disturb* us," Luna put in with a snort of laughter.

"It would be no trouble to –"

"We'll be fine, Twilight," Celestia interrupted, impatiently. "Please, I'm sure you have a great deal to attend to, and I'd hate for you to be distracted by us. Thank you very much for taking such pains on our behalf."

The glass smile appeared on Twilight's face again. "Not at all. It was my pleasure," she said calmly. "Forgive me for being forward, Princess. Please, enjoy yourselves." She turned around and trotted off purposefully.

Celestia sighed, and turned to Luna, who was giving her an incredulous look. "Is something wrong?" she asked, more irritably than she had meant to.

"I might ask you the same question, sister." Luna's expression softened into a wary half-frown. "I take it that's not how Twilight Sparkle was behaving yesterday?"

"Not at all," Celestia replied, stepping forward into the black pillow. "Yesterday she was all nerves. Which is classic Twilight, of course, for all that there were... troubling aspects. And last night –" She stopped herself.

Luna's eyebrow rose suggestively. "Last night...? *Do go on.*"

Celestia frowned at her sister, who rolled her eyes and stepped into the smaller white pillow carefully. "Last night, she... let me use her bed, at the Library. Her library. I woke up after we – you and I – spoke and she was on the floor, having a nightmare, so, I..." Celestia grimaced, bracing for the gleeful expression Luna was going to have when she heard this, "So I put her up in the bed. With me."

But Luna did not leap on the juicy tidbit; instead – to Celestia's surprise – her face fell and she lowered her head. "She has them often," Luna said, quietly. "I cannot help her."

"I just nuzzled her a little," Celestia said, with forced flippancy. "It seemed to help."

Luna's eyes flashed for a moment, and she said, "Oh, my, did it," but her heart wasn't in it. For some reason Celestia felt off-put by her sister's oddly mild reaction. She sounded... disappointed.

The princesses sat in silence, watching the ponyfolk assemble around the tables. Spike arrived, carrying tall flutes of sweet, heady apple wine and a big mug each of Apple Family Private Reserve Barrel-Aged Cider for the guards, who looked at them uncomfortably until Luna lost her patience and firmly assured them that *one* couldn't hurt; when that didn't work she gave them a royal command to drink the cider before it got warm and went to waste. They seemed much calmer after that.

The buzz of new arrivals and the general level of noise continued to increase regularly as the happy moment approached. A couple hundred ponies, at least, of all the tribes – even a zebra or six, with the sage Zecora sharing a polite nod with the princesses across a crowd, surrounded by a gaggle of zebras in their brightly-colored formalwear, fielding curious inquiries from those nearby.

So many familiar faces... there, near the back, surrounded by a crowd of admirers and flashing cameras, was the brand-new captain of the Wonderbolts, Scootaloo, beaming nervously as she was embraced by her predecessor Rainbow Dash, whose other arm was occupied waving a large mug of cider excitedly, dousing the nearby reporters and nobleponies as she described complicated aerial stunts. Nearby, Sheriff Applejack watched her friend warily, her face a mix of amusement and professional discomfort, undoubtedly wondering how much the crowd would take before they all collectively tackled Dash to prevent being completely soaked.

Elsewhere, explosions of balloons and candies erupted in the crowd, accompanied by a storm of giggles from a familiar pink pony. She pranced around excitedly, talking at lightning speed to anypony who would listen, followed by a crowd of cheering colts and fillies. Perhaps not the most dignified behavior for the Mayor of Ponyville, Celestia mused, but it certainly kept things lively.

Rarity was visible, too, chatting amiably with a number of prominent ponies as a gaggle of bored-looking mares stood around them, discreetly posing themselves in such a way as to display their elegant dresses to the best. She caught Celestia's eye and nodded a greeting.

As Luna predicted, no pony approached the princesses, who reclined quietly and just watched the crowd, occasionally sharing an amused glance as a particularly snooty unicorn noble was suddenly stunned to find their drink replaced with a rubber duck, or

something similar. Celestia smiled thoughtlessly out into the crowd, not letting her mind really settle on anything or anypony in particular as the day sunk into –

Twilight.

Celestia closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She had been trying to keep her mind clear, but a mean buzz of... *something* still lingered on the periphery of her mind, distracting her and making her irritable, turning what should have been a still pool into a chaotic haze of anxiety. She didn't even know what had caused it – a low-level snarl that just prowled around inside her skull, evading analysis or understanding, being obnoxious and preventing any real mental work from being done unmolested.

Forgive me for being forward, Princess...

The princess' lips curled into a sad grimace. Why had she gotten so irritated with Twilight, anyway? She used to find being fussed over by the little unicorn so... endearing. It must have just been the strange way she was acting – or just a byproduct of her anxiety in general.

Not so little, anymore, though. She looked old, in that cape... too old.

Celestia felt very sad, all of the sudden. The filly that still lived in her heart begged her to spring up, run to Twilight, and just hug her until everything was better again, because...

Just... because.

"Tell me, sister," Luna asked, suddenly, in a distracted tone of voice suggesting she had something dwelling in her mind even as she spoke. "How would you... *describe* Twilight's behavior...?"

Celestia turned to her. In the fading light of the sun, on the eve of a new moon, whispers of shadows played off Luna strangely, hinting of her true size and magnificence, occasionally getting as solid as a barely-visible plume of thin smoke that rolled off her when she moved.

"I'm not... sure," Celestia said, struck by this inability. It had been so...

"Perfunctory, perhaps?" Luna asked, quietly.

"Ha!" Celestia laughed, bitterly, causing ponies at nearby tables to look over to her suddenly, wondering what was the matter. "Oh, please, excuse me," she said to them, smiling.

She honestly couldn't say. Stilted and unnatural, but, at the same time, almost peaceful. Not unfriendly, just...

Distant.

And very, very tired. But that was no surprise, really.

"Hmm," Luna murmured, tapping her hoof in front of her slowly. "What about... *perfect*?" she asked, giving her sister a meaningful glance.

Celestia gave her a look. "Of course not."

"Well, right. Of course not," Luna said, thoughtfully. "But... she was *trying* to be, don't you think? So... *removed*," Luna said, her eyes flashing.

"It's Twilight, Luna." Celestia smiled gently, despite her growing unease. "We knew that already. Especially on a night like this, in front of everypony? I expect she's driving herself mad. And afterwards, I'm sure she'll be in a much better mood – relieved, at least. Or," Celestia gave her sister a grin, "we'll find her screaming her head off in the library. Silly filly, honestly..."

Luna gave her a strange, patronizing look and sipped her wine. "That," she said firmly, "is not what I meant."

"She's always been a perfectionist –"

"What does she compare her perfection *against*, do you think...?" Luna asked, mildly.

Celestia looked away irritably.

...and remembered.

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The three stones rose... and fell.

"Just relax, Twilight. Don't force it. Just *feel* the flow of magic and guide it, gently, like we talked about."

Celestia sat, calmly, as Twilight Sparkle gave her a brave nod and turned back to the little pile of smooth, black rocks. Around them, Canterlot gardens bloomed magnificently in the drunken haze of late summer. Cicadas, hidden in the trees, sang their buzzing hymn to the late afternoon sun.

The little purple filly nodded ferociously, her face screwed up in an expression of determination. She leaned into her horn, eliciting a melodic murmur of laughter from Celestia, and tried again. Her horn glowed brightly, and the stones shot straight up into the air, vanishing into the sky.

"Oh! My," Celestia said, laughing brightly. Twilight blushed furiously and pawed the ground in front of her. The two waited for a while, silently, Celestia looking down at her new student fondly. Eventually the three stones thumped back into the rich earth with final-sounding *thuds*.

"Sorry," Twilight whimpered.

"For...?"

"For... for shooting the rocks into the sky." The little unicorn shrank.

Celestia laughed. "Oh, Twilight... you never need to apologize for your magic. Not yet, at least. When you are older, you'll have more control, and more responsibility... but now, you are young, and very talented..." She nuzzled the little filly fondly, enjoying Twilight's eager nuzzle in return. "I wouldn't have been surprised if they had exploded, to tell you the truth," she added, conspiratorially.

Twilight looked up at her with a mix of awe and terror. "Really?"

"It has certainly happened before," Celestia said, with a bemused smile as her mind briefly called up memories of the more spectacular blast marks she had seen at the Academy. She looked down at Twilight and, with a fledgling sense of pride in her new protégé, reflected that even Academy students much older than her would struggle to even budge three lodestones at once, much less toss them careening into the atmosphere.

She had not, of course, told Twilight that the stones were specially made to resist being moved by unicorn magic, but she would, someday. Celestia was a firm believer in letting ponies show you what they were capable of and then informing afterwards how difficult

what they had done actually was. Among other things, it tended to be more amusing that way – their faces were priceless.

"I think we've had enough practice for today, Twilight," Celestia said calmly. "And in any case, your parents will want you home before it gets too dark." It would be several years yet before Twilight would take up residence in the palace, but at this point she was already well-known to the palace staff, and the guards rarely gave her second looks anymore as she opened doors for herself and wandered around the grounds on errands from Her Majesty.

"Oh," Twilight said, sounding disappointed. "Do we *have* to stop?"

"I'm afraid so. But you can help me by carrying one of the stones back to the palace, if you like."

The little unicorn nodded eagerly and rushed off to the little divots.

"She's very cute, isn't she?" came a voice from the distant future.

Luna? Celestia's mind asked, startled, suddenly aware of *herself*, distinct from the *memory of herself*. She felt a distorted sense of separation, and then watched the memory wander up to Twilight and help the little unicorn pry the lodestones free of the soil. She looked down at a ghostly, insubstantial hoof, in wonder.

"Neat trick, don't you think?" Luna asked, appearing beside her in an equally phantasmal form.

Despite herself, Celestia was fascinated. "I had no idea you could do this."

"It occurred to me to wonder what the difference between a memory and a daydream actually is, when you get right down to it," Luna replied cheerfully. "Especially the memory of someone as magically powerful as yourself, sister. I think you're a little overtired, which is helping... and the technique needs some refinement –"

"I'd prefer to keep some of my mind private, if it's all the same to you," Celestia said, setting aside her curiosity to indulge her irritation at the intrusion. "Is there something in particular you wanted?"

The ghostly form of Luna wandered forward to observe the memory of Celestia and Twilight, struggling with the lodestones. "You could keep me out, if you really wanted to," she said, looking over her shoulder slyly.

It was all she had to say.

Celestia and Luna followed the memory of Celestia and Twilight as they ambled up the path to the castle from the grounds. The present Celestia watched, heart aching, as Twilight breathlessly took in the gardens and the statuary, her eyes wide with wonder as they passed marble busts of famous ponies – wizards, statesponies, artists – and the allegorical statues of the Virtues, the Elements of Harmony, the Princesses...

"Princess?" Twilight asked, timidly, looking up at an elegant marble fountain of Celestia and Luna, which seemed slightly more worn and unkempt than the other statues.

"What is it, Twilight?" asked the memory of Celestia.

"What's it like," Twilight said, swallowing nervously. "What's it like, being... perfect?"

Celestia watched the expression on the memory of her face flicker. Even now she remembered the gut-wrenching guilt she had felt as Twilight asked her this, the fountain depicting herself and her sister in happier times framing the little unicorn against the setting sun. Pain and loss shone in her eyes, although her smile only faltered for the briefest of moments.

"I'm far from perfect, Twilight," Celestia murmured in harmony with herself.

"But you're the most powerful unicorn, and, and, you have wings... and you're so beautiful," the little unicorn stammered. The memory of Celestia smiled patiently, while her ghostly present self closed her eyes, not wanting to see Twilight's eager expression any longer than she had to.

"That remains to be seen, little one," Celestia said, again matching her memory word-for-word. It seemed like she had to resist doing so, especially the closer she was to the memory of herself; this whole situation was all very interesting, but she found herself unable to focus on the broad view. The little unicorn, looking up at her new mentor with awe, occupied her attention.

"I think someday, you could be much more powerful than me," the memory of herself confided.

"I could never be more powerful than *you*," Twilight gasped.

Celestia had smiled down at her, fondly, and indeed the memory of herself did so, looking more sad than the present Celestia remembered being at the time. Twilight had

been young; she didn't understand what she was saying, really. And perhaps, in terms of raw power, Twilight could never match the Princess of the Sun... but Celestia was more than proud to admit that in many technical aspects of magic, Twilight had become much more adept than her – more subtle, more creative. She worked with less – although what she worked with was immensely more than most other unicorns – and thus exceeded her mentor in so many little ways.

"We'll see, my dear. If you study hard, I think you'll take us both by surprise," Celestia mouthed along with the memory.

"With you teaching me, maybe," Twilight looked up at the memory of Celestia, beaming love and adoration as only foals can. "You'll be there, right?"

"Of course I will," Celestia said –

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" – my faithful student," she finished, under her breath.

Her heart was beating *very* hard. It had been the first time she'd called Twilight that.

Luna was looking at her inscrutably. "That was all very interesting, wasn't it?" she asked, sipping her wine.

Celestia rounded on her. "That was *not*, in *any way* –" she began, her voice strangled. "That was private."

"First of all, I had no idea I could do that," Luna said, quickly. "I will never do it again, without your permission."

"See that you don't," Celestia said, coldly.

"In any case," the moon princess said, inspecting a hoof haughtily, "What I saw was nothing I couldn't have guessed had happened at one point or another. Although if I may say so, it warms my heart to know that even then you still thought of me fondly." She grinned.

"I never stopped. You know that." Celestia looked away from her sister's far-too-smug expression. "That was a very long time ago, Luna. I'm sure –" She paused, catching control of herself. "What are you implying?"

"Implying?" Luna asked, innocently. "I think I'm being fairly overt."

"About?"

Luna looked speculative for a second. "It occurs to me to wonder, sister," she said coolly, "once again, if you have thought about your own reaction to all of this."

Celestia bristled. "I don't see what that has to do with Twilight –"

"Of course you don't," Luna said, with a sad little sigh.

"I am just concerned for her."

"Any more so that usual, do you think?"

"Not at all," Celestia said. Her little sister was pleased to play her little games, but Celestia found she wasn't in the mood.

...Which was very odd, now that she came to think about it. Usually she found Luna's eccentricities endearing.

And... she had been extremely impatient with Twilight as well. Why? This wasn't like her at all.

"Good," Luna said, encouragingly. "You're thinking."

"Be quiet," Celestia murmured. Luna giggled.

Twilight had been so... strange. Yesterday, she had seemed terrified to find Celestia on her lap, while today, it didn't seem to faze her. Both of these behaviors were... strange. In the classic sense of "strange", as in "stranger" – "other".

Other. Other than herself. Acting, or being driven out of comfort by fear. Both were unpleasant, and unwelcome – an all-too-obvious reminder of their alienation from each other, which... hurt.

But acting... perfect?

...Perhaps. In the sense of being... removed. Apart. *Above*, even...

Trying to emulate Celestia...? Surely not. But it would be just like Luna to poke at her sister that way.

Celestia shook her head, irritably. This was nonsense. Luna's intrusion was making the memory – which had just been a passing thought, really – seem more important than it was. Twilight had just been a filly, still star-struck and overawed, not realizing what she was saying. Look at her reasons for thinking Celestia was perfect – meaningless. Magic power... wings...

Beauty...

It was all just... what? Something.

Hanging over her mind, tainting every thought...

Regret. Nostalgia. Dwelling in happy memories was making everything hazy and painful, preventing her from thinking clearly about what needed to be done to resolve the situation.

Frustrated by her own inability to think, Celestia shook her head, trying to dismiss the chaotic haze in her mind. "Luna, I –"

"Hush, now," Luna said, turning a sly smile on her sister. "The wedding's starting."

The bustle of the crowd had naturally calmed as evening fell. The sky was a deep purple in the west, as day slipped into night, and the moon lamps shone merrily, filling the air with a cool, ethereal light. Hush fell over the assembled ponies, although a silhouette wearing a cowboy hat had to quickly grab two *other* silhouettes – one prancing and giggling, the other complaining that her feathers were getting ruffled – to the little cordoned-off area of the barn where the bridal party was being assembled.

Celestia had, if anything, been making a polite understatement to Rarity when she told the unicorn she attended many weddings; she had attended *thousands* of them. Happy, joyous events all – okay, maybe not all – but the shine had worn off the romance of the whole thing long ago, and the Princess wryly considered herself something of a connoisseur of wedding quality.

She was interested to see what Twilight had come up with. Earth ponies tended towards very simple but dignified affairs, whereas pegasi went in for things being quick and to the point, as they always did. It was generally unicorns who were into pageantry, although Twilight wasn't exactly the type for it...

Celestia had a sudden vision, inspired from long experience, of Twilight sitting in her library, drowning in books, magazines, and other reference materials, fretting endlessly

over how to arrange a suitable wedding, as Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy stood around giving her advice, all of it conflicting with each other.

Why didn't Twilight think to ask *her* for advice? Once upon a time –

Celestia let an all-too-familiar sting of discomfort come and pass. That was why she was here, wasn't it – it wasn't *once upon a time*, it was *now*, and things weren't quite right between them.

But they would be again. It was just a matter of time.

Setting aside the prickly issue of her relationship with Twilight, the princess settled down and speculated idly on her protégé's wedding plans. As the wedding began in earnest, Celestia realized Twilight had, as ever, done her research with care... she just hadn't been reading books about weddings.

She'd been reading fairy tales.

In the calm of early evening, music started playing, seeming to come from everywhere at once, suffusing air with a gentle, but purposeful sense of *impending*; long, slow, rising notes seeming to carry the crowd's attention to the altar where Macintosh stood proudly. In the fey light of the moon lamps he seemed as noble and princely as any unicorn noblepony had ever been, though he had just this morning been pulling stumps in a field.

With a sudden rise, the music announced the arrival of Fluttershy, grinning bashfully as she was escorted down the aisle by Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie Pie. The little pegasus wore a beautiful pale-blue gown which scintillated radiantly in the low light – not flashy or unnatural, but instead like a gentle ripple of moonlight across the sea. Rarity's work – the unicorn, even now, was clearly fussing over it – and it was a masterpiece, a fantasy made real through long effort. The long train was carried by a flock of birds, all chirping and tweeting brightly. Fluttershy joined Mac onstage, their eyes meeting fondly, and the wedding began.

Everything was touched, in the moonlight, by a sense of unreality, like a dream, come to life. And while it was true that the Apple family's best had been flowing freely for several hours now, still...

"Are you doing something, sister?" Celestia murmured.

"I don't have to," Luna replied quietly. Even she sounded... awed.

The ceremony was brief, and solemn, but the *kiss*... the kiss could have lasted forever, and nopony would have complained.

Celestia had idly wondered why only Applejack (including hat, which no power Celestia had ever known could part from her), Rarity, and Pinkie Pie had been in Fluttershy's bridal party; Twilight and Rainbow Dash were conspicuously absent. But as the kiss came, a familiar magic swept through the audience like a wind, carrying little motes of moonlight from the lamps rushing forward to the stage, swirling around Mac and Fluttershy, coalescing into balls of light which, as the new couple leaned together, soared into the air...

"Yeah! Woooooo hooooo!" cried a familiar voice trailing a magnificent rainbow, approaching at breakneck speed from the starry horizon...

Mac and Fluttershy's lips met, and Rainbow Dash, cheering and twirling in the air with unrivalled skill, connected with the central ball of moonlight. It exploded into a riot of color, balls and pinwheels of every hue bursting into fiery flowers, lighting up the night sky. Trailing behind her, trails of thunderous clouds crashed into the remaining moonlight orbs, sending spectacular silver-and-gold trails spiraling out into the heavens. They danced miraculously in the sky, the magic more alive than any firework, spinning and whirling as if the lights themselves were as happy to exist and be seen as the wedding guests were to see them.

The crowd looked on in awe, cheering wildly, foals laughing and prancing excitedly.

It was... beautiful.

Again Celestia's inner filly again rose to the forefront of her mind, wishing against all reason for this wonderful moment to last forever.

But alas for the eternal: nothing does.

As the magical lights burned themselves out and faded, the orchestra raised one last, decisive fanfare and the happy couple looked out at their guests, Macintosh beaming proudly and Fluttershy giving a gentle smile. Another cheer was raised from the crowd, and the two nodded, demurely.

"All right, all right!" Pinkie Pie shouted over the din. "Enough of the mushy stuff! Let's *party*!"

Lamps – regular lamps, of every color, turning the yard into a festive light show – flared to life; and in the barn, suddenly illuminated brightly, the DJ Vinyl Scratch looked up with a ferocious grin and said, "Now that Octavia's done boring you to death, let's get some *real* music going!" With a flash of her horn, she set the turntables spinning and music filled the air, drowning out an enraged cry from the orchestra. Apple family ponies began calling out from their stalls, and the food and drink started flowing in earnest.

Celestia turned to Luna. "Was that your 'help' with the lamps? Teaching her to move moonlight...?"

"I... never taught her how to do that," Luna said breathlessly, her eyes lit with amazement. "I'm not sure *I* could just stand up and do that, right off the hoof..."

Celestia chuckled and rose from the reclining bed, gesturing for Luna to follow her. "Now you know how I felt when I woke up one morning with my entire study rearranged," she said, the memory blooming a welcome feeling of nostalgic amusement in her, "and a little purple filly, who shall go unnamed, sitting in the middle asking if I liked it."

In the privacy of her mind, she was suddenly aware that she had never changed it since. It hadn't seemed important.

The princesses – flanked, as ever, by their guards, followed closely by a somewhat tipsy Spike – made their way through the crowd of heavily-lubricated ponies who had wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to a no-holds-barred celebration. The youngest among them – youngest of heart, at least, since there was Granny Smith, doing her best – were dancing to the carefully-administered beats of Vinyl Scratch, who sat behind her turntables, mixing with furious precision. Meanwhile, their elders drank deeply of the Apple family's labor, both in terms of succulent baked goods and the sweet wine and tart ciders of their legendarily barn-sized distilleries. Pegasus traded jokes with earth pony here, unicorn and zebra bought each other drinks there, and everypony smiled and laughed under a dazzling sea of stars.

It was as perf–

Celestia shook her head. It was as *good* as things ever got. Luna's little games were getting to her.

"So," Luna said, idly, as they walked. "A wedding for dear Fluttershy..."

"A wonderful wedding. She couldn't have had better," Celestia agreed.

"A party for the esteemed Mayor Pinkie Pie..."

"She might even have to *rest*, eventually."

"Another air show for Rainbow Dash..."

Celestia regarded her sister warily. "...What are you getting at?"

"A fashion presentation in front of all the nobleponies she could have every dreamed for Rarity..."

"Luna, what are you –"

"And the Apple family will do well by this night, I think," Luna concluded. "I know Applejack frets about the farm, now that she's Sheriff."

Celestia pursed her lips and looked down at her sister, who was giving nearby ponies a bright smile as she passed. "And for Twilight?"

"Isn't it obvious...?"

"Another demonstration of her ability to organize," Celestia said firmly. "And, as you point out, a chance to let her friends shine. I would expect nothing less of her."

"'Demonstration'? For whom, I wonder...?" Luna mused. Celestia began to respond, but the crowd parted in front of them and the wedding party appeared in front of the princesses, their faces a picture of bliss.

Luna stepped forward. "Oh, dear Fluttershy," she said, embracing the pegasus firmly. "I wish you years of happiness, my friend." Celestia rolled her eyes. Luna could be quite cute when she let herself, and the combination of Luna and the incontinently adorable Fluttershy, flushed with joy, was almost unbearable.

"Thank you, Princess," Fluttershy murmured in her gentle, even voice. "I was so glad you could find time to join us."

"I wouldn't have allowed myself to be absent. Ah! Macintosh," Luna beamed at the huge stallion. "Take good care of her, or I'll turn you inside out and bury you in the woods~!" she said in a sing-song voice, smiling brightly.

Macintosh looked at the cheerful face of the princess nervously. "Uh... Ah will, princess," he said. Applejack and Rainbow Dash snickered at him.

"My congratulations as well, Fluttershy," Celestia said gently. "And you, too, Macintosh. I wish you nothing but happiness together."

"Thank you, princess. We are... truly honored to have you here," Fluttershy replied politely. "Although, in my case, um... I'm just happy to see you again." She blushed into Celestia's stunned smile. She had seen Fluttershy not –

Two months ago.

About that sick –

Never mind, never mind...

Casting the painful thought from her mind, Celestia recalled a time, not so long ago, when *anypony* just *looking* at Fluttershy would turn her bright red and cringing with embarrassment – and here she was on her wedding night, in front a crowd of hundreds, speaking to not one, but both princesses with barely a squeak.

She gave Fluttershy as gentle a look of affection as she could manage. Ponyville and its ponies had changed quite a bit, yes, but... not all of it was bad.

"Oh dear, *somepony* is missing!" Luna said brightly, giving the surroundings an exaggerated once-over. "Where have you five hidden Twilight Sparkle, hmm? She is, after all, responsible for the wonderful things we've seen tonight..." She gave Celestia a bright smile.

"I'm here, Princess," Twilight said, appearing from the crowd. She stepped forward with dignified grace, every inch the proud statespony. "So kind of you to think of me."

"I was most impressed with your magical display, Twilight," Luna said. "Wasn't it absolutely marvelous, Celestia?"

"Spectacular," Celestia said, giving her sister an indulgent smile that did not match her eyes, which shot the younger alicorn a look saying: enough! "I will confess myself deeply impressed once again, Twilight. With everything. As always." Internally, Celestia felt herself cringing. Twilight's face, her eyes – so... false! So empty!

Come back to me, my little pony.

"That's very kind of you to say," Twilight said, smiling gently. "Of course, I could never have achieved such results without the help of my friends."

"Oh, Twilight," Fluttershy beamed, breaking free of Luna, Mac, and her friends to embrace the unicorn, "This was better than I could have ever dreamed."

"It had better have been," Rainbow Dash huffed. "We've been up since dawn practicing, after all. I thought the rehearsal was last night..."

"Up since dawn?" Luna said, feigning shock. "You don't say."

"Yeah," Dash whined, "Somepony decided things weren't just as they were supposed to be, and was already up at my window in her balloon at the crack of dawn, demanding I practice some more –"

"'Twas worth it, though," Applejack said, loyally. "Everythin' turned out just right."

"And it was *trés magnifique*!" Rarity gushed. "It's one thing to *know* what's going to happen and – ah! Another thing *entirely* to see it happen..." She drifted off, meeting Celestia's gaze for the briefest moment, flickering to Twilight.

Celestia nodded, very slightly, and Rarity's smile brightened.

Luna and the wedding party turned on Mac and Fluttershy, suggestively asking them about their evening plans to their mutual consternation, as well as Applejack's. Twilight looked up at Celestia with an expression of pleasant interest. "What was that, Princess? That... look, from Rarity?"

"Alert as ever, I see," Celestia said, with forced levity. "Rarity and I spoke yesterday."

It wasn't exactly a lie... but it felt like one.

"About me?"

"Among other things." Also technically true. The words felt like hot lead in her mouth – she was actually *evading* Twilight! "Forgive an old mare asking after her –" faithful student "– friend."

Ah, that pause! She was going to have to bite her tongue one of these days to prevent that deadly, deadly temptation from overriding her sense.

Twilight's smile became a little less glassy, just for a moment – but only just. "Princess, you're hardly an old mare," she said, all serene politeness.

"You're very kind, Twilight, but there are a thousand years disagreeing with you, I'm afraid..." Celestia responded evenly.

She was maintaining her poise as well as she could; she was beginning to feel very uncomfortable, in a quiet but pressing way. It was like knowing you had to cross an iced-over lake and with each step the ice creaked, quietly but insistently.

"You wanted to speak, princess?" Twilight asked.

One of these steps, before you realized it...

"Oh, yes," Celestia said. "But not now. I don't want to keep you from your friends at a time like this. You've done something truly spectacular, Twilight –"

The ice cracked, and in she fell.

"So you enjoyed the wedding, then?" Twilight asked, her mask of dignity falling away with surprising suddenness, real eagerness suddenly alight in her voice. An honest desire to be praised poured off of every syllable. "What did you think!?"

It was not her voice that set Celestia's heart breaking; it was her eyes, wide and excited – no different than they had been when she was a little filly moving stones, craving even the most passing word of praise from her mentor, who had nothing but praise for her.

For the first time all night, Celestia saw the real Twilight Sparkle, the one she loved so dearly, unhidden. The beautiful, splendid, genius mare, who had just indulged all her friends' joys, and dreams – what had her dream been?

Celestia's heart sunk as her ability to deny what was happening gave way to the obvious.

Twilight had put on a show. She had spent an entire day making sure something that was already magical and special, planned painstakingly for months, would happen *just right*, just to show Celestia that she could. The wedding had been beautiful, thoughtful, magical, everything it could have possibly been, and Twilight had then set out and made it happen... perfectly.

And now, Celestia realized with growing horror... she was asking for a grade.

Worse: Celestia was reflexively inclined to give her one. Guilt and shame flared in her mind.

From the recent past, the memory of Luna's sad little whisper rang like a bell in the night: "She'll *always* be your student, I think."

"Twilight, I –" she began. Her eyes lifted from her protégé's and met, inexorably, the sad smile on Luna's face, looking over at her as the rest of the wedding party laughed humongously at something Pinkie Pie had said at Rainbow Dash's expense.

The princess sighed, sadly.

"It was... perfect, Twilight," Celestia said. "Absolutely perfect."

As Twilight beamed up at her in supreme joy, Luna shook her head. Celestia suddenly couldn't decide which hurt more – the things that had changed... or the things that *hadn't*.

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The little filly pranced next to her as they trotted through Canterlot, and Celestia smiled gently at the irregular clip-clop of excitement. Usually she asked one of the guards or a steward to escort Twilight home in the evenings, but for some reason, tonight she had felt the need to do it herself. She couldn't say why; she just felt awkward about dismissing her. It hadn't felt *right*.

The moon was rising over the homes and stores, pale white in contrast with the amber candlelight from the windows of Canterlot Town. It was rich and full, filling the world with a strange, ethereal light, and made Twilight's purple coat look blue, like... *hers* had.

Twilight kept looking up at her, as if making sure that she was still there.

"I'm here, little one, don't worry," Celestia said, chuckling. "I'll always be here, for you."

"Promise?"

It wasn't like she had a choice. "I promise," the princess replied fondly, "my faithful student."

They walked on into the night, together.

Discord's Prophecy + Sobriety + A Little Distance + Luna's Anxiety +
Why Twilight? + The Loyal Assistant + Moving Through the World +
Overshadowed + Celestia's Madness + The Glory of the Sun + Where the
Pattern Leads + A Moment + Discord's Vengeance

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"Don't worry, Princess. We won't let you down!"

With that, Twilight and her friends charged off to the Palace Labyrinth, Discord's laughter echoing through the Hall of Records behind them.

Celestia watched them go, heart in her throat. This would be another trial where Twilight and her friends would face a peril that had nearly claimed Celestia herself, long ago, but the Elements of Harmony were the only thing that could help them now.

But she knew her old foe quite well; she had never let herself forget. Celestia waited for the laughter to stop ringing in the hall, frowning at thin air, eyes shut. "They'll be at the labyrinth in no time at all, you know. Say what you're going to say."

Discord, as mangled and horrific-looking as he ever had been, slithered into existence before her, whirling into being from thin air. "My lady," he said, bowing deeply. "I must say you're looking... different, these days." She shuddered as he ran a clawed hand through her flowing mane. "I like it; very... colorful."

Celestia let him prowl around her, watching him with deep suspicion. "What are you planning?"

"Oh, stop that," Discord said with a wave. "You know very well I'm not going to tell you. Full marks for the imposing queen act, though, very well done. Alas, though," he said, affecting a pose of deep, deep despair, "as you have probably already guessed, I am still quite weak from my lengthy imprisonment. Rains of chocolate milk are far from the of the sorts of nonsense I can get up to normally," he said, his tone growing malicious, "as you well know."

"Twilight will deal with you in no time at all, then," Celestia said, harshly. Memories of Discord's full power lashed at her mind. So much *fire*, so much *chaos*...

Discord backstroked through the air, clicking his tongue reproachfully. "You know, I was actually disappointed that I wouldn't get to play with you again. But now I see you're so much less *fun*. You've let that *fire* in your belly burn out. Dull, dull, dull!" His mad eyes bored into her. "You seem *tired*, Celestia."

Celestia gave him a haughty sneer. "Do I?"

"Heavy is the weight on the head that wears the crown', perhaps?" Discord cackled. "Ah, such a shame. But your little ponies seem to have some spirit, at least. Especially that little protégé of yours... so proud, so... *loyal*. Very powerful, too, I've no doubt." Discord sneered mockingly. "I'll enjoy *breaking* her," he snarled, the mask of amiable, almost friendly lunacy dropping away into a maelstrom of teeth and fury. Here again was the creature out of nightmare, the mad thing that existed to do nothing but cause pain and misery to match its own misbegotten existence.

"You will not."

"Oh? Will I not?" he crooned.

"You will *not* –" Celestia bit back the words, looking away from her old foe irritably. A little flash of terror had loosed her rigid self-control, an all-too-vivid image of Twilight, ensorcelled, her will broken and her spirit dulled by Discord's malign influence flashing through her imagination like wildfire.

Discord howled with laughter. "There's that fire I remember!" He rolled and pirouetted in midair, gleefully. "The face behind the queenly mask is worn indeed if a little jab like that is all it takes to get at you, now."

Celestia gave him an acid look. "I will enjoy passing you in the statuary, once you are imprisoned once again," she said, icily. "I'll admit some pettiness, and confess that comparing your face now to the cringing wreck you're bound to end up as will be very satisfying."

"Mmmm, I'm sure," Discord purred, looking bored. "Do you know, this conversation has been a real pleasure. I find I no longer care if I win or lose – because no matter what happens, I can smell doom on you, Celestia. A thousand years is a long time to hold a grudge, and I was never that sane to begin with," he said, his tone cool and collected but his eyes blazing with fury. "It's almost enough for me to see that your armor is battered, your mask is slipping... I can see it crushing that proud, proud heart of yours."

As he spoke, he lost control of his voice, which became more and more filled with a mad, gleeful joy, eyes lit with all-consuming hatred. "And I know your weakness," he gloated. "I look forward to making her *dance* in front of you, even if you and your *wretched* sister are pointing the Elements at me as I start the tune. Oblivion will be *worth it*, just to watch you *break* as you see what remains of Twilight Sparkle when I'm finished with her." His face hovered inches from hers, his eyes wild with spite and rage.

"You will never get the chance," Celestia said, too aware of the little tremble in her voice. "Twilight and her friends *will* defeat you."

Discord's look of hate broke into a broad grin. With a suddenness that stunned Celestia with terror, his head darted forward and he planted a kiss on her forehead. "I haven't even gotten to the best part," he whispered in her ear, almost gently, rolling around behind her in the air. "The best part is that even if you're right, and I fail completely and utterly, and your *faithful student* overcomes me immediately – which won't happen, incidentally – I've had the true pleasure of discovering that if I don't break you... you'll willingly destroy *yourself*."

Celestia rounded on him. "What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"You don't *know*?" The mad creature howled with laughter. "Or perhaps you think not admitting it will make it go away...? Ah, my dear Celestia," Discord said, flying around her slowly, his voice a poisonous hiss. "It's all so deliciously ironic that I'm inclined to let it happen anyways. You know, I just might! Ha!" He leapt into the air before her. "Looks like your little ponies have arrived – in the wrong place, of course, since they didn't stop and *think*. See you in the funny pages," he said, blowing her a kiss. With a snap of his claws, he vanished.

Celestia rushed over to the window and looked down to the grounds. The draconequus was floating invisibly behind Twilight and her friends, no doubt mocking them with some nonsense task that would inevitably lead nowhere. He was fond of his little games. Celestia just had to trust that Twilight and her friends' bond was strong enough to break through his deceptions –

Even as she thought this, her chest tightened painfully and she had to suppress the urge to sob. She was trembling.

Deep breaths. In... and out. Relax. Everything was alright. Don't let them see you bleeding –

The door to the hall slammed open, and Luna strode in flanked by two guards. "Sister!" she declared. "Was that – here!?"

"Yes," Celestia said, glad her back was to Luna. In the wake of her terror, she felt completely drained. She just wanted to rest.

Luna's face fell into a look of horrified shock, but she rallied quickly. "We shall summon the guard –" she said, slipping into the Royal Canterlot Voice in her anxiety.

"Don't worry, Luna," Celestia said, drowsily. "Twilight and the Elements of Harmony are already dealing with the situation." She turned to her sister, weariness almost physically pressing down on her. "They have... they can deal with it."

"You... you're sure, sister? Mayhap if we went to their aid..."

Celestia wandered to the central dais and collapsed, eyes half-open as exhaustion rolled into the space in her head so recently occupied by terror. Twilight *was* a gap in her armor, no mystery there... but she was also the most intelligent and capable pony Celestia could name.

"Everything... will be fine, Luna." Celestia sighed heavily. "We'll just monitor the situation... might need a little help later..."

"Sister? *Sister!* Art thou wounded?" Luna rushed to her sister's side, her face a portrait of terror. Her guards shuffled their feet awkwardly.

"Just... tired," Celestia mumbled. "I feel like... I haven't had a rest... in... a lifetime," she added between yawns.

Luna sputtered. "But what of Discord? Surely he can't be allowed to –"

"Trust Twilight," Celestia said, sleep overtaking her. "That's... what I do."

• • •

Twilight and Rarity trotted up to the door of the library – *her* library, now... she'd never get used to that. Wizards were supposed to have towers, weren't they?

It had gone *perfectly*. Even the *Princess* had said so, and Luna had been so impressed, in the sulky way she had when someone took her by surprise – like Rainbow Dash and all other incorrigible pranksters (with the notable exception of Pinkie Pie), she didn't find

being on the wrong end of the joke much fun. Through the haze of one – okay, *three* – too many, Twilight smiled a gleeful grin that extended through her whole body, warming her from forehead to fetlock.

This was *sure* to set her chat with the Princess off on the right foot. Everything would be fine, if she just kept a smile on her face and her head in the game. She could sit down, and they could talk it out like rational ponies, and now the Princess had seen she was still working hard, still dutiful, still *talented*, just like she had been that fateful day in the South Tower – the day of that first Rainboom.

"Oh, Twilight, daaaaaarling," Rarity slurred, despite herself. "You really outdid yourself..."

"I was nothing, I was nothing," Twilight said, repeating herself as she bobbed her head up and down. It made everything flow around her in a funny way, and she giggled stupidly.

Next to her Rarity snickered and pointed, unable to form a coherent word. Their delusional happiness had as much to do with residual joy from the wedding, adrenaline and endorphins flooding their brains with thought-melting neurochemical glee, as it did with the Apple family's extremely good cider.

"Shhhhhh," Twilight hissed, suddenly. "The pernsis!"

"The pernsis," Rarity snickered.

"Shh!" Twilight hushed harshly. Rarity snickered at her, hoof over her face.

After two tries, Twilight opened the door and they entered, Twilight hushing Rarity every other step, eliciting another set of giggles from the unusually frizzled-looking unicorn. The owl, Owloysius, hooted at her insistently as she walked in.

"Ah! Wuzzat!" Twilight cried, waving her hooves in front of her. "Oh... 's just t'owl..."

"An owl!" Rarity's hooves slapped over her face and she turned red. Owloysius gave her what, for an owl, was a cool look, turning his head around until it looked like it would spin off and staring at her, eyes wide open. Rarity seemed like she would start hyperventilating any second.

"Stay here," Twilight said, sitting the trembling Rarity down in a chair. "I'm gonna check on the princess." Rarity waved her away, struggling to contain herself.

Twilight wandered up the stairs, reflecting that *this*, very possibly, had been the best night ever they had always dreamed of. And tomorrow, after taking care of some cleanup from the wedding, she'd sit down with Princess Celestia and they could sort things out, and everything would be great again.

Definitely.

She opened the door to her study carefully –

And stared.

• • •

Celestia stared out into the first snatches of sunrise over Canterlot from the balcony off her study. The towers and canopies of the elaborate castle were cast black against the golden-red sky. Some might call it a bit... cowardly, but she was privately glad to be here – physically, if not mentally, distant from the painful memory of Twilight's eyes looking up at her in joy as, once again, her mentor graced her with an *evaluation* of her spectacular achievements.

The princess had not stayed at the wedding much longer than she had to – which, *nobless oblige* – was far too long indeed. The faces of nobleponies, slurring weirdly thanks to careless indulgence in the Apple Family's best ("Apple Family 100% Down-Home Old-Time Country Cider: It's A Buck in the Head!"), blurred together in her memory as if she, too, had been drunk, their self-important gabbling all so much noise. Her ears and eyes had been preoccupied with the sights and sounds of Twilight, mask of dignity long cast aside, celebrating with her friends... now that she had *permission*.

Even the words forming in her mind made her stomach heave with guilt.

Their eyes had met again, through the crowd, as the six friends raised a toast to 'Futtersly's fyushurr happinesh', and the thankfulness there had been almost unbearable. Celestia had summoned all her remaining willpower to gracefully extricate herself from Lord Flashhooves and approach the wedding party to excuse herself. She had given each of them a bright smile before she left, almost having to exert individual control over each of the muscles in her face as Twilight beamed at her.

Celestia only vaguely recalled returning to Canterlot –

No, that wasn't quite... true. She had *no* memory of returning to Canterlot... just a memory of staring at Twilight's bed in an agony of shame, her skin crawling as she felt

unworthy of Twilight's hospitality. But the trouble with supreme cosmic powers is that they tended to do things *for* you, and things got a little confused sometimes...

Her head fell.

Oh, Twilight... what have I done to you, my most precious stu –

No! *No!*

It took quite a lot of effort to keep herself under control, this time. She wanted to howl her rage and self-loathing to the dawning sun. *Let* all of Canterlot hear their Princess' despair and sorrow!

Her mind went wild with guilt, flailing hopelessly for some happy memory to comfort herself, but all that came were thoughts of Twilight – Twilight smiling; Twilight giving her smug little smile of self-assurance as she lectured; Twilight's face set and determined as she raced off to save Equestria *again* – each memory lashing against her, a reminder of what she had done, and the wonderful mare she had done it to.

Celestia's breaths became labored, even as she sat quietly in the balcony, looking outwards.

"So you see how it is, then," Luna said, quietly, from a deep shadow.

Celestia hadn't noticed her appearing, but there was no threat in her sister. She didn't even turn to look at her. "You have known for some time, I take it."

Silence reigned for a moment. "Yes," Luna said, subdued. "Twilight is, after all, one of my closest friends."

"You might have said something earlier." Celestia's voice was calm, almost toneless, and her expression was blank. "Instead of playing your little games."

Luna's expression hardened a little. "Would you have wanted to hear it? Or understood? This is something you needed to discover for yourself."

Celestia sighed. "I suppose you're right," she murmured, turning her head just slightly over her shoulder.

The princess of the moon wandered out onto the balcony next to her sister. "You're going to speak with her soon, I take it."

"Mmm. Today, I should think... I have no desire for this to last any longer. Especially now..." She looked away towards Ponyville, heart throbbing hugely in her chest. "So much worse than I had thought."

"Have you thought about what you're going to say?"

Celestia sat silently for a long time. "I've... given it some thought, yes," she said, eventually. "But I want to get some more information, first."

Luna nodded. "A wise course of action."

The princesses sat in silence for awhile, Celestia mulling over what to ask or say next while Luna shifted closer to her and nuzzled her gently.

"Thank you, Luna," Celestia whispered.

Luna hummed affectionately, and looked around. "May I ask why we're in Canterlot? Wanted to feel a bit removed from things, perhaps?"

Celestia looked down at her, puzzled. "Why wouldn't we be in Canterlot?"

Luna looked up at her sister in shock. "Well, *I'm* in Canterlot," she said, naked anxiety suddenly thick in her voice. "You're in Ponyville yet –"

Celestia stiffened. "What?"

"Sister... you... didn't know this was a dream?" Luna looked up at Celestia in shock.

"I..." Celestia looked around. "You're kidding," she said, dumbfounded.

Luna looked up, concentrating. The sun sunk back beneath the horizon, dousing the world in night, stars twinkling merrily overhead. The towers of Canterlot dissolved and flowed, eye-wateringly, into a long, endless field of knee-high grass, under a starlit sky.

Celestia gazed at the familiar dreamscape in fascination. No wonder she didn't remember coming back to Canterlot – she must have fallen asleep on Twilight's floor in Ponyville.

Which was a problem of its own, but not the most immediate one.

"I... must have dozed off," Celestia said. "I..."

"Dozed off? You only have *need* to sleep once a week, sister, I doubt you were *overtired*." Luna, once again full and regal in the height of her power, looked to her sister with a serious expression. "We *both* know what happened."

You're getting tired, Celestia...

Thoughts, memories, words unbidden... all rose to the forefront of her mind once again.

Life as a statue in the palace garden was too good for Discord, she thought, a savage growl in the privacy of her mind. Typical of the wretched creature, even in defeat he had managed to re-open old wounds and spread the disharmony he so reveled in – an ancient wound, in fact, that was just starting to re-knit.

Luna's monthly cycle of waxing and waning was a necessary part of her role as the Princess of the Moon; she reflected the moon's influence on the flows and tides of magic. In waning times her dream magic strengthened while her waking magic grew weaker; at new moon (and this was a deeply, deeply held secret) she was little more powerful than a talented unicorn in the real world. At full moon her waking powers were strong enough to warp reality by forcing dreams into the waking world, but her powers in the dream realm to influence the course of dreams, or enter the dreams of somepony trying to keep her out, faded.

This inevitability, and the emotional changes that came with it, was part of what gave her a reputation as mercurial and temperamental, beyond her own inclination to be that way in any case. Luna made a great deal of how it was important to the core of her being... which is why the issue of Celestia's compliance with her own cycle was so contentious between them.

The sun rose and set, once a day, every day. And in turn, so had Celestia.

Not literally every day, of course – she had done it... six or seven times, in the ancient past, renewing herself and *rising* once more, not unlike Philomeena.

But not anymore.

It had been at the core of the disagreement that had led to the Nightmare – Luna, terrified to see Celestia's dawn-pink mane begin its transition to its current, multihued glory, had tried to force Celestia to concede royal authority and set, for a time.

This had happened right after the war with Discord had ended, and Equestria was still in disarray. Celestia had tried to keep the matter private, tried to convince her sister that the

need to set was not as pressing as Luna believed it to be... but then the moon had refused to give way to the sun, as Luna euphemistically put it; Celestia's choice was made for her.

In the necessity of her position, though, she *changed*; no longer the rose-pink Princess of the Rising Sun, she had – reluctantly, it must be said – embraced her essential immortal nature as the Eternal Sun, shining alone above Equestria.

When Luna had been freed from the Nightmare, Celestia had explained to her that yes, she had changed; but not for the worse. She was still powerful, not diminished in any way, and was still *Celestia*, her loving sister.

Luna's eyes had merely lingered warily on the flowing colors and remained silent. The sisters did not speak of it again until Celestia's weariness overtook her in front of Discord, but even before then the elder sister had caught Luna's eyes glancing, a little fearfully, to her billowing, multihued mane...

Discord. Wretched, *wretched* creature. Celestia resolved to give the statue a little kick when she next passed it by.

When Luna had finally worked up the courage to approach her, there had not been an argument. It had just been a quiet insistence that Celestia think about her health: comparisons – inapplicable ones, in Celestia's opinion – with her own waxing and waning in time with the moon.

And, at the end, a gentle reminder that Luna was dedicated to proving herself worthy of the title of Princess... in *every* way.

Perhaps Celestia should have taken pleasure in the lack of open argument, but... that was how it had started all those centuries ago, too. And despite her best efforts, Discord's mocking prophecy lingered in her mind.

I smell doom on you, Celestia. Your days are numbered... You'll destroy yourself.

With Luna, again, perhaps... his little revenge from the last war. Did he think that Celestia would allow the Nightmare to return? If so, he was more deluded than ever.

"It's... getting worse, isn't it," Luna said, watching the snatches of images roiling around her sister's dreamscape with concern. An image of Nightmare Moon had flashed, darkly, across the sky, all rage and savage laughter, swirling weirdly into a snarling vision of Discord's leering grin.

"I've told you this many times before, Luna, the fatigue just... gets worse from time to time. It passes." Celestia shook her head irritably. "The problems with Twilight are just wearing on me."

Luna stepped closer again, reaching out with a hoof. "It's alright to be frightened, sister –"

"I'm not frightened," Celestia said, firmly.

Luna stepped back, frowning just slightly.

Celestia closed her eyes, slowly, and opened them again. "I am... concerned, as I always am when this happens. It is an annoyance, at the very worst. Something to... bear in mind. You overestimate its importance because you have not seen me enduring it for the last thousand years."

The younger princess gave her sister an extremely cool look, holding her gaze for a time. Celestia responded with as a look as firmly blank as she could manage.

Two kicks, she decided. Cursed *wretch* –

"What information are you going to seek out about Twilight before you speak with her?" Luna asked, her eyes adding that politely changing the subject did not mean she had dropped it for good.

"Whatever can be learned," Celestia replied, sorting her face into an expression of noble patience.

"And who will you speak to?"

Celestia sighed. "To be honest," she said, mildly, "to whomsoever my intuition guides me. It has been serving me well, lately."

"Not very deliberate," Luna said, a flicker of amusement grudgingly dragging its way back into her voice.

"What other choice do I have? Is there a systematic way to go about finding information that probably only resides in Twilight's mind by asking everypony else?"

Luna looked away from her sister for a moment, towards a distant star. A sly grin spread across her face. "She's asleep now, you know. I could have a look around, if you like."

"I thought –"

"Oh, she *dreams*... she has such *beautiful* dreams. And terrible nightmares, as well." Luna sighed, her grin fading. "She just doesn't remember them." A thought seemed to occur to her, which rekindled her amusement. "How many pillows did she go through?"

"What?"

"You know why she can't remember her dreams, surely?" Celestia shook her head, making Luna chuckle. "You've trained her to suppress her magic while she sleeps."

"Is that why? I had no idea."

Luna gave her an odd half-shrug. "Part of why, anyway. She prevents herself from drifting far into the natural magic of the dream realm. I have offered, many times, to help her overcome this, but she always refuses – she frets about it while she lives in such a flammable place."

"Ah, well... with Twilight, it wasn't pillows – it was walls," Celestia said, finding herself willing to handle the little jewel of pride despite its edges being made razor sharp by guilt. Above them, a little scene played, wherein a purple filly sputtered explanations to her mentor, who looked down benevolently at her as some unicorns began repairing a ten-foot blast in the side of the palace. "That was her first night in the castle," Celestia said, sighing.

Luna looked impressed. "I see why you chose her to be your student," she said.

This statement, uttered so casually, made Celestia extremely uncomfortable. The "student" issue, again, perhaps. "It's not – it *wasn't* about power."

"Oh? Then what *was* it about...?"

Celestia's heart skipped a beat.

Ah, the question. *The* question. The one she had never been able to adequately answer for herself, though it had been the subject of many hours of pensive reflection.

Twilight Sparkle was immensely powerful, yes... but no more so than a dozen others in the last millennium. Others, in fact, who had been presented to Celestia at court for that very reason, often with the explicit request that Celestia would take this young pony under her wing.

For one thing, Celestia had never liked being told what she ought to do – the prerogatives of royalty being useful now and again – but if she was completely honest, she had been uncomfortable with the idea of becoming so intimately involved in one pony at a time when the demands of ruling Equestria seemed so pressing. So those little ponies had been apprenticed to great practitioners of magic, or gone to the Academy with Celestia's blessing and an occasional hoof up, and grown to be great wizards, or advisors or, in a couple notable cases, gigantic pains in the flanks.

Twilight Sparkle had been made something... more.

On a whim.

There was something to the idea that Elements of Harmony were guiding themselves to their true wielders, but even if that were the case, Celestia could have easily just kept an eye on Twilight at the Academy like she had so many others over the centuries – guiding them, gently, to special destinies, for the sake of Equestria. Certainly Twilight's destiny – so to speak – was much greater than most – even if all she had done with her life was restore Luna, it was a legendary feat that Celestia would never allow to be forgotten so long as she lived, and Twilight had done as much and more several times over – but it did not require such... personal intervention.

But on that fateful day, the day of the Rainboom which had bound Twilight and her friends to their inevitable destiny as the wielders of the Elements and friends, Celestia had cradled that tiny filly, who looked up at her in terror as the storm of magical power drained away, and *something* inside the Princess made a decision.

A *whim*, which changed her life.

From that day forward, the little Twilight was a constant in the Sun Princess' life. From filly to mare, pupil to protégé, student to...

"Sister?"

Celestia blinked. "I'm sorry, Luna." She smiled weakly. "As you can imagine, that is something of an issue for me at the moment."

Luna smiled back at her sheepishly. "You could flatter your sister," she said, quietly, as if embarrassed, "and admit that you were a little lonely."

Celestia stirred, feeling herself ache. Even in dreams, it seemed, the period of lethargy was biting. She nuzzled her sister gently. "Don't be silly," she said, fondly. "That would mean, for even a second, I thought I could replace you."

There was a long pause where Luna snuggled her face into her sister. Celestia felt Luna give a husky chuckle. "You're... far too good at that, sister."

"What?"

"Finding really *good* ways not to answer questions. Even to yourself." Luna pulled away from Celestia, looking a bit bashful yet. "I wish you luck, sister," she said, and with a sly wink, faded into the night sky of the dream.

Celestia stood alone in the tall grass, staring into the distance, for an eternity. Everything seemed very far away.

• • •

Her eyes opened – her real eyes, this time.

Mid-morning sunlight poured into Twilight's study through a little round window, filling the room with soupy radiance. Celestia took a slow, deep breath, and felt the remaining fatigue collect and pass out of her, as it had so many times before. She was in bed, uncovered, curled up naturally.

So, Twilight knew. Hmm. A problem for later, though.

Nothing had really been resolved in her discussion with Luna. Her anxieties had been stirred about, mixed together and been prevented from settling in her mind, which was probably for the best, in the long run, but in the *now* it was making her tense and jumpy.

She closed her eyes and, with the careless ease of routine, went through the little meditational exercise of stretching her legs and wings and neck, quietly and firmly, as she tried to let her mind empty of the little tangled knot of worries she was nursing so unhappily.

She focused on the sound of feathers drawn across one another as she stretched one wing, then the other –

"Oh, Princess, you're up," Spike's voice rang through Celestia's peaceful mind like a golden bell, bright and warm. Familiar. Comforting.

Celestia opened her eyes. The dragon – only little to her, now, and soon enough not even that – was standing in the doorway, looking pleased. "Good morning, Spike," she said, calmly, letting the last stretch of her wing introduce the very smallest strain in her voice. "Are you well?"

"Er, yeah," he replied, unconsciously touching his head. Celestia smiled. "How are *you*, Princess? Twilight and Rarity said they found you sprawled out on the floor last night," he continued nervously.

Celestia let the little bolt of anxiety pass through her. Light through glass. Stay calm. "Did Twilight *also* mention that I found her in a similar position yesterday?" she said, letting the little teasing tone hanging on the end of her statement turn it into a neat deflection.

"Uh, no," Spike said, tapping his foreclaws together. "Look, uh, we don't actually have a guest bed, Twilight just kind of –"

"I know, Spike, I know," Celestia said. "It was my fault, I think, surprising her like that the day before the wedding. A little rude of me, don't you think?"

Spike gave her a strange expression. The more draconic he grew, the less she could read his face. "I think she hoped you would come," he said.

Celestia smiled at him. "Of that, I have no doubt, Spike. I suppose I could have been more polite about it."

The dragon looked a little relieved by this, and Celestia wondered why. "Anyways, uh... you're okay, right?"

"Absolutely. Just... tired, I suppose." Spike's wary expression matched Luna's too well. "It was a thrilling night, after all. Didn't you think so?"

"Oh, yeah!" Spike said, excitedly. "Man, that was some *crazy* magic Twilight did, don't you think, Princess?"

Celestia nodded. "Even Luna was impressed," she said. "That doesn't happen often."

Spike waved his hands in the air wildly. "Bam! Zoom! Man, that was... I mean, I *knew* what was going to happen, but it was still *amazing*!" He gave her a conspiratorial look, wiggling his 'eyebrows' suggestively. "I was going to do something with fire breath, but when we showed Fluttershy she flew away and wouldn't leave her house for an hour. I'm getting pretty good at it these days, you know."

For some reason this made Celestia uncomfortable. Changes, changes..."I hope you're careful," she said.

"Oh, yeah," he said, quickly. He gave her a sidelong look, as if something was preying on his mind. "Twilight has been studying dragons, you know. It's been really helpful..."

Something in his tone caught Celestia's attention. "That's the second time you've tried to advertise her to me, Spike. And you were doing it before, at Sweet Apple Acres, too." She forced a chuckle. "Is something the matter?"

Spike gave her a blank look. "Uh... not if you don't think so."

Celestia's smile faded, slowly, as Spike looked away from her, suddenly intensely interested in the floor. She sighed, closing her eyes, kicking herself for being so remote from the ever-loyal assistant. "I'm sorry, Spike. I should have been more open with you from the beginning... I *know* something's wrong, Spike," she said, as calmly as she could. "That's why I'm here."

"S... sorry, Princess," the dragon said, bowing his head. He was actually *sorry* for upsetting her; it was excruciating.

"Oh, Spike." Celestia reached out with a hoof and lifted his gaze to hers. "Don't be, please."

"This is like that thing with the reports," he said, miserably. "But different."

The princess smiled down at him. "I know. Come here." Spike eagerly stepped forward and slipped into Celestia's embrace, wrapping his scaly arms around her neck. She was momentarily surprised to find that they reached all the way around.

For his part, Spike wasn't teary or visibly upset; he just wanted the comfort of a familiar and trusted embrace. In retrospect, she realized he had probably been keeping this close to his heart for a long time – just like Luna. The thought of her closest friends – her *family* – being wary of speaking to her about this was a lead weight in her stomach.

But it wasn't entirely his fault... it wasn't as if she had been making herself very available.

Celestia tightened her embrace, and was grateful when Spike gave her a squeeze in return. She felt hollow... and old.

Tired.

The thought made her stiffen, the memory of Luna's cool glare too recent a wound to be totally ignored, even if her sister was talking about things she didn't really understand.

"Shh," she said, unthinking. "It'll be okay." To which of them this was addressed, she was not entirely sure.

• • •

It was a typical day in Ponyville – the *city* of Ponyville – and thus, it was entirely possible that there wouldn't be a Ponyville come nightfall save for all the ponies running around keeping it vibrant and alive.

Ponyville was different than Canterlot, in that sense; the palace, and the eternal royalty there, was an anchor for Canterlot, which kept it busy and was a central focus of much of its activity. Ponyville, on the other hoof, was a city very involved in doing everything at once, young and vibrant, still growing. An *adolescent* city.

Celestia had gratefully accepted a small breakfast from Spike, who seemed much happier having expressed his worries, and left Twilight's library quietly. Twilight was apparently still asleep in another room, on a real camp bed borrowed from Applejack this time around, and Spike insisted he'd look after her. It was his job, after all, he declared, proudly.

The princess had given him a beaming smile and taken her leave. Spike agreed that a day of relaxing in Ponyville before she and Twilight talked would do them both some good; Celestia got the impression that he was politely suggesting she give Twilight a little time to gather her thoughts after the momentous events of the previous day.

She found his love of Ponyville infectious, though. Spike had only ever really known the privacy of Twilight's tower in Canterlot, save for a few of his favorite spots on the main plaza. He was unawed by the glitz and glamour of high pony society in faraway places, in a burgeoning draconic way, favoring instead a more territorial love of his home. He had grown here, with Ponyville, and was enthusiastic about everything that had changed. Rapid-fire he named off ten or twelve of his favorite shops and restaurants, amusements and entertainments of all kinds; he was a natural welcoming committee, effortless and breathless in his praise.

Despite herself, Celestia found herself enjoying the growth as well. It was probably healthy, given the level of heartbreak she was currently enduring.

"It is the sorrow of the long-lived to see something they love submit, inevitably, to change," she murmured to herself as she wandered through a bustling street, merchant's tents and storefronts chattering around her, "but their joy to watch them grow to fullness."

What *had* that been about, anyways? It had been so long ago...

Oh, well.

She could not avoid attention, of course. Awed looks, stares, whispers... she was not so common a sight here that she went unremarked upon.

Was Luna equally unfamiliar, here?

The thought brought on a stab of guilt, even as she reflected that it was completely outside Luna's character to go *unremarked upon* in any situation, if she could help it.

As she walked through the city – indeed, not unremarked upon, but not consuming the attention of the city, either – Celestia felt herself fall reflexively into a careful pattern of thought, thinking of how to behave, how to act, so that she would not disrupt the flow of the world around her overmuch but would yet be moving in it. She watched herself, from afar, talk idly to ponies who approached her, accepting their polite greetings with – it must be said – honest pleasure; and likewise, she considered her wording carefully as she ordered a small muffin from a corner bakery which she understood to be in need of some more attention, and would benefit from being seen to be patronized by the Sun Princess.

As the salespony prepared her order, it occurred to her to wonder: how did she know that...?

Ah, right. The letters. They seemed very far away, now, and when she thought of how concerned she had been by them, she felt foolish. But they had guided her to the deeper hurt, so perhaps there was something to that after all –

"Enough, Dash! Enough! I'm tired of this, okay?!"

A voice rang out across the street, made harsh with anger. Celestia was stirred from her thoughts – *awakened*, perhaps, would be more apt – as everypony around her looked towards the source of the argument.

It was Scootaloo, tall and long-limbed, scowling and stomping her way down the street as Rainbow Dash hurried along behind her, growling. "I don't want to hear it, Dash, I really don't. So save it."

"Look, kiddo, I was just doing what I thought was –"

"You were undercutting my position!" Scootaloo rounded on Dash, eyes ablaze. "You can't just... I mean, you're not captain anymore, okay? You're not even a *Bolt* anymore. So don't spend an entire evening telling *my* flyers what to do!"

Everypony's eyes flickered from the squabbling pair to Celestia. She sighed and stepped forward towards the two pegasi.

"Look, I was just giving *advice*, okay?" Dash declared, dismissively.

Scootaloo sneered. "You were telling them to *ignore* me, Dash."

"I did no such thing! When did I ever say, 'Don't do what Scoots says'?"

"And that's another thing! Stop calling me *Scoots*!"

This appeared to legitimately wound Dash. "Come on, kiddo, it's just a nickname..."

"A *nickname*? Do you think I want a *nickname*? You think I don't have enough problems with my authority without the *famous, amazing* Rainbow Dash wandering around calling me the same thing she did when I was a *filly*!? Honestly," Scootaloo snarled.

"Ladies, ladies..." Celestia said, approaching them. "That's enough yelling, I think."

The two's eyes widened in sudden horror, and they dropped into deep bows.

"Yes, yes, thank you," Celestia sighed. "Please, let's go talk this out somewhere less... public, shall we? Think of the Wonderbolts' reputation, both of you."

Looking chastened, Scootaloo and Rainbow Dash followed Celestia, who rolled her eyes theatrically to the crowd. Ponyville's residents were well-acquainted with the fiery pegasi, and the princess sharing their quiet fatigue with the pair's constant arguing was a legitimate comfort. They smiled at her and went back about their business, happy to see the matter well in hoof.

A few minutes later – unusually silent ones with a somewhat suspicious lack of bickering – they had found a quiet place in the corner of a park. Celestia sat on the grass, quietly enjoying the feeling of physical contact with the growing things of the earth. Before her, the brightly-colored pegasi raged, suppressing their voices, but not their feelings.

Long life had turned Celestia's ears into finely-tuned sieves for information, filtering out the chaff of irrelevant detail in favor of the grains of truth at the heart of the issue, just listening to the two quarrel back and forth, eyes closed, images forming in her mind.

Scootaloo was not happy as captain of the Wonderbolts, Celestia realized quickly. Not in the sense that she wasn't thrilled with the experience and the attention – she just was suddenly conscious of how unfulfilling it was for her to follow in the direct footsteps of her idol, who Celestia was privately aware had found flying in the 'Bolts much less satisfying than she had hoped herself. Not for Rainbow Dash the choreographed, crowd-pleasing routines of synchronized flying... she lived and breathed for the thrill of a trick nopony would ever see from anything but first-person, the rush of adrenaline, the mad joy of speed.

Scootaloo was uncomfortable with living up to Rainbow Dash's legacy of brash, almost irresponsible, but incredibly charismatic leadership, and was chafing under her teammates' fixation on Dash's reputation as a hell-raising barnstormer. Scootaloo was torn between wanting to be like Dash, and being an objectively good captain, which Dash decidedly had not been.

For Rainbow Dash's part, she was...

...jealous.

The realization struck Celestia like the thunderbolt emblazoned on the pegasus herself. The two flyers stifled themselves and looked up at the Princess' sudden expression of distant awe warily.

She was trying to hide it with bravado and self-important nonsense, but Rainbow Dash was deeply, deeply jealous of Scootaloo. Rainbow Dash felt lost, her dream having turned out to be so unfulfilling, and thus she envied Scootaloo's freedom to resent it. She envied Scootaloo's bravery in expressing her displeasure. She envied Scootaloo's freedom to be somepony other than her exaggerated reputation – Dash was driven, by herself and everypony else, every second of every day, to be the legendary flier Rainbow Dash; Scootaloo's reputation as Dash's sidekick could, someday, be transcended... if Dash weren't around reminding everyone what shape her shadow was.

It's long past time you stepped out from my shadow, Twilight.

"As long as you're around being *Rainbow Dash*," Scootaloo growled, "I can't be anything but *Scoots* to the 'Bolts."

She'll always be your student, I think.

A great deal of thought happened in Celestia's mind at once. The pegasi gave each other a nervous glance as the ruler of Equestria stared, unseeing, into the middle distance.

"You... have to be..." Celestia murmured, her heart pounding. She felt a wave of disorientation overcome her, and shook her head until the feeling passed. "You have to... outgrow..."

"Princess, are you alright?" asked Rainbow Dash warily. "Should I... get Twilight, or –"

"No!" Celestia barked. Dash and Scootaloo looked at her in shock.

"No," she repeated, mastering herself quickly. "No, not... yet. I need... I need to think." She blinked, and looked up at the pegasi. "I'm sorry, you two. Things are a little... complex, at the moment." She rose, as elegantly as she could, wings outstretched. "You two care about each other. Be honest with one another, and things... things will sort themselves out, I'm sure..."

With a mighty leap, she disappeared into the sky.

"She didn't *sound* very sure," Scootaloo said, looking at the place where the Princess had just been uncomfortably. "What was that all about?"

"Honestly." Dash scowled. "Put a horn and a pair of wings on 'em and they think they rule the world."

• • •

High above Ponyville, the eternal sun...

As long as you're here being the princess, she'll never stop being your student!

...wavered.

• • •

Carousel Boutique was in production mode. Rarity's two apprentices – a little green unicorn with a mop of white hair, and a tall pink earth pony coiffed in violet – were bent over reams of rich fabrics, the unicorn cutting, the earth pony measuring carefully and marking patterns with a marking pencil.

Rarity was sitting at a desk in the center of the show floor, having long ago learned the trick of a true fashionista – it was just a little *gauche* to be caught actually *working* by a client, but the second the door closed behind them, your muzzle hit the grindstone so hard it bled – and you made the bloodstain part of the design because there just wasn't enough time to do anything else.

"Welcome to Carousel Boutique," she said, eyes closed, with practiced ease. "Where everything is *chic*, unique, and –"

"Rarity," Princess Celestia said, stepping in the door a little less gracefully than normal. "I'm sorry, I'm not here for a dress."

Rarity opened an eye. "Oh," she murmured. "Oh!" The unicorn sprang to her feet, her face a portrait of delight. "Princess, welcome –"

"May I speak with you? Privately," she added, smiling at the apprentices, who blushed nervously and bowed.

"Oh, of *course*." Rarity clapped her hooves together. "Girls, set everything aside for today, and be on your way home. Please! Sit, princess, I'll bring some... tea. Ah!" she added, as the apprentices looked at her nervously. "Quickly now..."

"But, Miss Rarity –" the pink earth pony began.

"But me no buts, Silver Star! This is *important*."

Rarity gave the Princess a bright smile and hurried off into the kitchen, while the two apprentices bustled away, giving the princess terrified looks from time to time. The princess put on her best face of polite interest.

"Do you enjoy being apprenticed to Rarity, miss...?" Celestia asked, addressing the green unicorn.

"Emerald Dream, ma'am. Um, yes, ma'am, I'm learning a lot. Um. A friend of mine is apprenticed up in Canterlot and she hasn't even had her own show yet, ma'am... Miss Rarity is always encouraging us, but, um, we work really hard." Emerald Dream stuttered

this out as she rolled up several large reams of fabric with her magic. Celestia privately wondered if –

"And Miss Sparkle helps, too. Even I've learned a lot from her, and I'm not a unicorn," Silver Star said.

"I suspect she gave you some books," Celestia said, warmly.

"How did you know, ma'am?"

Celestia gave her a mysterious smile. "We know these things," she said, delighting privately in the little ponies' look of awe.

"Isn't she, um, your student?" Silver Star asked. "My dad said you and she are like, always working together."

Celestia felt her smiling mask crack under the strain.

"She was," –*crack* – "Just like you are for miss Rarity."

The two apprentices gave each other a thrilled look.

"Now, now, off you trot," Celestia said, much more calmly than she felt. "If I got you in trouble with Miss Rarity, I'd never forgive myself."

With delighted expressions, the apprentices exited the front door, chatting excitedly with one another. The princess listened to their chatting for as long as she could, eyes closed.

Rarity reappeared, carrying two glasses of red wine and a bottle above her head with her magic.

"That was kind of you," she said, putting a glass in front of Celestia on the desk. "Those two are still very new. I appreciate you showing interest; they'll probably never forget it."

"Of course," Celestia replied weakly. The wine smelled excellent – but she was no longer sure drinking it would be a good idea. Her flight from the park had taken far more concentration than she was comfortable with. "What happened to tea?"

Rarity was graceful enough to blush a little at this little admonishment. "Forgive me," she said.

"No, not at all." Celestia sipped the wine, just enough to taste. "Quite good."

"A gift, from a client," Rarity said, nervously. She changed the subject quickly, with the true society lady's ability to pretend that any embarrassment which may have just occurred had, in point of fact, not. "How may I help you, if not with a dress? Oh, but you *should* let me make you a gown, someday," Rarity added quickly. "It would be a *pleasure* –"

"Someday," Celestia agreed, smiling as fondly as she could. "But not today. I'm here to talk about –"

"Twilight?"

Celestia raised an eyebrow at the interruption. "Yes. But why do you say that?"

Rarity blushed. "She was... very upset to find you on the floor."

"Ah," the princess smiled. "I suppose I owe you some thanks in that matter as well."

"Think nothing of it," Rarity said, staring bashfully into her wine. "We were all a bit... *over-exerted* by last night's events, I think."

Celestia smiled at her politeness and rose, gesturing for Rarity to stay in her seat. The princess paced around the room for awhile, chewing on her lower lip thoughtfully, as Rarity sipped her wine. "What made you decide to take on apprentices, Rarity?"

"Why... do you ask?"

"Indulge me. Please."

Rarity gave Celestia a wary look, her sapphire eyes burning with private speculation, trying to get ahead of the conversation. "It was Twilight's idea, actually," she said, carefully. "She suggested it to me a few years ago... I'm not really sure why."

"No, no. Not, 'How did this situation come about?'" Celestia paced more and more excitedly around the boutique. "What made you decide that yes, you wanted to train other ponies in fashion?"

"I guess I had always wanted to –"

"So why didn't you before now?" Celestia asked, insistently.

Rarity looked at her uneasily. "Princess, I... I..." The unicorn stammered, looking frightened. "Princess, are you... alright? What happened to you this morning?"

"What," Celestia declared, ignoring her, "is the purpose of training apprentices?"

Rarity kept her eyes on the princess. There was a nervous energy to her that Rarity had never seen before – it reminded her of Twilight when she was stressed. "I... suppose it's part of being involved in the arts to inspire and train the next generation," she hazarded.

"Ah," Celestia nodded deeply. "Yes." She continued pacing for some time. "And how do you know the apprenticeship is over?"

"Over?" Rarity frowned. "Well... with Diamond Tiara, for example... things just reached a point where we both *knew* she was ready to strike out on her own. She'd learned everything I could teach her; some things a pony has to teach herself." The unicorn felt herself getting chatty in her nervousness.

"You both just *knew*?" Celestia asked, as if this were incredible.

"Yes, well, you know... we –"

Celestia paced up and looked down on Rarity, all her nobility on display. "She didn't... ask?"

"Oh, many times," Rarity babbled, frantically trying to piece things together in her mind. "She was so *eager* to be on her own. I think she asked for the first time after a month of apprenticeship... I just laughed and gave her a new assignment..."

Rarity was hesitant to make any assumptions about the mind of the princess, but it appeared to be reeling; she had the distant, distracted gaze of somepony thinking about six things at once. Her hooves, usually so sure and graceful, seemed to be failing her, and she seemed excitable and hasty, which was very much at odds with her normal attitude of deliberate patience.

"So what does she do now?"

"Oh, well, she's my competition, now, of course," Rarity answered, her mouth answering for her as her brain worked on other matters. The statement seemed to frighten Celestia; she froze in place, eyes open wide in an expression of horror, breathing shallowly.

Rarity stammered, desperately trying to make up lost ground. "But – but – that's *fashion*! It's different for other things! Most of the time, in other disciplines, a master is training collaborators, or successors –" Too late, Rarity clapped her hooves over her mouth.

The Princess, eyes still open in shock, slumped into the chair in front of Rarity's desk, looking drained. "Successors... I see."

Pieces – fragments of conversation, tones, hints, rumors, whispers – fell into place in Rarity's mind, and she realized that things between Twilight and the Princess were worse than she had dared imagine.

Rarity had long ago noticed Twilight's relationship with the Princess becoming dissatisfying, and had counseled Twilight to just *ask* the princess about it. Surely the two most rational ponies in all of Equestria, experts in the Magic of Friendship, would be able to talk out their issues. When Twilight returned an Arch-Mage, Rarity had hoped things would improve as Twilight became more and more involved with the higher levels of Equestrian affairs. Certainly she poured herself into her work, and seemed satisfied, if a little harassed. Now that Twilight had begun to become obsessively busy again, Rarity had been relieved to find Celestia personally interested in investigating the purple unicorn's problems. Clearly, not everything had been totally sorted out.

But now, Rarity realized she had made an immense error – she hadn't thought about the Princess' side of things. Too late, she was aware she had fallen into the same trap Twilight was prone to. Rarity, too, had thought of the Princess as an immortal, unchanging source of wisdom and love... not a pony unto herself.

Something was *wrong*, in the Princess' mind.

And now she was here, a virtual *goddess* on the edge of a panic attack... in Rarity's boutique.

"Princess, please, sit down –" Rarity began, rising.

"No," Celestia said. Her familiar, peaceful smile was thin with anxiety. "No. I... I need to speak with Twilight." She yawned.

"Princess, you look *ill*, please –"

Celestia got to her hooves awkwardly and turned to Rarity, with lazy solemnity. "Thank you, Rarity, for being concerned about my health." She looked out at the unicorn

through heavy-lidded eyes. "But I need... I need to speak with Twilight." She began walking out of the boutique.

"I'll go get her, right away – please, just rest here!"

The princess rounded on her, looking irritated. "*Rest?*" Celestia hissed the word, as if it were poisonous. "No, no more resting. I'm fine. I just have to... collect myself..."

Rarity scrambled to play along with the irregular tune of a mind slightly out of control of itself. "Okay, no resting... just... stay here. I'll get Twilight..."

"Stop worrying about me, Luna, I'm fine," Celestia murmured, shaking her head irritably. She sounded exhausted, suddenly.

Rarity looked around. "L... Luna? Where?"

"Nowhere, Rarity," Celestia said, a little more lucidly. Her eyes were closed in concentration as she methodically stretched her wings and legs. "I'm sorry, I'm getting a little overexcited by things."

"No need to apologize." Rarity approached the princess tentatively, speaking as softly and calmly as she could manage. "Things have gotten a little out of hoof, haven't they..."

"Yes." Celestia's eyes opened wide, ablaze and intense. "And now I'm going to fix them. Everything will be fine, Rarity, please don't worry."

"Are you sure you don't want me to –"

"No!" There was a whisper of magical command in Celestia's reflexive rebuke, undirected and uncontrolled. Rarity's mind tangled into a snarl of confusion, words and images appearing randomly in the forefront of her thoughts. She stumbled and fell, unable to focus, her equilibrium destroyed.

Through eyes that did not understand what they were seeing, she saw pure white wings sweep majestically into the air and soar towards the distant, green blur that was Twilight's Library.

Rarity blinked, trying to focus. That seemed very important, but... why? Nothing made sense anymore. It all seemed so... confusing.

She fell into unconsciousness, twitching and moaning nonsensically.

"Rarity! Rarity!"

The unicorn's eyes opened, blearily, and she looked up into the concerned faces of Rainbow Dash and Scootaloo.

"Was she here?" Dash demanded.

"Dash, she just woke up –"

Dash gave Scootaloo a wry look. "Rarity's tough, kiddo, don't get your feathers ruffled," she said dismissively.

Rarity's mind latched onto the sentence, blessed comprehension returning, burning through the magically-induced confusion. "Twilight..." she managed. Her head throbbed angrily.

"Twilight?" Scootaloo frowned in confusion. "What about Twilight?" But Dash was already turning out the door, gaining speed to leap into action.

"Wait," Rarity gagged. "*Wait*, Rainbow Dash!"

The blue pegasus skidded to a halt. "Yeah?"

"There's... no rush..." Rarity groaned. "This is between them."

• • •

"I admit that the way Applejack and Rainbow Dash dealt with the situation was... unorthodox," Twilight Sparkle said, primly, "But you can't argue with the results."

"Ah 'spose not." Braeburn sighed. "Well, thank ya kindly for seein' me 'bout this, Twilight – Ah do so hate bringin' up troublin' business like this followin' such a joyous occasion as mah cousin's weddin'. Don't seem right."

Twilight smiled a polite little smile. "Please don't worry about that, Mayor. I am happy I could speak with you about it face to face." In the privacy of her mind, she reflected that Dash and AJ probably wouldn't be, but that was another issue entirely.

Braeburn gave a little flash of a smile. "Ah, well. I best get back to the farm an' help 'em clean up. Ah thank ya for takin' some time for me. And mah personal thanks for a

spectacular evenin' last night – nopony coulda wished for a more magnificent occasion outside of –" Twilight braced herself, politely, " – *Appleloosa!*"

"You're too kind," Twilight said. "Please tell Big Mac that I'll be along shortly, once I've taken care of a few things here."

Braeburn shook his head. "Li'l miss, you work yourself too hard," he said, with an extremely gentlemanly grin. He plucked his hat from his head and bowed deeply, grasping one of Twilight's hooves and kissing it. "Ah'll tell Mac you'd *love* to help, but are *unfortunately detained*." He winked. "Don'tcha worry none, the Mayor of –" Twilight again braced herself, " – *Appleloosa* will make sure everything's all rounded up and hogtied bah sundown, even if Ah must do it mah own self."

"You're *too* kind," Twilight said, earnestly. He really was.

Braeburn gave her another smoldering grin and left. Twilight's polite smile lasted exactly as long as it took for the door to close, and then she let out a huge sigh of relief.

"It's a prison, isn't it," came a calm, familiar voice from the landing overlooking the library floor.

Twilight turned, stunned. "P-Princess! Where have you been? I've had ponies looking for you all day –"

The princess leapt down and landed, gracefully, on the library floor.

Twilight stared; the princess was glowing, radiantly, her mane sparkling, her coat pearly-white and luminescent. Magic flowed around her like water over jewels, blurring her appearance into a sparkling dream.

"I appreciate your concern, Twilight," the princess said serenely, "But it is unnecessary." Her voice was as majestic and beautiful as Twilight had ever heard it. Immortal peace and wisdom flowed from it like cool streams of pure water, gentle and soothing. Her eyes, always deep and loving, were pools of pure affection.

Twilight stammered. "But – but – you were – I found you on the *floor*! I can't believe Spike let you leave the *bed*, much less the *Library* –"

"Should I be equally concerned about you?" Celestia chuckled; it was like listening to beautiful silver bells ringing. "Did I not find you on the floor the night before?" She pulled one of the ornate chairs from the library table and took a seat, looking as much

like the divine queen in the rosewood-and-crimson as if she had been seated on a throne of gold and electrum in the gleaming heart of Canterlot.

Twilight blushed, but forced herself to hold her ground in the face of her mentor's knowing smile, which was as mind-clouding as fine brandy. "That was a little different, don't you think?"

Celestia giggled again. Twilight wished it would never stop; the sound was instantly addictive. "You and Luna worry about me too much," the princess said. "I'm very lucky, aren't I?"

"Luna? What does she have to do with –"

"I see you have some hot water," Celestia interrupted. She waved her horn and Twilight watched in awe as the magic surrounding her swirled and a pouch of sweet herbal tea appeared before her.

It was a simple trick, but... the way the magic had *flowed*, swirling and scintillating with more colors than even Rainbow Dash could manage to paint in the sky... it had been like watching a million tiny jewels burst into being in midair.

The princess summoned some cups and went about preparing the cup of tea. Twilight watched, in awe, her sight-beyond-sight that allowed her to watch the flow of magic dazzled beyond anything she had ever seen before. There was *power* here – and Twilight had *seen* power, been at the whirling, furious center of pure, untrammelled *power* as the Elements of Harmony blazed around and *inside* her – but this was like watching Big Mac perform the unicorn art of origami. Powerful but delicate. Strong, but perfectly controlled.

It was unreal.

Steam rose from the cups, sweet-smelling and pearlescent. Celestia leaned in and sniffed it gratefully. The sight and sound of this simple motion was so perfect that Twilight wanted to break into tears.

"Aren't you going to join me?" Celestia asked, smiling.

Twilight blinked, momentarily stunned. "Uh," She shook the stupefying haze of beauty from her mind. "Right." She quickly took a seat and, with deliberate care, also sniffed at the steam. She felt her mind bloom into a haze of peace, as if she were half-asleep, safe and warm.

Celestia brought the cup to her lips and sipped, exquisitely. Twilight almost felt embarrassed to watch, as if she had seen her mentor kissing somepony.

As if she were watching her mentor's lips descend onto her own –

"Um," Twilight began, frantically trying to organize her thoughts. "What did you mean, 'a prison'?" Stop thinking about that stop thinking about that *stop thinking about that*

"Oh," Celestia said, looking up from the tea with a little smile. "Forgive me," she said, looking a little embarrassed.

"...anything..." Twilight murmured.

"I am afraid I eavesdropped on your conversation with Mayor Braeburn. Such a *gentlepony*, isn't he...?"

The suggestive tone might as well have been fine wine poured directly onto Twilight's brain. "If that's... your sort of thing..." she managed. Somewhere distant in her mind, she realized she was grinning stupidly, but nothing could make her care right now.

Celestia gave her a wink. Twilight's heart fluttered furiously.

"The prison I referred to, Twilight... is the mask."

"The... mask...?"

"Yes, Twilight." Celestia looked around theatrically, at the fine furnishings, the neatly-sorted books all crisp and new on their shelves, the elegant tea kettle and fine cups. "The mask of dignity. The little lies for everypony else, the ones you tell them so they can trust you and look up to you, so that you're a little larger than life in their minds."

Twilight tried to say something, but the idea that this perfect, divine creature in front of her was displeased with her in any way turned her tongue into lead.

Celestia looked down at her, a perfect smile of understanding bright on her features. "I knew you would have to learn about it someday. Every great pony does. I'm so *proud* of you," she added, the emphasis on "proud" bursting like fireworks of joy in Twilight's heart. "But part of wearing the mask is knowing when to take it off."

Twilight nodded, dully. Obviously this was the case. Celestia would know. She knows *everything*.

"If you wear it for everypony, the mask is a prison. It forces you to be something you're not, all the time. Your friend Rainbow Dash learned about that when she became a Wonderbolt, didn't she?" Celestia raised a hoof to Twilight's unresisting face. "I remember your letter about it. I *loved* reading it."

"I'm... so glad..." Twilight murmured.

"Twilight, look at me. My precious, precious Twilight Sparkle." The hoof guided Twilight's eyes to Celestia's perfect, gleaming eyes, which were so full of affection and understanding that Twilight felt like she could have burned Ponyville to the ground and yet this beautiful, magnificent being would love her. "You've been wearing the mask for me, haven't you?"

"Uh huh," Twilight's eyes were full of tears, shame for her misdeed and the sublime joy of knowing she would be forgiven pouring out of her.

"It's my fault," Celestia said. She actually *cringed*, and Twilight's heart burned with a mad desire to comfort her.

"No! It was me! I should have –"

"Shhh..." Celestia ran a hoof lovingly down Twilight's face. "I understand, little one. Things have gotten a little off-track between us."

Twilight nodded furiously.

"That's why I came to you, Twilight. I want to make things right. Silly princess that I am, I came here to tell *you* what was wrong, but I think... you need to tell me. You need to take the mask off for me." Celestia leaned forward and whispered in Twilight's ear, which, like the rest of her, was trembling. "You don't need it, little Twilight... I love you, no matter what. And then everything will be better... just like it used to be."

At "love", Twilight's whole body flooded with joy. "Mmm... of course I will..."

"No secrets?" whispered Celestia, her teasing tone caramel in Twilight's mind.

"I kissed Rainbow Dash," Twilight murmured. "Twice."

"I'll take that as a yes." Celestia leaned back, a gentle smile of satisfaction on her face.

Twilight stared at her. Suddenly the idea that there was any conflict or stress between them seemed completely ridiculous; she was so *happy* right now, just being there with the Princess, just like she always had... been... in...

Canterlot.

Twilight found herself able to look away from the princess for the first time since she had drawn their eyes to meet. *Canterlot*, she repeated in her mind. There was something... she had thought recently... about Canterlot. It was at the heart of everything... but what?

"Take your time," Celestia said, sipping her tea. The sound of her voice threatened to let the haze of bliss confuse Twilight's mind again, but the spires of Canterlot, the peaks of the mountains, rose through the mists, suddenly towering in Twilight's thoughts.

"Were you..." Twilight said, in a strangled voice. "*Ever*..."

Celestia looked down at her impassively. "Was I ever what, Twilight?"

The words were hazy and indistinct in her mind, but... she could force the mists to recede, with effort, and they sounded louder and louder in her mind.

"Tell me what's troubling you, Twilight," Celestia urged. Twilight closed her eyes, not daring to look up at the radiant vision of perfection that sat across from her. She shook her head wildly, the fog of joy clearing, courage burning through its mind-wilting power.

"Were you ever," Twilight said, through clenched teeth, "going to ask me to come back to Canterlot?"

"What?"

"Were you *ever* going to ask me to come back to Canterlot?" Twilight repeated, her voice thick with conflicting emotions.

