

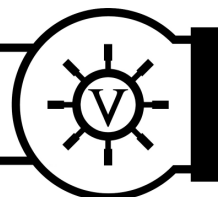
Half the Day is Night

AugieDog

Table of Contents

Prologue	2
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	7
Chapter 3	12
Chapter 4	17
Chapter 5	22
Chapter 6	29
Chapter 7	34
Chapter 8	41
Chapter 9	48
Chapter 10	56
Chapter 11	70
Chapter 12	79
Chapter 13	94
Chapter 14	107
Chapter 15	125
Epilogue	146

PONY FICTION VAULT



The three-quarter moon inched over the horizon, reddish-yellow as the leaves Celestia could hear rustling in the breeze that washed down from the heights of the mountain behind her. Stepping forward on her balcony, she closed her eyes and breathed it in. "Beautiful," she sighed.

"Thank you." Luna's voice, so much softer now than Celestia remembered, but even a year and a quarter since her sister's return, she still felt like dancing whenever she heard it.

She glanced sideways at her smaller, darker sister. "I missed you the most in autumn. Each night longer than the last, and me with hardly enough ideas to fill them all."

Luna shrugged. "You did okay. I mean, all the basic parts still work and everything."

"I had a lot of help." Celestia looked back at the moon and thought of ponies whose grandchildren's grandchildren had long since grown old around her. "That first night after you... after you were gone, I did something wrong and managed to blow out half the stars. A couple old earth ponies showed me a trick for burning marsh gas in vessels, teams of unicorns replicated the effect on a much larger scale, and every pegasus in Equestria flew multiple sorties to get the new stars aloft."

"Yes. I—" Luna stopped, cleared her throat. "I can feel their hoofprints, like... like where it was always just *me* shaping the night before, now there's... there's all these *others* mixed in. And I—" Again a stop, another breath. "I'd like to know their names, Celestia. I'd like to know who they were."

Celestia nodded, and as she began telling Luna the story, a thought began forming in the back of her mind.

Looking up from her notes, Twilight Sparkle realized she wasn't hearing the music from Pinkie Pie's "Hooray for Friday" party down the street anymore. Had it gotten that late?

She yawned, stretched, stood, and shook herself. She'd stopped by the party earlier, of course, had said hello to everypony and had some punch and cake, but this underwater breathing spell she was working on just kept nagging at her; she'd said her 'good nights' pretty early and had come back to the library to get another few hours of research in before hitting the hay. But now, walking into the foyer where the big grandfather clock stood quietly ticking away, she realized she'd completely lost track of the time.

Three soft clangs from the clock, and she had to give a little laugh. Good thing she didn't have anywhere she had to be on Saturday, or—

A knock sounded at the library door, gentle but definitely the tap-tap-tap of somepony's hoof. Twilight blinked at the door, looked back at the clock, thought briefly about waking Spike, but no. This was Ponyville. Even at three o'clock in the morning, it wasn't like there was anything here she really had to *worry* about...

Another few taps. Twilight set her horn to glowing, used the power to nudge the handle down and push the door open.

Darkness outside, the stars glinting through the cold of late autumn over the town square—and something darker, something like a piece of blackest night come to life, a mane and tail flowing, wings outstretched, a horn jabbing upwards and making Twilight gasp, "Nightmare Moon!"

"Ummm," came a slight voice, and a figure stepped into the light thrown over the doorstep from the library's main room, a winged unicorn only slightly taller than Twilight herself, her deep purple mane falling over one eye. "I don't use that name anymore, actually."

Her cheeks heating with embarrassment, Twilight bowed to the ground. "Princess Luna! I'm so sorry!" She glanced up at the pony princess, so much like a shadow cast by her older sister, Twilight's teacher, Princess Celestia. "I... I've been buried in my books the past however many hours, so my mind's a thousand miles away!"

Princess Luna shrugged and didn't meet Twilight's gaze. "It's a natural enough mistake," she murmured.

Some silence, then Twilight shook herself again. "Please, Princess, won't you come in?"

"I—" She looked back at the dark and silent town, looked up at the stars, bit her lower lip, pawed a hoof at the ground; Twilight couldn't imagine what was making the co-ruler of all Equestria so nervous, but the scent wafting from the princess definitely had more than a little fear in it. "Yes," she finally said, bowing her head with an air of defeat that confused Twilight even more. "Thank you."

Twilight stepped back, and Princess Luna glided into the foyer as gracefully as a cloud across the face of the moon, the darkness of her flanks taking on a silky sheen in the warm glow of the library's lights. All too aware of the state she'd left the main room in—whenever she began researching a spell, it seemed like every book in the place held a little bit of what she needed—Twilight stammered out her standard apology: "I'm sorry about the mess, your Highness. Like I said, I was—"

"Yes." The princess smiled tightly over her shoulder. "So it's *I* who should apologize to *you* for interrupting."

"Oh, no, Highness! Never!" Twilight moved to the princess's side and gestured with a hoof into the library. "I hope you know that you're always welcome here!"

The taller pony blinked her big dark eyes down at her. "You sound so sincere, I could almost think you mean it." She looked away and trotted in.

Her confusion growing, Twilight stood for a moment, then rushed after the princess, activated her horn, and swept the books from part of a table. "Can I get you anything? Tea? A sandwich? I might have some cake from—"

"Nothing, thank you." The princess settled at the table, and her head drooped again. "I don't want to be any more trouble than I already have been, than I already am." She sighed and added, "Than I already am *going* to be..."

"Trouble?" Twilight suddenly felt wide awake. "I... I don't understand, your Highness."

Nothing for a long moment, Princess Luna not raising her head, a chill spreading down Twilight's spine. "If anyone in this world knows me, it's you," the princess said at last, her voice as quiet as a winter midnight. "Sister Celestia tells me you alone among all our subjects learned of my prophesied return, that you alone had the understanding to stop me when I... when I..."

Her voice trailed off, then she looked up, a sudden determination in her face. "Celestia and I have vowed that what happened between us a thousand years ago will *not* happen again, and therefore we... she... I- Oh, blast it all!" The princess leapt to her hoofs, her wings spreading like dusk after a long day and raising her into the air, a dark glow springing up around her horn. "This is crazy! And stupid! I shouldn't've come here! There's nothing you or *anypony* can do to help me!"

"To help you?" Twilight repeated. "Princess, if you're in trouble, just tell me, and I'll try to--"

"Stop." The coldness in the word made Twilight's ears fold back. "Don't offer what you can't deliver."

"Excuse me?" Whether it was the lateness of the hour or the little frustrations of her spell research, something inside Twilight snapped, and she glared up at the younger of Equestria's two immortal rulers. "Maybe if you'd just tell me what you're *talking* about, I'd have a better idea what's going on around here!" Princess Luna's dark eyes narrowed, and Twilight wanted to sink into the floor. "If you wouldn't mind, I mean, your Highness."

The slow strokes of the princess's wings made the only sound in the library for a moment, then she sighed and settled to the floor once more. "Celestia's decided," she began, her gaze focused several feet off to Twilight's left, "that is, she and I have talked about how I... what I did and how I changed and why and... and- Blast it all!"

Twilight could only stare as the princess shook her mane away from her face, those dark, dark eyes more intense than ever. "Celestia is going to give me all her authority for one week so that I can rule over both night and day the way she had to for the past thousand years." The ghost of a smile pulled her snout. "She says she's earned a vacation." The smile vanished. "But it's *really* her way of trying to stop me from going insane again, her way of showing me that we're truly equals when it comes to Equestria, her way of saying that she trusts me and loves me and wants to help me."

Twilight felt her jaw drop, but Princess Luna was going on: "I just don't know that she *should* trust me. I mean--" Her breathing was getting shakier and shakier. "When I was the Mare in the Moon, exiled up there by myself for all those centuries, I used to rant and scream and swear up and down that I would bring eternal night upon Equestria once I returned! And now? Now my sister is turning over the reins of power to me!" She stomped a hoof with a crack like a thunder clap. "Like I never lost my mind! Like I never tried to destroy everything we'd built together! Like I was never Nightmare Moon at all!"

In the silence, all Twilight could think to say was: "I thought you didn't *use* that name anymore."

Princess Luna coughed something that could have been a laugh. "You're exactly right." She took a stance on the library carpet, dark power surging through her mane. "Since I can't seem to talk Celestia out of doing this, I've decided I need you there in Canterlot with me, you and your five friends who stopped me before." Those eyes fixed on Twilight, and she felt them sift straight down to her soul. "So, Twilight Sparkle, I ask you: summon the Elements of Harmony, attend me next week in Canterlot, and be prepared to strike me down should I once again become Nightmare Moon."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Rainbow Dash hovered a couple inches off the floor of Applejack's barn and made a 'time-out' sign with her front hoofs. "The princess is gonna do *what*?"

Twilight sighed. "We have *two* princesses now, you know."

"Indeed we do!" Rarity gave a brisk nod. "And I for one think it's a *marvelous* gesture on Princess Celestia's part!" She fluttered her eyelashes. "Allowing her poor, repentant sister to take the throne of both day and night for the next week! Sheer poetry!"

"Huh?" Pinkie Pie cocked her head. "I didn't hear anything rhyme."

"But Twilight!" Fluttershy's breathy voice seemed even more hesitant than usual. "Princess Luna was..." She glanced around the otherwise empty barn and whispered, "She was Nightmare Moon! She wanted to take over the world and make it dark all the time! What if she... if she...?" Her eyes got wider as her voice squeaked away to nothing.

"Yes." Twilight licked her lips. "That's the second part." After the princess had left the library at four o'clock this morning, Twilight had banished the idea of sleep and had started making a list of things she needed to get organized over the next two days for the trip to Canterlot. And the *first* thing on that list was this meeting to tell her friends about Princess Luna's request.

It took less time than she'd thought it would, and she wrapped the explanation up by nodding to Spike, the little dragon setting his quill pen to a piece of parchment. "Now, I'm voting 'yes.' But we'll need to be unanimous in deciding to do this, so if anypony has any objections--"

"Yer darn tootin' I do!" Applejack leapt to her hoofs. "A week? Away from the farm? Ain't no way, no how!"

But Twilight had spent the early morning hours making lists of arguments, too. "It's practically winter, Applejack. The first snow'll be falling any day now, right, Dash?"

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "I'd hafta check the schedule, but yeah, next week or the week after." She grinned. "'Cept I'm gonna be outta town in the capitol, aren't I? Can't wait to tell the crew *that*!"

Spike made a check mark on his paper. "I'd call that our second 'yes' vote."

"Snow don't matter!" Applejack set her jaw. "Winter's just as busy 'round here as any other time'a the year, y'know! I cain't go gallivantin' off to—"

"Canterlot!" Rarity's face absolutely glowed: Twilight had suspected she wouldn't have any trouble convincing *her*. "And being on Princess Luna's staff means a week at the top of the social ladder! Oh, the *gowns* we shall need!"

"And the parties!" Pinkie's eyes spun like pinwheels. "I mean, I'm sure they're all, like, powdered wigs and minuets up there now, but once Pinkie Pie comes through, they'll know how a party's *done!*"

Twilight heard Spike's quill scratch two more check marks. "*Four* 'yes' votes, then."

But she was keeping her attention on Applejack. "I know it's a lot to ask, AJ, but Princess Luna *needs* us! She told me—" Twilight had to swallow, remembering the princess's voice quivering slightly in the quiet of the library earlier not that many hours ago. "She told me we're the only ponies she knows in the whole world now other than her sister. We... we're the closest thing to friends she has."

"Friends?" Applejack waved her front hoofs. "She tried her dangedest to kill us! 'Member that avalanche? An' the manticore? An' the—?"

Dash snorted. "We all do, AJ. But that's why it *hasta* be *us!* We kicked her tail, and she knows we can do it again!"

"Dag nab it!" Applejack's frown softened. "But I reckon yer right. I can always leave a list here fer Mac and the girls, but the Elements of Harmony, well, ain't no one else can do *that.*" Her frown hardened again. "But one week, an' I'm outta there, y'all hear me?"

Twilight sighed in relief, Spike making a fifth check mark on his paper. "Thanks, Applejack." She turned then to the spot where Fluttershy had been sitting and had to blink when she saw nothing there but an empty stretch of floor, the yellow pegasus nowhere in sight. "Fluttershy?"

Dash sprang into the air. "Oh, great! C'mon! She can't've gotten *too* far!" And she sped out the barn door, the others jumping up to follow on hoof.

"The poor dear," Rarity said, tossing her mane beside Twilight, the two unicorns galloping out into the sheer blue of the frosty morning. "Not exactly the 'bright lights, big city' sort, is she?"

A pop behind them, and Twilight looked back to see Pinkie Pie trotting out, her jaw working a huge mass of bubble gum. "She's just mixed-up. I mean, whoever heard of playing hide-n-seek where the pony who's 'it' hides and the rest of us hafta go seeking?" She blew another bubble and popped it. "Looks like I'll need to run through the rules with her again."

Applejack pushed past the pink earth pony, her gaze aimed upward. "Anythin', Dash?" she called.

"Nope!" Rainbow Dash swooped down. "I'm gonna head over to her place and see if she's hiding under the bed."

"Right." Applejack looked at the other ground-bound ponies. "Twilight, how 'bout you, me an' Spike stay looking 'round the hills here? Rarity, you an' Pinkie can try callin' for her down the road to town. Okay?"

Twilight nodded, perfectly happy to let AJ organize this. Rarity and Pinkie turned for Sweet Apple Acres' front gate, and Twilight heard Pinkie saying, "Maybe if we both dressed up like bunnies..." before they went around the corner of the barn and passed from earshot.

The sudden weight on her back told her Spike had climbed aboard. "You think she's all right?" he asked.

A sigh from Applejack. "Girl's always been flighty as a new-born filly, but I know summa her hidey holes." She gestured to the south. "How 'bout you two head on down the orchard? This time'a year, if she's up a tree, she oughtta be perty easy to spot."

Twilight looked at Spike, and his shrug earned another of Applejack's sighs. "'Cause we's already run the leaves off 'em, 'member?" Shaking her head, she turned for the hills north of the farm. "City folk..."

Starting down the slope toward the autumn-bare trees, Twilight blushed a little that she'd forgotten that, but then it hadn't been nearly as exciting this year as last: without Applejack and Rainbow Dash distracting each other and the other runners, she'd only managed to come in 17th...

Spike gave a little snort. "Like we don't have enough to do already! I mean, two days to get ready for a week in Canterlot? Where are we even gonna stay? Our old place at the university? Or in the Night Palace? 'Cause if you're really on Princess Luna's staff, I

should be setting things up with Stargazer and the rest of the Night Ministers, not wandering around an apple orchard looking for—"

"You're right." Twilight was painfully aware of all the things she had on her own list, too. "You head back to the library, Spike, and I'll keep nosing around here for a while."

"What?" His tone made her swivel her head around, his face shocked. "You want me to walk all the way to Ponyville? On my own?"

Twilight started to sigh, but a thought made her smile. "If you hurry, you can probably catch up with Rarity. I'm sure she'd be *happy* to give you a ride into town."

Spike's eyes widened; he hopped off her back and took off for the farm's front gate faster than Twilight had ever seen him move. "See you around, Twilight!"

She watched him for a moment, chuckled, turned with a shake of her head—and found herself staring directly into Fluttershy's emerald eyes, the yellow pegasus hovering right in front of her. "I'm sorry, Twilight," she said, her words rushed and slurred, "but I can't go to Canterlot! *Can't!* There's all the winter blankets for my little woodland friends! I've barely even started getting them out of storage let *alone* started giving them out!"