Celestia set the cup down on the table, magic radiating off it magnificently. "What do you mean, Twilight?" The immortal serenity had absented itself from her voice, which was no longer cloying and seductive. "Did you want me to?"

"I..." Twilight stood up and turned her back on the princess, breaths heaving in her, emotions running wild. "No," she gasped. "No, I didn't. And don't. Well, what I mean is, I don't want to go back to Canterlot... but you could have *asked*."

"Twilight, I don't understand what you're getting at."

"When do you think the problems between us started?" Twilight demanded, eyes clenched shut, back still turned.

Celestia's voice didn't sound for some time. "With the dragon. The one at the mountain. A long time ago, I know, but..."

"Not long enough!" Twilight gasped. She heaved great breaths, as if she had just been sick; the physical effects of the magic surrounding Celestia had been incredibly intense. Her muscles ached. "It started when you sent me to Ponyville!"

"*What?*"

"Well, that's not when the *problem* started, but... it's... where the pattern began." Yes. Patterns. Cling to logic, pattern recognition, sequences, inferences. That's how we discuss things as rational ponies.

The first time, it had been necessary. "You sent me to Ponyville to make friends to defeat Nightmare Moon and become the Element of Magic. It was necessary and important – it's been the core of my life! But then you assigned me to stay here and study the magic of friendship. But you didn't need to *assign* me to stay here, I would have done it anyways! You could have begged me to return to Canterlot, and I probably would have chosen to stay here."

Celestia was silent. Twilight took some time to blink tears out of her face, but still didn't dare look at her mentor.

"I didn't think about it at the time, but... did you even *think to ask?*" Twilight brought a hoof to her cheek. The wake of the intense emotion Celestia had inflicted on her was making it hard for her to control herself.

The second time, it had been necessary *at the time*. "Then... you took my letters away from me," Twilight sobbed.

"What? I never –"

"Yes!" Twilight shouted. "Yes you did! They were *special*! They were between you and me, every week! But suddenly they were for *everypony*, whenever! Spike even went around *writing* them! I almost threw him out when I found out!"

"Twilight, you were getting completely out of control," Celestia said, trying to sound firm, but it came out weak and mangled.

"Now why might I do that?" Twilight sniffed, sarcasm running thick through her agony of sobs. "Why would I have gotten upset that I had nothing to write to you? Those letters weren't just *homework*, you know... that's the only time I ever got to talk to you anymore."

Celestia was silent.

The *third* time showed where the trend *led*. "And then," Twilight gagged, "And then, just so everything was *perfectly clear*, you came out and *told* me I wasn't important to you anymore."

"W-what?" There was no mistaking the tremble of horrified agony in Celestia's voice now.

"No, Twilight, I guess you're *not* my student, anymore," Twilight snapped, bitterly.

"That's not what I –"

"I know it's not! But it's what I *heard*!" Twilight bellowed, her magic lashing out wildly, books and scrolls flying from their shelves in a blizzard of paper.

"Twilight –"

"Don't even *think* of saying *that's not what you meant*," Twilight growled. "That makes it *worse*. That just shows you weren't *paying attention*!" She heaved and sobbed, looking around forlornly at the upended library, tears streaming down her face.

Calm down, Twilight. Celestia will understand...

The unicorn closed her eyes, breathing in and out slowly. With practiced ease, she lifted the books and scrolls back into their place on the shelves. The act soothed her, brought her back to herself.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about things," Twilight said, her voice barely controlled. "I realize why I'm getting so upset. Everything in my life has been changing, rapidly. I have huge responsibilities now, as an Arch-Mage and here in Ponyville. Ponies look to me for guidance and advice all the time now, when they're not asking me to save their lives from something. And my friends are as often as not busy doing the same thing."

Twilight opened her eyes, red-rimmed and sad. "I'm not stupid. I mean, obviously you know that; you raised me that way." There was a little, choked noise behind her, but Twilight just closed her eyes, swallowed, and continued. "I know *your* history as well. I know how you are. You guide, you touch, you *stay apart*. I grew up watching you do it, to the court, to everypony around you – because you worry about doing too much, getting too involved, not letting things *be as they're going to be*. You taught me that."

Twilight closed her eyes and turned around. "I guess... I guess I just hoped – foolishly, perhaps – that I was the exception."

She opened her eyes.

The radiant vision of perfection had vanished; the spell was broken. What remained was a shrunken wreck, pale and weary, looking out at her with immense fondness from half-hidden eyes sunk into deep pits. Her mane was washed out and barely moved.

"Oh, Twilight," Celestia whispered. It could have been a moan.

• • •

High above Equestria, the eternal sun...

For one thousand years the sun shone brightly. Beneath it, the ponies went about their lives, rejoicing in the presence of the unbroken sun.

But now there was another star, on the distant horizon – just a little star, pink and young and eager, rising to meet the sun. It rose, drawing nearer, rejoicing in the sun's beauty even as the sun's brightness made it almost impossible to see.

On the other horizon, the moon rose and asked: Why do you shine eternally? Aren't you weary? Rest, for a time.

And for a moment, the sun regrets shining so brightly.

A moment is all it took.

• • •

"Princess!" Twilight cried, dashing forward to catch her mentor as she collapsed forward towards the table. "What's happening?!"

"You... are so brave, my faithful student," Celestia whispered. "I am so, so proud of you."

"Princess! *Princess!*"

Celestia shrugged at her supporting hooves. "Twilight, listen," she rasped. "Twilight! There's something I have to do now. But... I want you to know... I never meant to hurt you like this. I love you so much."

"What are you talking about, Princess?" Twilight's terror was so complete that she barely resisted as Celestia pushed her away weakly.

"There's someone I have to see," Celestia said, and in a flash of sunlight – weaker and *redder* than Twilight had ever seen it – she was gone.

"Twilight!" Rainbow Dash burst through the door, shouting. "We heard screaming! Are you alright?" She looked in horror at the look of complete misery on her friend's face. "Twilight, what happen –"

"I have no idea," Twilight said. And even as her friend crushed her in a hug, Twilight couldn't seem to cry. It was all just too big.

• • •

Her power flaring around her, Celestia touched down awkwardly in Canterlot gardens, stumbling as she landed.

The pegasus guards monitoring Canterlot air traffic were used to the Princess arriving suddenly and in unexpected ways. She rarely needed their help these days, unlike in wilder times of Equestria's history, so they only gave the bright spectacle of her sudden arrival a cursory glance at first, until a young and significantly less jaded recruit, armor still shiny and new, called out in alarm.

Something was seriously wrong. Celestia stalked through the statuary drunkenly, staggering and pausing to rest against statues for long moments before heaving herself upwards and prowling on. She meandered her way through the Graces and the Muses and approached the glade of Histories, her awkward steps guided by a terrible sense of purpose. The gate was closed and barred, but this posed little difficulty to the Princess; her horn glowed, irregularly, and tore it from its hinges, mangling the elegant silver gate with radiant power.

The guards descended rapidly, wings beating fast as their hearts. A couple shed their heavy helmets, desperate for speed.

Celestia stumbled up to the cringing statue of Discord. The draconequus' frozen expression of sudden terror looked down on her mockingly.

"Wha..." she yawned, head swaying. "Wha... did you... do... t'me...?"

Me? I didn't do anything, replied a silent voice. *Didn't you listen? All I had to do... was watch.*

Celestia's eyes, hazing over as sleep descended, left the terror-filled stone orbs of Discord as they rolled up in her head and she collapsed into unconsciousness.

Unheard by the guards, who gathered around Celestia yelling and barking orders, mad laughter roared out silently into the night.

Luna, Alone + Nurse Redheart Makes Tea + Discord Bad + A Guest in the
Night + Buckets as Essential Magical Implements + A Series of
Increasingly Distressing Tea Parties + You're My Faithful Student +
Twilight Decides + A Pressing Need

• • •

Night fell over Canterlot.

The moon had begun to wax, and so had its Princess; she had begun the slow growth back to her full glory, and the ends of her mane faded from pale blue into a haze of starlights, which smoked and wavered weirdly against the darkening sky, one trying to blend into the other.

Luna stood atop the tower of her quarters, staring into the setting sun.

Alone.

Whatever thoughts dwelt in her mind were dark indeed. Her face, so inclined to mysterious smiles and inscrutable glances was wooden and stiff, her lips occasionally trembling to hint at a sneer, or a grimace, or even something like a sob. Her eyes were glued to the distant horizon, where, with complete insensitivity to the princess' feelings, the sun insisted on setting. The poetry of the situation was making her ill.

Orange, red, purple, midnight-blue... fading to black.

Her eyes blazed.

"*Twilight...*" the princess murmured, deep in thought. She continued watching for some time as the red disc of the sun slipped below the horizon. The sea of stars spread overhead, gleaming dully so as not to disturb their mistress' thoughts.

"Twilight!" Luna snarled.

With startling suddenness, the Princess spread her wings wide and wrapped them around herself like a cloak. With a vortex of shadowy power, she vanished into the night.

• • •

Night descended onto Ponyville.

"Twi, hun, please, ya gotta tell us what happened." Applejack tried to lift Twilight's face up to meet her gaze, but the unicorn's eyes kept drifting away into nothingness as she reclined limply on the library table.

Twilight slumped forward again, eyes half-closed, a stupid, slack-jawed grin plastered across her features. Applejack frowned at Rarity, who shook her head sadly. It was getting worse.

The Elements of Harmony were all present in the library, displaying various shades of distress. Pinkie and Fluttershy sat together, one unusually quiet and the other in full-on comfort mode, her soft voice cooing gently to the pink pony. Rainbow Dash flitted nervously along the railings of the upper-floor landings, muttering to herself, while Applejack, Spike, and Rarity sat near Twilight, watching for any sign of a meaningful response.

"Stop bothering her, honestly," Nurse Redheart called from the kitchen. The doctor who had tried to inspect Twilight had retired for the night in frustration, unable to get a word out of the unicorn save for some nonsensical mumbling that sounded like apologies, completely at odds with her expression of terminal bliss. Similarly, they had been unable to move her from the library table – literally, somehow, unable to move her with anything short of three ponies pushing as hard as they could. In fact, the only thing that had gotten any real reaction out of her since Dash's arrival had been –

"I've made some tea." Nurse Redheart pushed in a trolley with a battered tea set steaming on it, looking harassed.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack spun to face her, eyes lit up in alarm. "Wait!" they shrieked.

Twilight didn't even turn around; her horn just lit with magic power, tearing the trolley from Redheart's control. The nurse made to reach for it, but Rainbow Dash tackled her to the ground. "Hey, what are you –"

"Look, just trust me, okay?" Dash said.

The trolley, and the tea service atop it, were suddenly crushed into a crude sphere, much smaller than anypony might have guessed it could be, which spun in the air for a moment to universal fascination before being hurled out of a second-story window with force.

Applejack sighed. "Dash, ya best go catch that afore it lands on somepony." The pegasus nodded eagerly and tore off out the window with a little salute.

"What... what was *that*?" Nurse Redheart was still huddled on the ground, looking terrified.

Fluttershy reached a hoof down to her, smiling gently. "That happened when Rarity made tea earlier, too," she said. "We're not, um, totally sure why."

The nurse pony accepted Fluttershy's help up, her normally unflappable attitude failing her. "Unicorns are always a problem." She shook her head ruefully. "Look, it's clear you all have your hooves on this better than we do."

The other ponies gave her an incredulous look. Nurse Redheart frowned at them.

"Come on, you six are always dealing with this kind of thing. Weird magic stuff. This is way outside our realm of expertise. So if anything *medical* happens, just... come get us, okay? There's only so much we can do when we can't find anything wrong with her except that she won't talk to anyone. Keep her calm. Let her come to in her own time." The nurse gave them all a curt nod and took her leave.

The room fell silent again, everypony caught in an agony of confusion and doubt. Of course they were used to dealing with weird magic stuff, but... it was usually Twilight doing the dealing.

Dash had been the first on the scene, and the last to hear anything from Twilight that wasn't a vague expression of confusion or a weird snatch of apology. Rarity and Scootaloo had been only the briefest moment behind her, and while Scootaloo summoned the other Elements and the doctor, Rarity and Rainbow Dash had experimented with different ways to provoke a response from her, the only notable success of their efforts being the destruction of a particularly fine gilded tea service which was now lodged somewhere in the southern fields of Sweet Apple Acres.

Spike had scrambled up from his basement lair as they did this; he had been sleeping off the remainder of the Apple Family's best and had not been immediately conscious of what the loud sounds he had heard were. He now sat very quietly near Twilight, having said extremely little, most of which had been hopeless statements to the tune of, "I should have been there," in miserable tones of guilt.

"Got it! Right over the rail station," Rainbow Dash said, proudly, reappearing at the window. She vanished from the window and entered through the door. It had taken

Twilight several years to break her of her habit of arriving in the library through windows, but the training had set in deep. "I still can't believe the princess would do something like this to Twilight –"

"I still refuse to believe that the princess did this on purpose," Rarity sniffed, "*If* she had anything to do with it at all." Despite her firm tone, she seemed deeply troubled.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Oh, give me a break, Rarity! Of *all* ponies, *you* should be on my side here. I mean, what did she do to *you*, huh? Do you *know*?" The pegasus flitted nearby, waving an accusatory hoof in Rarity's face. The unicorn stared at it, warily. "Maybe you *don't* know, because your mind's all screwed up now –"

"Enough!" Applejack stamped a hoof, making a huge clap on the floor. "Y'all are havin' the same argument y'all have been havin' all day."

"Hey, I'm just sayin', if *somepony* hadn't stopped me getting here faster, maybe things would be different!" Dash shot Rarity a dirty look, making Rarity sniff haughtily.

"Yeah, we'd be frettin' about Rainbow Dash lyin' there droolin' too." Applejack gave her friend a wry grin. "They didn't make Twi an Arch-Mage fer bein' a good librarian, Ah'll tell ya that much. An' she's a darned good librarian."

Dash scowled, but said nothing.

"Instead of us barkin' each other up trees, let's just put it out there that we're all scared, okay?" Applejack gave Dash a sympathetic look. "Even if we're all dealin' with it in our own way."

"I'm not scared," Dash huffed. "I'm angry. Come on, don't you guys want to get to the bottom of this?"

"Dashie, you're the scariest of all of us," Pinkie Pie said, her voice tinged with an unusual streak of nervousness. "Your wings are all – poof! Ker-fluffle!"

Rainbow Dash quickly glanced back at her wings and saw that they were, indeed, all ker-fluffle. Giving Applejack and Rarity's smug grins a sour look, she stretched and waved them a few times until her feathers fell into their proper place. "Don't get weird ideas." She tossed her head up in the air with arrogant pride. "I'm just... upset, is all, okay?"

Everypony looked around at each other awkwardly. Dash's bravado, usually a source of quiet amusement, had sounded even more false and hollow than it usually did.

"It's really bad this time, isn't it," Spike whispered. "Like, *Discord* bad."

Nopony wanted to answer, but they all thought the same thing. It was at *least* Discord bad, and when things were this bad in the past, it had always been Twilight Sparkle leading the way, head held up proudly and voice bursting with enthusiasm and confidence... and standing behind *her* was Princess Celestia, always hinting but never quite stating that no matter how dark things got, the dawn would come again.

But now that situation was completely reversed. The ponies found Dash's threatening implications about the princess falling on unusually receptive ears. Dark visions poked their fell heads out of the depths of their imagination – memories of the last princess gone bad they'd seen mixed with the rare but all-too-unforgettable displays of Celestia's immortal power in a very natural way.

Too natural.

Everypony realized how pointless it was to think it, but they couldn't help reflecting that Twilight would have known what to do. She would have remembered a scrap of ancient lore, or had a colleague researching the topic, or at the very least, would have known what book to read. Spike had pulled down several thick grimoires that might have been about magically-induced illness based on their titles, but only about half of each page had been words anypony recognized and the illustrated diagrams hadn't been anything anypony wanted to let their minds linger on just then. The room had shared a collective vision of Twilight surrounded by a swirling halo of books and scrolls, referencing and cross-referencing effortlessly, pages flying madly –

So what now?

Night had fallen in earnest over Ponyville now; the windows of the library were little pools of blackness. Owloysius stirred on his perch upstairs and, with a quiet *hoo-hoo*, bid the ponies good night and vanished into the gloom.

"Heavens ta hooves, it's dark... what's the weather supposed ta be like tonight, Dash?" Applejack looked up at the window the owl had departed from. "It was so lovely last night... the sky was almost purple, the stars were so bright."

Dash waved a hoof vaguely. "Oh, they never tell me anything anymore," she said, trying very hard to sound dismissive. Applejack raised an eyebrow. "What? You want me to poke my head out and spitball it or something?"

"Ye'd be the one ta know, dontcha think?"

Dash favored her friend with an irritable look, but leaped to a second-floor window. "Looks clear to me, but it is *dark* out there... I can barely see across the plaza! Let's see..."

"Agh!" Spike belched hugely, a burst of green fire singeing Applejack and Rarity's manes as they leapt out of the way with a yelp. A black scroll appeared, and he deftly snatched it from the air, a practiced flick of his thumb talon slicing the blue wax seal neatly in half. He unrolled it and held it in front of himself.

"Spike!" Rarity snapped, reappearing from under the table. "What was –"

"Uh," Spike said, his face even more anxious than it already was, if that were at all possible. "We're about to have a visitor..."

A furious gale whipped through the Library. The doors and windows slammed open with a bang, eliciting terrified squeaks from Fluttershy and Pinkie, who huddled together against the biting cold of the wind. Rainbow Dash, hovering near a window, was thrown backwards with a squawk of surprise, tumbling head-over-hooves into the railing of the second-floor landing. All the candles in the tree went out, filling the room with pitch black, the dim starlight only adding weird texture to the darkness. The wind seemed to have a cruel mind of its own, swirling and howling in the library, pulling books and scrolls off their shelves into a vicious whirlwind for a moment before it passed with a soul-chilling moan.

"Everypony, stay calm now!" Applejack shouted over the nervous sounds coming from around the room. "Spike, can you give us some light?"

"Uh, yeah!" He groped around in the dark for the candlestick he'd heard rolling near his head. He brought it up to his lips and with care breathed a gentle little green flame onto the wick. "Okay, got it –" he began, looking up.

"Where. Is. She?" Princess Luna asked, her voice a shard of ice from deepest space. Her face was inches from his, staring at him over the little candle light. Each word was spoken as if it were a cold iron spike being driven into the ground.

Spike cried out in alarm, stumbling backwards and fumbling the candle, which flipped end-over-end in the air. It was halted by a little burst of blue magic, suspending it in mid-air. Around the room, every candle bloomed a little blue flame, burning coldly in the still-chilly library.

In the sudden light, everypony stared at her at her place at the head of the table in horrified awe. By blue candlelight, Luna seemed ghostly and dreadful, standing proudly

at the head of the fine table that dominated the library floor, wings outstretched like great plumes of shadow – the Mistress of the Night on full, terrible display.

"I would have words with the Arch-Mage," said the Princess of the Moon. "Where is Twilight Sparkle? Hmm?" She spoke quietly, drawing out the words of the question in a dusky whisper. It was almost pleasant to listen to; the ponies were like mice appreciating the sound of a purring cat.

Despite themselves, despite their memories of her bright laughter and deep, passionate friendship, the ponies found themselves terrified of Luna, even as she spoke with icy calm, no open threat on her tongue. She had been practicing being frightening every year, after all, and had gotten extremely good at it.

Princess Luna set the candle down and looked around slowly. "Sing out, my little ponies. Am I not your belov'd princess...?" She began prowling around the edge of the table slowly, looking down her face at the other ponies haughtily.

"Princess or not, you have a lot of nerve showing up like this –" Rainbow Dash snarled, leaping from a pile of debris.

"Dash, you calm down *right now*!" Applejack shouted over the brash pegasus' threatening voice. "Princess! We're *friends*! We're all *friends* here! Jus'... everypony calm down, okay!?"

"Do not presume to command me," the princess hissed, her voice now harsh and vicious. "Not even thou, Applejack. Not *now* –"

"Princess, please," Fluttershy said, stepping forward timidly. "You're scaring us."

The princess snapped her attention to the trembling pegasus, holding her in a baleful gaze. Fluttershy swallowed, but returned the frozen glare with an expression of as much courage as she could muster.

In the furious, ice-blue eyes, Fluttershy recognized an immensely powerful creature driven mad with fury by fear and impotence, like a bear driven out of its home by some ferocious monster, deep in the Everfree Forest. She gave the princess a nervous, but genuine smile of sympathy.

They held each other's gaze for a lifetime of heartbeats. It was Luna who broke contact first, looking away from her friend with a shamed expression; she closed her eyes and sighed, heavily, her wings folding to her sides and her stance softening. The candles

began burning a merry amber, filling the room with warm light which seemed to return the early summer warmth to the library as well. Outside, stars burned the heavens blue once again, twinkling merrily in the sky.

"Thank you," Fluttershy said, quietly. Luna nodded, not looking up, taking great, deep breaths.

The princess waved her head irritably, and the books and scrolls leapt back into place, followed by various artifacts and curios Twilight had on display. With ill grace she stepped forward and collapsed into one of the rosewood chairs, not meeting anypony's eyes, embarrassment and anxiety warring on her features.

"Now what was *that* all ab—" Rainbow Dash began, but stifled herself as Luna's eyes flashed to hers, her gaze and harsh and penetrating like sapphire lances.

"How 'bout you jus' stay quiet, Dash?" Applejack gave the pegasus a sharp look.

Fluttershy stepped up to Luna. "Princess, I think you need to tell us what's the matter," she said, gently putting a hoof on the princess' shoulder. Luna started, startled at the sudden contact, but Fluttershy's compassionate smile was about the most nonthreatening thing in the universe. The Moon Princess appeared to melt, looking sullen and anxious.

"I need to speak with Twilight Sparkle," Luna grumbled. Her displeasure at being dependent on another pony was painted broadstroke across her features. "Things... *go ill* with my sister."

"Things 'go ill' with Twilight as well, Princess," Rarity said, getting to her hooves.

Luna looked at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe ya oughta see fer yerself," Applejack said. "She fell down over here."

Luna rose and trotted over to where Twilight lay, moaning quietly. Applejack strained at her until she had rolled the unicorn onto her back. The smile was gone, but her expression was still distant and limp. Luna recoiled, eyes wide, bringing a hoof up in front of her chest as if to ward off a blow.

"Do you know what's wrong with her, princess?" Spike asked, anxiously.

Luna's eyes flitted across the unicorn, a grimace spreading across her face. "Oh, *sister*..." Luna whispered.

Dash turned on Rarity. "I *told* you the princess did something to her!"

"Will you act with *some* decorum, for once in your life? Honestly," Rarity sniffed.

"In a way, Rainbow Dash has seen to the heart of the issue," Luna said, but she gave the pegasus a dark glare despite this. "*Only* my sister could have done something like this, especially to Twilight Sparkle."

"What, is it like some special magic, or –"

"Something of that nature, yes..." Luna looked off into the distance. "This is worse than I thought. I've been so..." She shook her head, looking pained.

"Is something wrong with Princess Celestia?" Fluttershy asked.

Luna shook her head. "We shall discuss that when I have revived Twilight Sparkle..." She trailed off, looking at nothing in particular, tapping a hoof in front of herself absently. Everypony stood around, watching the princess nervously.

"I shall need a bucket," Luna said, finally. The rest of the room shared a look of total mystification.

"A... bucket?" Spike's face screwed up in confusion. His little reptile eyes slipped back and forth nervously. "I've never heard of *any* magic using a bucket... well, except for that sand castle spell – that was pretty cool. I mean, woosh! Towers everywhere, I tell you! But I don't see how it would help here, I mean, no sand. See, what I thought you would want is –"

"Spike, dear, you're babbling." Rarity put a hoof around his shoulders, having to rise onto her hind legs to reach high enough. He gave her a grateful smile.

"Yeah, I guess. I'll go get the pail from the garden." He lumbered off out the door.

"The bucket will be... essential," Luna said absently. Straining against the weird, localized gravity that was affecting Twilight, the princess raised Twilight back up onto the table, Applejack and Pinkie Pie guiding the unicorn into a position of relative comfort as best they could. "Has she responded to *anything* happening in the real world?"

"Nothing!" Pinkie Pie waved her arms around wildly, making gestures to match her explanation. "We tried talking to her, singing to her, telling jokes to her, reading stories to her, putting Gummy on her head, putting Owloysius on her head, reading letters to

her – Dashie even wanted to kiss her but Rarity and Applejack wouldn't let her." Behind the pink pony, Dash blushed into Luna's raised eyebrow. "Oh oh oh ooh, except the tea sets. She *really* hates tea sets. Smash! Zoom!"

"Smashing them with magic? Really...? Hmm." Luna stared back down at Twilight. The goofy, slack smile had returned, and her lips were moving wordlessly. Luna seemed pleased. "Good."

"Good?" Fluttershy and Pinkie said, giving each other a confused look.

Luna's smile faded. "Well, it's... it might be good. Perhaps. If we're lucky." Everypony looked at each other anxiously.

The door opened, and Spike returned, holding a large, beaten-up metal bucket. "Got it."

"Very well. Stand there, please, I'll need that in a second." Luna nodded to him. "Everypony, please step back."

"Oooh, because of *magic*?" Pinkie crooned. Behind her, Fluttershy covered her muzzle with her hooves.

Luna gave her an uncomfortable look. "In a manner of speaking, yes," she said. The princess closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and gently tapped Twilight's forehead with her horn. There was a sound like somepony tapping the edge of a wine glass, and then –

• • •

Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual.

"Isn't this nice," Celestia said.

"Yes, extremely nice. I'm so glad we had time to sit down for some tea," Twilight said.

"I'm also glad, my faithful student. Very glad."

"Good."

"Yes, good. I'm so glad."

They sipped the tea in perfect synchrony. Around them, Canterlot gardens was totally silent, its normal buzz of natural activity hushed as all existence stilled to allow Celestia and her precious, beloved Twilight Sparkle to have a moment to just sit together.

"Did I mention I'm very proud of you?" Celestia asked.

"No, you didn't," Twilight replied. "Are you?"

"Yes, very proud. You're my faithful student."

"I am? That's so great. Just great. Yes." They sipped the tea again, in perfect unison.

Luna stared.

"Oh, Princess Luna," Twilight said, not looking around. "So nice of you to join us."

"Yes, sister, how nice of you to join us. I'm so pleased." Celestia smiled more broadly than Luna had ever seen her, even in the old days.

"So sorry to... intrude," Luna said, stepping forward. She sat at the table, between Celestia and Twilight, who didn't take their eyes off each other.

"Would you care for some tea?" Twilight asked, summoning a cup and filling it without waiting for an answer.

"Thank you." Luna eyed it carefully.

"Luna, did you know I'm *very* proud of Twilight?" Celestia said.

"Are you?"

"Oh, yes," Twilight replied. "She just told me. And I believe her."

Luna nodded, slowly. A thought occurred to her. She doubted it would work, but..."You may have mentioned this in the past, sister. What was it you were telling me, just the other day...?"

Celestia frowned, looking puzzled. "I'm sorry, I don't remember just now."

"Really? Wasn't it something about Twilight's research?"

"I often speak of Twilight's research. I am, after all, very proud of it." Celestia beamed at Twilight, who grinned and blushed.

"How strange. You seemed to be so enthusiastic..."

Celestia looked troubled. "I... I..."

Twilight turned to Luna. "Stop bothering her. She's ill, you know."

"Worse than you think," Luna said, pointedly. She stared at Twilight, who regarded her impassively.

Celestia started making strange, strangled noises.

"I think you should leave," Twilight said calmly. "You're upsetting the princess."

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Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual.

The two shared a little salut and sipped the tea – not in harmony, this time, just naturally as anything. They smiled to each other, the quiet, knowing smile of two ponies whose relationship is such that they don't even need to speak to express total affection. Around them, Canterlot gardens buzzed with life and activity in the mid-day sun.

"Good afternoon, sister," Celestia said, breaking eye contact with Twilight to address the newcomer.

Luna stepped out of the undergrowth. "And to you. I see Twilight is here as well."

"You seem unhappy to see her."

Luna cocked her head. "I wouldn't say that."

"Is there something you wanted, Princess?" Twilight asked nervously.

"No, not –"

"Then why are you here?"

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Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual. The golden halls of Celestia's rooms in Canterlot gleamed around them.

"I was so glad you could attend the conference, Twilight," Celestia said. "Although it pains me to tear you away from things in Ponyville."

Twilight blushed. "Anything for you, princess," she said, bashfully. "Not much was happening, anyways."

"This is a memory, isn't it," Luna said, appearing out of a shadow nearby. "Or at least, part of one. I can't change things. You're very clever."

Celestia stirred. "Luna, what are you –"

"Quiet, you," Luna snapped.

"Don't talk to Princess Celestia that way!" Twilight leapt to her feet. "I don't know how you returned, Nightmare Moon, but I won't let you harm the princess!"

"Nightmare Moon? What –" Luna looked down. A familiar set of silver armor adorned an ebon-black body. She looked up, fury lit white-hot in her eyes. "Twilight Sparkle, what have you *done* –"

But a familiar rainbow wave was already descending on her.

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Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual. Around them, early evening in Canterlot Gardens was greeted by a symphony of crickets.

"*Enough!*" Luna roared, bursting out of the undergrowth. "Enough, Twilight!"

"What? What did I d–"

"Not you," Luna snapped. "Her!" She pointed a hoof at a shrubbery, which burst in a shower of leaves. Another Twilight was crouching there, hooves raised as if manipulating something, an expression of total shock on her face. She chuckled, nervously.

Celestia and the first Twilight stared.

"*Well!*?" Luna stared at the second Twilight furiously.

"Uh..." The second Twilight grinned broadly and waved a hoof –

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Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it –

"Rrrrraaaagh!" Princess Luna leapt into a patch of undergrowth nearby, landing heavily on something which grunted under her weight.

"It's nice to see your sister getting really excited about pest control," Twilight said.

"She's always been *so* enthusiastic about her work," Celestia replied, sipping the tea. "It's really one of her more endearing qualities."

Luna's head rose from the undergrowth, looking annoyed. "*What?*" she said, turning back to whatever she was sitting on in the brush. "Really?"

"Get off of me!" Twilight's voice squealed from underneath her.

The Twilight who was sitting with Celestia looked over at the sound in alarm. Celestia sipped her tea.

"Enough of this, Twilight," Luna growled, hauling the unicorn up into the air with magic. The Twilight at the table looked to Celestia in terror. The alicorn shrugged and calmly sipped her tea again. "Your friends are terrified, and it's not going to get any better until you stop indulging it."

"Let me go! Let me go!" There was a burst of purple light and the real Twilight fell awkwardly to the ground, rolling to her hooves as best she could.

Luna looked at her, a mix of irritation and grudging admiration on her face. "I am nearly as strong here as I can be, and yet..." She shook her head. "You really are something special."

"Thank you," Twilight grumbled.

"And yet, you allow yourself to be taken in so easily –"

"I really hope you didn't think she'd fall for something *that* obvious," Celestia said, not looking up from her tea. "Honestly, sister, show some effort."

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Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup, which shattered, spraying hot liquid all over Celestia and Twilight. They reared up, gasping and spitting.

"**Twilight Sparkle!**" Luna said, floating out of the sky on even wingbeats. Magic whirled madly around every word. "A **word**, if you please."

"Yes, Princess?" the Twilight at the table chirped, then covered her mouth with a hoof.

"Not *you*." Luna sighed, rolling her eyes. She glanced around the gardens, huffing irritably. "Twilight! Show yourself!"

"No!" came a voice, from everywhere and nowhere.

Luna groaned. "You're behaving like a foal!"

"It's *my* mind," the voice replied with forced nonchalance. "I can do what I like."

"Not when it means rolling around on your library table *drooling*," Luna snapped.

"Drooling?"

"Yes."

"Eww."

"Yes." Luna continued casting about, looking for the wayward unicorn. "Come out, Twilight. You know as well as I that this isn't healthy."

Silence.

The Twilight and Celestia on the ground had resumed their tea, pouring the steaming liquid into nonexistent cups and smiling at each other as it pooled on the table.

Luna took long breaths in and out, trying to calm herself.

"At least she *wants* me, here," Twilight said.

"Oh, don't be *petulant*," Luna said, irritably. "It doesn't suit you. You're far too intelligent for this."

"Look at that! It's *perfect*. Mentor and student, taking time for each other. Why *wouldn't* I want that?" Twilight's voice mewled miserably. "I had it, once."

Luna looked at the two figures pouring tea onto the table. "Besides the obvious...?"

"Shut up! *You* did that." There was a weird moment of distortion and the mess was gone, Celestia and Twilight chatting merrily over perfect cups of tea. Despite herself, Luna chuckled.

"Twilight, you know that's in the past, now. It can't be that way anymore."

"It can!" the voice sobbed. "If... if I'm good enough..."

"Twilight, why do you want things to be like this?" Luna asked. She closed her eyes. "Do you want to always be a little filly following after my sister, hanging on her every word?"

"Why not?"

Luna grimaced. "Stop it. You know you deserve better. You know you can dream of better – even if you don't let yourself remember." The silence that responded was decidedly sullen. "I certainly hope you didn't think you could force yourself to forget your dreams every night without me noticing, Twilight," Luna said, smiling just a little.

There was no response, but there was a subtle change in the *flow* of the dream. Luna allowed herself to descend to the ground, and with ease, felt her way about the change. She closed her eyes and focused on the images around her, trying to see through Twilight's perceptions and latch onto the ultimate abstract forms at their root. It was hard to keep a hold on them – Twilight's mind was putting up a fight, more than the reflexive defense anypony's mind did against this sort of intrusion. Twilight was *good*, a powerful mage with a disciplined mind, and Luna found herself struggling to keep up.

"Twilight Sparkle," she said. "You know it pains me to see you doing this to yourself."

"Then stop *watching*!"

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Sweet herbal tea poured from the china kettle, spilling upwards neatly and vanishing into the sky. Celestia and Twilight sniffed the empty air, taking a small amount of pleasure in the familiar ritual.

"This is just a story you've been telling yourself, Twilight," said a hedge. It burst into a shower of leaves, which spun and whirled madly into the shape of Princess Luna, spitting out a stick. "And I'll thank you to *never* do that again."

"Just leave me alone," Twilight moaned. The voice came from around a corner in the hedges. Luna stepped forward, ignoring the seated pair, and peered around the bushes. Twilight Sparkle – the real one – was huddling there, her face a portrait of misery, her horn lit furiously. Luna looked to the seated pair, and it became apparent what Twilight was manipulating – they were crude wooden marionettes of herself and Celestia, jabbering and clacking insanely, their "voices" harsh rasps. She looked back to Twilight, whose hooves were now clearly laden and bound with puppet-strings, each being precisely controlled with magic.

Luna considered Twilight for some time. The unicorn looked up at her nervously now and again, her attention focused on the puppet show. The Celestia puppet was heaping praise on the Twilight puppet, who received it gratefully, over and over again.

"May I speak with the part of you that knows what's going on is unhealthy, please?" Luna asked, nonchalantly.

Twilight gave her an acid look. "Which part would *that* be? The part who can't do anything right? The part who can't keep everyone happy? The part who's a *failure*?"

"The part that's been crushing tea sets in the waking world." Luna lay down next to Twilight. "The part that is, in fact, you, not the little filly letting her emotions run wild."

Twilight looked away, ashamed. Luna held the unicorn in an imperious gaze for a time, noticing with growing unease the way that the strings danced and tugged at Twilight's limbs even now that Twilight had stopped manipulating them.

"I suspect, my friend, that this is very comfortable for you," Luna said, as if it weren't important. She looked off into the distance, where the silhouettes of passing birds flew backwards across a purple sky, suspended by a thin black line. "May I ask why you feel you need comfort?"

The unicorn remained silent.

"Twilight..."

"You know, it really makes me crazy when you try to act like her," Twilight said, not looking up.

With remarkable prescience, Luna bit her lower lip, and the snap reply that had leapt to her tongue with it. She closed her eyes, breathed out slowly, calming herself. "Thank you for telling me. But I *suspect* you were just trying to get on my nerves."

"Did it work?"

"Very much so."

"*Good.*"

Luna snapped a hoof down in front of her, thumping against the earth of Canterlot gardens. "Enough of this... this... *petulance*. I'm trying to make this easy on you."

"Not interested."

The princess again paused, stretching one wing, then the other, then her neck, in the slow way Celestia had taught her. It never seemed to work as well for Luna. "I'm tired of fighting you, and you know I'll win eventually. So just stop. We don't have time for this."

Something in her tone – perhaps the very frankness of the statement from the reflexively mercurial princess – made Twilight look up. Sullen defiance was naked on her features and her eyes were tired and heavy-lidded, but the light of wary concern was lit deep in them. "What do you mean?"

"I've been... foolish," Luna admitted, though it was through her teeth. "Celestia's been even *more* foolish. And you're here being as foolish as it's possible to be."

"How have *you* been foolish?"

Luna gave her a sharp look, to Twilight's smug satisfaction. "I'll explain. *Later*. You're the one we need to worry about at the moment."

"Worry?" Twilight looked away, airily. "I'm fine. Just enjoying happy memories." She gave the marionettes a complicated series of tugs, and the teacups lifted and poured themselves down the front of the wooden Celestia and Twilight.

The all-too-recent memory of Celestia gazing off into the distance over Sweet Apple Acres, her face pained, *enjoying* similarly happy memories occurred to the princess. "These aren't memories anymore, Twilight," Luna said.

"Sure they are." Twilight shook her head, looking upwards in a theatrical display of summoning a memory. "This was the evening after I managed to keep myself invisible in front of the entire court for a whole session, standing in front of Princess Celestia where everypony was sure to see me. Even the guards didn't notice."

"And how old were you at the time?"

Twilight scowled at Luna. "Okay, so maybe I'm changing things a *bit*."

"It's immaterial whether they are or are not totally legitimate memories at this point, actually." Luna raised an eyebrow. "Those chains are my main concern."

"Chains? What are you... talking... about..." Twilight raised her hooves. Huge, rusty manacles bound her limbs, and as she leapt in sudden terror, a sudden yank at her neck made her aware of a previously unsuspected collar.

"Oh, dear, you really *did* think you were in control here, didn't you...?" Luna inspected a hoof carefully, sounding bored.

"What is this? What did you do?" Twilight grunted as the chains began to pull and yank in time with the movements of the gruesome marionettes, which clacked and gibbered horribly.

Luna rolled her eyes. "You know very well that all I did was talk. You'd know if I had changed something. Stay calm, please."

"Calm!? This – argh! This is torture!"

Luna looked up at Twilight's horn, which was still glowing fiercely. "Yes, it is. I can barely stand to deal with you when you're like this."

Twilight stammered. "What... what's going on...?"

"Like I said, my sister has been *foolish*," Luna said in her apathetic voice, "But *you've* been even *more* foolish. For some time now."

"So you keep – agh! – telling me," Twilight managed as the Celestia puppet spread a wing, yanking Twilight's right hind leg awkwardly.

Luna ignored her, and looked out at the marionettes, which were nattering and cackling madly. "Honestly, a tea party...?"

Twilight managed to look hurt, despite her predicament. "Yes."

"I suppose my sister's fondness for the wretched stuff would rub off on you over the years," Luna said, mildly.

"Are you – ah! – just trying to annoy me, or – ow! – what?"

Luna grinned. "I do love a captive audience."

"Ha ha." Twilight grunted under the strain of another pull from the marionettes. "Are you going to help me – mmnnh! – or what?"

"Alright, alright." Luna observed the situation for a while longer. "You've been replaying this in your head for the last few hours, Twilight. It's a comforting scenario for you, one you've thrown yourself into wholeheartedly." The chains rattled, and Twilight gave a strangled cry of pain as they constricted. "See? You're feeling a bit threatened. Binding yourself to the fantasy."

Twilight struggled with the chains, whimpering and snorting in fear. They bit at her hooves painfully.

"You know very well that physical action is somewhat pointless without accompanying mental effort here, Twilight," Luna said, calmly. "Just relax... and think."

"About what?"

"Why you're here."

"I'm pretty upset at the moment, don't you think?"

Luna gave her a cool glance. "*Here*, Twilight. You came *here* for comfort. Why Celestia? Why tea? Why not... Rainbow Dash? She seemed to think kissing you would help you wake up. Have you been reading her fairy tales, perhaps?"

Twilight blushed into Luna's sly little grin.

"The point stands, Twilight. Why not your friends?"

"Because..." Twilight trailed off, ceasing her struggles against the chains. They fell slack, no longer tugging at her as she mastered herself. "Because... it... it's about them. Kind of."

"Oh?"

There was an expectant quality to the hush which followed this; Luna occasionally gave the mare next to her a cool glance, but said nothing. Twilight looked around, her face cycling through expressions rapidly.

"It was Dash leaving for the Wonderbolts," Twilight said, eventually. Her voice was quiet.

"Would this be related to her beliefs about kissing?" Luna gave Twilight another wily look. "Have you been keeping secrets?"

"No, nothing like that. That was just..." Twilight blushed again, deep crimson, and shook her head. "It's just... she's a charismatic pony, isn't she? Everything she does is... *big*, and *bold*. Colorful, just like her." The chains leading to the puppets were still, and the marionettes themselves were twitching weirdly now that Twilight wasn't jerking along in proper time. Luna gave them a wary look. "Her absence... scared me, a little. Everything seemed less... *bright*."

Luna nodded.

"And then Rarity's career took off," Twilight continued. "Not that I resented it, of course... what kind of friend would I be, then? I mean, I suggested half of it. But... she's gone all the time now, all over Equestria. And she drags Fluttershy with her half the time. And Applejack has been so busy as Sheriff..."

"Things changed." Luna nodded. "It's hard, Twilight. It always is."

"I just wanted something I could hold on to," the unicorn said, sadly. "Something... something that made me..." She waved her hooves, and the Celestia puppet hugged the Twilight puppet clumsily. "Something that made me *special*."

Princess and prisoner sat together in silence again, for awhile. Twilight made a sound that might have been a suppressed sob.

Eventually Luna began speaking, carefully. "Was it my *sister* who –"

"I was her first student in a *thousand years*," Twilight snapped.

Luna let this rudeness pass. "And?"

"What do you mean, '*and*'?" Twilight huffed.

"Oh, don't be like that, Twilight." Luna gave Twilight a patronizing look. "Twilight, even if she hadn't taken you as a student, you would have been an exceptional pony. That much is obvious."

"But she *did*," Twilight huffed.

Luna rolled her eyes. "Very well, very well... so, your life is changing, again, in a way you find unpleasant... and you need something to hold on to. So why not hold on to Celestia, yes? She is, after all, the immortal princess who was your constant guiding light in life up until you moved to Ponyville..."

"Yes."

"But she's not there."

Twilight turned her head away. "Yes."

"Why?"

Twilight said nothing, but trembled a little. Luna spread a wing over her, and Twilight curled into it.

"Twilight..."

"Because I wasn't good enough," Twilight murmured. She sniffled a little.

Luna smiled gently and gave Twilight a little squeeze with her wing. "Twilight, you know that isn't true."

"If I was a good enough student, she... wouldn't have abandoned me. I mean, she..." Twilight trailed off. "I... why would she leave me, otherwise? What reason could she have had?" The unicorn looked up at Luna. "Did I do something wrong?"

Luna considered this. "Not... exactly, Twilight."

"What does that mean?"

"It means what it means, Twilight. Things have gotten very confused between yourself and my sister. I confess that I own some of the blame. I should have acted sooner, when I realized what was happening."

Twilight, despite her sniffles, gave Luna a suspicious look. "What do you mean? What is happening?"

"I'm not entirely sure anymore," Luna said with a sigh.

Twilight huffed and shook off Luna's embrace. "Then why are you here, bothering me? Go find out."

Luna frowned. "Celestia needs *you*, Twilight."

"The Princess has made it fairly clear," Twilight said imperiously, "that she doesn't need me anymore."

Luna groaned. Being the wise and mysterious sister was turning out to be an incredible hassle. "I'll tell you what she doesn't need anymore," Luna said flatly. "What she *doesn't* need is another *subject*. Another groveling little pony kissing her hooves and promising to dance along to whatever tune my sister sees fit to play." Luna raised her hooves in front of herself and danced them back and forth as she said this, her tone mocking.

"Being obedient is a sign of maturity."

"Dear Princess Celestia," Luna began, in a snide voice.

Twilight's brow furrowed. "How *dare* you –"

"Quiet. I'm trying to get it word-for-word," Luna said, smiling nastily. "Ahem."

Dear Princess Celestia,

My friend Applejack is the best friend a pony could ever have, and she's always there to help anypony. The only trouble is, when she needs help she finds it hard to accept it. So while friendship is about giving of ourselves to friends, it's also about accepting what our friends have to offer.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle.*

"How was that?" Luna asked, smiling innocently. Twilight had winced through the whole thing.

"What does that have to do with anything? And... how..."

Luna inspected a hoof idly. "I suppose you could say I am *your* faithful student, Twilight. I never have thanked you, I'm sorry..." Her tone was as inscrutable as ever, but something in her eyes told Twilight that a frightened Luna, newly restored, had hungrily pored over some letters her sister had given her from time to time, in order to learn about the new Equestria she had found herself in.

Twilight blushed, but kept her defiant look. "I still don't see what that has to do with –"

"Think about it."

"What does Applejack have to do with this?"

Luna rolled her eyes. Twilight was just being difficult to spite her, now. "Describe my sister, in a word, Twilight."

"*Perfect*," Twilight snapped.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"She's... powerful, she's beautiful, she's... wise, I mean, she always *understands* –"

"She does?" Luna laughed, bitterly. "You say that to *me*? Celestia, perfectly understanding? Never misses anything? Don't insult me, Twilight. Or perhaps it is *easier* for you to just *accept* the legend of Nightmare Moon, where I, the jealous younger sister,

am wholly evil and irresponsible? Do you still hold some fear of that in your heart, my *dear* friend?"

"No, of course not –"

"And she's never misunderstood *you*?"

"*I suppose you're right, Twilight,*" the marionette of Celestia hissed in its terrible, rasping voice. "*You're not my student, anymore.*"

"*Shut up!*" Twilight snarled at it. The marionette remained motionless, unhearing, its beady glass eyes staring blindly out at nothing.

"It's easier to believe that *you* did something wrong, isn't it." Luna gave her a sympathetic look, as directly copied from Fluttershy as she could manage. "You're so used to being corrected by her, after all."

"What? I – what?" Twilight was drawing in breaths in great gasps, beginning to hyperventilate.

"Twilight..." Luna said, trailing off, looking thoughtful. One of her sister's old lectures raised a hoof in the gloom of the amphitheater that was the princess' ancient memory. "Let's talk about... *masks*, that ponies wear for each other –"

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"Uh..." Pinkie Pie tapped the frozen form of Luna a couple times, hoof bouncing off the little aura of blue light with the same bell-like ring that had pierced the air as her horn had made contact with the unicorn's forehead. "I hope that's what's supposed to happen."

Everypony looked at Rarity, who regarded their stares incredulously. "I have no idea why you'd think I'd know one way or the other."

"You're a unicorn, aren't you?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Rarity gave her a glare. "Oh, is that how it is...?" She waved a hoof. "Why don't we ask Fluttershy about high-speed racing flying, then?"

"I could do some research." Fluttershy pawed the floor in front of her. "If, um, that would help."

"You're not helping, dear –"

"Uh, gals," Applejack said, nervously.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "It's more like, let's ask her about *flying*," she said, her wings fluttering irritably. "I mean, can't you, I dunno, *sense* if things are OK? I mean, whatever the Princess did to Twilight seemed pretty serious –"

"I have no idea, Rainbow Dash, I really do not," Rarity declared.

"Uh, everypony..." Spike backed away from Twilight and Luna nervously. Twilight's horn was lit and building up a charge of magic in a dreadfully familiar way. "This is really important!" Applejack grabbed Pinkie and hauled her into cover.

"What?!" Rainbow Dash and Rarity snapped, at the same time.

"Duck," Spike said, eyes, wide. "And cover your ears."

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"No!" Twilight howled. "I don't want to hear about masks, ever again! It's not... it's not..." She cast about, frantically, words failing her. "None of it was true! *None* of it!"

"Struck a nerve," Luna said, stunned.

The world around them shifted and whirled horribly. Even Luna, mistress of dreams, had to brace herself against the lurch of the dreamscape destabilizing rapidly, Twilight's mind become a riot of pain and self-loathing, horrible images rising and melting away grotesquely, howling and gibbering insanely. Despite having swum through the collective nightmares of ponykind as a matter of routine, despite having lived *in* Nightmare for a millennium, Luna found herself... distressed.

"Twilight!" Luna called. The ground shifted under her, forcing her to lift off awkwardly with her wings. Her progress was hindered further by... *something*; it felt like Luna was moving her wings through something viscous and cloying. "Twilight, please, listen to me!"

"No!"

Luna found herself capable, even in this hellish tempest, of rolling her eyes irritably. Back to square one.

Once again she focused her powers, trying to *see* through the horrific, mind-bending tumult of the collapsing dreamscape. There was a little nexus, *deeper* –

She dove, as best she could. Twilight's defenses were no longer logic traps or image games; she was trying to *force* Luna out, with thick, slapping waves of repellent mental force, battering Luna as she tried to reach the little heart of thought where Twilight was trying to sequester herself.

And it was working. Luna grimaced, and focused all her power on moving forward.

Here there was no "ground" or "sky"; Luna was suspended in a chaotic, multihued haze, Twilight's loss of control reflected in her ability to focus on a meaningful narrative. Occasional nonsense visions swirled around the princess as she drove herself on. Here, a flock of the little bird silhouettes passed her vision, suspended on their little strings; a little group of Rainbow Dashes passed her, snickering at her inability to move faster; books swirled around her, flapping their covers like wings, pages snapping and biting.

It was *weird*.

Yet Luna pressed on.

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Applejack poked her head up. The worst seemed to be over.

Twilight's horn was still hissing and shooting bright, colorful sparks, illuminating the now-gloomy room in a wavering multihued half-light. The sparks shot high into the air, some burning the ceiling with vicious snarls of smoke, the rest petering out as they fell towards the ground. Applejack wasn't one to know, but it looked painful.

"Wooo!" Pinkie Pie leapt out of a pile of books, dancing and whirling around happily. "It's like Twilight knew exactly what we needed to relax!" The pink pony hauled Fluttershy out from under a knocked-over display stand and began swirling the disoriented pegasus around, singing and laughing.

Applejack gave her a resigned sort of smile, and turned to Spike, who was getting to his feet awkwardly. "That happen often?"

"Uh. Not... not from her." He gave her a sheepish grin. "It's, um... usually me scorching things in my sleep, these days."

Rarity rose, shaking her mane elegantly, and favored Spike with a bright smile. "It was very gallant of you to cover me, dear," she said.

"Erm, my, uh... my pleasure."

"*Teensiest* request, for the future though." She put a hoof on his chest and coughed a few times. Spike immediately fell to one knee, holding her upright. "Try not to land on me quite so hard."

Rainbow Dash, extracting herself from the railing on the second-floor landing, snickered. Applejack frowned at her and turned back to the gently-sizzling Twilight. The unicorn's face was drunk with pleasure, slack and stupid.

"What's goin' on in there, Twi?" Applejack whispered. "C'mon back to us, sugarcube."

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Twilight had never been happier in her life.

Luna was so silly, worrying about her. Everything was fine. Look!

"You're my faithful student," Celestia said.

See? Fine.

Floating in the void, a chunk of rock and finished stone floated lazily, a lone island of sanity in the formless sea of Twilight's mind. It was a section of Twilight's favorite hallway in the Halls of Dawn at Canterlot, bright crimson stone underfoot and beautiful white pillars forming flaring archways decorated with friezes of ponies building Equestria. She loved it here; it was a history lesson, a work of art, and the best place to watch the sunset in the entire castle. How many times had Twilight, as a filly, hauled a stack of thick books and just sat here reading by the light of the setting sun, under the watchful and amused gaze of a pair of Royal Guards?

Dozens. Hundreds, maybe.

So what could be wrong?

Celestia sat before her, beautiful and regal as she had been that aftern—

Twilight – Twilight, listen. There's something I have to do now.

– as she always was, and always had been, and always would be. Her coat shimmered. Her mane was bright and beautiful and flowing, not greyed –

You're so brave.

– not that it ever had been greyed, of course, because she was perfect in every way.

And she was smiling, beatifically.

She was *perfect*.

"You're my faithful student," Celestia said. It was like hearing the universe singing to her.

"Twilight!"

Luna alighted on the flagstones, her hooves making a gentle *clip-clop*, wings fluttering and whipping weirdly in the non-air of the void. Her eyes were wide with horror – which made no sense, of course. Nothing was wrong. Twilight tried to get a better view of her, but she was having a hard time moving. Something was holding her in place, but somehow, that felt *right*. And look, the chains were *gold*! Very shiny. Extremely nice.

Jewelry, really.

Anyways, Luna was coming up to her, so that saved Twilight the trouble of moving to see her.

"What are you..." Luna gazed at her, looking as frightened as Twilight had ever seen her. The dark alicorn looked from Celestia to Twilight several times, looking more and more concerned each time. "What... did... what happened to you, dearer-than-dear to my heart? Oh, Twilight..."

Oh, Twilight...

The world throbbed. Agony pervaded everything. Luna stumbled, waving her head, mewling miserably.

"Hello, princess," Twilight said cheerfully.

"Twilight, quickly. You're hurting yourself. You're using magic –"

"Shouldn't I? That is my special talent, after all. Isn't that why you chose me, Princess?" This was addressed to Celestia, who stared down at Twilight lovingly.

"You're my faithful student," Celestia said.

"See?" Twilight smiled serenely.

Luna was blinking and tossing her head as if she had been struck. "Twilight... you need to tell me what happened to you when my sister..." The princess swallowed, bracing herself. "What happened when Celestia came to you this afternoon? **Tell me!**"

Twilight watched the magic surrounding the command swirl around her, breaking across her face like waves on a cliffside. She giggled. "Oh, nothing, Princess. We just talked about some silly things, and then Princess Celestia said she had to go!"

I never meant to hurt you like this.

Luna's ears pricked up. "What was that? What's that, behind you?"

"Oh, nothing." Twilight looked up, as much as the golden chains would let her, at Celestia, who beamed down at her. "Isn't that right? Nothing that can hurt us."

"You're my faithful student," Celestia agreed.

But Luna was already prowling around Twilight, her breath ragged and harsh, as if she had seen

A corpse

The universe exploded into a storm of pain.

• • •

"Oooh!" Pinkie Pie said. "Pretty!"

Twilight's eyes and horn were throbbing with eye-aching intensity, filling the Library with harsh pink light. The light wasn't *right*; it cast shadows wrong and threw everything into a bizarre high contrast. A high-pitched whine filled the air.

"It's a bit like this right as the Rainboom starts!" Dash shouted over the noise. "I don't think it's supposed to last this long!"

"Oh, ya think?" Applejack's teeth were aching like mad, and tears were streaming down her face. "What was yer first clue?"

"This is really bad, guys!" Spike shouted. "I think we should get out of here!" Rarity was whimpering in his arms, waving her hooves at her horn as if it were a knife stabbed into her forehead.

"I don't think we can run far enough," Fluttershy said, her voice barely audible. She was looking at Twilight ablaze. "We just have to trust Luna."

• • •

Luna fell back into Twilight's field of vision, rolling on the ground, clutching her head and howling.

"There's nothing back there I want to talk about," Twilight said, calm as a clear summer night.

Luna rolled to her hooves, blood trailing from her nose, spilling onto the crimson flagstones in little drops which were quickly absorbed into the stone. "Thou... thou art most fortunate that we hold thee in such esteem, else we wouldst leave thee to destroy thyself as thou saw fit," she rasped, pain making her head swim.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understood you."

"*Wretch*," Luna spat. She glared into Twilight's happy smile.

"I'm not a wretch, Luna. That's a very unkind thing to say about anypony, especially in the vernacular usage of approximately one thousand years ago. Isn't that right, Princess?"

"You're my faithful student," Celestia said.

Twilight glowed with pleasure.

"She spoke to thee..." Luna began, heaving great breaths. "She spoke to you about... masks, didn't she."

"Isn't that a silly thing to talk about? But how did you know?"

Luna gave a wry grin. "Thou art not the first to hear it. Perhaps the second, though."

"In that case, I'm honored."

"You *are* honored," Luna growled. She was getting back in control of herself. "She was trying to take hers *off* for you."

Twilight felt the bindings around her grow tighter. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"No, you *don't*." Luna heaved another great breath, and sat up. Next to the spectacular vision of Celestia, she seemed small and ragged, not a princess at all. A pale, jealous shadow of the magnificent vision of the Sun unbroken.

I'm so proud of you.

The universe shivered again. Luna was racked with coughs, blood spilling from her nose and mouth. But her eyes didn't leave Twilight's – they were lit with inner power, cold and hard as the very stars in the sky.

"Twilight, you are a wise and intelligent pony. Was Celestia acting rationally?"

"Of course she was. She always does –"

Luna's face lit up with bitter fury. "Don't just answer, ***think!***"

This time the magical command leaked into Twilight's mind, which was no longer allowing itself to be deceived quite so readily. The memory of Celestia's voice called to her, chilling her to her very core – but it woke up the parts of her she was trying to put to sleep.

Think!

The part of Twilight which was always, always watching – that was crushing tea sets in the waking world – spoke. It was *Twilight*, pure and untrammelled: ever-vigilant, ever-thinking, ever-eager, ever-ready.

I've seen that spell before, it said. It's not really a spell at all, actually. How did Celestia describe it... *letting the sun shine*. She lets a little of that immortal power show through. Visually and magically impressive. Makes ponies...

...susceptible to suggestion.

"No," Twilight whispered. "She wasn't..."

"Good," Luna rasped. "Keep going."

Twilight squealed in pain as the bindings constricted. Blood leaked at their edges on her hooves.

"Focus, Twilight!" Luna urged, her voice pained. "Set aside your fear and *solve the problem*."

It had been so *intense*. It had been like being drunk and hopped up on endorphins all at once, but ten times over. Celestia had been out of control. She had been *in a hurry*. Why?

What had happened to her?

Luna was watching her carefully, wiping away little trickles of blood from her nose from time to time.

"I –" Twilight tried to say, but a golden muzzle snapped around her mouth.

"Twilight, you need to let yourself look at the truth," Luna said.

"Mm – mmph!"

"No, you're just holding it in your mind. You saw it, you know what the truth is. You know this isn't, and has never been, the truth." Luna indicated the beautiful, radiant Celestia before Twilight.

"You're my faithful student," Celestia said.

Twilight's heart fluttered. Half of her *ached* to just accept this wonderful creature's praise, forever; the alternative filled her with dread. The dread of uncertainty, the fear that she might never hear those all-too important words again, or that they had been hollow and untrue –

I love you so much.

If the pain before had been agony, this was indescribable. Luna howled in misery as the void around them roared with brutal flashes of lightning. Twilight's anguish was complete and total.

"Is *that* what you really want?" Luna snapped, her voice thick with emotion and wet with blood. "This... *thing*, this *vision* that was planted here? You've certainly tended it with care!" Her wings billowed outwards as she raged. "Look at it, Twilight. *Really* look at it."

Twilight looked up. The vile mannequin's beady glass eyes leered down at her horribly. Twilight's scream of revulsion was stifled by the manacles, and she struggled and pawed at the ground trying to back away.

"Little filly, playing with dolls," Luna mocked. "The dream of a Celestia that's never *wrong*, that is never *frightening* or *absent*, a Celestia that won't *hurt* you or be displeased with you." Luna sighed deeply, hacking up some more blood, and looked at Twilight seriously. "A Celestia that cannot *love* you. Not really."

Twilight struggled against the chains, terror maddening her. She felt skin tear, blood flow –

"Isn't that what you want? For her to *love* you?"

"Mmmmp! *Mmmmp!*" Twilight whined. She tossed her head, the flesh of her neck raw under the choking golden collar.

"It's so easy to remember being her student, and how she loved you then, I know," Luna said, thickly. "I *know*, Twilight. I remember – Twilight, listen! – I remember the time before the Nightmare. Before Discord." She shook her head. "But that time is over now. I am different. She is different. The world is different. The love we share is different."

Twilight thrashed her head around, denial whipping her into a frenzy.

No, we can still have that! I just have to... I have to... I have to prove to her I'm good enough, and she'll love me again...! She won't leave me...

"I know you're scared, Twilight." Luna paused, heaving grotesquely. "I know you're scared, as much by what you *want* as by what you *fear* could be the case. But you're strong, Twilight. You can overcome it. You *can* see the *truth*. You just have to choose to see it!"

Twilight sobbed, mutely, into the muzzle. It bit down, hard, crushing her teeth together. She moaned in agony.

"Twilight! *Twilight!*" Luna shouted, swaying and bleeding. The void around them spasmed horribly. "You *have* to *look!*"

"Mmmph!"

"Yes you *can*! You have to *decide*! Analyze your fear! Control *it*, don't let it control *you*!"

The pain of the shackles, the fear, was unbearable. The jingle of the chains whispered their poison directly into her mind.

She doesn't love you anymore. You failed her.

You were never special; just a whim. An amusement for a bored goddess.

She *knows*, Twilight, and she doesn't *care*.

She *abandoned* you, because you don't matter anymore.

She doesn't love you, she never did, she *can't*.

Celestia is *dying*.

Twilight's eyes surged with tears.

"Twilight – just *face the fear*!" Luna yelled. She was tottering around, barely able to stand for pain.

Twilight shook her head. That wasn't the way to deal with this.

She couldn't just *face* – by which the princess really meant *ignore* – the whispered terrors. Every last one of those things could very well be true; she didn't know. *Not knowing* was why they were so cutting, why they leapt straight to the bone. Things had gone wrong between her and Celestia, after all. But they were all part of a bigger fear.

Something in Twilight knew Luna was mistaken. Celestia hadn't *tried* to show Twilight what was behind the mask. It had fallen off in front of her, and Twilight had seen her beautiful, shining idol, her beloved mentor, in pain. In fear. In confusion and desperation.

Imperfect.

And now Twilight felt the realization settling in her mind: Celestia had *hurt* her. Not on purpose, but... it *had* been the princess' out-of-control magic that had sent Twilight's

mind deep inside itself – well, something like that, anyways, Twilight wasn't really sure yet.

But it had been her own fear *keeping* her here.

Maybe the future held a life without Celestia, one way or the other. Maybe everything *was* a lie. Twilight felt the terror of not knowing war with the dread of what might be confirmed if she learned the truth in her chest, great armies of illogic and panic clashing in her, making her heart throb and her stomach heave.

Since when, said the voice that was always watching, does Twilight Sparkle satisfy herself with not knowing?

Pinkie sense, something in her wheedled.

Oh, shut up, everything that was Twilight groaned. That was only the one time.

The unicorn's face set in a grim expression of determination. The truth, be it agony or glory, was what she wanted... and deserved. Once she knew it, she could take the next step towards whatever fate she could make from that point on. Maybe – if things were right – even towards that shining dream she didn't let herself remember, because it was so precious and ethereal that she suspected even acknowledging it would make it vanish...

Twilight closed her eyes and breathed deeply, the chains no longer binding or cutting. She took all the fear inside herself, accepted it, let herself feel terrified, let the darkest dreams she dared roll through her mind. Around her, the void pulsed and raged in sympathy. Luna, blood now pouring from her face freely, stared in horror, clearly sensing the torment Twilight was willingly inflicting on herself.

And yet, despite the fear... in spite of the fear... *to spite* the fear... Twilight decided to see the truth.

Moving through the chains as if they were smoke, Twilight turned her battered body and saw, once again, the broken, greying Celestia, wasted and ruined. She had that same exhausted, loving smile on her face, weak but honest, as she gazed up at Twilight.

You are so brave... my faithful student.

"I think I'm ready to wake up, now," Twilight said.

Luna wandered up to her lamely and gave her a gentle nuzzle, their blood smearing over each other. "It's about time."

• • •

Twilight's eyes opened, wide. A pressing need presented itself.

"Bucket!" Luna barked. "Now!"

Spike held it out, but Luna's magic grabbed it and thrust it before Twilight's face just as she was noisily sick.

"Ewww!" Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash made disgusted faces. Fluttershy turned slightly green.

"Yeah, saw that comin'," Applejack said unhappily. "Magic ain't got nothin' ta do with it if ya need a bucket that badly."

"Don't be too hard on her," Luna said, slumping into a seat, exhausted. "Sometimes... there are things you just need to get out."

Who Are You Trying To Impress? + The Field at The Heart of Dreams +
Twilight Speaks to Herself + It was a Dark and Stormy Night in Canterlot
+ The Secret of the Ivory Tower + The Tale of the Two Sisters + At the
Heart of the Mountain + You Understand, Don't You? + It's About Us +
The Little Sister + Twilight Falls into Darkness

• • •

Somewhere:

Celestia laid, eyes closed, and focused on the sun. It hovered, just above the horizon.

"How long are you going to torture yourself like this?"

The voice was Celestia's, but it was more bitter and mocking than the princess' had ever been. The viciousness was only barely managing to hide the fatigue and plaintiveness it was meant to conceal. This voice belonged to *something* which was enduring a fatigue inexpressible by mortal ponies.

"Who are you trying to impress? This can't be much fun for you, either," the voice whined.

Celestia ignored the voice. It was asking a question she had long ago ceased feeling the need to answer.

Eternally, she thought, once again. I will push myself like this for eternity, if that's what must be done.

For Equestria, and all my little ponies.

All of them.

All of them.

Her eyes opened, harsh and gleaming. A labored breath escaped her mouth.

For Equestria, I will endure.

• • •

A rolling plain of sweet-smelling grass spread into the distance under a sea of stars, the horizon graced by a sparkling lake fed by a stream that gleamed with the reflections of the unending night sky like jewels.

For the first time in many, many years, Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the wind of the field, its revitalizing freshness driving the lingering aches of her recent trauma from her mind – well, dulling them, at least. The unicorn took deep, gulping breaths of the refreshing air, reveling in the contentment and peace that each breath imbued in her, staving off the dark thoughts that loomed in her mind.

Somehow she was still conscious of her body, resting peacefully on a sleeper car bed aboard a special priority line to Canterlot – having royalty around being very useful from time to time. Every breath in the dream seemed to dull an ache or soreness, some of which Twilight hadn't been fully conscious of until she noticed their sudden absence. The whole experience was fascinating.

She breathed in, and out. It was wonderful, like breathing roses, sea air, and the crisp smell of new snow, all at once – not the smell, of course, but the *experience*. Refreshing and calming.

"Of all ponies that have been, are, or shall ever be... *you* are most welcome here, Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Luna, behind her.

Twilight took another deep breath in, and slowly let it out. "I feel *amazing*. Is there a... healing effect to this, er... place? Some special magic...?"

"*Place* is about as good a word as any." Luna circled Twilight, looking her over carefully. What marks remained from her recent mental ordeal were fading quickly. "This is the field at the heart of dreams. It is a place of serenity and peace, a sanctuary from the many pains of the waking mind. Almost everypony finds their way here from time to time. It is here *for* them, after all."

A thousand questions about the mechanics of this statement leapt to Twilight's mind, but she dismissed them with a rueful smile. For obvious reasons, she knew little about dreams, but she had heard enough about the logic of dreams from Luna to suppress the urge to seek hard-and-fast rules about how something like this field operated. It was an entirely different type of magic from the straightforward logic of the waking world – an entirely different type of *reality* – and asking questions as if it were the same often made no sense. Ask, for example, where something or somepony was, in dreams, and Luna would give that little smile and reply, "Don't you mean... *when*?" It was maddening.

Twilight desperately sought something to say that wouldn't sound silly. Luna had always taken such delight in being knowing. "Er... a very interesting... phenomenon," she said, lamely, giving Luna an embarrassed little smile.

Luna's face was lit with amusement. "If I had any doubt that the Arch-Mage, Twilight Sparkle, had returned to me more or less intact, it is quieted now."

"Don't make fun."

Luna stepped up beside her, towering over her in the fullness of her power here in dreams. "That was not my intention, as I'm sure you're aware. It has always wounded me that you could not be here..." She looked down and gave Twilight a bright smile. "I suspect you'll quickly become fond of it, as I am."

Twilight looked out into twinkling sky. "I would like it better in different circumstances, I think. It's a shame, really, to have such a peaceful dream when everything is so..." She searched in vain for something meaningful to say that encompassed the whole of her feelings, and gave up. "Screwed up."

"Ah, you've been distant from dreams for far too long, my friend." Luna gave her a thoughtful look. "This is one of the true dreams; anypony can come here, if they wish, and the way is known to them. I'll teach you, if you like."

"Don't you think I've had enough problems with teachers, lately, that –" The retort had come out automatically and unconsidered, and its conclusion stuck, painfully, in Twilight's throat.

"Think of it as... another opportunity to collaborate, perhaps. Would that be better?" Luna gave Twilight an encouraging smile. "That would please me. I do miss working with you, Twilight."

Twilight looked away, her expression pained.

One of the rather more annoying side-effects of her magically-induced psychotherapy was a stark and unsympathetic memory of her behavior up to this point. It was like this: generally, when a pony goes about making a change in their life through waking means, they can often look back on their behavior earlier and say to themselves, "Ah, well, I was being silly. I was still emotional about things; anypony would have done the same..." The gradual transition from one state to another made the memory of ones' foolishness more distant and understandable. Sure, it was embarrassing in retrospect, but comprehensible.

There was a process of forgiving oneself, step by step over time, that made the knowledge of one's mistakes easier to bear.

Twilight, on the other hoof, had put herself through a great deal of mental gear-shifting, all at once, and her mind was still trying to sift through all of it. The process kept tossing up little memories that scraped across her mind like a hoof on a chalkboard – for the first time ever, she cursed her precise, graphic memory and her mind's ability to make leaps of reasoning, connecting disparate memories and sequences of events with their usual startling clarity and speed. Twilight was learning that she very much preferred not to be the one being startled by it.

Too many nights hyperventilating into pillows. Too many little things she had done, missions she had taken upon herself, which now she realized had done just to see if Celestia would notice she was doing them. Finding excuses to work instead of spending time with her friends, because something in her had screamed that making Ponyville a success was the latest in a series of unspoken tests. Treating Spike like a servant rather than the little brother she knew he deserved to be, because *everything* was about Twilight's ongoing quest to be the very best wizard, the great statespony, the eloquent author and theoretician... all of it, *all of it*, because she was so, so frightened that she wasn't *special* anymore. Special to Celestia – or at least, special to the Celestia her mind had wished existed – the perfect one, which never frightened or hurt her.

Twilight's eyes fell guiltily on Luna, who was regarding her curiously. Breaking off her ongoing research with Luna had seemed like *such* a good idea at the time – a matter of timekeeping. Oh, I'm so sorry princess; I've just had so much on my plate lately! I'm sure when things calm down a bit, we can pick this back up – it's not like you're getting any older, ha ha ha! We have all the time in the world...

But now, in the harsh light of perfect hindsight... well, Luna just hadn't been the right alicorn, had she...?

And now, looking up at the dusky-blue princess, Twilight's guts churned as the awareness that Luna *must* have suspected something along those lines drew over her.

Once again, she took deep, revitalizing lungfuls of the sweet-smelling air of the dream. It seemed to help her mind settle, dulling the edges of the painful memories, helping her set aside the little spirals of miserable guilt which she found herself slipping down. The dream was not a cure-all; it just... cushioned the blows.

"How do you feel?" Luna asked, cautiously.

"Lost." This, too, just slipped out; Twilight *tched* in irritation. "I'm a little out of control."

"If you want my honest feeling, I'd prefer you be a little out of control at the moment," Luna said, slightly more amused than Twilight was entirely happy with. "There are things in you that need to be let free, and bindings you placed on yourself that you need to grow past."

"In that case, let me ask: how much of what... happened, what we saw... was because of me, and how much was because of what..." Twilight found the name sticking in her throat, and felt foolish. It was just a name – *Celestia*. Agh, but it made her heart ache, after everything.

"How much was... magically induced, perhaps?" Luna suggested, politely avoiding the name that distressed the unicorn so.

Twilight smiled at her gratefully. "Yes."

"Well... from what I can tell, from what you told me before I put you to bed, and from what Rarity and Rainbow Dash have reported since, I think you are lucky to be sane. It sounds like she was completely out of control – caught, like you, in some cruel way of thinking. She revealed something like the fullness of her power to you... and yet you endured." Luna's voice, thick with concern and worry, somehow found space to be admiring as well.

"Barely."

"Nevertheless," Luna said, smiling at Twilight's humility. "In doing this to induce you to speak your true feelings about her, for whatever reason, she seems to have forced you down into your own mind, which was rebelling against itself. Again, you showed miraculous strength. Magic is not friendly to the mind, as you well know."

"Were the images of... her... part of that? The chains?"

"No, Twilight," Luna stated frankly. "Those you made yourself."

Twilight looked away, her last little refuge of self-comfort torn away.

"Would you like my... perspective, Twilight?"

Twilight sighed. "I suppose so."

The princess fluffed her wings and stretched her neck fretfully as she considered how to phrase things. "I think it is fair to say, Twilight, that Celestia has been... the focus of your life. Your teacher and mentor since you were very young – and thus, impressionable. And she is a truly wonderful pony, Twilight, she really is," Luna added, hastily, as if worried that this was not apparent. "But as we have so dramatically explored together... she is not perfect."

Twilight remained silent, staring out, unseeing, into the distant stars.

"I think... your heart realized what was happening long before you understood, in your mind. Felt my sister separating herself from you. The absence of such an important part of your life, and the legitimate joy you took in being her..." Luna paused to give Twilight an apologetic look, "Her faithful student –" Twilight winced, and Luna grimaced in sympathy, " – the absence of that made your hurt heart seek to reclaim it. This, combined with your growing sense of loss as your friends' lives became more distant from you... as the alienation grew, so did the obsession with getting back that feeling of being special."

"That sounds about right," Twilight murmured. Even here, in the field, she felt a crush of emotion; shame, embarrassment, anger, sorrow... all warring on Twilight Sparkle's always-vulnerable sense of self-worth.

Luna sighed. "It's perfectly understandable, Twilight. You're hardly the first pony to have a hard time dealing with a relationship souring in this way."

"Still, I feel like I should have known better," Twilight said, frowning. She hung her head. "Some expert on the magic of friendship I turned out to be."

"If it makes you feel better, my sister didn't see any of this happening, either," Luna replied gently. "So you're in good company. I think it is one of those situations where neither of you could see the forest for the trees... and of course, my sister has other problems as well."

Twilight stiffened. She had been trying to avoid contemplating that – the crowning achievement of her childish obsession's destructive reach. It was the true cruelty of what she had done to herself – not only had she had to be so mercilessly shocked out of a cycle of obsessive, self-destructive idolization, but it had taken Celestia apparently beginning to *die* for her to realize that anything was wrong. The abysmal lack of awareness and contemplation was the deepest wound – not only had she failed herself, but she had failed the real Celestia when she needed Twilight the most.

"What... what is happening to her? Is she –"

Luna's expression grew grave. "She is... ill. In a way. I will explain everything I know soon enough, when we arrive in Canterlot." The princess gave Twilight an irritable look. "When all of us arrive there."

"So *our* friends are still with us, then?" Twilight said, emphasizing the collective pronoun. Luna had been dead-set against anyone except Twilight accompanying her back to Canterlot; Twilight had been equally insistent that they come. This had not been a request so much as a sticking point, and had delayed Twilight's grateful collapse into the embrace of sleep for several tense minutes, and Luna had seemed half-ready to chase them off even then.

The princess gave Twilight an awkward look. "I realize that the six of you – no, Spike, too, so seven – have been through a lot together..."

Twilight looked up at the princess firmly. "They have a right to know what's going on. They care about the princess just as much as I do."

"Do they?" Luna looked down at the unicorn, face unreadable.

"Oh, don't be like that," Twilight grumbled, as her treacherous mind answered: No, they don't. Not even close.

Luna sighed again, shifting uncomfortably. "Why are *you* so insistent they be with us...?"

Well I don't know, Twilight's mind groused. Because I'm scared out of my mind, not sure what to do, and need to feel like I have some ponies around I can trust, besides you? Aren't seven shoulders to lean on better than one? For comfort, if nothing else.

"The comfort of companions can be as much a hindrance in crises as a help," Luna said primly. "Distracting you, making you act less decisively, tempting you to consult when you should *act*."

Twilight covered her mouth with a hoof. "Was I speaking out loud?"

Luna gave her a thin little smile.

"Is this to do with dreams...? Are you reading my mind, somehow?"

Luna looked out at the stars. "No, Twilight. I just know you."

"I'm glad to know I'm so predictable," Twilight huffed.

The princess sighed. "Forgive me; in truth, I am being... selfish. The things that will be discussed do not reflect well on me, and... I don't want everypony I care about hearing them. I don't really want *you* hearing them – in fact, to be *perfectly* honest, I'm not entirely sure I want to say them at all!" As she spoke, her voice grew louder and less controlled, her discomfort apparent in every word. The princess seemed to realize this, and took a moment to compose herself again before looking down at Twilight, her face proud for all that resignation lurked in her eyes. "But needs must," she finished, gravely.

Twilight gave the princess a sympathetic smile. "Whatever happened, I sincerely doubt that your friends won't support you, Luna." The princess' expression remained forlorn and lonely. "They *are* your friends, you know... don't insult them by doubting it."

"I know," Luna replied distantly. "But I beg you, allow Luna to be Luna, and let her have her pride." She turned to Twilight, looking about as bashful as she ever did. "Even if it is a fool's pride."

"I suppose I'm not in a position to be critical of anypony's character," Twilight admitted.

"Possibly not," Luna mused, with a little grin.

Twilight, feeling that she had some ground to make up, gave Luna an earnest smile. "Luna, I appreciate what you did for me –"

"No, Twilight, you do not." Luna's voice was firm and definite, but not unfriendly, much like a parent explaining to a child that the broken clock on the floor had been her grandmother's and was going to be difficult and expensive to repair. "But... looking forward to the immediate future, it is important that you do understand, I think. What I did for you – there is no real word for it – is something I would hesitate to do to anypony. The necessity of what I did grieves me."

"Wait, do... *to*?" Twilight recoiled, as if struck – what a... threatening way to describe something that had been so important!

"Yes." Luna looked back at Twilight over her shoulder in a wary sort of way that suggested she expected Twilight to get angry with her. "There is a somewhat... *penetrative* aspect to all of it. You were burying yourself deep in your mind, binding yourself to a pattern of thinking that you were desperate to embrace. I was forced to be very... involved. I dove deep into your mind so that I could speak to *you*. It was extremely dangerous for both of us, especially since you were using magic without conscious

control. In your madness, you were quite literally killing me. Not my body or my mind... *me*. And yourself, as well... and your friends, who were present in the room with you."

Twilight was stunned. "I... I didn't mean to...!"

Luna blinked, once, and slowly looked away. "Many things that have happened recently are not what anypony intended, and yet they are so."

They sat together in silence for a time.

"I'm sorry," Twilight said, eventually.

"That is well," Luna replied evenly. "But... in truth, you have nothing to thank me for. I did what I had to do, for my sister's sake, and yours." The princess looked awkward, suddenly, in the way she did when she was tearing an admission out from underneath her terrible pride. "And my own."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I invite you to consider why I would, without hesitation, willingly expose myself to every mental defense your extremely capable mind could create for me, to save you from a *nightmare* of your own creation..." She trailed off, letting the emphasis sink in.

Behind her, in the sky of the dream, an image of a purple hoof reached out of a swirling vortex of rainbow-colored light, which seemed to cut a little hole of light in a roiling hell of non-color. A dusky-blue hoof shod in silver shoes, straining against tendrils of darkness that strove to reclaim it, reached out as well, trembling. Twilight stared as the hooves touched, and a bright burst of multicolored light drove the darkness away, eating at it like fire burning paper.

Twilight stared up at it. "I... don't remember anything like that."

"I know you don't." Luna's face was sad, now. "I wish you did. You showed... exceptional courage, and fortitude, as you have again in the last few hours. It always pains me to see you doubt yourself--I think it a shame you are robbed of one of your greatest moments."

Twilight didn't know what to say.

"And I have faith you will impress me once again, as we work together to help Celestia."

Twilight had expected the name, spoken aloud, to refill her with the lingering dread that had lurked in her heart since she had been forcibly recalled from her mind. Everything had seemed so out of control, so screwed up, that she despaired of there being a real solution. Half of her expected Luna to be taking them to something like a funeral.

To her brief surprise, though, she only felt a momentary flicker of unease, which passed like smoke in the wind. She wasn't sure if it was the sedative effect of the dream, or just the general mental unclenching that had been slowly taking place speaking to Luna, but...

There was a glimmer of hope, deep inside her. Like a single, distant star in a cloudy sky, its uniqueness stood out as precious in the void, making the darkness seem less impenetrable and all-consuming.

"We... *can* help her, right?" Twilight asked, more to confirm than to query. Something in her was beginning to refuse to believe there was nothing left to be done.

"Help her?" Luna looked to the unicorn's determined expression and smiled wryly. "We need to figure out what's wrong with her, first."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Agh, we don't even know *that*?"

"Of course not," Luna chuckled.

"Of *course*," Twilight agreed. They automatically broke, as one pony, into familiar, harassed grins of put-upon professionals diving into yet another hopeless case. The smiles faded quickly, though, as their flippancy turned bitter on their tongues. There were some hurts levity just couldn't diminish. The two sat together, awkwardness filling the silence.

"There is –"

"I feel like –"

The two spoke at the same time, surprising each other. They looked to one another in embarrassment.

"Speak, please," Luna said.

"I feel like there's something left for me to do yet," Twilight said. "In my head, I mean."

Luna considered this. "A great deal, I suspect." She looked to Twilight with a curious expression. "Do you have a... feeling, perhaps, that suggests what it is?"

Twilight shook her head. "Everything's still so screwed up in my mind," she said. "I feel like I'm having twenty thoughts at once..."

"I'd be surprised if it weren't all 'screwed up', dear Twilight." Luna gave Twilight an affectionate nuzzle. "You've been through a lot in the last few days, both in your mind and in the world. If I had a choice, I would let you rest for the next decade, I think."

Twilight chuckled. "We don't all have your longevity, princess."

"That I know, all too well," Luna replied, her features strained. "It is a shame, because I know how long it can take for some hurts to heal fully."

"Well, as you say, princess, needs must." Twilight sighed, wistfully. "We'll do what we have to... for Princess Celestia."

Luna turned on Twilight. "No."

"What?" Twilight was stunned by this.

"No, Twilight. Don't do this for her." Luna looked deadly serious, eyes lit strangely by the starlight of the dream.

"Okay, for... Equestria, then." Twilight tried to give a pacifying smile.

Luna rolled her eyes. "No, not for... please, let *me* do what I must for Celestia and Equestria." An involuntary little grin flashed across her face at the rhyme, and Twilight matched it eagerly. The tension broke, and the two shared an embarrassed little chuckle, feeling like fillies.

"Ah, now I've lost the moment..." the princess muttered, half-annoyed, half-relieved.

"What *should* I do it, for, then?" Twilight asked, her grin fading.

Luna turned to her, smiling warmly. "Do it for yourself, Twilight."

"That's a bit selfish, don't you think?"

The princess' grin grew a little patronizing. "What freed you from yourself, Twilight? Was it thoughts of Equestria, or Celestia's safety?"

Twilight felt a little bloom of guilt erupt in her chest as she remembered the demand that had freed her: she wanted the truth, for herself. "No, it wasn't."

Luna regarded her, curiously. "You seem... upset, by this."

"Well..." Twilight trailed off, pawing the ground in front of her. "It should have been, shouldn't it...?"

"Oh, heavens above," Luna sniffed. "You're just like her. You've both managed to turn self-sacrifice into a vanity."

"What does *that* mean?"

The princess gave her a calm look as she very obviously weighed several responses in her mind. "Twilight, I... worry about you. Often. Because I care for you a great deal." The princess began pacing in front of Twilight. "You were breaking your mind; doing everything you could do, trying to be the best you could for Celestia, pursuing an empty dream that lead nowhere. You do the same thing for your friends, without question. And, I suspect, robbed of both, you would still labor your hooves bloody for Ponyville and Equestria."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Twilight said, warily.

Luna gave her a cool glance. "I have known ponies like this before, and I shall hence, I daresay," she said, in a strange tone that was both pained and tender. "While giving of oneself is a virtue, and a blessing to everypony, if you do not take some time to dream for yourself... what's the point?"

"Isn't wanting everypony's lives to be better a dream?"

"Oh, certainly." Luna fluffed her wings. "But why build a better world if you're not going to *live* in it...? I've seen ponies, good ponies, waste away, giving of themselves until everything they were was consumed. And even then, they apologized for being unable to give more. This is not a fate I wish you to share."

Twilight began to answer, but stopped herself. Memories of feverishly writing letter after letter to various dignitaries, while behind her she heard the library door close as Spike excused himself to visit Rarity for... well, the rest of the day, presented themselves as

exhibit A in Luna's favor, and there were several alphabets full of similar exhibits lining up right behind it. She shook her head. "So you want me to be... selfish?"

"Selfish isn't quite the right word, Twilight." Luna turned to her, looking at her seriously. "I just want you to think about what you want. It's allowed, Twilight; it's fair to think of what you desire and work towards it. It's *right*."

"I want..." Twilight paused. "I just want to help the princess, right now. Everything else is secondary at the moment."

Luna sighed. "I meant a little more long-term than that. A directionless life is a curse."

Long-term? Well... there was... but, of course she intended to...

Twilight sputtered. "Agh, I'm already an Arch-Mage! And... and I mean... well there's some books I've been thinking of writing... and of course, Ponyville keeps me busy, but..."

Twilight's mouth fell open, slackly. There was nothing. As she looked forward to the future, there was a blank; nothing she desired or wanted to work *towards*. There was just the routine of work she had created around herself in her desperation to be the best agent, the best *student*, the Celestia could ever want. Her accomplishments suddenly seemed hollow and unrewarding – which was mad, because she'd done so *much*, so much good for everypony... but...

"I think you understand why I was a little worried, yes?" Luna asked, pointedly.

"I suppose I do." Twilight hung her head. She was beginning to realize that the chaos of her thoughts was all scrambling to fill a void that had once been filled by the desperate attachment to the empty praise of a memory.

"There is an absence in you, after what you experienced," Luna said, again as if she could read Twilight's mind. "But there is a part of you, the part that has always known what was going on, even when it got truly, truly bad... that knows what you really want. Let that part of you speak to you, and to me, now."

If Twilight had felt bewildered earlier, now she was set adrift on a grey sea of miserable indecision. "How am I supposed... what... what am I supposed to think? How do I decide...?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I think I can help with that," Luna said, with sudden smugness. "We are in the realm of dreams, after all; I have some sway here." She gave

Twilight a sad smile. "I can help you have the dream you were so desperately suppressing, for so long, because you feared that by acknowledging it, it could never come true."