"Fluttershy—"

"And who'll turn the heater on and off in the henhouse? I've tried and *tried* to explain to the roosters and hens how the controls work, but they never seem to get it!"

"Fluttershy—"

"And snow doesn't bank itself, you know! If I'm not there, it's likely to cover over my little friends' burrows! And *then* where'll they be? Buried in the snow! *Buried!*"

"I'll help you, Fluttershy!" With a sigh, Twilight mentally threw her list into the wind. "We've got today and tomorrow, and we can certainly get a good start on those blankets in that time. We can ask Apple Bloom and the Cutie Mark Crusaders to look in on your chickens if it gets cold, and the snow, well, Dash said that might not start till the week after." She caught Fluttershy's hoofs between her own, held them, looked into the pegasus's wide eyes. "But we need you, Fluttershy. *Equestria* needs you. Without Kindness, the Elements of Harmony can't hold together, and without the Elements of Harmony, Princess Luna won't trust herself to do her duty."

"But..." Fluttershy swallowed so hard, Twilight could follow it down her neck. "Canterlot! And... and *everything!*"

"We'll all be there together, Fluttershy." Twilight kept hold of her friend's hoofs. "Please?"

For a long moment, Twilight could feel the pegasus trembling. Then in a tiny voice, Fluttershy asked, "You'll really help me? Get the blankets done before... before we leave?"

"Of course!" And that made it unanimous. Twilight smiled. "Rainbow Dash is at your place right now, so we can get her to help, too!"

"I don't like this, Twilight." Spike poured tea into her cup, Twilight Sparkle watching through bleary eyes as he squeezed in exactly the right amount of lemon. "Princess Celestia says she's passed all my questions on to Princess Luna, but I haven't got a single answer yet! Not *one!*"

Nodding, Twilight activated her horn and raised the cup to sip from it, Zecora's special blend just exactly what she needed to perk herself awake at five o'clock on a Monday morning after two of the most hectic days of her life. But she'd gotten everything checked off her list: all Fluttershy's blankets had gotten unpacked, Rainbow Dash had made arrangements with the weather crew, Applejack had left at least 50 pages of instructions for her brother and sisters, Rarity had dropped a hissing box of Opalescence off at her parents' house after locking up her boutique, and Pinkie Pie had put together a Sunday night 'going away' party with a speech from the mayor and apple pie all around.

Twilight took another sip of tea. "I'm sure Princess Luna's made arrangements."

A clatter from the library's front door, and Pinkie Pie came bouncing in, her panniers flapping against her flanks. "This is so exciting! I mean, I didn't even know there *was* a five o'clock in the morning!"

Whooshing up behind her, Rainbow Dash snorted. "Reminds me of dawn patrol at flight school, getting the sky ready for sunup." A single battered bag strapped to her side, she landed beside the table, clamped her hoofs around one of the cups Spike had set out, and sucked it dry. "*Not* my favorite thing."

Another snort, and Applejack sauntered in, her packs not nearly as bulging as Pinkie's. "Some of us're up this early *ev'ry* day."

"Yeah?" Dash gave her a toothy grin. "Well, some of us are crazy."

"Girls! Really!" Rarity swept through the doorway, a simple but elegant traveling cloak thrown around her shoulders and draped across her back. "We've a *very* long day ahead of us, and I fully expect our nerves to be completely frazzled long before we manage to lay our weary heads down upon whatever silk and satin finery the palace manages to put together for us."

"Silk?" Fluttershy peered around the doorpost, her eyes wide. "*And* satin?"

Rarity nodded firmly. "At the very least." She shrugged her cloak open, her horn glowing, and eight small golden brown muffins, shiny with glaze and each wrapped with a red ribbon, floated out to settle themselves among the tea cups. "So I had these specially prepared by Mrs. Cake last night to strengthen us for the journey."

Fluttershy drifted over to join the group, her one bag even smaller than Dash's. "Oh, Rarity! They're beautiful!"

Pinkie Pie dived face first into hers and came up chewing, the ribbon stuck to the pink forelock of her mane. "Tasty, too!"

Dash laughed, spun her muffin on the tip of a front hoof, and bit its head off. "Not gonna eat the ribbon, Pinkie?"

"What?" Pinkie looked shocked. "Don't you dare, Rainbow Dash! Those are totally our totems!" She touched the little bow. "We wear them in our manes as long as we're in Canterlot. So anytime we're feeling icky or sticky, woozy or bluesy, one look at that ribbon, and *bam!* We'll know who we are, where we are, and what we're do-do-doodly doing!" She gave a massive grin, her eyes curling shut, bits of muffin clinging to the corners of her teeth.

A shiver iced down Twilight's spine like she sometimes felt when she'd unraveled a particularly knotty magical problem. Which was odd; why would—?

But she stopped that line of thought. She'd learned the hard way that it was sometimes best not to question things when Pinkie was concerned. "I think you're right, Pinkie," she said. A flicker from her horn pulled the ribbon off her own muffin, and she turned to Rarity. "Could you please do it for me, Rarity? I've never been much good with bows..."

The white unicorn blinked, then smiled, her eyes and horn lighting up to tie the ribbon in Twilight's hair just behind her right ear. Chattering and laughing, the others quickly finished their muffins, and Rarity fitted their ribbons in among their manes as well. "You, too, Spike," she said over her shoulder, swirling Applejack's ribbon around the band already holding her pony tail together.

"Me?" Spike looked from Rarity to the other two muffins and back again, and Twilight couldn't keep from smiling at the astonishment spreading over his face. "You made one for *me?*"

"Well, of course!" Rarity cocked her head at him. "You're part of our little ensemble, aren't you?"

The dragon picked up a muffin, undid its ribbon, and gave it such a reverent look, Twilight was surprised hearts didn't burst into the air around him. "But I don't have a mane..."

Rarity puffed a breath that ruffled the ribbon she'd used to partially tie Fluttershy's straying strands away from her face. "Oh, let me!" She aimed her horn at him, the ribbon flew from his claws, and in less than an instant it had wound itself around the spikes above his right ear hole, the red standing out against his green scales. "There!"

Spike touched it with a claw. "I've gotta look in a mirror!" He turned, took half a step toward the library's foyer, and stopped, his eyes going wide. "Princess Luna!"

Twilight felt her ears fold back, and she looked over to see the co-ruler of all Equestria standing still as a statue just inside the front door, something almost bottomless in those dark eyes. "I—" The princess stopped, then started again. "I didn't want to interrupt... "

Parts of her brain finally unfreezing, Twilight bowed to the floor, saw the others doing the same, heard Rarity saying, "Oh, not at all, your Highness! Please, come in! We've a muffin for you, if you're feeling peckish."

Silence, and Twilight straightened, afraid they'd somehow insulted her. But the winged unicorn seemed to be blinking more in surprise than anything else. "For... me?" she asked after a moment, and Twilight remembered what the princess had said the other morning during her first visit.

"Of course!" Twilight stepped forward to stand beside Rarity. "Because that's what friends do!"

For a moment, Twilight thought she saw a shimmer at the corners of the princess's eyes, but then she was tossing her head, her mane flying like a pre-dawn breeze. "Thank you!" she said, almost leaping across the room, every bit of her shyness gone so suddenly, Twilight couldn't help smiling. "Celestia says that breakfast is the most important meal of the day," the princess went on with a grin, "but I've always been more partial to supper myself."

Pinkie gasped. "Dinner muffins! That would be so great!" She bent around and started rooting through her panniers, streamers and glitter flying in every direction. "I've gotta make a note for when we get back!"

Applejack and Rainbow Dash shied away from the sparkling shower with a "Hey!" and a "Watch it!", and Twilight sent a quick shield spell from her horn to keep the stuff from falling into the cups. "Do you have time for some tea before we go, your Highness?"

Princess Luna was unwrapping her muffin, both the ribbon and the pastry floating in the air ahead of her. "I'd better not." She gave the muffin a nibble and nodded toward the darkness outside the window. "It's only an hour and a half 'til sunup, so it might be best that we get to the palace for Celestia's ceremony before she begins to worry."

Fluttershy gasped. "Ceremony? At the palace? What do we-? Are we supposed to-? I thought we would just..." Her voice trailed off, her wings quivering.

Twilight found her heart speeding up a bit as well. She'd attended any number of ceremonies at both the Day Palace and the Night Palace during her years in Canterlot, and knowing how much pomp and circumstance tended to surround them... "Excuse me, your Highness, but--"

"Yes, I know." The princess sighed. "If it were up to *me*, Celestia would simply give me her power, head off on her vacation, and that'd be it. But Sister seems to have become very fond of ceremonies during the last thousand years." She finished her muffin, and the ribbon darted to the base of her horn, tied itself there in a flowery knot. "We have our ribbons, though." The taller pony smiled and bent to touch the tip of her horn to the ribbon in Fluttershy's mane. "I certainly know I'm going to need *mine*."

Fluttershy blushed so red, Twilight was sure she could feel heat from it. "Oh, princess," the pegasus whispered, peering up from behind the locks of pink hair her ribbon held together. "What if I trip on some stairs and run into a pony carrying a pitcher of water and that pony spills the water all over another pony and ruins that pony's gown? What if *that*?"

Princess Luna blinked, and Twilight opened her mouth—but Rainbow Dash spoke out first: "If that happens, Fluttershy, we'll deal with it!"

"Exactly!" said Pinkie, sliding over and bumping her shoulder against Fluttershy's side. "Like my uncle Yorick used to say: if you're gonna make a mistake, make it a good, *loud* mistake!"

Applejack gave her a sideways look. "Since when d'you have an uncle Yorick?"

Pinkie put a hoof in front of her mouth. "Shhh! Don't tell Fluttershy!"

"And don't worry." Princess Luna's smile made Twilight think of a summer night under the stars. "Don't *any* of you worry." She turned that smile on each of them in turn, and Twilight could almost smell the tension in the room dissolving. "Your only job this week will be keeping an eye on me." Which brought some of the tension back to Twilight's shoulders. "But with my ribbon here—" The princess touched one silver shoe to the bit of red around her horn. "I'll remember you're watching me, and that'll make me watch myself." She blinked again. "If that makes sense."

Pinkie nodded briskly. "Perfect sense!"

"Uh-oh." Dash gave another of her grins. "If it makes sense to Pinkie..."

The others laughed, and Princess Luna joining in made Twilight's breath come a little easier again. Maybe this would all work out after all. "Well, Spike." Twilight tapped a hoof against the table. "If you'd kindly put the dishes away, we'll be ready to go."

The little dragon had been stroking his bow, a dreamy expression on his face, but he snapped out of it, gathered up the tea things, and carried them away. A moment of clattering, and he returned brushing his claws together. "Fastest dish washer in Equestria," he said.

"All right, then." Princess Luna looked around. "Everypony has everything she's taking?"

Twilight patted the satchel beside her, and Rarity gestured toward the front door. "Well, my luggage is in the cart outside, but I wasn't sure how we'd be traveling, so—"

"Traveling?" The princess's horn flared so bright, Twilight had to squint and look away. "Like this, of course!"

The light faded almost immediately, but it took Twilight a moment of blinking before she could make out her friends, standing beside her and doing their own blinking in the middle of a vast, dark, cold, and empty chamber. "Welcome to Canterlot!" Princess Luna's voice called, the words echoing strangely in the darkness all around Twilight.

"Where-?" Twilight set her horn glowing, tried to look around, but the darkened space was so big, she couldn't see anything other than her friends standing in the puddle of light she was casting and craning their necks as well, the cart full of Rarity's luggage sitting half in shadow. "Where are we?"

A piece of the darkness moved, Princess Luna stepping into the light to smile down at her. "Sister Celestia calls it the Night Palace." She looked around, too, her smile becoming a frown. "Nowhere near as nice as our old place, but I guess that's pretty much a ruin nowadays." She sighed. "I don't come here that often..."

She took a wide-hoofed stance on the shiny marble floor, and dark energy burst from her, a wave that struck walls and ceiling after a few seconds and set spots glowing like stars, the room finally lighting up enough for Twilight Sparkle to see that they were indeed in the main hall of the Night Palace, a place she'd visited many times during her years in Canterlot, the indigo and purple carpeted steps leading up to the Night Throne just across the room from where they stood. But every time she'd been here before-

Twilight gestured at the emptiness where desks, tables, stalls and workstations had once stood. "Where are the Stargazers? The Night Guard? Moondancer and Shady and... and all the rest of the Night Ministry?"

Princess Luna gave a snort. "It's taken me more than a year, but I've finally sent them all on their way. I mean, I can understand that Sister Celestia needed those other ponies while I was gone; there's no *way* she could've run both day and night by herself!" Wings unfurling, she rose slightly into the air and spread her front hoofs. "I'm very grateful to the Stargazers, of course, for taking care of things the past thousand years, but, well, I never needed anypony's help to bring on the night *before*..." She landed with four delicate clicks of her silver shoes, clicks that echoed through the emptiness of throne room. "So now that I'm here, we can go back to how things used to be."

So many questions crowded Twilight's head, she was still trying to pick one when Princess Luna gave the floor another click. "But I'd best get the night wrapped-up or we won't have a clear field for sunrise. It's at 6:46, so at 6:30, I'll meet you all here and we'll head across the courtyard to the Day Palace for Celestia's little ceremony." She gestured to one of the hallways that led from the main hall. "The last of the Stargazers left a week ago, I think, so take any rooms you like, and I'll see you all in an hour and eight minutes!" Spreading her wings once more, she leaped upward, the darkness swallowing her like smoke

Silence for a long moment, then Fluttershy's soft voice: "I always thought Canterlot would be... brighter... ."

"This isn't—" Twilight made an effort to organize her thoughts. "We'll see the city later, but right now—" She turned to Spike, staring around the hall with his mouth open. "Spike, can you head over to Moondancer's? See what she knows, and stop by my parents' place, too: they might—"

"Parents?" Applejack blinked at her. "Y'know, I ain't never heard you mention your folks afore, Twilight."

Twilight gave the cider-colored earth pony a sideways smile. "They're both retired and absolutely determined *not* to travel: I was kind of a surprise to them late in life." She gestured to the third pillar along the wall to the left of the main hall's big mahogany doors. "My dad's desk was always right there, and Mom worked across the courtyard in the Day Ministry for more than fifty years." Another little chill down her back. "There must've been 500 ponies living and working in this building, ponies whose families had done the same jobs for generations..."

"Yow." Rainbow Dash was still looking around, too. "And the princess gave 'em the boot?" She leveled her gaze at Twilight. "*That* couldn't've been popular."

Twilight could only nod, and Spike puffed smoke from his nostrils. "I'll be back quick as I can," he said, heading for the door.

"And bring some streamers with you!" Pinkie's voice came loud as a balloon pop in the silence. "I mean, this place is gloomy even for a Night Palace!" She shrugged her panniers around. "I need to get unpacked, then it's tiki torches in the corners, mirror balls on the ceiling, a little bandstand over by the—"

"Okay!" Twilight shook the rest of her indecision away. "Let's put all that on page two of our lists, then turn back to page one. First we'll pick our rooms and get this ceremony out of the way, then we can see what's going on here." She turned to Rarity, slipping into the harness of her luggage cart. "You need any help with all that, Rarity?"

"No, no." She flashed a dazzling smile. "Just let me take the first room down the hallway, would you?" She strained against the harness, and the cart began creaking forward. "Then once everypony's settled, come see me. I've got the outfits for our first day all picked out."

"Outfits?" cried Rainbow Dash and Applejack.