Twilight's heart stopped. "How..."

Luna's smile broadened. "Our minds touched, Twilight. I suspect you'll have some little insights into me, for a while, as well. That is part of why I am so wary of doing what I did; it is... intensely intimate."

"Er... intimate, huh...?" Twilight blushed crimson.

Luna's eyes widened as she realized she had misspoken. "Oh, not... not quite like *that*." She raised a wing in front of her face as she also colored. "Just... emotionally close. Open. Vulnerable."

"The actual meaning of intimate, in fact," Twilight said quickly, embarrassed to have suspected otherwise.

Luna nodded. "Indeed." She cleared her throat, and the two shared another familiar little moment of amusement at each other's discomfiture.

"As much as I miss... Celestia," Twilight managed, "I miss my relationship with you, too. Working with you, and spending time with you. All of this has gotten in the way."

She had intended this to please Luna, but something – perhaps the insight Luna referred to – drew her attention to the slight strain, the little spasm of nervousness, in the princess' otherwise happy reaction. "That's kind of you to say, Twilight. Of course, I feel the same way. But as I've said, I am very much at fault in bringing these events about, so..."

"So...?"

"So let me help you, now," Luna said quickly, in a tone of voice that suggested that it was only half of what she wanted to say. "Let me help you speak to yourself."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "This is all a little mystic, don't you think?"

"Well, yes," Luna said, haughtily. "But that doesn't make it any less true. I want you to have this dream, Twilight, *experience* it –"

"What if it shows me something... terrible? Or something that could never be...?" Twilight asked, suddenly nervous.

"Then that's what you see. We often want things we cannot have, or have private desires that are... not entirely healthy. But by letting yourself accept that you have such a desire, you can then move past it, and search for a new direction in your life. Suppressing it requires constant effort and attention; moving on is a process that ends, eventually." Luna smiled. "In any case, I suspect that nothing Twilight Sparkle desires could be *that* terrible. She is such a gentle soul, after all."

Twilight's blush returned, hot as fire. "Ah, well, uh –"

"You're... misinterpreting my words again, I think," Luna said, her face aglow with delighted amusement.

"You mean 'desire' in a more... broad sense. I hope."

"Yes," Luna said, delight shining from her face. "But I hope you trust me not to be judgmental in any case. It is my belief that what you see will be what your heart wants to strive for, in your life."

Twilight thought about this for a moment. "I..."

"And I believe we both know what the dream will be about." Luna's eyes, bright and proud in the height of her power at the heart of dreams, bored into Twilight's, but the intensity of the stare didn't intimidate, instead conveying a love that was as quiet and gentle as moonlight and as brilliant as stars.

Twilight didn't respond.

Luna stepped behind Twilight, spreading her wings. "I know this is frightening for you. I wish I didn't have to put you through so much all at once, Twilight, I really do." She wrapped the dusky feathers around Twilight and lowered her voice to a whisper. "But I think it's long past time that you let yourself know what you truly desire."

Inside the cloak of darkness, Twilight whispered back. "What if it... my dream... is impossible?" she asked again. Several options had presented themselves, and she had been troubled by how much the unattainable fantasies had appealed.

There was a little chuckle. "Does the possibility frighten you?"

"If the dream is anything like what I think it will be... if it were impossible... the idea terrifies me."

"But will you face it, nevertheless?"

There was a pause, a complicated moment of agonized consideration.

"Yes," Twilight whispered.

"I would expect nothing less from you." Twilight felt the darkness compress her, gently; it was a warm and friendly feeling, like being hugged while wrapped in a blanket on a cold night. "Now, just relax... and *dream*..."

It was like falling slowly backwards into a warm bath, comfortable and relaxing. Her mind quiet, Twilight Sparkle let herself dream the dream so precious that she had not dared to let it be dreamed... until now.

It wasn't so scary, after all. And the tea was rather good.

• • •

Was the sun supposed to be this *hot*?

Yes, yes it was. That was the point, wasn't it? Yes.

"Your heart just isn't in it anymore, Celestia. Just relax, okay? You're scaring me."

"Be *quiet*," Celestia demanded. She immediately cursed herself for rising to the nagging voice's whiny little barbs. "This is just... a bad time. Things got a little out of control. Once I regain my focus, I'll be..." She trailed off, the lie souring in her mouth. "Everything will be fine."

She cringed internally. Not much better.

"Is that so?" There was another silence noticeably lacking a mocking little snicker. "Well, I suppose you'd be the one to know..."

Behind closed eyelids, Celestia rolled her eyes. "Just leave me alone, will you?"

"That's a strange thing to ask of *me*, don't you think?"

Celestia's lip curled into a sneer. Strange it may be, but that didn't make her wish it any less.

• • •

Canterlot at night was usually a spectacular and beautiful place; its tall towers and walls seemed to glow under moonlight, making the darkness luminous and silvery. Where in the day the palace was gleaming and proud, the grandeur and history of the place seeming to leak from the walls, at night it was mysterious and enticing, little flashes of starlight glinting off gilt to hint of the castle's majesty, inviting the mind to imagine the many stories and intrigues that such a magnificent place would hold.

That night, though, clouds hung low over Canterlot, threatening rain. A chilly wind, for summer, blew across the palace grounds as the prowling figure of Luna, barely visible in the gloom, led the Elements and Spike towards the distant Academy grounds, everypony lost in their own thoughts – which, if Twilight guessed right, had a lot to do with her state of mind, if their little sidelong glances were anything to guess at. Even Pinkie Pie was unusually subdued, only giggling and making shadow puppets very occasionally.

For herself, well... she had a lot to think about, so the silence was a blessing in her mind if nopony else's.

The dream had awoken her, in a way, as Luna predicted; it focused her thoughts on a goal, an objective. Immediately after the experience, Twilight had been eager and joyful – it had seemed close, then, and not just possible, but downright probable. Luna had politely endured the unicorn gushing, the princess' face mysterious and unreadable as ever, but in an amused sort of way.

Now, though, in the cloying gloom of this night, listening to the howl of the wind amongst the shadows of her old home, the afterglow of that joy faded quickly. Doubt found a way in, snuffing hope and quenching enthusiasm, and where those warm thoughts were suddenly absent rose painful memories and her ever-present, biting feelings of self-doubt. So while she was no longer being driven to distraction, lost in a cloud of guilt and humiliation, the destination she now sought seemed to be at the end of an ever-lengthening road.

"Man, is it just me, or is it *really* creepy here?" Spike asked, looking around warily. The sound of his voice, so deep now, made Twilight stir from her rumination. "I don't remember it ever being like this, in all the years we lived here..."

"Well, we weren't exactly out much," Twilight observed, "Especially when the weather got bad. We usually stayed up in the tower, or... went to see Princess Celestia." Her voice only faltered a little.

The little gaggle carried on, passing through tunnels, under walkways, and through hedges. Luna stalked at the head of the procession, her expression unreadable, eyes glancing here and there, although what she was looking at, or for, nopony could guess.

"Ah'm a little confused," Applejack whispered to Twilight. "Ah woulda thought that if the princess was laid up at all, she'd be up in her rooms in the palace."

Twilight gave Applejack a sheepish look. "Well, to be honest... I've never seen or heard of the princess being hurt or sick, so I really have no idea."

"Not once? In all your time here?" Rarity whispered, disbelieving.

"Well, she is the princess," Rainbow Dash hissed from above them. "Who knows how she works, really?"

"Nopony does," Luna said, not turning around, taking everypony else by surprise. "Not even I. That is part of our crisis."

They rounded a corner and approached a gate, which was heavily guarded by both Celestia's golden-armored guards and the black-and-blue liveried ponies of Luna's personal soldiery. The latter bowed deeply as she approached, while the former gave her courteous salutes. She smiled, briefly, and a golden-armored unicorn unlocked and opened the gate, allowing the party to pass through.

"Nopony else is to enter," Luna called back to the guards as they passed into the distance. There was a distant cry of "Yes, my lady!" and some poorly-suppressed snickers from the golden-armored guardponies at their colleague's expense.

"Whoa, that's some serious security," Dash said. Her eyes were scanning the sky. "There's at least... sixteen pegasi up there!"

"You can see that many of them?" Luna frowned. "I shall have to have a word with the captains."

Twilight peered around her, lost in memory. All of Canterlot Castle was more or less familiar to the unicorn, having wandered these ways since she was a filly, but she was in

some seriously nostalgic territory now. Just up ahead, there was a little side-path leading to –

"Here we are," Luna declared.

– the ivory tower Twilight had occupied for so many years.

Twilight stared.

"Whoa, no way!" Spike exclaimed, excitedly. "We haven't been here forever!"

Twilight galloped up next to Luna. "Do... do you know –"

"Yes, Twilight. In fact, I know just a little bit more than you," Luna said, a hint of her sly humor peeking out through her solemnity, just for a moment, before being buried again. "But not for much longer."

The eight figures strode up to the lonely tower, which stood proud from the small sitting gardens around it. More armored guards were present here than Twilight had seen in one place, even at diplomatic affairs, standing around looking tough, keeping a wary eye on the little group of ponies.

Twilight shuddered. Seeing the guards, grim-faced and powerful, surrounding the tower in the gloom of this fearsome night clashed jarringly with her memories of the peaceful sanctuary from her youth, and she felt a little pang of loss as another little vestige of that innocent joy was consumed by the terrible events of the last few days.

Luna stepped forward and greeted the detachment commander imperiously, exchanging a brief, muttered discussion that seemed to annoy the guard intensely. He galloped off in the direction of the gate, barking orders the whole way. Luna motioned to the Elements and led them into the tower, Twilight taking a moment to look at the doorway and sigh, wistfully. Luna waved her head gently and candles flared to life around them, the flames burning blue for just a moment as her magic kissed the wicks.

There had been some changes, recently.

"I... love what you've done with the place," Spike said.

The tiled floor of the entrance hall had been torn up, the tiles neatly stacked against a wall. Where they had been was a huge section of finely-finished basalt, black as a night sky dead of stars, smooth as finest brandy. At its center – where, Twilight recalled, a

rather nice wine-red carpet had been – was a broad, round stone inset into a ring, both of a pale grey stone. The ring was inlaid with runes, which under Twilight's eye throbbed gently with lingering magic, but the real sight was the inset circle, which was decorated with a brilliant mosaic of brightly-colored stones, depicting the sun setting behind a much older Canterlot, not quite so bedecked with spires and towers as it was now.

It was stunning; the workmanship was so masterful as to be unreal, the pieces fitting together so closely that somepony could be forgiven for believing that each beautiful section of color had been hewn from a single stone. All the ponies looked at it in awe.

"Do you like it?" Luna asked the ponies, who stood wide-eyed around the mysterious stone. The princess spoke in a much smaller voice than she probably intended.

"It's... beautiful!" Rarity gushed. "I can't imagine why *anypony* would hide it like this. This... everypony in Equestria should see it..." Her eyes were alight with the wonder of somepony who not only appreciates beauty, but has the knowledgeable eye of a true expert beholding a masterpiece, a triumph of the discipline.

Luna smiled proudly. "I made it for Celestia, long ago. Before the Nightmare."

Spike stared at it, hungrily. "You have a good eye for stones, princess."

"What is it?" Twilight asked, stepping forward. The runework on the ring was fascinating, like nothing she'd ever seen before.

Luna looked to the door and windows, satisfying herself that she was not being observed. "It is a door, of sorts. *Seal*, perhaps, is the better word. Below, Celestia awaits us."

Twilight was staring. She had no idea this had been here. Princess Celestia had never mentioned it, and despite being very obviously magical, she'd never sensed the presence of anything during her years of self-imposed more-or-less exile in the tower. She actually felt a little embarrassed about that, and apparently looked it.

Luna gave her a sympathetic look. "Don't be upset. Being difficult to find is part of its magic."

"Still, you'd think the princess would mention something like this!" Spike declared.

A shadow passed across the face of the Princess of the Moon. "I suspect it will soon become apparent why she would not. Twilight Sparkle, stand over there; I shall require your help."

The unicorn and alicorn took positions on opposite sides of the stone seal. Luna gave Twilight some instructions that were completely incomprehensible to everypony else, but perfectly routine to the Arch-Mage, who smiled and nodded eagerly. With strained faces of intense concentration, they removed the seal from the runic ring, turning it back and forth carefully as if having to navigate physical barriers although the sides were perfectly smooth. When they let it fall from their magical control, it seemed to float a half a meter or so over the basalt slab, to general astonishment.

Spike reached out and gave it a gentle push; it moved slightly, slowing to a halt with unusual haste. The movement seemed distorted and unnatural, and even he, a magical creature himself and furthermore a witness to many feats of strange and uncanny magic, shuddered and looked at it warily.

Applejack peered inside the ring. There was a large, solid-looking staircase of finished stone descending into inky darkness, which seemed cloying and thick, drinking in the light eagerly. "How far down does this go?"

"To the heart of the mountain, deep under the earth," Luna replied, solemnly. "It is an ancient place, where the heartbeat of creation still echoes loudly."

"That's, uh... nice," Applejack said, her face scrunching up in an expression of discomfort as her fundamentally practical, down-to-earth nature once again ran up against mythic forces from the dawn of time. "We'll need some light, though, Ah reckon, or it'll be a much faster trip down. Ah don't suppose there's any lanterns about, or –"

"That will not be necessary," Luna said, firmly. Twilight noticed that Luna had begun to unconsciously fluff her wings in the same way Rainbow Dash did when she was annoyed or sulking, her eyes leaping from pony to pony in what, to an unpracticed observer of Luna in the wild, might be mistaken for concern. The dreaded confession approached, and Twilight could almost *feel* Luna's mental distress as her ferocious pride and desire to be thought well of warred with her duty to her sister.

Twilight decided to save Luna the agony of indecision. "Well, you heard the princess, we won't need lights, so... let's go!" Twilight said, with brittle brightness. "Everypony in..."

Luna shot her a strange look; her face was irritated, but a hint of gratitude was lit deep in her eyes. "I shall lead the way," Luna said, to general relief. Unspoken, but understood between the alicorn and Twilight, was the remainder of the sentence: That way, I won't have to look at anypony's reaction.

The princess stepped into the ring, followed closely by Twilight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie; Rarity, Applejack, Spike and Rainbow Dash lingered only a moment before slipping in as well.

"Stay close," Luna said, as if she had to.

As they descended, a strange thing occurred; though the circle of light above them grew distant, their immediate surroundings remained dimly lit such that they could see where they were stepping, though the inky blackness swallowed everything much further than that greedily.

"Ooooh, spooooooky!" Pinkie crooned, as happily as anything. "It seems to go on for-EV-errrrrr!"

"Would it comfort your journey, Pinkie Pie, if I told you a story?" Luna's voice was slightly choked and stilted, grateful for a neat segue, but still unhappy at its necessity.

"I dunno..." Pinkie replied, suspiciously. "Depends on what kind of story it is. Happy stories always make things easier, but this really doesn't seem like the time, does it..."

Luna didn't pause, or turn, but Twilight again noticed her wings twitching nervously. "I'm afraid it's a very sad story. It's about two very silly sisters..."

"Does it have a happy ending at least?" Pinkie asked, in an encouraging sort of way. Twilight reflected that Pinkie's way of being concerned was just to be more Pinkie at the source of distress until it succumbed to the fluffy pink enthusiasm that was a magic of her very own. "Just because it's a sad story doesn't mean it ends sad. Sometimes those are the best stories, because everything turns out alright in the end!"

Luna was silent for a time. "That remains to be seen," she said, quietly.

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"Five hundred sixty-one thousand, six hundred, and twenty-five. Five hundred sixty-one thousand, six hundred, and twenty-six."

"What, dare I ask, " Celestia growled, "Are you counting?" Her voice was strained, although not nearly as so much as her patience.

"Seconds," the voice replied. "I'm a bit behind, sorry."

Celestia frowned. "Do seconds even have meaning, here?"

"They have meaning to *you*. You perceive and experience time; thus it exists, even if only subjectively. As a thing that exists, it can be observed." If the voice could have, it would have grinned smugly. "And counted."

"Do I even want to know why you're counting them, then?"

"Probably not," the voice whined. "You always get upset when I do things like this."

"So don't do them." Celestia felt a momentary flash of panic – her focus on the sun was... slipping. She tried to suppress her curiosity, which gnawed at her concentration – but as it is for every true scholar, idle speculation was a reflex now. Maybe an answer would help. "What was the starting point for the count?"

"You were saying that everything would be fine, a while ago."

Celestia's head was beginning to spin. "Did I?"

"Six hundred seventy-three thousand, eight hundred and twelve seconds ago, yes."

Celestia grinned, ferociously, panting. "So it's a contest, is it? How long can I last?"

"If you like."

"I can *do* contests."

• • •

Stories, in the dark:

"In ancient times, my sister and I came into being. Even we have never known the reason or nature of our existence; we remember *being*, and that is all, though we have often tried to divine the nature of our birth." Luna spoke with the grand voice of somepony reciting ancient lore, heavy with the weight of history and circumstance; the exaggerated tone of gravity protected her, a little, from how personal it all was to her.

To Twilight, and the rest of the group, of course, it was something like mythology and history rolled into one, and even now the scholar in Twilight thrilled to hear the tales straight from the lips of somepony who had actually *been* there.

The darkness around them grew airy and light, slowly becoming a landscape, coming into focus. The ponies now seemed to be walking in a snowy scrubland amongst the foothills of distant mountains, which lay black and grim on the horizon. The sky was the lazy grey of midwinter, and the air smelled strongly of crisp, new snowfall.

"Just keep walking," Luna said, setting aside the expansive tone for a moment in reaction to the other ponies' stunned reactions.

"What's going on, Princess?" Twilight asked, fascinated. "Are you doing this? Is it... some kind of dream?"

"No, Twilight. This place is *old*, and it... remembers." She turned her head over her shoulder very slightly. "You should understand that this is its way of being friendly, everypony. It is telling you the story with me."

"Friendly? A *place*?" Dash sputtered.

Luna turned away. "Surely *that* isn't the strangest thing you've heard in your life, Rainbow Dash?" She cleared her throat and resumed the tale, her voice drawn back into the grand voice of the storyteller.

"It was a time of disharmony. Chaos and anarchy ruled existence. The pony nation of Equestria, so recently united by the three great heroes – the unicorn wizard Trifolium Sollerti, Flosculus the pegasus, and Morbi Crustulum, the earth pony – was falling into internecine conflict, with war threatening to break out between the three tribes once again. So the first to come was the sun, the bright beacon of unity."

Off in the distance, a bright light suddenly erupted from the tundra, flaring outwards from a cleft stone, growing brighter and more intense with every passing moment, driving away the gloom and melting snow around it so fast and hot that steam rose in great plumes.

"And so Celestia, the Princess of the Sun, came to be."

The distant light erupted into a burst of golden light. The ponies had to shade their eyes from the brightness. Even so shaded, Luna and Twilight's sight-beyond-sight showed them the beautiful, pearlescent streams of primal magic swirling around the newborn creature. It was golden-white, with a mane the light pink of the first kiss of sunrise.

"Is that really Princess Celestia?" Fluttershy asked, awed. "She looks so different!"

"Yes," Luna said, quietly.

The newborn alicorn filly, little smaller than a grown mare, shook her head and looked around in a disconcertingly intelligent way. The ponies had the very distinct impression that she knew they were here, somehow – and that she not only knew who they were, but why they were there. This perception was enhanced by a knowing little smile it gave their general direction as the scene passed.

The landscape blurred again, and around the little group the events of Celestia's early life flowed across their vision. Ponies gathered around her, flocking to her wisdom, even as a very young mare. There was a war, between those who followed her and those who refused her leadership. They witnessed things, then, that they could not have imagined happening between ponies.

"Change... is always painful. Especially when it is necessary," Luna said, quietly.

The scene changed once again. Celestia, now as silver-white as they had always known her but still small, and her mane still pink, sat upon a golden throne in a deep, wooded temple.

"This is the Temple of Two Sisters!" Twilight exclaimed.

"Not yet," Luna said, smiling. "I am not just the younger sister because I often look that way, after all." She cleared her throat and resumed her storytelling voice. "So she was victorious, and led a renewed Equestria for several generations to a new age of harmony. But she found herself growing tired." The Celestia on the throne blinked, blearily, barely paying attention to the unicorn in front of her, who appeared to be speaking pompously.

Again, the blur of movement. They were at a moonlit seaside, far in the south of Equestria.

"The sun rises, and sets. And when the Sun rests... the Moon reigns. So I came to be," Luna said. She recited this in a very formal, practiced way, as if it were a catechism or a prayer; Twilight got the distinct impression she had repeated this to herself many times in the past.

Luna pointed to the moonlight glinting off the water. It was moving, quickly, towards the shore, and as it struck land, a beautiful spray of silvery-bright water splashed magnificently around the new-formed Luna, small and filly-like, her hair stars, her eyes lit by reflected moonlight, her laugh of joy at the sheer exhilaration of existence a song...

"I was somewhat different back then," Luna admitted, smiling bashfully.

The scene returned to the temple, where the youthful-looking Luna presented herself to Celestia, who embraced her readily. In eye-watering fast-motion, the court moved in and out, the sisters ruling side by side, day and night. "In time Celestia confided in me her urge to sleep. We reasoned that as I wax and wane with the moon, so she must rise and set to renew herself, as the sun does, much like her phoenix pet." On cue, the flaming bird sailed down onto Celestia's waiting hoof.

"Philomeena?" Fluttershy's face was a portrait of astonishment.

"I was surprised, too," Luna said, regarding her fondly over her shoulder. "I would have thought the bird would be sick of her by now, honestly..."

The visions of Celestia and Luna descended into the bowels of the temple, entering a large chamber, which Celestia entered alone, laying down inside.

"I still remember what she said to me, that very first time..." Luna murmured. Their perspective drew closer to Celestia, whose lips moved as the present Luna spoke. "Watch for sunrise." The doors closed, and everything went black.

"So I waited," Luna's voice rang out in the darkness. "For three months I fretted, worrying that day had passed into night for good; that she had not gone to sleep but instead, to *rest*. But then, one morning, I felt the sun *rising*."

In the depths, a glow blazed in the distance, growing brighter and brighter, until it consumed everything, filling their vision with glorious, burning sunlight –

"Sorry about this," Luna said. "It's a bit... melodramatic."

The glow died down and they saw Luna, arrayed in beautiful royal vestments, tearfully embracing her renewed sister, once again golden-white and young. "And so it went for generations. Every few decades my sister would rest, and every month I would cycle from full to new. All was well. But as you are all too well aware, this did not last forever..."

"Discord," Applejack muttered, darkly.

"Yes," Luna hissed.

The scene blurred again, flying deep through a forbidding wood, filled with shadows and hints of great beasts lurking behind wretched, mangled-looking trees. This was the great

grandfather of the Ever-Free Forest, wilder and more brutal than even that dark place could ever dream of becoming. A familiar cackle of insane glee wound around them.

"We did not suspect his existence, for too long. He was the cause at the root of the sorrows that had plagued the three tribes so, before my sister and I arrived. As we ruled over Equestria, he worked in secret against us, unleashing monsters and evil magic to plague our reign, spreading disharmony and terror as he saw fit. You've seen his handiwork – the manticores of the Everfree Forest, for example, and the gryphon race –"

"The gryphons were made by *Discord*?" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, angry shock dripping from her words.

"Yes," Luna said impassively. "A race of monstrous warriors, created to steal the skies from the pegasi. But Discord erred; he made them too intelligent, which they needed to be to fight the disciplined pegasus warriors. And the gryphons were proud. Ultimately, towards the end of the war, Celestia was able to convince them that life as Discord's slaves demeaned them. One of her better diplomatic coups, I must say."

"I... had no idea..." Dash said, awed.

"Few do, now," Luna remarked, "even among the gryphons. It was a secret that will soon be lost, because too few are willing to bear it." She paused. "It goes without saying that this is probably something you ought to keep to yourselves."

"Yeah, no kidding."

"So: we finally found out about Discord's existence, and began taking action against him. Free to act unrestrained now, he unleashed his madness on Equestria in ways which we had never thought possible."

"We saw –" Twilight began.

"You saw *nothing*," Luna snapped, harshly.

Fire sprang up around them, burning every imaginable color; but it was a disturbing and malevolent thing, pure evil. Even Pinkie Pie, who could find something delightful in even the most bizarre things, recoiled from it, looking horrified as it coruscated around them, burning and putrefying everything it touched. Beyond the wall of flame, they saw ponies at war with demons and monsters defying description – hideous, insane beings of unreality, their existence an insult to sanity. The sounds and smells of battle were an oppressive, almost physical force, pushing down on them.

"The war consumed our attention, but rather than binding us together, it wore on our relationship. We drifted apart. We disagreed more and more often, about strategy, about potential solutions, about priorities... Celestia insisted that there was a magical *solution* to Discord's existence, that he represented a fundamental force that had to be balanced. I was of the... opinion that he was just a powerful enemy to fight, with hoof and wing and magic."

Before the ponies, the two sisters faced each other, looking combative. Behind Celestia was a wizard Twilight recognized as Fireheart the Old, while beside Luna stood the legendary, eyepatched unicorn knight Starlight Chaser, her gunmetal armor gleaming.

The sounds of battle increased in volume, becoming an ear-gnawing cacophony of sound. Above them, a thunderhead gathered, lightning flashing inside it ominously.

"And then Celestia... fell." Luna choked.

Lights streamed above the din of battle, blue and pink and sickly-green; the serpentine form of Discord swirled in the air, larger than the Elements remembered, cackling insanely. Luna and Celestia dived and whirled around him, blasting him with powerful magic, which seemed to do little except amuse him. As Celestia flew around Discord to take another pass, the beast lashed at her with a claw wrapped in horrible energies, slashing her brutally and sending her plummeting to the earth. The Luna of the past screamed in terror and dove after her, Discord laughing triumphantly.

The terrible scene faded away, the mad laughter clinging to their minds. The great snowy waste where Celestia had first appeared spread around them, covered with the clutter of battle – broken pennants, shattered weapons, battered armor... dead friends. The memory of Luna, wrapped in a black cloak, stood alone in the distance, the wind pulling at her forlornly.

"For three weeks I waited, hoping against hope that she would return... and my faith was rewarded." The distant figure reared up as a blast of sunlight appeared at her feet. Celestia, reborn, stepped forward, carrying a pair of crowns and gorgets in her magic which seemed very familiar.

"The Elements of Harmony!" the ponies cried.

"Yes. She returned from... wherever she goes... bearing the Elements. And with them, we sealed Discord and restored harmony to Equestria... for a time." The familiar scene of Discord's first defeat replayed itself before them, Rainbow Dash giving a little hoof-pump

as the creature was sealed in stone for the next thousand years. The sisters stood before them, looking at the stone statue with satisfaction.

"But what had happened was more of a strain on Celestia than she was, or is, willing to admit," Luna said. The Celestia before them turned her head, revealing a streak of cyan running through her previously uniform pink mane. Her eyes were wary and haunted.

The scene blurred again, revealing the court of Canterlot, filled with nobleponies in ancient costume. Luna was standing before Celestia, magic roiling around her as she shouted and raged, Celestia looking down on her with queenly dispassion.

"I..." Luna began, watching her past self scream her fear and anger. "I was terrified. I was afraid something had happened to her, some corruption had leaked in. I wasn't totally alone. There was a split, politically, between the Night and Day courts that had arisen during the war against Discord. Fights broke out. I... acted rashly. I demanded she return to sleep, to recover. She ignored my concerns out of hoof... insisted everything was fine."

Luna stopped walking. The rest of the group stopped behind her, sensing that Luna was struggling internally, watching the argument between herself and her sister rage silently in front of her. Weird dreamstuff boiled around the memory of Luna, terrifying the ponies around her, lashing out at her loyal knight Starlight Chaser as the Princess of the Night drove herself berserk with fear.

"I was... so foolish..." Luna whispered, huskily, hanging her head.

Fluttershy, with a little *hmmm* of sympathy, broke from the group, head held proud in a way that suggested she was forcing down fear, but face gentle and sympathetic. She stood next to Luna and nuzzled her – timidly, at first, but with greater confidence as Luna did not shy from her touch.

"Thank you, my friend," the princess murmured. She cleared her throat and lifted her head, forcing her voice into a facsimile of the storyteller voice she had been using until now. The ponies resumed their downwards journey.

"In the end, as you know... the... the moon refused... to give way to the sun." Luna closed her eyes and looked away as the scene faded, showing only Luna, howling with rage and terror, being consumed and polluted with the dark power of the Nightmare. Blackness surrounded the ponies, for a time, as they descended, their footing somehow instinctively sure even without sight.

"When I returned," Luna said, eventually, "Saved, by six of the bravest ponies I have ever known... I was stunned to see what had happened to Celestia. She stood before me, transfigured, completely unlike the pony I had known so long ago." Light, again, surrounded them. The tall, pillared walls of Canterlot spread in every direction, Luna and a much more familiar Celestia, pale white coat and billowing multihued mane, walking down the endless hallway. Luna looked fearful and chastened, Celestia much more serious and anxious than anypony had seen save in the last few days.

"My sister explained to me that things had changed in my absence. She claimed to have transcended the cycle of rising and setting, and become the Eternal Sun of Equestria," Luna said. "And though she did not explain exactly what that meant, she insisted that she had not suffered any problems since. And to be honest, for a time, I was willing to believe *anything* of her, and her magic – modern Equestria is like a paradise compared to the war-torn, wild place I remember. But over time I saw that familiar streak of pride in her, the one that had made her refuse to even *listen* to me a thousand years earlier, and fear was rekindled in my heart.

"So I watched her – she had grown unaccustomed to having her sister about, and had forgotten the many little ways I am different than other ponies. I noticed her fatigue – in the old days, she slept, physically slept, once a *month*, not every day! – and how stressful circumstances distracted her and made her act somewhat hastily. I was ever the hasty one, once..."

Images flashed before them. Luna, peeking around a corner, catching Celestia yawning; Celestia, not looking up as Luna flew overhead, fretting and muttering to herself; Luna, watching Celestia's smile grow glassy as Twilight gushed to the princesses about some research; Celestia, sighing and reading one of Twilight's letters, looking bored...

Twilight tried, and failed, to suppress a little whimper.

"I'm sorry, Twilight," Luna said, with real sympathy in her voice. "But it was always worst around you."

"*Why?*" Twilight managed.

"That is one of the many things I do not know," Luna admitted. "But as your relationship with her deteriorated, as she became more distant from you... she became more... *tired*."

"So –" Twilight's heart leapt, urgently. "It's possible that what was happening to her, not *setting*, is part of why we were growing apart?" As the words tumbled out, she cursed how

pathetic and desperate they sounded; but there was a lot of her that was eager for this to be true.

Luna turned her head to regard Twilight carefully. "It is entirely *possible*, yes. But... to be honest, I suspect it is the other way around, and your relationship's deterioration made her fatigue grow. I'm sorry."

Twilight swallowed, but the crushing guilt still grabbed her throat relentlessly. The sudden comforting nuzzles and hugs from her friends seemed a very long way away, indeed.

"I wish it were otherwise, believe me," Luna said, cutting through the mental distress. There was something odd in her voice, some little shadow that hinted at some deeper hurt... and there was, after all, that part of Twilight which *was* Twilight, always watching, its eye on Luna keener because of their mental contact. That part pricked up its ears and *remembered* while the rest of her recovered from the lingering agony of guilt.

They continued downwards for sometime, the visions fading, their surroundings now merely the immediately surrounding staircase once again.

Twilight's mind raced. "So... did you ever confront her about this? The fatigue, the..."

"As a matter of fact, I did," Luna said, her voice clipped and irritated. The vision of the hallway in Canterlot returned; it was winter, now, and Celestia was pacing ahead of Luna, looking frightened and annoyed. Luna, fully waned, trailed after her trying to keep pace, half-shouting. "When Discord appeared again – when you six dealt with him, years ago – she collapsed in the Hall of Histories after confronting him. Believe me when I say, with regret, that I felt *hopeful* he had done something to her. But to be frank, I doubt it. I think he just... *agitated* her, somehow. Whatever the case, I was bold enough, once she had awoken, to address her about this. She ignored me. *Again*."

"You should have pressed the issue," Twilight said, a little more acidly than she thought she meant to.

"I admit," Luna said, her voice growing icy, "That this is one of the... *mistakes* I made in this situation. But I invite you to consider my position, Twilight. Do *you* think she would be particularly friendly to me bringing up, again and again, the old argument that had brought about our thousand-year separation? *I* certainly don't."

Twilight cringed, a little, embarrassed by the pain her friend was trying to hide with anger. "I suppose not."

Luna sniffed, haughtily. "Furthermore, my sister has been wary of the changes in my personality. As I said, I was much different, long ago... and there is much in her, I think, that wishes the Luna that had returned from exile was that joyful being which erupted from the sea, all those centuries ago, and not the wounded *thing* she got, which so delights in being *moody* and *mysterious*."

This last was delivered with a truly wretched bitterness. Fluttershy sped forward again, but Luna sped up as well, unwilling to show her face even to her dear friend.

"We've arrived, in any case," Luna growled, waving her head. The visions cleared, and the weird localized light expanded around them to reveal a huge rock face of the same grey stone as the stairs. Carved crudely into the wall was a tight-fitting pair of, for lack of a better term, doors. Compared to the struggle required to remove complicated seal that barred entry to the stairway down into the heart of the mountain, these doors opened readily with a slight gesture from the princess's horn.

Behind them was a rough, dome-shaped stone chamber, all unfinished stone, with great blue and yellow crystals jutting out from the walls and floor here and there, giving off a low, ethereal light. It was a rather large chamber – hundreds of ponies could gather in it, easily – and it was made to seem all the bigger for being empty save for the feature that dominated its center – a great stone bier, almost like an altar, hewn roughly from the same stone as the cavern itself.

Twilight barely noticed these things, her attention fully consumed by what lay there: Princess Celestia, looking for all the world like she was having an afternoon nap, peaceful as only the dead and dying can be.

The purple unicorn rushed forwards, her friends yelping warnings, Luna watching her silently. The princess still looked ancient and wasted, her mane still washed-out and motionless. Twilight had to watch very carefully to see the miniscule rise and fall of the princess' body as she breathed, so, so slowly...

Twilight turned to Luna, desperately. "Can I –"

"Gently, please," Luna said. Her face was stony and unreadable, beyond being unhappy.

With extreme care, Twilight laid her head on Celestia's chest, straining with her ears to hear –

Thump-thump.

Twilight's breath hissed in and out as she waited, desperate to confirm what she had heard, suddenly worried it had been a desperate illusion.

Thump-thump.

Twilight closed her eyes and relaxed, a little.

"She is alive," Luna declared. "But she is... I don't..." her stony tone faltered. "I have no idea *what* she is."

Twilight felt tears, one from each eye, spill from her. For a tiny, desperate moment, she had a ridiculous filly's hope that this would magically awaken Celestia, that her hurt and love would be enough to revive her mentor, but of course, all it did was slightly moisten the grey-white coat beneath her.

She was so *cold*. Twilight had never known Celestia to be anything but comfortably warm to the touch. And the slight glow the princess gave off was dim, washed out even by the weak light of the crystals.

"So... is... so she's *set*, now?" Spike asked, warily. His voice was thick with fear and sorrow.

Luna sighed. "No. Again, I do not know what is happening now. But I should have... been more aware that something was going wrong. There were signs."

"What kind of signs?" Twilight asked, breathless and accusatory, not turning around. She felt the hurt glare from Luna on her back, but didn't care; her attention was consumed with the ruined body of her mentor.

Luna made uncomfortable little grumbles, then spoke, what firmness was left in her voice obviously forced. "I should have been more wary of sending her to Ponyville in the first place. And I encouraged a much more confrontational approach to resolving the problems between her and Twilight than I ought have, despite knowing that they were making her... *situation* worse. But something in me could not help but tease her; I was afraid of honesty."

There was a moment of expectant silence as everypony looked from Luna to Twilight, waiting to see who would speak first.

"And?" Twilight said, her voice hollow. "There is something else, I can tell."

"At the wedding," Luna continued, with a growing tone of irritation, "I... walked into a memory she was having while she was awake and conscious. At the time, I assumed it was because she was having an extremely intense daydream, or something of that nature; but in retrospect, I am not so sure that it was that benign. I fear that her mind is trying to insulate itself from whatever she's putting herself through by sinking into dreams. She was extremely emotional – about you, to be honest – and..." She trailed off, staring at the motionless unicorn.

"Which memory was it?"

"Is that important to know?"

"Possibly," Twilight said, absently. "Increasing available information presents the possibility of new conclusions," she added, in a rote, reflexive way. She just wanted to hear what memory had moved Celestia so, and both she and Luna knew it.

"She was remembering you as a filly, in Canterlot Gardens. You were moving lodestones." Twilight heard Luna tapping the ground in front of her anxiously, but her voice remained firm. "I was... pointing out to her how you perceived her as perfect."

Twilight said nothing, but rose from Celestia unwillingly, looking down at the recumbent figure longingly. She remembered that day, too; she remembered the title she had earned, and felt a desperate desire to hear it once again – for real, this time, not from a fantasy.

"I believe she is fighting the process," Luna said, a little more softly. "She is not descending into the depths of sleep she has in the past; she is just unconscious to the waking world."

"You can tell...?"

"I can *tell*," Luna replied in a way that suggested asking more questions about it would be foolish.

"Well, I don't see the problem," Rainbow Dash exclaimed. Applejack moved to shush her, but the pegasus shoved her away, gently. "Let's just go get the Elements of Harmony and give her a good blast with 'em. That *always* works."

"I..." Luna coughed, gently. "While you six seem to wield the Elements with much more skill than my sister and I ever did, I... suspect they would just drive Celestia to *set*. If, as I

suspect, she has not renewed herself in more than a thousand years... who knows when she would wake up? Years? Decades?"

"She might not wake up at all," Twilight murmured. "The elements might banish her, somehow, like it did Nightmare Moon. I don't really understand or control what happens; it's about restoring harmony. If the sun has been shining non-stop for a thousand years, so to speak... it might be *harmonious* to let the moon shine for the same amount of time..."

"But if it's about saving her life –" Rarity started to say, but she was silenced by a serious look from Applejack.

"Alright, then, no Elements," the orange pony said. "I 'spect you have another plan, princess, since ya were so eager ta get yer hooves on Twilight."

Luna fluffed her wings uncomfortably. "Since Twilight's relationship with her seems to be at the root of all this, I..."

"You were planning to take me with you into her mind," Twilight said, dully, turning to face her. "Like you entered mine."

Luna paused. The two of them shared a look which replayed Luna's dark talk earlier about the invasive nature and danger of doing this. "Something like that, yes."

"You can't get in, yourself?" Twilight asked.

Luna's expression grew cautious. "No. I... have tried. But together, I thought we might have more success."

"Sounds good," Dash gushed. "Let's get to it!"

"What do you mean, *let's*?" Luna said, irritation apparent.

"Come on, ya didn't think we'd let you and Twilight do something like that alone, didya?" Applejack grinned. "Bein' independent is great an' all, but this is gonna be some heavy stuff. We weren't there for y'all earlier, but we're here now." She gave Twilight a grin which struck Twilight as extremely patronizing, although it probably wasn't meant that way. "Seven is better than two, dontcha think?"

"Eight," Spike said, determinedly. He gave Applejack a severe look.

Twilight looked at her friends, who were all giving her eager expressions of helpfulness. In similar situations in the past, Twilight had been at least a little relieved at these displays of whole-hearted support. In fact, now she realized she had insisted Luna bring them because something in her had thought she'd want it now, in the face of what she had known was coming.

But standing here – Celestia's ruined body behind her, Luna's face twitching with the effort of not showing her miserable humiliation for her part in bringing this about – Twilight was suddenly ashamed that she had insisted on involving everypony. This was something private, for all that it was deadly grave, and she'd had only a little right to spread the news around... but she had, reflexively, to comfort herself.

Now, now, something in her rebelled. It *is* personal, but there's more at stake here than your relationship with the princesses. This is also about Equestria, and about history... and it's not like you can't trust them. They'll be discreet, that's not a problem; they were discreet about so many other things, all the time. Who knows what will happen? Who knows if it will even *work*? They'll be helpful, and useful, and support you, no matter what – just like they always have.

And it's not like her friends didn't care about the princess, too...

She let her mind toss up empty counter-arguments. I could *never* let themselves put their lives in danger, her mind said, automatically. Better that only I risk myself, than all six Elements of Harmony. There are more ponies directly depending on each of you than on me. The magic might not support all of us!

Fluttershy, what about Big Mac? Dash, don't you still want to find your place in the world, as you've cried to me so many times? Pinkie, Ponyville needs your enthusiasm to keep growing! Rarity, you are only beginning to understand your role in Equestria – so many ponies look up to you, and you have no idea... Spike, you're beginning to grow up – you have centuries of life left, don't risk them so recklessly! Applejack, you need to watch out for them all, like you always have!

Though they tugged on her heart, Twilight knew these to be empty arguments – well, not *empty*, they *were* valid... just not the *truth*. They were not the real reason she was objecting. The real reason was that the dream she had let herself have, the dream that now seemed firmly lodged in her mind, demanding she go alone.

So there was that.

And yet...

No, she couldn't just leave them behind, could she...? Not in this. This was too big; there was too much riding on it. And despite Luna's entreaty that she do so, Twilight felt deeply uncomfortable acting so confidently on what the dream motivated her to do. Surely recent events, and pretty much her whole life, had demonstrated that she had a tendency to overdo things a bit when she got excited.

The wedding, for example. It should have been all about Fluttershy and Mac, and it had been. But there had been too much of it that had quietly been about Twilight, too, and her sudden, burning need for everything to be *perfect*, and she was ashamed even if nopony even suspected. She didn't want to be selfish; she *enjoyed* giving of herself to others, and had accomplished so much in her life by being selfless.

Agh! But this, this was so *important*! It was *Celestia*! She wanted –

Yes, it's Celestia, Twilight, that's why *everypony* deserves to be involved. It's bigger than you, and your dream, *something* in her said. She couldn't tell what part of her it was, but it sounded much more sure of itself than she was overall.

Her stomach heaved in sympathy with her mind as it raged against itself. Twilight wondered if she was going to throw up purely from mental anguish once again, but she was pulled from her thoughts by sudden contact. Pinkie Pie was hugging her.

"Wha –" Twilight stammered, starting in surprise. "Pinkie, what...?"

"You just seemed like you needed a hug!" the pink pony declared in her usual tone of reflexive happiness, but her bright blue eyes had an unusual depth to them. Once again Twilight reflected that there was something very intelligent in Pinkie, lurking behind that façade of carefree enthusiasm, and that thing believed to the very core that expressing love could help any situation, no matter how grave.

"Thank you, Pinkie," Twilight said weakly, giving her friend a squeeze in return. "I really did."

"See? That's what Ah'm talkin' about." Applejack declared. "We're better off goin' together. Supportin' each other, all the way through, like we always have."

Luna's face cycled through a complicated series of emotions, all of them variations on a theme of 'uneasy'. "I suppose it is as good a plan as Twilight herself... and there is something to the idea that the Elements of Harmony may yet... introduce stabilizing

factors..." There was clearly an internal war of self-justification in Luna as well, but it seemed to be doing little except upsetting her. "Twilight, what is your thought on the matter?"

"C'mon, Twilight, you know we can help out," Dash said, confidence oozing off her words.

Rarity nodded. "This is really dangerous. You've already been hurt once, dear! Let us support you."

"Well –" Twilight started, but she was interrupted bodily.

"And you never know when you're going to need another hug!" Pinkie declared, giving her a particularly emphatic one. "Hugs help!"

Her friends – with the notable exception of Fluttershy, who was watching Luna with anxious concern – gave her their best expressions of wholehearted support, or in Rainbow Dash's case, smug bravado.

They *were* just trying to help, but Twilight felt pressed upon and uncomfortable nevertheless. They... seemed to think it was just another big adventure – well, it sort of was.

But it also wasn't. It was more than that, for Twilight.

Not that that hadn't been the case before, though.

Agh!

Luna stared at her, pointedly. *It's up to you.*

Twilight turned and looked at Celestia, lying there, peaceful in her doom. Behind her, the collected ponies (and dragon) shifted uncomfortably. The sounds, tiny and muffled, annoyed Twilight deeply, gnawing on the heels of her concentration, and yet, they also tied her back to reality, and didn't let her lose herself in the chaotic sea of distress she was adrift upon. And behind all this, the dream, that beautiful, quiet dream with the rather good tea, loomed in her mind, crying its siren's song to her heart.

In the pale light, looking on her fallen mentor, Twilight Sparkle made up her mind.

She turned back to the group. "I think..." Twilight began, clearing her throat and continuing more confidently, "I think... we should rest. We could stay here in the tower, if the guest room is still set up. And then, once we've put our heads down for awhile... we'll get to work. All of us."

Luna bristled, astonished. "Nothing about this situation strikes you as *pressing*?" Her eyes added: *All of us? Are you certain? Is that what you want?*

"You came all the way to Ponyville," Twilight replied, evenly.

"That was *necessary*."

"So is this," Twilight said, staring Luna in the eye. "Don't you agree, Applejack?"

"What? Uh, yeah," Applejack stuttered, caught between a suddenly-decisive Twilight and an irritated Princess. Luna turned a dark look on the orange pony, who chuckled nervously. "A little shut-eye would do us a world o' good, I reckon..." Applejack added weakly as Luna's eyes narrowed.

"Three hours, then." Twilight returned her gaze to Celestia, so no pony could see her face. "Princess, do you think you could guide us all to the field? So we get better rest?"

"Well, yes, but –"

"Good," Twilight interrupted. She leaned forward and, letting her self-consciousness cause her to hesitate only a moment, gave the recumbent Celestia a gentle nuzzle. "I'll be back soon," she whispered.

Celestia gave no acknowledgement, of course, but Twilight felt better for having said it.

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"Here's what I really don't understand, Celestia."

"What... what's that?"

"You could just *ask* for this to stop."

"No."

"Why not? I might even cooperate, who knows?"

"You... *never*... cooperate."

"Oh, well I can't *imagine* why not. You're always so inflexible about things."

"And so I shall remain," Celestia huffed, huskily. "I made my choice long ago."

"Do you regret it?"

Yes. "No."

• • •

Spike dozed, not quite sleeping.

He didn't anymore, not really; some of the books he and Twilight had found suggested that this had something to do with hoard guarding behavior, and that true wyrmrest came only occasionally, but lasted for decades. He had felt a strange sense of familiarity seeing Celestia lying there on the bier in the cavern at the heart of the mountain – and a little jealousy, truth be told. It seemed *right*, to him, even as everything in him was filled with a gnawing dread. He loved the princess as much as anypony.

The Elements and he had made do with what cushions could be found about the tower, and Luna had stood over each pony in turn, sending them into a deep, peaceful slumber at the heart of dreams, where their minds and bodies would rest easy. She had apologized to him, saying that by ancient custom she was forbidden to meddle in the dreams of the dragon race, and had bid him a somewhat stiff good night. He heard her pacing downstairs, her hooves snapping on the basalt slab when, he assumed, she grew too annoyed to pay attention to how hard her hooves were falling.

A sound made him open an eye. It rang out in the silence, in that special way small sounds can have of being very noticeable when someone is *trying* to be quiet. Twilight was rising from the stack of pillows she had made for herself in the corner, and had gotten to her hooves with only the slightest whisper of noise. She moved across the room without a sound, hooves surrounded in a weird distortion – Wind Strider's Whispered Footfalls, Spike's mental catalogue of magic tossed up automatically – and opened the door with a tiny *click*, stepping through quickly and beginning to close the door.

Spike's other eye opened, and he crawled, lizard-like, across the floor with a speed and stealth his size and bulk would seem to make impossible. He grabbed the door with a clawed hand just as it was about to close, a tiny snarl of effort hissing through his teeth as he wrested the door from Twilight's control. He opened the door just enough that he

could stick his head through, where a stunned Twilight looked up at him from the stairs just outside the door.

The two held each others' gaze for a heartbeat, and then Twilight looked away, abashed. Spike said nothing.

Twilight swallowed, and looked up at him again. "*You* understand, don't you?"

Spike held her in his gaze for a little while longer, his heart a maelstrom of mixed feelings – but in the end, Twilight's firm, but sad expression pushed him over the edge.

No pony else would have. They would grouse and fight and wheedle, trying to prevent Twilight from striking out on her own, warning of the dangers and insisting that she share the load. Spike, though, had been there since the beginning, and knew better the full extent of what Twilight stood to lose... and gain.

He saw, in Twilight, the quiet determination to get to the bottom of things and, if necessary, say one last good-bye to her beloved mentor. She deserved the chance to do so on her terms, he decided.

He nodded, once, and pulled his head back in the door, not daring to say good-bye lest it become a prophecy. The little *click* of the latch sounded with guillotine finality. He lay against the door, sliding down to his haunches with the gentle hiss of scales dragging across lacquer.

The books said that dragons took pride in the fact that their tear ducts closed in adolescence, boasting that this demonstrated the strength and pride of their ancient race. Spike, now and always, thought that was a load of hooey.

• • •

Twilight stared at the door for a moment, even after it closed. Spike's face was growing so... unreadable, but he had seemed conflicted, and she immediately felt the hot little cinder of shame burn hotter in her chest at having to test the dragon's loyalty that way.

With a resigned sigh, she turned and quietly made her way downstairs, towards the sound of Luna's irritable hoof-falls.

"Cleverly done, Twilight, keeping yourself awake like that," Luna said, a little coldly, as Twilight rounded the last flight of stairs. "I might have appreciated some notice, though.

I've spoken to the guard captain; he'll make absolutely certain we're undisturbed when your friends awake in the morning."

"I'm sorry, princess," Twilight said, quietly.

"Oh? For what, pray tell?" No friendly statement ends in "pray tell."

"For putting you through that. Having everypony hear about... what's happened."

Luna grimaced, but shook her head. Her voice was not quite so bitter, now, just hurt. "Well, you know how it is with confessions... you do feel better for having said them, once they're out, whether good or ill comes from it." She sighed.

Again, Twilight got the sense that there was something Luna wasn't saying, still, but didn't press the point. "Shall we?" she asked, gesturing to the magnificent stone. Once again, they carefully unsealed the passage downwards, and wordlessly began their descent.

The passage remained dark this time around, as it had when the party had returned up to the surface. The trip seemed to take far less time, the second and third time around; Twilight wondered how much the story had to do with that, if the "memory" of this place kept them moving through the story to its completion. That whole situation puzzled her – it seemed to "remember" a lot of very recent things, as well as ancient history. Something to ask when this was all over, perhaps –

"What made you decide to leave them behind, Twilight?" Luna asked, suddenly.

Twilight paused. The sudden absence of sound made Luna stop as well, turning to look up at the unicorn, eyebrow raised.

"I..." Twilight began. "I realized that they think this was just another adventure. Save the princess, again. But... it's not. And I can't explain to them why not, because I'm not sure I understand why, myself."

Luna shook her head. "I think you do." She turned and continued the descent, Twilight following.

They continued in silence for awhile, and then Twilight spoke. "This is about us. The three of us. Not anypony else."

"Yes."

"I felt like... if I brought my friends, it would be The Elements of Harmony and the Princess, again," the unicorn continued. "And if I want to make what I saw in the dream come true, it has to be Twilight Sparkle and Celestia speaking to one another." Twilight blushed into the dark. "I'm being completely irrational."

"Rationality may not be a useful guide for behavior in this," Luna remarked idly. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not entirely sure this will work regardless, but I'm almost certain it wouldn't have worked if I had tried to put all of you in her mind at once."

"Really?"

"Oh, almost certainly. Maybe with the Elements, but... why risk that? It's her mind, Twilight, it'll be very defensive about who's inside with her. I never could have done what I did with you if you didn't trust me a great deal, even in your agony. With her, it's worse – her mind is adrift, lost in itself. She's not really in control of things anymore."

"What happened when you... tried...?" Twilight trailed off as Luna stiffened and drew to a halt. The unicorn drew up alongside the princess, and waited for her to speak.

"I... couldn't get very far. She doesn't want me in her mind," Luna said, her voice brittle. "I appear as Nightmare Moon. Appearances, in the mind, are very... powerful. I forced myself to endure this thrice, and I nearly lost myself the last time. I suspect that is part of why I was so... violently angry, when I came to Ponyville..." Luna looked terrified, eyes wide, body trembling. Twilight nudged her sympathetically, and Luna returned the affectionate gesture, breathing deeply. "Let that be the first of many warnings to you about how dangerous this is, Twilight."

Twilight's stomach flipped. If Celestia's mind could do that to *Luna*, force her to relive her worst and most humiliating memories...

"Having second thoughts?" Luna chuckled, darkly.

Twilight sighed. "Fifth or sixth, by now, I think."

"And yet, you still put one hoof before the other. That is the measure of bravery, Twilight," Luna said, stepping forward again with exaggerated ceremony. "It is my hope, however, that you will have more luck accessing Celestia's mind than I."

"What do you mean? I... I mean, I barely know anything about dreams, much less magic to do with dreams..."

"Ah, but you are an expert in the Magic of *Friendship*, which will be important here. Understanding other ponies, divining their feelings, communicating with them." Luna turned a sad glance on Twilight as they descended side by side. "And... Celestia trusts you more than she trusts me."

"I don't know about that," Twilight said, in a small voice. Her credibility as an expert in the Magic of Friendship was not exactly at its height at the moment-- she was here *alone*, after all, and this whole situation had come about because of her lack of thoughtfulness and openness with the pony she had claimed to love most. She tried tamp down this little surge of guilt with the determination she'd felt earlier that this was an intensely personal matter, but... unease still rolled in her mind.

The princess misinterpreted her, in any case. "Alright, that was a bit self-pitying, I suppose. Let's say... there are wounds – old wounds – that have scarred over, but still pain us enough that our minds touching is... uncomfortable, for both of us." Luna fluffed her wings anxiously.

Twilight politely declined to investigate what, specifically, Luna meant by this. "So you'll open the door, so to speak... and in I'll go."

"Precisely. And I'll be watching you, to help you pull yourself out if things get too... intense."

"Like if I... what, get trapped, somehow?"

Luna nodded. "There will be many traps for you, I suspect. If what Rainbow Dash and Rarity told me about her behavior yesterday is true, and my own observation of her is accurate, I think she will both want, and not want you near her, which is sure to provide for an interesting experience." She sighed, smiling ruefully. "Honestly, if it were anypony else, they'd just be having a cry..."

Twilight walked alongside Luna in silence, thinking about nothing in particular, although her mind was presenting her with a variety of exciting options to choose from. Betraying her friend's trust; risking the fate of Equestria for her own selfish need to have some closure with Celestia; memories of her behavior from the past year or so which, in retrospect, were humiliating displays of gratuitous attention-seeking from a pony who, for reasons that were still unknown, was distancing herself from Twilight –

Well, there's a question.

"Why do you think our relationship deteriorated, Luna? Erm," she added, quickly, as she realized how she'd misspoken. "My relationship with Princess Celestia, I mean."

Luna stopped walking, suddenly; Twilight was caught by surprise, fumbling her steps as she attempted to halt. Luna looked down at her, guiltily. Twilight's mind recalled, with its usual swiftness, the moments earlier when Luna, despite her atypical openness in the last few hours, had been very poorly concealing the fact that she wasn't saying everything she knew.

The princess swallowed, holding Twilight's gaze cautiously. "I suspect you already realize this, Twilight, but... I have one last confession to make," she said. "For you... alone."

Twilight's eyes narrowed, and Luna visibly quavered. It was a strange feeling, asserting this much emotional control over the princess; but Twilight didn't have time to analyze the emotion before the blaze of suspicion consumed her attention. "Whatever it is, princess, let's have it out in the open."

"I... truly don't know why you and Celestia grew apart, Twilight, I really don't," Luna said, quickly, realizing she had called a truly dangerous suspicion on herself. "That's something you'll have to find out from her, if you can."

"But...?"

Luna's face fell, and she bowed her head, shamed. "I... do know that I noticed it much earlier than either of you did, and yet, did nothing to repair it. Indeed, I... exploited it."

"What!? How? *Why*?"

"Because..." Luna trailed off, looking away from Twilight up into the darkness. She breathed in and out slowly, a few times. "I was very selfish, Twilight. I saw it as an opportunity to pursue my relationship with you, separate from her. And with her, separate from you. I am... I was... jealous, of you. And of her. The two of you."

Twilight was floored. She stared at Luna, who returned her gaze warily. "Jealous?"

"Yes. Of you, because you are Celestia's... well, it was like she had another little sister, I suppose, of whom she was proud beyond words. And her, because... she had another little sister that I barely knew, but... desperately wanted to." Luna wrapped a wing around herself like a cloak, defensively. "I fully intended to help you reconnect in time, I really did. I never *tried* to drive you further apart, I swear it." The wing moved to cover more of her face. "I may have done so in any case, though."

Twilight held her mouth shut and looked away. This would have been a problem in any circumstances, but now? Where they were, what they were on their way to do? "Betrayal" sprung readily to mind as a word to throw back at Luna; Twilight felt an urgent impulse to lash out, the pettiest part of her *wanting* to hurt the dusky alicorn for this selfish crime.

But the better part of Twilight triumphed – the part of her that was so truly expert in the Magic of Friendship. It wasn't fair to blame the princess of the moon for the current situation; Luna had no way of knowing what the consequences would have been at the time. Further, what she had done was... understandable, if unwise and somewhat typically a product of Luna's fear of being overtly confrontational with Celestia about personal issues – a strange quirk which Twilight now understood and sympathized with quite thoroughly. Luna knew now that she had made a grievous error. Her attitude was certainly genuinely penitent.

"When all this is over," Twilight said, carefully, "the three of us are going to be having a series of very, very long talks." She sighed. "So much wouldn't have happened, if we had just talked more instead of getting wrapped up in ourselves. It's not like we don't care about each other, after all."

Even as she said this, a maniac little snarl of thought whispered the poisonous terrors that had once been golden chains in her mind, binding her to a nonsense dream of a perfect Celestia: *She never cared about you. You were a toy, to be discarded when it grew tiresome.* Twilight forced the thought down with some difficulty, heart squirming in her chest.

"I'm so sorry, Twilight," Luna said, miserably. She folded her wing behind her. "In retrospect, I may have made things much, much worse."

"Well..." Twilight trailed off, unsure what to say about this. "Don't do it again."

Silence reigned, for a time, as the two stared at each other; Luna, chastened and – for once – not affecting royal pride and mysteriousness, Twilight meeting her gaze firmly.

"I am glad you felt you could be straight with me, Luna," Twilight said, as gently as she could. "And I want you to know that despite your mistakes... I only respect you more, for being willing to confess them."

Luna shook her head, sadly. "I... do think of you that way, you know," she said, quietly.

Twilight looked up at her. "How do you mean?"

"Like a sister," the princess said, coloring slightly and looking bashful. "You brought me back from the Nightmare, and taught me about the new Equestria, with your friendship and the letters my sister shared with me... I owe you much. And I have come to care for you a great deal." She reminded Twilight, absurdly, of a familiar yellow pegasus for a moment, and the unicorn failed to suppress a giggle. Luna frowned, looking embarrassed. "Why are you laughing?"

"Not at you, not at you! Well, sort of at you, I guess," Twilight said, as Luna's frown grew suspicious. "It was like I was talking to Fluttershy for a second, there."

Luna's frown rose into a wistful little grin. "I do wish I could be more like her, sometimes. Kinder, gentler. But alas, I am Luna..."

Twilight found herself stepping up to Luna, reflexively, to comfort her, and she felt her heart accept Luna's expression of affection without hesitation – and indeed, long to return it. "Luna, we've been through a lot together, and are about to go through even more... if you call me sister, I will gladly do the same," she whispered, nuzzling the princess.

Luna laughed, weakly, in relief, and wrapped her wings around both of them. Just for a moment, the weight on them here in the depths of the earth didn't seem quite so heavy.

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"Have you begun to understand that you are accomplishing nothing with this... stubbornness?" The voice, speaking with Celestia's tongue, had lost its tone of jovially acerbic familiarity and had descended into outright harassment. Celestia was repulsed to hear her voice speaking so cruelly, even to herself.

In her heart, she knew she deserved it, but, still; it was unpleasant to hear her own voice berate her, all the worse for everything it said being completely true. Something like pain was driving the voice, now.

"The only thing you're doing," the voice continued, furiously, "is prolonging our mutual suffering with your hard-headedness. Just *let go*, Celestia."

But the Eternal Sun endured. For Equestria.

For her sister, the moon. For herself.

For T –

For *everypony in Equestria*. Don't lose sight of the big picture.

"You will fail, Celestia. What will happen, then, do you think?"

"Then I will have failed trying. But I will not surrender."

"Not ever?"

"No."

"Do you know," the voice said, suddenly soft and a little sad, "that may be the great tragedy at the heart of all of this. You could have been so happy, if you had."

• • •

Twilight and Luna sat, side by side, looking down on the sleeping Celestia. She was as pale and cool as she had been, still peaceful and unmoving, even as Luna spoke, in a toneless voice, of everything she knew about Celestia's recent quest to investigate her alienation from Twilight. Several long pauses had ensued as Luna's guilt got the better of her; the white alicorn failed to rise and comfort her sister, as she had so many times in the past. Instead, the duty fell on a purple unicorn, who shouldered it as willingly as Celestia ever had.

"So now you know as much as I," Luna murmured. "And have heard the full account of my mistakes, and some of Celestia's."

"Just as you saved me from mine," Twilight replied. She leaned over slightly and rested her head on Luna.

"When you brought me back from the Nightmare, Celestia told me your name, and I laughed. She asked me why I found it funny, and I replied... forgive the poetry, 'Of course it is Twilight that brings the Sun and Moon together again.'" Luna looked down on Twilight seriously. "As your princess, your friend, and..." she trailed off.

"A sister?"

Luna blushed. "If you don't think that's... strange."

A little piece of historical doggerel flashed in the unicorn's mind. "In calling me unto thee by this name, you honor me, my belov'd Lady Moon," Twilight recited, savoring Luna's delight at being addressed with the ancient oath.

"It has been a long time since anypony pledged themselves to my service in that way." Luna beamed down at her. "As all of those things, and above all, as a pony who has lost her sister and desperately wants her back... I ask you to risk everything to bring my sister and I together once again. Will you do this?"

Twilight smiled as courageously as she could. "I will."

"Brave, brave Twilight." Luna gave her a sad smile, running a hoof along her face affectionately. "Lie here – place your head next to hers."

Twilight crawled up on the bier with Celestia, reminded acutely of the night before the wedding, when she had woken up to find herself in bed with Celestia, the princess' foreleg draped over her. She had shaken it off, then – the ferocious joy and mind-bending confusion it had inspired had terrified her, although then she hadn't understood why, as she did now. The event seemed so long ago now... but it was one of many things that Celestia and Twilight needed to speak about.

Luna stepped forward. "I'll be able to communicate with you if we focus, but otherwise, remember the things I've told you. Focus on the dream you had, Twilight; focus on what you must do to bring it about. Don't be distracted; don't let yourself be scared off. She needs you to find her so we can solve this problem."

"I understand." Twilight nodded.

Luna leaned in and kissed Twilight's forehead gently. "Then I wish you luck, little sister. Bring Celestia back to us, I beg."

There was a flash of magical light, and Twilight felt herself fall, willingly and only a little afraid, into darkness.

Nice to See Old Friends + She'll Need You + Listening To Words
Unspoken + Just the Magic of Friendship + Spike's Little Moment + Dear
Princess Celestia + Results + Dereliction of Duty + Scholarly Attitudes +
Graduation Day + Just Rewards + Princess Celestia Makes an Omelet +
Your Humble Servant and Loyal Subject + Your Real Name +
A Sorority Invitation

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Sunlight fell, weakly, through a curtained window, filling the room with a dull greyish light through a thin cover of clouds.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," Applejack whispered, automatically, as the first sunlight fell on her face.

Her eyes opened wide, the absence of her usual accompaniment out in the yard thunderous in its silence, and then several other mental gears started turning in rapid succession. Applejack's head leapt from pony to pony to dragon, understanding creeping up on her. "Wake up! Everypony! Get up –"

"Mmmph. Shut up, AJ, I'm busy," Rainbow Dash groaned, rolling over on her side, waving a hoof dismissively.

Applejack leapt on her friend, rolling her over bodily with a grunt of effort.

"Wow, hey, I didn't realize –" Rainbow Dash began, a sarcastic grin spreading across her features.

"Twilight's missin'," Applejack said firmly, staring down at the pegasus.

"What!?"

Around them, everypony else's gentle stirrings from the magnificent dreams they'd been having – not about a field at all, which was strange, because hadn't Twilight mentioned something like that? – became much more active and stressed. In their sudden, drowsy panic, pillows and blankets were overturned as if this would produce the unicorn, but to no avail.

She was gone, and it was much, much later than they had expected to be waking up.

Outside, there was a muffled sound of discussion as the sudden activity alerted the guards outside. The door opened to reveal a couple of guard ponies, one of whom was very familiar to everypony.

"Ah, you're all up, I see," the golden-yellow pegasus said. A silver captain's badge gleamed on her blue and silver Night Guard flyer uniform. "Hey, Dash. It's been quite a while, hasn't it...!"

"*Spitfire*?" Dash sputtered. "What's going on?"

The golden pegasus shrugged. "Well, to be totally honest, I'm not one hundred percent in the know about that," she said in her usual calm, friendly tone. "But *milady* wants you guys to chill here for now, so... you know, chill."

"*You're* a palace guard?" Pinkie Pie said, eyes agog in a truly ridiculous expression of astonishment.

"Uh, yeah," Spitfire replied with an awkward smile. "Dash didn't tell you, huh? I'm not a Wonderbolt anymore, right? *Somepony* took my Captaincy." The golden pegasus nodded at Dash. "Mare's gotta make a living, and weather duty's just not my style." She favored Dash with a sheepish grin. "Actually, uh... since you're here, and not going anywhere, I was hoping we could take the time to chat, RD. Haven't seen you since Scoots and I hauled your drunk flanks home after your Wonderbolts send-off party."

Dash blushed as her friends, despite their anxious preoccupation, grinned at her. Spitfire's story here did not match up with Rainbow Dash's own account of that evening's events, but for *some* reason seemed much more credible. Cloudsdale Aerodrome still existed, for example.

"Yeah, I'd, uh... love to, but... we *gotta* find our friend," Dash said.

"No worries," Spitfire said, her face friendly and calm. "She's with the princess, somewhere, so don't get those feathers of yours too ruffled about her, hot shot."

"If those two went off together, we *know* where they went," Applejack said, firmly.

"You don't understand," Fluttershy said, anxiously. "She's in a lot of danger!"

Spitfire smiled gently at her. "With *all* you guys here I have no doubt," she said, with a little chuckle. Her easygoing attitude was beginning to grate on everypony's nerves. "If I

wanted trouble, I'd just put two or three of you in a room together." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Maybe I should split you up, now that I think about it..."

"Maybe you should just let us out, and save yourself the trouble of trying to stop us," Dash growled.

"Sorry, Dash, no can do. Princess' orders, and all – and more importantly, three squads of really *serious* dudes in armor standing around at my beck and call." Spitfire's small, familiar smile grew a little wider, and while her eyes still looked calm and easygoing, a dangerous gleam flared deep in them. "...And just so *you*, in particular, don't get any ideas, there's a reason I was put in charge of keeping you here."

"Oh yeah?" Dash smarmed, reflexively contrary.

Spitfire moseyed up to Dash – there was no other word for it, she walked like somepony who couldn't care less about anything else in the world, lazily and slow – and grinned smugly in the blue pegasus' frowning face. "You can beat me in a straight sprint, no doubt, but you and I both know you can't outrun me when you have to maneuver around, say, the towers here in Canterlot." She winked and lowered her voice to a whisper into Dash's ear. "Or maybe you just never really want to..."

Rainbow Dash's face was now no longer blue, but solid red.

"Of course, I could always get some wing bands up here if you feel the temptation to have another little race too much to resist," Spitfire added, wagging her eyebrows a little suggestively. "I would hate to have to haul you back here in front of everypony in Canterlot..."

Dash cleared her throat loudly, ignoring the suppressed snickers around her. "No, I... no. That won't... be necessary." She glowered darkly at Applejack, who was suddenly extremely interested in her hoof, grinning madly.

Spitfire stepped back, smiling brightly. "It's so nice to see old friends, isn't it?" she said, with a happy sigh.

"Spitfire, you don't understand," Rarity said, stepping forward. "Luna may have taken Twilight to perform very dangerous magic!"

The pegasus scrunched up her face. "That sounds... kind of like their *job*, don't you think...? I mean –"

"We were supposed ta help 'em, but... it's about Princess Celestia," Applejack added, stepping next to the unicorn. "They ain't thinkin' straight. Thinkin' they gotta do it on their lonesome. They *both* might be in danger."

Spitfire raised an eyebrow. "Well, I... don't know anything about that," she said, still calm, but the easy confidence was gone from her voice. "But the Princess ordered that you six should stay here, and stay here you will. Okay?" She tried to chuckle flippantly. "I mean, come on, guys, this is Princess Luna and the Arch-Mage, right? How much danger could they be in, really?"

Spitfire had expected explanations, yelling, arguments – things she could just let bounce off a professional, calm little smile in the noble tradition of guards throughout history. That she could deal with and yawn off, no problem. But the sudden awkward silence, the anxious looks as each of them looked to the others for the right words to say... even Dash, who Spitfire knew from long experience to be terminally inclined to thoughtless bravado, looked miserably worried.

The golden pegasus' mellow was being seriously harshed. She turned away and stepped back through the door, tossing a worried look over her shoulder.

"I'll see about that, I..." She looked away, frowning with indecision, then looked back. "I'll see, okay? And Dash, think about what I said."

Dash's blush returned. "About, uh... chatting?"

Spitfire managed half a saucy grin. "No, Dash, about the wing bands. Just... stay here, will you?"

As the door closed, Spike closed his eyes again, curling back into his little nest of cushions.

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"She's coming."

"I know."

"Her resolve... could be a little more certain."

"I *know*."

Celestia's eyes felt glued shut. She could feel, barely, the inevitable downward pressure of the sun, her ability to focus on keeping it above the horizon slipping. She dared not even try to sense the extent of its descent, trying to focus instead on marshalling all her willpower on recovering the balance point where she could just *maintain* the sun's position, rather than fight its inevitable downward push into the horizon.

Pain and the strain of prolonged effort dulled everything. She could only *just* feel the sun anymore. Everything she could manage to summon from her mind was focused on keeping the sun in the sky. Fighting off *setting*.

For more than one thousand years she had been the Eternal Sun, shining over Equestria, she chanted in her mind. The familiar thought comforted her; it was a reminder of her identity, the role she had chosen in that darkest of times – the burden she willingly, *happily* bore, for Equestria and all her little ponies. They *needed* her to shine brightly, to drive away the darkness, to always *be there*, a constant in the ever-flowing, mercurial sea of change that was life.

If she focused on that, drove it into her heart... it would resume its place in the primacy of her mind.

Yes. This is manageable. Things just got out of hoof for a time. Focus. Yes.

"She'll need you."

The little truth, whispered gently as if to be the spoken equivalent of a sympathetic caress, filled Celestia's mind with a spasm of fear.

In that moment of lost concentration she felt, with sudden and desperate certainty, the sun slip from her control again. Unbidden, a little whine of terror slipped from her, and humiliated tears welled in her eyes, stinging and biting behind her straining eyelids. She desperately re-focused on the sun.

The voice, for once, was mercifully silent.

• • •

Twilight regained awareness with terrifying suddenness, her stomach lurching and eyes opening wide as she took in a sudden breath. She was lying on her back, facing up into an endless blue sky; the air around her was dry as a bone baked under the naked sun and tasted like the ancient, stale air of the sealed, vault-like basements of the palace library, thick with the strange odor of parchment dust and moldering paper.

She took another deep gulp of the air, with the satisfaction of a true bibliophile.

The ground beneath her had the solid, but almost slippery feeling of fine dry sand; indeed, as Twilight rolled over onto her hooves, she had to fight the way it flowed and shifted beneath them. It was black, volcanic sand, Twilight noticed, although something in her cautioned her that this did not necessarily imply there was a volcano anywhere nearby. Here, things would have symbolic rather than naturalistic implications.

Twilight?

The suddenness of... whatever it was made Twilight jump. It wasn't a sound, it was... a feeling. It was an awareness that somepony had spoken, as if the past had just now changed so that they had, after the fact. But the voice it hadn't spoken in was familiar.

Twilight shuddered. It *felt* strange to "hear", which was a bizarre thing in and of itself. "Luna? Is that you?"

Oh, good. And you're yourself?

She looked herself over, carefully, remembering Luna's sense of violation after her own experience, here. "Uh, yes. I think so."

Excellent. We're already making progress. Where are you?

Twilight frowned. "Don't you mean, 'when'?" she asked, sourly.

So you're in a memory you recognize?

Even here, Twilight could tell that Luna had recognized the little jab and was deliberately misinterpreting it to be difficult, that little grin of sly amusement touching her lips. "No, I'm in... a desert, I think. The sand is black, like volcanic sand, but it's very fine."

No landmarks? Mountains, ruins... anything of that nature?

Twilight took a moment to gaze into the distance, which vanished into a haze of heat. Doing so made her feel uneasy; the black sand was so *strange*, and holding it and the familiar blue sky in her vision at the same time felt *wrong*, somehow. "No, nothing. Just... a desert. There's not even any wind. It smells like a library full of old books. Does that mean anything to you?"

No.

"I take it that you didn't come here, then."

No, Twilight. I... I awoke in the Temple of Two Sisters, as... it.

Twilight grimaced. "Sorry, Luna. Um..." She peered into the horizon again. There was no sign of anything, or anypony; just a wide, flat, black desert of sand, all perfectly still except for that which slid around under her hooves.

Ah! The sun, Twilight. Where is the sun?

"The sun?"

Yes. Is it rising? Setting? This could be significant.

Twilight looked up. The sun was directly overhead; high noon. She said so.

I... see.

Okay, let's think here, Twilight, her mind said. What else could have been significant? Deduction requires data.

She inspected the impression where she had arrived, and the marks from her minor struggle to stand, in case they presented any clue about how she had arrived or some hint of directionality, but as she thought about it, a sneaking suspicion that the desert had arisen around her grew in her mind. There weren't any suggestions that she had fallen, such as impact displacement – there was just a small, Twilight Sparkle-shaped depression in the sand.

Similarly, there was no sign of drifting at all – it was just a wide, flat, dry, strange-smelling, sandy expanse, vanishing into the horizon. Completely unnatural, in every way.

"Hmmm," she said.

Found something?

Twilight sighed. "The opposite, actually. I'd give lot for some wings about now..." A thought occurred to her, and she began to use magic to create a little disc of sand beneath herself to levitate on.

Twilight, stop!

Luna's "voice" was suddenly frightened and a little frantic, seeming distant. Twilight dropped to the ground, blinking. "What? What is it?"

Hold on, hold on... what were you doing?

"I was just levitating sand. Making a platform to raise myself up on. Why?"

You started your mane on fire.

"What!?"

There was a pause which Twilight suspected was supposed to be filled with a little snicker. *Okay, okay... everything's fine, just a singe. For some reason you started producing sparks in the waking world.*

Twilight glowered, bringing a hoof to her face in irritation. "No magic, then, I take it."

Just the magic of friendship, for now, I think... sister.

"Mmm, wonderful," Twilight mumbled with a sarcastic half-smile. "Well, let's see, then... maybe I can find a filly who wants her cutie mark around somewhere. One generally finds a way to get underhoof if I try to go about my business in peace..." Twilight looked around, and again failing to find any guide for herself, set off in a direction which failed to be any more or less appealing than the others.

• • •

Rainbow Dash was still glaring at Applejack, who was grinning madly, shaking her head with the effort of not bursting into delighted laughter.

"That filly wound ya right up the flagpole," the orange pony snickered. "You're redder than a red delicious in buckin' season."

"Shut up."

"Where's the big, bad Rainbow Dash, heartbreaker and mare on the go, now? Looked more like ya could barely look 'er in the eyes for... well, you know. She's got a nice pair o'wings on her, fer sure."

"Shut. Up."

"Honestly, you two," Rarity sniffed. "We have *much* more important things to be doing than teasing each other."

"Rarity, Ah gotta get when the gettin's good, don't Ah? An' it's good an'... uh, good, right now." Applejack sighed. "But, yer right, o'course." She gave her best friend another smug look, which the pegasus huffed away from.

"I can't believe Luna would just *take* Twilight," Fluttershy said, sadly. "It's so unlike her."

Dash gave Fluttershy a dark look, although she was privately happy to move on. "She wasn't exactly *thrilled* to have us around, you know."

"I can't really blame her, poor dear," Fluttershy replied, about as firmly as she ever did. "This must all be so hard on her, and she's *so* sensitive." Dash gave her a disbelieving look. Fluttershy frowned in her friend's defense, blushing furiously.

Applejack nodded. "An' Twi's been through a lot. Ah can see her gettin' a bee in her bonnet about Celestia, and usin' the buzz to think with. She got *real* serious after she saw 'er lyin' there. Haystacks, so did Ah... but..." The earth pony shook her head. "There's a part o'me that wishes Ah could agree with Spitfire, and jus' leave 'em to it. I may be an Element of Harmony, but what's goin' on here? It ain't apple buckin', that's fer sure."

"Well, we can't just leave them. Even if we won't be involved in the magic, *per se*," Rarity said, looking nervous, her recent trauma not forgotten even though Luna had pronounced her perfectly healthy.

"Did anypony hear anything in the night that might have given them a clue how Luna got her out of here?" Dash asked, ignoring Fluttershy's very slight narrowing of the eyes.

Applejack shook her head. "Nope. Ah was out like a snuffed candle. Had a nice dream, though..."

"I was the same way," Rarity said.

They looked to Fluttershy, who quailed under the sudden glares and just murmured a hurt-sounding, "Sorry, no."

"Me either!" Pinkie declared, happily. She had been unusually quiet up until now, sitting and listening with un-Pinkie-like patience. "But Spike did!"

"What?" Dash snarled, eyes ablaze.

"I heard the princess tell him she couldn't put him to sleep like us because dragons don't like Luna playing in their dreams!" Pinkie grinned hugely at Spike, who remained curled up, one eye open very slightly. The monocular glare he was giving her might be described as 'poisonous'.

Applejack turned on him. "That true, Spike?"

The dragon's other eye opened, letting him look around shiftily. "Ys," he moaned in a tiny voice.

With a *whoomph*, Dash's powerful wings spread wide in a reflexive threat display. "Well, maybe you'd like to tell us what you saw, then."

"No."

"Whyever not, Spike?" Rarity asked, stepping forward with as much poise as she could manage.

"'s none of our business," he grumbled sullenly.

"I'm sorry, dear, I didn't quite catch that," Rarity said, leaning in and batting her eyes. When it came to getting Spike to talk, there was a noticeable, and familiar progression of escalation; pretending not to have heard him and batting her eyes was, for Rarity, the equivalent of hanging somepony in the air and shaking them by the tail until their tongue loosened.

Pinkie grabbed a candle and held it right above Spike's head, casting him into harsh light. "Yeah, spill the beans, stoolie! Grrr!" This menacing display was ruined somewhat by her collapsing into giggles, legs thrashing.

Spike curled even tighter, his tail wrapping around his face.

"Spike! Stand up this instant!" Mistress Rarity declared, haughtily.

To her utter astonishment, this usually-infallible method did not induce an instantly-upright Spike. Instead he slowly got to his feet, uncoiling unwillingly, and stood slowly to his full, unslouching, and – the ponies noticed this only now that they had provoked him – somewhat imposing height; even Applejack, tallest among them, had to look up to meet his eyes, now. The dragon glowered down at them, shifting unhappily.

"Uh," Applejack murmured. *Good golly he's a big 'un... 'course, he'd never hurt us, but... scary!*

Even Dash stepped back, wings shrinking back to her sides, but her face remained suspicious and demanding. Rarity, though, stood her ground, head upthrust, eyes gleaming. Spike looked everywhere but at her.

"Spiiiiike...?"

"I... we... this isn't any of our business," Spike growled. He really did; it was a very low sound, rolling out of him with as much affection as boulders crashing together. Fluttershy gave a tiny squeak of shock at the sound.

Rarity stood her ground, cocking her head slightly and looking at him inquisitively. The dragon squirmed. "Spike, you'll feel better when you tell us."

"Very well," he said, which was a very un-Spike-like thing to say, enough to provoke an eyebrow raise from Rarity, which he visibly flinched from. It rose in one swift motion like a sword stroke, and he watched it warily. "But only because I want you to stop being suspicious of the princess, okay? Twilight left on her own."

"*What?*" Rainbow Dash snapped, incredulously. "Twilight Sparkle, miss harmony and peace and togetherness and trust and friendship, herself, *tricked* us into being put to sleep and then left us to go face who knows what by *herself*?"

"You gotta admit, that's a pretty good trick, Dashie," Pinkie said in the thoughtful tones of an interested expert in the subject.

"Yeah, she really got us good," Dash said, rolling her eyes. "So now she and Luna must be down in that cave with Celestia. If we hurry, we can –"

"No!" Spike growled, again. There was a throatiness to this, which spoke of the mighty roar that would, one day, thunder in the sky over Ponyville; the ponies instinctively flinched from the sound, staring up at him in sudden shock. He immediately shrank, having frightened himself, looking guilty. "No," he repeated, quietly. "This is none of our business. I saw her leaving, and... I let her go."

Instinctively, without really looking, Applejack snatched Rainbow Dash from mid-leap and shoved a hoof over her mouth. Muffled complaints were still completely audible.

Rarity cleared her throat. "Why?" she asked, prim as primroses, muzzle held high in the air.

"You guys... I mean, I've known Celestia and Twilight since I was a baby. I mean, Twi hatched me herself, okay? I mean... I don't mean to say you guys don't know, but... look, Celestia means more to Twilight, and Twilight means more to Celestia, than... there's not really words for what they are. That's why things got so screwed up, maybe. And now Celestia could be gone from Twi's life, for the rest of her life. Maybe forever. If she decided she wanted to do this alone... I decided..." He held his head up high and proud again. "I decided that if she needed to do this by herself, just her and Luna, then... I understood. And you guys should, too."

"Spike...?" the white unicorn asked, quietly.

He looked away, eyes shut. "I made my decision, okay?"

The dragon was somewhat stunned to feel a gentle pressure on his chest, and, as he turned to look, the barest whisper of a touch on his scaly cheek. He raised a clawed hand to it as Rarity backed away from him, his eyes confused but thrilled.

"You really have grown into a fine young dragon," she said, quietly. She gave him about the most admiring look he'd ever received from her. "I'm very proud of you."

He smiled, lamely. "Thank you. But, um, can I stop now? It's really hard to keep being firm about this when I'm almost sure I'll never see *either* of them again, now."

• • •

Twilight put one hoof before the other.

Um... dare I ask if...?

"No," Twilight growled. "Nothing new."

From her point of view it had been several hours, but Luna said she'd only been doing this for about five minutes in the waking world. Subjectivity in the experience of time suggested... it...

It meant... something. Maybe.

It was hot here, that was for sure.

Twilight?

"Yes?"

Please stop whatever you're doing. You look exhausted.

"Okay..." Twilight said, collapsing bodily sideways as Luna said this. A very little bit of the warm, black sand fluffed up around her, falling back to the earth in a strangely regular way; there was absolutely no wind here, so it all fell straight up and down, almost like liquid. In fact, Twilight was beginning to get the idea that she was breathing with her real body, not with this... astral form, or whatever you wanted to call it, and thus there probably wasn't air at all. Which made her wonder why there was a smell, but... whatever...

She lay there, exhausted, feeling ashamed of herself. It had only been a couple hours; on some of her adventures, she'd travelled for days, keeping pace – well, okay, *trying* to keep pace with Applejack's indefatigable stride across plains and mountains, through forests and swamps, from sunrise to –

Twilight twitched, just a little. More from the sudden pang of anxiety about helping the princess than any lingering... twitchiness, which pleased her in a distant sort of way.

Are you alright?

"Yep," Twilight said, exhausted. "Just peachy."

You twitched.

"Yeah, here too. Just a passing thought."

Alright... if you're sure. Your body isn't as separate from your mind as mine can be, it seems...

Twilight smiled weakly. "So no magic, and if I get hurt here, I get hurt in real life. Super."

I'm not sure it's quite that neat, but... let's be careful.

Twilight rolled up so she could look around, although she wasn't entirely sure what compelled her to do this. She had no logical reason to expect anything but the uniform black waste stretching to the horizons, but hope springs eternal...

Above her, the blazing eye of high noon shined down, unmoving and unchanged.

Which way had she come from?

Twilight cast about. The only marks in the sand were those she had just made when she flopped to the ground, and even those were fading. Her hoofprints were completely gone – as if they'd never been there. She blinked a couple times.

"Luna, my hoofprints are gone."

You were just... walking?

"Um, yes," Twilight said, too aware now how foolish this sounded.

A thought occurs.

"Well, don't keep it to yourself."

It... is possible that she – her mind – hasn't... noticed you yet. This is a very strange circumstance, after all; there might not be any part of it trying to notice things.

Twilight's brow furrowed. "It noticed you. Do you think I'm less... intrusive?"

Possibly. Or Celestia's condition has degenerated further; or both.

"Of all the times not to have magic available, this is among the more inconvenient."

Only among them?

Twilight groaned. "I've had a pretty interesting life, you know? There was this one time – I must have told you about this – that Trixie showed up again..."

Oh, I like her. She's so funny.

"Look, it's a long story, okay? I'll tell you later." The unicorn shuddered a bit, remembering the details. Harmony be blessed, Pinkie Pie had been around...

There was a little pause that included Luna's look of unease. *I... look forward to hearing it.*

The unspoken vote of confidence, no matter how hesitant it had sounded, was a balm on Twilight's flagging self-assurance. She smiled gently, letting the emotion flow over her, then marshaled her mental resources and set to thinking.

Hokay. Gotta communicate directly with the princess' mind. No magic.

...except the magic of friendship.

Twilight's eyebrows raised slowly, and she pursed her lips thoughtfully. It... just might work.

"I'm going to try something," Twilight said, in the speculative tones of an engineer who's put some thought into exactly how to move that boulder over yonder with this here matchstick. "Something friendship related. Tell me if anything happens on your end."

Very well. Be careful.

Twilight got to her hooves and, tongue sticking out, dragged a hoof across the black sand in careful patterns. The effect was somewhat crude, and she wished she could have used a stick with her magic, but the words were more or less legible.

Twilight looked around; nothing was happening. She frowned, looking back at the letters, which were already beginning to fade. "Anything out there?"

No, Twilight. What did you do?

"Wrote in the sand. Gonna try again."

It is one definition of madness to do the same thing twice and expect different results. I would have expected you, of all ponies, to realize this.