Rarity rolled her eyes. "They're very minimal, very tasteful, and will merely set off our Elements of Harmony neckpieces, which I would *also* suggest we wear."

Rainbow Dash had leaped into the air, her wings beating furiously. "If you think I'm gonna get all frou-froued up-!"

"Please, girls." Twilight slung her own pack over her back and stood. "Our Elements of Harmony, yes, considering they're why we're here. But can we please take a look at what Rarity's got for us before we jump to any conclusions?"

No one said anything, but Dash did settle to the floor again. "Okay." Twilight nodded toward the hallway. "We'll meet in Rarity's room in, say, half an hour?"

"Got it!" Dash zipped off so fast, the air of the throne room swirled around Twilight, and Pinkie wasn't far behind, giggling and bouncing out of sight.

"Ummm..." Fluttershy glanced through her hair at Applejack. "I don't want to be a bother, but... could I follow along with you, Applejack? Just... just for a little while?"

"Sure thing, sugar cube." Applejack gave the pegasus a big smile. "We'll get us a couple'a sweet suites, how 'bout?"

Fluttershy giggled, and the two started across the marble floor for the doorway.

Twilight gave Rarity another look. "You sure you don't need-?"

"Quite... fine... thank you!" The cart was moving at a crawl, but it was moving. "I'll see you... in half an hour."

"All right, then." Her mind turning over her new apprehensions, Twilight trotted past Rarity and into the hallway.

• • •

Decidedly *not* huffing and puffing, two things a true lady would *never* do, Rarity still heaved a rather large sigh of relief upon dragging the cart to the first door down the hallway. Knowing the opportunity this week represented, she had packed nearly half her shop—sewing machine, fabrics, patterns and all—and was determined to take full advantage of whatever luck might come her way.

Poking her nose at the doorknob, she pushed inside, hoping the place would be large enough for a workroom—and stopped with a gasp, the charcoal-black unicorn stallion rifling the cabinets along the far wall spinning to face her.

His steel-gray mane and tail looked as if they'd perhaps been nicely styled a number of weeks ago, and his cutie mark appeared at first glance to be a basketball, a brownish circle with curving lines throughout it. Too many lines, though, Rarity realized at once, and the background color of his coat showed between them, giving her the impression of a spherical framework of some sort.

A book hovered before him in the light of his horn, the panniers across his back already holding several others, and the shelves of the cabinet he was going through were full of them: dusty old tomes of the sort Rarity imagined Twilight would be interested in. So she took a stance in the doorway, found her most imposing voice, and said, "A book thief, is it? And not a very bright one, either, stealing from Princess Luna's own palace!"

The book slid into his pack. "They're not hers," he said, his voice deep and gentle and not at all what Rarity had imagined a thief would sound like. "Well, all right, they probably *are* hers, but she's made it quite clear she's not interested in them." His eyes moved—looking her up and down, she realized—and while she found their deep blue color quite attractive, the disdain in them was decidedly less so. "And I take it you're my replacement?"

She sniffed. "The only replacement *I'm* interested in is you replacing those books!" She tapped the ground decisively. "At once, if you please, or I shall have to call—" Realizing that she should have called out to her friends *before* this point in the conversation, Rarity forced herself to continue with false bravado. "—for reinforcements!"

His eyes narrowed. "That might prove difficult, what with Her Highness deciding she doesn't need anypony around here anymore." He gestured with his snout. "So call by all means, miss. I just find myself doubting you'll get a response. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He pushed brusquely past her into the hall.

Shock froze her in place for a second, but just for a second. "I will most certainly *not* excuse you!" She stormed out after him. "I shall instead inform the princess of your actions and request she take all appropriate measures!"

"Fair enough." He looked back over his shoulder. "Tell her it was Orrery Stargazer and that Mother and I and the rest of us are staying with my uncle Daybreak. It'll save her the trouble of having to track me down."

Rarity blinked at him. "Orrery?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's an old family name. I was *really* looking forward to getting rid of it once Mother retired and I took her place as Night Minister, but, well, that's not going to happen now, is it?" He started to face forward again, then stopped and gave her another look. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"Possibly." Rarity considered: apparently this stallion was involved in whatever Twilight had been talking about earlier in the throne room, a gentlecolt of formerly high rank now fallen on hard times. Feeling a twinge of pity, she offered, "I am Rarity of the Carousel Boutique in Ponyville, here by royal decree of her Highness, Princess Luna. I do hope you'll forgive me for thinking you a thief, but I'm newly arrived and wasn't expecting to find anypony here."

Orrery's brow wrinkled. "Princess Luna reads 'Clothes Horse' magazine?"

Rarity let herself smile. "As, apparently, do you."

His eyes rolled again. "I have sisters, and we've been in somewhat close quarters of late." He turned all the way around and gave her a bow, smooth and sophisticated and making Rarity's heart pick up just a bit. "I accept your apology, Miss Rarity, and offer you one of my own that I'm no longer in a position to offer you the welcoming reception you deserve." He blew out a little sigh. "If you've a spare moment, however, my uncle is still the Day Minister, and I feel certain we can arrange some small soiree to show you that this—" He gestured at the shadowy hallway around them. "This dreariness isn't at *all* representative of Canterlot."

Rarity caught her breath. Just what she'd been hoping for! "You honor me greatly with your invitation, sir. My companions and I will be overjoyed to accept."

"Companions?" He blinked. "You travel with an entourage, Miss Rarity?"

"I travel with my *friends*, Mr. Stargazer." She waved a hoof toward the other end of the hall. "We were instrumental in returning Princess Luna to herself and to the rest of Equestria, and she has therefore—"

"That, uhh..." Orrery's ears folded slightly. "That might not be something you wish to spread about publicly." He took a step backwards, then turned and started for the arch that led back into the throne room. "Still, send word to my uncle's house when you're free, and we'll see what we can do to amuse you and your friends. Now, I'll ask you again to excuse me." And he trotted through the archway and out of sight.

"It was truly the oddest thing!" Rarity waved her horn, tucking a quick stitch into the collar of Rainbow Dash's blue satin jacket, the pegasus shifting her head back and forth to peer at herself in the full-length mirror Rarity had set up against the cabinets her unexpected visitor had taken the books from. "Why *shouldn't* we let ponies know we were the ones who restored Princess Luna?"

Twilight seemed a bit distracted. "Ory Stargazer," she muttered, shaking her head, the reflection from her tiara spattering shards of light over the walls of the room.

But Applejack shrugged, fiddling a bit, Rarity couldn't help noticing, with the simple gabardine collar around her Element of Harmony necklace. "Well, Princess Luna ain't done much to get on folks' good sides 'round here."

Fluttershy's sigh didn't even rustle the lace of her collar. "But Princess Luna *is* good! Maybe she just isn't at her best with other ponies..."

Pinkie heaved a much larger sigh. "As my uncle Arbutus would say, 'I blame a tragic lack of parties.'" She rolled over onto her back, Rarity happy to see that the skirt she'd designed followed the movement rather than snagging or tearing. "Fortunately, some of us are gonna be correcting *that* pretty darn quick!"

One last stitch, and Rarity snapped the thread, tied it off, stepped back. "There! That should keep it straight!"

Rainbow Dash didn't immediately sneer, something that Rarity took as a compliment, but she did keep turning her head, looking at herself in the mirror first with one eye, then with the other. "I like the gold stripes, but, I mean, this looks like a uniform jacket." She gave a grin. "Am I s'posed to be an admiral or something?"

"In a way." Rarity resisted the urge to tug the sleeves down Dash's front legs, but she'd made them specifically short so they wouldn't impede her movements. "I felt it best that we present ourselves as a cross-section of society in order to reflect Princess Luna's status as princess of all Equestria. And of the six of us, you're best-suited to represent the large contingent of soldiery here in the capital."

"Huh." Dash nodded. "I can do that."

"That—" Twilight shook herself, seemed to come out of her reverie. "That's a really good idea, Rarity."