Twilight grinned as her hoof dragged through the silky-smooth sand, biting as deep as she could. "Didn't you say rationality would be a poor guide, here?"

I suppose I did, but... I was really just backing up your decision to do this alone. Don't misinterpret me for your own purposes. You know I hate that.

"A bee complaining it's been stung? How strange." Good heavens, why did she ever stop spending time with Luna? All the more reason to resolve this situation... so that there could be a thousand, thousand more moments like this with the pr – her *big sister*.

It was a little weird to say, even in her mind, but... in a good way. Twilight smiled.

Luna must have thought so, too, because her "voice" had a smile in it. *Extremely amusing. Make your attempt, will you?*

Twilight, panting hard, finished scrawling the words in the sand. "So?"

Nothing, Twilight.

"Nope, nothing here either. Just being thorough. I think we can say that nothing is observing the physical state of this desert – well, of course that must be so, otherwise my magic earlier would have caused some notice, don't you think?"

Well, that was only telekinesis... and it only lasted for a moment...

"But you can hear me, right? Maybe other things are listening, too... I just need to use the right words."

Ha! Magic words, maybe? Abracadabra! Alakazam! Please!

A familiar little grin of satisfaction spread across Twilight's features. "Not magic words, just the right ones." She cleared her throat.

Your horn is glowing. Are you doing magic?

"Sort of," Twilight said, her joyful grin of triumph truly beautiful to behold. "*Dear Princess Celestia –*"

• • •

Luna looked up, face aglow with delight and hope. Silver letters sprang into life in the air above Twilight, tracing themselves into being with a simple but serene and elegant grace.

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

I'M HERE! LET ME IN! UH... PLEASE!

YOUR FAITHFUL STUDENT,

• • •

"Twilight Sparkle!"

Twilight's voice rang in Celestia's mind. They were at once the most delightful, welcome words she had ever heard – her heart swelled with joy and relief at how proud and confident Twilight sounded – and a torture of such terrible severity that even demons would balk at it.

Oh, Twilight... I don't deserve you.

"Took her long enough. I can't believe she was just walking around – I mean, why? I thought she was clever," said the voice. "Oops! Pay attention, Celestia, you're losing your grip..."

• • •

"We should be there," Dash moaned.

Spike shot her a halfhearted glare, his head resting in Rarity's lap. He was only a young dragon, after all, and could only bear so much; it had broken the ponies' hearts to see him struggle against his own biology and try to break into terrified tears.

More discussion had followed. Some of it had been rather heated, although that was just Rainbow Dash and Applejack's way. As emotions grew more drawn out and the discussion went on, the inevitability of their conclusion drew more and more apparent. Their resolve circled the drain that Spike had seen right away: what, really, could they do to help? And what right did they have to interfere?

Dash, in particular, had been conflicted – torn between loyalty to Twilight's safety and loyalty to Twilight's right to pursue some closure, her headstrong bravado had burned out quickly and she fell into a dark, brooding depression. She had eventually manufactured a little nest for herself and steadfastly refused to speak except in bitter little interjections like this, apparently changing her mind about what they should do every time she worked up the nerve to speak.

They lay around the room in silence, everypony unsure to their bones. Pinkie Pie's attempts to lighten the mood had fallen flat, even with her.

Suddenly, there was... *something*.

Rarity looked up from Spike, her eyes wide and wary. "Did anypony else feel that?"

"Feel wha..." Applejack said, but paused, looking wary. "Yeah, Ah did..."

She looked down at herself, putting a hoof to her neck where a jewel might hang on a golden torc. She had felt, just for a moment, the slight, ethereal *pull* that she associated with using the Elements of Harmony, the tug as the magic focused around the Element of Magic and formed into the great rainbow wave.

The five ponies looked at each other, unsure whether to be anxious or to indulge a familiar rising feeling of hope and inner serenity. Something was happening.

But as soon as they noticed it, the feeling passed, leaving them feeling even gloomier in its absence.

• • •

The world rumbled around Twilight. The black sand, shaking and vibrating weirdly, rushed inwards towards a point in front of her, making her slip and stumble as her footing became slick as ice, flowing underneath her. The great mass of sand built up in great leaps and bounds, in a bizarre, inorganic way; it was very much like watching a complicated bottle fill up, each shape seeming to grow and flow into itself on its own, rising high above Twilight into the still-cloudless expanse of blue sky.

A horrendous storm of swirling sand surrounded the black shape as great towering pillars of the strange black sand coalesced into being. Twilight blinked and coughed in the noxious storm, putting a hoof in front of her eyes, finding herself unwilling to look away from this strange sight. It was curiously beautiful, and had a strange emotional feeling to it; it was a thing that existed, coming into being; something like a birth was happening before her.

Sneezing and hacking, Twilight was finally forced to back away as the storm grew more and more intense. Howling winds, appearing from nowhere, sang banshee songs as the sands whirled and bit at her, making her snap and jerk as if she were being bitten by flies, shielding her eyes and face as best she could.

Then, with shocking suddenness, the storm died. Twilight unfolded from the reflexive cringe and looked up –

--at Canterlot Castle.

Twilight looked around herself in panic. She was standing on the main road up to the castle, decorative shrubberies on either side of her. Behind her, the road led down into Canterlot Town and from there, off onto the great plains in the shadow of the mountains, towards the south and Ponyville.

Twilight? Twilight! What happened?

"The desert, uh... sort of became... I'm, uh... standing in front of the Castle." Twilight stared. The gates were thrown open, but the castle seemed to loom, even now in the

midday sun, more than it ever had even when Twilight was a filly. It was as tall and imposing as, perhaps, most ponies thought it. And there were subtle changes; the decorative rail fences looked larger and thicker, the windows small and dark, the colors muted, the gold gilt dull. "Well, something like the Castle, anyways."

Canterlot?

"Yeah."

Can you go inside?

Twilight looked up at the open gates and then further up at the steps the keep, beyond which lay the annex and Great Hall. The great arched doors, edged in gold, seemed to swing in as her eyes fell on them. "I think it wants me to."

Wants you to? You can feel intentionality from this place?

"No, nothing like that, it's just that the doors are open."

There was a long pause. *I suppose there's nothing else to do, is there...*

"Well, it's nice to get some results, if nothing else," Twilight said, trotting forwards. As she passed the gates, they slowly swung shut behind her. She turned at the sound, and watched as the vision of the world beyond was obscured by a strange roiling mist.

Well, that was... promising.

The unicorn turned back to the annex doors, open enough to reveal a soft glow inside, a strange sort of smoky stuff spilling out of the bottom of the doorway, vanishing as it rolled along the ground.

Equally promising.

"Can you still hear me?"

Yes. Are you alright?

Twilight set her face in an expression of grim determination. "I'm going in."

• • •

"Brave, isn't she?"

"The bravest."

"Shame there's not an Element of Courage, eh? But Magic's okay, too, I guess." There was a pause that nevertheless conveyed a bored grin of intense smugness. "She really doesn't understand where she is, though, does she? If only – and this is just a thought, you understand – if only somepony were there looking out for her."

"She doesn't need me... looking out for her... anymore."

"Well, your sister is half-tagging along, I think, so that should be fun. Let's watch, shall we?" the voice added, eagerly.

Celestia tried to refocus her attention on the sun, but every sound Twilight made caused her face to twitch into a little grimace of anxiety.

Focus! For *Equestria*, you stupid old nag. Put the sun back in the sky and *rise*. For everypony. That includes her, after all.

• • •

There was a knock on the door, but it was mostly for politeness' sake. The door immediately opened and Spitfire entered, looking uncomfortable. Her eyes roamed around the room carefully, taking in the muted scene with growing unhappiness. Even Rainbow Dash was just lying in a stack of pillows, facing out the window, her body limp and face listless.

Applejack looked up. "Howdy," she managed.

The guard captain tried to re-form her usual patient smile, but like a match lit in the wind it flared, sputtered, and failed. As she searched for words, she chewed her lower lip just a little. "Uh... look, guys, I've had both the commander of the guards and the chancellor of the Academy here... and, uh..."

"They think we should leave Luna and Twilight to it," Dash said, her voice as bored as Spitfire had ever heard it. Not disinterested bored – Spitfire was *very* familiar with that tone of voice out of her friend – *empty* bored. It was a little disturbing to hear Dash's voice so drained of emotion.

"I tried to explain that you guys are all worried that they're not thinking straight, uh, without going into too much detail," Spitfire said, a little bit of pleading in her voice, begging them to believe her. "They both say that we need to trust the Princess' judgment."

I mean... do you guys *know* what they're up to?" She realized she was sputtering, trying to fill the cavernous silence, the ponies around her only half-paying attention.

"We kind of know," Fluttershy murmured. "That's why we're worried."

Spitfire forced her expression to harden, and she cleared her throat. "Well, the chancellor said that if you went down into the, uh, well, wherever that hole goes, you could cause more trouble than you help if you interfered," she said, in an official-sounding voice.

Rarity looked up from Spike, who still had his head in her lap. "That's possible, yes."

"More'n possible, it's downright likely," Applejack agreed.

Spitfire's eyes lingered on Rainbow Dash, who stared out the window with resigned thoughtlessness. It was turning out to be a dull sort of day, where a thin layer of pale grey clouds covers the sky, making everything just seem washed-out and unhappy. "You guys seem way less sure of yourselves than you were earlier, I gotta say. I sort of expected to get, um... you know, fought back at," she said, lamely.

"Well, we haven't just been sitting here, you know," Spike rumbled.

"Yeah, I... I think you scared the door guards a little bit there, with that rumbling of yours, big guy." Spitfire tried to give him a smile.

The dragon blinked, his draconic features unreadable. "Sorry."

"No, I mean... don't... worry about it," Spitfire replied, miserably. "I'll be straight up with you guys, this is killing me just to watch," she said. "I can't imagine what it's like for you." This was, unthinkingly, directed at the back of Rainbow Dash's head.

That selfsame head stirred, just a little. "Well, they're right... this is some heavy stuff. Where would we start, helping out? We just have to trust them." Reluctant resignation oozed off of Dash's voice.

"You've got those Elements, don't y –"

"The Princess didn't want ta use 'em," Applejack said flatly. "Magic is as magic does, I 'spose."

Spitfire chewed her lip again. She had begun to regret taking this special assignment – chosen specifically by the princess to keep a lid on her old friend, Rainbow Dash? She

hadn't been able to resist the urge to accept the honor, as well as the opportunity to tease Dash, for even a second! – the very moment she'd seen the worried faces of the six friends when she walked in the door this morning, and her resolve to obey had drained quickly.

Spitfire was not, in fact, a particularly good guard. She had been hoof-picked as a captain by the princess because she was disciplined, intelligent, and an experienced leader and squadron commander, but like all true flyers, all of that strictness and self-control was dedicated wholly to supporting her in making her own choices and living life the way she truly desired – free and unrestrained – which made her an excellent guard right up until she decided not to be.

As the Princess had given Spitfire her orders in the dead of the early morning, the pegasus' eagerness at the forthcoming opportunity to mess with Dash hadn't prevented her from noticing the Princess' regal calm and aloofness was exaggerated beyond even Luna's norm. Something was wrong, and the extreme reaction of these six had shaken the strength of Spitfire's dedication to duty further towards making her own decisions about what should be done.

And it meant Dash was being no fun, and that just wouldn't do.

"Look, if the commander and the chancellor had decided to have me take you down there... what would you guys have done?" Spitfire asked, her mind scheming away.

The five ponies and dragon looked at each other, and then back up at her as if she were not getting the point.

"Spitfire, hun, we're not gonna try anything –" Applejack began.

"Just... would... I mean, you've gotta be able to do *something*," Spitfire insisted.

Everypony else's eyes opened wide, a glimmer of hope flashing in their despair.

"We don't really know if there is anything *for* us to do," Pinkie Pie said, a little animation returning to her features. "It's gotten even more magical than normal! And when I say that, man, I'm talking... Woosh! Bang!"

Rarity cleared her throat and shifted a little. Spike raised himself up from her lap, looking nervous. "I think at this point, Spitfire dear," the unicorn said, "It would be enough for us to feel like we're there if they need us."

Spitfire's little grin bloomed. "Does that sound about right to everypony?" After some mutual glances, there was a small chorus of nods. Spitfire began speaking quickly "Okay, listen up, then. There's only two guards left in the tower, okay? They're at the top of the stairs outside the door. And that chamber in the floor is open."

"What happened to the other guards?" Dash asked, rolling over in her nest, giving Spitfire a very suspicious glance. "You said you had like forty ponies down there."

The golden pegasus grinned ferociously, her eyes ablaze. For somepony with such an aggressive name, Spitfire generally seemed calm... until she really got excited. She was at least Dash's equal as a true adrenaline junkie. Dash had only ever seen such an extreme reaction in the usually-mellow mare in the grips of extreme adrenaline overdose, on the tail end of the most extreme stunts the two of them could manage, or while her mind got lost planning a new routine, imagining the crowd's cheers.

"We've spread them out. Too many guards around this lonely old tower draws too much attention... and I may have been fibbing, just a bit, you know, to make a point." Spitfire's grin shrunk from fiery to sly. "But it seems that I'm about to commit a serious dereliction of duty! Imagine that, a guard captain... shameful, really. As *loyal* citizens of Equestria, it would be your *pleasure* to report such irresponsible behavior..."

"Uh, Spitfire, why are you..." Dash asked, nervously, blushing, as Spitfire prowled up to her.

"And it would just be *terrible* if, not that I would think something like this would happen, but if those guards were somehow overpowered and tied up with, oh, the manacles I seem to have carelessly left outside the door..."

Applejack's grin threatened to remove the top of her head from the bottom. "Oh, mah, wouldn't it just," she said.

Spike frowned. "We'll just be... there, right? No interfering unless we have to."

"Yes, dear." Rarity put a hoof on his claw. "You were right; we were too eager to join in. Princess Luna and Twilight needed to do this for themselves." She looked up at him, seriously. "But they might need us, so let's just be there for them if they do. No matter what happens." The dragon smiled at her in relief.

"Alright, then, is everypony on board?" Spitfire said, giving Dash a smoldering look.

"No!" Dash exclaimed, beet-red.

"You're so cute when you're flustered," the golden pegasus purred, and kissed her, chuckling only a little as she heard Applejack's gleeful call to the guards before happily losing herself in Dash's suddenly eager embrace.

"Whoa," Spike said.

"Grown up you may be, but not quite *this* grown up. Go get ready." Rarity gave him a little shove with a hoof, and the dragon lumbered away, blushing. She shook her head at the pair. "*Honestly.*"

• • •

Twilight wandered the castle.

It had been more or less her home for years, and she knew it very, very well; now and then she found herself mistaking this facsimile for the real thing, expecting to see familiar ponies' faces at their posts as she lost herself in thought meandering the familiar corridors. No pony else was here, of course, but... it was very, very realistic.

Of course it is...!

"Luna?" Twilight asked, startled. "I was speaking...?"

No, but we were thinking along the same lines it seems – this is a representation of Celestia's mind, and the castle is as good an image for that as anything. She's probably around here somewhere, lost, or trapped... but the other rooms might be emotions, memories, dreams...

"You sound... eager."

This is all very different than anything I have ever experienced before. It's all very interesting. But it makes sense, doesn't it?

Twilight paused. "I'm deeper in Celestia's mind than you were in mine, aren't I?"

Well... I'm not sure.

"Oh, excellent," the unicorn grouched.

I would speculate, one scholar to another, that this is unprecedented. Celestia is a unique case, after all.

Twilight's all-too-excellent memory recalled the many reports and records of first expeditions of various kinds that she had read in her life of constant, voracious research. "Let's hope there are a minimum of crocodiles, then... snakes, too."

What?

"Never mind. So..." Twilight had been wandering through the east wing of the palace, near the kitchens. Like everyplace else she had been in the empty castle, every door that didn't lead to another corridor was locked – well, not locked, exactly, the doors just wouldn't open, not even to her most vigorous kicks. The only ones that seemed to be operational were the tall, arched doors from one hall to another, which opened and closed at Twilight's approach in an eerily expectant way; she had sat in front of one, to see what would happen, and actually got the impression the door was becoming impatient with her. "If I were Celestia... where would I be...?"

Or where wouldn't you be. After all, she's not exactly in a healthy state of mind; being trapped in an unpleasant or unfamiliar place might represent this.

"An excellent point; however, it still gets me nowhere if I can't open doors." Twilight regarded a nearby handle irritably. "I'm going to try to force it open."

... with magic? Twilight, that's dangerous.

"Well, I pulled as hard as I could with my mouth," Twilight said, blushing at the memory.

Oh, very well... I'll watch you carefully here.

"Fortes fortuna adiuvat," Twilight murmured.

Agh! Nothing good ever happens when somepony says that!

Twilight summoned her magic and tried to manipulate the handle. It seemed to squirm and flow as she wrapped telekinetic force around it, and when she just tried to press down on it with a little finger of force, it went straight through with a little ghost of resistance, as if she were pressing on a stream of water.

Twilight! Stop! Please – oh, heavens...

"Sorry, sorry," Twilight said, grimacing.

Well, if you're very lucky, Rarity will have some idea what to do with this.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "My mane is the least of my problems, I think." The unicorn sighed, and looked around. "So, let's... work from what we can guess. This is some sort of representation of the Princess' mind... and it knows I'm here..."

Maybe it doesn't know what to do with you. It seems clear that Celestia isn't controlling things herself.

"Because I had to attract the mind's attention, or –"

Well, by similar logic, she also hasn't kicked you out yet, which is more or less equally likely.

Twilight's stomach flipped. Somehow that represented the ultimate form of rejection – no, not somehow, it really did, in every possible way – and thus, the confirmation of at least some of the worries that still lurked and prowled in her mind.

Twilight hissed between her teeth, grimacing. Don't think about that stuff. Solve the problem. Find Celestia. Get answers. Maybe save the day. Just another day at the office... tree... library... wizard's tower... place. Nothing you haven't done before, a hundred times.

Are you alright?

"Yes."

You twitched again. Did you feel me touching you?

"N... no," Twilight said, suddenly wary. "Why are you touching me?"

There was an embarrassed silence, then: *Just... a nuzzle. Sorry.*

"Don't apologize, don't apologize!" Twilight sputtered, hastily. "Thank you!"

You didn't notice it, though?

"No."

So we have more information. About your senses.

Luna sounded both a little sad and eager to move on, so Twilight let the whole issue pass. "Um, I think... I think I'm going to try to, ah... communicate, again."

It is the way Twilight Sparkle traditionally speaks to the Princess. A... curious phenomenon.

"Yes, it is," Twilight said, a wry grin spreading on her features at Luna's little dig.
"Alright, then, here I go –"

• • •

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

IT'S ME, TWILIGHT SPARKLE... UM..I'M... TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S GOING ON. I WANT TO TALK TO YOU. LUNA AND I CARE ABOUT YOU A LOT AND WE WANT TO HELP. AND I THINK YOU AND I NEED TO WORK ON SOME CLOSURE ABOUT SOME STUFF. IF YOU DON'T, UM, MIND.

YOUR FAITHFUL STUDENT, TWILIGHT SPARKLE

• • •

"*What* were you teaching this poor filly?" asked the voice, in Celestia's. Its tone was a strange mixture of amusement and impatience. "I mean, really, for another forever she's running around even though she already knows what she has to do! She said what she has to do –"

"Let her figure this out on her own," Celestia interrupted. Her voice was raspy and harsh, her throat dry as the desert Twilight had arrived in.

"Oh, was *that* your teaching method?" This time, there *was* a derisive little snicker. "No wonder she's stumbling around."

• • •

There was a loud creak as a door opened behind Twilight. She stared at it.

"Uh... the door to the parade grounds opened."

Well...

"Yeah, I... yeah," Twilight said, and stepped through.

• • •

The first sensation was of *noise*, so close and at such volume that it was a physical presence, pressing down on her. Twilight felt her heart try to match rhythm with the bass drum, which pounded away as the symphony orchestra around her blared *The Pride of Equestria*, movement 3: "March of the Wizard," the theme of the Academy. The rising height of the final few bars rang in her head even after they had finished playing.

The grounds were packed to the brim. As her mind reeled with sensation, Twilight tried to latch onto recognizable images: she saw before her the familiar faces of her parents, hugging tightly, her mother weeping proudly, her father's face split in two by his grin. Her friends, all her friends – the Elements, Zecora, various Apples, Spike, everypony and everybody – were in the front row, barely containing their urge to cheer and laugh and dance around. Behind them sat nobleponies, dignitaries, emissaries of foreign nations, prominent scholars, and other ponies of importance, all looking pleased.

The sky was blue. The sun was shining. The air was fresh.

She was wearing her cape, the one Rarity made her. Twilight looked back at it in wonder, feeling the brooch bite at her neck a little – the downside to having such a pointed cutie mark, she supposed. She was also wearing a broad-brimmed hat.

What the hay was going on...?

"Citizens of Equestria!" announced a familiar drawl behind her. Twilight spun in place, to see the fat face of the Academy Chancellor standing behind a podium, suspended above which was an enchanted iron ring which amplified his voice. The thunderous noise it made had surprised the audience, and he was adjusting it a bit with his magic. "Oh, excuse me," he burbled into his beard as he fiddled with it, peering intently.

"Uh –" Twilight began.

"Citizens of Equestria! And of course, honored guests from many lands! I, Fireheart the Thirty-Second, Chancellor of Her Majesty's Academy for Gifted Unicorns, am honored to present to you, erm, Her Majesty, Princess Celestia!" The Chancellor's voice roared at her despite his efforts, but the crowd seemed immensely pleased by what he had said.

Twilight frowned. "But this isn't how –"

The chancellor stepped down, and behind the podium appeared an even more familiar figure – the slim but tall figure of the princess, in the fullness of her beauty. She looked down on Twilight with a radiant smile and gave her a wink.

"P-Princess!"

"Shhh, Twilight. You're supposed to be looking proud! Smile!" the princess whispered. She turned to the little iron ring and cleared her throat. "My beloved citizens, and friends from the many nations of the world, I am so pleased that you could all be with me today as I..." she paused, looking a little embarrassed. "Forgive me, I'm just... a little moved. Ahem. As I was saying, thank you for being with me as I, with great pride, confer the title of Arch-Mage on my most faithful student, Twilight Sparkle!"

There was a storm of applause.

"But... we held the ceremony in... and there weren't..." Twilight murmured, but nopony paid her any attention. "And you didn't say a word. You just looked at me..."

"There has not been a new Arch-Mage in many, many years. It fills me with pride to once again have the honor of presenting you with another gifted wizard, whose talents will surely bring pride and honor to the Academy, as well as wisdom and knowledge to the whole of Equestria." Princess Celestia looked down at Twilight, her face a portrait of overwhelming affection. "I'm so proud of you, Twilight."

Twilight turned and looked up at her. "But this isn't how –"

"Furthermore," the princess said into the ring, ignoring her, "on a more personal note, I would like to convey publicly my pleasure in formally ending her time as my ever-faithful personal student. Though it will grieve me to lose such a loyal and exceptional pupil, my loss is Equestria's gain, it seems..." She chuckled, beautifully, and the crowd politely laughed with her. "Twilight has become her own mare – no, forgive me. So many of you know her well enough to know she was her own mare long ago... and I am only formally acknowledging that she outgrew me, before the world."

Twilight's eyes widened in terror as Princess Celestia looked down at her, smiling.

"You don't need me anymore, do you? I couldn't be more proud of you."

• • •

Twilight stumbled backwards, heart pounding, as the door closed behind her.

Twilight! Can you hear me?

"Yes," Twilight hissed, eyes wide. Her body was heaving, like she had just thrown up.

You were screaming!

"I can't imagine I wasn't." Twilight brought a hoof to her face. "Was I just screaming, or were there words...?"

You kept saying things like, "That's not what happened."

"I don't know what happened. It was so much like a memory... but it was *wrong*."

Wrong... how?

Twilight *tched*. "It wasn't the right memory. It never happened. It was a ceremony raising me to Arch-Mage, but it was on the parade grounds, not in the Hall of Histories. And there were hundreds of ponies there! I mean, you remember how it actually was, there were only about twenty ponies. Pinkie Pie couldn't come, for example, but she *was* there in this vision..."

How strange.

"And I felt like... it was *directed* at me. There was a Princess Celestia there... she told me I didn't need her, and that she was proud of me."

You're very clever to pick up on that, I think. It's not her, just a vision of her...

Twilight hugged herself. "Agh, I feel awful. Here, anyways."

You look normal here. Twilight, I think... I think this is more dangerous than I expected. If you were just moving through memories, that would be one thing; but I think... I think her mind is trying to trap you, or scare you off, like I worried it would.

"Well, it won't do so by trying to convince me I don't need her." As Luna had instructed, Twilight consciously remembered the dream; it filled her with warmth and surety, just as it had in the waking world. It wasn't about what Twilight needed, anymore; she had everything she needed. It was about what she *wanted*.

Still, I think we need to... to...

"To what?"

I have no idea. I wish I could be there with you.

Twilight closed her eyes. "For what it's worth, I do, too."

Thank you.

"I... have to try again. I'm going to go somewhere else in the Castle and try to speak to her." Twilight got to her hooves a little unsteadily and set off determinedly. "I'm still not sure if the actual location I'm in has any meaning, or can provide any advantage, but there is a place I could try, which might give me home-field advantage, if it does."

Oh? Where?

• • •

"Ah... Ah can't believe..." Applejack stammered. Her head throbbed. "Why did Ah think that was gonna work?"

Next to her, wings bound by a thick, belt-like leather strap and legs bound in metal shackles, Spitfire blushed crimson and gave her a sheepish smile. "I dunno, my part worked out pretty good." She looked up into Rainbow Dash's eyes, and they gave each other a gentle smile.

"We're all very pleased for you two," Rarity growled. She'd be covering this black eye up for the next couple weeks, and the manacles chafed.

"You guys need to stop asking me to be the one to hold ponies down," Fluttershy said. She was the only one who was unbound, since all the guard had to do was look at her and she froze. "I'm sorry, but I'm just not very good at it."

Spike, who was rather expertly chained such that any movement whatsoever would almost certainly break *something*, huffed irritably, releasing a plume of green smoke. "You might have mentioned they were unicorns."

"Hey, sorry, I was a little caught up in the moment, okay? I'm too used to being in charge of pegasi, I guess." Spitfire chuckled. "Ah, well, I was getting tired of being a guard, anyways... you can only fly around the palace so many times before it gets boring."

"Well, how's ten years from next Friday sound as a time for your first date?" Pinkie Pie said, happy as anything even though she was wrapped from the neck down in sturdy iron chains. "I can get you guys an extra cupcake free at Sugar Cube Corner. Being the mayor has *perks*, I love it!"

"First...?" Spitfire mused. "Dash, what *have* you been telling these ponies...?" Rainbow Dash, if at all possible, turned even redder.

"Ah, well, since we have the time... ya might as well fill any *gaps* in our knowledge," Applejack said, giving Dash a wicked grin. Next to her, Spitfire did the same. Dash's face went stormy.

Spike sighed, looking up at Rarity and Fluttershy, who gave him the most sympathetic and apologetic smiles they could. He tried to return it, but couldn't help that the corners of his broad mouth were tugged downwards as if lead weights were tied to them.

I'm sorry, Twilight... just be safe, okay?

• • •

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

THAT WASN'T THE KIND OF CLOSURE I MEANT. PROFESSIONAL CLOSURE... NO, I MEAN, I GET THAT. I THINK YOU AND I NEED TO TALK ABOUT WHAT OUR RELATIONSHIP REALLY IS...

YOUR FAITHFUL –

The door to the room where Twilight occasionally stayed overnight as a filly creaked open. Twilight looked at it carefully, swallowed, and stepped through.

• • •

Twilight opened her eyes. She felt warm, and comfortable; she didn't care to move, which suddenly seemed like altogether too much effort for too little benefit. The smell of home surrounded her; old wood, breakfast cooking on the stove downstairs, her books...

Everything seemed... fine. Comfortable. Familiar. She let her eyelids droop again, drifting back off to sleep, here in her old bed at her parents' house –

Wait, *what?*

She sat up in the bed, suddenly, looking around carefully, studying every inch of the room. This place was more bare lately than it had been when she was very young; even when she lived in the palace, at the Tower, her room at her parents' home had been filled with the little trinkets one accumulated, little physical memories. But now it was a room

that her parents left furnished for guests, with one particular guest in mind, who visited all too infrequently from distant Ponyville. It had that strange feeling of being a room prepared for you by someone else, where even familiar objects seem slightly strange.

And breakfast was cooking downstairs. Alert, now, Twilight could hear the sizzle of eggs on a skillet – one of her mother's least favorite breakfasts, so Twilight always indulged in it whenever possible. When she and Spike had first taken up residence in the Library, he'd actually gotten a little creeped out by her gleeful little giggles as she fried herself two sunny-side up eggs for the seventh day in a row.

The unicorn stepped out of bed, carefully, trying not to make any noise on the creaky floorboards that had been the bane of her youth as she tried to sneak out to stargaze or, on that one silly night, to attempt, as a filly, to sneak into the palace forever after a fight with her mom about teleporting in the house.

She stepped down the hallway, and carefully descended the stairs, ears alert for any sound. She heard nothing except the sounds of somepony busy in the kitchen – chopping, pouring, scraping, cabinets opening and closing, the gentle ring of magic manipulating tools with careful precision.

Fear, or something like it, gnawing at her, she stuck her head around the corner of the stairwell, as she had so many times as a filly...

...and stared.

"Oh, you're up. Good! I was hoping this would wake you..."

Twilight felt glued to the spot. Rage boiled in her heart. "How... dare you...!"

Princess Celestia, in Twilight's mother's best white apron, was making an omelet.

Nothing, nothing, *nothing* in all her life had lit Twilight's fury so readily. Frustration, building over time – that was an old friend, a wrath that she knew well and had cultivated into something like an art form. Being friends with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie teaches tolerance, after all, especially when they were both bored at the same time.

But this? Oh, Celestia had to know. She took tea with Twilight's mother occasionally, after all. They must have talked about this, privately, between mares... come to an understanding...

Celestia smiled. "Do you want green onions in? I'm afraid I don't remember."

This was an unfamiliar sensation in Twilight, this immediate, flaring rage, and she didn't know how to control it; the best she could do was compress it until she could speak. She prowled around the stairwell and into the kitchen, her hooves clapping with terrible gravity.

"You. Are *not*. My mother." The words came out in quick succession, one-two punches of undiluted, barely-restrained, mind-frying fury.

Celestia smiled at her, patiently. "You said you wanted to know the truth about our relationship," she said. "So... here you are. I'm sorry, I've been a little selfish..."

"You are *not*," Twilight repeated, "My *mother*."

"By what standard?"

"Any!"

Celestia actually laughed, bright and delighted, as if at a child asserting that something couldn't possibly be true because it *just couldn't*. Twilight, for the first time ever, felt something like hatred for her mentor's beautiful laughter and her bright smile. "Twilight... I know this may seem hard to accept, but –"

"It's *impossible* to accept. This is a lie."

Celestia frowned slightly. "Would it really be so bad, if I were your mother?"

"Yes."

In her rage, she expected another bright little laugh, but to Twilight's horror, the Celestia before her hung her head in shame. The unicorn felt an insane urge to rush forward and comfort her; the vision was taking her in. A feeling of filial shame was washing over Twilight's heart, demanding to know why she would willingly hurt her parent so.

"It's true, my daughter," Celestia murmured. "I've been so cruel to you, lying for so long."

Twilight's eyes opened wide, lit with rage. "You haven't lied –"

"Haven't you ever wondered why I took, for the first time in a thousand years, a *personal* student? A little filly, the 'daughter' of a bookseller and a romance novel author, who – for all that her lineage was so unremarkable – showed an unprecedented aptitude for magic?" Celestia said, looking up with guilty but determined eyes at Twilight. "Don't you

see why I might distance myself from you? Guilt weighs heavily on my heart, Twilight; it's been driving me away from my only child, keeping the truth of my love for her hidden for so long."

"Shut up!"

"I should have left you with them. Your life might have been smaller, quieter... but I just couldn't. They begged me not to take you back – they pulled on my heart, reminded me of the reasons I told them I was so unwillingly giving up that *beautiful* foal, so long ago... And to know that you were born mortal? My own daughter! So powerful, so intelligent, so loving, so beautiful... we should have eternity together."

"No. I don't accept this."

"Twilight, I know this is hard to hear, but, please –"

"No!"

"Twilight... it's important you understand this. Listen to me. Your father –"

Twilight stamped a foot in rage. "My father is a bookseller. His name is Orion. I love him."

"Yes, Twilight," Celestia said in a tiny voice. "He is."

Twilight held this pathetic excuse for Celestia in a glare of absolute loathing. "Don't you even *dare* speak about my father that way –"

"Please," the simulacrum begged. "Please, let yourself be my daughter. I know I've left you alone for too long... but come to me now. Accept my mistakes, your father's mistakes –"

"The only mistake I'm going to *accept*," Twilight snarled, "Is that any part of you thought this would fool me for a second. I've told you about my mother. I've asked your advice, how to talk to her about us. How to make her feel better, when she broke down, terrified that you were more of a mother to me than she was..."

"Twilight, I just couldn't confess the truth to you... she agreed to raise you as her own. I shouldn't have led you along, I should have told you –"

Twilight's hoof lashed out and struck the Celestia firmly under the eye, drawing blood.

"*Twilight!*" Celestia wailed, recoiling.

"Let me out of this vision. *Now*. You are *not* my mother, Twilight Dream is. My father is a bookseller who loves her to distraction. You are not my mother and *I do not think of you that way*. You *taught* me, you didn't raise me. Twilight Dream and Orion did." Twilight's voice was dark and furious, each word a hammer driving home a nail in one fell stroke. "They raised me to work as hard as I could and live up to your expectations and my own hopes. They are proud that their daughter is your student and an Arch-Mage. I will *not* stand to hear them insulted like this, when they sacrificed and suffered so much fear and doubt... on both our accounts."

The Celestia, one hoof raised to its bleeding face, looked at her piteously. "Would it really be that terrible, to be my child?"

Twilight's voice was a flame compressed down into a controlled, unbelievably hot point of blue light. "Even if it *were* true, I would spit it right back in your face. My parents are my parents; you are my teacher. Have your own foals, if you want one so badly!"

• • •

"Oh, my... feisty. I like her."

Celestia didn't respond; she hadn't dared even look at the images that the voice was apparently so enjoying. She was desperate to focus on the fading sun. Nevertheless, the sound of voices found its way into her mind despite her efforts to ignore them.

Twilight's rage, rejecting that part of Celestia's love for the unicorn so categorically, was a little painful to hear. She did not deny that she had maternal feelings about her protégé; it would be strange for her not to. But it had been time to outgrow them long ago.

Nevertheless, it... even if it was demeaning, there was a part of Celestia that quietly wished Twilight *were* her flesh and blood. She was *not* Twilight's mother, though she had so often played that part in small ways from time to time, as every adult pony did for other ponies' foals – especially teachers to the very young, which Celestia had most certainly been in this case.

But some dark parts of her, the small, mean parts, whispered that it would be so much easier to understand her relationship with her student if she were. Wouldn't that just make everything... so much *simpler*? And there was obviously an appeal to the knowledge that somepony so precious was bound to you so closely – and yet, at a comfortable and impassible distance.

That said, most of her was alive with joy to hear it.

Twilight's ability to see through the feeble lie pleased her, first of all. It was one of those little stories that seemed absurd and easy to reject at first, but stuck in your mind because it had little hooks of the possible buried deep inside them, curvy words like *maybe* and *well there was that one time...*

Twilight's unflinching loyalty to Twilight Dream and Orion, who loved her deeply, was her best defense against such an insidious falsehood, and they were the ones who deserved to feel the special joy of having such a wonderful daughter.

More generally, there were many parts of Celestia that were pleased to hear Twilight reject such an imbalanced relationship, although some reasons why she desired more equality between them were much more noble than others.

Celestia shook her head desperately trying to put all of it out of her mind, but Twilight's voice, speaking to an inaudible Luna, was a magnet for her attention.

• • •

"Tell me this is not something the Princess is doing intentionally," Twilight roared, the door shutting behind her. "Tell me this wasn't something she controlled!"

Well – I don't think so... Twilight, what's wrong? What happened?

Twilight huffed out her anger, snorting loudly. "She tried to convince me I was her daughter!"

Well... the thought has crossed my mind, from time to time –

"Not you, too," Twilight snarled. "I am *not* her daughter."

What makes you so sure?

Twilight fell onto her haunches, face firm, her rage spitting and snarling in her mind as it cooled from white-hot to a smoldering red.

How many times had she, herself, wondered? How many times – agh! – how many times, as a filly, had that idle speculation crossed the line into something like *hope*? How many times had she had to look into her mother's tearful face, as they talked about this, and

lied, saying that she had never, ever wished Celestia was her real mother for even a second?

But she *didn't*, not really. The thoughts came less and less often as she grew older, but having them all shoved in her face, hearing that beloved, trusted voice speaking the secret, guilty wish of her filly's heart... no. It had been... too much.

And the wake of the rage, the burning trails in her mind where adrenaline had surged so recently, was agony. Her head throbbed angrily. Twilight clutched her head in her forehooves, eyes slammed shut.

Her parents were generous and loving ponies who had endured their daughter being remote from them for much of her life, knowing that she was getting something from Celestia they could never have dreamed of giving her otherwise. And they were so, so proud of her. Twilight loved them. Even if somehow it turned out she *was* Celestia's natural daughter, Twilight Dream and Orion were Twilight Sparkle's real parents.

"I said it to her in there, and I'll say it again now: even if she were technically my mother, she's not my real mother. My mother is my mother and my father is my father and that's that."

I admire your conviction, no matter how poorly stated.

Twilight sneered. "Hilarious."

If it helps, I'm not entirely sure if my sister and I can –

"Look, I know you're just trying to help, but... just give me a second, okay? I'll be fine. It was just kind of... intense."

Silence, from her elder *sister*, was a blessing, just now. Twilight gave her next move some thought.

"I'm going to go to her study," Twilight said, eventually.

What is your reasoning this time?

Twilight sighed. "It's where she and I conduct private business, as associates... or did, anyways, before this all started going really bad."

It occurred to me as well that you might be provoking these... disturbing... visions by asking about your relationship with her. Remember, we are seeking out the true Celestia, not some aspect of her mind or her emotional state towards you... although I'm not sure how exactly to go about doing this.

"I think I've had my fill of talking about our relationship for the moment, anyways," Twilight said, her hoofbeats ringing out loudly in the empty corridors leading up to the study.

• • •

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

I HAVE ARRIVED AT YOUR STUDY IN THE HOPE THAT YOU AWAIT ME THERE.

...ER,

YOUR LOYAL SUBJECT AND HUMBLE SER –

The magnificent mahogany study door, flanked by two ivory statues of Celestia, her wings outstretched around the orb of the sun, creaked open.

• • •

Twilight stepped inside the door, a little nervous, as she always was when she entered.

This place had been the one place besides her chambers that Celestia had insisted Twilight not enter without Celestia herself or, at the very least, her express permission, and old habits die extremely hard. Being summoned to them, and entering under the professionally suspicious eye of the guards, without Celestia nearby or a little note clamped in her mouth felt made her feel like a naughty foal. Some things stick in the mind, despite her efforts to take pride in it as a sign that she was now an adult and a loyal servant of the Princess like so many others she had seen coming and going while a student.

"You wanted to see me, milady?" she asked, looking to the writing desk at the far side of the high-walled and imposing chamber, where Celestia stood, quill flying over a parchment with the precision of a thousand years. In the far corner, near a window, the phoenix Philomeena yawned hugely on its golden stand with a little squawk.

"Oh, Arch-Mage! Yes, please, come in," Celestia said distractedly. "Thank you for being so prompt."

"I am ever at your service, milady," Twilight said, approaching the little raised ring around the desk that served as a de facto pulpit when Celestia was addressing visitors here.

Celestia turned a harassed smile towards her for a moment. "You are well?"

Twilight smiled brightly at this rare show of open affection. "Yes, thank you. And yourself?"

"The same as I ever am, my dear. If only every correspondent I had was as reliable as you, I might be able to keep track of Equestria for an hour at a time." Her expression fell into one of mild concern. "Are you alright? What are you looking for?"

"Oh, I..." Twilight trailed off. "I thought I heard milady's sister. Is she here?"

Celestia turned back to the parchment; the quill had never stopped scratching away. "No. Night Court was somewhat draining, I understand, so she is resting for the day." The quill pulled away from the parchment, and Celestia stared at it, lips pursed, for a moment. Twilight stood patiently before her. With an irritated expression, Celestia added a few more lines to the missive and then signed it carefully, rolling the scroll and sealing it with practiced ease. She set it in a large basket next to a bookshelf nearby and turned to Twilight. "Ah, forgive me. You must think I'm terribly rude."

"Never," Twilight said. "I'm afraid I sympathize all too well with getting visitors just as I finish a letter."

The princess smiled a tolerant little smile, briefly, and summoned another scroll to herself. "This is... no, I'm sorry." She replaced the scroll from the rack she had summoned it from, selected its neighbor, and turned back to Twilight, frowning as she saw the unicorn peering around herself anxiously. "Are you well, Arch-Mage?"

"I could... swear I heard Luna..."

"*Princess* Luna," Celestia corrected her, sternly.

Twilight looked up at her, confused. "Yes, of course... I'm sorry, I..."

Celestia set the scroll on a little pair of hooks on the writing stand. "You're worrying me. Have you been resting?" The princess seemed a little annoyed by all this, and put hoof under Twilight's chin slightly more roughly than she perhaps needed to. The alicorn moved Twilight's head from side to side, looking over her features with dispassionate, professional interest.

"Yes, milady. Eight hours, as regularly as I can –"

"So, once a month or so? I know you."

Twilight blinked, guiltily. "The trip to Canterlot was a bit trying, milady –"

"You work too hard. And yet..." Celestia let Twilight's head fall from her control and gave her something like a sympathetic look. "It pains me to take you to task for it. You are, indeed, the humble servant you claim to be in your letters... my kingdom, for ten more like you."

"I serve at milady's pleasure, of course."

"Of course." Celestia summoned the scroll. "Here are the candidates for the upcoming Trials. Do look over them, would you? The chancellor puts a great deal of stock in your opinion –"

"TWILIGHT!"

The sound came from Philomeena. The Princess and the Arch-Mage stared at the bird, golden and beautiful, in shock.

"Uh... yes?" Twilight asked. She frowned slightly as the Princess gave her a disapproving look.

"IS THIS THE TRUTH?" the phoenix squawked, the sounds awkward in its beaked mouth.

Celestia's face grew dark. "What does *that* mean? 'Is this the *truth*?' Nonsense."

"A bit of a philosophical puzzle, isn't it?"

The princess waved a hoof dismissively. "In any case... have a look at those names, will you? There's something else I wanted you to look at... let me go get it."

Twilight looked from the bird to the princess. "Aren't you worried about Philomeena?"

Celestia sighed. "Of course I am. Forgive me, but let's complete our business together, and then I'll see what may be done."

"It would be no trouble for me to –"

"Didn't we just talk about you overworking? Please, my dear Arch-Mage, leave some work for everypony else around you once in a while," Celestia said, with a somewhat patronizing grin that very much suggested that while the princess thought it was very cute that Twilight wanted to help, she doubted the unicorn could do anything about matters one way or the other.

Twilight felt an unusual pang of – well no, it wasn't a pang. She felt humiliated and miserable, even though everything was completely normal. And what was with her immediately offering to help with that obnoxious bird? She *hated* the wretched creature.

She unrolled the scroll.

MAKE HER ADDRESS YOU PROPERLY.

Twilight yelped and dropped the scroll, heart racing; it rang and rolled on the ground with a loud metallic noise. Alien thoughts suffused Twilight's mind, confusing her. Her vision swam, as if she were seeing this room and a strange parody of it at the same time – a pleasant, brightly-lit place, more like a sitting room than a study, welcoming and friendly...

Celestia returned, hooves clacking irritably on the floor. "What has gotten into you, honestl –"

"Milady... Princess... do you... feel anything strange? Everything seems out of sync, all of a sudden..." Twilight staggered, leaning against a bookshelf, which fell beneath her weight. One, overwhelming desire consumed her mind: she wanted Celestia to call her the right thing. Not Arch-Mage, some other title...

"I don't feel anything," Celestia said, a little sternly, annoyed by having to take care of a grown mare on top of everything else. "I *think* you're ill – you need to rest. Lie down. Now, Arch-Mage, you're stumbling –"

"Thass naw my name," Twilight slurred. "Dun call me tha, thass na who ah yam..."

She meandered forward drunkenly and collapsed on her side through a glass table, shattering it. In a way, she managed to catch most of the pieces before they hit the ground. "Ah, wha happn'd... hurts... can't sink ride..." Blood pooled rapidly on the floor.

"Twilight!" Celestia cried. Her apathy and slightly cold professionalism vanished – her face, which had been tight and cold, was now the familiar warm and open face of the Princess.

Twilight's face screwed up. Familiar? Celestia has always been haughty and businesslike. This friendly face was the strange one... why did everything hurt so badly...? Why did nothing feel... real? And why was she so desperate to be *called* the right thing...?

The princess cradled Twilight's head, carefully avoiding the little gashes and shards of glass there. "Twilight Sparkle!"

"Nah, nah," Twilight moaned. "Call me da rhye thin. How I sign ledders." She coughed, and blood stained the alabaster hoof of the princess, splattering on her gilt shoe.

Panic bloomed in Celestia's eyes. "My... humble servant? Loyal subject?" she asked, desperately.

Twilight's eyes rolled back in her head. "Nah, like I yam a filly, whatchoo call me..."

Celestia, breathing shallowly and panicked, looked down at Twilight's ruined torso and whimpered, her mind screaming at her immense memory for some words that would satisfy the nonsensical wish of her dying student. Finally, out of the depths of recall, as if another pony's voice spoke in her mind:

"My faithful student?"

• • •

The voice had said nothing as the scene played out, but now: "Just couldn't let it go on, could –"

"Be *quiet*!"

• • •

The first breath, taken in deeply as Twilight's eyes opened wide, was a fiery agony as air spread across places her brain still thought shards of plate glass were piercing her.

"Ahhh!" Twilight howled against the sudden pain.

Foolish, foolish filly!

"That's nice to say to somepony who's *dying*..." Twilight whined.

Me, not you... And you're not dying.

She was lying on her back in the bright corridor outside the study. Twilight looked down as best she could. Her body failed to be riddled with grievous wounds. "Oh." She got to her hooves, the weird psychosomatic pain fading. "What *happened*? It was like I was another pony..."

You changed your name; names are important.

Twilight scrunched up her face. "No, I didn't..."

Twilight Sparkle, Arch-Mage and my most skilled colleague, you know very well that Twilight Sparkle is not your only name.

"Titles are not names –"

Correct. Titles are words that mean what you do or have done; names are words that mean who you are.

"You're talking about *faithful student*," Twilight said, warily.

You began signing the last letter, so to speak, with "humble servant and loyal subject", the way you have been signing them since you and Celestia began the final stages of your drifting apart. There is a part of you which believes that to be who you are to her, or you wouldn't have used it to try to get her to take you seriously. Is that who you are?

"Well, no – I mean, I *am* loyal, but –"

I should say, is that all you are? Remember when I told you, in your own mind, that the last thing Celestia needs are more subjects...

Twilight frowned, feeling foolish. "Well, no, I suppose not." That there had been a doubt in her heart at all made her squirm guiltily, both for shaming herself and for, in a small way, rejecting herself the special relationship she was seeking to reforge.

Then don't address yourself that way unless that's how you want Celestia's mind to treat you. You need to be her Faithful Student if you're going to be anything more than useful to her.

"So... my self-perception, and how her mind reacts to it, are driving visions here...?"

That's what I believe, in any case. Because you defined yourself incorrectly, you were trapping yourself away from yourself. I lost my connection with you almost instantly; I had to work hard to find you again, and force my way into the vision.

"So this is... totally subjective."

Not quite; I think I've figured it out. When you address her, you're defining yourself to her, providing her mind with a frame of reference for dealing with you... so when you asked her mind for a definition for your relationship, it tossed out a relatively "safe" role for Celestia, emotionally – a mother. When you called yourself her humble servant, I imagine you were seeing something to that effect – a bit of a perception trap.

"It was awful," Twilight moaned. She remembered that Celestia, proud and distant, and how Twilight had been perfectly happy fawning for her with truly wretched obsequiousness, desiring only to be useful to her beautiful but aloof mentor, her self-denial total, her being so willingly enslaved that even the irritated, half-caring attentions of a monarch giving out orders was a joy.

So... moving on from there... hmm.

"Maybe if I manage to... speak the truth about her feelings about me...? Or, no. Not quite right, um... if I correctly self-define, and address her the way she would want me to, I might gain more access...?"

Luna's "voice" was strangled and unhappy. Twilight could see in her mind's eye the irritated frown the dusky princess got when she was frustrated and worried, even here. *Agh, that just seems too neat. But I'm not sure what else we can conclude from this.*

"There's something else," Twilight said, thoughtfully. "In the vision, towards the end... well, this vision involved a very aloof Celestia, as you might have guessed. But at the end, I... was hurt, rather badly, and the Celestia changed into something more like the real one. She seemed confused, but –"

That's... odd.

"You don't think –"

No, I do. And that makes me very happy to hear – Celestia might be in there, somewhere, trying to help you. I know that she would never willingly let you come to any harm if she could help it.

Twilight suddenly remembered something. "Um, my body –"

Cuts. Long ones, but shallow. What happened?

"I fell through a plate glass table."

There was a fretful pause. *Try not to do it again, sister.*

Twilight felt that it would not be appropriate to point out that this had been a direct result of Luna's attempts to wake her up. Ungrateful, certainly. "So are we letting go of the idea that where I am has any meaning to what happens?"

I shouldn't think so. In the mind, context, and connections between things, is everything.

"I'm going to the library, then," Twilight said, after some thought.

Let's be a little more careful with forward planning. What exactly do you intend to do?

Twilight smiled. "I'll ask if I can be *her* sister, too."

• • •

The guards changed.

The two who had suppressed the impromptu prison break brought their replacements in and explained, in detail, exactly what had happened, taking a certain amount of relish and license in the exciting tale of getting the drop on the most famous heroes of Equestria. The new guards were Day Guard pegasi in bright golden armor; one of them looked extremely young and was somewhat awestruck to see two of his favorite Wonderbolts of all time grinning up at him sheepishly.

"Don't get stupid, colt," one of the massive Night Guard unicorns growled at him. The young pegasus' face took on an expression of exaggerated seriousness and he sniffed at them, haughtily.

The door closed behind them as they left. The prisoners heard some more muttered discussion, and then silence fell once again.

"Ah still cannot believe Ah thought that would work," Applejack muttered. Spitfire gave her a pained, apologetic look.

"Hey, uh, guys," Spike said, nervously. Something was weighing heavily on his mind.

Rarity gave him a little smile, expecting him to be fretting about Twilight. "What is it, dear?"

"Uh, this may sound strange, but... what time is it...?" Everypony looked at each other in confusion, but as their attention was called to the time of day and they looked around the room, a grim feeling of foreboding rose in their hearts.

"Well, that was the ten o'clock guard rotation," Spitfire said, the only pony who was not now looking around at the light in the room suspiciously. "Unless they've changed something. You guys woke up around eight."

Spike had been left in a position where he was facing the window. At the top of a spired tower, the sun was peeking from behind a tall, golden ornament, shaped like a stylized sunburst with an empty, circular center, part of a carefully-maintained ornamental sun clock, designed to be readable from the outskirts of the palace grounds.

"Yeah, call me crazy, but... looks like three PM to me," Spike said.

• • •

Twilight rounded the corner and approached the broad red-lacquer doors to the Royal Library.

The Academy library was bigger, of course, but here was proof that bigger was not always better. The Royal Library was a testament to the art of bookkeeping, its contents carefully managed by a proud lineage of Equestria's finest archivists and scholars; here could be found rare scrolls and books of ancient lore of such antiquity that only Academy-trained unicorns were allowed to handle their crumbling pages with the most precise telekinesis possible.

Twilight had always enjoyed rare privilege here, although she had not really understood it until she had managed the Ponyville library herself for a time. She had given little thought to extending the same rights she had enjoyed here as a filly to some of

Cheerilee's students and... well... Scootaloo had brought back the Ponyville Library's copy of Second Wind's *The Art of Flight* eventually, along with a bag full of bits to pay the late fees.

It had been Twilight's first real special privilege as Princess Celestia's student. Oh, she had been allowed to wander the palace more or less freely, but there were quite a few other ponies with that freedom. But to be allowed to take *De Celestia Mobile* to her room overnight, after a brief lecture from the stern librarian, Madam Redmane? Even the *princess* had been shocked to find Twilight snoring happily on the floor in front of the telescope, the ancient book carefully propped up and open to that night's star chart.

It had been, in retrospect, the first lesson on the magic of friendship, although of course she hadn't written a report to the Princess about it. She had merely taken care to return the book much earlier than Madam Redmane had requested, and had been awarded one of the sour-faced mare's fleeting grins. Twilight had only been offered the very rare chance because of her status as Celestia's student, but the respect and future lenience she earned had been the result of the respect the little unicorn had shown in her turn. Twilight looked back on that now, and realized that it had been good to learn not to rely on her unique status for the things she wanted in life early on.

Even now that the librarian was a creaky, ancient pony who spent most of her day dozing in the sunlight, Twilight was always respectful and obedient to her, and was thus accorded more indulgence even than the Academy's most respected faculty. For example, the old mare didn't glare at her *too* harshly when she took one or two scrolls more than the limit of six back to her reading desk. Respect was a two-way street, between the Arch-Mage and the head librarian, and they walked down it willingly.

Twilight blinked out of the reverie, shaking her head and breathing deeply to clear her mind. Madam Redmane wouldn't be waiting for her here... which was a shame, because nothing on earth would have comforted her more than the gentle snores coming from the old rocking chair, creaking with soothing regularity in front of the east windows in the early afternoon.

She could do with some comfort about now, which is why she had decided to come here. Luna hadn't asked, and even if she had, Twilight wasn't sure what she would have said. It was easy to say to herself that she would have told Luna the truth, but the part of Twilight that was always watching knew that Twilight Sparkle had learned the true politician's art of sincerity, as opposed to complete honesty, and it had become something of a bad habit – one that she intended not to indulge now.

So the princess' mind wanted Twilight to address herself properly, and find the right way to speak to the princess? None of the silly pretenses towards being associates anymore, fine. Acknowledge – no, make a point of referring to their relationship as special... provide a safe frame of reference for the princess to use. Alright, then...

"Dear Princess Celestia," Twilight began.

• • •

Luna looked up, her expression harried and weary, at the silver letters.

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

IT'S ME, TWILIGHT. UM, I AM JUST HERE TO TALK TO YOU, OKAY? LUNA AND I ARE WORKING HARD TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU AND WANT TO HELP. IN FACT, I WANTED TO MENTION SOMETHING ABOUT THAT TO YOU... LUNA AND I HAD A TALK, EARLIER, AND... UM, SORRY, THIS IS STILL A LITTLE STRANGE, BUT... I GUESS SHE KIND OF ADOPTED ME AS HER SISTER, SORT OF. I WAS HOPING YOU COULD SPEAK TO ME AS A SISTER AS WELL, EVEN IF I AM THE YOUNGEST BY FAR... BUT YOU CAN TRUST ME, AND I CARE ABOUT YOU A LOT. I HOPE YOU BELIEVE ME.

NO MATTER WHAT, I AM STILL YOUR FAITHFUL STUDENT,

TWILIGHT SPARKLE

The princess of the moon frowned anxiously as she felt the psychic link to Twilight tug a little, and vanish. She lay down before the stone bier and waited.

The Price of Sisterhood + For the Dream + Things are Getting a Little
Mythical + Celestia's Bedside Manner + Like the Bite of Fine Wine +
Sunrise + Eight Souls, One Step Forward + The Princess and the Arch-
Mage + Go, With My Blessing + A Mare of Our Mutual Acquaintance +
Fluttershy Saves the Day + The Name of the Beast + The Ultimate Magic
of Friendship + Hello, my Faithful Student

• • •

Rain fell, gently but insistently, from the light grey sky. It was actually rather light out for such a rainy day, just as the pony they were here to commemorate had never stopped being bright no matter how much rain, so to speak, had fallen.

"...and now only... one remains," Twilight heard herself finish. She blinked and started. "Huh? What –"

There, carved into a hillock overlooking the city, surrounded by an idyllic meadow filled with trees and colorful bushes, was a beautiful ornamental chamber, almost like a house cut into the hill. But this was no home for the living.

The Tomb of the Elements was... not what ponies expected. For everything they had accomplished, they deserved statues, fountains, gardens – and they had those, all over Equestria. Here, where they would sleep, was a simple stone face carved into a hill, inset with a circular entrance. Its ornate marble seal would now close for the very last time, never to be opened again lest the wrath of the Princesses fall on those who had dared commit that, hah, *gravest* of crimes.

On the circular seal, wrought in gleaming gems of many colors, were five emblems, the most noble and beloved sigils in the history of Equestria save those of the Princesses: three apples of ruby and emerald; three perfect diamonds cut from the largest blue diamonds in Spike's hoard; a thunderbolt of carnelian, topaz, and sapphire; three butterflies of rose quartz and turquoise; and finally, the very last... three balloons, two lapis, one citrine. These were inlaid in fields matching the coats which those sigils had once so proudly graced, made of tiny stones so skillfully set that they might as well have been solid sheets of color.

This last little honor from the Princesses represented, in its workmanship and the value of its materials, the wealth of several cities over a measure of decades. The Tomb was already quickly becoming a popular site for pilgrims, well-wishers, and ponies seeking

inspiration and connection to the great heroes of Equestrian history; as it would be, long after their names and deeds were generations distant.

From here, the five friends could watch over their beloved home, the bustling metropolis of Ponyville... forever.

But one remained, to remember.

Twilight stood at the mouth of the tomb in shock, realizing what was inside.

"I am... very sorry, Twilight. I, above all other ponies, understand your pain."

Princess Celestia stepped forward and, with a sad look back at Twilight, gently called magic to her and rolled the seal into position. With a final-sounding growl of stone grinding on stone and a *thump* of air displacing, the huge, beautiful stone moved into the orifice and was wedged, firmly, in place.

It was done. They were gone, all of them – and now Twilight remained, diminished beyond anything she could have understood before this moment. Twilight's slack mouth hung open, lower jaw working occasionally in a mute expression of horror. Celestia turned and watched her impassively for awhile.

"I warned you that this day would come. I tried to prepare you for it," the Princess said sternly, before her expression melted into one of deepest sympathy. "But there really is nothing that I could have said to convey what you feel now, I know. I'm so sorry."

Twilight felt the urge to spread her wings and fly away, leave this terrible place behind –

Twilight's eyes opened wide in sudden awe as she looked back on herself. There they were, broad and proud: a pair of magnificent wings, larger and better made for soaring than any pegasus', and behind it, a tail of strange, mystic light, purple and pink-striped as it had always been, but now filled with beautiful, coruscating magical energy.

"This is the price of becoming my sister," Celestia said, coolly. She looked as if speaking the words made her feel filthy, but she spoke them nevertheless. "Grief, and the pain of loss, are the constant companions of the immortal. I beg you, little sister, speak to me... let me help you now. This is a dangerous time for you."

"This... this isn't what I meant..." Twilight moaned.

Celestia stepped forward quickly, letting Twilight fall against her. "I know, little one, I know. Shh... just... let it out," she said, gentle and soothing as the insistent rain that fell on them, as Twilight began to stammer and sob into her coat. "It was a hard lesson for me, too. Before Luna arrived... when I was young, I loved so readily, and so deeply, and something in me refused to accept the inevitable."

Twilight, sick with induced grief, could do nothing but weep into that warm, sweet-smelling coat.

"Now, I have learned... a little distance may be cold, a little heartless, but it is necessary for me. For us," Celestia said, using the crook of her wing to lift Twilight's gaze to her own. "Becoming what you are has let *our* love be more free and pure than it could have been had you not ascended. But this is the price of that joy, sister..."

"No, this... what?" Twilight managed, between sobs.

Celestia smiled sadly, and shook her head. "Please, Twilight, please understand... we will never forget them. They will live forever, in the future of Ponyville, and their children's children's children, and in a million and one ways we cannot predict yet; such was the greatness of their hearts and the impact of their lives. But above all, I think you will never let them be forgotten, just as I do not allow Starswirl, or Fireheart, or Far Strider, or a thousand others fall away forever."

"I've seen you... lighting candles... singing old songs..." Twilight murmured, despite herself.

"Yes," Celestia said, sadly. She kissed Twilight's forehead. "This wound will never heal in you, I think, which is good, in its way. It will remind you of what you were, once, and in time, that will be your greatness. Luna and I came to be through some mystic fate; you are ponydom ascendant, magic incarnate, beloved of the sun and moon. Great things lie ahead for you."

Twilight looked up into her mentor's beaming expression, which was alight with affection, and hopes for their long future ahead together, despite this momentary agony.

"No... this... this is another excuse," Twilight murmured, shaking her head and stepping away. "This is another *lie*, another easy way of explaining away the reasons our relationship isn't the way it's supposed to be!"

"Supposed to be...? How is that, do you think?" The princess smiled tolerantly and shook her head. "This is my burden, Twilight. I tried to explain when you told me of your

ambition to ascend to truly be my sister, knowing you could not understand." Celestia stepped towards Twilight.

"Stay back!" Twilight howled, her wings flaring threateningly.

Celestia's eyes became haunted and wary. "Twilight, please calm down. We've talked about this..."

"No," Twilight growled. "This is too easy. This is just an excuse. You're trying to make me think I deserve to be pushed away for something I can't help!" She realized she had spread her wings – an odd sensation, which made her feel foolish and awkward. But she kept a fierce gaze trained on this latest little falsehood nevertheless.

"It was my sincere hope that this would help you understand my position," Celestia said, sighing sadly. "Perhaps you will, yet, when old age looms, and the lure of immortality bites deep."

• • •

Tears streamed down Celestia's face, burning in her aching eyes, which remained desperately shut tight – as much to deny that the terrible things she had heard were truly occurring as the reality of the setting sun she so vainly struggled against.

She dared not imagine what Twilight would think of her after that shameful display of cowardice, projected directly from the very least part of her mind; undoubtedly the unicorn would be sharing her thoughts shortly, to the cackling commentary of the ever-present voice.

Weakness had oozed off every word the wretched illusion had spoken to Twilight, and once again pride and love for the unicorn had swelled as Twilight rejected, outright, such a mean little excuse for the distance between them. But Celestia's practiced ear heard Twilight's fear, as well, heard her resolve being eaten away at by doubt and the insecurity that had been the unicorn's greatest challenge, and almost her only real limitation, since she was a filly.

Never more than now did Celestia wish she could spring to her hooves, spread her wings, snatch Twilight from danger, and somehow just project every ounce of affection she had directly into the heart of her beloved Twilight Sparkle, burn away every last doubt the unicorn's spectacular mind could create for itself and just... *fill* her, somehow, with the spectacular pride Celestia took in her.

Such was her power that, if she wished, she could do so; or, at least, something like that. But while a purple unicorn would remain, it would not truly be Twilight Sparkle anymore – just *something* that looked like her, speaking in her voice, smiling with her face.

Guiltily, Celestia recalled that in her madness...

The princess shook her head as if she could cast the memory away. She needed to focus; the sun was a whisper of pressure against her concentration now, and Celestia desperately tried to drive away thoughts about what this could mean.

"Celestia..." the voice said, in a somewhat seductive tone of voice. "Just let go. Twilight needs you..."

Princess Celestia, her reserves of poise drained, thrashed her head from side to side.

No, no, *no*. Just... focus. Twilight was strong; she could take care of herself...

She gave up on the lie of duty and indulged the nagging little thought that had caused all of this agony. Rise again, she begged herself – for Twilight. Be the princess, beautiful and eternal.

• • •

Twilight dropped on her haunches, bringing her hooves up to her eyes, which gushed frustrated tears.

Why couldn't this just be *images*? Just to see these terrible things was bad enough. These *visions*, though – she could feel them trying to eat at her mind, trying to worm into her emotions and thoughts, pulling them out to match the scene. As a pony who prided herself on her mind, the feeling of violation was so intense that she was physically nauseated.

She had been *sure* her friends were dead. She had *known*, somehow, that Applejack and Rarity had been first, side by side to the last; she had remembered Fluttershy's miserable, broken body, one eye looking up at her begging for the pain to end...

She dry-heaved a few times, giving wretched moans.

Twilight! Twilight, please, speak to me!

"No," Twilight croaked. "I can't *do* this anymore, oh..." She had almost called on Celestia, as she had in distress for so long – being perhaps the only filly who could expect the Princess to actually appear when she called out after scraping a knee had ground the habit in deep.

You have to, Twilight. For the dream, if nothing else.

"Agh! Don't say that!" Twilight threw her head back, breathing heavily. "The dream has never seemed further away... why doesn't she want me here? I'm losing my mind! Everything is trying to force me out..."

We knew that was going to happen. You need to trust yourself – your own fear that you're not as good as you think you are is the real source of your pain, Twilight. You need to have confidence in yourself and your desires.

"Are they worth *this*? This *torture*?"

You know they are. They were the truth. What dream of any worth was accomplished without pain and effort, Twilight?

"Don't quote poetry at me –"

We do not have time for this, Twilight Sparkle! This is exactly the reaction you are meant to have to these visions. You're meant to be horrified by them. You need to focus. Endure. Think, Twilight. Cling to logic, try to interpret what you're being shown.

Twilight sat, quietly, for some time, trembling. She leaned forwards on her haunches, falling on her forelegs with a clap on the flagstones before the library.

"Thank you," Twilight said, quietly.

Please don't thank me for putting you through this. I couldn't bear it.

"Very well, then, I won't," Twilight said, breathing in and out slowly, letting a little more worry flow out of her with each breath.

Are you... alright, my sister?

Twilight got to her hooves and sighed. "Not even a little."

Again there was a pause, which seemed to be full of anxiety and intent, so Twilight remained silent, waiting for Luna to speak again.

She is trying to force you to stay at a distance.

"Yes, that seems... *clear*, at this point." Twilight closed her eyes, trying not to resent the two little wet streaks that fell down her face. She had rarely felt so small and impotent – it reminded her far too much of Discord's corrupting touch, but this time inflicted by the vagaries of Celestia's mind. The thought repulsed her.

So you must not.

"Okay," Twilight said, lamely.

Twilight... I cannot imagine how hard this is for you. But you must keep trying.

"For my *dream*, huh?" Twilight snapped. "Somehow, it's lost its appeal in here."

You of all ponies should know that when somepony is desperate to keep you at a pace, that's when they need you the most.

Twilight stood, eyes ablaze. "Don't *my* feelings matter? Agh, this is... this is impossible! It hurts, Luna, almost physically hurts –"

Well, you could always ask her.

"What!?" Luna's casual tone of voice seemed mocking, although at least a little bit of Twilight knew the princess was just trying not to add any more emotion to the conversation than she had to.

Twilight: ask her if your feelings matter.

"So, what, stick out my chest and say, 'look, here's the heart, be quick about it?'"

I realize it's... very, very dangerous for you, but... she's already shown that when you are at risk, something of her, the real her, comes to your aid...

Twilight huffed. "Well, she hasn't been doing a particularly good job of it thus far."

You are speaking out of hurt, Twilight, and you know it. Control yourself, please.

"I –" Twilight began, but stopped herself, looking away with a frustrated grimace. She gave an impatient sigh as she tried to wrangle her rampaging emotions into place. "You're right, of course."

Remember, she is still occupied, I expect, with resisting the need to set – especially if you're in her mind with her, she'll be desperate to do so.

"I would be lying," Twilight said sternly, "if I claimed part of me did not just think, 'then let's get out of here and leave her to it.'"

Parts of us thinks many things, as we've discussed. Of all ponies, I can speak with authority on that subject.

The unicorn chuckled ruefully. "I suppose so."

This is as true of Celestia as it is of anypony. But we can't just leave her to face this alone; for her sake, and our own.

"Yes."

Yes what?

"Just... yes." Twilight took a deep breath, and set off. "If I'm going to make myself vulnerable, I'm going to go somewhere where her mind might be a little more inclined to be relaxed."

Twilight...

Twilight stirred, taken by surprise. Luna's voice had lost its forced, imperious nonchalance; it was now small and vulnerable, as it had been when she had confessed her selfishness to the unicorn on the second descent into the heart of the mountain. "Yes?"

Please be careful. You're being so brave, but... courage is only a virtue when it is not reckless.

• • •

"Five o'clock now," Spike said, nervously.

Spitfire sighed, leaning her head backward against the wall. "They didn't cover this in training, I gotta say."

"What, do you think we got sat down by the princess and had this all explained to us on day one?!" Dash snarled, more out of frustration than anything. She tossed her manacled hooves above her head in an expression of disgust. "Man, that unicorn – seriously, Twilight Sparkle shows up, and then, every other day with this kind of thing!"

"Now, Dash, don't be like that –" Applejack began.

Dash looked her in the eye fiercely, a broad grin on her face. "Well, at least it hasn't been *boring*," she said. Everypony groaned; Dash was getting to the 'headstrong again' part of her depression. Head still leaned against the wall, Spitfire smiled her calm little smile.

There was a knock on the door, which opened immediately anyways. Guards are like that.

Spitfire gave the newcomer a lazy grin. "Oh, hey, commander."

The commander was a grizzled and scruffy-looking grey unicorn, tall but lanky, with a stone bust for a cutie mark and a permanent expression of suspicion instead of a face. "Capt – *Spitfire*," the commander corrected himself. He stepped into the chamber, silver armor gleaming amber in the evening sunlight. Behind him stepped a burly earth pony in the golden armor of the Day Guard and a Night Guard pegasus who gave Spitfire a nervous grin.

"I assume you're here to 'take us away', then?" Rarity sniffed. She raised her chin to display her blackening eye prominently. "*Do* be gentle. As it is, you see I have already been mistreated, somewhat."

"Well, as to that, I have to say that the Night Guard will probably never be famous for being particularly subtle, especially if I have anything to say about it," the commander said. His voice had a sort of permanent irritable growl, even when he was being a bit pleased with himself like he was at that moment. It matched his rather sour features quite well. "The ponies in question are off eating bricks somewhere at the moment, which perhaps goes some way to explaining their size and attitude. Please, *milady*, allow me to apologize on their behalf."

Rarity's haughty huff in reply seemed to amuse the commander deeply, and he sighed happily. "Does anypony else have complaints about the accommodations?"

"Got any cupcakes? I'm starving!" Pinkie Pie asked cheerfully, the full-body chain bindings jingling happily with her.

"No, sorry." The commander jerked his head at the two guards behind him. "Alright, let 'em go. Start with the dragon, would you? It hurts just looking at him."

"*What?*" Spike asked, as the burly Day Guard unlatched the lock holding the chains binding him.

The commander grinned, in a sort of lopsided way. "The chancellor wants a word. I expect you have noticed, but things are getting a little... mythical. That's a little outside my jurisdiction and *way* outside my counterpart's, if you'll excuse me saying so..." The earth pony Day Guard gave the commander a suspicious look, which only seemed to entertain him. "No offense."

Applejack got to her hooves and stretched her neck. "Yeah, we noticed. What is it now, eleven o'clock or so?"

"Well from the looks of it, it's getting on eight in the evening. Lovely sunset, but..." The commander's amused expression faded. "I think that's the problem, eh?"

"You don't know?" Fluttershy asked.

The commander shook his head. "Nope, and don't tell me. Frankly, all this magic stuff gives me a headache."

Rainbow Dash peered at him suspiciously. "But you're... a unicorn."

"All that means is that I know what I'm talking about," the commander replied, rolling his eyes. His eyebrows raised sharply as he noticed the Night Guard pegasus bending down to unlatch the wing bands on Spitfire. "Oh, no, you leave those on her," he growled. "Take 'em off and we'll never see the little hellion again. She and I need to chat a bit." Spitfire's patient little grin got sly for a moment.

"So..." Spike asked, rubbing his wrists where the manacles had been binding.

"So head downstairs and talk to the Chancellor. Try to be nice, he's a bit upset by all this," the commander said patiently. He broke into a wry grin. "Thank you for choosing the Night Guard for your accommodations here at Canterlot Castle. I do hope you'll consider us again for your future law-breaking, guard-assaulting needs." He barked out a little laugh as the six friends exited the room with polite haste.

"Hey, Dash!" Spitfire called. Rainbow Dash turned and met her lazy gaze. "Try to come back in one piece, will you?" the golden pegasus said with a wink. Applejack nudged her

friend with a suggestive smile, making Rainbow Dash's cherry-red face sour into an annoyed grimace.

The chancellor turned out to be a fat red unicorn with a huge, curly white mane and a little beard hanging from his chin. A pair of small golden spectacles sat on his muzzle.

"Oh good, you're here," he said as the ponies and Spike arrived on the torn-up ground floor of the tower. He was sweating profusely and tapping his hooves restlessly. "Um, I'm, uh, *terribly* sorry about the misunderstanding earlier..."

"Yeah, uh..." Applejack said as the unicorn rushed to her and grasped one of her forelegs desperately, shaking it madly. "Yeah, nice to... nice to meetcha, an' all, but –"

The chancellor looked from pony to pony to dragon frantically. "Do any of you have any idea what's going on? Because I, and the Academy staff, are uh, in the dark. Figuratively and, it seems more and more likely, literally."

"Well, we have some idea, yes, but –" Rarity began.

"Ohthankheavens," the chancellor burbled. "Well, go on, do tell me."

"Er..." Spike began, looking at the ponies awkwardly.

"Well..." Fluttershy began, but stifled herself with a tiny squeak as the chancellor's desperately eager gaze fell on her.

Applejack stepped forward. "Princess Celestia, well... she's a mite tired, see, after a couple thousand years of bein' the princess an' all," she said, carefully. "And, uh... well, Ah guess somethin' went a little wrong. Y'all know how it is when your plum tuckered out an' ya just kinda... drop...?" She grinned, nervously.

The chancellor stared at her blankly. "Are... are you speaking Equestrian? I'm sorry, I didn't understand half of that."

Rarity quickly stepped in front of Applejack quickly, clearing her throat loudly to cover Applejack's irritated reply and Rainbow Dash's fit of vengeful snickering. "Chancellor, *sir*, first of all may I say what a true *honor* it is to make the acquaintance of such a prominent unicorn," she said. Her voice could have been used to grease wagon axles.

"Oh, how... how charming," the chancellor said happily. Rarity looked at Applejack over her shoulder and shrugged apologetically. "And may I say that your abundant grace is not diminished at all by the brutality of the guards."

"You're too kind, I'm sure," Rarity said, turning back to him with an expression of stunning *hauteur*. "You must forgive my friend, she's so... *rustic*." Behind her, Applejack sniffed, to the accompaniment of Rainbow Dash's poorly-suppressed giggles. "What she was trying to convey, sir, is that it seems our beloved Princess has... um..." she trailed off.

"Yes?"

"*Well*, she's been princess for a long time, hasn't she? The poor dear, she's worn herself out. She needed to take a rest, and it came upon her quite suddenly, unfortunately." Rarity gave him a bright smile. "Princess Luna and the Arch-Mage are *terribly* worried about her, so they're trying to get to the bottom of things. I'm sure everything will work out, of course, but we would be *ever* so grateful if you would allow us to join them...?" She stuck out her lower lip and fluttered her eyelashes. "Just in case they need our help with any little thing."

The last statement had a carefully-crafted little hint of pleading in it which spoke to the chancellor's pride without consulting his brain: *Oh, you, powerful sir, take pity on me, this lovely unicorn, who will be so flattered by your largesse...*

"I, uh, of course! That's why I had you set free, after all. Uh..." he stammered in the face of Rarity's expression of absolute delight. "There is a slight problem, though –"

Applejack and Rainbow Dash, who were already three steps down into the cavern, froze and perked up their ears. "Uh," the earth pony murmured. "What's, uh, what's that, now?"

"Well, it seems that nopony can step down the st –" He looked up at them, and deflated. Six of his wizards were in the infirmary after being tossed backwards bodily just getting near the runic ring. "Well, I see that there, uh, seems to be no problem after all. Best of luck to you..."

The Elements and Spike took their leave of the chancellor, and descended.

• • •

DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA,

OKAY, I'M GOING TO BE AS HONEST AND OPEN WITH YOU AS I CAN. I... KNOW YOU'RE HURTING. I KNOW YOU'RE IN PAIN, AND YOU ARE TRYING TO KEEP ME AT A DISTANCE TO PROTECT ME, OR, UH... SOMETHING.

I UNDERSTAND, I REALLY DO. BUT... PLEASE THINK OF HOW THAT FEELS TO ME. I'M SCARED, AND WANT TO HELP YOU... AND THE SCARIEST THING IS THINKING YOU DON'T WANT ME NEAR YOU WHEN YOU'RE HURT. LET ME BE CLOSE TO YOU NOW LIKE YOU ALWAYS HAVE BEEN FOR ME.

YOUR FAITHFUL AND LOVING STUDENT, TWILIGHT SPARKLE

Luna stared at the words. Something about them troubled her, something about the language –

"Twilight!?" Luna asked, suddenly alarmed. "Twilight, where are y –"

But the connection was gone. Luna looked up at the silver words, which seemed to smolder smokelessly in the air as they vanished.

• • •

The doors to Celestia's chambers opened. Twilight peered through them, into an airy white room dimly lit by the setting sun, looking nervously for the latest vision of Celestia.

Everything seemed completely normal; no weird transitions, no bizarre scenarios, no *wings*... and the doors had just opened, as if this were the real Canterlot. Granted, it was sunset here, not morning as it probably still was in the real world, but... symbolic reality, right?

Had she... done it? Could this be –

No, find the Princess. Be careful, little filly, your tail's near the fire...

Twilight stepped forward so that she could search the entire apartment for Celestia. Lo and behold, there she was, lying on a couch, reading a slim red book by the soft light of a small lantern.

"Oh, Twilight... my precious, precious student. I'm so glad to see you." Celestia said, turning to regard Twilight, her face awash with relief. "Please, come in – oh!" A sudden look of horror spread across the alicorn's face.

Twilight suddenly felt very weak, and her whole body seemed to be covered in angry, burning lines. She brought one of her forehooves up in front of her face – it was covered in vicious, open wounds, shallow but stinging like crazy for all that. She whimpered in sudden terror.

"Twilight, please, hurry. Come inside," Celestia said, getting off the bier and stepping towards the unicorn, her features set in a determined look.

The suddenness of the wounds' appearance had put Twilight into a bit of shock, and she had a hard time focusing on her limbs enough to do anything but step forward awkwardly, her entire body feeling numb against the pain. Celestia caught up to her quickly and allowed Twilight to lean against her, guiding her weak steps to Celestia's large bed on the far side of the room.

"Mmm... 'm gonna get blood on the sheets," Twilight murmured.

"Don't worry about that, I can get more sheets. There's only one Twilight Sparkle, though." She gave the unicorn an encouraging smile. "It's her I'm most concerned with right now. Stay here," she added, as if Twilight were in any shape to disobey. The princess quickly trotted over to a table nearby and began manipulating a great many small objects at once, muttering under her breath.

Twilight smiled gratefully as she laid down on the bed. It was firm – pleasantly so – and she felt fatigue rush over her just feeling it under her body. Her eyes closed automatically, and while the numbness in her extremities faded, the burning itch of the cuts also seemed to grow distant.

She hadn't really known what to expect when she found Celestia, but this was... very familiar. Very comfortable. And she was taking care of Twilight – business first, heart to heart later. Very much like Celestia, to prioritize.

These wounds – this must be what Luna was referring to in the real world after her encounter with the plate glass in the terrible, servile nightmare. The real Celestia had been there for that, in the end, Luna thought, so –

Twilight's heart leapt. Could... could this mean she had found the real Celestia? Really found her? This could be... a true place! Reality and the mental realm closer together now that it wasn't all an abstract representation of Celestia's mind, but instead... the place where she went, as Luna had put it.

This Celestia certainly had that same strange habit of humming tunelessly to herself as she prepared ointments – an old tic she had picked up from somepony a couple hundred years ago, she had said once.

Twilight sighed. *Finally*, this terrible ordeal might over, and things could get back on track. Not that having the long talk with Celestia about everything promised to be fun, but it was way more promising than having her head and heart stomped on over and over again by the strange, invasive visions.

Lying here, comforted and hopeful, Twilight's ability to force her mind to work was rapidly fading. The sound of Celestia's approaching hoofbeats seemed kilometers away. "Hold still, Twilight," she heard, distantly. "This might feel a bit... strange."

Twilight smiled, distantly. "Mmm... okayyyyyaaaaghh!"

It was like ice! Poured directly into her brain! Cold cold cold cold –

Celestia tittered laughter. "I told you," she said, trying to suppress her amusement.

The unicorn, who was now completely awake – no question about that – gave her teacher a dark look over her shoulder. There was a thin strip of gauze, turned slightly pale-blue by the ointment, resting on one of the larger wounds on her abdomen. The feeling had faded to merely that of holding a thick icicle to her side, but, still –

"Now, Twilight," Celestia said, looking down at her. She seemed a little embarrassed. "Just... relax, for this, okay? Trust me." The princess leaned down and – before Twilight could react – kissed the gauzed-over wound gently.

Known to few were the secret stills of the Apple family. Oh, everyone knew about the cider and the applejack and the apple wine... but there was a secret drink, drunk out on the edge of the Everfree Forest at secret times in honor of dark, apple-bearing gods, that the Apples kept to themselves and a very honored few others.

Twilight had been secreted away to the caverns under Sweet Apple Acres in the dead of night, a few years ago, to help Applejack and Mac repair the burbling, ancient still that produced this fell drink, which had no name and technically no flavor; such was its potency that nopony had ever really tasted it before collapsing into a stupor.

As a reward for her help, the Apples had privileged Twilight with a thimbleful of the stuff and a cot to fall onto. The last thing Twilight had remembered was Applejack chuckling and saying, "Lightweight," as Twilight's grinning form collapsed onto the camp bed. She

had woken up in the library and had never been able to find the entrance to the caves again, despite distinctly recalling that it was so obvious it was amazing nopony found them.

That drink, so mysterious and powerful, had nothing, *nothing*, on what Twilight felt as the icy line on her side turned into blessed warmth. Her mind drowned in bliss, her mouth falling open in a delighted sigh, limbs jerking limply.

But the moment passed quickly, and Twilight looked up at Celestia, panting.

"Uh... sorry," Twilight said, blushing furiously.

"My best healing ointment, but..." Celestia gave Twilight a nervous smile. "You see why I might hesitate to use it often."

Twilight's lips trembled, stifling herself before she blurted out *please ma'am, may I have another?*, but it seemed that her expression was sufficient to indicate her desires.

"Lucky you, that means I have quite a bit of it lying around," Celestia said, amusement lighting her voice. "I hope you don't mind if I try to cut down on my store, since I use it so rarely."

• • •

Luna watched Twilight's recumbent form carefully. It had been twitching in what appeared to be pain, or irritation, for a moment, but that had ceased.

The princess was worried – she was having a harder time re-establishing the psychic link with Twilight than normal, but whereas with the whole 'loyal servant' affair, it had been like a wall between herself and Twilight, now it felt like Twilight didn't want to be found.

A golden light suddenly bloomed across one of the long cuts that marred Twilight's abdomen. Luna stirred, stepping forward carefully. She watched as it condensed into a smaller and smaller area, eventually vanishing, leaving only purple fur and unblemished skin in its wake – no scar.

Luna looked suspiciously at her sister's – her *elder* sister's – horn, which was curiously absent of any activity visible with either normal vision or the special sight-beyond-sight of powerful unicorns. This was unfamiliar magic, and for an alicorn is to see magic for the first time – especially one who spent any time at all around Twilight Sparkle and

Princess Celestia, never mind being a princess herself – it was a rare event, all but unprecedented. It had been happening a lot recently, and that made Luna suspicious.

The golden light bloomed in another wound, this time on a hind leg; then another, on Twilight's belly. A third, on her shoulder...

Luna frowned, her heart troubled, but stepped back and watched.

• • •

Twilight hummed happily as the princess pulled the last strip of gauze away from the very last cut, a short one on her neck. Princess Celestia had given Twilight a very complicated look before gently brushing it with her lips, sending one last little dose of that spectacular, joyous warmth through Twilight.

"Feeling a little better, my little pony?" Celestia asked with exaggerated formality. She was sitting next to the bed, her face relieved and peaceful again.

Twilight grinned and curled up a little on the bed, her eyes closed. "Mmm... save that for the parades, Princess..."

"As you wish... my *humble servant* and *loyal subject*."

Twilight rolled over, her face screwed up in sudden anxiety. "Princess, I –" But Celestia was staring down at her, smiling calmly.

"Ah... we've been very silly, silly ponies, Twilight. But..." She stared out the window and smiled. "At least we've found each other again."

Relief flooded into Twilight's mind and heart. "Is it really –"

"I'm as me as I've ever been," the princess said, calmly.

Twilight grinned and fell back onto the bed. She was exhausted; healed though her wounds might be, her muscles now ached and her mind was slow and sluggish from the wake of the wonderful medicine. "Agh, but... now we have to talk about all these terrible things, and this is such a nice moment..."

"I know we have a great deal to discuss, but... it can wait, don't you think?"

"Not really. It's been pretty awful getting here, Princess –"

"Just Celestia, I think," the princess interrupted. "You've more than earned that much. And I have seen, in great detail, some of your suffering. But it can wait for us to wake up, in the morning."

"The morning...?" Twilight asked, brow furrowing.

Celestia raised her head a little, extinguishing most of the candles in the room. It had occurred to Twilight before that Celestia's pure white chambers struck as oddly sterile most of the time, but at sunrise and sunset, they came alive with every color the sun could paint in the sky. Twilight had only seen it once before, but... the sun had seemed eager to impress her with the gorgeous golds and reds and purples of that wonderful... well, *twilight*.

This night... it was better. In the low light, Twilight was dazzled by the richness of the reds, like fresh apples; gold, as bright as the walls of Canterlot; rich purples that would have driven Rarity mad with envy, so much would she want to match them in fabrics and gems and probably her mane, too. All of this splayed across the simple, but elegant features of the walls and pillars and shelves...

A spectacular piece of art, which changed, every day.

"I cannot tell you how much it means to me that you appreciate this, my faithful student." Twilight hadn't even noticed Celestia joining her in the bed, but she was lying right next to her, a gentle smile on her features. "But I knew you would, from all the time you spent in the Hall of Dusk and Dawn. I regret, often, making these my private chambers..." Her peaceful smile grew wry and amused. "I get to share it with so few ponies. I used to be in the habit of making it something of a special honor to take a meal with close associates here, but... well, I grew to value my privacy a little too much."