Storing this compliment away as well, Rarity scheduled a little preening session for herself later when she had the time. For now, she just tossed her head with a smile and said, "I *do* have them every once in a while."

But Twilight was looking anxiously at the door. "I wish Spike would get back. I'd really like to have a better idea what we're stepping into before—" A tiny bell popped into the air beside her and started ringing, fast and tinny and making everypony in the room wince. Twilight reached a hoof out, popped the bell like a soap bubble, and stood, the blue-black drape of her cloak flowing just exactly the way Rarity had hoped it would. "That's showtime, girls." She smiled over her shoulder at Rarity. "And thank you so much, Rarity, for the outfits. It didn't even cross my mind that we'd need anything to wear here!"

Rarity added a few more minutes to her planned preening. "*That*, my dear Twilight Sparkle, is what friends are for."

"Ooo! Ooo!" Pinkie hopped from the floor to balance on her hind legs, her front legs waving wildly above her head. "And ribbons! We all still have our ribbons?"

Glad she'd used the good stuff to wrap those muffins, Rarity touched hers, twined about the first curl above her forehead. "I've brought several rolls," she said, "so should these need a bit of sprucing up, we can—"

"No!" Pinkie didn't seem to cross the space between them, just flashed suddenly from the door to right in front of Rarity, a ferocious grimace on her face. "*These* are the muffin ribbons! *These* are the ones we wear! *These*! No others!" A second, Rarity staring wide-eyed at her friend like she so often found herself doing, then Pinkie's fierce look melted into her usual grin. "Unless, y'know, you lose it or spill chocolate on it or some bird flies down to take it away and build a nest with it. There's, like, a whole section in the muffin ribbon rules about the proper way to replace them."

A chuckle from Applejack. "Well, sugar cube, reckon we'll make sure we ask you afore we do anything."

Pinkie Pie nodded. "That'd prob'bly be best, yeah."

Twilight nodded, her horn flaring and the door pulling open. "Okay, then. Let's go wait for the princess."

• • •

Over and over, Applejack kept telling herself not to stare around with her mouth open like some foal never set hoof off the farm, but so far just about everything she'd seen made her jaw want to drop and her eyes want to bug out. Even the rooms she and Fluttershy had looked at down the hallway, well, Applejack didn't know a fancy enough word to describe them: each one had a full parlor, and the bedrooms, she was sure, were bigger than the whole kitchen back home! The closets opened up enough to walk right into, and the windows looked out onto gardens that even in the darkness before dawn, she could tell were beautiful and well-tended.

That all these rooms were completely empty bothered Applejack more than a little—she could still smell the lavender soap and floral perfumes of the previous tenants, like they'd pulled out in one mighty quick hurry—but she and Fluttershy had picked a couple rooms right across from each other, and Applejack had unpacked her boots, her kerchiefs and bolo ties, and the Honesty necklace she'd kept in the bureau drawer at home the past year or so since—

It still almost seemed like a dream, all the goings on around the Summer Sun Celebration the year before last. But every time she started thinking maybe she'd imagined it, a quick look at that necklace, gold and shiny, the ruby-red apple in the center the spitting image of her cutie mark, that always brought it home: real, honest-to-goodness magic that she was somehow right in the middle of.

Her kit unpacked, she'd slipped the necklace on, collected Fluttershy, and they'd headed back to the room with Rarity's cart full of luggage parked out front. Then after waiting what seemed like five hours for the white unicorn to get them all duded up, Applejack was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, step out into the hall beside Twilight, and start toward the throne room of Canterlot's Night Palace.

Oh, if her momma could see her now...

But looking through the archway ahead, Applejack thought she noticed more of a shimmer to the walls of the main hall than she'd seen earlier. Of course, it *was* getting on toward sunrise; did the Night Palace brighten up at dawn? She couldn't remember from her schooldays whether—

She stepped out onto the black marble, the foot of the throne just ahead, and stopped, Twilight and the others all gasping same as she did: Princess Luna, dark and sweet and perfect as a fresh ripe plum, standing next to Princess Celestia, the light dappling off her like a lazy summer afternoon out in the orchard when the breeze rustled the leaves of the apple trees all around.

Applejack's knees bent without her even having to think, bowed her to the ground, her heart hammering inside her. "Your Majesties!" Twilight was saying. "I'm so sorry! I thought we were running early!"

"You are." Princess Celestia's voice made Applejack think of pie and ice cream. "But so are we."

A nickering laugh from Princess Luna. "Sister thought we might like a pep talk before the main event." Applejack straightened, looked up at the two immortal rulers of Equestria in time to see Princess Luna touch a hoof to the red ribbon still tied around the base of her horn. "I told her we were ready for anything, but, well, once she gets an idea into her head—"

"Quite so." Princess Celestia gave a crisp nod and turned her gaze toward Twilight, the warmth of her eyes washing over Applejack as well. "Still, I can almost believe it when I see the friends my little sister has gathered to assist her." Princess Celestia's smile just about scattered the butterflies in Applejack's stomach, but nothing could stop them wiggling entirely, not when she thought that she was expected to somehow help run Equestria for the next week...

Still, if Applejack felt tongue-tied as a filly at her first barn dance, well, nothing ever seemed to faze Twilight. "We're just glad we can help," the purple unicorn said.

Another nod from Princess Celestia. "I also wanted to say that I won't expect your usual reports, my faithful student, while you're involved in this assignment. But don't be surprised if you get a postcard or two via young Spike here." The princess moved slightly, and Applejack saw the little dragon for the first time standing in the shadow with the two winged unicorns. He had a look on his face like a sparrow with crows crowding her nest, more worried and tense than she'd ever seen him. She glanced at Twilight, saw a little worry come into her face as well, and had to wonder what Spike had learned out in the city this morning.

"So!" Princess Luna tapped a shoe at the floor. "Shall we go?"

"We shall." Princess Celestia turned the light of her horn onto the door, and the big mahogany panels swung open without a sound, a large, dark, empty vaulted corridor stretching out on the other side, another archway at the end framing what Applejack recognized as the gray of a pre-dawn sky.

The two princesses started forward in perfect step, Twilight moving to follow, so Applejack did, too, kept pace with her friend, heard the shuffle of the others behind them, Pinkie Pie whispering in a voice that seemed to echo from every wall in the building: "Are we heading for the buffet?"

The only other sound Applejack could hear in that whole corridor was the tippety-tap of their hoofs on the marble, but halfway along, her ears perked to a low sort of rumble from the grayness ahead. Closer to the archway, she recognized it: muttering voices, hundreds of 'em, she figured.

Then the princesses were stepping out through the arch, the black marble under their hoofs changing to black and white granite flagstones, and Applejack saw a courtyard opening up on either side, pine trees and mulberry bushes framing a long slash of a space wide-open to the sky and filled with unicorns, pegasi, and earth ponies, every color and size imaginable and more of them than even showed up for the big Apple family reunions every summer.

An instant of silence, then all the ponies burst out cheering, Applejack almost stumbling, the sheer force of the sound nearly as strong as a wind. The princesses dipped their heads first to one side, then the other, chants of "Celestia! Equestria! Celestia! Equestria" rising from the crowd and echoing equally from the dark towers of the Night Palace rising up behind them and from the crystal walls of what had to be the Day Palace ahead, all whites and golds to the Night Palace's blacks and silvers.

No chants for Princess Luna, though, she noticed...

The flagstone path led straight across the courtyard, wider, she thought, than the whole town square back in Ponyville, and when they reached the center, the sky still growing lighter, Applejack suddenly got her bearings, realized the Night Palace made up the north wall of the courtyard, the Day Palace the south. And the courtyard itself seemed to stretch east and west farther than she could even see: folks out here would sure get a great view of the sunrise.

She started wondering if this sort of gathering was an everyday thing in Canterlot or if today's special occasion had brought 'em all out, but by then they'd crossed the courtyard and were entering the archway of the Day Palace, an exact duplicate of the archway they'd walked out of a few moments ago but built of white marble instead of black.