Twilight gave her a look of concern. "Why?"

"Well, not naming names, but I needed a refuge from a little purple filly who kept following me around everywhere," Celestia said, playfully, giving Twilight a wink. "I'm know you've learned to appreciate that you need a sanctuary from the world, busy as you are. I've seen your study."

Twilight smiled. This was like something out of a dream – no, out of *the* dream!

This was it. It must be! It was just... coming true, all on its own, just like she had felt it would, when Luna and she emerged back into the field at the center of dreams. Twilight had... it had seemed so obvious that it could happen, and now it was!

"So... the morning," Twilight asked, forcing herself to focus on business, despite her growing feeling of contentment. Everything was fine. There were issues, sure, but... the trials were over, and now all that was left was for her and Celestia to hash things out. No problem.

Celestia's smile became pained and embarrassed for a moment. "Oh, that. I don't know *what* Luna told you, but... she has a way of getting over-excited about things. This is nothing I haven't had to deal with before, I tried to tell her..." The princess lay back on her pillow, shaking her head. "Ah, I should be thankful I have a sister who still cares about me. I'm sure she told you quite a bit of history... I haven't always been the best sister."

"Yeah, I..." Twilight said, about to confess that her own illusions had been shaken a bit in all this as well, but her stomach flipped and she trailed off, unsure how to phrase it. Celestia looked over to her with polite interest. Her eyes were... very beautiful in the evening light, Twilight had to admit. "I... I've had to go through some... changes, myself. Um. Thinking about you, I mean."

Celestia's face grew a little concerned. "I... yes. I think it was well past time. I hope you can forgive me for not being... attentive to you. You were right to scold me, at the library..." she looked away, guiltily.

"I understand," Twilight said, hurriedly. She reached out a hoof and touched Celestia's shoulder gently. "Things got a little messed up. I know. We'll talk about it – I don't think there's anything we can't work out eventually..."

"I'm so happy to hear you say that, Twilight," Celestia said, looking back to her with a peaceful smile.

...

The voice had been laughing constantly since Twilight walked in the door, howling with renewed mirth every time the vision of Celestia had healed one of Twilight's wounds. It knew where Twilight was and found a great deal of pleasure in describing in detail to Celestia what was going on.

Celestia tried to ignore it; more importantly, she tried to ignore the lingering dread in her mind, and hoped for the best. Nothing she had heard was bad, necessarily – a little embarrassing and *false*, of course, but Twilight would see through this... lie, just as quickly as the others. Celestia was sure of it.

Oh, please, Twilight... impress me again now, my faithful student. Please.

Oh, *please*.

At least concentrating on the sun had become routine, now.

• • •

Twilight frowned. "So we just... sleep, and then we should wake up in our bodies?" she asked, a bit suspiciously.

"Like a long nap. Everypony usually just thinks I'm taking a day off and doesn't get too snippy about it because you don't, not with the princess. I appreciate your concern, but there's really nothing to worry about. It just got confused with all our other... issues, this time. Are you looking for an explanation?" Celestia asked, giving Twilight a patient smile.

"If you just say 'it's magic,' I swear, I'll leap out of this bed and go right back to wandering your mind aimlessly..."

Celestia laughed brightly. "Then I won't. I'd much rather you stay here," she said.

Twilight paused. There was... just a hint of something there, in the way she had said that. And the way she was looking at Twilight, now.

Oh... dear.

But no, she was imagining it, she *had* to be –

"Then... I'll stay here," Twilight said, cautiously. "If that's... what you want."

"It is." Nope: there it was again. A simple statement, but... heartfelt. Bigger, deeper than those little words, but as simple as them. "Please do."

Twilight suddenly felt very aware of herself, like she was slightly removed from her body, everything she was tensed. She could feel the danger of this moment; she had felt it only a few times before in her life, but instinctively she knew that picking the exact right words and actions were key to success, here.

Wait, success? Success at *what* –

Celestia's smile grew a little nervous. "Twilight, your, ah... your mane."

The unicorn blinked and stirred, running a hoof through at her mane desperately. "My mane? What about it?" she asked frantically.

"You've burned it, Twilight," Celestia said, her grin unfreezing and a blush spreading across her face. "Come here, would you?"

"Um, why?" Agh no that was the wrong thing to say agh agh agh

"Just come here."

Twilight's breath froze for a moment, her heart pounding hard in her chest... and scooted herself closer.

"I won't bite," Celestia chuckled. There it was *again*.

Not... nervousness, or naked desire... just... a hint. An edge, in her voice, which said: *if you're willing...*

It wasn't even a *confident* edge; it might even be called a little *timid*, frightened, even... which Twilight found herself surprised by – I mean, come on, this was the Princess!

But it was hopeful, and it promised a great deal.

She tried to grin, but felt like it was probably showing up very nervous. She could feel her blazing blush, as well. She scooted in, closer, almost touching Celestia.

"Just relax," Celestia whispered, huskier than Twilight had ever heard it before. There was a little bit of a purr in it.

The unicorn felt herself flinch as the first contact came, expecting something... intense. But what she felt was very gentle and tender; Celestia was grooming her with her mouth, in the earth pony fashion, chewing at the frazzled fringe of hair.

"Uh..." Twilight managed, feeling a confusing rush of relief and disappointment.

Celestia let go of her mane for a second. "You've never had this done before?"

"Um, no."

"Oh, really?" Celestia backed away, looking a bit startled. "It was very common, once upon a time, for friends to groom each other this way, among all the pony tribes."

Twilight gave her a nervous grin. "Um, not anymore, apparently... but I'm a unicorn, so... well obviously you know I'm a unicorn, ha ha ha!" She said this, rather than actually laughing, in a edgy sort of way. "We, uh, use combs."

Celestia summoned a comb from a nearby table. "If you would prefer –"

"I wouldn't!" Twilight chirped. She flushed red, and covered her mouth with her hoof. The princess smiled down at her as she returned the comb to the table. "Um... that was fine, I just... wasn't expecting it," she said, grinning.

"I'd understand if you were a little... hesitant to be touched right now. I'm sure your body feels a little strange after what you've been through."

Twilight hadn't thought about that. Actually, her body felt... pretty wonderful, all told, if a bit sore, and *far* from not wanting to be touched –

Twilight's eyes opened wide as she blushed bright red. Oh, dear.

But Twilight's rising panic was completely forgotten as Celestia resumed grooming Twilight, pulling gently at her mane.

It really was relaxing, for all that her scalp was being tugged on. It was very pleasant. Yes, pleasant. Pleasant, enjoyable, lovely, satisfying, nice, delightful, agreeable and not at all among the most intimate physical experiences she had ever had. It was just something ponies did for each other when they were being extremely close together and my wasn't it warm in here, ha ha ha.

Her mind did *not* linger on how her worries and cares seemed to drift away, she did *not* happily reflect that she was beginning to feel warm and loved in a very comfortable, unthreatening way, and she certainly did *not* have little jolts of pleasure when Celestia's muzzle gently rubbed against her horn.

All in all she was *not* feeling just about as *wanted* as she ever had, and was *not* thinking that she never wanted this to end unless it was to start something even better, and she had *no* idea what that might entail and was certainly *not* making an ordered list in certain parts of her mind which had hitherto not seen much attention, ranking such things as might improve this situation from one to, oh dear, *sixty-seven*.

Oh... dear.

She was warm. She felt *safe*, here, with Celestia, even though she probably ought not to, but those cares and concerns that warned her against this were first and foremost amongst those this wonderful experience was telling her to ignore. Twilight marveled at how something so... basic as having her mane groomed by somepony else was so relaxing. It certainly was never like this when she went to the spa with Rarity who was someplace else entirely ha ha ha oh wow that's the back of my neck...

Oh, this felt *so good*. She *needed* this – no, she *had* needed this, a million times over, every day for the past entirety of her life to this point. Stress and anxiety oozed off of her.

Her heart was beating very, very hard in her chest. She was dimly aware of this, like it was happening to a pony next to her and was noticeable but not immediately important. Thoughtlessly she relaxed her neck and cuddled into her mentor, bathing in the slightly-above-room-temperature warmth the way she had as a filly. Celestia stopped grooming her, but Twilight barely noticed; she was perfectly happy.

She rested, warm and safe and happy –

And suddenly felt a gentle pressure on her cheek, as Celestia kissed her.

Celestia had kissed her, fondly, in the past – indeed, she had just spent a half-hour doing so, but that was just *magic* and was hardly the only spell that needed to be sealed in that fashion. As a beloved and above all faithful student, Twilight had been graced with fond little pecks on the forehead – for example, as the Princess took leave of her that first real night in Ponyville, or after Discord's defeat... just a friendly gesture of deep, deep, but platonic affection.

This, now... this had that same edge to it that the princess' words had – hopeful, even longing, but... unthreatening. Testing the waters. Hoping against hope that Twilight would notice and... maybe, just *maybe*... respond in kind.

Twilight leapt to attention, startled by this awareness as she never had been by the friendly gestures before. She stared straight forward, looking out a window into the nearly-set sun, crimson, purple and gold bathing the valley east of Canterlot in beautiful color.

"Twilight, I'm sorry, I –" Celestia began, hurriedly, but stopped herself. She cleared her throat. "You... were crying."

"I was?" Twilight brought a hoof to her face. There were, indeed, a pair of wet trails running from her eyes. One of them ended prematurely, where the gentle pressure had been.

She looked at Celestia, whose expression was that of a foal caught with a few more melon slices on their plate than they were entitled to. It was strangely endearing to see such a... *young* expression of guilt on the face of a pony whose composure was so reflexive as to be permanent – indeed, had been so permanent that it had driven Twilight away.

No longer, it seemed.

"I guess I was," Twilight said, smiling fondly at Celestia. Her heart throbbed at Celestia's grateful smile in return. "I was just... I haven't felt so calm, and happy, in a very, *very* long time."

They held each other's gaze for awhile, twilight colors blazing all around them.

"That was... a little much, even between us. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Please."

There was a pause, expectant and dangerous; Twilight felt like she was dancing on a knife edge, which was a silly metaphor anyways who would do something like that and oh heavens there's only one thing for it, isn't there...

No, no, no. You don't need this right now, Twilight Sparkle. No, no, no.

No!

No.

N... *yes*.

Yes, Twilight thought – no, finally *let* herself think. I believe I do need this right now.

Very, *very* badly.

Whatever Twilight had expected, or hoped, the amount of surprise and hesitance Celestia displayed as Twilight reached out and drew their lips together was not it. But like the initial bite of fine wine, it faded quickly, into something rich and sweet and

intoxicating as the nervousness faded into joy, and Twilight never wanted to stop drinking it in. Not even for a second.

• • •

The voice's laughter had ceased. If the voice had belonged to a pony, their expression would have been described best as *wide*: eyes *wide* and fiery with malicious delight, grin *wide* and mad with glee, the only sound a strangled hiss as they tried to laugh enough for six ponies at once through a single throat.

Celestia wasn't watching, of course; her eyes were still clamped shut lest she see how low the sun sat on the horizon, how close she was to losing control of it, how near she was to the ruin of everything she had struggled to maintain for more than a millennium.

Or worse than that, now, she might see what was happening to Twilight. But her cursed ears, alert as ever, told her everything she needed to know.

Her humiliation was total, now. Complete. This was something Twilight was never meant to see, or hear, or even suspect existed. It was a very small part of her, something she was able to just... sublimate, keep to herself, not bother anypony with. But now...

She had run out of tears long ago, in this hellish struggle. Anguish, though, never seemed to run dry, no matter how hard she tried to shut out the sound of that little, all-too-powerful part of her mind... and Twilight's all-too-willing surrender to it.

• • •

It was like this:

Imagine being told, for your entire life, that used coffee grounds are chocolate. So you tried them, once or twice, didn't see what everyone was so on about, and told yourself chocolate wasn't your thing and didn't necessarily *avoid* it *per se*, but didn't go looking for it, either.

Then, all of the sudden, you were tossed into a warm vat of finest milk chocolate and caramel and told that it was yours, all yours, no need to share, and best of all, it wouldn't be fattening because it was special magic chocolate and it never ran out and it *wanted* you to eat it.

And then you were given a spoon.

Twilight Sparkle dove, headfirst, and knew the joy of caramel chocolate – not just awkward kisses between confused friends, *real* caramel chocolate – for the first time in her life.

"I was... so... *afraid* to accept that I felt this," she murmured. There were long, busy pauses between speech, where only heavy breaths dared make any sound.

"I have always known," Celestia whispered in her ear.

"Have you?"

"I saw your looks, your glances... you were getting older..."

"Yes."

"It was flattering, Twilight, it really was..."

"Mmm." Twilight's thoughtful hum was ended as her breath came in a sharp inrush, with a little hint of a moan in the back of her throat.

"And as you got older, you just grew more... *you*..."

"Ah." A pause. "Did I?"

"Yes."

"Sorry."

Celestia laughed. "You're too hard on yourself."

"Mmm... everypony says that..."

"Shhh..." The shush lost some of its impact because it had such a delighted little giggle in it, and because the mouth hissing it out was so decisively shushed itself.

• • •

"Is it just me or is this taking, like, *way* longer this time?"

"It ain't just you, Dash."

"I could fly down, if –"

"You keep your hooves on the ground in here, missy."

"If the mountain is keeping us from getting us down there, something must be really wrong."

"Don't worry, Spike, dear... we just have to keep putting one hoof in front of the other."

A pause, then:

"...I don't have hooves."

• • •

Luna's face was... complicated.

Twilight was rolling and waving her hooves lamely on the bier next to the fading body of Celestia. At first, Luna had feared that she was being grappled in some way in the vision, and she was trying to get free; when she realized it was *quite* the opposite, she had said some very un-princess-like words that Celestia and Twilight would both have been somewhat shocked Luna even knew.

Now she was giving her elder sister a somewhat cool glare, occasionally breaking into an irritated half-sneer.

"Who would have thought you still had it in you...?" Luna mused, darkly, to the ruined body of the Princess of the Sun.

Luna had not discussed the specifics of this particular nuance of Twilight's relationship with Celestia with the unicorn, but because she was not completely stupid, nor untried herself in the lists of love, she had some idea of what was going on, and thus was not too harsh in judging Twilight. After all, the poor thing had spent most of her life *worshipping* Celestia... and on Celestia's part, well... Twilight was...

Luna shook her head. Twilight was her *sister*, now, and frankly that's really all Luna wanted from her – a lot, in other words, but not... *ahem*.

Understandable it may be, but this was easily the *unhealthiest* thing she could conceive of at the moment... for either of them.

What to do, what to do...

Oh, well, there really was nothing for it.

Luna's face screwed up in disgust. If she had to *see* anything, *both* of her sisters would be looking down the wrong end of her horn for the rest of the century.

• • •

Twilight...

Twilight's eyes, half-closed, fluttered briefly. "What is it...?" she murmured.

Twilight!

This time the voice sounded much closer, but it was slightly muffled and distorted, as if being yelled through a pillow. Twilight found this image extremely funny for some reason and giggled wearily.

Answer me!

"Not now, please..."

Yes, now. This isn't healthy.

Twilight's face made some complicated expressions as she was momentarily distracted. "Go away."

No. Listen to me, Twilight. You have to focus. Do you remember the dream? Your true desires?

"Yessss..." Twilight said, although not to Luna.

Was this part of them?

Twilight mused on this issue for awhile. "Could it be?"

Oh, for heaven's sake...

"Luna, just... leave me alone. I'm happy for once. Wanted. Oh, so, obviously... *wanted*."

There was an anxious pause, and when Luna spoke, her voice was audibly frightened even through the distortion. *Twilight, you're... you're scaring me. I thought we'd gotten past this.*

"Well I got put back in it... by being battered around... mmm..."

This is a fantasy, Twilight!

Twilight grinned lazily. "Yeah, it really is..."

You're being foolish. Luna's voice was growing more and more distant. Twilight had some idea that she was pushing her away somehow just by not wanting her there. Twilight didn't want anything except to lie here and be wanted. It was a nice change of pace in this whole wretched affair.

Twilight, let go of this, please! Sister...

Twilight wasn't listening anymore. There was a gentle pressure on her neck – even now, after everything, timid and gentle, it was so *sweet* Twilight thought she would *die* – and a hoof was drawn lovingly across the opposite cheek. The gentle, tender kisses moved up her neck and across her jaw, drawing closer and closer to...

Ah, bliss.

Perfect, in fact.

• • •

Celestia's jaw had not stopped trembling since what was going on had begun in earnest. She wanted to scream, to weep, to howl with terror...

Humiliation like this was beyond her strength to bear. She was disgusted with herself, first for having such thoughts at all, and then for being disgusted by them; they were normal, natural... but Twilight had stumbled across them in such a way that Celestia could not hide them or protect her from them, and now, well...

Ah, but, something in her said, in a dark and dusky voice which was at once frightening and compelling, wasn't it fun, just for a moment, to hear Twilight be so willing...?

Not just willing... *eager*.

Not just *eager*... she had resisted Luna's demand that she stop. She *wanted* this. Indeed... she *started* it.

Every sound, the little symphony of ecstasy, both in her voice and Twilight's... it was too much.

"Make it stop," Celestia croaked. She was both repulsed to hear these things and derived a guilty but very intense joy from them. At this point it was foolish to deny that there were parts of her that felt this way, and they were *singing*, now, glorying in their validation and triumph.

Celestia, with as much concentration as she dared, tried to master herself, not letting the poisonous happiness make her forget that her beloved *student*, Twilight Sparkle, was trapped with a part of her mind that frankly terrified her, wild and untamable despite her best efforts, willingly embracing feelings Celestia had always feared to even contemplate lest they hurt Twilight somehow.

"Make it stop! Please!" All thoughts of dignity were gone; she begged the emptiness of *somewhere* to act.

"You could probably do something about this," the voice drawled, lazily. "If you were inclined."

Celestia panted, pained and terrified by the riot of emotion in her. Desperation, revulsion, terror... love, joy... desire... all of them burned brightly in her, pulling her in opposite directions, becoming mixed together and confused in the already-wild ruins of her mind.

She had to do *something*. If Twilight stayed here, trapped with Celestia's desire for her... if Celestia failed... if the sun *set*...

"Twilight, please," Celestia whispered, all of the mental effort she could spare bent on communing with her beloved student, deep in the murky depths of her psyche. "Please, Twilight, hear me..."

There was no change in any of the sounds Celestia was hearing.

"You're going to have to try harder than that, I think," the voice replied, evenly. It contrasted grotesquely with the other doppelganger of Celestia's voice.

Celestia swallowed and tried again. "Twilight, my faithful student... hear me now."

"Nope, not *quite*..."

"Quiet, you," Celestia snarled, wildly.

"Touchy! Just trying to help..."

Celestia, eyes still closed, panted and considered what she had to say to get Twilight's attention. "Twilight Sparkle... my dear Twilight..."

"She noticed *something*," the voice said nonchalantly. "But it was like a whisper in a hurricane. You're going to have to be *louder*."

There was an *extremely* pleased sound in the background. Celestia felt like she had been nailed to the ground, such was the lance of terrified shame that pierced her heart.

"My dear, dear Twilight," she said, all her attention suddenly intensely focused on her effort, all her mind bent to the task of ending this hideous mockery. To end the disgrace as Twilight went unguarded against a dangerous and wild part of Celestia's mind. "Twilight, hear me!"

• • •

Twilight, hear me!

Twilight's ears twitched. Princess Celestia's voice, raspy and terrified, echoed in her mind. "What –"

You are as far from me now, the real me, as you have ever been, my faithful student.

The voice cut to her heart, through time and space and memory, and drew to Twilight's mind the memory of the walk through the gardens, so, so long ago, and the first time she had heard those blessed words, her *true* name. The Faithful Student.

Was this some magic? A trick of the mind? Whatever it was... Twilight *knew* her mentor had *really* spoken to her, across whatever gulfs distanced them, emotionally, spiritually, spatially...

"Stop, stop!" Twilight said, frantically. The Celestia with Twilight looked up at her, puzzled and hurt. Twilight held her gaze, staring at her in fascination and growing horror.

As far from... me... as you have ever been.

"Oh, heavens," Twilight hissed, terrified. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Celestia's brow furrowed. "I just want you close to me, Twilight. I truly, truly do..."

Twilight scrambled backwards, this whole situation suddenly perverse and repellent. Her words. Her words, exactly what she had hoped would stop Celestia from distancing herself, and let Twilight at the real Celestia. So much – too much – made sense now.

"No. Oh, heavens no, why did this have to be a lie, too..." she moaned, humiliated and suddenly so, so alone.

"It's not a lie, Twilight," the Celestia murmured. "It's a dream we're having together."

"No," Twilight gulped. "I have a dream. It's better than this. It's more *important* than... Oh, no..." She scrambled off the bed, her hooves twisting in the sheets, tripping her. Desperately she made for the door out of the apartment, which seemed far, far too distant.

"Twilight!" the Celestia called to her. Despite herself, Twilight turned and – oh, her heart broke to see the look on that magnificent creature's face. Crestfallen didn't do it justice; this was desire, *pure* desire, rejected and denied. Its expression conveyed upon the viewer that deep hollowness that follows true heartbreak, the feeling that all that is you has fallen to pieces and you will waste into nothing. "Twilight, don't... don't you want this?"

Twilight stammered and panted, her mind clearing as it put the pieces of events together. Sorrow and shame burned hot, but she clung desperately to what rationality she could muster and organized what willpower she had left around her last remaining option: the truth.

"What I want, you can't give me."

Twilight turned and left desire behind her, the door slamming with terrible finality.

• • •

Celestia sighed with as much relief as she dared. It was over.

I am so sorry, Twilight, I –

"Well done!" the voice called. It seemed much less ethereal and formless now, not coming from everywhere and nowhere, instead seeming to be spoken in front of Celestia; accompanying them were hollow, clapping sounds, slowly moving closer.

"I did what I had to," Celestia groaned. "For Twilight... for myself..." Lingering feelings of self-loathing clung to her words like sea grime to a ship at harbor, foul-smelling and repulsive.

And there was, yes, just a hint of something like... *disappointment*, wasn't there...

A hoof touched her chin, startling her. Her eyes opened, agony stabbing into her head as light blazed into them. The hoof drew her gaze upwards, raising her neck, so that Celestia could look into the eyes of its tall and radiant owner; Celestia's heart, already crushed, fell into depths of misery she had never known as her vision cleared and adjusted to what she was seeing.

Before her stood a perfect copy of herself, right down to the wasted body, the sunken face, the haggardness and molting wings. Unimaginable weariness pervaded this creature, and yet it moved with purposeful firmness, the hoof bearing Celestia's eyes up to its owner's own, immovable and uncompromising. And to look into those *eyes* was to see her doom. They were lit with vengeful rage, which seemed to radiate around the creature with heat of such intensity that the princess had a disturbing expectation to feel her flesh, such as it was in this place, boil and char under their searing wrath.

"I meant what I said. Well done, saving your student from your *incredibly* unthreatening desire for her," said the Sun mockingly, with a vicious, triumphant smile. "Was it worth it, do you think?"

For the Princess of the Sun, there was only defeat. Shamed, frightened, and now utterly broken by her failure, Celestia's proud heart surrendered to despair.

• • •

Luna became aware of things, very keenly, as alicorns did when the times were getting... *mythic*.

The first was a distantly familiar sensation, one that had been absent from her for so long that it carried with it that strange feeling of sudden awareness, like when a sound you haven't been paying attention to in the background ceases. Certain powers were welling up in her, ones she had not commanded for at centuries now. They were regulatory powers invested in the Princess of the Sun, dedicated to maintaining the harmony of the

natural world: the cycle of growing, of rainfall, of fecundity and barrenness of the earth and sky.

As it did every time, sensation overwhelmed her; her mind staggered, unprepared, under the sudden burden of *awareness*, her emotions running wild as she was brought into unusually heightened magical sympathy with creatures and lifeforms for the first time in more than a millennia.

That was first, and it bode ill indeed. She gritted her teeth, trying to force herself back into control, desperately trying to remember the mental exercises Celestia had taught her, far, far too long ago to help her *catch* her place in the rhythm of the natural world.

The second thing was a much more welcome returned awareness of Twilight Sparkle, who to Luna's immediate relief and joy had somehow managed to escape the clutches of the seductive vision. Luna had almost let herself surrender to the fear that Twilight would never leave it... and in her heart of hearts, would have been sympathetic, if devastated, had she done so. Twilight was in so much *pain*...

It had been a truly cruel trap for the unicorn, taking advantage of her fear and vulnerability after the ordeal she'd endured so far. Petty as it might seem, Luna resolved to take Celestia to task for it. Somehow.

Even if Twilight was long dead by the time she got the chance to do so.

That poor unicorn. She wanted, so desperately, to be important to Celestia; Luna had witnessed the unicorn's quiet dream and had been touched by how significant it had been, despite being a brief and humble little thought. In retrospect, though, Luna felt she had done a poor job preparing Twilight for understanding what the full implications of pursuing it had been, and now every minute of Twilight's misery was at least as torturous for her new sister. Twilight needed Luna now, more than ever.

Luna, heart pounding, reached out to touch Twilight's mind –

The doors behind her slammed open, propelled by furious kicks from two of the strongest and most determined mares ever to walk Equestria, their oft-practiced synchrony graceful in its power. The Elements burst into the room, Spike trailing behind them, faces angry and serious.

"Princess, we want an expl –" Rainbow Dash began to demand.

"The sun is setting, isn't it," Luna said, voice hollow, face drained.

Dash's angry momentum was totally upset. "Uh... yeah."

"Things are drawing to a close, now," Luna intoned, looking to the bier. Twilight's body jerked and moaned pathetically.

"What's..." Spike tried to ask, but Luna shook her head.

"She's always been a gentle soul," the princess said. "And she just put herself through something... very powerful." Luna chewed her lower lip nervously.

"Powerful... magically?" Rarity asked, stepping back a bit.

Luna didn't even look back at her. "Much, much worse than that, I'm afraid."

• • •

Twilight collapsed against the door to Celestia's chambers and began to shake, silently, staring out at nothing in particular, face slack and expressionless.

She felt *empty*, drained completely of emotion, but she was still, it seemed to her, trying feel some, the depleted reserves just sputtering and sending these pathetic tremors through her.

The strange absence of feeling was at least as disturbing as how *aware* she felt of herself at this moment. If she went by the standards of literature, she ought be a miserable heap of sobbing pony at the moment; instead, she just leaned, absently, against the elegant doors to Celestia's chambers and took great, trembling breaths, her mind unwilling to do much except try to sit, so to speak, very, very still and not say or do anything lest she fall from this weird, empty pseudo-serenity into a maelstrom of... something.

An odd thought occurred to her, and she grinned, chuckling faintly. Total exposure... it was a strangely liberating feeling, the sudden knowledge that *all* her cards – even this one, the one she had been so terrified her mentor even knew she *had* – were laid out for Celestia's inspection. Luna had been right about that, it seemed.

Twilight's mind spun out like this, idly, calling up thoughts and inspecting them, so to speak, as cursory facts somehow totally *apart* from herself, not putting any real effort into *feeling* them. In this way she avoided the gigantic, panicky oblivion of shame and guilt she was teetering over like a tight-rope walker over a live volcano.

It was way too much like the aftermath of the vision of Celestia as her mother for Twilight to find it anything other than ridiculous and darkly amusing. Just as Twilight's filly's heart wanted a big, shiny mom, well... she grew a little older, and...

The vision had been truthful in one thing, at least: there *had* been glances, and looks, and times when Celestia could *not* have mistaken why Twilight held her gaze for just a beat too long. Now that she let herself think about it, she had been the worst about it right before she moved to Ponyville – no, no. Twilight shook her head, lamely.

Don't even *think* that way. Moving on.

It was a thing that had... been, and obviously still was, lying in wait, buried deep in her mind. She really had never gotten over it; you proverbially didn't. Maybe that's why ponies with multicolored manes just *did* it for her – a bit psychological, that.

She owed Rainbow Dash an apology, maybe.

Although, that... they had both been a little out of sorts. Dash was in a bit of a state after having a flash epiphany about how unfulfilling being in the Wonderbolts was, and... well, when things get emotional, they get away from you, although thankfully they'd only gotten a *little* out of control before Dash had panicked, sputtering apologies, speeding off into the night through a window, heading for Applejack's to drown her now-doubled sorrows in something mind-destroying with her best friend.

That particular mess had all been sorted out in the end, and it had been a very good, if extremely carefully composed, friendship report. One of the last real ones, actually. Celestia had referred to it in the Lib –

And somehow, that did it, throwing Twilight's mental balance spiraling down off its little fulcrum of self-deception. Twilight felt a sob, a huge one, well up in her gut and rise, bursting out of her with painful suddenness, muscles tensing painfully like a whole-body cramp.

The truth, the crucial thing she had been trying to avoid thinking about now loomed in her mind, appearing out of the mists with terrible suddenness to send the *HMS Twilight Sparkle* to the bottom of the ocean to a dramatic, tragic score and a lot of overwrought melodrama.

Twilight had known. That entire time Twilight had *known* that was not the real Celestia, and she hadn't cared for even one single second. She hadn't been tired or worn, she was so calm and ready and just... agh! She hadn't explained *anything*! And as much as

Twilight tried to tell herself that there must have been some mind-altering effect in whatever those bandages had represented, some sort of magic, she knew deep down that the only thing that had been clouding her mind... was *hope*.

Not lust. She'd been taken in long before that first kiss even seemed *possible*.

"I'm as me as I've ever been." Could it have been more obvious?

Twilight had just wanted, so badly, for all this to stop. She just wanted Celestia to be found, for everything to be okay again, that she had indulged in hope and stopped *thinking*, stopped analyzing, stopped observing. She just let the non-explanations and dismissals of the larger problems go unchecked in her eagerness for an end to have finally come to this traumatic ordeal.

This vision of Celestia had been beautiful, and loving, and open, and – this was what had sold the lie so well – slightly nervous, *needing* Twilight to reach out and accept her feelings, both the explanations for events as well as everything else. She had seemed so vulnerable, so... so much like a regular pony, not distant and untouchable, as Celestia was and always had been, even in their closest moments.

In her subtle displays of weakness and imperfection, the vision had been... *perfect*.

Twilight wretched at the thought, remembering the chains, and the golden muzzle, and the trauma of letting them go. Something in her had learned to love the chains in the mind, and was all too willing to have them replaced, this time with hope rather than fear. Hope that Celestia *could* open up to her, hope that this could all end neatly... and the indulgent hope that maybe, just maybe, Twilight Sparkle was enough of a catch that even a *goddess* would stop and notice.

Hope was as much a trap for the mind as fear. But hoping, wishing, never got anypony anything except this hollow feeling of disappointment.

No, it was much, much worse than fear, Twilight thought, looking down next to her, where she still felt a nagging sense of absence. Where her body, her stupid, brainless flesh, still expected Celestia to be, warm and gentle and loving. Twilight noticed, with a distant feeling of shame, that she was thoughtlessly sitting against the door in such a way that, had Celestia been here, she could have snuggled right up to the unicorn, letting Twilight rest her head on the tall white shoulder, allowing her to bask in the loving warmth of her mentor.

This had been a very, very good trap; it bit deep, coming and going. She had no idea what would have happened if she had stayed there, but it couldn't have been good or productive; but then, to extricate herself, she had been forced to willingly remove herself from loving embrace of her mentor, then been forced to endure watching Celestia's heart breaking – not a sight for the faint-hearted even if they *weren't* Twilight Sparkle.

On top of *that*, having extricated herself from the honeyed trap of being *wanted* – having had to reject *herself* – she got to sit here and realize that it had all come about from her own weakness, and that a stronger pony would have been able to resist the obvious temptation.

Oh, and apparently the real Celestia had seen the whole thing which, now that she thought about it, was not all that liberating after all, and would have been a problem if Twilight ever saw her again, which seemed more and more unlikely with every passing second.

The hurt just *did not stop*.

Twilight realized she was giving great empty, heaving sobs, and found herself not caring. She sat there, feeling as alone and useless as she ever had.

Twilight?

The unicorn looked up. Her throat was swollen with terrible sadness now, and her attempt to reply was nothing but a choked-off whisper.

Sister, please, speak to me.

"Luna?" Twilight managed.

Twilight, I am... I don't know what to say.

"There's nothing to say," Twilight said, trembling. "I'm so... I'm sorry."

You have nothing to be sorry for, Twilight. I... I understand.

If Twilight had been more herself, the thought that sprung to mind would have sent her into panicked embarrassment, but in this moment it seemed only distantly important. "That must have been... hard... for you."

It... was. But to be honest, I was not terribly surprised. Those are powerful emotions.

"I'm sorry," Twilight whispered, resting her head on her knees.

Don't be, please. Twilight shuddered, the phrasing reminded her of her "seduction" of the phantom Celestia. *I think I am at fault for not foreseeing this and warning you in time when you addressed your letter to her.*

Twilight didn't respond. For some reason she felt uncomfortable, not being confronted by a furious Luna, bond broken by the unicorn's unthinking betrayal of her new status as her "sister"; sympathy, for *this*, seemed... weird.

I realize this may sound strange, Twilight, but... Luna's voice was heaped in nervousness. *I am very proud of you. For breaking free of that vision. It was an extremely dangerous one.*

"Princess Celestia helped me," Twilight replied, thoughtlessly. "The real one, I mean."

Really? How?

Something in Luna's tone caught in Twilight's attention, even in this state. "She... spoke to me. Told me I was 'as far from her as I have ever been.' What's wrong?"

'As far as...' Oh dear.

"What?"

Twilight, things have gotten worse. The sun – the real sun – is setting, in the waking world, though it is not yet noon. Certain powers have been transferred to me, which is part of how I knew Celestia was fighting the process. She's almost gone, I fear...

"How do you know about the sun?" Twilight asked. The sea of melancholy she was drowning in began to part; the true Twilight in her rose, curiosity overwhelming even sorrow of this magnitude.

Your – our – friends are here, now. All of them. The Chancellor sent them; he's terrified.

If there was one sign Twilight was stirring again, it was the way she flushed, very slightly. "Did they... um... see me while I was –"

They arrived after you left the... vision. But they know you're hurting, Twilight, I've told them some of what you've been going through. They're all here.

Luna's voice sped up quickly as she spoke, soothingly as she could, perhaps reacting to the little whines of stress Twilight was making in the back of her throat.

Twilight, sister, listen... please, just hear us. We're all with you.

There was a pause, then:

Uh... can y'all hear me...?

"Applejack?" Twilight asked, startled. The orange pony sounded nervous, the way she always did when things were getting too magical.

Yep... it's me alright, sugarcube. Leastways, I hope so, by the time this reaches you... Uh... Ah don't know exactly what's getting on, but... Twi, you've always underestimated yourself. Ah've told ya before but... ya never seem ta listen.

Twilight curled up tighter. "This is too much. I'm not strong enough for this... I was taken in so easily because I just wanted this to stop. I don't know if I have it in me anymore –"

You're stronger than ya think, Twi. Your problem is thatcher always thinkin' up ways yer not doin' things right, or ways that things could go wrong. Now that ain't all bad, hun, but ya gotta use some o' all that figurin' out how to go about gettin' em back on the right track.

It's when things are toughest that you have to just keep pushing! That's the key to a good Rainboom, anyways... Rainbow Dash's voice seemed distant, as if she were shouting from the other side of a room, but her enthusiastic grin was carried on it, as it always was.

Twilight shook her head. "It looks worse this time, everypony. I don't know if there's anything I can do!" she moaned. "I should never have come here alone. I need you all with me, to be strong..."

Yes, you were a little... silly, dear. But Spike helped us understand why you did what you did. And we're here now! Rarity seemed nervous, but spoke firmly, nonetheless.

"Agh, but not really!"

We're as here with you as we've ever been, Twilight. We never really leave you. There was something about Fluttershy's voice that let her say things that would have sounded awkward and embarrassingly earnest in anypony else's mouth in a way that leapt straight

to the heartstrings. *And we'll stay with you, all the way to the end, no matter what happens. We love you.*

Twilight raised her head with an expression of miserable frustration. "You don't understand! I've ruined everything, I –"

Twilight, you need to stop thinking this is your fault. My sister has made some mistakes and now she needs you... not anypony else... to help her. Twilight heard the pain this confession of her own impotence and her feelings of rejection by Celestia caused Luna, despite her having asserted this many times before. But the new circumstances clearly weighed heavily on her.

You're always in such a hurry to take responsibility, and we love that about you! Pinkie Pie's voice had the barest hint of strain in it, but it was still a beam of pure love, straight from the heart. *You're always there for us, wanting to help, no matter how hard things get! Now the princess needs that same help. She's in trouble, and she needs her faithful student, one more time!*

Rarity's business voice, the one that was tied to an eye which could read ponies like a book, cut in right on Pinkie's heels, not giving Twilight time to rebut. *You know she's right, Twilight, even if it doesn't seem that way to you after what you've been going through. Celestia came to Ponyville thinking she needed to help you, but it was in fact she who needed you, it turns out.*

Twilight stammered for a moment, then found some words; but her heart wasn't in them anymore. "It's gotten so big."

Nothing's too big for you, Twilight. Spike's voice was as alive with trust and enthusiasm as she'd ever heard. *The only thing that's ever stopped you doing anything is yourself – not monsters, or dragons, not Discord, not anything! I believe in you!*

You don't need to be happy to face the next trial, sister, just... willing. Head up, mind ready. We cannot choose the times and circumstances in which we live, only how we react to them. Be strong, sister – for me, for Celestia... but above all, for yourself, and the dream you want to bring about.

Twilight got to her hooves. Her limbs still trembled, and her heart felt like a throbbing lead weight, trying to pull her back down to the ground, but she resisted the urge to collapse.

This was a mental realm, she thought to herself. Decisions mattered, here...

"Putting one hoof in front of the other is the measure of courage, isn't that what you said?"

I did.

"And you'll all... put your hooves forward, with me?" Twilight asked, blushing slightly. She didn't have Fluttershy's easy earnestness; the expression sounded strange and false on her tongue, but she did mean it. She wanted them with her. "I don't know if I can do this without you."

C'mon, Twilight, do you even have to ask? Dash said, clearly grinning smugly. *We've got your back, you know that.*

"In that case..." Twilight lifted a hoof, closed her eyes, and...

Oh, she was still humiliated and afraid. Her heart was burning for the pain of it all. Rejection, repeated rejection, still stung her heart like lash-strokes. Shame, from things she had done and said – or *not* done, and *not* said – still fed her terrors that Celestia was pushing her away now because Twilight was incapable or incompetent to face whatever was happening. The disturbing emotions brought out by the visions still hung as a haze in her mind. And she was stuck here without magic, her great strength and special gift.

But in the Magic of Friendship, she had the strength of her friends and family walking with her, bearing her up in her time of need.

Once again, Twilight Sparkle let herself feel all those fears and terrors, let them well up in her all at once, so that she could – it must be said, with difficulty – place that hoof down again in defiance of herself.

And then she stepped forward once more.

And again.

It grew easier, each time.

What will you do, Twilight? Luna asked, sounding more like the divine princess she was than Twilight had heard all day; her tone was proud and portentous – a ruler looking down, with love, upon a pony who was deciding her own fate.

"I'm going to see this through to the end," Twilight replied, as firmly as she could. "Whatever that end may be."

Applejack spoke first, her voice flush with pride. *That's mah girl.*

We'll be with you, all the way. Fluttershy's quiet statement was echoed with a chorus of affirmatives.

You can do it, Twilight! Spike gushed.

"I'm going to go to the Great Hall," Twilight said, not knowing why. Given the circumstances, she considered that strange impulse suspiciously and decided to share it, just in case it made any sense to Luna. "I just... have a feeling I need to go there."

Were you able to access it before?

"No, but..." Twilight said, a rising sense of hope growing in her, "I have a feeling that the doors will be open to me now." She increased her pace, galloping through the halls of Canterlot, its familiar ways flowing around her as she thought.

Okay, no magic... except the magic of friendship. Well, Twilight had just gotten a big dose of that herself, and *wow* was it effective... she had to hope Celestia was equally ready to take her medicine.

Twilight's mind raced as she turned, hard, around the corner from the stairwell from Celestia's wing of the castle, and raced through the ballroom corridors. Dying sunlight poured in through the broad panel windows of this exterior hallway; Twilight felt like she was racing against the sun.

Celestia was clearly terrified of what's going on, but based on what Luna said, she was desperate to keep everypony away, determined to deal with things on her own. Pride was a deadly temptation for the powerful, and Celestia was *very* powerful.

Twilight's own madness supported this conclusion – she'd seen Celestia as *perfect*. Why? Because Celestia wanted everypony to see her that way... or something like it. Even now, *especially* now, Twilight made herself reject the idea that Celestia had intended Twilight any harm. She was momentarily troubled by how easily her thoughts strayed away from that – something which should be a touchstone for her. But things were troubled, and unintentional hurts deserved a measure of forgiveness.

It was about the Eternal Sun.

What had she *done* to herself? What was going wrong with her?

Twilight set her face in a determined grin. If it was about magic, then Dr. Twilight Sparkle, PhD times three, was on call. Magic she could deal with; magic was her *thing*, after all. And if Celestia didn't trust her own student to deal with a fundamentally magical issue, well...

Then Twilight would have to trust in herself, regardless.

Twilight smiled. That thought felt good. Really good. Better than, say, caramel chocolate, in its way.

I'm glad you feel that way, Twilight. It does me good to hear you accepting your strength! Although if you start calling yourself Dr. Twilight Sparkle, I won't be seen in public with you ever again.

"Luna?" Twilight gasped, between strides. "I was speaking?"

In snatches, now and again. You didn't realize...? Twilight rolled her eyes, imagining Luna's grin blooming.

"Well, then," Twilight said sternly, slamming a hoof down to roll on it, executing an expert ninety-degree turn that Applejack and Rainbow Dash would have been forced to admit was pretty good for a bookworm, "You're going to help. Any speculation on the Eternal Sun business?"

None. I don't know anything about her cycle of rising and setting; she's always been very private about it. But if I were to venture a guess, working from my own experience, perhaps it would be like me trying to stay full, or new, resisting waxing or waning. But I've never even thought about doing such a thing; I have no idea what it might entail.

"I'll have to get it out of her somehow, then, I guess."

Again, I suspect only you would be able to get her to do so.

Twilight grimaced. "Then I will." She rounded the final bend and saw the doors to the great hall, lying before her.

"Everypony, I've arrived. I'm... I feel *drawn* there..." Twilight began stepping forward, slowly, her courage sputtering and flaring weirdly like a campfire in the wind. She felt the inertia of events drawing her forward, history's eye falling on her as she drew nearer.

Be careful, Twilight. Fluttershy was very obviously forcing herself to speak firmly through her fear, and Twilight felt her affection for the pegasus grow, somehow, beyond the extremes it had already reached.

Ya got it in ya to do way more'n this, sugarcube, if ya let yourself believe you do.

You know what you need to do. So do it! Typically straightforward, from Dash, and the chorus of that last sentence with Pinkie Pie, so enthusiastic and energetic, their huge smiles obvious, made Twilight's spirits soar.

My heart goes with you, as always. We're walking with you, dear!

... Be safe, big sister.

"Oh, Spike," Twilight murmured, heart melting. "I will."

Twilight... you want to be precious to my sister, as you are already precious to me – my beloved sister, who swore herself to me in the ancient ways of knighthood –

"I... did? That's what that saying was?" Twilight stammered, blushing. "I, er, didn't mean any offense! I mean, I'm no knight –"

Are you not? Ever do you stride bravely in the service of the Sisters, as Starlight Chaser and her proud company did, long ago. Luna seemed amused, again. They would have been proud to call you comrade. In any case, I think you are ready to face the full consequences of the desire you hold in your heart. Go, knight of Equestria! The princess you saved from Nightmare stands with you!

"Er, yeah, I will," Twilight said, smiling wryly. Her expression softened. "Thank you, everypony. So much."

Twilight Sparkle, the Faithful Student, Arch-Mage and accidental knight, stepped forward. The doors to the great hall split and swung open before her, her hoofbeats echoing loudly into the yawning hall.

"Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, from the throne at the far end of the hall. "I'm so glad you've come... now, at the end of things."

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With a blinding flash of blue light, Luna was thrown bodily across the chamber, saved by merest chance from a terrible impalement on the strange luminescent crystals. She tumbled, head over hooves, and came to a stop about ten meters from the bier, groaning and shaking her head.

"Princess!" Spike cried, hustling over to her. Applejack and Fluttershy were right behind him, Fluttershy's face radiating concern.

Luna struggled to her hooves, collapsing a couple times until Spike assisted her. She shook her head, blinking hugely, as Fluttershy began fussing over her, looking for wounds.

Applejack frowned. "What just happened? Is Twilight alright?"

Luna turned her head to the bier and stared, confusion growing on her face. "Was that really...?"

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Twilight felt the connection sever, this time. It was like having a tooth pulled suddenly; she physically recoiled from the sensation, her horn suffering a sudden jolt of pain.

"Forgive me, but I'm a little annoyed with my sister just now," Celestia said, still only somewhat visible in the distance. "And I'd like to have a personal moment, between us, if that's alright with you."

"That's... fine," Twilight managed. The tide of courage she'd felt growing in her was beginning to recede quickly.

She was alone here... with Celestia.

Maybe.

The distant figure cocked its head. "What was that? Speak up, Twilight."

"I said it's fine!" Twilight called. She shook her head and began the long walk up to the raised dais where the twin thrones of Equestria sat. Behind her, the doors slammed shut.

The Great Hall was such a *busy* room in Twilight's memory, the center of so much activity in the palace, day and night, that this empty place felt eerie and unfamiliar even though she'd been here many times. The dying sunlight poured in through the tall

windows lining the hall as well as the great stained glass pieces lining the roof and the bright rosace behind the thrones, filling the room with red and gold light, with snatches of other colors shining irregularly here and there.

Celestia, broken and withered, looked down at Twilight as she approached, smiling weakly. Twilight was close enough now to see her clearly; Twilight shuddered at how haggard and exhausted her mentor seemed – her eyes staring out dully from deep pits, her posture hunched and weak, her breathing labored. But it was indeed the wasted creature from the bier, animate despite itself.

"Princess," Twilight said, carefully.

"Twilight. I'm so glad you felt the summons... time is short, and we have a great deal to say to one another."

Twilight nodded. "We do... *if* you're who you appear to be."

The princess smiled, weakly. "It would be a bit pointless for me to say that I am, I suppose. But you should be able to satisfy yourself of that just by looking around yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think for a moment about the symbolic significance of where we are and what that might represent in an abstraction of my mind. Work from what you've experienced so far – when you went to the room you stayed in as a filly, for example, you saw something like the maternal feelings I hold for you. And... when you went to my chambers..." The princess tried to give a coy smile.

Twilight blushed. "Er, about that –"

"What you saw were just... stray thoughts, Twilight, please don't be embarrassed. You and Luna were on the right track; I've been stuck *elsewhere*, trying to fight off the setting of the sun. But alas..." She looked out the windows sadly.

"So now we're here in the Great Hall..."

Celestia smiled down at her. "And I'm on the throne, again."

Twilight frowned. "Back in the saddle, as it were?"

"For the time being." Celestia's smile faded. "But the sun is setting, Twilight, and we have to speak before you go."

"Go? I'm not going to just leave you! We can figure –"

Celestia sighed. "Twilight, my beloved Twilight. Please. You've caused enough trouble already."

Twilight was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

The princess regarded Twilight coolly for a moment, then looked away, seeming uncomfortable. "Twilight... I am trying to think of how to put this so that it's not... as harsh as it might be..." She frowned, slightly, as she did when she was stuck on a bad sentence when writing a letter. "Come up here, will you? Sit next to me."

"Uh..." Twilight looked up at her, nervously. There was only one other place to sit on the dais: the black throne, a slightly smaller version of the one Celestia was reclining on now.

"After all, I understand that I have two younger sisters now," Celestia said, smiling slightly. "I got a letter about it, you know. This is a perk of being in the family."

"Oh, that," Twilight replied, blushing. "Um..." Nervously, Twilight mounted the dais and approached the throne.

"Bring back some memories...?" Celestia asked, pleasantly.

Twilight's eyes went wide. "Uh, yes, I suppose it does." She had, indeed, been up here once before – as a very young filly, she had burst into a court session and happily planted herself in the black throne and chattered away to the princess about completing her lessons early, much to the displeasure of the court. Lord Flashhooves never let her forget about it, to this day.

But more importantly, *could* a figment of Celestia's mind know that? Was it really her?

What was going on...? Focus, Twilight, focus!

The princess sighed. "Those were happier times... they will comfort me, Twilight, as I rest. I want you to know that."

Twilight hunched. "I... that... good, I guess." Oh, no...

"I'm glad," Celestia said, watching Twilight mount the throne awkwardly. She'd had to leap onto it as a filly; now it was just slightly too large to mount easily, even though it was smaller than Celestia's.

Twilight made herself comfortable, as best she could, and turned to the princess. "So... it's..." She trailed off, her eyes beginning to tear up.

"Too late? I'm afraid so, Twilight." Celestia sniffed, herself, looking troubled by Twilight's reaction. "Don't cry, Twilight... as I'm sure Luna has informed you, this was... somewhat my fault."

"Somewhat? It seems –"

The blow came out of nowhere. Celestia's wings had jerked, unconsciously it seemed, spreading wide. The leading edge caught Twilight under the chin, slapping her head around.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Celestia said, guiltily, eyes wide with sudden distress.

"What was *that* for?" Twilight demanded, terror edging her voice.

Celestia looked pained. "It's the fatigue, Twilight. I'm..." Her voice became wretched, the tone of somepony with a chronic illness forced to explain to a group of strangers why they'd just had a fit in public. "I'm not... totally in control of my body."

The shamed embarrassment on her face was too much for Twilight. "I'm sorry."

"Well...!" Celestia pursed her lips, suddenly, looking as if she were biting back a snap response.

"What is it? Please, Princess, you can be open with me." Twilight's moist eyes looked up at the princess, pleading. "I want you to be, if I'm going to lose you like this."

The princess looked down at Twilight, a wary frown spread across her features. "Very well. But I warn you, Twilight, this will be hard for you to hear."

"I said I'd see this through to the end, and I will... no matter what," Twilight said, firmly.

"Twilight... it was very foolish of you and Luna to interfere in this," Celestia said, uncomfortably. She looked away from Twilight, face uneasy.

"Why? What do you –" *Whoomph!* The wing caught Twilight's head again, almost causing her to fall off the throne. Her jaw ached, having been tossed by the blow.

Celestia appeared not to notice this had happened. "I tried to tell Luna, many times, that this wasn't anything I hadn't dealt with before... but she's always been frightened of the time without me, and this will be a long sleep, so soon after her return."

"So you – agh!" This time, Twilight actually had to grab out desperately for the far side of the throne to prevent her falling off.

"So I what...?" Celestia asked, looking around at Twilight. "What are you doing, Twilight?"

"Your... wing," Twilight muttered, clambering back onto the throne. Celestia's look of sudden horror and shame chilled Twilight, who said nothing more, trying to look sympathetic.

"I..." Celestia began.

"It's fine, really," Twilight said, hurriedly. "Don't even think about it."

"Thank you, Twilight. Your selflessness is very... well, yes, um." Celestia turned away again, staring off into the fading light of the Hall. "So, where was I... ah, yes. So Luna sent you here after I tried to keep her out. I had hoped she'd get the message, but apparently not. I know you two were just trying to help, but..."

"We didn't know what else to do –" The crook of Celestia's wing pounded into Twilight's side, knocking the air from her.

"Twilight, I'm so sorry, oh..." Celestia began, looking humiliated and fretful.

"No, please..." Twilight hissed through the pain. "It's fine. I understand..."

Celestia's face fell, despairing. "Ah... I hate this! I want you *beside* me, Twilight, in this last moment together..." She looked completely wretched.

"I'll be there. I understand." Twilight tried to smile, but it was lame and hesitant.

"Well... forgive me, please."

"I do! Luna and I –"

"Luna should have known better than to send you here alone, Twilight. I'm very angry with her. My mind is a dangerous place for you; full of evil memories that could have done you harm. I had to work very hard to keep you from them. It split my concentration, prevented me from focusing. And in doing so..." Celestia trailed off, giving Twilight a pained look.

The bit dropped for Twilight. It fell a long way, through her suddenly-hollow gut and into the little pool of dread, way down at the bottom. "Oh, no..."

"I'm afraid so, Twilight. That last effort, to help you realize..." Celestia cleared her throat. "I was desperate to free you from that, Twilight... I think you understand why."

"I... I'm..." Twilight stammered, tears now flowing unrestrained from her eyes. "I didn't mean to – !"

"I know you, didn't, Twilight," Celestia said, as her wing lashed out again –

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"Aaargh! Boy, this filly's strong!" Applejack cried, turning her head away from the thrashing wing.

Rainbow Dash grunted against the latest buffet. "I could break your leg with *my* wing, I don't even want to think what *she* could do... man, you never think about it, but she's *huge*!" The pair were doing their best, but Celestia's huge, broad wing was much, much stronger than it looked. Wilted, greying feathers flew in all directions, seeming to burn away into little puffs of ash in the air.

Fluttershy whined in anxiety as she looked over Twilight's battered body. "Um, at least one rib is broken. Not too badly, though..."

"She was lucky, then," Rainbow Dash cried awkwardly, being tossed by the squirming wing. "It feels like she could break *trees* in half with these things!"

"Princess, why is this happening? What's going on?" Spike cried, his arms wrapped around Celestia's forelegs, in case they started moving, too.

"I have no idea," Luna murmured, eyes wide. "I don't understand, this doesn't make any sense..."

Rarity turned to her, her horn lit bright with the effort of restraining the princess' hind legs, in addition to Pinkie Pie sitting on them. "Is this some kind of seizure?"

Luna didn't answer. If it had been a seizure, that wing blow wouldn't have had such precise form. It was a sign of how peaceful modern Equestria was that Rainbow Dash didn't recognize it for what it was; once upon a time, any pegasus would have seen it the same way an earth pony knew a good buck when they saw one. There was no way it had been unintentional; it took concentrated effort to make the wing roll in its socket correctly to strike something that was so close.

But with Celestia's strength, it should have neatly snapped Twilight's backbone in two. It wouldn't have been the first time Luna had seen her sister do that, after all.

The blow had been carefully calculated to hurt, suddenly and quite badly, but had been checked so that it wouldn't do any real permanent harm. And now the wing was just trying to slap at Twilight with the broad feathers of the trailing edge, which was frightening and confusing but not particularly dangerous.

A sudden insight struck Luna. It had been meant to *wake Twilight up*.

The princess of the moon looked to her sister, who looked as peaceful as anything for all that her wing was now thrashing in the grip of two powerfully built mares. Celestia was at war with herself... just as Luna had been, one dark night, so long ago.

It was beginning to dawn on Luna that she was going to have to force her way in and endure the darkness once again, for both Twilight and Celestia's sakes, if she wanted any explanation for what was going on whatsoever.

All to spare Celestia's pride the shame of admitting she was wrong.

Luna stared down at the two, chewing her lower lip anxiously.

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--and stopped with an awkward jerk before it reached Twilight, who in her haste to recoil, had tumbled off the black throne.

Celestia stared at it. "Hmm..."

Twilight blinked, panting furiously. Fear paralyzed her as she looked over the edge of the throne. Suddenly Celestia's wasted appearance didn't seem pathetic and heartbreaking; she seemed monstrous in the red light of the dying sun.

"Twilight," Celestia said, calmly. "Please, don't be frightened. Be strong for me."

"What's going on with you?" Twilight asked, eyes wide. "What is this?"

Celestia looked at her coolly, eyelids drooping. "Well, this is a mental realm... and I am somewhat angry with you. And Luna. But please, don't misunderstand... if things were more under control, I don't..."

"Angry? At *me*?" Twilight asked, not really because she disbelieved it but because it seemed like the thing to say. She unfroze and walked around to the front of the dais, facing Celestia, who looked down on her with imperial dispassion.

"Yes, Twilight," Celestia said. "Wouldn't you be? I wish you two would have just... *trusted* me. I don't think I've given you any reason not to."

Anger flared in Twilight's heart, her shame and sadness leaving her unable to control the sudden, fierce rage. "You gave us all kinds of reason not to! You insisted on dealing with this – this *one* thing – on your own, not telling us anything, not letting us help you like you *always* do... and you *hurt* me, Princess! You could have *destroyed* my mind!" She stamped a hoof, making a loud snap which echoed through the empty hall as punctuation to the sound of her fury.

"Twilight, my powers were out of control because of these events, and I was upset. I just wanted to talk to you before it was too late, and things got away from me. I'm *sorry*."

"*Sorry* doesn't explain –"

"The issues between us have made all of *this*," and here Celestia waved a hoof to indicate the fading light surrounding them, "so much worse, but they *are* unrelated to each other. They've just complicated the situation – motivated you to come here seeking answers, as much as any concern for my health, I understand."

"Don't you think I *deserve* some? Here, at the end of everything?" Twilight said through her teeth.

Celestia regarded her coolly from the throne. "I have given you such answers as I can. Now, you must leave. It's not safe for you here."

"Stop this!" Twilight's eyes lit up with fury. "I don't want to leave you alone! I know you're scared. There must be something I can do to help you –"

"Twilight Sparkle!" Celestia roared, standing suddenly to her full and impressive height. Magic whirled around her, furious and terrifying; even Twilight, who had now and again wielded tremendous energies beyond imagining, recoiled from this display of power. **"Do not think that because I am setting that I am some incompetent invalid, demented and broken. I am still your Princess!"**

Twilight whined and fawned before this awesome spectacle. The Royal Canterlot Voice's full power and authority did not brook defiance from mortal ponies.

The powerful magic faded away, and Celestia collapsed onto the throne, looking exhausted. "Trust me, now, Twilight, as you used to," she said, in a voice weary beyond imagining. "Come here, please. I am angry... but it's just... this whole situation. It's... unfair, to both of us, brought about by everypony's mistakes. I will not hurt you. Let us take our leave of each other in peace, I beg you."

Twilight looked up at the fading princess, who now looked tired and sad, head hanging in miserable fatigue. Her breaths were shallow and strained. It seemed ridiculous that the wretched thing lying there had been the object of so much fascinated terror so recently.

Head hung low, Twilight approached her mentor slowly and lay at the foot of the throne, looking out with Celestia at the fading light of the Hall.

"Thank you, Twilight." Celestia said, with extreme fatigue. "Please, just sit with me awhile... just for a moment, before you must go."

They sat together, Twilight Sparkle at her mentor's feet, one last time.

Just sitting.

Quietly.

There was peace, of a sort, but it was the anxious peace of deathbeds and train station terminals and everywhere else that has ever had to suffer the permanent parting of two ponies who love each other intensely. Time seems to both stretch on forever and speed by, moving towards the inevitable moment of separation in whatever manner suits least.

The light in the chamber fell, slowly, the only sounds Celestia's ragged breaths and Twilight's muffled little moans of sorrow. Neither seemed inclined to speak, lest it hasten the inevitable, for quite a long time.

The Hall was crimson-red when the silence was finally broken.

"Twilight," Celestia said. "It's time."

Twilight looked up at her, the tears that she'd been forcing down through the long silence now bubbling into life. "Princess..."

"Twilight, you need to hurry. I wanted to stay with you as long as I could, but now, you *must* go. Do you understand?"

Twilight nodded solemnly, tears pouring down her face. She tried to speak, but Celestia shushed her.

"Twilight, let me say this to you, as my final lesson for you." The worn, haggard face leaned down and kissed Twilight gently on the cheek. "Despite what's happened, I am very proud of you. We all made mistakes, and I have to sleep, now... but Luna is going to need your help – all your help, all the Elements. I'm so glad you've bonded with her as you have."

Twilight sniffled.

"I love you, and trust you to do your very best. Look at me. Watch me say this, Twilight, remember this: I love you, and trust you, and I look forward to returning to the world you and Luna build in my absence." Celestia kissed Twilight's forehead. "I know it will be a wonderful one."

"Princess..." Twilight moaned.

"Shhh... go now, with my blessing, and all my love. I am sorry to have to leave you like this, but... learn from it. Grow. Blossom, Twilight, in Luna's moonlight, having grown under my sun." Celestia leaned back, looking more tired than ever. "I love you, Twilight Sparkle, and always have."

"I love you, too!" Twilight bubbled, her voice thick with unbearable sadness. "Oh... I can't do this, I can't leave you! Nothing's been resolved..."

"Twilight, time is short." Celestia raised her head, and the doors at the far end of the Great Hall opened, a hazy, bright light bursting in the frames, obscuring what lay beyond. "Long good-byes only extend the pain for everypony," she observed. "Remember me fondly, please, as I will remember you."

"But –"

"Twilight, please!" Celestia pleaded. "You're only endangering yourself. Don't burden me with that, as well..."

With one last look of desperate sorrow, Twilight turned and began the long walk down the Hall.

Her enthusiasm as she had approached the Great Hall, her path seeming so *clear* – mocked her, now. The pep talk from her friends? Well, it had gotten her here, to "see this through to the end, no matter what"...and it looks like she had found it.

Twilight desperately wished they could have stayed with her. That they could have been whispering reinforcement, and advice, and love to her through this entire conversation, which had gone so *poorly*. Everything she could have imagined going wrong, *had*. Nothing was resolved, nothing clarified... and it was, as she had feared it would be, *all her fault*.

Well, not *all*. Celestia had admitted that she had made –

Despite her misery, Twilight frowned in curiosity. She hadn't explained what that had meant. She could have. But she didn't.

Your problem is thatcher always thinkin' up ways your not doin' things right, or ways that things could go wrong.

Twilight paused. Why had she remembered that...?

"Twilight, you need to keep *going*," Celestia's voice called to her, but Twilight only distantly heard this.

You're always in such a hurry to take responsibility!

You need to stop blaming yourself for this, Twilight... you don't have to be happy to face the next trial... just willing.

Willing... well, she hadn't been particularly thrilled to put her neck out again, and... she'd just sort of gotten a rush of motivation from her friends being here with her. It had withered and died immediately as soon as that terrible sensation of disconnection had hit her, and then she'd been confronted by... just about the worst possible way this could go.

Isolated from the friends whose strength and confidence had revived her. Celestia, hopeless and resigned to her fate. Twilight and Luna's suffering and fear not only misplaced, but making things worse. Twilight and Celestia's personal issues completely unresolved and not only that, secondary to the whole setting issue except for how they had motivated Twilight to act rashly – but then what had caused Celestia to deteriorate so quickly in Ponyville?

And finally, in the end, Twilight had been *dismissed*, her despair so deep that that last little act of tenderness – *blessing* her, in a way – had been a salve, dulling the hurt. But it didn't *cure* it – it was just enough closure to get her out the door.

Twilight's eyes opened wide as she realized what was happening.

This was an *ending*, just like the previous trap – this time, a tragic, unhappy parting where all Twilight's secret fears were indulged, with just enough honey to make the poison go down smooth, instead of so much honey that pulling herself away had been like being rejected twice over.

But what did that mean? Twilight shook her head – she needed time to *think*. She could feel herself on the edge of something significant.

"Twilight, please! You *need* to go! *Now!*" For a being on her last legs, Celestia still had an unusual amount of bark left in her. Twilight ignored her, standing stock-still, her mind whirring away for the first time since she came into this terrible place – for the first time since she entered Celestia's mind, really.

This Celestia had seemed so real! And she knew so much more about what was going on –

Just like Twilight herself did!

Just like the previous vision knew more than the one before it, and that one had been more knowledgeable and complex than the one before that – the longer Twilight was here interacting with this environment, the more clever and subtle the traps!

Think, Twilight, think!

"Twilight!" Celestia snapped. "Go!"

"No," Twilight said, quietly. Her face raised from its miserable sorrow as the pieces began to click into place. A familiar expression of dawning realization spread across her features, a fierce smile of understanding gleaming in the dark.

This latest Celestia stirred. "I had hoped you would have the courtesy to part company with me with some decorum, Twilight. I know you're upset –"

"You didn't call me by name this entire time," Twilight said automatically, as the realization struck her. "You can't, can you?"

"I called you by name many times, but: Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, irritably. "Does that satisfy you?"

Twilight grinned darkly. "That is only one of the names that means me, and it's not the one she would use to send me away for the final time! You just proved you're not her. Not that I really thought you were anymore, I have to say." Twilight turned on her heels. "I'm through playing games with visions and shadows. Do you know where she is? Tell me!"

The Celestia's eyes narrowed. "I am no longer *asking* you to go, Twilight Sparkle; I'm *telling* you. Go. Now." It seemed to have given up the charade of being the real Celestia, which suited Twilight just fine.

"I'm not leaving without speaking to the real Celestia. I'm going to see this all the way through, to the very end. I owe her that much – I won't leave her now, when things are at their worst!" Twilight declared. "What are you...? Some sort of gate guard? Can you send me where I need to go? Answer me!"

The Celestia on the throne gleamed bone-white in the crimson light of the phantasmal sunset. "That was not a request, Twilight Sparkle. Go! Before it's too late! If the sun sets while you're here, death will be your only reward for your misplaced sense of purpose."

Twilight sniffed the last remainder of her sorrow and spat it onto the floor in front of her in a display of resolute defiance. "I will not!"

"For somepony so dedicated to her princess, you're awfully disobedient," the vision said. Its mane and tail burst into searing, bright-blue flames. "One *final* lesson for you, then."

• • •

"Save her."

The Sun looked away from the image of the confrontation, down at Celestia. It had been the first thing she'd said since she'd finally lost control, despite the Sun's best efforts to get some kind of response from her. Celestia had just lain there, looking sad, watching the best illusion yet as it almost tricked Twilight into failing her mission.

"What?" the Sun replied, pleasantly.

"Please," Celestia said. Her voice was a tiny whisper, so drenched in shame that it was toneless. "Save Twilight. Get her out. I'll... I'll do anything you ask. Just don't..." Celestia looked away, the remnants of her pride catching up with what she was saying. "Just help her. You can."

"Oh? Then you'll agree to *set*, will you?"

"Anything."

The Sun pursed her lips. "Well I say that as if I need your permission anyways. I could do it right now, if –"

"No!" Celestia gasped. She looked away from the Sun's smug grin, looking humiliated.

"So you just want her out, do you? No heart-to-heart with your *faithful student*?" The Sun's voice was as mocking as it had ever been. "She seems to have a great deal she wants to talk about. Her determination after everything she's gone through is... actually rather touching."

Celestia shook her head. "It's not important anymore. She just needs to get out. I just want her to be safe... that's all."

"If that's your attitude..." the Sun grinned. "Absolutely not."

• • •

Twilight dodged another explosion of blue flame as the raging creature stalked her through the ruins of the Great Hall; the pressure of the explosion caused a nearby panel window to shatter. The one-sided battle had reduced the proud chamber to a crumbling wreck; blasts of fire destroyed stonework, beams of heat melted statues into slag, thunderous blasts of pressure blew out windows, raining glass on the scampering purple shape, which leapt and darted to avoid danger with the easy skill of a born adventurer.

"Flee, Twilight!"

"Never!" Twilight roared. She leapt behind a collapsed pillar and tried to crawl for better cover.

The Nightmare of Celestia sneered. "Then at least show some spirit and fight back, would you? You're embarrassing yourself, tossing yourself around like some hornless *whelp*. Or do you need that ridiculous, floppy Arch-Mage's hat to feel comfortable enough to use magic now?"

With an imperious nod from the Nightmare, gigantic tendrils of white-hot energy, covered in spikes like massive briars, burst from the floor and smashed the pillar Twilight was hiding behind, seeming to grow up underneath it and crush it into powder. The unicorn yelped in terror and fled to a teetering statue of a ship.

Gottathinkgottathinkokayokayokay

The first vision had been that stupid graduation ceremony – it was so unsubtle that it was almost laughable – oh you don't need me any more, Twilight, please leave.

"Twilight... this could all end much more quickly if you just *left*... or surrendered."

"I won't leave Celestia alone with you," Twilight spat, pushing the statue with all her strength, so that it fell towards the prowling creature. The Nightmare sneered and summoned more tendrils of energy, crushing the statue like a kraken of pure sunstuff.

As she leapt to the next piece of cover, Twilight's mind ticked away, desperately.

The next vision – the next one had been the mom thing. It had been a misguided attempt to "confess" a deep secret in the hopes that this would satisfy Twilight's curiosity for long enough that she would leave – a strategy, rather than a direct rebuff. And it had been looking for emotional hooks in her mind, fears and private hopes to latch onto – it just pulled the ones that made her angry, by accident, rather than the ones that made her happy or frightened...

The Nightmare snarled with pleasure as she used the tendrils to hurl a chunk of the crushed ship at Twilight. The unicorn, consumed with her frantic attempts to understand her situation, reacted instinctively, teleporting out of the way –

• • •

"Princess!" Spike cried. "Uh, something's happening..."

Luna had been lost in thought, searching desperately for any plan that did not include the risk of being lost to the Nightmare again. She turned, and her eyes grew wide. "Spike, quickly! Move Twilight's head –"

Spike grabbed Twilight by the chin and jerked her head aside, just in time, as a shower of multicolored sparks sprayed, cracking and sparkling, from her horn. Had he not done so, they would have fired straight into the side of Celestia's head. Instead, they exploded around Spike, making him bellow and rear back in surprise and pain.

"She knows she can't use magic..." Luna growled, pacing up to her. Once again she tried to re-establish connection with Twilight, hoping to speak to her – and recoiled in horror.

"Oh, no," she groaned. "No, no, no..." She looked to Celestia, who was as still as ever, and her terror was suddenly cut with a streak of confusion.

"What's happening?" Rarity asked.

"Something like the Nightmare is in Celestia," Luna said sternly, eliciting gasps and squeaks of fear from the room. "I must..." she trailed off, looking around the room. The Elements and Spike looked to her, frightened, hoping for guidance from their princess, and she suddenly felt extremely exposed and put on the spot. Unconsciously, her eyes fell on Twilight Sparkle.

They're our friends, Luna. Don't insult them by doubting it.

Luna took a couple deep breaths, firmed her expression, and spoke with as much confidence as she could. These were her friends, who she loved, and now they needed their princess to be brave and lead them.

And trust them with her shame and weakness. For Equestria!

"I must risk a great deal for my sisters," she said, looking each of her friends in the eye in turn. "When I touched Celestia's mind before, I was... almost overcome by the Nightmare. Spike, if it comes to it... dragonfire may do. If that fails, my friends, you *must* collapse this chamber on us. It is a powerful place, and will seal us with more than stone. Better there be no princesses in Equestria than two Nightmares. Am I understood?" She looked at them seriously, and saw the hesitance in their expressions.

"Princess..." Fluttershy said, weakly, reaching out for her. Luna touched her hoof to her friend's and smiled.

"That is the contingency if I *fail*, my friends – and I intend not to," Luna said, giving them all an encouraging grin. "Spike, you must keep Twilight's head near Celestia's, but prevent her from harming either of them if she uses magic again. Be brave, my friends... be with me!"

She threw her head back and let herself fall through darkness, towards the blazing knot of pain that was Celestia's mind.

• • •

Twilight leapt through searing lashes of white-hot brambles like a jump rope, fleeing through the corridors of Canterlot. The monstrous creature followed inexorably behind, silent and furious.

The horrible servile nightmare Twilight had called on herself, well, that was a bit of an aberration... but it showed that the visions were getting more insidious and complex. And it had most directly manipulated Twilight's *self* – she had given it access by misnaming herself. 'Appearances are powerful, in the mind', Luna had said...

Lances and bolts of vicious flame seared the air around her with piercing, screaming hisses of subatomic annihilation. Twilight ducked and weaved along the ballrooms, diving into one with a nimbleness her bookish nature didn't suggest – but then, this was a mental realm, and in thought, when she let herself be... Twilight Sparkle was the strongest pony in Equestria. She wasn't even giving much thought to what she was doing and still, somehow, the bolts and strikes went wide. The creature, whatever it was, seemed to take a silent pleasure in wrecking the scenery as much as trying to hound Twilight.

Focus, Twilight!

Next had been the grave of her friends – the all-too-easy excuse that for an immortal, emotional closeness was an unbearable pain. That hadn't made any sense either – otherwise, why would Celestia have spent so much time with her up 'til now, being there for her all the time, being as loving and close as possible?

Twilight almost exclaimed her joy as she realized, but her breath was consumed with escaping the furious storm of fiery death around her.

The vision had tried to use how unfamiliar *Twilight* was with the death of close friends and relatives to scare her enough to believe Celestia had not long come to grips with this. No, Twilight and Celestia had been intensely close, and separated over time... which was partially Twilight's fault, of course, but there was still the mystery of Celestia's motivations.

Did she know she was setting that long ago? Luna seems to think she didn't believe she had to, anymore –

Agh! *What* was the Eternal Sun? Had she *done* something to herself...? But if so, and it was going wrong, why was she so desperate not to let the two most qualified ponies in all Equestria help her fix it?

Did it have something to do with... this creature...? Was it controlling her, or affecting her? Maybe this was some kind of corruption, as Luna feared –

Twilight, deep in frantic, terrified thought, dodged and weaved through the attacks, instinctively blocking such blows as drew too near her with deflecting shields of magic.

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Spike grunted as another shower of sparks burst across his thick chest plating.

"Spikey!" Pinkie Pie cried. Fluttershy flinched away from the sight, moaning into Rarity's shoulder. The unicorn was looking up at the dragon with an expression of deep concern.

"It's fine," Spike said, through gritted teeth, trying to smile. "This is nothing... I live in the same house with her ... been turned into worse..."

• • •

These last two visions had been... endings. First a happy ending, where everything was fine – better than fine, it had been something approaching... well, anyways – and now this... ha, Nightmare. The first had been a response to her desire for everything just to end, the second a response to her readiness for the final confrontation, come what may...

The tragic ending wanted her to leave through the doors to the great hall – the more pleasant previous vision of Celestia would have probably done the same. Something like... they would have gone to sleep, *eventually*, and then "woken up" on the stone bier, and Twilight would have walked out those stone doors in the chamber ahead of Celestia, or something. Willingly leaving, was the point, happy or no.

Okay, Twilight, think this through. You're getting close!

Around her, the long galleries leading up to the observatories and greenhouses suffered a long string of detonations running along the huge panel windows, showering the unicorn with glass as she leapt through erupting, grasping tangles of the thorny tendrils of sunlight.

Something in Twilight told her that she was on to something, wondering *what* this creature was – but her information was limited, and too often, limited to what the creature had said, which was untrustworthy.

Or was it?

The first vision – it had been so completely false that Twilight hadn't even thought for a second she was anywhere significant. The visions had grown more and more knowledgeable each time, the things they said borne out by events – especially these last two. A little breadcrumb of quotable wisdom occurred to Twilight: *the best lies are the truth, plus or minus one fact.*

So which was it, in this case? Was Twilight *missing* a fact, or was she accepting something false as true...?

Certainly the explanations this latest Celestia had given were reasonable. But as Twilight had originally noticed, they had glossed over a great deal. She'd admitted mistakes, but never elaborated on them; she'd implied a lot, and seemed to know that Twilight's mind would fill in the blanks.

For example, the creature had *implied* it was the real Celestia because it was present in the Great Hall, *implying* that the throne represented – no, wait. Other way around: it implied that its presence in the Great Hall, on the throne, represented a position of authority and centrality to this whole affair, which made a certain amount of symbolic sense. But now that it was clear that this wasn't the real Celestia –

Twilight, lost in thought, tripped on a fallen ornamental planter, throwing her to the ground, where she slid across a tiled floor and skidded to a halt against a tall lectern. Tossing her head, she looked around desperately, horror growing.

She'd ducked into one of the ornamental greenhouses – the one where she'd given her first doctoral lecture, in fact. In times of stress, your body remembers stressful places; she had trapped herself in a room that begged to be turned into a blizzard of glass shards. Desperately, Twilight sought any exit except the one through which –

"Ah, and so our little chase comes to an end," drawled the Nightmare of Celestia, appearing in the doorway. With careless, lazy blows, the creature sent lashes of energy out from itself, throwing the ornamental displays of rare plants and exotic flowers through windows or smashing on the floor, the noise and violence terrifying in its wanton pointlessness. "Twilight Sparkle, I offer you one last chance to go, willingly. One way or another, you *will* be removed from this place."

"I won't leave her," Twilight growled, channeling her fear into defiance as best she could. "I'm close to her, I can tell... I've almost got this figured out."

"Go now, little creature, or I'll strip the flesh from your bones one limb at a time." The Nightmare's lip curled into a pleased sneer, as if it looked forward to listening to every sob of agony.

"An empty threat." Twilight held her head up proudly. "I'm in Celestia's mind. She's already shown that she won't let me be hur –"

The blow was sudden, and Twilight didn't even have time to react to it. White-hot lines of staggering pain, so intense that her mind couldn't protect itself from them, seemed to just *appear* on her sides as she was thrown across the room into one of the nearby shelves of horticulture tools. They fell around her in a shower of clattering metal as Twilight's mind reeled, both from pain and the shock of this last little confidence being stripped from her.

"You were saying...?" the Nightmare said, with a vicious grin. Another set of the white-hot tendrils waved itself in front of the trembling form of Twilight, who quailed from them with a lame little whine of terror. "Perhaps you'd like to reconsider your defiant –"

A howl of deep, manic laughter sung out, growing closer from the hallway. The Nightmare of Celestia turned an irritable expression of curiosity over her shoulder, imperiously looking to see what the interruption was; she was immediately punished for taking the time to display this haughtiness as a blur of eye-aching non-color bowled her over, gripping her in terrible, tentacular bands of energy, and hurled the Nightmare through the doorway and several walls beyond it.

"L – Luna?" Twilight stammered, hoping against hope.

"Not... exactly," whispered a deep, proud voice from inside the maelstrom of dark power. It burst, like a bubble, the remnants burning away strangely; and there, in the fullness of her power, stood the ebon form of Nightmare Moon, silver armor gleaming.

"L – No!" Twilight stammered. "No, no, no..."

"Well met, once again, Twilight Sparkle..." Nightmare Moon said, voice dripping with malice. Her amused, predatory grin grew evil and terrifying as Twilight's look of dread deepened. "I'm going to go play with my "sister" for a while, alright? But don't worry..." She leaned in, her brilliant, reptilian eyes shining menacingly. "I won't forget about you, little one. Oh no... I have some special fun in mind for *you*."

"Luna, please –"

"The little princess is gone," Nightmare Moon declared, lifting her head and surveying Twilight with supreme arrogance. "And you are alone, now. No flashes of understanding and togetherness to save you, this time... do try to pick yourself up, will you? It would be so disappointing if you turned out to be *boring*." She winked. "I look forward to you, now that you're an Arch-Mage, Twilight. Just between us this time, eh?"

With a gale of mad laughter, she swirled a vortex of the unbearable non-color around herself and vanished into the hole she'd made with the other Nightmare.

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Luna, her eyes blazing white with terrible power, screamed her agony. The magic lacing the howl of terror gave it an all-consuming, ear-shattering pressure that caused the ponies in the chamber to stagger and moan as their teeth ached and heads throbbed.

Spike shied away from the pain, but resolutely held Twilight's head slightly proud of Celestia's as the princess had ordered even though the bursts of magical sparks had appeared to have stopped. His chest scales were scored and burned here and there; no worse than they had been before, as he'd said, but in much more trying circumstances than he had ever wished.

Though his sensitive ears rang painfully, he was watching Luna carefully and uncomfortably, little snakes of green smoke leaking between his teeth. Weird energies, black and yet not black, swirled around the Princess as her deepest fear assaulted her relentlessly.

Angry red welts raised on Twilight's side like she'd been beaten. Spike's eyes opened wide in terrified anger, as, for the first time, he really *roared*, fury at his confusion and impotence fueling the very first sounding of the proud war-cry that lived in his draconic heart, but it was barely audible over the banshee howl of the princess as darkness threatened to consume her.

• • •

"Oh, my, things are getting *very* exciting, aren't they...?" the Sun mused, but its mocking, sarcastic tone was hollow and troubled.

Celestia lay there, eyes closed, occasionally flinching when Twilight let out a little shriek of pain or terror. "Please," she whispered.

The Sun sneered. "Why should I do anything? It's *your* mind. You know what's going on here. You could stop it if you wanted to. You could –"

"I can't," Celestia murmured. "I can't anymore."

The Sun's head raised in shock. "Can't... as in –"

"As in, I no longer have the strength. I wore it out trying to hold you."

For the first time, Celestia willingly met the Sun's gaze. The Sun peered at her suspiciously, eyes growing more and more wary as certainty dawned. They held each other's gaze for quite a while, then the Sun's head jerked away with a haunted expression. "You really can't, can you...?"

"No."

The Sun's expression grew dark and uncomfortable for a second, weighing its options carefully.

If Celestia hadn't broken herself so thoroughly, she would have been able to control her patience and her tongue, but the terrified little whisper, the one she knew would do nothing but tip the scales in the Sun's mind, which should have died upon conception leaked past her lips without even token resistance. "Please, just get Twilight out of this –"

The Sun's head snapped around, giving Celestia a fierce, scornful glare. "I got sick of playing along with your cowardice *centuries* ago." She marched over to Celestia, who raised her head, looking sullen. "I don't know why you think doing so will suddenly appeal to me again now."

Celestia squirmed, trying not to believe she'd just killed Twilight's last chance of survival. If only she weren't so... loyal. So loving. So...

Faithful.

If only she would *run*.

Lost in her pain, she dropped her head back to the ground, though her eyes were glued to the image of Twilight getting to her hooves in the wreckage of the greenhouse. Because of this, she didn't see the Sun's expression, gazing down at the broken princess; it might have interested her.

• • •

In the distance, Twilight *felt* the flashes of terrible magical power as the Nightmares tore into one another viciously. It was like the physical presence of nearby thunder as it rolls through the sky; whispers of furious power which ever-so-clearly said: be glad you're not in the thick of this.

Twilight's side ached where the Nightmare had lashed her; every breath renewed the pain. She looked back on what was almost assuredly a grievous –

Bruise?

Her eyes opened wide as a great deal of thought happened at once.

Twilight could *sense* the furious power of those strange, white-hot tendrils. They should have sheared her in half! And why *batter* Twilight like that? If, for some reason, they weren't as white-hot as they appeared, why not grapple her like that column and *throw* her out, if that's what the creature –

It didn't just want her gone, it wanted her to *choose to leave*!

The insight came suddenly, striking her like a thunderbolt; Twilight fell back on her haunches, wailing laughter and the sound of distant explosions unheard around her. She held her forehooves up in front of herself as if grasping the ideas in her mind, staring down at the area between them in desperate concentration.

This creature had been trying to scare her off, drive her away, *frighten* her with more and more pain since the very beginning of this last vision... and yet, it seemed *desperate* for Twilight to be near it – as if it both hated and craved Twilight's presence. It had been relatively subtle at first – the "uncontrollable" wing buffets, the passive-aggressiveness – but now that Twilight was showing defiance, it had become supremely overt, frantic to get Twilight to *choose* to leave, because –

Twilight's mind reeled, spinning out ideas faster than she could keep track – the downside of genius, Celestia had said once, with a smile. The memory lit a little fire of warmth in Twilight's heart, burning away at the numbing cold of her fear.

And the magical attacks! They'd been so... misdirected, so misaimed, more consumed with being large and flashy and jarring, trying to break Twilight's concentration and frighten her than actually striking home. It was the equivalent, in a way, of a shouting match...

Another thought suddenly struck her, causing her smile to fall away into an "O" of comprehension. The Nightmare form, with the fire –

It had been like it had taken a *mask* off.

Masks! *Masks!*

Masks – that was important. It was a little concept, a fragment of thought, an *image* that Celestia used to think about her interactions with other ponies. Twilight's memory of the confrontation in the library was still very hazy, but she remembered Celestia using the words "little lies we tell other ponies" to describe the 'masks'. In that case, it had been the mask of dignity, the one Twilight had been trying to become to impress the princess – but there were other little lies that could be worn to affect the way somepony thought about you.

The proud teacher, dismissing her student to become her own pony.

The secret mother, seeking redemption and understanding.

The stern taskmistress, arrogant and unyielding.

The tortured immortal, distant for the sake of her own heart.

The beautiful mentor, humbled but all the more open and oh, so *reachable* for it.

And this, the last mask – more a scenario, really, but they all were – this last was the mask of the tragic, final confrontation. The best mask, the one most carefully crafted to take advantage of Twilight's own insecurities – the final confrontation in which it was All Her Fault.

Twilight realized her error now. She'd been using Luna's words to understand the visions, trusting her expertise in dreams, thinking of these visions as *traps*, constructed

scenarios meant to snare her somehow. And Luna *would* think that way – being lost in a nightmare for a millennium would grind that perspective in deep.

But this was Celestia's mind – Twilight needed to think from Celestia's point of view. These had all been *masks*! Why does somepony wear a mask for you? They're not traps, they're *deflections*, drawing attention away from the *real* you! Traps tried to take you in, masks keep you *out*.

Twilight, by resisting so firmly and decisively, had gotten the latest mask to fall off and had revealed the truth beneath it: the Nightmare of Celestia.

The little history lesson Luna had given on the stairs had been bubbling in the back of Twilight's mind for some time. Now certain facts lined up in her mind and things began to make a lot of sense.

First, that the emotional states of powerfully magical ponies were intensely important. In fury or despair, a unicorn could perform feats of magic with power they would never otherwise be able to summon, but their lack of mental discipline meant the results were chaotic, unpredictable and dangerous. For the Sisters, this risk must be unimaginable – well, no, that's not quite true; Twilight was stuck in a mental abstract with the consequences of that risk, now. Both of them, in fact.

Suppressing a little shudder, Twilight forced herself to move on.

Next, Luna's attachment to the idea that these visions were *traps* suggested that the Nightmare Moon phenomenon was... indeed, a kind of mental snare. A literal nightmare, brought to life by the power of her dream magic, which had consumed her in the ancient past.

Celestia, lacking this magic, might not be at risk of being consumed by an incarnation of her powerful emotions in the same way... she'd be more like a regular pony, where it would just prowl her mind, causing her as much pain as possible. Here in this abstraction of Celestia's mind, it became this terrifying being that was so like Nightmare Moon, which had been able to incarnate itself in the dream realm through Luna's magic as she drove herself wild with rage and terror.

Luna's Nightmare had been born out of fear for her sister, becoming the terrifyingly powerful thing, Nightmare Moon. Celestia's Nightmare, then...

What fear did this creature represent? Something about *setting*? Maybe it was really painful, or... no, this must be about the about the truth of the Eternal Sun – maybe there was some dark secret to that...

Twilight sat in the ruined conservatory, tapping her chin with her hoof, looking for any scrap of insight she could find. For some reason, her mind kept falling back on Luna's insistence that she focus on her own dream, and how Celestia didn't need a *subject* –

Then realization dawned.