Also, Applejack couldn't help noticing, *this* corridor had stallions and mares in golden armor standing at attention along both sides, light glowing from the walls and up along

the corbeled ceiling like the first touch of dawn. Banners more varied than any rainbow streamed overhead, soft voices singing wordlessly in the distance somewhere, and when they stepped through the tall oaken doors at the end of the corridor, the ponies crowded around the desks and workstations that filled this whole end of the throne room all began clapping, a thunder of applause that almost took Applejack's breath away after the silence of the Night Palace.

And if it was bothering *her*— She chanced a quick glance over her shoulder, saw Fluttershy cowering against Rainbow Dash, Rarity close along her other side, Pinkie Pie right behind, the three of them pretty much herding their timid friend along, her eyes clenched. Applejack gave them a nod—not much else she *could* do—and faced forward again, the whole throne room of the Day Palace a riot of stomping, whistling, cheering, the air alive with scents of cedar and sandalwood.

The princesses had reached the red carpet that rose up the tiers to the Day Throne itself, little waterfalls trickling down either side past the two guards standing at the base. They turned in unison, their manes flowing even though Applejack barely felt a breeze, and a hush fell over the crowd as soft and sudden as a little spring rain shower. "My dear friends," Princess Celestia said, her voice no louder than before, but Applejack was sure it rang more clearly in her ears, so clearly, she guessed, that the words would likely be audible all the way out in the courtyard.

"I thank you all for your presence on this momentous day," the princess continued. "Five seasons ago, a sad, dark era came to an end, and a new, wondrous age began for all Equestria when my dear sister Luna returned to us after so many trials and tribulations. I've therefore decided to take advantage of the situation in a way I've been unable to dream of for more than a thousand years." She smiled. "I shall take a week's vacation."

The crowd got even quieter, and Applejack couldn't help glancing sideways, a little touch of something in the air that could almost have been fear. "Luna and I have shared so much with each other this last year," Princess Celestia was going on, "I know I'm leaving you in the best of hoofs. So, until next Monday at 6:53AM, I shall bid you all a fond farewell." She swiveled her head to Princess Luna. "Sister?"

Princess Luna looked up at her. "Yes, sister?"

"The dawn is yours." Princess Celestia bent down and touched her horn to Princess Luna's, and while the younger princess didn't really change, something about her definitely became different to Applejack's eyes, an authority resting on her somehow that hadn't been there before.

"Thank you, sister," Princess Luna said quietly. Raising her head, she looked east, her horn glowing, and at that moment, sunlight began trickling into the hall, a muffled cheer bursting from the crowd outside. Those inside sent up a cheer of their own as the light strengthened, and Applejack felt a lot of the tension disperse like dew at dawn.

Movement back at the foot of the throne, Princess Celestia spreading her wings into the light. "Have fun, everypony!" she called, then she shot upwards. The streaming dawn wrapped around her, and she vanished.

Applejack heard more than a few cries among the cheers, a lot of faces with expressions on them like a foal on the first day of school watching her momma trot away. So when Princess Luna spread her own wings and rose up the steps to settle on the carpet before the Day Throne, Applejack wasn't sure how many were really watching her and how many were still trying to catch some glimpse of Princess Celestia.

"Ponies of Canterlot," Princess Luna said, that same deep quality to her voice. "I cannot thank you enough for your trust and for the trust my sister has placed upon me. It is my dearest hope that—"

A flash caught Applejack's eye, made her turn her face back and up to the ceiling above the ponies filling the hall behind her. Something moved among the girders there holding up the roof, and as Applejack stared in horror, one of the massive solid metal fixtures began to bend. A ringing snap, and it broke away completely, started to tumble downwards toward the crowd.

"Twilight!" Applejack yelled. She lurched sideways, shoved Twilight Sparkle bodily around, and pointed at the huge metal beam tumbling from the ceiling toward the crowd filling the Day Palace's throne room. "Lift it! Now!"

Leaping forward, she heard Twilight gasp, but Applejack couldn't do anything except trust her friend would do what she could. "Clear the floor!" She pitched her voice like she was calling Big Mackintosh in from the back forty. "Y'all can exit to each side and at the back! Nice and orderly, now, but *move!*"

Rainbow Dash burst into the air and streaked to hover above the center of the crowd. "Folks on my left through *that* door, folks on my right through *that* one, and folks behind me out the back! Let's go!" She jabbed her hoofs at the nearest three pegasi in golden armor standing along the walls. "You, you, and you! Help 'em out!"

The soldiers jumped, their wings unfurling to sail them over the crowd, and *that* was apparently the first time anypony in the audience looked up, the first time they saw what was glowing and hovering in the air above Rainbow Dash. Applejack heard gasps and shrieks, spared just enough of a glance to see the beam was holding steady halfway between the ceiling and the floor, the thing big as the windmill back home but solid metal and weighing who knew how much! Long as it kept floating, though—

"Ev'rything's under control, folks!" she called, sprinting into the crowd to nudge some ponies gently to the right and others to the left. "We just needs to clear the floor so we's got somewhere to set the dang thing down!" Another glance back at the throne showed her Twilight standing wide-eyed, her horn glowing fitfully—and Princess Luna beside her, the light from her horn so bright, Applejack had to look away. The anger hard and plain on the princess's face wasn't too pleasant to look at, either...

Whether it was the early hour or that the Canterlot folks were just naturally tractable, Applejack was happy to find she didn't have herself a stampede to deal with. Everypony moved quick and easy toward the exits, the other soldiers stirring themselves to help out, and in not too many minutes, they'd cleared the area underneath the beam. "Look like it'll fit, Dash?" Applejack called to her friend.

Dash looked up, looked down, looked up again, then nodded. "Lower away!"

"You're certain?" came Princess Luna's voice, and Applejack couldn't help folding her ears at the fury behind her words. "I could vaporize the thing easily enough..."

Which made her ears fold even further. "Really wish you wouldn't, ma'am! I've a mind to give it a little lookin' over, if'n it's all the same to you!"

"As you wish, Minister," the princess said, and Applejack started to wonder who she was speaking to, but Princess Luna was going on: "Gently, now, Minister Sparkle."

"I'll take your lead, your Highness." Twilight sounded more than a little shaky, but when she looked up at the beam, it was gliding down light as a feather to settle on the floor of the Day Palace between the foot of the throne and the desks along the walls.

Up close, the thing made Applejack sweat even more: a fluted cylinder a little bigger around than an apple barrel, probably more decorative than structural, but solid and shiny and one hundred percent spun steel, she figured; so long, its ends would've stuck out the front and back doors of the barn back home. If this thing had fallen into the crowd—

"Yow." Rainbow Dash glided to a stop on the other side of the beam. "Not what I'd call up to code."

"Indeed, Miss Dash," said somepony Applejack had never heard before, and looking over, she watched an amber and orange pegasus land beside Rainbow Dash, his white and gold uniform jacket a lot like her blue one, his cutie mark a couple crossed swords. "Well done with the crowd, by the way."

Dash's eyes went wider than Applejack had ever seen. "Oh my gosh! Captain Destrier! You... you remember me?"

"Of course." The stallion nodded with a slight smile. "We'd be honored if you'd stop by the Citadel while you're in town to discuss your Sonic Rainboom techniques with us."

"Oh my gosh!"

Applejack cleared her throat. "You in charge 'round here, captain?"

"He is." Princess Luna strode up, Twilight right behind her, and Applejack had to force herself not to shy away, a little too much Nightmare Moon in the princess's face. "For now."

A little gasp from Dash, but Applejack couldn't look away from Princess Luna, the slightly larger pony's eyes dark and fixed on hers. "I will have answers, Minister Applejack."