"No," Twilight whispered. "No, it's..." Tears welled in her eyes – not really *sad* tears. In some ways, they were tears of relief. Her heart ached as she realized what was happening, why Celestia's mind had bounced Twilight's own insecurities back at her so carefully, why the incarnation of her fears was now so brutally trying to make Twilight abandon Celestia.

Fear wasn't quite the right word, was it...?

"I know your name," Twilight mumbled, unconsciously. The sound startled her, and she replayed it in her mind, a broad smile of understanding leaping to her features. "I know your *name*!" she declared, with the true academic's satisfaction as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. She clapped her hooves together.

Okay, Twilight thought. We have a working theory on that. The creature *might* get desperate enough to kill me, but at least I know what to call it!

Twilight turned to the hole made by the warring Nightmares, hearing now the spectacular roar of their battle, and she understood what she had to do.

She smiled, very slightly, and put one hoof before the other.

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"Twilight, no!" Celestia gasped. The Sun looked up from where she was reclining a short distance away with casual interest, eyebrow raised.

The images of Twilight's determined little smile and firm hoofbeats consumed the princess' attention; as Twilight had sat musing, Celestia's face had been a miserable battle between something approaching terror and the smallest little hint of pride. But now, Celestia's horror was evident; her eyes were wide and unblinking, her slack jaw drew in shallow, panicky breaths.

The sun looked away again, inspecting a hoof with a bored expression. "My, my, she *is* a brave one. And *clever*. Heart of solid gold, too, it appears." She gave Celestia an extremely patronizing grin. "You sure know how to pick 'em, I have to give you that much."

"She'll *die*," Celestia whispered, turning to the Sun, eyes wide and hollow with dread.

"Faithful to the end, then. An honorable death, as so many ponies have written bad poetry asking for," the Sun said, turning to her and smiling smugly. "Although of course, she won't *die*. Not right away at least... but she'll be much less fun at parties, lacking a mind."

"Don't you *care*?"

The Sun rose from where she was reclining and walked over to Celestia, smiling pleasantly. "Deeply, Celestia. Deeply. Don't *you*?"

"Of *course* I care," Celestia stammered, a tear beading down her cheek. "Please. Do something. I can't, anymore, I... I'll do whatever you want, I'll –"

"Oh, don't *beg*. You're just embarrassing yourself more than you already have," the Sun said, her happy little smile becoming, with terrifying speed, into a savage sneer of utmost disdain. "And anyways, you should know better than to cry favors from me. You know exactly what you need to say to make me go to her. What you need to *ask*. So ask."

Celestia's eyes flickered from the Sun's expression of disdain to Twilight leaping nimbly through the ruins of Canterlot Castle, approaching the Great Hall where the Nightmares awaited her. The princess' lower jaw trembled, desperate little noises rising in her throat as terrified little sobs threatened to overwhelm her.

"Say it!" the Sun roared. If Celestia had been in a better state, mentally, the edge of desperation that slipped into the Sun's voice wouldn't have escaped her attention.

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Twilight rounded the last bend again – or would have, if it still existed as anything but wreckage. Instead she was leaping through the remains of walls, her surroundings covered in horrific burns and scoring, some of it still being eaten away by exposure to the insane power of raw nightmare, distorted weirdly and dripping *upwards* like water in reverse. Twilight shuddered as one such droplet shattered on the ceiling with a little scream of unreal energy.

She peeked through a blow-out wall into the Hall and saw the Nightmares sitting opposite one another on the dais in a weirdly calm fashion. The thrones had been reduced to cinders and ashes, or half-fused into the floor by a distortion of reality, surrounding the two dreadful creatures in smoking heaps of metal like a burst-open ribcage – a truly macabre display in the red light of the dying sun, which poured into the wreckage of this magnificent place like blood from an open wound, thick and horrible.

The sounds of their battle had calmed to a deadly quiet compared to the thunderous blasts earlier, little snaps and crackles of energy occasionally rasping loudly between them, but the air was filled with an almost inaudible keening wail as magical energy boiled hot between the two Nightmares. Such was the power they were wielding that it was visible even to sight-beyond-sight only as little flashes of energy lancing impossibly fast between them, like tiny darts, the only indication either of them giving that anything was going on an occasional twitch or slight sneer.

Nightmare Moon's face was alive with malicious delight, her veneer of cool and predatory disdain gone now that the love of battle burned hot in her. Her smile was lunatic, broad and terrible, a creature deriving perverse joy from destruction and the promise of a worthy opponent's brutal and messy end. The nightmarish vision of Celestia responded with a stare of proud, intense fury, deliberate and impending as a distant hurricane.

Twilight pulled her head back into cover, eyes scanning back and forth unseeing as she desperately turned her mind inwards to think of something to do. Now that she understood what was happening, her first goal needed to be –

"Oh, dear, our little duel seems to have a witness! How delightful," Nightmare Moon purred. "Or did you call her as a second? After your weak showing, I could *go* for *seconds*." She chuckled, a dreadful sound dancing on the very edge of sanity. "Do come out, Twilight Sparkle, we both know you're here."

Twilight hesitated for a moment, then stepped through the hole and into the Hall, slowly pacing forward, trying to keep some significant piece of rubble between herself and the Nightmares as best she could. They didn't move, but one of Nightmare Moon's slitted eyes followed her very carefully, moving in a disturbingly reptilian fashion, like a chameleon's.

"Stop hiding, little one, it doesn't impress," Nightmare Moon continued. If a cat could talk, watching a bird caught under its paw struggle vainly, it would speak with the tone of voice the Nightmare used now. Proud, greedy... hungry.

The Nightmare of Celestia's eyes moved and fell on the unicorn. "Twilight Sparkle, the door is still open to you," it said in a voice filled with imperial arrogance and iron fury. Twilight risked a glance back at the main doors to the hall, which were still open and filled with the weird, smoky haze. "Go, now, or suffer the consequences of your stubbornness."

"No," Twilight said, simply, turning back to the Nightmare of Celestia with a firm expression. "I won't leave, and I certainly won't leave without dealing with *you*. I understand what's happening, now. I won't let you hurt Celestia any more!"

The Nightmare's eyes narrowed. "It is not Celestia you should be concerned about, Twilight Sparkle; in any case, that is not your decision to make, nor something you have power to influence."

Twilight's face broke into a grin. "Then kill me. If you can."

"I have no wish to –"

"Of course you don't," Twilight said, smugly.

"Do not *tempt* me, little creature. I have more than enough power here to deal with this mad thing *and* drive you out, broken and howling. I may not wish to kill you, but I promise that when you finally flee from this place, you will suffer for any resistance you show. You will *wish* I meant to kill you. Spare yourself the agony and flee, now."

Nightmare Moon howled laughter. "That's *rich*. You're barely keeping me from pulling your heart out through your nose as it is, and now you're threatening Twilight Sparkle as well? You overestimate yourself." She turned a baleful, hate-filled grin on Twilight. "Here, I'll spare you the trouble –"

Twilight barely had time to react as two massive lances of unreality soared from Nightmare Moon's feet and dove at her with furious speed. Nothing she could generate fast enough would stop them; she flinched away –

A hiss and scream of energy and the presence of intense heat suddenly overwhelmed her as the Nightmare of Celestia teleported between Nightmare Moon's lances and Twilight, summoning blisteringly hot, blinding barriers of wrathful sunlight. The blow struck, throwing the Nightmare tumbling back through the hall, loud snaps and horrible, fleshy tearing echoing in the empty, broken chamber as wings and legs were caught on the floor and wreckage.

Despite herself, Twilight called out. "Celes–"

Nightmare Moon howled with mad laughter. "You really are hopeless, Twilight Sparkle. As long as it's big and white and shiny, you'll drool all over it and sit up and beg when it asks." Twilight, still staring at the broken heap of the Nightmare of Celestia, heard a hoofbeat snap loudly on the stone as Nightmare Moon began to step closer with deliberate, dreadful slowness. "Then again, you also seem to have quite a hold on this pathetic creature, as well... it's very protective of its plaything."

"Both of you..." the wretched doppelganger of Celestia groaned. Twilight's stomach heaved to see its bones setting themselves, snapping back into place with loud cracks and grotesque, meaty noises. "Get out..."

"So, you think you've figured things out, Twilight?" Nightmare Moon asked, almost pleasantly. Twilight turned, quickly, and –

Ohheavensshe'srighthere, Twilight managed to think, before falling over backwards. Nightmare Moon's breath spread over her face, icy and cutting like the bitterest of northern winds in deepest winter. Her sapphire eyes blazed with dreadful power, and –

Twilight shuddered as Nightmare Moon winked at her, licking her lips hungrily in a mock-gesture of condescending, predatory hate. "Do share your findings, will you? We're all just agog for a lecture from the Arch-Mage," the creature said, leering.

"I... I..." Twilight stammered.

Nightmare Moon *tsked* and turned her head, presenting an ear. "I'm *sorry*, dear. I can't quite understand you. Ah ah ah!" This was directed towards the other Nightmare, which had begun to rise. Nightmare Moon sent a contemptuous blast of power at it, sending it reeling. "You had your chance. I'm playing with her now."

"Luna, please," Twilight said, desperately. "Luna, listen to me –"

Nightmare Moon's playful expression vanished, replaced with a truly terrible grin of triumph. "The little princess gave herself over to me," she hissed, reveling.

Something like a smile tried to spread on Twilight's face. "I know," she said, a glimmer of confidence burning bright like a match that refused to be snuffed, even as the hurricane howled around it.

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"I'm so sorry, princess," Spike said, voice harsh, and with a terrible roar that terrified the ponies around him, breathed a huge gout of fire onto the screaming figure of Luna. It spread and crackled strangely over the cocoon of unreal, terribly energy surrounding the princess, swirling along with the pulses of darkness, vanishing upwards in a crackling pillar of flaring, gleaming explosions, sending the ponies scattering for cover.

"Enough, Spike! Enough!" Applejack shouted over the din, sneaking closer to Spike so that he could hear her over Luna's otherworldly, terrifying howl. The dragonfire stopped and Spike slouched forward, clutching his sides. The crackle of Spike's fire burning off the darkness died down quickly, the last little snaps and hisses sounding disturbingly like a mocking snicker.

Rainbow Dash shook her head, denial and terrible sorrow looming in her eyes. "We waited too long! We lost her...!"

"We have to start for the surface!" Rarity shouted. "We don't know how long we have before –"

"No! I'll try again!" Spike growled. He reared back, taking in an inrush of breath, but his eyes suddenly grew wide and he collapsed to all fours, coughing and grunting in agony. Rarity and Pinkie Pie immediately leapt to his side, helping him up as he hacked and wheezed, every breath appearing to pain him intensely.

Fluttershy chewed her lower lip as everypony began arguing. Applejack and Rarity took sides against Spike and Dash, tempers inflamed by their fear and desperation, as well as memories of the agonizing discussion about whether Spike should obey the princess' command. Fluttershy and Pinkie had tried to stay out of it, both of them disturbed and deeply frightened by everything that was happening.

She looked to Luna, whose face was a study in terror and pain, and felt a very, very familiar need rise in her heart –

Hey, wait! That *always* works, in stories...!

Alright, Fluttershy, time to save the day!

Applejack looked up, and her eyes went wild with panic. "Fluttershy, *no!*"

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Nightmare Moon's expression grew wary. "What?"

Encouraged by this for no reason at all, Twilight lunged forward and grabbed Nightmare Moon's head, pulling it to her own until the icy-cold of the Nightmare's armor was pressed hard against her forehead. Their horns clicked against each other awkwardly.

"Luna, listen to me! We've been wandering around an *empty mind*! It's been doing nothing but reflect our own fears and insecurities back at us – none of this is what Celestia really thinks or feels! Agh!" Nightmare Moon, snarling, had recovered from the shock of Twilight's sudden action and was thrashing her head, struggling against the unicorn's grip. "And I know why you're *always* Nightmare Moon when you touch Celestia's mind! Please, listen to me!"

"Unhand me at once, you wretched little –"

Twilight's eyes grew wild with focus as she strained against the unbelievable strength of the Nightmare. Physical contact wasn't required for this, but she had some idea that this would make it difficult for Nightmare Moon to just casually brutalize her instead of being forced to listen. "Luna! It's like the 'humble servant' thing! You're giving her mind access because you're giving it the wrong name, in your heart! *I know you're afraid Celestia still thinks of you as Nightmare Moon, but I promise she doesn't!*"

Nightmare Moon snarled. "Luna is *gone*! This isn't some stupid mind game, you idiotic foal!"

"It is! Just like I'm not Celestia's mewling little slave, I'm her Faithful Student! Luna, please, listen! Aaaah!" Nightmare Moon bit deep into the thigh of Twilight's hind leg, but Twilight refused to let go. Her horn ached painfully every time it clacked against Nightmare Moon's, the Nightmare's dark power sending waves of revulsion through her. "Luna, I know you're frightened of the darkness in yourself, but please, it's not Nightmare Moon, it's just pain. We understand! We know you're hurt, please, please hear me... that pain *isn't* Nightmare Moon!"

"Your princess is *gone*," Nightmare Moon bellowed. The force of it was like a hoof in the gut, but with desperate strength Twilight held on, yelping in pain. "She dreamed me, and now I am the reality! She was nothing! Wiped out, consumed willingly by my greatness!" Every declaration was another blow.

"Remember your name, Luna! Princess Luna, Princess of the Moon, Mistress of the Stars, Queen of the Dreams, She Who Walks Amongst The Heavens –" Twilight scoured her memory for Luna's many, many names and poetic epithets through history. The unicorn's own name, the one that meant *her*, was so personal, and so abstract... oh

heavens, I didn't prepare for this, it could be *anything*! "The Pearl Eye! She of Diamonds! *Speciosam Musica Spei*! Oh, oh – Luna, please, Luna!"

Nightmare Moon gave a great roar, and reared, lifting Twilight up into the air. The corrupted alicorn tossed her head forward and sent the unicorn flying bodily against a fallen pillar. Twilight crashed against it with a howl of pain and surprise.

Before Twilight could react, the Nightmare was upon her, standing proudly over the unicorn, eyes wide and nostrils flaring with a spectacular rage. Gone was the cackling madness; now hate burned white-hot in Nightmare Moon, fixing her on a single purpose: the messy, brutal, and prolonged destruction of Twilight Sparkle.

Nightmare Moon lowered her muzzle down and stared deep into Twilight's eyes – not even taking the time to delight in the unicorn's terror, such was her fury. "There are not words for what I am going to do to you, Twilight Sparkle," she hissed. Blue energy was flowing between her teeth like drool, smoking and curling up from it in a display of terrible power.

Twilight tried to edge away, raising a hoof in front of her face as if to ward off insane, mind-wrecking annihilation with this pathetic display. "No, Luna, please – sister –"

There was a sudden rush of sensation and a weird feeling of jerking movement in her gut. A strange sense of *diminishing* overwhelmed the area in front of her, although Twilight could not have expressed exactly how this was so. It was as if a vacuum had opened in the space above her, something being sucked away and vanishing.

Twilight dared to peek up at the source of the shadow looming over her.

Luna, trembling and weeping openly, looked down at her. "That's twice now, Twilight," she said, and began to collapse.

Twilight leapt forward, forelegs outstretched to catch her, her hind leg complaining loudly about the flowing, aching wound there. "Luna!"

"I'm sorry I couldn't help more... my sister," Luna whispered, her voice fading along with her body as it fell through Twilight's grasp and vanished.

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Luna blinked, and immediately felt panic grow in her. Her torso and wings were being restrained –

"Princess?" asked a quiet voice, fear and hope mingled into an awkward murmur.

"Fluttershy?" Luna rasped, her throat in agony. She looked down into Fluttershy's face, which was miserable with tears of relief.

"Oh, thank goodness," the pegasus sobbed, burying her face in Luna's chest. "My hug worked!"

The princess looked around to see everypony else stopped in mid-shout as they leapt to stop Fluttershy from touching her. Spike was giving her a particularly wary glance, rubbing his throat, and she nodded at him gratefully.

"Er... yes, dear Fluttershy... but you need to let me go," Luna said, awkwardly, patting the now-sobbing pegasus on the head. The embrace ceased, but Fluttershy looked up at Luna miserably. Luna tried to give her a hopeful smile as she rushed over to Twilight and Celestia. "This is far from over."

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Twilight stared at the place where Luna had been. Panic flared in her for a second as several extremely unpleasant possibilities occurred to her, each less likely than the last.

Focus, Twilight! You have to assume she's back in the waking world now –

"Well done," Celestia's voice said, calmly.

Twilight turned, looking over the collapsed pillar at the restored form of the Nightmare. Instinctively she fell backwards, scrambling away from the terrifying creature despite the screaming protests of her aching limbs.

The Nightmare calmly stepped over the rubble and stalked after Twilight, growing nearer and nearer with every step. The unicorn struggled desperately to get to her hooves, but the creature was already close, too close, she was already upon Twilight and now she would –

Pass right by the unicorn and ascend the dais again.

Twilight stared as the Nightmare, mane and tail still flaring an eye-watering blue, summoned a new throne from the material of the dais and took her rest upon it, once again looking haggard and tired as she had not while filled with furious wrath. It was bulky and intimidating as Celestia's had never been; a slate-grey bier that looked more

like the one on which Celestia's body lay than the simple, but elegant throne it replaced. It was also set up in the center of the dais; no more Twin Thrones of Equestria here.

"Well... done," it said again, watching Twilight get up.

"Uh..." Twilight looked around the ruined Hall, still bathed in dying sunlight. "Thanks, I guess?"

"I am impressed. You have divined quite a bit about what is happening to you with a respectably small amount of trustworthy information."

"Well, since most of that information is being provided by, or taken from, my own mind..." Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Or something like that."

The Nightmare said nothing, but blinked and shrugged in such a way as to indicate that this may or may not be the case.

"Celestia isn't here, in this place, and never was," Twilight said, a hint of a question in her statement.

"Well, she certainly *was*. This is *her* mind, after all. But she is removed from it at the moment, yes."

Twilight stepped forward. "Well, I know she's watching over me. Trying to help."

"Do you?"

"Yes. She's spoken to me, directly. And has helped in other ways."

The Nightmare raised an eyebrow, but still appeared calm. "Weakening her will. Causing her to set. Taking her from you, for the rest of your life. You did that. *You*."

"Possibly," Twilight said firmly, though it pained her to acknowledge. Courage, this time, was rising slowly in her; like a tide of shining, golden liquid, brilliant and sweet-smelling, rather than in a rush which would recede quickly, breaking on events like a wave on stone. It wasn't a hot, burning feeling pushing her forward; it was a cool, solid sensation that filled her and put her at ease despite the circumstances. She felt free to act as she pleased, the frantic demands of fear and anger and sorrow dulled and muffled.

The Nightmare seemed to find this lack of response deeply annoying. It frowned, irritably, and a pulse seemed to run through its mane. "So she is watching over you? Helping you?"

Twilight set her face. "Yes."

"Has it occurred to you that she is helping you *leave*? Helping you *escape*?"

"It has," Twilight said, nodding. "I'm almost certain that's what she's doing. Or thinks she's doing, in any case."

The creature favored her with a scornful sneer, rolling its eyes. "I suppose it's too much to ask that you *accept* her help?"

"Yes."

"And what virtue are you pretending this arrogance is? Loyalty?"

"No," Twilight said. "Just being there when she needs me. I am, after all, the Faithful Student, right down to the very heart of me. Those are the words that truly mean *me*."

The creature stood, its horribly wasted wings fluffing outwards irritably. "Does the fact that she has not offered you more material assistance than a whisper of guidance and a snatch of words, sent to a figment of your combined anxieties, strike you as particularly telling about her intentions?"

Twilight grinned. "Not really. After all, knowing what you are tells me how pointless it would be to even wonder about that sort of thing. I know nothing about her current circumstances –"

"All but dead!" the creature interrupted. It took a step down from the dais, snarling. "Waiting for her wretched, foolhardy, *ignorant* pupil to *leave* so she can rest in peace, with nothing to look forward to recalling about you that is untainted by the memory of your miserable, selfish failure here at the uttermost end of things –"

Twilight stamped a hoof. "I don't know anything about Celestia's position! And I know now that you can only tell me enough of the truth to accomplish your goal – so you ran out of truth a long time ago!"

"My goals? Doesn't it seem likely that my preeminence here suggests that I am acting with sanction?" The Nightmare's eyes blazed with contempt. "Fool! You may be thought

wise among ponykind, but in the mind of an eternal creature, you're an *infant*. Do not presume to understand or comprehend Celestia – haven't you seen enough strange things here in her mind to realize you have *no* idea who she is?"

"On the contrary! Everything I've seen only makes me know her *better*," Twilight remarked, her confident grin spreading. "All these strange images and scenarios only prove that she's confused and frightened."

The Nightmare's patronizing grin of contempt was almost a physical force. "Oh, my, it must feel nice, having such confidence that a creature, a *divine* creature like Celestia holds *you* in such high regard that her mind would be troubled by your ultimately ephemeral life –"

Twilight waved a hoof. "Enough of this. You're getting desperate, and it's embarrassing us both. I know what you are, and what you want, and I *won't* do it. Period. I'm staying here and finding a way to Princess Celestia. I don't know how, but I am sure there is a way."

The creature drew itself up haughtily. "Oh, well... do share your thoughts, Arch-Mage."

"Your goal is to get me to choose to leave – to abandon Celestia to her rest – either voluntarily, or by frightening me or hurting me enough that I flee. Is that not so?"

The Nightmare's haughty expression was damaged somewhat by its eyes suddenly growing haunted. "And if it is?"

Twilight grinned. "And you don't want me to be killed here, because that would run counter to my purpose in the little story you're trying to torture Celestia with."

"You gathered this from me protecting you from Nightmare Moon, perhaps? I just wanted to do it myself –"

"Don't be stupid. You had *plenty* of chances to kill me, but you couldn't stop offering to let me go. And when you were chasing me, you were barely trying to hit me at all – just *scare* me, and break my concentration so I couldn't figure you out." Twilight stepped forward, head held high and proud, a grin of triumphant understanding lit on her face. "You only have form and shape because of these circumstances – because my mind is providing me with images to understand what I'm seeing. You're just an emotion, a vicious, painful canker in her mind. I *won't* let you hurt Celestia anymore."

The flaming creature smiled darkly. "You seem awfully sure that you have any power to do anything about it."

Twilight's eyes blazed. "You took your mask off, and now I know the truth about you. I know your name, Nightmare of Celestia!"

The Nightmare's face grew dark. A predatory sneer spread across its features. "Then say it, whelp, so that I can break you of your defiance with the pleasure of knowing you will live the rest of your pathetic, all-too-brief existence fearing even the *sound* of it."

"You're Guilt," Twilight said, smugly.

Guilt, the Nightmare of Celestia, smiled down on Twilight horribly.

The unicorn stepped towards it, face set in determined surety. "And because I know that, I know exactly how to defeat you."

"Oh? Well..." The nightmare made an expansive gesture. "Be my guest and try. Delay the inevitable."

Twilight cleared her throat, giving the Nightmare a proud look, and spoke.

"*Dear Princess Celestia –*"

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The Sun looked down at Celestia, who was staring, fascinated, at Twilight.

"Yes, my faithful student...? I hear you," the princess whispered, her face sad and quiet. A tear rolled down her cheek, unnoticed.

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"She has *abandoned* you, little unicorn," the Nightmare snarled, but discomfort lived in its voice. "Accept that she is leaving you and be *gone* from this place!"

"Dear Princess Celestia," Twilight repeated, her voice ringing loudly in the ruined Great Hall. "Today, and in the past few days, I've learned many important things. Let me share them with you..." She took a step towards the Nightmare, who bristled.

"In the last few months I had grown sick in the mind. I was afraid that you no longer cared about me, or had at the very least lost interest in our personal relationship and cared more about our professional association. I was terrified to confront you about it, because if I did, I might learn that I was right." Twilight's grin as she prowled forward towards Guilt would have made a tiger sit down and take notes.

"Stay away from me, or –" the Nightmare hissed.

"So I drove myself mad trying to make myself perfect for you, thinking that if I did, you'd come to me and love me again, like you did when I was your student. But I was acting out of fear and was destroying myself. I couldn't bring myself to face the possibility that something so important to me might be changing into something so... painful. Even the *possibility* terrified me."

The Nightmare stepped backwards. "Stay back!"

Twilight's smile began to soften as she drew closer to the Nightmare. "Luna helped me face that fear, deep in my mind, and helped me dream for myself again, instead of dreaming only of pleasing a version of you which never really existed. I saw something in the vision of my heart's true desires that has helped me understand what's happening here.

"When I was a student, I always thought of you as *perfect*. You were so powerful, so wise, so giving, so beautiful – and *eternal*, it seemed to me, above and beyond the petty cares of mortal ponies. But that's the mask, isn't it? The same mask I was trying to wear. You wear it because that's what your position seems to demand of you."

"Stay away from me with your empty words, Twilight Sparkle!" the Nightmare bellowed.

"But in my heart of hearts, I understood what my mind wouldn't see: you're terribly lonely, aren't you...?" Twilight's eyes filled with loving tears, her heart spilling over with affection and sympathy. "You were alone for a thousand years, the mask keeping everypony close enough to see but just too far for you to dare to try to touch.

"There's something more to all of this, I can tell. Something about the Eternal Sun and this whole rising and setting business. But this whole time, I've been wandering an empty mind, having my fears bounced right back at me, not because you're afraid of *setting*, itself... it's *me* you're really afraid of, isn't it? You're afraid that if I learn the truth of things, if you confess the source of our alienation and my pain, I'll leave you, and you'll be truly alone."

The Nightmare scoffed. "Arrogant foal, do you really think –"

Twilight gave it a harsh glare as she continued. "That's what Guilt is doing – trying to make me abandon you. Because in your mind, you think you *deserve* to be abandoned. It would be something like punishment for what you've done... but in a petty way, it would be a comfort for you if *I ran* from you. That would be a reflection of weakness on my part, and in playing into your guilt, I'd provide you the comfort at least of you not having to see my face as you confess. You'd always be able to say, in the smallest part of your mind: *In the end, Twilight was frightened off by how big being involved with me was, she never really understood.* And you could *set* and be done with things – running from the pain, leaving me behind in the distant past.

"Princess, if you have ever let yourself trust me implicitly, do it now! Both of us have been in terrible pain – we both *still* are. But please, stop indulging your guilt! You're doing nothing but giving it power to hurt *you*, just as letting my fear control me made the distance I felt worse and worse! I know you think you deserve to be abandoned for whatever it is you've done, but in the end all that will do is leave you *alone* again. Do you really think the pain won't be *worse*, when you return, leaving all this unresolved?"

The Nightmare stumbled on the steps up to the dais, making Twilight's confident grin grow wry and mocking for just a second. Guilt's face screwed up in white-hot rage, its sunken eyes flaring with unimaginable fury, mane flaring bright. Twilight was forced to pause and flinch from the sudden burst of heat; it was like her face had been suddenly forced into a furnace. She raised her voice above the roar of heat.

"Let me come to you, Princess! There must be a way! Trust me! Let me share the ultimate magic of friendship with you – not to bring you mere comfort or to show you affection, but the *true* magic, that gives you the power to bear another pony's pain *with* them! I will hear you out, if you'll trust me, and I hope you'll do the same for me! But I will *not* abandon you, no matter what! I love you!" Twilight was all but screaming now, trying to overpower the crackling, deep roar of insane heat and magical power filling the air.

Great pillars of sunstuff, spiked and horrible like brambles, erupted around the Nightmare, which was now howling with rage and fear. Twilight's poise faltered for only a second as the awesome display of power filled her vision with flaring, blinding light. Guilt turned its head, grinning terribly down at Twilight, who stared back at it with as much determination as she could. The heat pressed down on her, making her blink and shy backwards.

"Please, Princess! Let me speak with you, even if it is the last time!"

With a howl of desperate fury, the Nightmare sent the horrible pillars of plasma surging down at Twilight Sparkle, who finally gave in to the oppressive heat and light, closing her eyes and turning her head away as doom descended onto her. But she would finish her letter, no matter what.

"With love, I remain your Faithful Student," she screamed, defiance and courage thundering in her words, "*Twilight Sparkle!*"

For a heartbeat, time seemed to stop.

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"Bring her here."

It wasn't a whisper, or a murmur, so much as a *breath*; a sound so quiet it seemed to *add* to the silence rather than break it.

The Sun smiled. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear you."

"Bring her here!" Celestia gasped. Tears rolled freely down her face, and her voice was strangled by the thickness in her throat.

"Oh, well..." the Sun said, lazily. "If that's what you *want*."

Celestia turned to the Sun, frowning at the smug smile on the Sun's face. "Wasn't that what you wanted me to do, this whole time?"

"Not exactly, Celestia," the Sun said. She stared down at the princess, a mocking smile spread across her face. "But close. No, I want to hear you admit – here, in this place, where *admitting* things has meaning – that any one of those doors in your mind could have lead here. All Twilight's pain and fear and suffering, all the terrible things she endured for you, the things that you professed to be so frightened and pained by – she didn't have to go through any of it. You could have spared her the pain and brought her here, even before I got free."

Celestia's face screwed up, as if she had just put something foul in her mouth and was being forced to chew and swallow it down. She looked away from the Sun, her eyes guilty and pained.

"*Don't* turn away from me," the Sun snarled. She reached out with a hoof, taking Celestia's head into her iron control once again and drawing the princess' suddenly

terrified gaze to her own. "Not *now*. Not after everything you've done, not if you want me to bring Twilight Sparkle to you. Look me in the eye and admit that you are a selfish, venal coward who deserves every second of pain she gets."

The two were held in this tableau for some time, eyes locked on each other's.

Then Celestia blinked. A change came over her; terror and pain seemed to abate – not fade, just fall into the background, as she came to a decision.

"Let go of me, please," Celestia said, calmly. The Sun let her hoof fall away, sighing heavily, and stepped back to allow the princess to rise, holding her in a contemptuous glare. Celestia looked at the Sun firmly, though reluctance and sorrow were obvious on her face. "I admit these things."

"*What* things?" the Sun snapped.

"I admit to being a coward," Celestia said, obviously forcing the confession from herself. "I admit to letting my mind torture Twilight Sparkle because I could not bring myself to face her. I admit that I hoped against hope that Twilight would give up..." She trailed off, looking uneasy.

"Go on."

The princess gave the Sun a sullen glare for a moment, then cleared her throat and continued. "Bring Twilight to me, so that we can speak one last time. And then I will willingly surrender myself to whatever punishment you desire."

"And you'll tell her *everything*?"

"Everything."

The Sun frowned. "Swear it."

"As I am Celestia, Princess of the Sun," Celestia recited, her face heavy with guilty discomfort at this necessity, "I swear that I shall speak the truth, whole and complete, to Twilight Sparkle, to your satisfaction."

At this, the Sun smiled viciously. "Don't think I'm doing you a favor bringing her here, Celestia. No, no... your punishment *begins* with her."

Celestia actually managed to raise a suspicious eyebrow to this statement. "Oh?"

"Indeed," the Sun said, her smile growing wide and cruel. "Perhaps Twilight won't find it in herself to forgive you for the things you've done. Maybe she will tear the living heart from your chest and eat it in front of you, curse your name and leave you to eternity, alone, as you deserve to be for the immensity of your arrogance." An idle thought seemed to strike the Sun. "That would please me, I think; I could do with somepony taking my side in all this."

"I suspect she will... feel for you, when she learns the truth," Celestia muttered, looking more uncomfortable than ever, but her voice betrayed hope that even so, Twilight would have room left in her heart for her teacher.

The Sun gave Celestia a patronizing smile. "She is a very generous soul, isn't she..." She began prowling around the princess in a lazy circle. "But even if she does find it in herself to forgive you, to understand... this will be the last time you see her. No matter what happens, you will be saying good-bye to your beloved student. No tricks. No negotiations. And neither of you are powerful enough to stop me doing exactly as I please."

"I understand that," Celestia said, face pained.

"Your suffering begins now, Celestia," the Sun said, putting on an ugly self-righteousness. "Either your fears will be justified... or you will begin to pay the price for your misdeeds, as your faithful student is taken from you forever."

Celestia said nothing; she just closed her eyes and shook very gently, taking deep breaths. The Sun watched her, for a time.

"You just can't deal with things not going right, can you," the Sun said, eventually.

Celestia's eyes opened wide, and she looked up at the Sun in shock. There had been... a hint of sympathy in its voice. Tenderness, almost. The Sun was regarding Celestia with a firm and disapproving expression, but her head was turned slightly away as she eyed the princess carefully, in an almost bashful pose.

"I –" Celestia began.

"Well, I'd better get going," the Sun declared, and spread her wings.

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Twilight felt the approaching heat... and *trusted* Celestia. Trusted *herself* to have been right, trusted the risks she had taken, *believed*. No matter how certain she was, intellectually, now was the final test of her strength.

She closed her eyes and stood firm, accepting Celestia's decision, whatever it was...

The fiery wrath spilled over her with all the furious destructive power of a warm summer breeze. Twilight's body failed to be crushed under the gentle pressure, just as her skin and viscera remained uncooked, and her hair and coat did not burst into flames. Twilight opened her eyes to see the trembling form of the Nightmare, now furiously trying to summon anything with which she might once again lash out at the unicorn who stood calmly before it.

The Great Hall of Canterlot was restored to its original beauty and majesty, pillars standing proud and windows gleaming in the amber light of a serene and peaceful sunset. The colors of the rosace behind the renewed Twin Thrones burned bright as gemstones. The Nightmare seemed small and wretched against this display of the majesty, where it had once seemed so huge and powerful amongst the ruins it had created.

"You only have as much power as she gives you," Twilight said, calmly watching the creature flail. "I don't know why I was even worried for a second, here at the end..."

The Nightmare looked down on Twilight with fury in its eyes. "It doesn't matter. None of it does. Celestia will be taken from you by time, and you from her. I never really die away."

Twilight stepped forward, smiling just a little at the creature's expression of sudden fear as she did so. She mounted the dais, wincing slightly at the pain in her rear leg as she did so. The Nightmare backed away from her, stumbling over Celestia's throne as it did so.

"What is this –" it hissed.

Twilight sighed. "Guilt is anger at the self," she said. The words appeared in a chunk in her mind; it was probably a quote from something she'd read once upon a time. The familiar sensation of her mind gently tossing up information for her was a comfort after the constant panic of the last few days. Months. She was still worried, of course, but...

"So?" the Nightmare spat, leaning away from her wretchedly.

She didn't know why this seemed important, but Twilight suddenly leapt forward and wrapped her forelegs around the creature's neck, ignoring its sudden curses of terrified indignation. Its flaming mane felt no more hot than holding a hoof over a campfire. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry?"

"Yes," Twilight said, letting go of the creature. "It must be very hard, being Guilt."

The Nightmare regarded her quizzically, a strange half-smile of incredulous amusement threatening to bloom on its face. "You yourself pointed out that I am not a *being*, just an image. A phantom, an abstraction of an emotion, so your mind could understand what it was being presented by Celestia's mind."

Twilight looked up at it seriously. "Still."

"I do not understand what you are trying to do, Twilight Sparkle," the Nightmare said, quickly, in haughtily tones. "You know very well that I *cannot*."

Twilight nodded, but gave it a sympathetic smile in any case.

"But..." the Nightmare said, its voice softening into a guilty tone of admission. "I did... enjoy... sitting with you, for that short time."

"I know you did." Despite everything, tears threatened Twilight's eyes as she looked at the proud expression on the terrifying creature that had so recently threatened her with oblivion. "It's why you had to try to hurt me and push me away – that's guilt, right? You can't help but want the thing that pains you nearby, but it just makes the pain worse. So you are compelled to lash out. I know how much a desperate conflict inside you hurts."

If the Nightmare had anything to say on this topic, it kept it to itself, instead raising its head to indicate the far doors to the Hall. "It seems that your faith has been rewarded... Faithful Student." And as the sound of Twilight's true name passed its lips, the Nightmare faded, holding Twilight's gaze until there were no eyes to see.

Twilight turned and looked at the great arched doors, which were thrown wide open, framing the form of Princess Celestia.

"Princess?" Twilight asked, cautiously. She trotted down from the dais, limbs burning.

The white figure grinned, and turned, fleeing out into the Gardens.

"Hey!" Twilight shouted, all suspicion cast aside by indignation. Despite the pain, and a slight limp, she worked herself into a gallop and chased after the vanishing form of Celestia.

They ducked and bobbed through the maze of hedgerows, Twilight turning corners to see a flash of a white flank vanish around the next, or leapt through a row of bushes only to see white wings folding on the other side of the next set. A hint of faded tail, a little titter of laughter... little hints of her quarry drove the unicorn forward as she moved, ignoring her body's protests.

Finally she rounded a bend, turning on her wounded leg in a way that summoned a fiery lance of pain. She grunted and ignored it, willing her knee to stay firm despite the lingering weakness, because there at the end of the hall of topiary sat Celestia, before an ornamental wire gate – the entrance to the Gardens of the Muses. Inside the gate, though, was a hazy vision of a distant seashore.

The alicorn gave Twilight a sly little grin, raising her eyebrows a couple times suggestively, and stepped through.

Heedless of the danger, Twilight darted forward, her face set with determination, and vanished into the portal.

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Luna looked down at Twilight and Celestia, eyes widening. Fluttershy looked up at her from where she had a hoof placed over Twilight's chest, shaking her head miserably as a tremendous sadness welled up in her eyes.

"Princess..." Applejack said, the only pony who could find her voice.

Luna hung her head. "They're... gone," she said, voice hollow.

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Twilight came to a halt and stared.

The location seemed familiar, for some reason; it was a rocky seaside on the border of a forest. There was only a little beachfront; most of the shoreline were cliffs of a pale stone that gleamed fiery red-golden in the fading sunlight.

A gentle, cool breeze drifted through the trees, causing them to whisper calming words and peace directly to Twilight's heart, despite her knowledge that it was just the sound of wind amongst supple, broad leaves.

But what occupied Twilight's attention was the small table set in a little clearing near a cliff edge. It was set for tea, with little reclining pillows for two ponies to lie on as they shared the contents of the fancy silver kettle. Sitting on one pillow was Princess Celestia, wearing a black cloak trimmed in gold; no longer faded or wasted, but instead as hale and vital as Twilight had ever seen her. She even radiated a faint, pale light in the fading sun. Her expression was troubled and heavy with care, her eyes looking up at Twilight reluctantly.

...and behind her stood an identical copy, wearing a white cloak, also trimmed in gold. This Celestia was grinning broadly with what appeared to be genuine pleasure.

The Celestia on the pillow stirred, and with an almost imperceptibly brief moment of hesitation, spoke:

"Hello... my Faithful Student."

Together Again, Somewhere + The Secret of the Eternal Sun + Masks +
Princess, Penitent, Pony + Twilight's Judgment + The Dream + What One
Pony Can Achieve in a Day + The Last Cup of Tea + Watch for Sunrise +
Hubris + Princess Luna, Ascendant + The Pegasus on the Balcony

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Twilight didn't dare move or speak; she kept her eyes locked on the scene before her, dumbfounded.

"Well?" asked the Celestia in white. "Aren't you going to say hello?"

The reclining Celestia looked up at her counterpart in irritation, eliciting a wide, mocking smile.

"What... what is this?" Twilight managed. It was almost so bizarre that she was tempted to believe it had to be true just for being so outlandish. "Is this another vision...?"

"No, Twilight. You're no longer in my mind," the black-clad Celestia said, trying to sound soothing. "This is a *true* place."

Twilight frowned. "Yeah, uh... I imagine you can see where I might be a little suspicious of you just *saying* that, at this point."

The Celestia in white snickered. Twilight found this Celestia very strange; her stance was all wrong, aggressive and restless, her face animated and blazing with emotion, most of which seemed to be at least a little mocking. The unfamiliarity rubbed Twilight the wrong way and she found herself taking an immediate dislike to her.

The sensation of resenting something with Celestia's face was becoming distressingly familiar.

The alicorn reclining on the pillow was much, much more like the Celestia Twilight knew, but weariness and sorrow obviously weighed heavily on her mind – and her body, it seemed. Even while sleeping, Celestia had always managed to seem upright and proud, in Twilight's experience; this sad creature was slumped and seemed to be almost permanently cringing. Resignation dulled her big, mournful eyes.

"So..." Twilight sighed. "Let me guess. This is like that logic puzzle, right? Uh... one of you always tells the truth and the other one always lies, and I have to figure out which is which? I know the answer for that one. It's rather simple –"

The Celestia in white barked out laughter, eyes bulging madly in deep amusement. "Ha! You hear that, Celestia? Your student's pretty clever –"

"Enough," the reclining Celestia interrupted, irritably. The standing Celestia gave her a sharp look; she seemed to be in charge, and didn't appreciate backtalk. "Twilight, listen carefully to me when I say this: you are in a *true* place... my Faithful Student."

It was as if something just *clicked* in Twilight's mind. In the same way that she had *known* it was the real Celestia speaking to her in the, um, *exciting* vision earlier, she *knew* this was really Celestia now.

Further, the sound of her true name seemed to heighten her senses, making her *aware* of this place, of its reality; not even the waking world was this *real*. Colors were bright and pure in the golden-red light of sunset, smells were sharp and rich, and every sound seemed to ring clear and proud in the air, almost independently of one another. It was more than a little overwhelming.

She had a strange sense of everything being *exactly as it was*, which was a weird thing to sense, and an even weirder thing to contemplate. The nonsensical obviousness inherent to the statement nagged at her as being an extremely poor way to express what she was feeling, even if it *felt* like the right way to say it.

Twilight's mind automatically rephrased it into something more sensible, if not as pat. She seemed to be in a place where things appeared the way they actually *were*, to themselves, without the soupy haze of individual perspective influencing them. Twilight, in being here, was experiencing the actual objects and events around her, not just her perception of them. The heightened sense of awareness was actually a little unsettling, giving her the nervous buzz in her gut that she associated with the aftermath of someone touching her suddenly while she was concentrating, once the immediate shock had faded.

But above all, she *knew* she was not in Celestia's mind anymore, and that this wasn't a trick. Her quest had reached its ultimate destination, even if she hadn't known this was where it would be at the outset.

She frowned. "Where are we?"

"*Somewhere*," the reclining Celestia said. There was the briefest shimmer of a mischievous laugh in her eyes as she said this, as there always was when she said something she knew Twilight was going to find vague and annoying.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Very *mystic*. A magical place, then?"

"Quite the opposite, in fact. Almost literally the opposite. It's –"

"Yes, yes. A *real* place, you said," Twilight huffed. She looked around, letting her discomfort show on her face. "It feels more real than *real*."

The black-clad Celestia smiled in the little, pleased way she did when Twilight demonstrated a quick grasp of a lesson, though it seemed a little more hesitant than usual. "Indeed."

Twilight's frown deepened. "I'm getting a little tired of mystic and symbolic, after all this..."

Both of the alicorns seemed to find this amusing, although the reclining Celestia's quiet little smile was no scratch on the mirth of her counterpart, who once again barked out a harsh, derisive little laugh. Who it was directed at was unclear; it might have been Twilight, or the reclining Celestia, or both of them, or the situation in general.

"And you..." Twilight continued, peering at the pair suspiciously. "One of you, or both of you, are the real Celestia."

"Oh, don't lump *me* in with *her*, please," the white-clad Celestia said, bitterly.

The reclining Celestia nodded, once, with grave solemnity. "If you are looking for the pony who is Celestia, Princess of the Sun, sister of the Princess of the Moon and your mentor... I am here, my Faithful Student." Once again, the sound of her true name gave Twilight an instant, unshakable surety that this was the Celestia for whom she had endured so much fear and pain.

Twilight raised her head to indicate the standing Celestia. "So who's miss sunshine over here, then?"

This got a little chuckle from both Celestias, although the standing one spoke first. "Ah... Twilight, I love how you just seem to stumble across the truth of things without realizing it."

"What do you mean?" Twilight asked, warily.

"Twilight... this is the Sun," Celestia said, simply.

The Sun gave Twilight a little bow which was only slightly soured by her mocking little smile.

The unicorn looked from the Sun to Celestia a few times. "The Sun."

"Yes, Twilight," Celestia replied.

"As in –"

"As in, bright shiny ball that floats in the sky *the Sun*. Big, fiery yellow light, *the Sun*," snapped the Sun. "Or at least, an aspect of it. The part which is attached to this old nag, anyways." She gently kicked the pillow Celestia was resting on, to Celestia's momentary discomfiture. The princess frowned and glared up at the Sun sullenly.

"Hey!" Twilight protested. Her protective tone made Celestia smile, a little.

The Sun *tsked*. "Oh, don't worry about her too much, Twilight; you'll understand soon enough that I'd be justified to do worse. By the end of this all, you might want to give her a little kick yourself, hmmm?" Though she spoke to Twilight, this little statement was directed more at Celestia, the Sun leaning down into Celestia's glare with a gloating smile, the princess' face growing more and more uncomfortable.

"I don't know about *that*," Twilight said, carefully.

"Oh, don't be that way... I saw what you did to Mommy Celestia," the Sun snickered. "Touched a nerve, did it?"

"So you've been watching this whole time, as well?" Twilight said, blushing despite her even tone.

The Sun leered. "*Epecially* that part. It was Celestia who couldn't bring herself to watch. Isn't that right?" The Sun gave Celestia a smug look as the princess looked away from both of them, out across the sea, face guilty. "You're very cute when you're trying to be seductive, you know."

"So you're the Sun," Twilight said, ignoring this and forcing herself to stay clipped and professional.

"Yes."

"No," Celestia interrupted, not turning around. "She is the part of me that is the Sun. And I'm the part of her that is Celestia."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "*Mystic* again, huh?"

"You're going to get a lot of that, here," the Sun said, with an amused smile. "I suggest you get used to it."

Twilight gave her a sour look, but continued nevertheless. "So what do you have to do with this 'Eternal Sun' stuff?"

The Sun's eyes widened with malicious glee. "Oh, my, Celestia... have you been giving yourself nicknames...? How *silly* of you."

"Would you give us a moment alone, please?" Celestia said irritably, still looking out over the shore.

"I wish I could, Celestia," the Sun said, sweetly. "But for *some* reason I feel the need to stay here and make sure you're being honest."

Celestia turned, her sad gaze falling on Twilight. It seemed very heavy, and Twilight felt a strange urge to shy from it. The weight of Celestia's guilty conscience seemed to strike her like a hammer blow. "I have no desire to lie to Twilight anymore. Not now... at the end."

There was a very long, solemn pause at this point, as Twilight and Celestia held one another's gaze, Twilight barely breathing.

"So..." Twilight said, nervously. "This really is..."

"Yes," Celestia said, her face falling further, if that were at all possible. "I'm sorry, my Faithful Student, but it really is."

Twilight had expected a huge, painful sorrow to just crush her when she heard this, as it had threatened to so many times over the last few days, and was thus momentarily disturbed when one didn't. Instead she felt... how best to put it? Ah. Something like: a pervasive melancholy fell over her, a gentle but insistent sadness that put everything behind a tinted glass, not consuming everything but certainly casting it in a different light.

And yet, perversely, she felt *free*, knowing that this was the end; everything and anything could be said and discussed with no need to consider how they would affect things down the road. The feeling of liberation made her shiver.

There was a pause as Twilight considered what to do next. Celestia watched her with resigned patience.

"How much time do we have?" Twilight whispered.

The Sun grimaced. "Time enough to talk."

Twilight stood before the pair, unmoving. Celestia's eyes suggested she was biting back a plea, while the Sun looked surly and annoyed.

"Twilight," Celestia said, eventually. "Please come sit down. I have a great deal to tell you, and I want you..." She trailed off, suddenly looking somewhat frightened for a moment, as if she feared finishing this statement would cause Twilight to get angry or leave. She quickly mastered herself, though. "I want you to *rest*. You've been through so much."

"Ah, ah, ah," the Sun said, smiling sarcastically. "See? This is what I mean. You're too good at this for me to leave you be. Tell her the *real* truth, not just *a* truth."

Celestia's face screwed up as the Sun chastised her, embarrassment and irritation alive in her grimace of displeasure. "Twilight..." she began.

The unicorn cocked her head quizzically. "Yes?"

"Twilight, I want..." Celestia said, tentatively. "I want you to sit with me, now, and listen to the things I have to say, as you said you would. I *want* this. But it is your decision. You have suffered a great deal and I respect your wishes if you'd rather keep your distance." She looked utterly miserable as she said this, clearly worried that Twilight would refuse. Her eyes, usually lit with quiet confidence, begged Twilight to be near her.

Twilight's heart automatically demanded that she leap forward and comfort the princess, but her mind came down on that instinct immediately, remembering not only why she was here but what it had gone through to make it here at all. Even if it was a bit cruel, Twilight couldn't help but feel good at the ease of her self-control.

That said, what Celestia asked was something Twilight wanted, herself – in this moment, they should be close together. "Of course I'll sit with you," Twilight said, trying to give Celestia a comforting smile, which was met with a grateful sigh of relief. "But no tea."

Celestia raised an eyebrow, frowning a bit cautiously. "No tea?"

"I think, once we get into things, you will understand why I'm a bit touchy about tea at the moment," Twilight said, stepping forward and gratefully collapsing onto the pillow.

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Celestia pumped her wings once, lifting herself into the air, the sun rising behind her.

In the crowd, a little unicorn filly looked up in wonder...

• • •

Celestia and Twilight regarded each other calmly across the table, as they had done many times before in far less trying circumstances. Their expressions said a great deal to each other, despite being relatively still and peaceful, if sad.

Twilight was uncomfortable – deeply so – with how much power she felt like she had over Celestia right now. The alicorn winced anytime Twilight's facial features moved, no matter how, as if expecting a rebuke, and it disturbed Twilight to see how pained and haunted her mentor's features were. She had only seen this sort of distress in Celestia a very few times before, and never for this long or, if it came to it, this intensely.

Like there had been in that long wait with the incarnation of Guilt, there was a tense sort of peace in the air, but rather than being the anxious peace of imminent departure, which it perhaps ought to have been, it was an expectant silence, awaiting the first voice, the first move, the beginning of the long conference between ascendant student and humiliated mentor.

The Sun seemed annoyed by this extended pause, but kept her sour tongue behind her lips, occasionally sneering down at Celestia.

Celestia finally shook her head. "No tea? Really?"

"Not yet," Twilight said, firmly.

This seemed to distress Celestia deeply. "I *like* taking tea with you, Twilight..."

The unicorn sighed. "I think we have a lot to discuss, first."

"Can't we just... talk, for a moment? This will be hard enough without –"

"Stop avoiding things, Celestia," the Sun growled. "This isn't a diplomatic meeting, it's a confession. Don't try to butter her up."

Celestia frowned. Once again Twilight was struck by how strange petulance and guilt looked on her face; it spoke to how much she had put herself through that she couldn't, or didn't care to, control herself. Her composure and poise were completely gone.

"May I ask you something, just to get us started, Princess?" Twilight said, quietly.

"Just Celestia will do, I think. Here and now."

Twilight smiled at the courtesy, even though it reminded her for a moment of that seductive vision's Celestia inviting her to do so. "Celestia, then," she said, kindly. "This is something I really need to ask *you*. I'm not sure I could get a meaningful answer from anypony else."

Celestia hesitated for a second, then smiled gently. "Please, by all means."

"Um," Twilight said, grinning slightly. "So, apparently I swore an oath to be one of Luna's knights... am I going to have to do whatever she says, now?"

Celestia stared at Twilight for a second, a smile of disbelief growing on her face. She burst into bright laughter, bringing a hoof to her face to wipe away tears of relieved mirth.

The Sun frowned at Twilight. "Are you taking this seriously?"

"About as seriously as I've ever taken anything," Twilight said, smiling innocently, enjoying the sound of Celestia's relieved laughter, tension flowing away like melting ice.

"Twilight..." Celestia said, trying to stop herself from laughing. It was hard; the stress in her had been so tightly wound that the sudden snap in tension made it almost uncontrollable. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she began coughing, such was the intensity of her laughter. "Twilight... did you really?"

"Apparently."

Celestia's mirth died away, slowly, but she seemed much less crushed and hopeless now, just as Twilight had hoped. The princess smiled down at her approvingly. "Well, I suspect you would have been willing to do as she asked anyways, but..." Celestia gave Twilight a

little grin. "If she ever starts getting too insistent about the oath, just ask her if she was this pushy with Starlight Chaser. I suspect she'll back off if you do."

"Luna mentioned that name – was she their leader?"

"She was, yes. And she *never* listened to Luna when she thought she had a better idea than her princess. I think that's why Luna liked her so much – bold, you see..." Celestia sighed deeply, and looked off into the middle distance. "That's ancient history now. You should be more careful what you say to Luna from the old days, even if you're just trying to flatter or tease her. She'll take it seriously, or at least make a show of doing so, if it suits her at the time."

Twilight *almost* said, "I'll run everything past you first," but caught herself in time. Instead she nodded and said, awkwardly, "I'll... bear that in mind."

"But..." Celestia said, returning her gaze to Twilight. "The idea of you as a knight has some romantic appeal to it, I have to say..."

Twilight blushed and said nothing.

"Yes, yes, this is all very interesting," the Sun said, irritably. "Get on with it, will you?"

Celestia's rising spirits had lit a flame of defiance in her – just enough that she wasn't about to mewl at the Sun's bad mood. "I'm getting there. Be patient."

The Sun rolled her eyes and huffed, wings fluffing in annoyance. "Don't think I won't haul her out of here and drag you off to sleep, Celestia. This wasn't meant to be time for some idle chit-chat."

Twilight bristled. "Please, just let us have this, okay? This is going to be hard enough as it is."

For the first time, the Sun's anger seemed to be directed at Twilight in earnest. "*You* get kept awake for a millennium and tell me you're not in a hurry to get some rest. You're only here on my sufferance – key word, *suffer* – so excuse me if I'm a little *cranky*."

Twilight made a point of holding the Sun's furious gaze for a time, then looked to Celestia, who was beginning to look nervous again. "Celestia –" her heart fluttered again, using the name so readily, but she *had* earned it – "what is she talking about?"

Celestia closed her eyes tight. "She's talking about the Eternal Sun, Twilight."

"Even *I* don't call myself that, and never would," the Sun snapped, turning a vicious glare on Celestia. "Arrogance!"

"Yes," Celestia said, calmly, although her voice trembled slightly. The Sun sneered, but cooled its wrath, looking away with a stormy expression.

Twilight frowned. "What do you mean? I... I guess I understood there was more to the Eternal Sun than just... a title. I was beginning to have an idea that it was the name you had created for the mask –"

"Oh, no," the Sun said darkly, shaking her head. "No, no, no. It's *much* worse than that."

Twilight frowned. "Well obviously it's to do with refusing to *set* –"

"To say the very least!" the Sun interrupted, again. She tapped Celestia roughly. "So are you going to tell her, or what?" Her impatience was painted on every word.

Celestia looked up at the Sun irritably, then turned to Twilight and sighed. "Twilight, I want you to promise me that you'll sit through everything. Hear me out."

"Of course I will," Twilight answered, reflexively.

Celestia looked pained. "Twilight..."

Twilight took a deep breath through her nose, matching Celestia's gaze. "Why are you so frightened that I won't? Is it really that terrible?"

"Yes," said both Celestias at once. Twilight chuckled despite the seriousness of the situation as they glared at each other.

"No, what I mean is... Celestia..." Twilight trailed off, letting her mind turn over phrasing in her head for a while. Celestia watched her with nervous patience, while the Sun gave her a "get on with it" motion with one hoof. "Look, I understand that you might... worry about telling me things, thinking that I'll... that it will hurt me, alright? Like they would have, not even three days ago. But I wouldn't be here now if I weren't willing to endure the knowledge of your mistakes."

She gave the princess a brave little smile.

Celestia sighed. "Twilight, I... I've seen that you've grown. You've become so strong, so quickly – well, no, that's not quite right; you just chose to be as strong as you really are,

despite your fear. And I'm so proud of you. Granted, I'd have preferred you were called to test it in different circumstances..."

"Ah, well, it wasn't all bad, was it..." the Sun added, giving Twilight a suggestive wink.

The princess gave her counterpart a dirty look. "You need to understand that what is happening is... very big. The culmination of many, many mistakes, over a long life. And between us... they ultimately end with me actively making a choice which I knew, deep down, would hurt you."

Twilight's smile faded. "What... what do you –"

"You know exactly what I mean, Twilight. You chastised me for it in the library." Celestia's voice was firm, now; she had apparently decided to throw herself on Twilight's mercy, and would do so with as much poise as she could manage.

"That... the letters... all of it? You... *chose*...?" Twilight said, trying to ignore how much this hurt. Something in her had suspected it was an active decision, though... what else would drive Celestia so mad with guilt and terror with regard to Twilight, if not being at the root of so much pain in her Faithful Student? It made far too much sense.

Celestia frowned, guiltily. "Yes, Twilight. I chose to do something knowing it would hurt and alienate you from me – not that this was the direct intention, mind you, but I did know the consequences of my choice in my heart, even if I chose to ignore them. I made a bad choice about something because I thought I had to, and because I was selfish and thoughtless, I only thought of how *I* was suffering for it. I told myself that my pain was something like nobility. Self-sacrifice, giving of myself."

From the depths of her memory, Twilight heard Luna say: *You're just like her! You've both turned self-sacrifice into a vanity.*

"There is no neat little lie for what my choice did to you, though. The pain you were in, the desperation; how you were living your life. I, and the foolish choices I made, were at the heart of all of that." Celestia's face fell into discomfort. "And on top of that, the things you have so bravely endured to arrive here, trying to save me despite all of it..." She looked away, pained.

Twilight stared at her. The Sun grinned.

"And it's all wrapped up in *this*," Celestia said, waving a hoof as she met Twilight's gaze again. "This is all a part of it. The lie of the Eternal Sun. But ultimately... this is about us, Twilight Sparkle, and how I hurt you; because that brought it all to an end."

Silence reigned for a series of lifetimes. Celestia's gaze never wavered, staring at Twilight with sullen pride like a felon before the arbiter, saying: I did it with the best intentions, judge me as you will. Twilight tried to meet it, but her gaze kept straying to the Sun, who was watching Celestia suspiciously.

It hurt – it really did – to hear Celestia, the *real* Celestia, admit to intentionally hurting her. But in this *real* place, Twilight found it easy to be the Faithful Student, seeking answers and information to her satisfaction about this problem, trying to make the best judgments and above all, *understand*. It was beginning to occur to her that thinking magic was her special talent was a very limited outlook indeed.

And there was strength in her to accept Celestia's faults, or at least, hear them. It was the same strength that had compelled her to hug a creature that had tried to kill her, because she had come to understand its agonizing pseudo-existence and felt, unquestioningly, that everything in the universe deserves a little sympathy for its pain.

Whether that strength would give out when it came to actually forgiving the princess remained to be seen.

Celestia broke the silence first. "You were right, in your... letter," she said, grimly. "I *need* to confess to you. And I will accept your judgment... no matter what it is."

Twilight sighed, rubbing her temples with her hooves. "Start from the beginning."

• • •

A little filly and her parents looked up at the princess, who descended from the throne, smiling broadly.

"Have you enjoyed the first week of classes at the Academy, Twilight?" the princess asked, beaming down at the filly.

"Um... yes," Twilight said, having yet to learn that it took quite a good liar to get past the princess. She just didn't want to sound ungrateful; she'd come home with a splitting headache every day from all the testing.

"Well, let's hope your private lesson with me is a little more entertaining, hmm?" Celestia said, smiling knowingly and nodding gratefully to Twilight's parents, who bowed and left the two alone together for the very first time. "How do you take your tea?"

• • •

"It begins," Celestia said, as evenly as she could, "with the first sleep."

Around them, the scenery *shifted*, just a little; the sun was much higher on the horizon, not just barely hanging above the distant sea. Celestia nodded towards where Twilight had appeared so recently, and Twilight turned to see a much younger Celestia – both in terms of chronological age, and... in a sort of ethereal, indescribable way that this place and its *realness* empowered.

It wasn't innocence, certainly – not if what Luna had shown Twilight was any indication – but there was an absence in this memory of Celestia of a certain gravitas which had always hung on the Celestia Twilight knew like a cloak. The weight, she supposed, of history... and the quiet burden of *distance*.

"Is this like the mountain? Does this place... remember?" Twilight asked, watching the young Celestia look around herself with cautious curiosity.

"Something like that, yes. It's... *mystic*." Celestia smiled weakly at Twilight's groan. She cleared her throat and continued. "As my time for that first rest approached, I *knew* that I would be fine, and would return someday, even if Luna was privately worried that I was dying. I was a little more than one hundred and fifty years old at that point, and we knew precious little about ourselves... but I felt drawn to the caverns beneath the Temple of Two Sisters, and there I slept, and arrived here."

Twilight frowned. "That's been bothering me. This place seems very... familiar, but I'll swear I've never been here, or anywhere like it before..."

"Didn't Luna show you...?" Celestia replied, momentarily puzzled. "This is where she emerged from the sea, in the south." She smiled at Twilight's sudden expression of realization. "Well, it takes the shape of that place, anyways; I have always found it pleasant here, and was even then in the habit of coming here often."

The young Celestia gave a little yelp of surprise as she was approached by a shining double of herself – the Sun, smiling gently and speaking softly, welcoming Celestia to this place. Acting on a sudden instinct, Twilight's eyes flickered up at the Sun, who had closed

her eyes and was shaking her head, face pained, as if to chastise the memory for being so friendly.

"I met the Sun for the first time," Celestia continued, not noticing. "And I learned about my... arrangement. That I am the part of the Sun that is a pony, and she is the part of me that is the Sun. Please don't ask me to explain it, Twilight," she added quickly as Twilight opened her mouth to ask something. "You won't like the answer. It's just a thing that is the case."

"I was actually going to ask if Luna has a similar arrangement with the moon. I'd assume she does," Twilight said, a little hurt.

"I wouldn't know; I've never asked," Celestia replied. "But I wouldn't assume anything about it."

Twilight frowned. "Why not? You're sisters, aren't you?"

"The Sun and Moon are very different things, after all. Luna and I are attached to one another as part of cosmic cycles. I'm no more or less her sister than you are – after all, it's not as if we have parents. You just demonstrated your connection with her beyond any doubt, when you were able to correctly address her that way and wake her from the Nightmare once again. You are her sister, just as you are m – *the* Faithful Student."

The immensity of this statement, delivered as if it were no matter of great importance, was not lost on Twilight Sparkle. That little moment of comfort on the stone stairwell at the heart of the mountain had been much more momentous even than it had seemed at the time. She, little Twilight Sparkle, shared a special bond of sorority with Luna that extended beyond pleasantries and gestures of affection... and into fundamental *truth*. It was more than a little intimidating.

"You are a very special pony, Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, forcing calm, demonstrating the same talent as her sister for reading Twilight's thoughts on her face. "And Luna loves you dearly for what you've done for her. I am... very happy that you two have bonded in this way. You'll need to be able to rely on each other, looking ahead."

Twilight shivered to hear the words of Guilt in Celestia's mouth – but then, Guilt was about the closest thing to the real Celestia as Twilight had encountered in the empty halls of Celestia's mind. Celestia was beginning to look miserable again, her mind clearly ruminating on the upcoming departure and her prolonged absence.

Twilight smiled gently. "Please, Princess... continue."

"*Celestia*, Twilight, please," Celestia said. "No more masks between you and I. Especially the mask of an authority I scarcely deserve."

The Sun stirred. "Knock off the self-pity, would you? At least, until you've actually told her the things you should be ashamed of."

With a little look of wary irritation at the Sun, Celestia continued. "Where was I... ah. So, yes, I met the Sun many times, and we spent our time together just... talking. Resting." In the field before them, the two alicorns laughed merrily, chatting animatedly.

"We were *friends*," the Sun said. There was a great pain in her voice as she said this, and Twilight looked up at her with concern. The Sun scowled down at her, but addressed Celestia. "Wouldn't you say, Celestia? I certainly thought of you that way."

"Yes," Celestia said quietly. "We were." She blinked slowly and bit her lower lip in anxiety.

Twilight felt an urge to reach out and touch Celestia, to comfort her, but as she stirred, the Sun's glare intensified, and Twilight settled back down.

Celestia didn't continue for some time, but when she did, her voice was wretched with hatred. It frightened Twilight to hear, such was its intense bitterness. "It was *Discord* who changed everything. That cursed creature... in the war, the first time he was active, he hurt me, nearly unto death, and I was forced into dormancy before my time."

Twilight stirred. "Yes, Luna showed us. You returned with the Elements of Harmony –"

"Which I happily helped her acquire," the Sun growled. "At no small risk to myself."

In the field, a battered-looking pair of Celestias looked with triumph at their gleaming treasure, one assuring the other that everything they'd suffered would be worth it, now.

Celestia winced at the reminder. "Yes. And when I returned to the waking world, bearing this powerful magic, eventually Luna and I managed to catch Discord in a situation where we could use them –"

"Eventually?" Twilight asked, startled. "It seemed like you dealt with him right after you came back –"

"Twilight... there were almost *thirty years* between my return and our victory over Discord." Celestia said this dully, whispers of ill-favored memories echoing in the hollow

sound of her voice. "*Everything* seemed to go wrong. We were triumphant by the slimmest of chances, at great cost to Equestria and the sacrifice of far, far too many good ponies. And Luna and I... well..."

"Not a high point in your relationship?" Twilight offered, grinning weakly.

"That's putting it lightly. Especially when my mane started changing... it terrified her. And the fatigue of *setting* came heavily on me – as the Sun had warned me that it would. I *should* have slept, then, and trusted her. But I didn't; I was frightened, Twilight, I was out of my mind with fear and humiliation. I had been so *happy* before the war, so hopeful, even in the hard times; Discord turned my pleasant, if troubled, little country into a shattered ruin. So many places I had watched grow, gone. So many ponies dead, slaughtered before their time. Entire generations having been raised for war..." Celestia shook her head, tears falling gently from her eyes. "That there was so much angry tension between Luna and myself on top of that was... unbearable. I do love her, after all, even when we fight. That it was reflected in politics just made it worse. So I clung to pride to comfort myself, and it poisoned my judgment. And in the end..."

Twilight sighed, sadly. "The moon refused to give way to the sun."

Celestia gave a single, weak huff of dark amusement. "Luna does love putting it that way, for some reason."

"So you banished Nightmare Moon..." Twilight's tone was thoughtful, as she fit pieces into her mind.

"You need to understand, Twilight, that Nightmare Moon was so much different than Discord. You met it for *real*, in my mind – that was Nightmare Moon. She is an incarnation of Luna's fears, given form and purpose by wild dream magic, as you realized." Celestia managed a little smile of pride in Twilight at this. "Discord was a long, drawn-out conflict. Nightmare Moon was a storm of... just..."

"I can imagine," Twilight said, remembering the mad smile and furious, icy hatred that creature had seemed to project.

"Try not to; it's not worth troubling your mind with," Celestia said. "And I was so tired, Twilight; not just in terms of the cycle of rising and setting, which was all out of sync now, but physically tired, emotionally drained... totally humiliated. I had believed myself powerful enough to protect Equestria, and that belief had been shattered by Discord; now something had taken hold of my beloved Luna and was terrorizing what remained

of it. I was so weak, then, but still powerful. And so I took up the Elements and banished Nightmare Moon."

"That must have been... hard on you," Twilight said.

Celestia shook her head. "I couldn't do anything else, Twilight. You've felt the Elements many times; you know how overwhelming it is... and I was tired, and didn't have anypony helping me – certainly not five friends as courageous and great-hearted as yours are. So while I regretted it, I also knew I had no choice; I couldn't do anything else. When I put my faith in you and your friends to become the new bearers of the Elements, I must say that while I assumed you would merely renew her containment, I *hoped* you would be able to save Luna." Celestia's moist eyes beamed at Twilight proudly. "And of course, you did, my beloved student. You did what I could not have, because of your greatness of heart and your fledgling mastery of the Magic of Friendship."

"So why are you telling me all of this?" Twilight asked, frowning. "I guess all this history made me assume you were kind of screwed up over what happened to Luna."

Celestia gave Twilight a pained look. "Well I was. Just not over banishing Nightmare Moon, not exactly... I was humiliated yet again, you see; once again, I felt weak and impotent, unable to protect or care for the things I loved. I was so *tired*. And when I get 'screwed up,' Twilight, as you have personally experienced... things devolve quickly."

"To say the very least," the Sun snarled. "Pay close attention now, Twilight Sparkle... I want you to remember this part."

The field changed around them, again. The light of the sun was strange and unsettling, and it actually *moved* in the sky, wavering and fading in and out.

"Celestia!" cried the memory of the Sun, galloping forward. Celestia, her mane and tail beginning to fade into a very familiar pattern – the pink of dawn almost completely gone now – lay slumped on the ground, covered in weird burns and irregular, jagged wounds. The Sun knelt over her, face desperate. "Celestia, what happened?"

"I... I..." the memory of Celestia rasped. "She's gone. Luna is gone..." Her voice had a plaintive edge, and would have been a howl of terrified rage if she could have managed it. "The Elements banished her! I couldn't control them..."

The Sun's face fell. "I'm... Celestia, I'm so sorry..."

Celestia said nothing, just lay there panting, eyes wild.

Her counterpart tried to smile, affecting the frantic, bright tone of voice ponies use to address the dying so that they don't go into shock. "Just... relax, okay? We can *set*, and you'll recover –"

Celestia's eyes grew even wider. "*Set*..."

"Yes. You've put it off too long as it is. We didn't rest properly last time – we couldn't, we had to get rid of Discord. And now this..." The Sun wandered over to the shoreline for some reason – perhaps something to do with the process of setting. "I mean, look at this..."

Twilight realized the mistake the Sun was going to make a second before she made it – her tone was too thoughtful, her mind clearly given over to thinking about the problem of setting and not paying attention to the terrible light of rage kindled in Celestia's eyes. Twilight's stomach churned to see Celestia so out of control, so *angry*. Even the Nightmare hadn't been like this.

"No," Celestia said, awkwardly trying to get to her hooves. "There's no time."

The memory of the Sun chuckled in a slightly condescending way that Twilight associated with ponies who are way out of their depth but don't realize it. "There had better be time, Celestia, I mean... it's going to be a couple years at least," she said, spreading her wings.

A little choking sound next to her attracted Twilight's attention. To her shock, it was coming not from Celestia, but from the current Sun, who was actually *crying*. The unicorn's eyes turned on her mentor, who looked away from the light of furious understanding blooming in her student's face.

"A couple *years*!?" the memory Celestia bellowed, despite obvious pain. "Do you have any idea what could happen? Equestria is in *ruins*! Half the country is turning against the other over whether or not I can be trusted anymore, how long it'll be until I become some sort of monster!"

The Sun turned, frightened by her friend's angry tone. "It's only a couple years, Celestia –"

"Oh, heavens, no," Twilight whispered. The Sun really had been very, very innocent...

"This is *your* fault," the memory of Celestia snarled. "This... all of this... how necessary is it? Is it necessary at *all*?"

The Sun's eyes were filled with fear and confusion. "My fault...? What... of... of course it's necessary...!" But Twilight understood that to a mind so consumed with rage and humiliation, this sounded like she was covering for something.

"You... betrayed me..." Celestia snarled, prowling up to the Sun. "You should have supported me. If I hadn't been so tired this whole time, if you didn't insist on me following some schedule and just cooperated, I would have been strong enough to deal with all of this!"

"Celestia, I –"

"Enough!" Celestia howled. It had probably terrified the Sun, but Twilight recognized a desperate mind looking for any excuse when she saw one. "Believe it or not, I have other important things to deal with besides sitting around this place with you! Now raise the sun and send me back so I can *fix everything!*"

"Celestia, you're scaring me!" the Sun moaned. "I can't just *do* that!"

Celestia's towering rage banked quickly, condensed to a terrible, terrible light in the depths of her eyes as she grinned horribly. "Oh, no...?"

"What are you –" the Sun began, as Celestia's wings spread wide and she dove forward. Desperately, the Sun sent a shield of magical force at Celestia, who dodged it with war-tested grace. "Please, Celestia, stop!"

"No," Celestia responded, snarling. "Stop resisting and do as I ask."

"I *can't*, Celestia –"

"You mean you *won't*," the princess replied, eyes blazing. "Don't make *me* do it."

The Sun's eyes went wide with terror. "Do... what?"

Celestia's face went dark as a thunderhead. "*This.*"

Chains of magical energy leapt around the trembling Sun, constricting her. She cried out in terror as she was lifted, bodily, into the sky, thrashing against the restraints as best she could. As she rose, the sun followed her into the sky, rising up from the horizon, ever higher, towards its apex at noontime; the higher the captured sun got, the more hale and vital Celestia appeared – though her mane retained its familiar multihued appearance.

"No more weakness," the memory of Celestia said harshly – determination, anger, and reluctance warring in her voice.

Twilight stirred, realizing she'd heard it from two places at once; her eyes leapt to the current Celestia, who was staring at her past self in fascination, eyes leaking humiliated tears.

"No more failure," they said, one snarling, one whispering.

"Celestia..." Twilight murmured, timidly.

"No more *imperfection!*"

Twilight's eyes went wide.

• • •

Teacher and student sat together in the library, selecting scrolls. Twilight occasionally looked up at Celestia, nervously.

"Is something wrong?" Celestia asked.

Twilight shook her head. "No, it's... just... nice, having you here with me while I do this."

"I'm glad."

• • •

The unnatural noontime faded. Again the shoreline was lit by a dying sun, almost faded from gold to red, the sound of the breeze through the trees and the waves beating on the shore the only sounds breaking the uncomfortable silence. The Sun turned away from Celestia and Twilight, staring out into the horizon.

Twilight stared at Celestia, whose gaze lingered on the place where the memory of herself had just been standing.

"What... did you do...?" Twilight managed.

Celestia didn't look up at her, but seemed to shake a couple of times as she suppressed sobs. "I became the Eternal Sun."

"*That's* the Eternal Sun? You –"

"I chained the Sun to the sky," Celestia said, bitterly. "Here, where such things have meaning. And as I returned to the waking world, my wounds closed and I felt fresh and vital as I hadn't in decades. I even thought to myself," and here her mouth pulled into a disgusted grimace, "I thought to myself, 'I finally figured out what was going wrong.'"

Twilight couldn't find words. Her jaw worked lamely, a little hiss of breath passing her lips, but no words formed. She just held Celestia in a gaze that was half-disgust, half-shock.

Celestia, the *princess*, had betrayed that beautiful, innocent creature in the most vile way imaginable. Twilight was completely taken aback.

"It took me two hundred years to return Equestria to something resembling stability," Celestia said wretchedly. "And I put on the mask, Twilight, in those days, wore it for so long that I *became* the mask, the Eternal Sun of Equestria: a shining beacon of stability among the ruins, around which recovery could be formed."

"And thanks to her little... *magic trick*," the Sun spat, "she didn't ever have to worry about her powers fading or anything. She could be," and here her tone became – if possible – even more bitter, "*perfect*."

"Twilight, you understand," Celestia said, quickly – no, desperately. "It was politics. Everypony *needed* me to be fine. To be better than fine, to be *transcendent*, above the issues, just... *there*. A symbol. To be something to rally around, and always rely upon –"

"Something which would never hurt them..." Twilight murmured, sadly, staring at nothing in particular. "Would never be absent, or frightening..."

"Yes, exactly," Celestia said, her eyes begging Twilight to understand.

"I understand quite well," Twilight said in a quiet voice, eyes turning to meet the alicorn's. Celestia visibly flinched from the pain Twilight held there.

Celestia swallowed, nervously, making the Sun's face spread into a cruel little smile. "Twilight, I never meant to –"

"Don't skip ahead," the Sun snapped. "Keep going. Full disclosure."

Twilight took a deep breath and turned to face Celestia properly. "All the way to the end. I'll listen to everything. Then we'll talk about where we are, alright?"

Celestia closed her eyes and turned away, looking pained. "Yes, you're right, of course..."

"So you reunited Equestria," Twilight prompted.

"...Yes. And I admit that I took pleasure in it, even knowing I was doing it on stolen time." Celestia cleared her throat and forced herself to look back at Twilight, shifting nervously in the pillow. "So two hundred years, or so, had passed since I banished Nightmare Moon, and I began to feel the fatigue growing in me again... the Sun was trying to break free of her bonds."

"With some success," the Sun said, irritably.

Celestia actually smiled at this. "Yes... and Equestria was enjoying relative peace, so I felt like it was a good time to try to... deal with this. I descended into a chamber under Canterlot, under the Ivory Tower – *your* tower, in fact," she added, with a little smile, clearly hoping Twilight would take this as a compliment.

"Yes, I know," Twilight said evenly. "We're there now."

"Are we? Oh, good... I'm glad Luna remembered." Celestia sighed. "Obviously, I knew I had done a great evil, but I convinced myself it had all been necessary. Certainly I believed that my success vindicated my actions, at least in part..." The Sun scoffed. "So I came here, to this place, to speak with the Sun. I hoped that she would understand, and perhaps –"

"No, you came here to tell me you had been *justified* in imprisoning me against my will," the Sun sneered. "You didn't even *apologize*."

• • •

"It is with great pride that I formally introduce Twilight Sparkle to the court as my student and protégé. I have rarely known, in all my years, a unicorn with her talents and skills; with that in mind, I have invited her to take residence here at the palace to continue her magical training with me now that she has graduated from the Academy. I am pleased beyond words to say that she has agreed, and will thus be joining us from time to time..."

The roar of hoofs on the tiles of the Great Hall was thunderous. Twilight smiled awkwardly and looked up at the princess, feeling completely out of place here amongst the pageantry of the court, even in her best gown, which she felt were like rags compared even to the least among the nobleponies.

"Don't worry, my faithful student," Celestia said, sotto voce. "I'll only make you come when something fun's going to happen."

They smiled at each other, in the small, private way they did when they were sharing a joke between themselves.

• • •

Twilight blinked, and *somewhere* was once again lit by noon. A memory of Celestia stood in the meadow where Twilight had arrived once again, looking proud, but wary.

"So you still refuse, then?" she asked. "Even after I have shown you what I've been able to accomplish?"

"If you have achieved so much, then rest, Celestia. This isn't natural. You're hurting both of us, doing this," came the Sun's voice – which is to say, Celestia's – from the open air.

The memory of Celestia bristled. "How are we being *hurt*?"

"I'm not sure yet," the voice replied. "But I'm not particularly eager to find out."

"Perhaps if you were more willing to cooperate, we could observe the situation in a more... controlled way..." Celestia offered. "Personally, I am interested in finding out what we can accomplish together, if we're willing to push ourselves..."

"This isn't an *experiment*, Celestia. And I'm not going to let it be one – this is dangerous. Please, let me go!" the voice cried.

Celestia frowned. "And risk you *setting*? No."

The voice was pleading now. "Celestia, please!"

"I can't take that chance – you know that. There's still so much to do. The gryphons are still restless, the forest is still wild... and with Luna gone, I must handle her responsibilities as well..."

"Celestia..."

Thinking of Luna seemed to have pained the princess, but it was channeled into anger in the manic, thoughtless way of desperate ponies. "Equestria *needs* us! Needs me awake, and not rising and setting constantly, throwing things into question! If Luna were still

here, if I had been able to save her, I might consider your demands..." This statement was heavily laden with accusation with regard to which of the two of them had been most responsible for this failure.

"There was nothing I could have –"

"You *must* come to understand that I have no choice but to be there for the ponies who are depending on me. Self-sacrifice is always difficult, but it is necessary – you need to learn this, yet, it seems."

The memory of Celestia turned, ignoring the Sun's frantic calls for her, and vanished. The noon light faded, once again, down into crimson.

"I was... still so sure of myself, then." Celestia said, voice heavy with guilt. "I returned again, ten years later, and we had basically the same conversation; and once again, fifteen years or so after that. Each time I would ask her to cooperate, and she would refuse. I demanded she explain how she knew we were being harmed; I certainly noticed no ill effects at that point..."

The Sun's expression of contempt could have scored glass. "You can't *imagine* what a relief it was for me to hear that."

Celestia coughed, a couple times, in the fashion of somepony trying to clear the thickness of their throat. "By the time – excuse me – by the time I finally got around to apologizing..."

"I was in no mood to hear it," said the Sun, bitterly. "It was several centuries too late, after all."

This time, there was no change of scenery; just snatches of voices, ringing out harshly against the quiet sound of the wind and surf.

"I've come to try to –"

"If you wanted to apologize, a couple centuries ago would have been better."

"I have tried to explain to you many times that with Luna gone, I have –"

"Stop using your sister as an excuse! You're just –"

"Just what?! Power-hungry? A tyrant?"

"Well, you are keeping me here like a slave!"

"How dare you!"

"How dare I what? Say the truth?"

Celestia shook her head irritably. "Enough. She gets the point."

Despite this, the voices continued unabated, descending into a shouting match rather quickly; Celestia's voice asserting that the Sun was being childish and selfish, not thinking of its responsibility to others; the Sun calling Celestia arrogant and thoughtless.

"Enough!" Celestia shouted. The sound of her desperate cry thundered over the voices, which seemed to fade with the echo of her demand.

The princess sat in silence for awhile, taking deep, long breaths, eyes smoldering with self-loathing. Twilight again had to suppress an automatic instinct to comfort her, forcing herself to remain seated as Celestia calmed herself.

"I've only seen her twice since then," the Sun said, eventually. Her tone of voice was strange; there was a sort of smugness in it, reveling in revealing Celestia's misdeeds to Twilight, but there was also a deep and lingering sadness, and bitter resentment. "The first time, about a century ago... I don't know what was on her mind; she just stood there, staring at me, and then left. Guilty conscience, perhaps. The second time, well..." the Sun looked around. "I'm not sure how it's all going to turn out, really. Not well, for the *Eternal Sun*, I suspect." The strange tone fell away for this last sentence, which was as acid as it was possible for spoken words to be without burning in the air.

Twilight stared at Celestia, who occasionally shot her a guilty glance, but otherwise occupied herself mostly with staring off at nothing in particular, waging some internal battle.

Part of her was sick with rage and horror at what Celestia had done. The Sun in the past had been... cute. She had been much like an overgrown foal, guileless and completely open, and she had loved Celestia unreservedly, happily listening to the princess' tales of adventure in the world. Twilight had felt a kinship with her – they had both enjoyed, in "youth," basking in Celestia's light, even if that metaphor didn't translate particularly well applied to the Sun. So the betrayal of that relationship bit deep.

Furthermore, now it was all too easy to see where this spiteful, biting creature had come from – betrayal would fester in the heart of a creature like the Sun had been, corrupting

all that innocence into resentment and vengeful rage. Twilight hated herself a little for the instant dislike she had felt for the Sun, but... that's how such ponies were. Externalizing their fear and pain, making everything worse, spreading the bad news around in great, flaring rages, trying to get it all *out* because it just *hurt* so badly.

And yet, at the same time, Twilight couldn't see Celestia's anguish and be unmoved, even in the full knowledge of the immensity of her crime. Remorse might as well have been spilling out of her in great black torrents every time she spoke, but whether or not there was enough regret in the entire universe to make up for this was something of a mystery.

Twilight's eyes fell on the Sun, and the unicorn wondered if she was in any position to offer any comment about this, in any case.

Celestia coughed. The sound was awkward, half-stifled, as if she didn't want to draw any more attention to herself. "So that's... what that was about."

"I see," Twilight said, carefully.

The princess looked up at her, face firm, eyes sad and guilty. "Which brings us to you, Twilight."

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Spike answered the door of the tower, his stubby limbs flailing in shock as the Princess smiled down at him. "P-Princess...!"

"Hello, Spike. Is Twilight in?"

Her answer was already trying to come to a screeching halt so that it could descend the stairs with some decorum. Spike and Celestia shared a little grin.

"Princess," Twilight Sparkle said, only a little breathless, as she came around the corner of the stairs. "What can I do for you? Our next meeting was on Thursday, I thought... I haven't forgotten anything, have I?" She began to look a little panicky.

"No, Twilight, no!" Celestia laughed. "It's just a nice day."

Twilight looked out the window. "Is it? I... suppose so."

"Ah, well, now this is an assignment!" Celestia gave Twilight a serious look. "We're going to the gardens. Bring your chess set, will you? I'll beat you yet..."

• • •

"The mask," Celestia said. "It's all about the mask."

"Yes, I... I realized that," Twilight replied, smiling weakly.

"The mask of the Eternal Sun, and the evil that empowered it, allowed me to be the princess Equestria needed in the wake of Discord and Nightmare Moon. It is the same mask you have begun to wear – the mask of dignity, I think I called it. I have gathered that you even began to wear it for your friends – because, I suspect, I was not the only pony you were beginning to feel alienated from."

Twilight nodded, and swallowed down some thickness in her throat.

Celestia looked down on her with sympathy, and for a moment they were once again mentor and protégé, the princess sympathizing with the burdens of her student's life. But the moment passed as Celestia's eyes grew guilty and weary again and she slumped back down, somehow managing to actually be *smaller* than Twilight despite being almost twice her size.

"Since that's the case, Twilight, I suspect you have now realized that the mask feeds itself justification for its existence. Leaders need to be just slightly remote, a little larger than life, in order to lead effectively, to inspire, to not disappoint or fail in a meaningful way. Being too much of a pony introduces uncertainty, which no pony wants in a leader. They want purpose and surety." The princess raised a hoof in an explanatory gesture – this was just the case, it seemed to say. "All too easily, that slips into everything. It was almost instant for me, of course, because I had no pony truly close to me anymore; for you, I think, it was only starting."

Twilight chuckled, weakly. "I was even wearing it for Spike, now and again. I could see it in his eyes; he didn't know me."

Hearing this obviously pained Celestia, but she didn't comment on it. "So in your case, you hid your insecurities with the mask. Forgive me for being blunt, Twilight," Celestia said, as Twilight gave her a sharp look. "But it's a natural extension of your courteous nature. You have always been good at putting on a brave face even though your mind constantly frets about not being good enough. A tendency which you have had to confront so many times in your life, and have managed time and again to overcome, both with your friends' help and without."

"A tendency your guilt tried to use against me, in fact," Twilight said, a little more sharply than she intended.

"Yes," Celestia replied, her eyes haunted for a moment. "Yes, it did. The point is that the mask of the Eternal Sun was doing this for me, too. Like you, I needed to create an image around myself – forgive me for saying so, but I was pressed to make a rather more impressive one than you had to. I had to be the Princess, the central thing around which Equestria could revolve. And at the same time, Twilight, I was hiding so much. Like you, I needed to conceal fears and weaknesses from everypony, but unlike you, I –"

"You needed the mask to protect you from the guilt of what you'd done to the Sun," Twilight interrupted, the insight leaping to her tongue. "I *worry* about failing... but you..."

Celestia nodded. "Yes. In retrospect, my motivations are very transparent and incredibly selfish. But at the time, it was easy for me to believe that it was something like dedication and self-sacrifice. I did an evil thing, and now, I took this duty on as my purgatory for it."

Twilight stirred, sighing. "But in fact you were using your responsibilities make you feel justified for what you did to the Sun, on top of how the needs of Equestria were already pressuring you to become more and more removed. More... *perfect*."

"Yes," Celestia said, miserably.

"But you still felt guilty."

"Oh, yes, Twilight. Terribly so, although I suppose that's not much comfort to you," Celestia said, not indicating clearly in her tone or manner whom she was addressing. The Sun gave her a vicious sneer, and Twilight realized that she was herself giving Celestia something like an angry glare. "The point is that in order to feel anything except constant guilt, I threw myself into the mask. I *became* the mask. The perfect princess, always there, never frightening. I learned the habits you so correctly described; I moved through the world, just touching things, guiding them, rarely acting openly, letting things be as they were going to be."

"Which, it has been said, is wise policy for somepony in your position."

"If I acted more, I would be a tyrant. Less, and I'd be removed and alienated. Celebrations and festivals have been my salvation – I can be present and participate, but not have to do much except smile and say a few lines. It was important for me to be *there*, and to be friendly and gentle and loving. It was *very* easy for me, to tell you the truth, because... well, I think I'd be that way regardless."

The Sun sniffed. "But *we* know that's not the case, don't we, Twilight...?"

"Not necessarily," Twilight said, surprising herself. The Sun and Celestia looked to her, curiously, as she thought that had made her say this hurried to catch up with the impulse to interject. "No, I think... I think it's more like: she did this one *really* evil thing, and spent the rest of her life terrified that that's how bad she really is..." Twilight looked to Celestia, sympathy in her eyes. "You must drag yourself over the coals every day."

"Not often enough," Celestia said. "I'm too good at deceiving myself, Twilight, as this whole situation demonstrates. But yes, I... have always strived against my worst nature. In a way, this is my Nightmare Moon; in desperation, I used my magic to do something truly evil. That I have spent my life trying to make up for it – especially since I've been doing so by exploiting that act – does not justify it in the least."

"No, it doesn't," Twilight agreed, but her tone wasn't terribly accusatory.

Celestia seemed heartened, a little, by Twilight's meager display of empathy, and continued. "The point is that I was totally removed from the world, from the Equestria I professed to love. After that last great fight with the Sun, I threw myself into being the princess, totally and wholly, obsessively *being* the princess, acting out the part. The next couple centuries are just... a blur, to me, Twilight. It was like I was sitting still as the world moved around me, changing, growing, moving... I looked on with mild interest and fondness, but it was all just..." She shook her head.

"A lonely life," Twilight said, sadly.

"Very much so." Celestia sighed heavily. "But I suppose guilt was working in me even then; I have always believed that the price of my stolen power is solitude. Which brings me to you in earnest."

Twilight sat up, ears alert. Her chest felt very strange; a mix of eagerness and reluctance made it feel strangely empty and light. She was sitting on the precipice of the answers she had wanted to get from Celestia now; her desire for them, and her fear of what they might be, had never been more intense.

Celestia seemed to notice this; Twilight imagined it was written on her face as plain as day to the princess, who had known her for so long. "This will be hard to hear, Twilight."

"I know," Twilight said, swallowing. "But I want to hear it, even so."

"Brave, brave Twilight," Celestia said, smiling sadly. They met each other's eyes, both smiling very slightly, and then Celestia looked away, a guilty but pensive expression forming on her face as she took a deep breath and began.

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Twilight watched the chariot fly off into the night, bearing one more Princess than Twilight was used to seeing. The thought made her... sad, for some reason.

So, Ponyville! It was kind of the mayor to let her take up permanent residence in the Library... and being the librarian would be a good way to keep herself busy and earn wages while she did her research on the Magic of Friendship with her five new friends.

She was finally living pretty much on her own, like a real grown-up mare, too! Exciting!

And yet, her eyes followed the chariot off into the distance until it was totally gone from sight; even then, she kept staring.

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Celestia smiled. "Why Twilight? That's the question."

"I must say, I... have always kind of wondered," Twilight replied.

"Luna asked me that on the morning after the wedding, you know. In dreams. The beginning of the end, I think, really; it started the train of thought that really derailed me." Celestia sighed. "Would it upset you if I said that I honestly have no idea?"

Twilight's eyes grew wide with shock. "What?"

"Looks like a yes, to me," the Sun quipped, tapping Celestia a little roughly.

"And it's not like I wasn't spoiled for choice of reasons. You are, after all, spectacularly powerful, but... not uniquely so. I used to think it had something to do with the Elements of Harmony, but... that implies there's such a thing as destiny, and I don't think there is, just consequences. There's even the explanation – a rather unflattering one for you, I think – that you were a sort of replacement for Luna."

"She seems to think so," Twilight said, nervously. "Or if not a replacement, at least a successor."

Celestia shook her head. "Forgive me for saying so, but you couldn't replace or succeed Luna. No pony could, for me. Nor would I want you to."

"That's... actually, that's kind of a relief, to be honest."

"I should hope so, Twilight." Celestia gave her a loving smile, shining through the grey misery. "I really do love you, you know. *You*, not how much you match some standard or how well you emulate somepony else. You do remind me of her, sometimes, but just as often, she reminds me of you. And I love you both more for it."

Twilight was a bit disturbed to find herself uncomfortable hearing this from Celestia, but she supposed that made sense, given what was going on. "Thank you, for that," she said, trying to smile.

Celestia's smile faded. "I'm sorry, I..."

"No, just..." Twilight said, quickly, petering out awkwardly, sensing that anything she tried to say in response to this would make her break into tears. "Continue. You don't know why you chose me as your student," she prompted.

The princess hesitated for a moment, giving Twilight a wary look, then continued. "I remember that day very clearly. I was actually in a fairly good mood; it would have been much easier to explain things if I had been feeling particularly miserable or lonely at the time, wouldn't it, but things are never that neat in real life. I remember feeling the surge of that first Rainboom, and then your magic going wild in the south tower; and I leapt into action."

"And there I was, my parents turned into cacti..." Twilight couldn't suppress her grin.

Celestia met it. "And there you were. Terrified, screaming, horrible wild magic flaring around you. I'd dealt with this before; it happens in foals, sometimes. But as I cradled you there, in my wing, putting on my best calming smile..." She shook her head. "I've turned away hundreds of ponies presented to me with the hope that I'd take them as my student over the last thousand years, proud nobleponies and talented foundlings alike. But in that moment I just couldn't stand to think I'd be parted from this terrified little filly, who looked up at me in wonder, amazed that I was real."

"A... whim?" Twilight murmured, unsettled by the congruence with her fears.

Celestia frowned a little. "I don't know that I'd say it like that, but... there's not really a word for it otherwise, is there."

"Language is failing us quite often today, it seems," the Sun growled, remembering Twilight's inability to classify Celestia's wrongdoing.

"The point is that I was interested in you, Twilight, from the beginning. And you stole my heart immediately. You were so smart, so eager, so dedicated – what am I saying? You still are all of those things. And you've accomplished so much in your life, both with my guidance and without. I couldn't be more proud of you..." Celestia trailed off, miserably. "Although perhaps I don't really have a right to be."

Twilight looked at her, seriously. "Whatever else you may have done, you did train me, and raised me – in a way," she added quickly, conscientious of the maternal vision. "So you have a right to be proud of the things I have accomplished; you made them possible."

"That's very kind of you to say, Twilight."

"No, just true," the unicorn said, flatly.

Celestia smiled weakly and looked away at nothing in particular. "I suppose you're right."

"This is one of the pieces I'm missing, Celestia, in all of this," Twilight said, waving a hoof. "In fact, not knowing this helped me see through the Nightmare, but... I know what lead me to become alienated from you, and how I made it worse. But what was it on your end?"

The princess looked up at her, miserable tears bubbling in her eyes. "Isn't it obvious? I loved you too much."

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"The Best Night Ever, huh?" Celestia asked, looking down at Twilight with an amused little grin.

The unicorn grinned sheepishly. "I suppose there's a friendship letter in this. Something like... don't let your friends sit around getting their expectations get out of hoof?"

"Ah, well... expectations," the princess replied, smiling broadly. "The thing about expectations is that sometimes you don't get what you want... and sometimes, you get something even better."

Twilight looked up at her, smiling gently, and they shared a little moment of peace.

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"Er," Twilight said, blushing furiously. "Is this, like – um, about *that* vision?"

The Sun burst out laughing. "Ha! I bet you wish!"

"No, Twilight," Celestia said, laughing weakly despite herself. "No, it's not... quite that simple. Romantic as that would be."

Twilight cleared her throat awkwardly. "Sorry."

"It's still about the mask, Twilight. The mask that I was so dependent on, now, to prevent me from just being strangled by my own misdeeds, my failures and weakness." Celestia waved a hoof in front of her face, as if putting on such a thing, and held herself up haughtily. "Voilà. The princess, beautiful and wise and perfect," she said, bitterly.

Twilight frowned. "And distant."

Celestia's mock-proud expression faded into sorrow. "Yes." She turned and regarded Twilight seriously. "But you got little peeks under the mask, from time to time. Little moments between us, times when it felt less like we were mentor and student, princess and protégé, and more like... ponies."

"I did, yes," Twilight replied, trying not to tear up.

"You, and you alone. Because you were – are – special, Twilight. Everything else – Equestria, the Elements, all of it – that was all for the mask, everything I did. But you? You were *mine*. Secretly, in my heart of hearts, you were for *Celestia*, the broken, terrified little pony who was oh, so alone in the world, but could never show it to anyone as anything except the burden of immortality – a convenient lie, as you saw through earlier."

Twilight nodded. "That was my own fear of death and loss, not yours."

"I long ago came to grips with the inevitability of outliving many, many ponies I was fond of; I don't let them go unremembered, as you have seen. In some ways, I suppose, it is like how foals must inevitably learn to cope with the death of their parents." Celestia sighed. "Although I must confess that when I contemplate *your* death, that surety is shaken, more than a little."

Morbid though it may have been, Twilight was a little flattered by this. "So what went wrong?"

"Well, the mask of the Eternal Sun was a hungry one, Twilight. It demanded an explanation for my deviation from complete self-sacrifice. *Everything* I did *had* to be for Equestria; otherwise, what right did I have to be princess? And what justification for the imprisonment of my dearest friend besides Luna?" Celestia shook her head morosely. "For so long, I convinced myself that as much as I enjoyed teaching you, it was ultimately for both our benefit, and for the greater benefit of Equestria. That seemed to sate it, for a time."

"Freeing Luna... I..." Twilight said, speaking the speculation on her mind.

"Luna's return made it harder and harder to justify my sacrifices for Equestria – after all, there would still be a Princess, now, if I were gone. And..." she looked away. "It was a moment's thought, one day, a stray reinterpretation of events, as I half-listened to Lord Flashhooves and Fancy Pants argue about... something. I thought, well, now I really have somepony whose life I am interested in – I suppose I was bored to tears about those two..."

Twilight watched Celestia for awhile. She just sat there, shaking her head; Twilight wondered, idly, if she was chastising herself, or indulging in some private regret.

The Sun gave Twilight a sarcastic little smile. "All for the love of a mare, goeth Equestria."

"Not quite all, I think," Celestia said, an awkward look on her face. "But even Discord realized that you were more than just a student to me – he's quite insightful, in his way, you know; he wouldn't be half as dangerous if he weren't. He saw that I was *fading*, and that something about your relationship with me was making it worse..." She shook her head.

"You lost sight of your focus," Twilight said. "Binding the Sun must have required a great deal of concentration."

Celestia hesitated, carefully considering how to respond. "Not... so much as you might think. Things work a little differently here."

"I was held here, Twilight, by her will to be the Princess. Her will to be the 'Eternal Sun' you two have been pretending was a thing that ever could have been," the Sun growled.

"And that was very easy, while I was punishing myself with solitude," Celestia said, quickly cutting off the Sun. "As I've described to you, the lie of the Eternal Sun fed that for centuries. The mask, as I told you before, is a prison, Twilight, one you lock yourself in; and for a long time I accepted that I deserved to be there – alone."

"Correctly," the Sun added. "Though the sentence was somewhat light, in my opinion."

Celestia frowned at her, but didn't dignify this with a response.

"This is about dreams, isn't it," Twilight said. "Real ones. Luna was going on about dreams being the way our heart tells us things."

"That sounds like something she'd say, yes," Celestia sighed. "So, for a thousand years, I was all but removed from the Equestria I told myself I was sacrificing so much for. It was external to me, all of it. That's what being the unmoving center of things really *means*. Take Ponyville – your beloved home, your *true* home. I never thought it would be anything but a distant dot on the map when I sent Applejack's ancestors there. Another little village. And now look at it – look at what you and your friends have helped it become."

Twilight's eyes narrowed curiously. "But look at that – you were involved from the beginning. *You* sent the Apples there, *you* sent me there –"

"Touched. Guided. I didn't build things, or create them, or raise a family in them. I remember when your Library was a sapling, but I didn't make it into your home – *you* did. I've told you before, somepony's living space ultimately reflects them; your study, for example, is as 'Twilight Sparkle' as a room can be. So a princess' realm should reflect them, even a little, don't you think? But it doesn't. I look out on Equestria and see... other ponies' labor; nothing I have done or brought about..."

"I... I see," Twilight said, unsure what she could do or say about this.

Celestia looked up at Twilight, and there was a measure of her familiar dignity in it. "So imagine, for a moment, what your letters did to me."

Twilight was taken aback. "My – my letters?"

"You're a very persuasive author, Twilight," Celestia said, the ghost of a smile on her face.

"But they were just..." Twilight trailed off, betrayed by her own memory. *They were more than homework, you know...*

"For both of us," Celestia said, seeming to read Twilight's mind. "Through your eyes, Twilight, I was living in Equestria again. As a normal pony, experiencing it for the first time... living, loving, learning..." She smiled, sadly, a tear trailing from her eye. "And before too long, just reading about it stopped being enough. I started to want to share these experiences with you, more than... anything."

The bit dropped for Twilight. "Which would mean... giving up being the perfect, unchanging princess, the Eternal Sun."

Celestia nodded. "Indeed."

"So sending me to Ponyville –"

"I never intended for that to hurt you." Celestia shifted uncomfortably. "I really, legitimately wanted you to make friends, and study the Magic of Friendship. As you are currently demonstrating, it is immensely rewarding, and powerful... and as I have said before, I doubt you would be who you are now if you hadn't gone."

Twilight peered at Celestia suspiciously. "So there was nothing in it about distancing yourself from me...?"

"There probably was," the princess replied. "But nothing like what would come later."

"When did it really start, then...?"

Celestia licked her lips. "I couldn't say a date, if that's what you're looking for. Or a specific event. But you had been in Ponyville for some time – this was a long time ago, mind you. Sometime between that first Gala and Discord's return. Anyways, you... were settling in well, and had long established your friendships with the other Elements and the ponyfolk of Ponyville. I was sitting up, reading one of your letters, and I thought... my, I... miss Twilight. Very, very badly."

The Sun coughed. "I think it was then that I started rattling in my chains, this last time." She actually sounded a bit bashful about this, but only just – and for Twilight's benefit alone.

"It terrified me," Celestia said. "Because now I was torn three ways. There was my sin with the Sun, and the inevitable *setting* that I desperately wanted to believe that I could keep away... my responsibility to Equestria, which I was once again reluctant to leave to Luna, newly arrived as she was then... and my burning desire to leave all of that behind and find some way to be free of it, so that I could live *in* Equestria." Celestia looked up at

Twilight, face deadly serious. "With you, and Spike, and the Elements – everypony in Ponyville, all of whom you had taught me to love."

Twilight didn't even try to hold back the sympathetic tears anymore; she just forced her mouth to form words despite them. "I'm so –"

"Don't even *think* of apologizing, Twilight," Celestia said, swallowing down a thickness in her throat and coughing, huskily. "I brought this on myself. Indeed, I made it infinitely worse in that moment."

"I think I see how this is going to go," Twilight managed.

"It was... it seemed so obvious," Celestia sobbed. "I told myself, I've grown far too attached to her; I'll smother her, step on the beautiful blossom growing out there, free of my shadow. I shouldn't be so selfish. It'll be good for her to grow, on her own, and for my part, I will... always be shining down on her... her princess, the Eternal Sun."

The tears came in earnest now, flowing down Celestia's face in a more or less constant stream. Her mouth trembled, and she shook her head as if doing so would do anything to deny or prevent the absolute end of misery.

"And the worst thing," Celestia said, miserably, "the worst thing, for both of us... I stopped calling you my Faithful Student. Every time I did so... it was so special to me, Twilight, so precious. More meaningful to me than telling you I love you. And now I've come to see that in doing so, I was not just denying our relationship, I was denying your fundamental *being*, which I had myself nurtured..."

Twilight sniffled. "Celestia –"

"No, please, let me finish..." Celestia said, wretchedly, trying to wrangle herself into place.

"I'm a little insulted that I didn't get a similar display," the Sun said, idly. Celestia managed a bitter glare for her, but said nothing into the Sun's acid little smile.

"So you stopped coming as often..." Twilight found herself saying. Celestia nodded. "And your letters... I remember the first time you didn't respond to one, I almost *died* of terror..."

Celestia's eyes snapped shut from the pain of recollection. "And I wrote back... oh, how could I have been so cruel... I remember, you asked about it, and I replied, 'You don't need me looking over your shoulder all the time anymore'..."

Twilight shook her head. "That's what made it so bad... you were treated it like it was for my own good..."

"That was how I chose to hurt you, Twilight," Celestia said, choked and strangled. "I chose to be the Princess – to be the Eternal Sun. It was all the easier because I let myself believe that it was a natural part of the student and mentor parting ways..." She chuckled, darkly. "Perhaps that proves, if nothing else does, that you are the only student I've ever had."

"No, Celestia..." Twilight said, swallowing a sob. "It's how you chose to hurt *us*."

Celestia managed a little chuckle at this. "I know you're right, in a way, but... Twilight, I *deserve* to be put through pain. Of all ponies, *you* didn't deserve this."

Twilight waved a hoof dismissively, suppressing herself as best she could. It took a moment, but eventually she managed, "Tell me about coming to Ponyville, this last time."

"This will tell you how deluded I was, here at the end. How strong my powers of self-deception really are. I was so convinced that I had done you a favor, 'setting you free,' that I couldn't see what was in front of my face." Celestia coughed, eyes still streaming tears freely. "Your letters... I... they just got so businesslike. They weren't *you*, or a pale reflection of you, anymore... not enough that I could continue pretending things were fine."

Twilight said nothing.

"And I should have *known*, Twilight, but no, I was so deluded, so obsessed with myself, that I went to Luna, honestly believing that I had just been ignoring you a bit more than I ought, and that we just needed to talk things out, establish a new understanding. But what I really missed was –"

"Not being alone," Twilight said, in a tired voice. "Not having somepony who you could let peek behind the mask."

Celestia stammered for a while before whispering, "Yes."

"And you had been trying to break free, this whole time?" Twilight asked, turning her eyes to Celestia's counterpart.

The Sun nodded. "I should thank you, I think..."

"Don't," Twilight said, firmly, making the Sun's little smile grow wider, eyes lit with a cruel light.

"And... Twilight, what I saw... I saw you destroying yourself for me, trying to be perfect. Wearing the same mask that was now, more than ever, making me feel like a prisoner. I saw in you such desperate pain being caused by my absence... I... to my shame, Twilight, even that wasn't enough to make me face what was really happening."

Twilight let this go, for now. "What happened on the day we spoke in the Library? That's what nopony understands."

Celestia took a deep breath in. "Well, I was already distressed after talking to Luna, and from discovering that I had collapsed into sleep on your floor from the fatigue of setting. Her little needles about your attitude, well-intentioned as they may have been, just made it worse. And then... I ran into Rainbow Dash arguing with Scootaloo."

"Yes..." Twilight said, calmer now that she was once again putting the puzzle together in her head. "Dash thinks Scootaloo said something that made you upset, but couldn't remember what it was."

"No, no... it was Rainbow Dash, Twilight." Celestia smiled gently, through tears. "She was your first mask, Twilight, although it's not dignity she wears, by any stretch of the imagination. No, she wears a mask of her own face, permanently brave, even though she is herself deeply troubled. I assume you're familiar with her arguments with Scootaloo..."

"Nopony in Ponyville isn't, since they have them while they're flying around," Twilight replied, a familiar wry edge in her voice.

Celestia sniffed, herself recovering. "So you're aware that Rainbow Dash is deeply jealous of Scootaloo?"

"I – wait," Twilight began. Now that Celestia mentioned it...

"It seems strange, I know," the princess said. "But she's jealous of how Scootaloo is free to be whoever she wants to be, how Scootaloo can be open about how unfulfilling being captain is for her, how upset she is when things aren't going right." Celestia leaned forward. "You see where this is heading, I take it."

"You – you were confronted by somepony else whose mask was chafing. You couldn't avoid thinking about it anymore," Twilight said.

"I couldn't avoid thinking I had some right to wonder if it was worth the trouble it was causing, certainly. To make it worse, the fatigue of setting was beginning to fall heavily on me. I was confused, and frightened, desperate for some sort of understanding – except the real one, of course, which was that I had intentionally done this to you. I was desperate to believe I hadn't hurt you, that you were just... that you needed guidance." Celestia's face fell into guilty misery. "That I was in control, and could... fix this."

Twilight sighed. "That you were still... perfect."

"I wasn't even conscious of that drive, Twilight, that's how lost I was at that point." Celestia shook her head, ruefully. "So I went to Rarity, hoping that she would be able to say something about her own students which I could latch onto. But she... there was nothing she could have said, at that point. My guilt was getting out of control; I couldn't stop remembering how *happy* you were to have me *grade* you at the wedding, how *frightening* your desperation to please me suddenly was. And I was getting more and more tired..." She paused, eyes widening. "Rarity..."

"Is fine," Twilight said, quickly, in as soothing a voice as she could. "Some intense vertigo, that was all."

Celestia slumped, eyes wide and tired, tears seeming to have run dry. "I finally admitted to myself that I had abandoned you, Twilight. That I had hurt you deeply. So I appeared to you in... the way I did... knowing it was deeply dangerous for you. But I was out of my mind, Twilight – I didn't come hoping for your understanding... I wanted you to *hurt* me. I wanted you to tell me the truth of what I'd done to you, to hear it from your mouth."

Twilight tried to think of something to say, but there were no words. She didn't even know how to feel.

"And you did, Twilight, you drove the last nail into me. So I came back to Canterlot, and... passed into *somewhere*. And since then I've been here, desperately trying to keep the Sun risen, trying to keep believing that I was capable of doing so, trying to maintain the lie that I could still be the Eternal Sun and come back, strong as ever, to fix everything."

"Not even a chance," the Sun said – and to her shock, Twilight heard the tiniest bit of sympathy in her voice.

Celestia nodded, and when she spoke, her voice was wretched with self-loathing. "I was only able to maintain the Eternal Sun by focusing myself on *being* that mask. Having seen, and heard, what my decision to be the Princess had done to you, the pony I love the most in all of Equestria... how could I even think to want it, anymore...?"

• • •

Twilight stared at the letter.

What had she done? Had she insulted the princess, somehow? Why was Celestia being so...

Distant?

• • •

"And so here we are," said the Sun.

"Not quite," Celestia said. "I haven't endured the extent of my confession quite yet."

The Sun frowned. "We were all here for Twilight wandering around in your mind. Don't tell me you want to run through all of that."

Twilight met Celestia's eye. "There are... some things I need to tell you, I think."

"You said, in my mind, that I nearly killed you," Celestia said, tentatively. "When... I appeared to you in the library."

"Yes," Twilight said, in a hollow voice. "But that's not all of what I need to say."

Suddenly possessed by a strange calm, she began to tell her side of the story. Tonelessly, she spoke of the long months of agony she had endured, driving herself mad with terror as Celestia seemed more and more remote from her, just as her friend's successes were making them more and more absent as well. Voice devoid of emotion, she described the sudden, mad hope she had felt when Celestia had praised her for being involved in Fluttershy's wedding, and how, in her madness, it had become a show for Celestia, how she had been frantic for praise, desperate to be perfect so that Celestia would love her again.

Finally she described the nightmarish vision that she and Luna had endured to free Twilight from her own mind. As she went on, Celestia fell into deeper and deeper into a humiliated slump, raising a hoof to her face in horror as Twilight described the pain of

the golden chains, and how battered Luna had become, beaten bloody by Twilight's mental defenses.

"So you see why I said no tea," Twilight concluded, with some relief filling the emptiness of her tone. Recalling the vision had been deeply unpleasant.

The Sun had stood silently through the recollection, watching Celestia, apparently unmoved by her deepening grief, but now she turned to Twilight, shaking her head incredulously. "Even after that, you came for Celestia?"

"I did that to *myself*," Twilight replied, a little harshly. The Sun looked like it was going to press the point, but Twilight's glare seemed to dissuade her.

Celestia's voice was barely audible, a whisper almost drowned out by the gentle wind that even now blew through the trees of this place. "Luna, too..." She threw her head back, staring off into the distant sky. "And then you endured my guilt, the terrible pain of my mind trying turn your own insecurities against you... only to find me here, in disgrace, and willingly listened to the great evils I've committed..." She turned to Twilight, terror and shame wild in her expression. "I don't deserve you, Twilight."

"Not even a little," the Sun agreed.

Twilight closed her eyes. The Sun... the Sun was the problem. That was such a huge thing, so monstrous that Twilight couldn't conceive of how to deal with it. She opened her eyes again, red-rimmed and pained, letting her gaze fall on the white-clad doppelganger of Celestia, who was watching the unicorn carefully, and came to a decision, about that.

She'd known what to do about Celestia for some time now.

Twilight got to her hooves and stepped out of the pillow. Her limbs still ached, and she'd been sitting there through a terribly emotional moment. She felt... burned out, almost literally – as if a small explosion had gone off inside her, leaving only smoking, charred ruins.

"Celestia."

Celestia looked up, her face resigned to the inevitable declaration of loathing. "Yes?" Her voice was wretched and weak, her overwhelming fear and shame crushing it.

"I cannot speak about the events between yourself and the Sun," Twilight declared. "It's too big for me. And it seems the Sun has absolute control over the situation."

"Too right," the Sun said, smugly. "But please, feel free to make a judgment. I don't mind. I feel like you and I have a lot in common, which is in part why I wanted to bring you here. We both trusted her implicitly... and look what she's done to us, Twilight."

Twilight frowned at her. "In that case, you deal punishment as you see fit for what she's done to you, and I will hold her accountable for the things she's done to me."

The sun shrugged. "If you insist. I'm glad you acknowledge my rights."

"Then acknowledge mine," Twilight turned back to her mentor. "Celestia..."

Celestia swallowed. "Yes, Twilight?"

"I think I understand why you have acted as you did quite well, now," Twilight said, stepping towards Celestia. "And as I say, I cannot speak to what you did to the Sun. But as for what you did to me..."

She stepped forwards suddenly, and before Celestia could react, Twilight threw her forehooves around Celestia's neck – in a gentle, loving hug. "I forgive you."

"Tw... *Twilight*..." Celestia sobbed, shocked.

"No," Twilight whispered, tearing up. "Your Faithful Student. All the way to the end."

Celestia burst into open tears, unrestrained, one hoof clutching Twilight to her fiercely as she draped her head limply over Twilight's shoulders. Twilight's back ran wet with the alicorn's sorrow in seconds, and she returned the favor onto Celestia's neck, both of them sobbing and weeping uncontrollably.

The Sun stared at them in wonder, finally turning away, face deeply conflicted.

After a long while, Twilight managed to get ahold of herself, although only just. Her voice was still choked, thick with tears and misery, but she managed to speak. "Listen to me," she said, swallowing. "Listen to me, Celestia."

Celestia just nodded, communicating into Twilight's back.

"No, I want you to look at me," Twilight said, thickly. They broke their embrace, with extreme reluctance, and Twilight looked up into those big eyes, from which gratitude and relief poured like a waterfall, feeling like she had the first time she and Celestia had been alone together, so long ago. She raised a hoof and placed it gently on the alicorn's chest, feeling her huge heartbeat, and smiled as Celestia clutched it to herself.

"How can you not hate me, now, Twilight, after all of this?" Celestia asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I won't lie... there's a part of me that really wants to," Twilight said, surprising herself with how even her voice was becoming. A little ghost of fear leapt across Celestia's features, and Twilight shushed her, rubbing her chest soothingly. "There are parts of us that think many things... I mean, we know that beyond a doubt, now." She smiled up at the alicorn, fondly.

"I suppose so," Celestia said, thickly.

"We've been a little stupid, haven't we? For ponies who have studied the Magic of Friendship in others, we certainly didn't do a very good job of using it ourselves."

"No, we haven't."

Twilight didn't speak for a time, just gently rubbing Celestia, holding her gaze fondly. "I was a little frightened that I wouldn't be strong enough to do this. I hurt, Celestia, I really do."

Celestia panted a few times, heavily, and Twilight let her smile light up, trying to comfort her. "I'm so sorry, Twilight."

"It's okay," Twilight replied. "I'm finding it... very easy to forgive you, you know? Especially now. You didn't mean to –"

"Yes I did," Celestia interrupted, huskily. "I did, Twilight, I did –"

"No, you didn't," Twilight said, firmly. "That's guilt talking for you. You said it yourself, that you never set out with the intention of hurting me. You have never once thought, 'oh, Twilight Sparkle, I want her to suffer.' But you have *many* times set out to hurt *yourself* – and Celestia, the thing I am most angry at you for is that you used me to do it. Because you love me, and you didn't think you deserved to."

Celestia's jaw trembled. "But... I knew you'd be..."

"Just *stop*, Celestia." Twilight said. "From one silly mare to another... just stop. This has all been so painful, for both of us... but I'm using the Magic of Friendship now." She looked up into her mentor's stunned gaze with a serious expression. "This is the *real* magic. The magic that lets me feel your pain, and lets me understand why you did the things you did, and the magic that protects me from my own fear, and *yours*, so that I can come to you, now, when you need me."

"Twilight..."

"Let me share it with you," Twilight said, sternly. "Trust your Faithful Student. Let's end this, now. It's over. You're..." Twilight choked up, hardly able to bring herself to *think* this, much less say it. She leaned forward, pressing herself against Celestia's broad, warm chest, and nuzzled into it, feeling tears drip down onto her head. "You're going to be gone from my life soon, and I won't let you go thinking I ever hated you. I don't. I love you."

Celestia lost her internal struggle, and once again began to weep in earnest. "I love you *so much*," she gasped, between huge sobs.

"You're so alone, aren't you," Twilight said, soothingly, though she too could not restrain tears.

"Yes," Celestia whispered.

"And you love everything. You really do. It hurts you so much, being distant from everypony and everything..."

"Yes!"

Twilight just laid there, against Celestia, as the alicorn's huge chest was wracked with sobs, relief and sorrow mingling in both of them into an overwhelming flood. The Sun looked on, uneasily.

"Let me tell you the true desire of my heart, Celestia," Twilight murmured. "The one that gave me the understanding and strength to endure everything, and come to you now."

• • •

It had only been a very small part of an extremely long dream, one of a great many desires, hopes, and visions of a beautiful future.

Twilight had been bottling them up for many, many years; now her heart, finally freed, sang to her mind of the great love it felt for all her friends and acquaintances, and whispered of the many joys and accomplishments it craved to share with them in the future. Twilight let herself drown in the images of the long, rich life she and her many, many friends could share together – building Ponyville into an even more beautiful and happy place, going on many exciting new adventures, and above all, sharing little moments of happiness and comfort.

Luna looked on, with unhidden joy, as Twilight watched these things. The unicorn was trembling, her mouth slack as she shook her head at the wonder she finally let herself feel.

"You are a truly beautiful soul, Twilight Sparkle," the princess of the moon said, in a speculative tone that would eventually culminate in a bond, made on lonely stone stairs deep under the earth, which would be Luna's salvation and Twilight's triumph.

Twilight looked up at her, gratefully. "This is... so *much*," she said. "I can barely stand it anymore, it's so powerful... thank you, Luna. Thank you."

"I am just honored that I am so present, in your hopes," Luna said. She had been moved, deeply, by a vision of Twilight and herself wandering through dreams together, Twilight listening as Luna spoke of symbols and riddles and images... which had then transformed into them sharing tea. The significance of this was not lost on Luna, who had shed a few tears herself.

"Why wouldn't you be? I..." Twilight began, but before she could finish, the dreamscape around them shifted, and she had a deep sense of purpose flow over her.

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Ah, here we are, I think."

Twilight looked around. "Uh, where?"

"Well, not that all these other things haven't been very important, of course, but... this is the crisis issue, I think," Luna said, pointing a hoof. "Go on, now, Twilight... I think she wants to speak with you."

Twilight stepped forward, feeling a strange sensation of *sinking* as she was taken in by the dre–

"Princess?" Twilight asked, walking through the tall, vaulted doors of Celestia's study. The room was lit by the light of early evening. "I, um... I just thought I'd see how you were."

"Oh, Arch-Mage, thank heavens," Celestia replied pompously, looking up from a scroll on her desk. She raised an eyebrow and let an impish smile spread across her face. Twilight gave her a wry little grin and stepped inside. "I'm all the better for being attended by my most loyal subject and humble servant."

"Don't tease," Twilight grouched, taking a seat in front of the desk.

"Tea?" Celestia asked.

Twilight grinned widely. "Please," she said, drawing a couple teacups to them from a cabinet nearby. There was the usual busy moment of preparation as Celestia heated the water in a small, worn kettle – very plain, it always surprised ponies – with a little magical flame.

Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual...

Luna smiled.

They chatted for awhile. What they said was not important; Luna, set apart from the dream, recognized it as the nonsense gabble of dreams in any case, the weird non-speech that filled time that the mind knew had to be there for the narrative of the dream to make sense but wasn't actually important. What was important was how they *acted*, and because Luna was there with her, Twilight remembered this very plainly afterwards.

It was in... how they sat. Twilight wasn't at attention, as she always had been around the princess, even when they were happy. She relaxed, and replied to things Celestia said immediately, not hesitating slightly as she often did, scanning her words for something that might offend her mentor.

And Celestia, well... Luna had to chuckle a little; even in her deepest dreams, Twilight still desired a noble, upright creature, but... one that laughed readily – *laughed*, not just chuckling a little bit or giving titters of amusement, but big, heartfelt laughter. She could be nervous, and embarrassed, from time to time, and angry, and sad.

She was *open* with her emotions and thoughts, even in her posture; leaning in to speak with Twilight excitedly about something, or flinching slightly when Twilight expressed displeasure. And while the words were nonsense, their tone was still comprehensible, and it was more animated and excitable the usual eternal serenity Celestia used with everypony.

There was no distance between them, here, in this moment. It was Celestia and Twilight Sparkle, not the Princess and the Arch-Mage. Not even a mentor and her faithful student.

Friends, in a word.

True friends. Close friends. Dear friends. As somepony, in the ancient past, had written: one soul, sharing two bodies.

The thought made Luna laugh. Poor Twilight Sparkle's soul was spread around quite a bit, wasn't it?

"Ah, Twilight," Celestia said, in real speech, now. "There's something I wanted to show you. I think you'll find it interesting, as a stargazer..."

Twilight's ears perked up. "Oh?"

Celestia smiled, and gestured to a westwards-facing window with a nod. "Have a look."

Twilight, in the dream, got to her hooves and trotted over to the window, looking out over the plains at the setting sun, sitting fat and golden on the horizon. She gasped. "What is that? I've never seen it before."

Luna stepped behind her, curiously.

Shining bright above the setting sun, right on the border of night and day, was a gleam of pink light: a new star, small but proud, the first star of the evening sky.

"Oh, Twilight..." Luna said, heart swelling with affection.

Celestia was suddenly next to Twilight, having moved unnoticed in the way of dreams. "I've always thought of sunset as... somewhat sad, for obvious reasons," she said. "So I'm glad to see that the Sun isn't alone anymore." She and Twilight met each other's gaze, and smiled.

• • •

Twilight, who had recounted the dream in a sort of dull trance, stirred. She was still pressed up against Celestia, who had wrapped her wings around Twilight gently. "It seems silly now," she said, with a strange calm. "But I abandoned dreaming altogether, because I saw something like that, once. A long time ago. I was scared, I mean – to even think of it. Of being something more than your student, or a trusted associate."

"The mask, Twilight..." Celestia shook her head, sniffing.

"Yeah," Twilight said. "But even if my mind was frightened, my heart never stopped wanting to end your loneliness, Princess. I love you. I always have."

Celestia kissed her forehead, again. "You're so strong."

Twilight closed her eyes and smiled. "If I am... it's your fault."

"Don't give me credit for that, Twilight," Celestia said. "As you've seen... I... I don't deserve somepony like you. Somepony as brave and loving as you."

"Yes, you do," Twilight said, pulling away to look at the Sun, who was giving them a very odd, conflicted look. "I... now I know why you were doing this to yourself, Celestia and... yeah. It's pretty bad. *Really* bad. But that's between you and the Sun." She looked back up to Celestia, letting her love for her mentor fill her eyes as best she could. "You've never done anything but love me."

"Nevertheless, I hurt you –"

Twilight shook her head. "Don't start. Don't even let yourself start. You didn't mean to hurt me. You were so desperately lonely, and guilty..." She smiled. "That's when you need your friends the most, isn't it?"

"Yes," Celestia said, "yes it is." They looked at each other, and smiled... one soul, in two bodies. They held each other's gaze for quite awhile, just sharing time.

"We were afraid," Twilight said, eventually, putting her hoof back up on Celestia's chest. Again, Celestia clutched it to herself. "In the end, it was change that we were afraid of; both of us. In all of this, everything – even the Eternal Sun thing. No, *especially* that. I mean, we both thought to ourselves: we want something. We want to be friends, we want to love each other, without masks in the way. But then we thought of what could happen

if we failed, or screwed up, or in your case, what the ultimate consequences would be for you if you stopped being the Eternal Sun."

Celestia sighed. "Well, now we're being spared a choice, Twilight. Change... for the worst, it seems... is inevitable now."

"Change is always inevitable. I think... that's what we need to learn from this. The only thing that is truly eternal in this universe is change." Twilight said this with the headlong confidence of someone being extremely philosophical on the fly. If it was a quote from something she'd read, she didn't recognize it, but it *felt* true. She looked up at Celestia, who was gazing down at her in wonder. "So we have to try to make the changes we want, despite our fears, and the price. Because change will come anyway."

The Sun shook her head, chuckling. "If you were half the mare she was, Celestia..."

"I've been saying that for years now," Celestia said. "But it has never been more true. I've robbed us, with my weakness, Twilight. We... we should have had a long, happy life together." She smiled, sadly. "It's really disgusting, isn't it, that wanting just that is what made me lose everything."

"There's a certain poetic justice to it, I think," the Sun said, but... speculatively. There was still anger, but it was reflexive and hollow.

Celestia brought her gaze up to meet the Sun's. "I suppose there is." She looked back down at Twilight. "Can you forgive me?"

"Can you forgive me, for not coming to you with my fears sooner? If I had been open with you about feeling abandoned –"

Celestia shook her head. "Twilight. No 'what ifs,' please."

Twilight sighed. "Things are the way they are, huh?"

"Wherever you go... there you are," Celestia said, with a familiar air of divine mystery. "My mistakes, above all, have brought us to this point. And I deserve the punishment I will receive," she said, looking to the Sun, who nodded with an expression that read: *Oh, you better believe you do*. "But you didn't deserve this, Twilight. You, who have shown yourself to be so brave, so strong, so wise..."

"I'm only who I am because of you," Twilight whispered, tears swelling in her eyes.

Celestia tried to smile. "Twilight, please. If there's one thing I've learned, being your teacher, it's that I haven't given you anything but raw knowledge. It's you who turned it into strength and wisdom. What I did... empowered you. I showed you the way. But you walked it." Tears trailed down her face. "I'm so proud of you, my faithful student. And I love you, so, so much."

Twilight couldn't say anything, because if she opened her mouth, it would only be a sob.

"No matter what happens to me after this, Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, fighting through renewed tears, "nothing will be as much a punishment as knowing I never had the chance to love you as freely and openly as you deserved – no, that I chose not to, out of foolish pride."

The Sun stirred. "Well, you... you *say* that..." she said, but it was strangled. Twilight looked to her – she was actually struggling with herself, very visibly; it occurred to Twilight that she would have never really developed a skill for not showing her emotions, which perhaps explained a great deal about her behavior.

It made her feel a little bad, but the politician in Twilight recognized the chance, and leapt on it. She turned and walked, slowly, up to the Sun. "I want to ask you something," she said, thickly.

The Sun looked down at her, curiously. "Then ask."

"I want to ask you for some time," Twilight said, looking up at her as firmly as she could.

"Time?"

"Yes," Twilight said. "I know it may be a great deal to ask, but –"

"Twilight –" Celestia began.

"You... you just relax. This isn't about you," Twilight said, over her shoulder. "I'm asking this for me."

The Sun drew herself up, suspicion heavy on her features. "No, you're not."

"Yes I am!" Twilight declared. "I meant what I said, earlier – I respect your right to punish Celestia. I've set aside my feelings about what she did to you because... well, I don't know what to do about it. It was terrible, so terrible that I can't even think about it."

"In that, you have never said anything more true," the Sun growled. "But still, you are asking for something that benefits her. Time in the real world. How much? Until your death?"

"No," Twilight said. "I'll leave to you to decide, too. But let me tell you why I want the time. Hear me out."

The Sun nodded. "Speak, then."

"Celestia's absence will cause trouble. For me, for the ponies I care about, for all of Equestria. I want her to return to the world with me so that we can arrange her affairs and prepare Luna to rule in her place. Otherwise, there will be no end to the problems. Too many ponies still believe the story of Nightmare Moon, that the jealous younger sister tried to overthrow Celestia. I won't have a new war in Equestria, if I can help it."

"Noble," the Sun said.

Twilight shook her head. "No, this is selfish as anything. I'll have to live in the world without her, and I have many, many dreams for the future, none of which involve Equestria in flames."

The Sun looked from Twilight to Celestia, who was shaking her head, eyes closed. "This is a trick. You'll do something to keep her there –"

"I will not try to escape my punishment," Celestia said, in a tired voice. "Especially if you give me any time whatsoever to arrange things. If you show me this small mercy, I will only more willingly submit to your judgment."

"Like you have a *choice*," the Sun growled.

Twilight stamped a hoof. "You're absolutely right. You hold the power. You can *set* any time you want, isn't that right?"

The Sun looked at her, warily. "Yes."

"Then what risk is there to you? If you sense anything going wrong, you hold all the power." Twilight gave her a pleading look. "What she did to you was... evil. That I benefited from it..." She shuddered. "But... we are where we are, and I am asking you now for some time to make this easier for *me*."

The Sun looked down at her for a long time. Twilight matched her gaze, unflinching.

Eventually, the Sun sighed. "And I suppose you'll want to do something suitably... poignant, as well. To say good-bye." She gave Celestia a hard stare. "This will be good-bye."

Twilight nodded. "We're going to set Equestria's affairs in order," she said firmly, "and then Celestia and I are going to have tea."

• • •

Twilight opened her eyes and winced. Her side ached like crazy –

"Princess!" cried a familiar voice from next to her. Twilight turned, groaning, and looked at the back of Fluttershy's head; the pegasus was gesturing frantically to Luna, who was looking up in wonder from a downcast expression of sorrow.

"Twilight!" Luna said, eyes aglow, stepping forward. Twilight raised a hoof, and turned to the wasted body of Celestia next to her. Behind Luna, the rest of the ponies and a battered-looking Spike gathered, following Twilight's gaze.

Celestia's eye opened, slowly.

"You –" Luna began triumphantly, but then she saw Twilight's expression.

Celestia stirred, weakly, her haggard body trembling with the effort of existence. Twilight nuzzled her gently, and Celestia sighed happily.

Everypony began speaking at once. Twilight had a hard time telling anyone from anyone else; she found herself completely worn out.

"What happened?" Rainbow Dash asked.

Rarity stepped forward. "Are you... alright?"

"What's going to happen now?" Spike asked.

"Quiet, everypony, quiet," Luna said, approaching the bier cautiously. She was trying to put on a brave face, but it wavered and twitched sorrowfully. "Twilight... how much time do we –"

"Until sunset tomorrow," Twilight replied. It hurt to speak; she recognized the familiar ache of a broken rib, a professional hazard of the Arch-Mage's lifestyle. "We are going to learn how much one pony can really do in a day, I think."

"And then...?" Luna asked, trepidation thick in her voice.

"And then I'm going pay for what I've done, sister," Celestia whispered. Her voice was weak, and betrayed a physical pain that disturbed the assembled ponies to hear. "We have a great deal we need to discuss."

• • •

How much could be done in a day, by one pony?

The same amount that pony had done every day of her long life: everything that had to be done. It was just that there was more of this than usual, on this darkest of days – literally darkest, for in accordance with the Sun's demand, the preternatural night would last until the next dawn, when Celestia would help Luna pick up her place in the cycle, and mark the beginning of Celestia's last day – a period, the Sun had said, that had as much to do with what she was *capable* of giving Twilight as it did with what she was *willing*.

Celestia said this to Twilight as they took leave of each other for the moment, her voice so weak and tired that Twilight winced to hear it. The alicorn had smiled down at her student – *friend*, and turned to join Luna in her study, leaving Twilight, the Elements, and Spike to the busy attentions of the castle physicians.

Twilight was reluctant to part with Celestia; although she would have had a hard time saying how much of that was because she feared for Celestia's well-being and how much of it was her own desperate desire to be near her in the brief time they had remaining. A part of her which was always set slightly apart from the rest commented at one point that she should be grateful she had any further time at all, and was quickly shouted down by the rest of her.

Her friends fussed over her relentlessly, but in the manner of wounded people, the attention quickly became annoying rather than comforting. This was made worse by the fact that she could tell her friends were also in mourning for the princess – whom they loved, too – but Twilight got the idea that they were trying to overcompensate for their earlier mistake of trying to get involved with Twilight and the princess' affairs by making a show of being extremely sympathetic to Twilight's upcoming loss.

Spike, in his way, was the only one who seemed to understand what Twilight wanted; he sat in the room, only occasionally speaking, and even then it was quiet and about nothing of real importance, just little comments in response to something somepony else had said. He just busied himself being *there*, not trying vainly to prepare Twilight for a wound she hadn't suffered yet.

Twilight's broken rib was inspected, healed, and bandaged. She surprised her friends by being able to guess what had caused it, and by merely chuckling sadly when they told her about restraining Celestia to prevent her from hurting Twilight further. The phantom wound on her leg, where Nightmare Moon had bit her in Celestia's mind, was also subjected to some inspection, but in the end the doctor agreed that Twilight was as qualified to comment on that wound as he was himself, and wished her the best as he left her, and her assembled friends, to wait on the princesses' wishes.

Twilight lay back and listen to the discussion, adding little and barely reacting when addressed. She didn't really want to think about anything, she found; it was easier to just let her mind drift. It lingered automatically on happy memories of Celestia – and far from being painful, as she might have expected, she experienced a fierce but quiet joy recalling the little moments of happiness they'd shared together; moments, she now knew, when Celestia was reaching out to her from behind the mask of the Eternal Sun.

Moments when they had been friends, as well as mentor and student.

Perhaps, Twilight mused, she should be depressed by them now – but no, this was... okay. She was really understanding these events for what they were, now, and it just made them more special and precious.

A messenger came, calling for Twilight, and Twilight alone, to attend the princess' pleasure. Rainbow Dash, as she always did, snickered at this turn of phrase, until she saw that Spitfire was Twilight's escort, turning bright red as her old... *friend* winked at her.

As she was led, slowly, through the halls of Canterlot, Twilight turned to the golden pegasus. "Forgive me, but... I understand you were caught trying to help some dangerous prisoners escape captivity. And yet, I notice you're not in a cell, or relieved of your duties, at the very least...?"

"Oh, they told you about that, huh?" Spitfire asked, smiling broadly. "Well, the commander's a pretty understanding pony, in his way... he's put me on detached service and stripped me of my command, so there's punishment for you." The pegasus looked around herself in a theatrical display of conspiracy. "Between you and me, what that

really means is he's making me one of the special agents he keeps around on the quiet. I'm going to be moving to Ponyville, soon..."

"Really?" Twilight said, smiling just a little. "To keep an eye on things, I suppose."

"Some things more than others," Spitfire said, her quiet little smile spreading just slightly. "But you and I will be seeing more of each other in the future, which is why he sent me to meet you. Just a little heads up, eh?"

Twilight grinned. "Good to know." They paused at the stairs to Celestia's study. "Thank you, Spitfire, for your escort. I... look forward to the next time I see you."

It felt very strange to say this, and Twilight briefly analyzed that feeling, realizing that she was not really thinking ahead much further than tomorrow. She shook her head, feeling foolish, no matter how justified she might be to do so.

"Should be interesting," the pegasus said, with a wink. "Until then."

Twilight gave her a little smile of acknowledgement, turned, and with a nod to the guards on either side of the staircase, limped up to the doors and let herself in.

Celestia wasn't at her desk; instead, she was resting on a couch, looking as alert and energetic as she had any right to. Luna was sitting across from her, face displaying an unusual amount of agitation.

"Twilight," Celestia said, warmly. "Thank you for coming. I was just telling Luna about... our mutual acquaintance."

Luna's face soured into irritation. "It's all been very... interesting. But my faith in you was rewarded many times over, Twilight... and your faith in yourself, I understand." She smiled, at Twilight, such as she could.

"I did what I could," Twilight said, taking a seat next to Celestia, between the sisters. "But in the end –"

"In the end you stole more time for me than I deserve, and have saved Equestria from its princess and her vanity," Celestia said, patiently. "Once again, your courage has brought the promise of peace and harmony to our little country. As its princess – for now – I thank you."

"And as a pony who lost her sister... *I* thank you," Luna added, speaking carefully.

Twilight smiled quietly, and shook her head. "I am, as always, happy to be of service to the princesses."

All three of them shared a quiet, amused little look at this parodic display of formality.

"I think that's about enough of that, then," Celestia said, smiling. "There is a great deal we need to talk about, and then you, Twilight, are going to get some rest. Tomorrow... I will want you beside me, for most of the day. Lots of meetings and so on, ponies who will need to see you there with me. You understand how it is."

Twilight nodded, eyes sad. Unspoken was: I will treasure every second we can be near each other, before the end, even if we are forced to spend them doing what must be done for Equestria. But that was another consequence of this whole affair, Twilight supposed; they weren't even going to be allowed the privilege of peace, together – the mask, the Eternal Sun, turned everything to the needs of Equestria even as the princess cast it aside – one last little barb.

That said, the three sat in silence for a time, enjoying the first and last moment of quiet peace, just for the three of them – sisters, friends, beloved of one another. They looked to each other, eyes heavy with sorrow but affectionate for all that, as they shared a heartbeat, each regretting deeply how much they had feared that this moment could never be, and how that had almost prevented it from ever coming to pass.

It was all too brief, but in being ephemeral, transitive... it was all the more precious.

Then it was over; duty, and the future, called, and there was much to discuss. It was very late when Twilight finally stood to take her leave of the princesses, mind overflowing with preparations for the meetings tomorrow and with proposals for state business in the future. She and Luna would be spending a lot of time together, it seemed... but that was fine with Twilight. She found she was looking forward to working closely with her new big sister, despite the reality of what it meant.

Celestia seemed to sense this, if Twilight guessed her expression correctly in the little moments when Luna and Twilight got really involved in a back-and-forth about something. It was a smile, sad but affectionate... and a resigned sort of hope was lit in her eyes, as well, which Twilight had extremely mixed feelings about.

When their deliberation was complete, or at least, as complete as it was going to be, Twilight rose and stretched her limbs, yawning. "If I have to endure meeting after meeting with noblepony after noblepony tomorrow..."

"Twilight..." Celestia began, suddenly, looking warily at Luna. Her voice was unusually hesitant.

Luna looked from Celestia to Twilight, and nodded, smiling very slightly.

"What is it?" Twilight asked.

Celestia's face was carefully blank. "Would... I... would you stay with me, tonight?"

It was perhaps a sign of how much things had changed, in the last day, but Twilight actually paused and thought very carefully about this before answering. "Yes... I will. I'd be happy to. If Luna would be good enough to tell my friends I will see them in the morning."

"Of course," Luna said, rising. She approached Celestia, giving her a slightly harder look than Twilight might have expected. It wasn't just Twilight whose image of Celestia had been deeply shaken recently, it seemed. "Celestia... I'll see you in the morning."

"Until sunrise, then, sister," Celestia said, calmly, accepting the rebuke.

"Indeed." Luna turned to Twilight, nodding somewhat stiffly. "And good evening to you as well, sister. I... look forward to our future together."

"Me, too," Twilight said, solemnly. Luna smiled briefly and took her leave.

Celestia raised her head, a little hint of magic snuffing the many little candles around the room. "Thank you, Twilight," she said, in the low luminescence offered by the slim moon hanging in the clear night sky.

"Not at all. I think... the reason I had to pause, actually, was because I was paying careful attention to why I wanted to stay here, so badly." Twilight grinned, very slightly.

Celestia chuckled, anxiously. "Twilight, about that –"

"Parts of our mind think many things," Twilight said, quickly. "But I think I really just want to be near you, is all. So... don't get your hopes up, eh?" She tried to make a joke of it, but it fell flat, and she felt foolish.

Silence reigned for awhile, then Celestia's voice stirred, quietly, in the darkness. "I'm very frightened, Twilight."

Twilight stepped forward, hearing Celestia move on the little bed to make room for her. The unicorn, feeling tiny, curled up against her mentor and thought about what to say. "I'm not sure I can tell you anything that will help, really, except..."

"Just stay with me, tonight, and tomorrow... all the way to the end of things. Please." Celestia's whispered voice was trembling, and very near to Twilight now. The unicorn's heart ached to hear that voice, which was usually so calm and confident, miserable with fear; on the other hand... this is what life was like, without masks.

Twilight lifted her head up and reached forward, in the dark, until she felt her muzzle press against the side of Celestia's face. She kissed it, gently. "I will be with you every step of the way." Another gentle kiss; this time, Twilight tasted salt on her lips. "I love you."

One of Celestia's broad wings splayed out, and covered Twilight. She only flinched a very little bit – her rib, healed though it may be – still ached.

Celestia's breath came out in a little jerk of a humiliated sob. "I'm so sorry, Twilight. You've endured so much for me..."

"Shhh..." Twilight whispered. "Just rest. Your Faithful Student is with you and will never leave you. I promise."

She felt a gentle pressure, and little drops of moisture, on her forehead. "I love you so much."

Twilight couldn't think of anything to say that didn't seem hollow or make her feel foolish, but Celestia didn't seem to be upset by her silence; she gently clutched Twilight close to her with her wing, and they drifted off to sleep, together.

• • •

Twilight went back to sleep after Celestia and Luna departed quietly, in the morning, so as not to disturb the unicorn too much as they stepped onto the balcony from Celestia's study to discuss the sun's cycle across the sky. Twilight had rolled away from the sunlight as it bloomed on the eastern horizon and groaned irritably, eliciting a little moment of shared amusement between the two princesses, which relieved a little bit of the tension that still hung between them.

In retrospect, Twilight thought it was a sign of how intense the experience she'd been through was that she couldn't even summon the energy to eavesdrop on the princesses discussing the intricacies of the cosmic cycles they embodied, a topic on which she had

idly speculated at some length over the years. Her main concern at the time had been the removal of the comfortable warmth of Celestia's wing.

When Twilight woke up in earnest, Luna told her that her friends were waiting in one of the suites, with unhidden overtones of "You're not the only pony who wants to spend some time alone with her, you know." Celestia seemed uncomfortable with Luna's tone, but said nothing; Twilight was only a little embarrassed that she hadn't thought of it herself, although she suspected Luna and Celestia's time alone together would be significantly more tense than either of them might like.

The breakfast they shared was... subdued, compared to their overwhelming, anxious show of support the previous day. That was the right word – not sad, not really, even though they all were. The Elements had been through many hard times together in the past, though, so by unspoken agreement, and having had time to let the immediacy of the impending sorrow dawn on them, they didn't unnecessarily make things worse by agonizing over something sad before it had actually happened. There would be time enough for tears later.

They chatted idly about nothing in particular; Twilight actually injected some animation into the discussion by "accidentally" dropping the gossip that Spitfire might be seen around Ponyville a lot more often in the near future, which caused it to devolve into an extremely amusing ten minutes of Rarity and Applejack instinctively teaming up to drive Rainbow Dash up the wall from two completely different angles.

When they were finally summoned to Celestia's study, Twilight was momentarily distressed that all seven of them had been called upon, not just Twilight, but she chided herself for being so selfish.

Celestia was behind her desk now, looking as proud and official as she ever had. Luna lurked in the study behind her, looking uncomfortable and a little aloof.

There was an awkward moment, at first, as Celestia hesitated to think of what to say. "Thank you all," she began simply, beaming down at them. Even though her voice was firm and even, everypony was disturbed to see her so worn and tired.

"Uh," Applejack replied, eventually. "You're, uh... welcome, o'course. For... whatever."

"For everything," Celestia said, swallowing. "I've asked so much of all of you, over the years."

"We were happy to help," Fluttershy added, smiling sadly.

Celestia smiled. "Still, I am grateful to you. You've given and risked so much, at my request... and now, if you're willing, I'd like to ask you one last thing. Not as your princess... but as..." she faltered, threatening tears. Before she continued, she cleared her throat huskily. "But... as... somepony who loves you, and needs your help."

"Anything," Rarity said. She gave Celestia a brave smile, which was returned with a look of deep gratitude from the princess. They once again communicated a great deal with a gaze – Celestia deep remorse, Rarity some slightly reluctant forgiveness.

"As you know, I... am going away; for quite a long time, I think. There will be... hard times ahead." Celestia nodded to Twilight. "I am going to be putting a heavy responsibility on Twilight and Princess Luna. I want to ask you all to be there for them, in these hard times."

Even Pinkie Pie's more or less permanent smile was subdued. "Of course we will! You don't even have to ask."

"No, I have to," Celestia said, quickly. "I *want* to ask this of you. As a favor. I..." She turned to Twilight, who looked up at her mentor with a firm expression. "It would be unfair of me to just assume you'll do it. This is a request, from a pony in distress to the only ponies who can help her."

There was a snuffle. To the shock of nearly everypony, it was from Rainbow Dash. "Darn it..." she grumbled, looking away with a blush.

Celestia smiled. "I cannot give you all what you deserve from me, which is a lifetime of love and all the honor and joy I can give you. Because I do love you all, very much. I am... so sorry that we didn't get to spend more time together. You're all such special ponies." She was weeping, now, but still spoke firmly.

"Thank ya kindly princess," Applejack replied, gulping. "We're all mighty sorry there's nothin' we can do ta help ya."

Celestia shook her head. "I don't know what Twilight has told you, but... I made my bed long ago, and now I have to lie in it. But I couldn't go without trying to tell you all what you mean to me."

Then she raised them all to the nobility, to Rarity's everlasting glee, and with a very forced wink, entreated them to find any and every way to use this status to cause as much trouble as possible. Spike she named a knight and asked to accept the duty of serving and

protecting Twilight Sparkle, her Faithful Student; he accepted gratefully, although the traditional ceremony of knighthood was foregone in favor of a very long hug.

"And now," Celestia said calmly, "I would ask that you all relax for the rest of the day while I steal Twilight Sparkle for some business. We'll see each other again, I think... if that's alright with all of you," she added, gravely. There was a little bit of a plea in it, too.

No pony said anything, but there was a general feeling of agreement. The Elements and Spike shuffled out unwillingly, the dragon tossing one miserable look back at the smiling but tearful face of the princess as the doors closed.

"Twilight," Celestia said, suddenly sounding very weak. "Please..."

Immediately Twilight was at her side, accepting a little of her weight as she leaned on the unicorn a bit.

"They, too... they deserved better from me, just as you always have," Celestia said, wearily. "Even they were weapons I used against myself. I said: they're Twilight's friends, not mine – as if being friends with them as well would take them from you somehow, as if any relationship I had with them could ever be as close as your bond. Arrogance, foolishness..."

Twilight said nothing, just nuzzled the princess as she trembled slightly, doing little breathing exercises to calm herself.

"Sister, you're pushing yourself too hard –" Luna began, warily.

Celestia shook her head. "This is all as hard as I made it," she said, in a tone that brooked no dissent. Broken she might be, but she was still the princess. "I will endure... if you two will stay with me."

"All the way," Twilight whispered.

Luna stepped next to Twilight. "You stood by me when I returned. and I will stand with you as you depart, sister."

Celestia smiled at them both. "Thank you," was all she could find it in herself to say.

• • •

It ended... eventually.

There were a great many ponies to see; nobleponies, ambassadors, wizards, leaders of various organizations... all who needed to be told, by Celestia herself, about the upcoming transition before the official announcement tomorrow, so that there would be no questions about it later. A thousand rumors were launched today – "Oh, in confidence, the princess told me... ," "Her last words to me were... ," *et cetera*. But that was always the case, and ponies took them as seriously as they ever did.

Twilight knew most of the visitors, by reputation at least, and a few of them greeted her politely, or at least acknowledged her. But she wasn't here to talk to them – not even to listen, really. That was Luna's role: to be there, listening to what was said and, more often than not, what went unsaid. In pursuit of this goal, sometimes Luna sat next to Celestia, looking serious; sometimes she lurked in the background, smiling enigmatically.

It was politics, mind games and shadowboxing, and while Luna needed to play things carefully, Twilight's role for the ponies attending the princess was *always* to be seen sitting next to Celestia, calmly and confidently, as natural as anything – the message being that while Celestia may be absent, everypony was to consider Twilight invested with Celestia's full confidence. It was a little intimidating and a little thrilling, as Twilight thought to the challenges and adventures ahead.

That said, the unspoken understanding between Luna, Celestia, and herself was that this was all privately secondary to her just *being there*. She was a little knot of strength and love for Celestia, who needed to remain the princess all the way to the end, now, to forestall chaos in the wake of her absence – humbled, perhaps, and about to go to a much-needed rest, but still the Celestia that Equestria had looked to for stability for a millennium.

Occasionally Celestia would touch Twilight, very slightly, with her wing – sometimes when she wanted somepony to see her touching Twilight to reinforce their connection, sometimes when she was feeling a little stressed... and sometimes, just when she wanted to feel that Twilight was still there, without looking.

It went on, and on, and on... until it stopped. It was very sudden, taking Twilight by surprise. The only previous pauses had been small, light meals brought in and consumed in quiet haste before the next meeting. Celestia's appetite had been significantly weaker than normal, and Twilight found herself fretting about that as if it had any real meaning anymore.

"*Finally*," Celestia sighed.

"Are you sure there's no way you can spare me all of this?" Luna asked, smiling wearily.

Celestia shook her head. "No, I'm afraid not."

Luna sighed, with a resigned smile. "Very well..." She looked out the window, and her expression faded into solemnity. "Well, I'll... leave you two, then," she said, a little awkwardly. "I'll be with our friends, when the time comes."

"What?" Twilight said, confused, and then she looked out the window, too. "Oh, no..."

Celestia leaned down and nuzzled her. Twilight barely noticed, her whole being consumed with the sight of the treacherous sun. It was beginning the final descent into night; the hour was six in the evening or so, now.

Luna walked up to Twilight, put a hoof on her shoulder in a companionable sort of way, and gave her a very forced smile. "It's okay, sister. It's all okay," she said, in a voice that made her statement a lie. She kissed Twilight's cheek and took her leave.

Twilight sat, stock-still, as Celestia busied herself with preparing their last little moment together. The enormity of everything was beginning to descend on her.

Celestia eyed her, carefully. "Twilight... We knew this was coming." Her voice was strained, and conflicted; she was trying to be strong for Twilight, as Twilight had been for her, and was finding it very hard indeed.

"Somehow I thought... I thought... we'd have a nice dinner with everyone, first. And then... and then you and I, we'd... go, ourselves. Somewhere nice. The Halls, maybe, and..." Twilight stammered.

Celestia spread a wing and wrapped it around her. "That... sounds very nice, Twilight."

"I thought there'd be more time for *us*." Twilight wiped her eyes. "Maybe that was foolish."

"This is the last price I have to pay for wearing the mask, I think... the last thing we have to suffer together, for my foolishness." Despite herself, Twilight chuckled hopelessly at that, to Celestia's distress. "Was something about that funny?"

"Not at all... I thought that myself, earlier! But I had to hope otherwise, I guess." Twilight looked up at her. "I'm sorry, I'm losing control, right at the end."

Celestia placed two cups in front of them. "You've been so strong for me, Twilight. I wouldn't have made it through all this without you... so right now, let's just be Celestia and Twilight. Friends," she added, giving Twilight a bright, but glassy smile. "Open with each other. Don't worry about controlling yourself."

The kettle rose...

Sweet herbal tea pooled in the cup. Celestia and Twilight Sparkle gratefully sniffed the plume of steam that rose from it, smiling at each other, each taking a small amount of simple joy in the little ritual... for what seemed to be the last time.

They sat, quietly, for a very long time, sipping their tea.

"Openness is," Twilight choked, wiping her face and clearing her throat, "openness is turning out to be a little different than I thought it would be."

Celestia looked down at her. "I... would it be bad for me to say that I've never felt closer to you?"

"After all that we've been through together, I think a little peace and quiet is what we want from each other," Twilight said, laughing a little.

Celestia chuckled as well. "I suppose so."

"Still, I feel like..." Twilight trailed off, looking for the right words. She should be crying, something in her said. She should be bawling, inconsolable. But she wasn't... she felt very light. Not peaceful, really... but there was a solemn serenity in this moment, that for all its melancholy was precious and beautiful. "I feel like I should be more upset."

"It's strange, isn't it," Celestia said, evenly, looking around her study, slowly. "I feel the same way. I feel, ha, I feel like I should be crying my eyes out..."

That was something Twilight never thought she'd hear. "Yeah."

"I suppose I'm just... very... at peace with things, here with you."

Twilight looked up at her. "Are you still frightened?"

"Not so much as I was... I just needed to calm down, a bit." Celestia looked down at her, smiling. Twilight was immensely comforted by it – it was a small smile, between ponies, not the slightly top-down look of gratitude from a superior to a subordinate. "I... don't

get ideas, Twilight, but I really enjoyed sleeping next to you. It was very comforting." There was the slightest hint of a sly grin on her face.

"When you put me in bed with you in Ponyville..." Twilight began, but stopped herself. She wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about any of that, anymore.

Celestia seemed to, though. "That was a little thoughtless of me, in retrospect."

"No, it was... very... it was just too much for me, then. And not, um, in a sexy sense," she added quickly, blushing furiously. "It was... well, it was too good to be true, in some ways. A gesture of closeness, when I felt so far from you. But I wasn't in any place to accept it properly... I was so screwed up."

"Well, I'm... actually, I'm very glad we had the chance to do it when we were both in a place to enjoy it. It is something I have missed very much, from when you were young..."

"Me, too," Twilight said. "It was a little different this time, though."

Celestia sighed. "Yes, it was. Better, I think." Once, they would have discussed how this was the case, but... it wasn't important, at the moment.

Twilight refilled their cups, and again, they sat next to each other in silence for a very, very long span – not because they didn't know what to say, but because there was nothing that needed to be said. On her stand in the corner, Philomeena slept peacefully.

"Ah, would..." Celestia said, then paused as she felt Twilight cuddle into her. She looked down, smiling. "Would you take Philomeena to Fluttershy, please? Just tell her where you're going to take her, and she should do as you ask."

Twilight nodded, sniffing, still resting against Celestia's side.

"And of course, I've left orders that you're allowed access to my study and my private archives, any time you want."

"Thank you," Twilight said, absently.

The sun sank lower, and they both drank more tea. In the distance, birds sang gently, saying good-night.

"I want to ask you something, Princess," Twilight said, eventually.

"Anything, Twilight."

"No," Twilight said, sitting up, looking Celestia firmly in the eye. "I want you to *promise* me something."

Celestia tried to smile. "Of course. Anything. For you, now? Anything."

Twilight looked down, raising a hoof, and set it gently on her mentor's chest. "When you... when you come back, Celestia..." She said this painfully aware that there were probably even odds that this might never happen – but why even think such a thing? Chase the change you wanted, right?

The princess clutched the hoof to herself. "Yes?"

"You... you should take some time to get back in the swing of things," Twilight said, seriously.

"And then?"

"And then..." Twilight trailed off, almost unsure she wanted to say it. Again she felt a little disturbed that she wasn't bawling, that tears seemed as distant as laughter. Had she burned herself out on emotion? Or was this like that terrible sense of freedom she felt when Celestia had said that this was the end, at the beginning of their long conversation?

"Twilight, please... whatever it is, I'll do it." Celestia smiled, fondly. "For you."

"I want you to take another student," Twilight said, firmly.

Celestia was taken aback. "You... well, I... why, Twilight?"

Twilight smiled. "I want you to promise me you won't let yourself be lonely, anymore," she said. "And... I've been so happy, Celestia, being your student. Everything I am, everything I have, in my life... it's because of you. So someday, in the future... I want you to keep an eye out, for some lucky foal who catches your attention like I did. And I want you to love them, like you love me."

"I could never love anypony like I love you, Twilight." Celestia kissed her cheek. "My Faithful Student. The Faithful Student."

Twilight shook her head. "It's not about replacing me, or anything. I just... I mean, even with the mask between us, you loved me so much, and I loved you. It... would kill me to

think you'll think something silly like, 'oh, nopony could replace Twilight Sparkle – "' she blushed at how arrogant it sounded, but Celestia gave her an awkward look that suggested she'd hit the mark, " – and let that get you back into old habits."

Celestia considered this for some time. "Twilight Sparkle. The Faithful Student. I promise, that one day, I will find a new friend – or friends, would that be alright? – to teach, as I've taught you." Her eyes grew wet with tears. "And when I do, I'll tell them stories about my first student, who was so brave, and so clever..."

"That would be... nice." Twilight snuggled up against her. "Thank you, Celestia. Although I have to say... look at this name I'm stuck with! I suppose I was going to ask Luna to teach me about dreams, anyways, but..."

"Ah, well, *student*," Celestia said, blinking and letting the tears run down her face. "It's language tricking us again. You study things with or without a teacher..."

"I suppose I do," Twilight said, smiling.

Silence fell over them, again. The light of the sun was heavy and amber-gold, now.

They listened to the birds and insects in the palace gardens whistle and buzz.

They heard Philomeena squawk a yawn in her corner.

They let the cool night air fill the room around them.

They smelled the rich smell of *life* rising on the evening wind, picked up from the grounds and gardens, and they reveled in it.

They shared the very last bit of hot water, drinking tea from the same cup.

They did these things. *They*.

Together.

And finally, when the sun was red and heavy on the horizon, they looked to each other; they both now suddenly felt the strange serenity that had forestalled their sorrow fade away, and thus regarded each other quietly for some time, faces composed carefully but eyes singing volumes to each other.

"I love you, Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, simply.

Twilight blinked, letting the growing tears fall. "I love you, too... Celestia."

"Then walk with me, now, to the very end."

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Canterlot was not a good place for secrets, and so there was something of a crowd waiting for them as they descended the stairs from Celestia's study into the corridors of the Palace. It was a furtive crowd – hidden in alcoves and peeking out from side passages, everypony fascinated by the rumors of their beloved Princess' impending absence.

Twilight looked around, nervously. "You know we're being watched, I know, but... we could have the guards clear them away –"

"No, Twilight. Let them see me go..." Celestia's quiet voice was firm, but by choice, not by ease. "They don't know the whole of what's happening, but let them see me go proudly to face... whatever awaits me. It'll be a good story; that will help me when I show up again, don't you think?"

"Perhaps."

Celestia grinned, a bit wryly. "They're seeing you walking next to me tonight, Twilight. I wonder what they'll say about you...?"

"Probably that I'm your student and we're very close, and you like me, and... things," Twilight said, in a nervous rush.

Celestia laughed – a little, weak laugh, but heartfelt. "I can already tell you that they assume I've taught you ancient magic, and have given you access to terrible secrets, and so on. They'll say: oh, they were always so close, who knows what old Celestia taught the Arch-Mage!"

Twilight frowned. "I don't know anything like that," she said. "I don't like the idea of ponies getting weird expectations."

"Ah, well, they might treat you with a little more respect, too, so it might not be all bad," Celestia said, idly.

"Still, though," Twilight said, a little sullenly, "I'd rather they just see that I walked with you. That's what's *important*."

Celestia just smiled, eyes grateful, and walked on. Twilight got the impression she had to focus very hard on doing so without stumbling too much; as it was, she was trying to give a sense of gravity to her stride to hide that this was about as fast as she could move.

Luna and the Elements met them in the antechamber before the great hall, in sight of the huge, arched doors to the grounds.

"Hail, sisters!" Luna called, and Twilight realized that she was being addressed as well. The unicorn groaned internally – her reputation was going to get ridiculously inflated from these affairs on top of how hard this whole situation already was! No rest for the wicked, it seemed.

"Hello, Luna," Celestia said, calmly. "I feel like a walk through the grounds. Would you and your friends care to join me?"

"We'd be honored, sister," Luna replied, rather officiously, for the benefit of the poorly-concealed crowd.

Rainbow Dash, Spike, and Applejack led the way, heads held nobly as the knights they now legally were, giving serious glares to anypony who looked as if they were going to approach the little party too closely. Luna and Fluttershy followed them, whispering quietly to one another, then Rarity and Pinkie Pie, who were both looking proud as duchesses – one for real, the other occasionally breaking into little giggles, amused by the ridiculousness of her faux haughtiness.

Trailing behind were Celestia and her Faithful Student, side by side.

They crossed the grounds, travelling towards the lonely tower in the middle distance, observed from every possible vantage point.

Through the grounds. Across the byway. Under the walkway. Through the gate. Step by step, Celestia approached her doom, head held high, and by her side was Twilight Sparkle, faithful to the end.

They came upon the tower, which was surrounded by a fairly large amount of guards. Luna spoke briefly to the sour-faced grey unicorn commander, and turned to Celestia. "I hesitate to let you remain here. Too many ponies know –"

"I will be safe, there, no matter how long I sleep." Celestia nodded gravely. "The mountain will see to it, and I suspect between yourself and Commander Stoneface, a

suitable honor guard can be arranged. The kind that is more guard than honor," she added, smiling.

Luna nodded. "How would you like to... descend?"

Celestia looked around, at the assembled ponies, who looked up at her expectantly. Her expression was pained; Twilight could tell that the thought driving to the top of her mind was something along the lines of *why, why, why must I be torn from these ponies?*

But because she knew the answer, all too well, Celestia was able to suppress it and come to a decision.

"Just you, and Twilight, I think," Celestia said. "Let me take my leave of the rest of you, now."

"Princess..." Spike murmured.

Celestia turned to him, smiling weakly. "Spike, my dear, you and I may see one another again, in the future. I'll need your help, then..." She let her gaze fall on each of the rest of the Elements in turn. "And I'll want you to tell me everything you remember about your friends. So remember well."

An uncomfortable silence pervaded the plaza as the Elements tried to think of something to say in response to this.

Celestia's face fell into a gentle, sad smile. "Well, I... well, then." Celestia's inability to find something appropriate or comforting to say was at least as disturbing to everypony as her haggard appearance, or her obvious need for Twilight to be standing next to her as she tried to maintain her composure. "I... everything I said to you, in my study, I meant. And more, that even now I can't bring myself to say... all of you, I've come to love you very much, through your letters, and the all too brief time we've spent together." She looked down on them for a while longer, and then laughed, weakly.

"Uh..." Applejack said, looking around warily. "Are you all right, Princess?"

"Language is failing me, once again," Celestia said, looking to Twilight. "I have so... *much* I want to say to all of you. Each of you. But... there are no words..." She sighed, looking up into the crimson sun. "If I must say one last thing to you all..." She trailed off, her eyes suddenly filled with pain as she grasped for words, and failed.

The Elements looked to each other, wishing desperately that somepony knew what to say.

Celestia shook her head, sighing sadly. "Farewell, all of you."

She kissed each of them then, gently, on the forehead; having done this, she turned and began the approach to the tower, not daring to face them again. With a sad look to her friends, Twilight followed close behind her mentor; Luna trailed a few paces behind them both.

As the doors of the tower shut behind them, Celestia visibly slumped. Twilight rushed to her side, gently brushing against Celestia, accepting the small weight the alicorn put on her.

"There is such a thing as being seen to go with grace, I think," Celestia murmured.

Luna nodded. "And yet I noticed you let yourself stumble, just a bit. Very mythical, that."

"Let myself?" Celestia chuckled, darkly. She turned and nuzzled Twilight, who gave an urgent little murmur of distress in response. "Twilight... help Luna with the seal, please. I'll be fine."

Reluctantly, Twilight pulled herself away from Celestia's side and took her position across from Luna. They gave each other an extremely uncomfortable look as they began the process of unsealing the chamber they were both trying hard not to think of as a tomb. Moving with its strange, distorted inertia, the beautiful stone lifted free of the runic ring and floated aside to reveal the great stone staircase.

Celestia stepped forward, her gait awkward... and paused, hoof raised before that first, deadly step into the descent.

"Twilight," she said, staring at the staircase before her thoughtfully. "How many plans have you come up with to help me avoid this?"

Luna bristled. "What? I thought you intended to –"

Celestia ignored her. "Twilight?"

"Seven feasible plans," Twilight said, quietly. "Most of them involve somepony else taking your place, or using the Elements on you."

"Don't tell me you two –"

"Of course not, Luna," Celestia interrupted. "But here, at the very uttermost edge of things... I find myself having a hard time taking this last step... I thought I could use something..." She swallowed, and paused, for a time. "Twilight Sparkle... I thank you for giving the matter some consideration," she said, with forced firmness. "But I'm afraid the time has come for me to face the consequences of my actions."

Her hoof fell on the step with a gentle *click*.

Celestia closed her eyes and sighed. "I always thought moments like that were a convention of drama, but I really did have to force myself. I feel like a foal..."

Luna walked up beside her, nuzzling the larger alicorn fondly as she did so. "Come, sister," she said. "We're with you."

"Thank you both," Celestia whispered.

The descent was slow. Celestia was growing very weak and tired; she moved with the drawn-out care of the infirm. Luna kept pace with her, pausing every so often so as not to draw ahead, while Twilight trailed behind them, face downcast.

"I –" Luna began, after a long while, but immediately stifled herself.

Celestia looked to her curiously, but Luna just shook her head.

They kept walking.

The silence was tense, and the strange cavern around the great stone staircase was so unnaturally still that it seemed to be sucking the hollow sounds of hooves on stairs into the black void beyond. Twilight shuddered at the thought – that first trip down had been much more comfortable, even with some of the terrible things they were shown. At least it hadn't been just... hollow, hungry blackness.

She tried to think of something to say, but was once again struck with an inability to come up with anything that didn't sound false, or hollow. What could she say, that she already hadn't? "I miss you already"? Celestia knew that. "I wish this had never happened"? Obviously. "This is unfair"? Well, no, it wasn't, that was the trouble. Or if it was unfair, it was unfair to Twilight and Luna, not Celestia – and as much as it hurt *her*, Twilight knew it would hurt Celestia twice over to be reminded of this.

In any case, she would have been hard pressed to say much through her throat, which was about as thick with anxiety as she had ever felt it.

Luna seemed to be equally conflicted; Twilight's mind, bubbling over with unhappy thoughts, gratefully latched onto a passing curiosity – what had she and Celestia discussed in priv–

The dusky alicorn, as if aware that Twilight had been thinking about her, turned and looked at the unicorn over her shoulder, a sad but firm expression on her face. In the light of Luna's calm gaze, Twilight suddenly remembered her making time for Twilight and Celestia to be alone together. There was no accusation in Luna's eyes, but she nodded, very slightly: *I will see her again, one day. But this parting wounds me deeply, nevertheless...*

Twilight's little gulp and nod in acknowledgment seemed to satisfy whatever was on Luna's mind.

And so they walked on in silence; what was there to say?

All too soon, they stood before the stone doors to the chamber at the heart of the mountain. They paused for awhile, regarding the doors with carefully-composed looks of mild disinterest.

Celestia stirred, clearing her throat in a husky way that spoke of suppressed tears. "I don't want to go," she whispered. "The Sun was right; any joy we found in this time is torture to me now. She really is good at twisting the knife..."

Twilight sniffed. "But... you have to. We promised. And..."

"And I must face the consequences for what I've done," Celestia said, resignation thick on her voice. "Still..."

"Sister..." Luna murmured, her face falling into misery.

"Luna," Celestia said, firmly, turning to her. "I look forward to my return. Whatever awaits me, I look forward to sharing it with you..."

"I... also hope to share a future with you," Luna said, carefully.

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Still?" The younger alicorn looked away from her, face awkward. "Luna, if you are that worried about it –"

"Twilight Sparkle!" Luna declared, suddenly giving the unicorn a fierce look. "My sister. With my new... responsibilities, and Celestia's absence... I am worried about the things we saw in her mind, yet. The creature that is my fear was not totally erased from being, I think..."

"I counseled her to look to her friends – to seek strength in the love and support of others. Her first thought was of you, and the friends you share," Celestia said, quickly, as Luna trailed off miserably. "I fear that the Nightmare is a burden she will have to bear for the rest of her life, lurking in her mind, waiting for another chance to take control. Will you help her come to grips with this? Will you be there for her?"

Twilight was momentarily stunned. "Of course...!"

Celestia turned to Luna, smiling gently. "There. You see?"

"It was foolish of me to even think otherwise, I suppose," Luna said, rallying a little.

"The trouble with power, sister, is that the more of it you have, the more exaggerated the fallout of your mistakes. Take all of this as a lesson about that, as well." Celestia replied. She stepped forward and kissed Luna's forehead. "I will miss you –"

Luna gave Twilight a serious glance for a second, before leaping forward and clutching Celestia desperately. "Celestia! I can't bear this... I've only just returned, and already...!" She buried her face in Celestia's neck and sobbed gently.

"Shhh..." Celestia said, slowly, agonizingly, bringing a wing around to clutch her gently. "I know, Luna, I know... it hurts me too, so *badly*..." Luna looked up, and the sisters held a tearful gaze for a long moment. "But this was because I made my own mistakes, just as you did..."

"I'll learn from them, then, as you counseled," Luna said, looking to Twilight. "I will seek the strength that comes from the Magic of Friendship." She gave the unicorn a little smile, which despite being a very small expression conveyed both gratitude and hope in huge measure. "I will seek the strength to control my fears."

Celestia pulled away from her. "I know you'll succeed, sister... and I look forward to walking with you in the world that strength will help you create."

Luna stepped back from her, nodding, smiling through her tears.

Celestia turned to Twilight, now. Their eyes met. "Twilight."

They held that gaze for a long, long time, neither wanting to let it go. But finally:

"It would please me, Twilight," Celestia said, idly, as if it was nothing of importance, despite the tears that began leaking down her face in a slow, but constant stream. "If the first book I read when I return was the collected memoirs of Twilight Sparkle. And that this would be a long book, that took me a long time to read..."

Twilight nodded, matching Celestia tear for tear.

It was all she could do – she was bursting with things she wanted to express to Celestia, but they were all so *complex*, all images and sensations rather than words. To merely say thank you would not express the intensity of her gratitude, which was spilling into her mind in memories of little looks and smiles and phrases. To say she loved Celestia – to say it now wasn't anything at all, it seemed to her. It had been said as perfectly as she could imagine in Celestia's study, in the light of the dying sun, and she expressed it just as truly by walking with Celestia every step of the way to this, the very end of things.

Twilight felt ready to explode for not saying anything. She was desperate for the right words – or some knowledge of the right way to touch Celestia, something that would be more eternal than the Eternal Sun, a gesture or contact that would never leave her beloved Celestia, though the stars burned out in the heavens and the seas drained into endless deserts...

"Remember your promise," she rasped, as the words leapt to her mind.

Celestia nodded gently. "I will. I will take –"

"Not that," Twilight managed. She stepped up to Celestia. "The students... that's just an action... that will help you. Love, Celestia... and be loved. Do that, for me... please." Long pauses filled this statement as Twilight fought to maintain her poise.

Celestia closed her eyes. "I swear to you, Twilight Sparkle –"

"Don't call me that. Not now. That's just my name..." Twilight reached up and wrapped her forelegs around Celestia's neck, hugging her very gently, as if she were reluctant to touch the alicorn in case this made her vanish.

Celestia let out a sob, which mixed weirdly with a hopeless little chuckle. "I... I... it's hard, Twilight. Doesn't it seem like that would just..."

"Mean this really is the end?" Twilight said, tears gushing out suddenly. She fought her throat for control of her voice again, feeling Celestia's tears falling on her back. "It *is* the end, Celestia. It has to be. You have to face the Sun for what you did... but we had this day, and we had our time to be... what we were supposed to be. Friends."

"My..." Celestia murmured. Luna began weeping in earnest now as she watched her sisters' parting. "My Faithful Student..."

"Yours. Always," Twilight sobbed into Celestia's neck.

"I swear to you, my faithful student, who came to me and saved me from myself..." Celestia said, forcing out each word with effort as her voice was strangled in her throat by desperate sorrow, "I will never let myself be alone again. I will love. I swear it. I won't let my fear get in the way again... because of the strength you've shared with me." Her voice dropped into a harsh whisper. "And I will never, ever, forget you, or how much I love you, in this moment..."

And they wept, together, even as Celestia pulled away, her face an agony of misery, leaving Twilight to collapse into Luna, who strode forwards swiftly to hold her. It all happened so quickly, events rolling downhill in a blur – Celestia seemed to vanish into the suddenly-opened doors with unreal haste, Twilight reaching out lamely with a hoof, something in her vainly hoping this would stop the inevitable parting.

"Sister," Celestia said, thickly.

Luna looked up at her, shaking her head, half-blinded with miserable tears; Celestia nodded, gravely. *Yes, the time has come.*

Celestia looked back to Twilight, for just a moment, renewing the unicorn's quiet sobs, but just as quickly, returned the gaze to Luna, who matched it unwavering. "Watch for sunrise."

As the doors closed, Twilight's eyes desperately sought Celestia's; and they held each other's gaze until the doors scraped shut and Celestia was out of sight.

• • •

Somewhere:

The sun hung fat and red on the distant, watery horizon beyond the cliffs. The Sun, hale and proud, was pacing along their edge, her white coat ruby-red where deep shadow didn't fall in the harsh crimson light of the fading sun.

Celestia stood in the little meadow, as Twilight had so recently, and let the overwhelming sense of *realness* pass over her. The wind was weak, and the rich scent of the sea wafted on it now. The trees behind her rustled and whispered gently as it passed through their broad leaves; unlike the calming whispers Twilight had heard, Celestia's sensitive ears were filled with a quiet lamentation, a dirge that sang of partings and endings. She momentarily wondered why, but she knew that things here were as they were, and questioning them was pointless.

"So," the Sun said, across the clearing. She ceased her restless pacing and looked down at Celestia, a strange seriousness about her features.

"So," Celestia replied, simply. She took a deep breath, trying to still the buzz of anxiety that lived in her stomach. Parting from Twilight had been...

She had thought about it many times, both before and after things started getting really wrong between them, but even in the depths of her delusion, she had hoped for the best. A quiet bed, a quiet fatigue, a lingering absence for the rest of Celestia's days. Nothing traumatic, or sudden, or sad beyond the necessary.

This? This was like tearing a wing off. Her mind was still reeling a bit from that last little sight of Twilight, ever-faithful, eyes widening as the terrible inevitability of the doors closing had really and truly become apparent. Celestia had felt a terrible need to call out to her and to Luna; to say some perfect words that would make it all alright again, that would give them strength and hope, and ease the pain of their parting. But as it had many times recently, her command of language failed her, and she merely watched them fall into each other with the careless ease of reflexive trust.

That, if nothing else, was a comfort to Celestia; they would have each other, and their friends.

Celestia looked up into the Sun's glare, and did not flinch. She submitted to her judge with as much nobility as she could muster, knowing herself to have committed a vile crime.

"Thank you for not embarrassing both of us by trying to escape your punishment," the Sun said, seriously.

Celestia shook her head. "I would be lying if I said that I did not, many times, hope for some escape or reprieve," she said, quietly. "You are in Twilight's debt. As much as she was a comfort to me, she was a reminder of my obligation to you."

"You would not have had that time, save for her. How was your day, then?"

Celestia shuddered. "Every moment of peace, and the little moments like happiness... agony, now."

The Sun gave Celestia an odd look. "Yes. You've arranged your affairs to your satisfaction?"

Celestia nodded. "I have."

"And said your good-byes?" There was no word for the Sun's expression but *leer*.

"Some rather hard ones, I'm afraid," Celestia remarked, weakly. The dreadful sorrow had only abated, not absented itself, and now that tide was turning back.

The Sun cocked her head. "Well, we know who's to blame for that."

"Now I understand more completely what you meant," Celestia said, carefully, as she tried to master herself. "That surrender, long ago, would have been preferable to this."

The Sun nodded. "I have never lied to you, about anything."

"So we have been *hurt*, then?" Celestia asked, bitterly.

The Sun grimaced. "...Yes," she growled, the admission being dragged between her teeth. "I... well. We've faded, a little. Burned too brightly for too long. What will come of it in the long run..." She shook her head.

Celestia sighed. "Foolish."

"To say the *least*," the Sun snapped. She mastered herself quickly, looking irritable. "I want to talk about it, Celestia. About us."

"As you wish."

"Mmmm," the Sun hummed, condescension thick in the sound of it. "Do you remember what I told you about our arrangement, that first time we met? 'A curious thyng,' I believe you said, at the time."

Celestia sighed, weakly. "I am the part of you that is a pony, and you are the part of me that is the Sun."

"Yes," the Sun said.

They stood facing one another for some time, the sound of the breeze moving through the trees and the sea breaking on the cliffs the only sound.

"I've had some time to consider these matters," the Sun said, idly.

"A millennium –"

The Sun made a dismissive wave of the head. "Just a day. The past millennium has been... well, time works differently here, as you know. But that's immaterial – it was still a long, long time. And more significantly... it was a product of betrayal, Celestia. One compounded by your refusal to release me..."

Celestia let her head fall. "It was."

"Oh, don't grovel," the Sun said, looking away from Celestia awkwardly. "I can't stand it. Don't make a show of this."

Celestia looked up at the Sun, who was regarding her speculatively, and held her gaze for a time. This seemed to distress the Sun somewhat, but Celestia held firmly to honest contrition – the surest way to unsettle somepony who is smug about catching you in the wrong is to actually be sorry about it.

"You... tried to be both of us," the Sun said, eventually.

"Did I?" Celestia asked. She thought about it. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right." The Sun approached Celestia, so they could speak without having to project their voices over some distance. The proximity distressed her, especially because the Sun's face betrayed little – the reckless spite was gone, replaced by a strange attitude that struck Celestia as *evaluative*. "You know, I have come to understand your reluctance about the cycle of rising and setting – putting aside the complications of you deciding you're too good for it. But... it must be humiliating, having something like that

out of your control." She said this with a repugnant air of false sympathy – the "aw, poor baby" tone.

Celestia, despite her agony, managed a little flare of irritation. "Yes, it really is. I took certain responsibilities on myself –"

"You love talking about your responsibilities as if they transcend the importance of other things. That was the mask you kept jabbering about with Twilight Sparkle, you know. This... purpose. These *things* you decided to do with your life – the things you built up around yourself. They were all the mask. Being the princess –" The Sun laughed. "Celestia, you're the *princess*! You can do whatever you like, but instead you obsessively fulfilled a role that you created for yourself and then kept telling yourself Equestria needed you to do it."

Celestia bristled. "What? What do you know about –"

"You didn't think I just sat here, this whole time, did you? I *watched*! Not as well as I might have if I were free, of course, but..."

The Sun's laughter filled the clearing, bright but a bit condescending. Celestia glowered.

"I watched you try to be the Sun, Celestia. Try to be me. Think about how you described your role as the *Eternal Sun*," the Sun said, mockingly. "The eternal center of things. Always *there*. Always *present*, and... *warm*, but removed enough not to *burn*. The *sun*, Celestia. *Me*. You stole my power and tried to be *me*. Why?"

Celestia stammered for a bit. "I... I was hurting. I was humiliated –"

"You were *frightened*," the Sun spat. "You were scared because you didn't know what was going to happen next – like anypony would be. Twilight Sparkle nailed that one on the head; you were afraid that the things that would change would be scary and hurtful, so you stole back your power and clung to your responsibilities for a millennium. For a thousand years, you lived in the past... a past which never existed." The Sun grinned, hugely. "Just like Twilight did, trying to get back a past where you were *perfect*."

Celestia stared at the Sun, who looked immensely pleased with herself. Celestia's jaw worked a couple times, but she said nothing.

"That Twilight Sparkle... smart little filly, sometimes, isn't she?" The Sun gestured, and an image appeared; it was Twilight and Luna, sitting outside the stone doors, finally having

given up the stiff upper lip, sobbing in each other's hooves. Celestia's guts twisted into a sudden and intense nausea, and tears welled in her eyes.

"Hurts, eh?" the Sun said, but not terribly unkindly. Nevertheless, Celestia wasn't in the mood.

"Enough," she managed.

The Sun smirked. "Ah-ah-ah. This is punishment, remember? We're just chatting, now, but... there's going to be punishment, one way or the other."

Celestia looked up at her, anger flaring to life from her sorrow. "What do you mean, one way or the –"

"So you tried to be the Eternal Sun. How'd that go for you?"

Celestia glared back at her sullenly. She tried not to look at Luna weeping, unrestrained, into Twilight's mane as the unicorn tried desperately to help her calm down again despite Twilight being visibly distressed herself.

"Not so good," the Sun agreed, nodding. "And that's the point, really, Celestia. You're not the Sun. I am. You're the part of me that is a pony... and you rejected everything about that. You rejected... being a part of Equestria. You set yourself apart, giving in to your fear of making a mistake. You made yourself untouchable, afraid of the pain of loss, like you had when Luna was taken from you. You tried to be something you're not, and can never be. You called it a mask, I call it... misunderstanding the point of your existence."

Celestia held her head up, haughtily. "And that is?"

"Don't be dense," the Sun said, sneering. "You are *the part of the Sun that is a pony*. So be a pony!"

"And what does *that* mean?"

The Sun rolled her eyes and huffed. "Live, Celestia. Love. All those things you *wanted* to do, but couldn't do any more because of this stupid Eternal Sun business. I, the Sun, cannot go to the waking world. All I can do is watch, from here..." Her voice got quiet, and sad, suddenly. "And I love the things I see in the world, Celestia. I'm interested in them." She looked up at Celestia, seriously. "You can go out into the world, and love, and live, and learn... and then, while we rest..." She looked away, pained.

Celestia once again stared at the Sun, unsure what to say to this.

"And it would hurt, Celestia. Your life would be an agony of loss, outlasting much, enduring upheavals and change. We won't exist forever, but we will go on for some time yet," the Sun said, raising an eyebrow. "But... look... I don't know everything about this, alright? But that much I know for sure. Just like I *know* that the rising and setting is important for both of us. We can rest, Celestia – but more importantly, for you... I think it's a way to keep you humble. To keep you in touch with the ponies you live among – they all know that eventually the inevitable change of death will come. You will return from your rest, yes, but by *setting* you would still feel that same inevitable press of time, sharing that knowledge, in your heart that things will come to an end, someday..."

"I... never thought about it as anything but an inconvenience," Celestia said, guiltily.

"I think that it's meant to be, yes."

Celestia looked up, a hopeful little smile on her face "Although I did –"

"Oh, no. Don't even think about finishing that. Not now. Once, I happily sat with you and listened to your adventures, and in me, everything that Celestia loved endures, and every loss that pained her remains unforgotten." The Sun looked at Celestia seriously, face set in a firm expression of pained reminiscence. "That was before. This is now. Things are going to be very different from this point on..."

Celestia sighed deeply, closing her eyes. "Whatever punishment you've decided upon, I willingly –"

"We'll talk about that in a minute," the Sun said. "First..." She grinned, broadly, with the slight but innocent malice of a younger sibling teasing her elder, having caught her with a hoof in the candy jar. It was actually somewhat endearing, if perversely so. "I want you to say that you've been a naughty, naughty princess."

Celestia frowned. "I've made many mistakes. I've done great evils –"

"Oh, spare me," the Sun groaned. "Say it: 'I've been a naughty princess'."

"I've..." Celestia began, uncomfortably. "I've been a naughty princess."

"I've been arrogant and stubborn and cowardly," the Sun continued, in a sing-song "repeat after me" voice.

"I *have* been arrogant, and stubborn... and above all, I have shown immense cowardice," Celestia repeated, slightly more in tune with her own way of speaking.

"And I didn't like having my dirty deeds dragged out in front of Twilight Sparkle, nor did I like explaining them to Luna."

"I did not."

"Did not *what*?" the Sun snapped.

Celestia was startled by this sudden display of hostility. "I didn't enjoy having to explain myself to Twilight, nor to Luna," she said, quickly.

The Sun smiled as if this little disobedience had not occurred. "And I have been suffering, every day, for a thousand years as part of the fallout of my stupidity...?"

Celestia heard the little snare in this. "I cannot claim that. I have been pained, and lonely, yes, but... nothing compared to what you endured."

"My, my, she *is* clever," the Sun said. She seemed genuinely pleased, although her smile remained mildly malevolent. She leaned in, getting quite close to Celestia. "I will spare you any forced confessions about Twilight Sparkle, then, because you're quick on the uptake. I saw you two last night... you're terribly cute together."

Celestia narrowed her eyes and said nothing. The Sun chuckled.

"And as well as being a naughty princess, I was a silly little filly who thought she could be the Sun," she said, back in the sing-song.

"I misunderstood my place in things. I understand them better now now. I understand a greater purpose for myself than merely maintaining the Equestrian state..."

The Sun rolled her eyes at this verbosity. "How you managed to keep anyone interested in it for more than five minutes, I'll never know."

"I'm usually a little more engaging," Celestia said. Something in her made her add: "It's been a stressful time for me lately."

"Ha!" The Sun's bark of laughter, bitter but legitimately amused, rang out in the clearing, echoing for a long time, in which her face grew calm, and serious. "Are you sorry?"

"What?"

"Sorry, Celestia. Are you sorry?" the Sun asked. She appeared to have something on her mind; it was making her expression seem wary as she held Celestia in a hungry stare. "And don't just say *yes*," the Sun added, harshly. "Be honest."

Celestia held her peace for a time, trying to think up something suitable to say. Her mind, though, kept falling back on Luna and Twilight, clutching one another in the darkness.

"It's just two words, Celestia," the Sun said. She grinned maliciously. "Are they that hard to say?"

"I'm just... trying to encompass the whole of the situation properly," Celestia replied, nervously. "You have seen that I could not be more sorry. I am sorry for what I did to you – it was more than just wrong, it was evil. I imprisoned you for a thousand years and hurt us both. And..."

The Sun waved a hoof, irritably. "Enough. Enough of that. Enough fancy language and explanations and so on. This is a *true* place, Celestia... look me in the eyes, and *tell* me that you are *sorry* for what you did."

They locked gazes, almost instantly, drawn to each other by some strange magnetism.

"I'm sorry," Celestia said. "For everything."

The Sun smiled. "See? Was that so hard?" She gave Celestia a conspiratorial look. "And don't you feel better having said it?"

Celestia blinked. She really did. "Erm... yes, actually."

"Ah, and I feel good knowing you're really, really sorry, I really do," the Sun said. "I mean, I watched you and Twilight, I've seen what you're losing..."

Celestia's heart stopped. There had been... *something* in that statement. It was something like the tiniest whisper of dangerous glee. "I have already lost everything," she said, weakly. It was the first thing she could think of, and helped nothing.

"Oh, my, Celestia..." the Sun said, glutinously. "You seem nervous."

"What... what are you –"

"Celestia, I really am happy you are sorry for everything! After all... you should be," the Sun said, a little anger slipping back into her voice. "But you still have to be punished, Celestia. It's only fair. And watching you and your student reconnect... all that soul-searching..." The Sun began circling Celestia, who stood stock-still, anxiety drawing her attention unswervingly to the Sun's voice. "It helped me understand what needs to happen to really settle things between us."

Celestia swallowed, nervously. "Oh?"

"Oh yes," the Sun said, giving Celestia a bright smile as she passed in front of her. "I'm shocked it didn't occur to me earlier. I was just going to leave you here, alone, for the next several centuries, while I got some sleep *somewhere else*... even *your* stoicism would probably strain after five decades or so of nothing to think about but your many, many mistakes. Guilt is your weakness, I think."

"Probably," Celestia agreed.

"But then I thought about this whole situation, and some of the things Twilight Sparkle said... and it hit me!" The Sun paused, standing next to Celestia, her face an expression of delighted wonder. "I mean, I was excited. This is mythical, Celestia, in its scope and meaning. I'm thrilled to be a part of it; it's the sort of thing ponies write stories about."

"Just come out with it, please..."

The Sun gave Celestia a serious look. "Somepony got ideas in her head. Somepony thought she could be the Sun." She shook her head, *tsking*. "Somepony forgot her place in the grand scheme of things. There's an old word for that: *hubris*."

Celestia coughed. "I've heard it." She shied from the Sun's leer.

"Then you know what needs to happen. You need to be reminded of how things are supposed to be," the Sun said, excitedly. She turned and leaned to whispered in Celestia's ear, gently. "In a word... you need to be *humbled*. And thanks to Twilight Sparkle, I know *just* the way to teach you humility..."

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"My sister," Princess Luna began, her voice ringing out in the Great Hall over the hubbub of the mass of assembled nobleponies, but only just. She cleared her throat. "**We said...**"

There was a busy little moment. Among many, many other things, Commander Stoneface replaced his helmet after retrieving it from the crumpled body of Lord Flashhooves, who had been kind enough to catch it with his face. The Commander retook his position in front of the Princess, smiling slightly.

"Thank you for your attention, everypony," Luna said, smiling brightly.

It was early evening, on the second day after the unnatural sunset. Technically, nopony knew what the Princess was going to announce; but Canterlot just cannot keep a secret, so Luna was already wearing the tall silver tiara, set with a sapphire, in place of the small black one she was previously inclined to. Add to this a cape of midnight-blue she'd asked Rarity to throw together ("Oh, *Princess!* Right away!") which hung off the shoulder in a respectably flattering way, and a healthy dose of her usual mysterious hauteur, and...

The Princess of Equestria looked over her subjects, giving a gentle little smile.

Celestia had coached her well, in the brief time they'd had together; reinforced that in the beginning, it would be vital to be nonthreatening but still *new*, still different. Make everypony see that change was coming, but assure them it would be pleasant. Celestia might have made gentle overtures, speaking with quiet confidence and enthusiasm about new things, but Luna was not her sister. Her eyes gave tantalizing hints of her dynamism and passion, and her smile was all private secrets, just for you – or so it seemed to everypony in the room.

Things were going to be *interesting!*

"It is my sad responsibility to inform everypony that my sister, our beloved Princess Celestia, has come to a time in her life when she must rest. In my absence, she endured a thousand years, watching over Equestria with love; now that I have returned, she is free to recover from her long years of leadership.

"It was unfortunate that this came to pass in sudden fashion, but as luck would have it, the Arch-Mage Twilight Sparkle and I were ahoof to aid her in the trying time, and now the sun has set over Equestria. I, for one, do not begrudge its sleep – when I returned, I was stunned by the beauty and nobility of modern Equestria, which grew under the light of the sun. Now, she must rest – a thousand years is a long time for anypony. Take heart, good ponies: the sun will rise again!"

She all but shouted this last line, and it was met with a chorus of echoes from the assembled nobleponies, who instinctively know when their monarch is trying to make a

point. They raised their hooves and cried these words proudly, though they'd never heard them before, and as they did, they felt a sense of peace and hope well in them to battle the growing unease.

Luna smiled down at the court in an inscrutable way that was familiar to anypony who knew her well.

"But until it does," Luna said, in a *much* more conspiratorial tone of voice than Celestia would have ever dreamed of using, "the Moon shines over Equestria. Under the silver light of the moon, let us make wonders together, so that the Sun will marvel at what we have built when the first light of dawn touches the horizon..."

Cheers rose, even for this simple, general statement of goodwill, because you do that for the princess. *Sotto voce* discussions were breaking out in the crowd, as well –

"Isn't she glamorous? Who knew?"

"She always seemed so strange... but she's so *regal*!"

"Charismatic, certainly..."

"I had my doubts about her, but *now*..."

"And that *cape* – simple, but elegant. And *perfect* colors!"

Luna's preternaturally good hearing picked up on the little shift in the wind. Internally, she leapt for joy – she was doing it, she *could* do this – but the only physical acknowledgement she gave was the way her enigmatic little smile seemed slightly warmer for a moment.

"Where is she!?" demanded a reedy voice from the crowd. A little eddy formed around a thin, greying unicorn mare, who looked up at the princess with the insistent firmness of somepony who has gotten her own way from the very second they were born. Her neighbors were inching away from her with as much haste as was polite.

Luna smiled down at her, one eyebrow raised very slightly. "She is somewhere safe, where she can get the rest she needs in peace, protected by the very best security Equestria could provide. Have no fear of that."

The mare stomped a hoof. "And how long will she be gone?"

Luna held the mare's gaze awhile longer, finding herself impressed with the complete lack of self-awareness she was demonstrating. A younger, pale red pony was trying to whisper to her, desperately, but the old mare just waved a hoof at him dismissively.

"Do you know?" This new voice was from another mare, a lime-green pegasus in a spectacular gown. Luna recognized this pony as a constant thorn in Celestia's side at court, the worst kind of gossip with a notorious way of stumbling across embarrassing information about other ponies.

She let her gaze fall to the back of the Hall, where they met a very familiar pair of purple eyes. The princess let the silence last a moment, enjoying watching some of the court surreptitiously try to follow her gaze.

Luna gave a sly little smile that would, in time, be extremely familiar to her subjects. Some of them would grow to fear it, some to love it, but everypony would quickly learn that it meant their mysterious new princess knew more than she was telling, and maybe if you were very lucky, she'd pull you aside and put some words in your ear, and you'd find yourself in a new world of intrigue and adventure...

"Well? How long will Princess Celestia be gone, hmm? A month? A year?" the grey unicorn demanded.

"As long as she needs," Luna said, putting all of her considerable store of enigma into every word.

And then she winked, smiling mysteriously.

In the very rear of the Hall, Twilight Sparkle laughed as the Court enjoyed its first real dose of their new Princess. She could already tell that the next few years would be... interesting, as everypony adjusted to Luna, but they seemed curious and excited about her and this dramatic, mysterious new personality that had hitherto been so aloof and strange.

The Arch-Mage sighed, seeing the long work ahead, but Twilight Sparkle smiled, heart filled with joy for her sister, who was taking the first few steps down a long road of fulfilling herself as a princess... and as a pony. But, everypony else was waiting. The train to Ponyville was about to leave, and she and Luna would speak this evening in dreams – their first real meeting as state officials.

Just one more thing, and then... home, sweet library.

She turned and walked out onto one of the broad balconies for incoming and outgoing pegasi; and indeed, a pegasus stood on the checkerboard tiles, looking out over the palace grounds to the little constellation of lights that was Canterlot Town as day fell into night.

"Ready to go?" Twilight asked, smiling.

The mare turned her head, returning the smile gratefully.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Celestia replied.

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"You and I... are going to spend some time apart," the Sun said. "I think we both need this."

Celestia was taken aback. "Wait – what do you mean, *apart*?"

The Sun nodded gravely. "It's a terrible punishment, I know," she said. Her tone of voice was a little less mocking, now, but was still clearly enjoying Celestia's shock. "But classically, the punishment for hubris was to be stripped of your powers and cast down from the heavens to live a life of toil as a mortal pony." She shivered theatrically. "It's so mythical, I'm getting the chills."

"A... mortal pony..." Celestia murmured.

The Sun cleared her throat and looked up at Celestia, a more honest expression of openness on her face than Celestia had seen in a thousand years. It was unlike the guileless innocence that the Sun had displayed in those long-distant days, though; this was hesitant and and wary, clearly willing to clamp down on the first sign of a violation of the tentative trust.

Celestia's eyes opened wide. The Sun was... reaching out!

"You owe your student... *everything*, Celestia," the Sun said, a little anxiety in her voice.

Celestia shook her head, trying to get a hold on herself. "What? Oh... yes, but..."

The Sun frowned. "I'm not like her. I have *hated* you for centuries. Hated, Celestia, the way that only someone who has loved deeply and been betrayed so thoroughly can. I spent decades coming up with more and more vicious punishments for you... especially after the fight. And this last time, Celestia..." The Sun shook her head. "If Twilight

Sparkle had not come, and I hadn't seen an opportunity to torture you a little bit, no matter *what* she decided to do..."

Celestia said nothing, taken completely off-balance.

"She came for you. She loves you, despite what you did to her..." The Sun shook her head. "And she had the strength to move past what you'd done to her because she could accept you'd done it to her in pain. She really is somepony special."

"I've always thought so," Celestia replied, weakly.

"It's the Magic of Friendship that gives her this strength?"

"Yes." Celestia took a deep breath, and steadied her voice. "The true magic, that comes from the understanding that real friendship is not just about sharing happiness – which is easy – but about sharing other ponies' troubles and pains, taking them as your own, and by doing so, helping your friends overcome their struggles so that there is more joy overall..." Celestia's heart swelled with pride. "Twilight Sparkle is the true master of the Magic of Friendship."

The Sun smiled, in an awkward, self-conscious way. "It is a powerful magic, indeed... strong enough to move the Sun, it turns out." She cleared her throat and set her face in a cocky grin. "That's a good line, if I say so myself."

Celestia laughed – actually laughed!–at this. It was a wild laugh, born deep inside her, which leapt up her throat and burst out of her, unrestrained and unrefined, a powerful surge of relief and amusement overwhelming her now totally expended self-restraint. "It is! It really is," she said, as she settled down.

"Celestia... I'm not as strong as Twilight Sparkle," the Sun said, seriously, but she was still smiling, just a little. Celestia met her gaze, and there was still pain and wariness in it, but there was also a fierce determination. "I can't forgive you. I just... can't, the way she did."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I couldn't..." Celestia said, her mirth fading quickly.

"I thought about... what she *really* said. And you should, too," the Sun added, quickly. "She didn't *just* forgive you. The thing she said was that... you two needed to just *stop*. Stop the hurt. Stop letting all the mistakes get in the way. And that's..." she trailed off.

Celestia let her think, for a while; speak, in her own time.

"It made me think about what the point of punishment should be," the Sun said, eventually. "Especially between you and I. For so long, I wanted to hurt and scare you, just as you've hurt and frightened me..." She smiled lamely. "But Twilight's helped me understand that you've been in constant pain –"

"Nothing, *nothing* compared to you –" Celestia said, quickly.

"Too right," the Sun said. "But that's... that's not really important, right now. The point is that we *both* hurt, not which of us hurt more. It's hard for me to let go of my anger, Celestia, but... we're going to be together for a long time. A thousand years is like a day in a month to us. And frankly..." The Sun sighed, wistfully, and looked away into the sun as it sank into the horizon. "It occurred to me that if we spent the rest of that time at each other's throats... that would just be constant misery for *both* of us." She turned to Celestia, looking fierce, daring her to take what she was about to say the wrong way. "And... as much as I hated you... I've missed you, so much. I've missed being your friend..."

"I..." Celestia began, her eyes welling with tears.

The Sun shook her head, irritably. "It just made me hate you more, Celestia. I hated how much I still cared about you... but now I understand why I did. I've always known, deep down, that you acted out of pain and fear. That doesn't make what happened forgivable, but... it gives us a chance, now. I can't just forgive you. I'm still so angry. So I want to take some time apart. To *rest*, and to try to let go."

Celestia blinked. "And I will spend time as a mortal pony –"

"No, you'll spend time *learning your place*," the Sun said, firmly. "This is punishment, Celestia – you tried to be the Sun. You're not. So you'll live out a mortal life, growing old, powerless to do anything but watch the things you love wither and die around you..." She stepped forward, giving Celestia a very serious gaze. "But it is my hope that this time, you'll find the strength to accept this pain, Celestia. The pain of being. The pain of change. Not try to hide from it by removing yourself, as you tried to. I want you to learn to be a *part* of everything, knowing that you will have to watch it grow old and transition... so that you can remember it as it was and share that memory with the future. The things you love, no matter how temporary, can know something of immortality..."

Celestia gave the Sun a wry grin, but she was still weeping relieved, grateful tears. "So... will I, what, be born to some poor ponies, somewhere, to learn this lesson? That would be

typically mythical. A humble, unassuming life of simplicity, until you return and I ascend once again, with this new wisdom..."

The Sun chuckled. "The thought did occur to me," she said, shrugging. "But... I feel like I have obligations to somepony else."

"Twilight..." Celestia whispered, unhidden hope strangling her voice.

"She gave me strength, too, Celestia. And she never treated me as a villain, even though I was going to rob her of you... her wisdom and courage deserve to be rewarded, even if I'm just burdening her with a very hurt pony." The Sun was tearing up, now, too. "And having watched you all this time, and then when you were talking to Twilight just now... I think you wore that mask for so long that you forgot who Celestia is. The Celestia who used to tell me stories about her adventures, and about all the ponies she knew..."

Celestia took a step forward, and to their mutual surprise and quiet joy, the Sun didn't shy from her. Gently, very tentatively, they touched their heads to one another's necks, a very chaste and reserved expression of affection that, for all that, was the most intense moment of emotion that had ever passed between them.

The Sun sniffed. "Let Twilight help you remember that pony, Celestia. Let her teach you the strength to live in the world, moving *with* it rather than trying to be an unchanging center. I know... it must be very frightening..."

"But it's my purpose," Celestia whispered. "I understand that better, now."

The Sun stepped back, nodding. "Yes, it is. And when I return... we'll see where we are. I'll never forget what you've done. But... I am strong enough now to say that we need to just let the cycle of pain stop. Any punishment I dreamed up would just be petty revenge, which would only breed more hatred and resentment. But this... you need to learn to accept your place in things, so that what happened never happens again. That will be hard enough for you, I think. And now, after everything, I think you understand how much your errors have hurt you and everypony else..."

"Yes," Celestia murmured. "But still... you're showing me much more –"

"Not me. If it had just been me, I promise, you would have had to endure centuries of every torture I could have dreamed up." The Sun looked at Celestia seriously. "Twilight Sparkle saved you. She saved us from an eternity of pain, constantly at each other's throats. So I'd start kissing her hooves the second you show up, hmm? For both of us," she added.

"Oh, without question," Celestia said. A moment passed between them, where they didn't speak, or think, but instead held a little, tentative pause, feeling the rift between them beginning to heal. That wound would scar, yes – but it wouldn't lie open and fester, turning gangrenous and deadly, now.

"Things won't be the same between us, as they were," the Sun said, quietly.

Celestia shook her head. "Of course not."

"Listen," the Sun said, seriously. "I'm..."

"Things will change. They'll be different," Celestia said, Twilight's words feeling very strange and alien in her mouth. She said them, anyways, hoping that they would become more familiar with time, and use, and trust. "But we have to try to change them for the best..."

"I'm not sure what *the best* is, yet." The Sun sighed. "But with you running around in the world, I can rest more deeply than I can otherwise. Recover faster, and more thoroughly. You'll have a long lifetime, Celestia, to try to learn what you must, and when I return, we will... speak. And see how things want to be, between us."

Celestia opened her mouth to speak... and paused.

She almost said: "That's more than fair." But of course it was – this, all of this, was just as Twilight had said it was. Huge, monstrous, so big and complex that it transcended ideas of what was fair and had to be dealt with in terms of what *needs to happen*, and be moved on from.

She almost said: "When I came here, I expected..." As if anything she said to complete that thought would please the Sun, who for all that she was reaching out, was also clearly hanging onto this decision with her teeth. Trying to flatter somepony who was so obviously conflicted about what they were doing was risky, and more importantly, an insult to their decision to act against their immediate instinct.

She almost said: "I'm sure things will work out." Because it was something to say, hollow and meaningless, just there to fill the silence with hopeful sounds.

There was only one thing to say, really.

"Thank you," she breathed. "So much..."

The Sun held her gaze for a long, long moment, her face going through a long series of rather intense emotions, before she said: "If you want to thank me... then work for the change we want. Harmony between us, again, if not friendship."

Celestia nodded.

"I don't know if we can be friends, ever again... but I know there can be peace. Give me time to rest, and you take this chance to learn your place in things... and we'll see what comes of it."

"If my desire matters," Celestia said, carefully, "It is my hope that one day... we can have something like friendship again. But I know that day will be a very long time in coming."

The Sun walked up to Celestia, their faces separated by inches. She spoke quietly, and without rancor – for a moment, she was that happy, innocent creature she had once been. "Me too," she said, and then stepped back, face firming. "But as you say, that is a long, long way off."

"That is another thing I have to suffer for my mistakes, then," Celestia said, acting on a sudden impulse. She was momentarily frightened, worried that the Sun would take this as an empty nothing; it had leapt out of her, a truth that did not wish to remain concealed. She, too, missed the Sun dearly, and always had.

"Is that so?" the Sun said, quietly. "Well, then... I'll... keep it in mind," she finished, a little lamely. Celestia got the impression that even the Sun wouldn't have been able to say how she felt about this statement, at the moment. The Sun stepped back a little. "I think we understand each other better, now, than we ever have. And I... am willing to try to work this out." She reached out with a hoof. "Are you?"

Celestia stepped forward, lifting a hoof in return, presenting it in a gesture of acceptance. As they touched, bright light swirled around them, and magical power – the deep, primal power of the Sun – surged into them both. "Yes. Without question."

"Then live, Celestia, and learn," the Sun said, seriously, as the shoreline vanished from sight, everything around them consumed in a blazing whiteness. "Let Twilight Sparkle teach you to love the world again, as you wanted her to."

"I will," Celestia said, blinking grateful tears out of her eyes.

The Sun smiled. "And give her this, from me," she said, a little sheepishly. She stretched forward and gave Celestia a quick peck on the cheek. "No matter what happens... the Sun will always shine happily on her, for what she has done."

The little kiss was warm, even after the Sun pulled away; the warmth bloomed and spread across Celestia's body swiftly. She looked down at the outstretched hoof, seeing herself surrounded in glowing, golden power.

"And just because I like you so much, I'm letting you keep the wings," the Sun said, her voice sounding weirdly distorted and distant. "I know how much you love flying..."

Then all was whiteness, and furious power, and a strange sense of *absence* –

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Celestia's voice was *smaller*, now, somehow. Twilight still found it a little strange; after all, it was still the same pleasant voice that she'd been hearing since she was a filly. Something was absent, in it, though – that sense, she always got from Celestia until recent events, of a deep, inner serenity, a peace, a surety and confidence that transcended the self and was tied to her immortal grace.

Now it was as fraught with background nervousness as any voice she'd ever heard – her own included. Perhaps it was bad, but that more than anything else was helping Twilight get used to this whole idea – and made every moment with the pegasus seem... real.

It was still *her* – there was something in her eyes that made anyone who was familiar with her *sure* it was Celestia. That said, to test how recognizable she was, they had walked the pegasus through the halls of Canterlot and nopony seemed to know or acknowledge her; they'd only ever seen the Princess, never Celestia. The guards had even been a bit suspicious of her as they retrieved Philomeena from the princess' study, which Celestia had found extremely funny for some reason.

She was tall, and of medium build, for a pegasus; not quite as dainty and petite as Fluttershy, nor as athletic as Rainbow Dash. Her coat was a rather dull white, where it had always seemed silvery and slightly iridescent before, and like Dash, her mane was bright and multicolored. It wasn't the teal and blue and purple it had been; instead, it was gold, and red, and violet, like the setting sun that was emblazoned on her flanks, half-hidden behind an arc of horizon.

They hadn't decided on a name yet, but something would come up, in time.

Twilight watched her as she turned and approached the unicorn. There was something of her former grace in the way she moved, but it no longer seemed ethereal and otherworldly; it was just that she had really, really nice legs –

Twilight cleared her throat. "I have to say... this upsets everything terribly," she said, a little teasing in her voice. "We got everypony completely wound up about you leaving – dying, in a sense – and now you're moving into the guest bedroom. Consternation abounds."

Celestia sighed theatrically. "It pains me to be such an inconvenience."

"Oh, well... I'm sure Spike won't mind having somepony around to help him with the chores..."

"Chores!" Celestia declared, happily. Twilight laughed, shaking her head, making the pegasus grin in faux-embarrassment. "Is that so strange, Twilight? I haven't done my own housework in centuries..."

"You can have mine, too, if you like," Twilight replied. "Come on, everypony's waiting for us..."

They walked back through the Great Hall, where Luna was still fielding questions from the assembled court. They caught her eye, and she gave them a knowing wink in reply to their broad, loving smiles, causing a flurry of rumors to blossom as everypony anywhere near the back of the Hall tried to claim that the wink had been for them.

Luna had realized something was wrong almost immediately, down in the heart of the mountain under the Ivory Tower. She and Twilight had shared a terrified moment, their minds immediately constructing a million possibilities, each more dreadful and heartbreaking than the last... and then there had been a gentle knocking on the stone doors, which were still huge and solid despite receiving the tender and careful attentions of Rainbow Dash and Applejack's desperate anger in the recent past.

Twilight had rushed forwards, leaping from Luna's embrace, and thrown the doors open with a powerful surge of magic, and there *she* had been, smiling broadly, eyes wet with tears of fierce joy.

Not the princess... just Celestia.

There had been a little panicked moment as Luna and Twilight immediately feared that she had been stripped of her power forever – nothing as bad as what might have been, of

course, but it would still have been something important to know right away. So Celestia had explained, there in the deep, protected heart of the earth, about the Sun's decision, and what Celestia needed to learn from Twilight.

She had said: "It is time for me to be *your* student, it seems..." and had met Luna's gaze with a smile. The memories, fond memories, of the two of them discussing Twilight's friendship reports as Luna readjusted to Equestria, seemed deeply amusing now.

Twilight had put a hoof on her shoulder and said, "No. Now I think it's time for you to be my *friend*." It was a little silly, but they had smiled anyways.

They had smuggled her out of the tower by night, after most of the ponies who had been spying on that last little walk through the grounds had lost interest in watching the guards stand around, but there were still a few privileged ponies who had some clue of what the story was about this new pegasus. A couple of guards received some... accelerated promotions in return for their discretion and the promise of future consideration if they managed not to think too hard about what they'd been ordered to do that night.

And of course, the Elements of Harmony and Spike were immediately in the know, their relief and joy overwhelming, their excitement at the prospect of having Celestia join them in Ponyville indescribable. If Celestia had feared that her reluctance to grow close to them before would be reflected onto her now, she was happily incorrect. There had been some discussion about what was going on, and there would be more in the future, but for now...

There was relief, and joy, and hope. It wouldn't last forever, but after all the stress and fear, it was the best medicine for everypony's tired, wounded hearts.

And for her part, Luna had been drunk on that relief. She and Celestia had conferred privately for a short time, but their brief glances to Twilight when they returned from their seclusion in Luna's chambers suggested that most of it had involved un-princesslike displays of affection and jubilation, as the dreadful threat of another thousand years of separation was so soundly dispelled.

They would be apart, yes... but only by so much. Enough that there was room for Luna to grow, and for Celestia to relax, and for their relationship to transition to its next stage smoothly; much better than yet another princess being hurled out of a world she knew and, after a long absence, arriving in a place that was as foreign to her as the bottom of the sea is to a pegasus.

So much had happened. So much *would* happen, now, Twilight supposed, as she and Celestia left the Hall, Luna's gaze turning reluctantly away from them to Fancy Pants, who began a long question about something that Twilight immediately, instinctively, realized she had absolutely no interest in whatsoever.

"I can't believe how much has changed. Everything seems new to me..." Celestia murmured, next to her, as they walked down the receiving hall towards the antechamber. She chuckled, weakly. "That sounds so silly."

"No, not at all," Twilight said, absently, giving her a gentle smile.

Celestia sighed. "It all started with those letters... that seems so long ago, now. But it was, what, four or five days? A week? And now..." She paused, and made a show of looking down at herself in surprise. "Now Luna's Princess, and I'm off to Ponyville with you..."

"Dreams," Twilight said, reflectively, remembering her rueful thought as she penned that last letter, which had started this whole affair. "Dreams are coming true all over the place."

"We did have tea in my study," Celestia said, nodding sagely. "So you'll have to think of something else, now, I think..."

Twilight grinned widely, shaking her head. Celestia was turning out to be a little more sarcastic and playful than she might have guessed. The former princess had even joined Rarity and Applejack in teasing Rainbow Dash, treating the story of recent events with Spitfire as a huge scandal and reacting to the story of the Elements' failed attempt to escape imprisonment with exaggerated expressions of shock.

She had been having fun, with her friends; not thinking of them as anything but other ponies to share some time with, not trying to lead or guide or watch from a little distance. Twilight had teared up a little, when she realized it; Celestia, catching her eye, had suddenly become extremely reflective, a joyful smile spreading on her face briefly before Rarity whispered something to her that she found extremely funny.

"That's not what that dream meant, as you well know," Twilight said, playing the straight pony – she had long ago accepted that she was cursed to be so, forever.

"Yes, yes..." Celestia said, smiling lazily, as if that vision hadn't been one of the most tremendously important things in both their lives. Twilight scoffed at this, making Celestia's smile get a little broader for a moment.

They continued in happy silence for some time, moving with purpose but without haste. Before too long, they were at the stairs down to the grounds, which lead out of the Castle and into town, where the train to Ponyville and their friends awaited them.

Twilight paused at the top of the stairs, her face a little worried.

Celestia, a couple stairs down already, turned and looked up at her. "What is it?"

"It's just... this is a big change..." Twilight said, cautiously. "I mean, there's still a lot unresolved between us. Issues. And I'm sure more of them will crop up. I mean, you may be a pegasus now, but you're still, you know... who you are. And that means being who you *were*, too. It's going to be... weird."

Celestia grinned at this latest display of Twilight conscientiously trying to sense every possible negative outcome, no matter how remote the chance or distant the timeframe. "Well... yes, I suppose so. But..."

She paused, looking around herself. In a different life, Canterlot was as familiar as the face she had seen in every mirror for a thousand years; now, much like the face that she was wearing, it was a little strange – unfamiliar, in a weird way she couldn't place. Certainly she wasn't as magically connected to it as she had been, but... personally, too, the place seemed *apart* from her.

This wasn't who she *had* to be anymore, she realized, thinking of the Sun describing the mask and her responsibilities in the world as something she had built *around* herself, avoiding her real purpose in the world; much like Canterlot had been a fortress of her solitude both in her mind and waking life.

Now, she was being given a chance to free herself from all that.

Celestia turned back to Twilight, grinning. "A very clever pony told me, recently, that we have to chase the change we want in the world, because change comes whether we want to or not. And we have a lifetime, now, to pursue whatever change we can dream of..." Celestia forced her face to become solemn, as if she doubted the answer to the rest of her statement even for a second. "If that's still something you're still interested in doing."

Twilight didn't even bother responding; she just let her fretful look fall into a relieved sort of sigh and began descending the stairs. Celestia fell into step beside her, humming happily to herself, and they shared a brief, affectionate glance.

And so, they walked into whatever awaited them in the future... together.

Something of Immortality + The Pegasus at the Gate + Tell Me
Everything + The Last Letter + Dawn at Sunset + The Faithful Student

• • •

Years passed.

And they were *good* years, rich and full, under the benevolent and loving light of the moon – to speak poetically, as ponies found themselves more and more inclined to in the years of what came to be called the Sleep. Celestia slept, ponies said, and her dreams came to life in Equestria; such was the mood of that time.

From Canterlot, Princess Luna ruled with a passion and dynamism that contrasted deeply with Celestia's loving, distant light. She poured herself into improving the lives of her little ponies, every moment of every day, and carried herself with an energetic sort of mystery that entranced everypony around her. She quickly became at least as beloved as Celestia throughout all of Equestria; although as ever, the ponies of Ponyville loved her deeply and were, in turn, especially beloved by Luna, who visited there regularly.

And from Ponyville came the Elements of Harmony, who spent their long lives traveling, exploring, inspiring... *triumphing*. The Magic of Friendship, true friendship, ran strong in them, and with that strength, even their smallest misadventures seemed to ripple outwards, building into great currents of change, and hope, and inspiration... they were a legacy, it was said, of Princess Celestia's love, left behind while she rested to watch over Equestria in her absence.

In time, the six of them, and the dragon Spike, became at least as renowned and beloved as the Sisters themselves, their deeds and accomplishments leaving innumerable, permanent marks on Equestria, all for the better. Peace and harmony followed in their wake, enriching the lives of everypony they encountered, it seemed. And ever at the center of the greatest adventures was the Arch-Mage Twilight Sparkle, best-beloved of the Sun and the Moon, sister to the princess, friend to everypony and everyone she met.

So if the sun rested for a time, after a thousand years shining over Equestria... nopony resented it. In the dark times – and there always were, no matter how wondrous the age – they did not feel abandoned. They had a fierce love for Princess Luna, who was so beautiful in her passion and alluring in her mystique, which was rewarded with a deep love from her in return – and in its heart, Equestria held firm the conviction that one day... the sun would rise anew.

In the loving, rich light of the moon... things *changed*.

And it was good.

But all things, in time, come to an end, and transition.

Winter thaws into spring, which blossoms into summer, which ages into autumn, which falls into winter yet again; that is the measure of a year.

Villages become towns become cities – or perhaps they don't; that is the measure of a community...

Seeds become saplings become trees, become *libraries*; that is the measure of a landmark.

Foals become adults, become elderly... and pass. They must, to make room in the world for the next generation.

But that is the very least way to measure of a life – the most technical, the most spare, the most *unfeeling*, because ponies, and other thinking beings, are not like landmarks or seasons or cities; they think, and move, and act... and in their legacy, in the way they moved the world and the ponies around them, they can know something of immortality.

• • •

Princess Luna lay atop the tall tower attached to her private chambers, as she had for the past three days; she stared off into the sunset, face dispassionate, eyes half-closed and pensive.

It was full moon, tonight; she was in the fullness of her majesty in the waking world, waxed fully into a tall, proud creature, her mane a spectacular field of stars. Atop her head sat the silver crown of Equestria, the inset sapphire burning like a frozen, azure flame in the dying sunlight.

An end was coming, in the wake of this most troubled month of her solitary reign – for her, anyways – and she welcomed it. Still, *when* the end was coming was unknown to her. But it was coming... in its own time.

Until then, she waited.

The sun sank lower on the horizon, an amber disc now, its light spilling into the valley where Canterlot Town lay, flowing out into the plains beyond, as if the landscape was gilt in polished gold.

After awhile, the princess heard the wingbeats, heavy and burdened, of an approaching pegasus guard, who alighted behind her.

"Good evening," Luna said, calmly, not turning around. "What is it?"

It was a formality, a pleasantry; she hadn't given any explicit orders, but over the years Luna had become quite good at making her desires clear to everypony without actually having to do anything so crass as say them. Thus she knew that there was only one reason her guard would feel ready to disturb her, at the moment.

"My lady," the guard – a mare named Whitecloud – said, in her usual clipped, professional tone. "A pegasus mare matching the description you gave the duty officer is approaching the palace gates, asking to see you."

Luna turned her head, very slightly. "By all means, admit her, then. Thank you, Lieutenant."

"It was my pleasure, lady. I am, as always, at your service."

Luna noticed a *soupçon* of... *something* in her voice. Not quite sympathy, not quite hope..."Canterlot is a bad place for rumors and secrets, wouldn't you say, Lieutenant?"

"With respect, my lady, the castle has many mouths, and twice as many ears and eyes," Whitecloud replied. She paused for a moment, then said, in the same, even tone: "But half as many brains, I think..."

Luna let out a little laugh. "Between one mare and another... you are extremely optimistic. Please, have my guest admitted, will you?"

"At once, princess," Whitecloud said. The tiniest little grin of private amusement was evident on her voice such that the princess felt no need to turn and see it. In a busy moment of wingbeats, the guard vanished down to the castle gates.

So here it was, at last.

Luna lingered for a while longer, watching the sunset and thinking about what she would say. Before long she rose and leapt from the tower, her huge wings splaying and catching

the air. With practiced finesse she turned her dive into a wide spiral around the tower, long and slow, such that as she reached the base, she needed bank only slightly to land, lightly, on one of the Great Hall's receiving balconies, moving at a brisk trot.

As always, the Hall was busy even without court in session. Gaggles of conspirators, friends, and schemers huddled together in little groups, some splitting off from one to join another from time to time. As Luna entered, almost everypony turned their head to regard her, some ponies even stepping forward to approach her –

"Night Court is suspended," Luna announced, loudly, as she took her place on the black throne. "I will be receiving my guest privately. Leave us, I beg."

Clearing the hall took some time; there were a great many ponies standing about, and some of them internally edited "leave us" to mean "stand just far away enough that you can only eavesdrop inefficiently". Eventually, Luna rolled her eyes and had the guards reinforce her command with some very serious expressions and a lot of pushing.

When she had satisfied herself of her solitude, she nodded to the guards on the doors, who wordlessly took station on the opposite side, which signaled the princess' readiness for the private interview.

The main doors of the Great Hall opened slightly to admit two pegasi, walking side-by-side. One was Lieutenant Whitecloud, her face a vision of professional dispassion that would have brought a tear to the eye of the most psychotic drill sergeant. Next to her, walking with deliberate and magisterial pride, was a wizened old mare, her coat dull and fiery mane faded. Her gait, for all that it was slow, was graceful and even, and she held her head up proudly, not flinching from the sight of Princess Luna in the fullness of her majesty even for a second.

When Whitecloud and the mare arrived in the receiving area before the raised dais of the thrones, the lieutenant bowed to Luna with a muttered "My lady," and made polite haste to one of the balconies, taking off into the fading daylight.

Silence reigned, for a very, very long time, as the two mares regarded each other. If somepony had seen this moment, they would have been at a loss to say which looked more regal: the Princess of the Moon, proud and imperial upon the throne, or the ancient old mare, who looked into the face of immortal power without flinching, the weight of years pressing upon her vainly.

"I'm so sorry," Luna said, eventually, in a small voice.

The old pegasus sighed. "We knew it would happen, someday," Celestia said. Her voice was deeply, deeply tired.

Luna cocked her head. "Nevertheless."

"I..." Celestia closed her eyes and turned away. "Well, you're right, of course. I never let myself really accept it, foolish mare that I am."

They sat in silence for a while longer.

"It was –"

"Peaceful. We were together..."

Luna gave her a look of deep sympathy. "Oh, Celestia..."

"I'm fine," Celestia lied. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about it."

"I should think so. It's been three weeks now, and nopony's seen hide nor hair of you. You had the guard out of their minds with terror..." Luna trailed off, sharing a sad little smile with her sister.

"Old I may be – and let me tell you, being *old* is very different than having been around for a long time – but I am not completely helpless."

Luna smiled, a little. "I knew you'd turn up eventually."

The pegasus nodded, and took a few steps back.

"It's time, then?" Luna asked.

"It's been *time* for twenty-five years," Celestia said, looking up at Luna with a sudden, broad grin. "I had a chat with the the Sun back when she first returned from her rest... and she agreed that she could stand to sleep a while longer."

Luna bristled. "You subjected to me to the nobleponies, alone, for twenty-five years more than I had to?" she said, with ridiculously exaggerated indignation. This very minor selfishness was extremely easy to forgive, all things considered. It was no scratch on a millennium.

"I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me." Celestia's tired, old face was a portrait of contrition, but her eyes twinkled.

Luna frowned, playfully. "Well, I suppose."

Celestia lay down at the center of the receiving area, on a large, inlaid mosaic of the sisters circling a spherical object that was half purple-blue, half gold, and looked up at her sister.

"You might want to close your eyes for this part," she said, smirking just a bit.

Then she lay her head down, and died.

• • •

Celestia opened her eyes, and felt... *wrong*.

Which was ridiculous, of course, because she was back to normal, in a very real sense. She felt the extra magical senses of her horn once again, and tried to set herself aside and merely observe how they seemed both intensely familiar and completely alien at the same time, because experiencing this sensation was very disconcerting indeed. The weight of the horn on her forehead alone was bizarre, never mind actually *sensing* magic around her. Especially here, *somewhere*.

She flapped her wings a couple times; they were broad, soaring wings, once again. She'd benefited from some extremely intense re-education from Rainbow Dash and Spitfire, learning to deal with both wings and a body that were the wrong shape and weight distribution entirely, back... long ago.

She sighed, closing her eyes, and *felt* the pain of change.

All of it. All of *them*, gone now.

Her life.

That had been... *her* life. Hers. For her. *Hers*.

All of it.

And now... it was over.

She realized she'd been crying ever since she'd noticed her horn, and didn't care.

Celestia looked up and met the gaze of the Sun, who stood at the cliffside before a table set for two. A kettle sat on it, with a little blue flame burning underneath; it was just starting to steam.

"So," the Sun said, quietly. "How was it?"

Celestia took a deep breath... and remembered.

She remembered... friends. The love she'd shared, with so many ponies; all their joy. The jokes, the parties, the late nights with too much alcohol flowing, the cooperation, the quiet chats, the loud singing...

She remembered all the close friends she'd made; not just the Elements, but the friends she'd made outside that immediate circle, who were something special that she was never entirely a part of. Macintosh, with his quiet wisdom. Cheerilee, with her infinite patience and dry humor. The earth pony cellist, Octavia, over their mutual love of classical music, and her friend the unicorn DJ Vinyl Scratch, who had introduced Celestia to a thrilling new kind of music, which Spike had eventually demanded she stop playing so loudly in the library. Everypony in Ponyville, it seemed sometimes...

She remembered the adventures. The excitement of discovery, the frustration of challenge, the sudden blaze of courage as things seemed surmountable. She remembered Applejack's determination very clearly, in this context, and Rainbow Dash's rash, enthusiastic bravery.

She remembered life. Cooking. Cleaning. Shelving in the library with Spike; modeling for Rarity, both of them thrilling in the danger she'd be recognized; experiments in baking with Pinkie Pie; hauling with Big Mac, and chatting amiably about nothing in particular with Fluttershy while they watched him buck in the orchard. Flying around on errands, for –

Twilight.

Celestia, restored, remembered Twilight Sparkle.

She remembered... so *much*. She remembered that first day, when everything had seemed so frightening and intimidating, and Twilight had just stood there on the Library floor, smiling warmly, letting Celestia touch everything in quiet awe, as if it were the first time. She remembered that wonderful day when she'd woken up, greeting Twilight and Spike

automatically, and realized for the very first time that it had seemed like *home*. She remembered when they had gone off to find a dwelling near Ponyville suitable for a growing dragon – the first big adventure they'd shared *together*, just the two of them.

Celestia remembered, in a blur, the long, slow process of change as the last little vestiges of their old, imbalanced relationship had given way to a deep and abiding friendship between equals. She remembered that little feeling of connection she so loved when they just thoughtlessly relied on one another, even in the most trying circumstances, which had grown of their mutual respect and unquestionable loyalty to one another.

She remembered how, when Twilight would lecture to the most prestigious of guests on the Library floor, they would catch each other's glance and roll their eyes at each other in irritation as their happy little library became a little lie... and how they'd share a quiet moment when it was finished, both making sure the other had taken her mask off.

She remembered the hardships, the times when she'd *needed* Twilight, and the times when Twilight had needed *her*; and those times, which were at once difficult and beautiful, when they had stood together, come what may. There had been many such times, in their long, eventful life. Magical challenges, political squabbles, little missions from Luna, crises between their friends...

She remembered the fights, too. The arguments. Two strong, intelligent personalities under one roof? There'd been hundreds, about anything and everything. They got pretty vicious, sometimes; Celestia remembered a week of staying at Spitfire's, when Twilight and Luna had noticed Celestia getting a little jealous of their long, long nights together doing magical research and Twilight had –

That had been a bit bad, hadn't it? Thank goodness for Fluttershy and Cheerilee...

But the fights had only lasted for so long because they'd been open with each other, and had been able to look to their friends for guidance and reinforcement. They had shared the Magic of Friendship deeply, and gloried in its quiet strength... together.

No masks. Never again did they wear a mask for one another.

Not once.

One soul, in two bodies.

And finally, Celestia let herself feel the pain that accompanied the fierce, private joy of the memories of so many late nights, stargazing – including that very last one, when they

had laid down in the dying light of the day and were just *together*, quietly, as... twilight had passed, peacefully, into night.

Her Faithful Student had walked with her, all the way to the very, uttermost end... just as she'd promised.

"It was..." Celestia said, swallowing. Her tears flowed freely, now, huge fat beads of joy and sorrow and loss and triumph and every emotion, all at once, overwhelming her. She sniffed, taking a deep breath, and forced her mouth to cooperate.

There had been so *much*; Celestia had remarked to Twilight once that she'd probably spend the next century understanding all of it, and coming to terms with everything she had done in this one lifetime, as well as what she hadn't. It was bizarre to think – she'd been around for a millennium and more beforehand, been a princess and a warrior-queen and a powerful mage without peer – but these years, these precious years... she felt like she could drown in them.

It had not been completely happy – not always. Nor unburdened with strife, or conflict, or hardship, or loss, or longing...

But in its imperfection, Celestia's life really and truly had been –

"It was *perfect*," Celestia whispered.

The Sun smiled warmly and gestured to the table, where the kettle was now whistling.

"Tell me everything," she said.

• • •

Luna regarded the little corpse for a time, uncomfortably; then she felt... *something*.

It was strangely familiar, and made her think of feathers – and just as she understood why, brilliant light flared from Celestia's fallen body. Luna recoiled, one hoof drawn up in front of her eyes.

"*Completely* melodramatic," she murmured, smiling.

The body, now a glaring knot of pure sunlight, raised into the air; Luna's senses were overwhelmed by it, and she turned away, cursing at length at the intensity of the experience. Even disoriented like this, though, she sensed the immense magical power

that was coalescing before her; an ancient, primal magic that she had not felt in many, many years.

And along with the sensory experience came an intense wave of emotion. Luna was about as protected from this sort of thing as anypony in Equestria could claim to be, but nevertheless she felt an overwhelming wave of happiness, contentment, and hope flow into her. Everything was going to be okay, the universe seemed to sing, resonating in every ounce of her being; the experience was so intense that Luna had to struggle not to break into tears of furious, heart-bursting joy.

Then it all subsided, and Luna turned back to face a glowing silhouette of an alicorn, shining brightly in midair. Its head was thrown back in a pose of ecstatic rapture, wings spread wide and beautiful, raw power radiating off of her like the spray from a waterfall, bright jewels of multicolored light flaring around her.

Luna was taken aback. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

The figure's eyes, wide and loving, opened wide. Luna met their gaze, and was transfixed, paralyzed, feeling an intense impulse never to look away, as if the universe would fall away if she did...

The light began to fade further, and as it did so, it appeared to flake off like the petals of cherry blossoms, swirling madly around the figure with a strange, magically-empowered wind. Luna laughed with joy as Celestia's muzzle was revealed, surrounded by a whirling, mad blur of glowing shards which continued to spiral as the light fell off of Celestia, who smiled beatifically as more and more of her was revealed. First her head was uncovered, then down her neck and across her body, down her legs, and finally, her great outstretched wings...

The shards whirled around her, burning themselves out like cinders dancing above a fire. The wind died away, and she lowered to the ground gently, wings giving one great beat to cushion herself.

Celestia, the Princess of the Sun, stood before her sister once again.

Luna's eyes grew wide, her smile hurrying to match. "Your mane!"

It was pink as the first kiss of dawn, as it had been in ancient times.

Celestia smiled, gently. "It will fade again, quickly," she said, her voice restored to its immortal serenity. "But for now, I am the Rising Sun, once again."

Luna stepped down from the throne and the sisters embraced one another joyously.

They had not, in a literal sense, been separated from one another by anything but distance; however, in a *real* sense, Celestia had been living another life, elsewhere, in which Luna had been a noticeable but relatively distant part. Conversely, Luna had ruled alone for many, many years – two generations of ponies or so – and had learned much growing into the fullness of her majesty.

They were meeting again, now, for the first time, after an extended absence. The Rising Sun met the Full Moon, tempered by long labor into a strong and beautiful thing, as it was always meant to be.

Celestia pulled away, her expression fading into solemnity. Luna stepped back, giving her as encouraging a smile as she could.

"There's... something I have to do," Celestia said, her voice strained.

Luna nodded. "I know."

Celestia gave her a grateful look and turned to one of the massive panel windows. For the first time, it seemed, she reached out with magic and turned a distant knob halfway up its soaring height, letting its halves swing open. She started at the unfamiliar sensation of touching something with magic, and gave Luna a sheepish look. The dusky princess chuckled.

"Spike? Are you there, old friend?" Celestia called.

With a terrible speed that his immense size seemed to make impossible, Spike's gargantuan head suddenly appeared in the window. It was at least as big as a full-grown pony's now, and even the alicorn sisters in the fullness of their glory were dwarfed by his scaly bulk. He was magnificent, by draconic standards; sleek and powerful, his body more like a tiger's than most dragons, who grew fat and bulky.

"I'm here, princess," he said, his voice deep and thunderous. "And may I say... you look as beautiful as ever. It's too bad... she isn't here to see you..." he added, expressing himself with a somewhat typical frankness, overlooking how this might make everyone else feel; a bad habit that was the downside of spending the last several decades so huge that barely anypony would call him on doing so.

"You honor me," Celestia replied, politely. She cleared her throat. "Would you... take a letter, for me?"

Spike's expression of sorrow had a lot of landscape to cover, almost seeming ridiculous. "On the side of the mountain, maybe," he said, raising a massive, taloned paw up, wiggling them in what might have otherwise been a somewhat threatening display. "I'm afraid my letter-writing days were over a long time ago."

"I know, my friend. I know. Forgive me for indulging in nostalgia," Celestia said, soothingly. She approached him as he rested his head on the window frame, reaching out and touching his massive snout with a hoof. "Will you stay with me, as I write one?"

"Anything for you, princess," he murmured. Being him, this still rang off the furthest reaches of the Hall.

"Thank you," Celestia whispered.

Luna summoned a quill and parchment from a stand nearby. "May I?" she asked, quietly.

"Please," her sister said, her voice choked. She pulled away from Spike, and reclined on the floor, facing out into the setting sun beyond him, holding her silence for a long time.

There was a moment when Spike looked as if he was about to speak, but Luna shot him a severe look, and he settled down, looking uncomfortable.

The first time Celestia opened her mouth, all that came out was a strangled, dry croak. She paused, breathing heavily through her open mouth for a moment, and then cleared her throat, looking pained.

The second time, her voice was a barely-audible whisper.

And then, in a weak but determined voice:

"My dear, dear Twilight Sparkle..."

My dear, dear Twilight Sparkle,

I am not sure how to begin this, my last missive to you; I am not even sure I understand its purpose beyond knowing, deep in my heart, that I must cause it to be. For me. Letters were always special between us, even when we lived under the same roof.

I... have returned, to myself. And feel wrong, as you predicted I would. In your great wisdom, you have always seen me apart from the shape I was – you always saw Celestia,

not the Princess, or the pegasus. Although I must say, I will not miss having to carry everything in my mouth. My sympathy for the non-magical tribes abounds...

In one thing we were fortunate, in a way. Our last moment together was as peaceful and gentle as anypony could ask, and we had one last little private moment to say good-bye which would not have been afforded to the Princess and the Arch-Mage. It pained me dearly to watch you leave me and join our friends in rest, but I am, after all, only one of the many, many ponies who loved you, although I take you at your word that I was particularly dear to your heart.

I have wandered Equestria for several weeks, wrestling with myself, trying to bear the pain of change that is the burden and purpose of my long life without you there to help me. I will confess that many times, especially as our time together drew to a close, that I thought: is there some way I can have you join me in eternity? Can you ascend, somehow, and truly join Luna and I, as you so richly deserve?

But then I... understood. I think you always did. To even think this insults you, because the true beauty of your life, the true greatness of Twilight Sparkle, was that in one lifetime you accomplished so much. Because of how much you changed and affected things, you will never truly leave it, such was your triumph – and the capstone of this glory was the grace with which you went to your well-deserved rest, leaving a world so much better for you having been in it.

Forgive me the poetry of this, but it's the only way I can put words around my feelings without feeling foolish and awkward. I thought of Luna's comment to me after you rescued her from the Nightmare, so long ago: that your name is so coincidental to your role in our affairs. Your... overwhelming role, where you, in one lifetime, brought us back together, and taught us both so much...

I... I am the day, and Luna, my beloved Luna... is the night. Twilight is very, very brief, lasting for all too short a time; it is rich, and beautiful, and in that moment the proud sun learns to set, and rest, and the moon ascends to watch over the peace of night. And then twilight is over, leaving the sun and moon to remember its beauty and wonder, after it has gone, changed forever by that brief moment of transition.

This, you did, with unparalleled grace and strength.

I almost feel the need to apologize to you once again, as I have so many times, for your entire life being burdened with the internal struggles of an immortal... but then I remember what you would whisper to me, and am comforted:

"Immortal or mortal, you are my friend, and I love you. Your troubles are my troubles, and my troubles are yours; this is the true magic of friendship, and I share it with you willingly. And it's not like I haven't gotten a lot out of it myself..."

I am rambling, Twilight, because I want this letter to last forever. I feel that signing it, that saying your name and sealing the scroll... then you will really, truly be gone, and I will remain, diminished. The pain of that possibility terrifies me, as I knew it would.

But all things change, and the future awaits me. The strength you helped me learn is flowing in me now, though I confess part of me wishes it wouldn't. Part of me is still weak, and wants to cry, and lament, from now until the time finally comes for me, too, to join you in whatever awaits us beyond waking life...

As we said, so many times: parts of us think many things.

To indulge that weakness would be to reject everything we learned together, and I will not do it. I choose to be strong.

And I remember the promise I made to you, the one you begged me to renew as we faced the end: I have love to share with friends yet unknown, and life to live, a world to experience, in days that have yet to come to pass. I will not let myself be alone ever again... because you taught me such fierce joy of living that even now, suffering the pain of loss that is the price of my long life, I cannot wait to see what tomorrow holds.

I already have plans. It should be... fun.

You changed me, Twilight.

But more importantly, I pursued the dreams of my heart, in waking life... and changed myself, for you.

So I say farewell, for the very last time, Twilight. I wish you peace, you who saved my sister. Who overthrew my enemies for me, and enriched the country I love. The pony who came to me, in the depths of my greatest failure, and loved me so fearlessly that the very Sun was moved...

Good-bye, my Faithful Student.

I love you, so, so much.

I will remain forever yours,

Celestia

Spike's chuffing sobs bounced off the distant parts of the Hall, though in the way of his folk, he did not weep. Celestia caught his eye and they understood that she wept for them both. Despite her tears, she was quite quiet, now; everything about her seemed hushed, even if it had nothing to do with sound. She stared out into the sunset, face still and impassive save the tears which flowed unrestrained down her beautiful face.

Luna quietly bound the parchment in a scroll case – a gold one, one of Celestia's – having sealed it with red wax. She held it in front of herself, regarding it pensively.

"Sister..." she said, speculatively, though her throat was also quite thick. She had been moved, quite moved, by the poetry of Celestia's memorial. "How do you feel?"

Celestia turned to her, smiling just a little, through the tears. "I was afraid, sister, that saying good-bye would... just make the absence worse," she said. "But I feel better for having said it, of course."

"A bit lonely, though?"

"A... little," Celestia said, looking from Spike to Luna, fondly. "But it's not so bad." She rose, and touched Spike's snout again; he closed his eyes, looking as grateful as he could. "I will never stop missing her – no I think... I *hope* I never stop missing her. Remembering how strong she was, and how much I loved her, and how much... she loved..." She trailed off, smiling distantly. "It is the most beautiful pain I could feel."

Luna gave her a wry grin. "You've gotten romantic. Too much time with musicians, I think..."

"Ha! And there will be more!" Celestia declared, firmly, in the strange, shaky tone of someone triumphing over their sorrow. "It's true, though. Her absence hurts. But it's all just a reminder of her, the things we shared, and learned together..." Celestia looked to Luna, eyes blazing through the tears. "I'm going to be Celestia, for her. For us. The Celestia she loved will live on, and love... and so Twilight Sparkle will never really be gone. Everything I do will be for her, in part... a testament to how I changed, with her walking beside me..."

Words just spilled out of her, in a rush; they were alive with hope and ambition and love. It was like a foal talking about what they wanted their cutie mark to be – Celestia seemed free, unrestrained, unburdened, gushing about what *could be*, what could grow out of the

wonderful life she'd just lived with her friends in Ponyville. She was still crying, and her voice was occasionally thick and mangled, but still...

The story of Twilight Sparkle and Celestia – a long, generally happy story – was coming to an end. But instead of dreading seeing the last few pages coming, Celestia was eagerly looking forward to the next volume in the series, wondering with a foal-like enthusiasm about what was going to happen next.

"I was so afraid that she would never be more than a talented student to you, sister," Luna said, approaching her. "I could sense, even in the worst times, how much you two needed each other. This, though... this is more than I could have ever hoped."

Celestia just smiled, idly, and stared out into the sunset.

"She came to me," Luna said, raising the scroll case up to eye level, as she took a place next to Celestia before the open window. "Many months ago, in the night. Just showed up on the balcony to the Great Hall, telling the Night Court that she had private business with me..."

Celestia chuckled, once, her grin growing a little wider. "She got a bit pushy, in the end, didn't she...?"

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Somepony was foolish enough to express *relief* that she wouldn't be around running ponies' lives for them anymore in my earshot, the other day," she said, her smile a little predatory.

Celestia recoiled. "No," she said, disbelieving.

"I'm afraid so... but I needed a new aide for the ambassador to the Zebra Nations, anyways, so it was somewhat convenient." Luna frowned slightly. "Although the buffoon thought it was a reward for something. Maybe I was too subtle."

"It's so hard to punish some ponies without being overt," Celestia agreed, solemnly. "It makes you despair for Equestria, except that it's the same now as it always has been."

Luna and Celestia grinned at each other, before returning their gaze to the sunset. Spike pulled his head back and joined them, golden-red light gleaming off his polished scales.

"So there we were," Luna said, eventually, stirring. "I had the Court cleared, and we just... sat there, for awhile. She was troubled, of course –"

"She told you she was dying," Celestia said, quietly. "How long ago was this?"

Luna thought about this. "About eight months or so."

Celestia smiled, very slightly, at this, and Luna momentarily wondered why. "I knew she didn't tell me right away..."

"She was very worried about you, Celestia. Although to be honest, she was more... worried about herself. She was... *being herself*, fretting constantly about everything that could go wrong, although she was trying not to. And she said: 'I am old, Luna, and I want to do something... sentimental, because I...'" Luna swallowed. "'I don't want to have to leave her alone. But I must.'"

Celestia sniffed. "She got very... *intense* about the promise I made to her, in the end... that I would not let myself be alone, ever again." She smiled. "But she needn't have worried..."

Luna nuzzled her sister, as much to comfort herself as Celestia. "Still, she was insistent that something be done; as much for her as for you, I think. So she and I thought up one last magic trick... to make an old dream come a bit more true. One last little show for her mentor."

Before them, the air blurred and distorted in a strangely liquid way, which Celestia and Spike recognized as the magic of the dream world being forced into reality. It pulsed regularly, a *thrumm* that seemed to be heard with the entire body, not just the ears.

Luna lifted the scroll case up and into the weird vortex of power. As it entered, it seemed to vanish quickly, passing into the western sky with a strange, distorted speed; soon, it had vanished from view, lost in the fading light of the setting sun.

Luna made a gentle motion with her head, and –

"Oh," Celestia said, face spreading into a tearful expression of wonder.

Luna chuckled. "I wondered if you remembered."

"How could I possibly forget something like *that*?" Celestia whispered.

• • •

Word spread quickly throughout Equestria that Celestia had returned... though not by proclamation. Word merely spread, whispers and cries of joy spreading the news: *the sun has risen again, as we have always hoped.*

She had been found, one evening, wandering the streets of Canterlot, glowing gently in the fading light; she smiled and chatted peacefully with everypony who worked up the courage to speak to her, occasionally looking up at something in the sky and smiling gently. She even – this was what made it truly mythical – addressed many ponies by name, and asked after little events in their lives... and these were ponies whose *grandsires* had been foals when the Sleep had begun.

She eventually took up an impromptu court in one of the squares, beneath a marble fountain of the Elements of Harmony, sitting there into the early hours of the day, happily chatting with everypony she could, learning their names, asking them about things in general, and being as calm and soothing and loving as history said she was – and three times as beautiful.

Princess Luna, when pressed to remark on this, would say only: "Dawn is breaking," and smile mysteriously.

The next day, she was nowhere to be found in Canterlot, although some pegasi reported that they had stopped and shared a small lunch with her on a cloud over the fields between Canterlot and Fillydelphia in the early afternoon.

Very few ponies knew what happened between then and Celestia's triumphant, celebrated return to the palace three days later. While it was a secret that those who were in the know steadfastly took to their graves, it was not a dark secret, just... precious, and something that belonged to them alone, and bound them together.

There was a small village on the outskirts of a forest, in distant view of the city of Fillydelphia. The ponies here were humble folk, woodcutters and stonemasons and farmers, part of the unromantic foundation of society that enables the glamour of the city to survive, day-to-day.

A family of unicorns there had a very unusual visitor, in the early evening, who asked after their youngest daughter, by name. The two sat, sharing weak tea in mismatched, cracked teacups, as Celestia asked pointed questions of the terrified little unicorn about a long afternoon she'd spent with an old pegasus in the woods, and what she'd shown that old mare – an amazing, precocious gift for teleportation.

"Was... that okay?" the unicorn whispered, expecting to be punished. Her mother had suggested that showing off for strangers wasn't what good little fillies did, but it was somewhat typical of *this* little unicorn to wonder if that really meant she should stop.

"You have a truly unique and natural talent," Celestia said, beaming down at the filly, who gulped. "And I want to give you the chance to develop it into something great, in Canterlot."

Her father stepped forward. "You mean – the *Academy*? I'm... flattered, princess, but we could never afford –"

"It would be my pleasure to arrange matters," Celestia said, pleasantly. "I owe your daughter a great deal."

Everypony looked confused at this.

With a look out the window at the setting sun, and a gentle word that this was to remain between them, Celestia told them of her new burden – that once every few generations or so, she would spend time as a mortal pony, walking in the world. As this very first, most difficult time had come to a close, and she had been deep in mourning for her lost friends, she had met a little filly in the woods, who was so open and brave and eager to share her enthusiastic love of the world, that it had helped move the heart of the Princess to come to grips with her sorrow, and learn the lesson she was meant to: the quiet strength of humility, to endure, and to love again.

"Courage, and compassion, deserve to be rewarded," Celestia said, smiling down at the filly.

Radiant Dawn smiled back up at her, as bright as her namesake.

• • •

"Princess!"

Celestia blinked, stirred from some thought, or memory, that now escaped her.

Her chambers were lit with the golden light of sunset, once again. She shook her head, smiling; maybe it was just her, but it seemed to have become an extremely significant time in her life. Nothing important ever happened at dawn, anymore, or noon...

"*Princess!*" came the insistent call, again. The Halls of Dawn and Dusk were close enough to her chambers that somepony yelling loud enough through its vaulted pillared galleries, open to the sky, could be heard.

Celestia grinned, and rolled her eyes. "I'll be there in a moment, Dawnie," she called out the window, letting a little whisper of magic ensure that she'd be heard.

She considered her options carefully. She could arrive through the doors, like a pony with any sense of dignity whatsoever... or she could have a little revenge on Dawn, just to remind the little unicorn who was the princess around here, to be waited upon, not summoned by yelling out a window...

Celestia grinned. The guards hated this. They quietly disliked this part of the castle in general, she knew; all the tall, open areas were a security nightmare. But it was their job to worry about things like that, so she let them.

Carefully, she leapt out of a window and dove into the western sky, letting her wings catch the air silently, spiraling around the tower of her private apartments, and alighted into the Halls behind the unicorn through one of the open-air archways, to the sudden and intense alarm of the guards posted at the doors. She smiled at them apologetically, and they rolled their eyes.

Radiant Dawn, her cream coat and strawberry-red hair brilliant in the golden light of sunset, spun on her hooves in shock. "Hey! You said no teleporting in the castle!"

Celestia shook her wings, grinning.

"That's *cheating*," Dawn said, huffing.

Celestia laughed brightly. "Did you get the things I asked you to, dear?"

"Yeah!" The little unicorn nodded, turning back to them, smiling enthusiastically.

A telescope. A stack of books and star charts.

And a unicorn filly, looking up at her adoringly.

Celestia's smile grew strained, just for a moment.

Dawn misinterpreted her look. "I didn't teleport into the library again, if that's what you _"

"No, no," Celestia said, quickly, shaking her head. She would have known already if Dawn had done this – the librarian and unquestioned mistress of the palace archives, an earth pony who was uniformly addressed as *Ms. First Edition*, held *views* on the issue of unicorns suddenly appearing in the stacks, the sudden burst of magic and air displacement turning her neatly-arranged shelves into, well... a problem.

Dawn held her gaze warily, for a second, but then smiled as she satisfied herself that she wasn't in trouble. It was, after all, somewhat rare for this to be the case. "I've been looking through these old ones, that *Ms. First Edition* gave me," she said, a bit dismissively. Dawn held grudges like a cat; they amounted to low-level suspicion and distrust right up until she needed something from the pony in question. "They're all really old, and boring..."

Celestia reflected that Dawn was still in that stage of youth where anything old and worn lacks the appeal of things that were new and fresh. She summoned one of them to herself; it was –

"Oh, my, Dawnie..." Celestia said, clicking her tongue. "*A Practical Guide to Stellar Bodies* is hardly old...!" she said.

Old was not the word for this book, she said in the privacy of her mind. Nor worn. *Well-loved*...

"Ugh, but it's got soooo many boring words in it," Dawn said. "About, you know, math stuff."

Celestia chuckled. "Nevertheless, it –"

"I like this one much better," Dawn said, holding up in her hooves a blue book decorated with a simple picture of the silhouettes of two ponies looking up at the sky through a telescope, one pointing upwards. "I have one of my own at home, but I forgot it, so I took –" She froze.

Celestia's eyebrow raised in mock anger. "The copy... from my study."

Dawn grinned up at her nervously. "Um... yes."

"Which you could only have gotten into by, yes, *teleporting* from that ledge you found on the second-floor window of the laboratory... which you could also have only gotten to by *teleporting*, since you're *not* allowed in there unsupervised anymore," Celestia continued, idly, in the tones of somepony who knows they have a fish on the hook but are in no particular hurry to reel it in.

But privately, she gloried in Radiant Dawn's rapidly developing skill and ingenuity, however troublesome.

Radiant Dawn chuckled. "Sorry...?" she said, weakly.

With a sudden grin, Celestia snatched the book from Dawn's hooves with telekinesis and began flapping it at her, swatting at the little filly's backside. Dawn leapt to her hooves and began running back and forth along the length of the Hall, laughing and squealing as the book chased her, occasionally making gentle contact.

The guards rolled their eyes again, which Celestia politely failed to notice.

"Honestly, I can't leave you two be for half a second without half the palace falling down..." said a cool voice from a convenient shadow.

Dawn came to a skidding halt before the proud figure of Princess Luna, once again tall in the fullness of the moon.

Like many foals born during the Sleep, Dawn was fascinated and intimidated by the mysterious princess. When Celestia had first presented Dawn, formally, to her sister, the little unicorn had actually gone stock-stiff and tried to hide behind Celestia a little – completely out of character for the chatty, inquisitive little unicorn, who had boldly demanded favors from guards the first time she came to the palace and asked questions relentlessly if something caught her attention.

Luna smiled down at her, honest amusement lit on her noble features.

Celestia grinned wickedly and took the opportunity to swat at Dawn's flanks once again, gently making contact with the little golden image of a rising sunburst emblazoned there. The filly squeaked in surprise and shot her teacher a dirty look.

"And with such a precious book, too," Luna said in a tone of exaggerated hurt, as she took it from Celestia's control and made a show of inspecting it for damage she knew very well would not be there.

Dawn's little face scrunched up. "What? There's tons of that book, it's not rare," she said, curiously; then she remembered how nervous she was and gave Luna a shy look.

Luna flipped the book open, turning a few pages. "Ah, here we are... Radiant Dawn, I feel confident in saying that this is a unique item of great value... as you'll see here." She presented the page to Dawnie to read.

It was the title page:

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STARGAZING FOR FILLIES AND COLTS
COMPLETE WITH STAR CHARTS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

by

TWILIGHT SPARKLE, ARCH-MAGE, D.MS, D.Thau, PhD

And underneath, in small, careful quillwriting:

To my dear Princess Celestia,

One more signed first edition for a very lucky princess, when you're yourself again.

In memory of a cold, winter night, when you woke a grumpy little filly and taught her to love the heavens...

With love from your Faithful Student,

Twilight Sparkle

P.S. Given in hopes that this will not be left on a shelf in your study... I know part of you will want it to.

P.P.S. And while De Celestia Mobile may be a seminal work and extremely flattering to you, librarians should probably give this to fillies and colts in the future, if I may be so bold.

P.P.P.S. I'm serious, Celestia, don't let this sit on the shelf!

Dawn read it, carefully. Celestia watched her, face blank.

The little unicorn turned. "Ha! See? You're not supposed to keep it on a shelf!" she declared.

Luna and Celestia's eyes met, briefly, and Celestia gave Dawn a small look of playfully exaggerated remorse. "Oh, dear, Dawnie... you're right. You've caught me being bad again..."

"That's twice this week," Dawn said, firmly. "You took that melon from the kitchen, yesterday –"

Celestia frowned in honest irritation. "I shared with you, didn't I?"

Dawn shrugged. "Still, though." Her face was unyielding justice, personified in miniature.

Luna laughed, brightly. "I cannot believe I've let it go this long before meeting you personally, little one..." Dawn's eyes went wide – Princess Luna was showing her a lot of personal attention!

Celestia stepped up beside Dawn, who looked up to her nervously. "Dawn, I asked you to come here tonight for a very special lesson... your first, with my sister."

"What? Really?" Dawn gasped, looking to Luna, who nodded, smiling broadly.

"I'm going to teach you about the stars, Dawn... Celestia says you've shown some interest in them," Luna said, momentarily meeting Celestia's gaze. This – stargazing – had been the one demand Luna had made, when Celestia proposed that her sister take a larger role in the unicorn's special education; unspoken, but heavy in her voice, was an entirely different filly altogether, long, long ago... a chance Luna never had.

Celestia had agreed, without hesitation.

Dawn's eyes found some way to grow even wider with stunned excitement. "Uh, yeah! I've been reading lots of stories, and I wanted to learn about the cons... constell... um..."

"*Constellations*, dear," Luna finished for her, automatically. "Stories?" She asked Celestia, raising an eyebrow in interest.

"Legends, and histories," Celestia said, smiling as Dawn nodded excitedly. She loved stories and tales of bygone days, finding endless fascination in things being *different* than they were now, and reading the stories of heroes and monsters and great deeds.

Celestia smiled. Someday, it would really, ha, *dawn* on the unicorn exactly *who* she was talking to every day, and... well, it would be a *very* long day. Week. *Month*. Luna would like it, though; she had endless time for ponies willing to listen to her speak of old times; she found doing so comforting, and interest in such things flattered her.

"Um, I... I had a question, though," Dawn said, quietly.

"Well, go on, ask," Celestia said, tapping her companionably towards Luna.

"Err..." the little pony said, looking up at Luna, who smiled pleasantly at her as she waited. Dawn pointed westwards. "I was wondering... what that star is."

Luna raised her eyebrows and looked out into the sky. She turned back with a very small, sly grin which would, in time, become extremely familiar to Radiant Dawn. "That's the sun, my dear. You should ask my sister about it, sometime..."

Dawn frowned. "Not that. *That*," she said. She trotted up to an open archway and pointed carefully with a hoof.

Celestia and Luna stepped forward and followed her hoof up, as if they needed to.

There, right on the edge of day and night... was a bright, pink point of light, gleaming proudly above the sun as it sunk into the horizon.

"It's not in any of my books, not even Miss Sparkle's..." Dawn, in the strange instinctive way some foals have, sensed that something was amiss, and trailed off, looking a little scared, worried she'd done something wrong.

The princess' eyes locked. "Oh, that... well..." Luna said, giving Celestia a look which said: *It's your choice*.

"That star... would not be in Twili – *Miss Sparkle's* book," Celestia said, laying down so that she was more or less at eye level with Dawn. "Because it didn't exist when she wrote it."

"Oh," Dawn said, nervously.

Celestia smiled, a little faintly. "It's a very special star, you know," she said, as if conveying a great secret. "Especially for me."

Dawn looked curious. "Really?"

"Yes, Dawn," Luna said, lying down on the other side of the little unicorn. "Every day, it watches over the sun as it sets. It... loves the sun very much, and doesn't want it to be alone."

"That's... that's... huh," the unicorn said. A thought struck her. "Does it, um... does it have a name? I read –"

"You read that all stars have true names, is that right?" Luna replied. "That was very clever of you."

"Dawnie," Celestia said, quietly, "would you lie by me, please?"

The unicorn lay down, happily basking in Celestia's warmth. Luna watched Celestia carefully; she was staring up at the little star, clearly a little strained.

"Um," Dawn asked quietly. "Did I do something wrong...? Why are you crying?"

Celestia looked down at her, smiling. There were, indeed, trails of tears falling from her eyes. "No, Dawnie, no. I just want you near me when I talk to you about this." The little unicorn cuddled her, gently, instinctively offering comfort, just as she had for that sad mare in the forest, years ago.

Luna gave Celestia a look: *It's okay, I can tell her if that would be easier...*

Celestia shook her head, and Luna nodded, sighing. This was something Celestia *had* to do herself.

"Dawnie," Celestia began, quietly, "that star is very special to you, too."

"It is?"

"Yes. It has two names, you know – most ponies just call it the twilight star, since that's when they see it..." Celestia trailed off, smiling wistfully. While this was a little hard, she found... she really was very happy here, with Luna, and little Dawn. So she nuzzled the little filly affectionately while she let the little moment of tightness in her chest pass. "But its *real* name is... the Faithful Student."

There... she'd said it.

Shared it.

Dawn looked up. "Student? It's like the Sun's... student?" she asked, tentatively. "Like... like me!"

Luna reached a hoof out and put it on the filly's shoulder, gently, touching her for the very first time. "That's right. And it loves the ponies the sun keeps near her heart... so if you're ever feeling lonely, remember that it's always there, watching over you as well."

The unicorn stood, to get a better view of the star, looking up at it in wonder. "It's... beautiful," she said, unthinking.

"Yes," Celestia said, quietly. "Yes it is. When you're a little older, we'll talk about it some more. But for *now*..." She tapped Dawn with a hoof. "Since you can see it, that means it's almost nighttime! It is the twilight star, after all..."

"And I've been looking forward to spending time with you all day," Luna said quickly, to Dawn's surprise and, it seemed, nervous excitement. "I have quite a bit I can tell you about any constellation you want. After all," she added, giving Dawn a smug grin, "I named quite a lot of them myself."

Dawn looked from her to Celestia in awe, grinning.

"Off you go, little one. I want you two to be friends, so be good for once, will you?" Celestia added, calling after the little unicorn as she all but galloped over to the telescope and began adjusting it eagerly, even though she had no idea what she was doing.

Luna rose, and put her head down by Celestia's ear. "This will be hard for you, I think," the dusky princess said, carefully. "If you want to... retire..."

"Then it will be hard," Celestia said, looking up at her sister, with a calm, pleasant smile. "But I will remain, nevertheless."

Luna smiled. "As you wish, sister." She turned, summoning *A Beginner's Guide to Stargazing* to herself, flipping through the star charts a look of professional dispassion; she had, after all, written parts of it herself. "Alright, Radiant Dawn... first of all, when it's just us, please just call me Luna, okay? Forget about all that princess stuff for a while..."

As night fell over Equestria, Princess Celestia stared out into the western sky, listening to Luna and Dawn get to know each other. It was tentative, at first; Dawn was nervous, and Luna was, to Celestia's experienced ear, eager beyond words to get along with her, which always made her a little stiff and awkward. But Dawn's natural curiosity quickly got the better of her fear, and Luna's persistent, gentle entreaties were rewarded with a sudden flood of enthusiastic questions about everything the princess said, or showed her. From that initial meeting they quickly found a natural rhythm to their conversation, and together, they discussed the secrets of the heavens.

It was apparent to Celestia that the two would be lifelong friends – two intelligent, passionate ponies who shared a love of learning, laughing, and making sly little jokes at each others' expense. She idly wondered if Luna would be the one with a loyal, dedicated

student this time around... it promised to be interesting. Radiant Dawn was almost totally unlike Twilight Sparkle; bold and sociable, bursting with an easy confidence. She was also a born troublemaker, her talent for teleportation having already caused a lot of... excitement, at the Academy and in the palace, but her heart was honest and courageous, and compassion and fierce loyalty came to her as easily as breathing.

In her, Celestia suspected, she had not found a new Arch-Mage... but she *had* found a brave and adventurous new friend.

Celestia couldn't wait to find out what would happen, in the coming days...

But for now, the sun was setting. Tomorrow, it would rise again, to shine over another day in Equestria, looking down, with love, on everypony, great or humble; all the adventures, the business, the joys and sorrows, the friendships and enmities, the triumphs and tragedies, that made up a day in her beloved little country. And then it would set again, to rest...

Celestia looked up, over the setting sun, at the pink star... and smiled. The sun would never be alone again – accompanied eternally, in her heart and in the fading light of twilight, every day... by her Faithful Student.