Swallowing, Applejack could only shrug. "All I gots is questions, ma'am. F'rinstance—" She trotted toward the narrowest end of the beam. "Anypony else see this thing flash 'fore it started to fall?"

"Flash?" Frowning, Twilight moved into step alongside her. "I... I wasn't looking at the ceiling, I guess."

No one else answered, though Applejack could hear hoofs clattering behind her despite the rising mutter of the crowd around the exits, the soldiers forming a rough perimeter to keep folks away. "Well," she said, coming around the end of the beam, "maybe you can tell me how powerful a unicorn'd hafta be to melt through a whole messa metal as thick as this?"

"A unicorn?" The shock in Twilight's voice made Applejack sigh. "Why do you think—?"

"Somepony had to—" But she stopped, the actual end of the beam rough and scratched. "Huh." Raising her head, she found Princess Luna standing with Dash and Captain Destrier, Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Rarity just behind them; continuing to tip her head back, she focused on the domed ceiling above them. "Who cleans that dome up there?"

"Captain?" The way Princess Luna growled the word sent a shiver down Applejack back.

The captain sounded nothing but uncomfortable. "Why, the maintenance staff, I assume."

"They earth ponies?"

"Unicorns, I should think." The puzzled glance he gave the ceiling made Applejack wonder if he'd ever even looked at it before. "Possibly pegasi, though, as I imagine only magic or wings could get a pony up among those girders."

"Yeah." Applejack gestured with a hoof. "I'da thought that, too, but I sees a whole mess of catwalks and crawlways up there 'less'n my eyes're goin'." She brought the hoof down and aimed it at the end of the beam. "And the scratches here tell me somepony took a hacksaw to it. Cut through 'bout three-quarters of the way, I reckon, then left their unicorn accomplice to give it that last little push."

"A hacksaw?" Captain Destrier was blinking.

Applejack shrugged. "S'what made me thinka earth ponies. Begging y'all's pardon, but I ain't never met a pegasus nor a unicorn as could handle any *real* sorta construction

work." She frowned at the jagged end of the beam. "Or *destruction* work, I s'pose. Oh, and ma'am?" She looked up at the scowling Princess Luna and shook her head so her pony tail flopped over her shoulder, tapped the ribbon there. "Might be you wanna *remember* a few things."

Princess Luna's eyes widened and rolled to her own ribbon, still tied at the base of her horn. "Yes, I..." She closed her eyes, took a breath, swallowed, and when she opened her eyes again, they were about half as scary as they'd been the last several minutes. "Thank you, Minister. And see? You do have some answers after all." She turned a strained smile toward Captain Destrier. "Captain, I'll ask you and the guard to give Minister Applejack your full cooperation." She tapped the beam with a front hoof. "Will you be needing this object any longer, Minister?"

Applejack's ears still twitched at the title, but it looked like the princess had gotten fond of it all of a sudden. "Yes'm, if you don't mind. Any saws we find, we can check their marks to these."

"Very well." Dark energy flowed from her horn, wrapped around the beam, and with a shimmer, it vanished, the muttering from the onlookers pausing for a moment, then getting even louder. "I've sent it to one of the empty rooms upstairs at the Night Palace; if you have need of it, let me or Minister Sparkle know. But for now, we've the business of the day to get on with." She nodded to Captain Destrier. "The Day Ministers may return to their places, captain."

Bowing his head, he touched a hoof to his chest and gave a trilling sort of whistle. The guard ponies all perked their ears, stomped a front hoof in unison, and marched to retake their positions along the walls. Princess Luna cocked her right front foreleg and took a stance, her mane almost flowing the way Princess Celestia's did, and her voice took on the same depths it had earlier. "All those with appointments for today, I shall be keeping Sister Celestia's usual schedule, and I thank Canterlot—I think all of Equestria—for giving me this chance to redeem myself."

More muttering from the ponies at the doors, some stepping back inside, their gazes darting upwards as they settled at their desks, but most heading away into the rest of the city in groups small and large; Applejack couldn't help scowling at that, knowing one of those ponies had triggered this whole thing, but, well, nothing she could do about that here and now. What she *could* do, though— She turned to Captain Destrier. "I reckon y'all can search out any hacksaw in the palace, captain?"

He nodded, gave a different sort of whistle, and two pegasi winged over, a uniformed unicorn flashing in beside them as they landed. "Commanders?" he said to the three. "We'll need a top to bottom search of—"

"Forget it." Rainbow Dash's voice; Applejack turned to see her shaking her head. "Whoever did this planned it real careful. They wouldn'ta left that saw anywhere near here." She shrugged. "At least, *I* wouldn'ta if it'd been *me*."

Applejack blew out a breath. "Reckon you're right, but we still gotta look." She pointed her snout at the four guard ponies. "If'n you was a earth pony wantin' to lay low in this town, where would you go?"

"Ground Town," one of the pegasi said so quickly, it was out before Captain Destrier's scowl could make her clench her mouth tight as a fist.

"Ground Town?" Applejack asked.

The captain's scowl softened into a look of regular annoyance. "There are agricultural fields carved on the flatlands in the middle of Canterlot, Minister. Most of the laborers there are, of course, earth ponies."

She nodded and turned to Dash. "You got any plans fer the next couple hours?"

Dash gave a wicked grin. "Can't say as how I do."

Applejack felt a tingle of excitement. "Then how 'bout you an' me head on out to this Ground Town and—"

Princess Luna clearing her throat made Applejack stop. "If you would, Minister, might I ask that you coordinate the investigation from here?" She lowered her head to Applejack's ear. "Please. I... I'd feel much better if my Minister of Honesty was nearby when ponies start lying to me about what happened here today."

Minister of Honesty? Applejack squinted down at her Element of Harmony necklace, blew out a breath, and nodded. "Well, I reckon I can go over the lista whoever was here this mornin' with Twilight and Captain Destrier, see if'n any names jump out as a suspect for our inside pony." She looked at Rainbow Dash. "Guess yer on yer own with that saw, gal."

"Naw." Rainbow Dash laughed, then called out, "Hey, Pinkie! You wanna take a walk?"

Shedding that jacket of Rarity's made Dash feel twenty percent lighter—she could barely stop herself from racing up into the weird currents twisting around the open spaces between all Canterlot's little towers. "The unicorns must do mosta the weather stuff around here," she told Pinkie Pie as they trotted into the streets, the Day Palace behind them shining like a jewel in the morning sun. "The air's *itchy* with magic!"

Pinkie nodded. "Like my uncle Zebulon used to say, 'When in Canterlot, do as the Canterlotians.' Except I don't think 'Canterlotians' is really a word."

Dash gave her a sideways glance. "Where are you getting all these uncles from?"

"The usual places." Pinkie pointed her snout at the sky. "It's okay if you wanna wing it, Dashie. I'll be fine down here."

And as much as the wind was tickling her, teasing her with its odd swirls— "Naw." She tossed her mane like she didn't care. "Maybe after we get done with this whole saw thing I can take a spin around." A thought made her brighten. "Or later when I head up to the Citadel! I mean, did you see? Captain Destrier? Knowing who I was? He gave a talk once at flight school about joining the guard and said he turned down the Wonderbolts—*turned them down!*—so he could serve Princess Celestia! That's, like, either the coolest thing ever or the craziest! I can't wait to meet some of those guard ponies and see what their HQ is like!"

Pinkie had started skipping. "You know what I like best? The way it smells here!"

Dash blinked. "Smells?" She tipped her head back, took a few whiffs. "It just smells... I dunno, clean, maybe."

"Exactly!" Pinkie did a quick little spin, and Dash couldn't help grinning at the startled stares she got from a couple of unicorns walking the other way along the shiny white pavement of the street. "This is where the fresh laundry scent goes when it's done with the laundry! And when cookies cool down? The smell packs its bag and moves in here!"

"Uhhh..." Dash looked around a little nervously. "You aren't gonna sing, are you?"

Pinkie flashed a giant grin. "D'you want me to?"

"No!" It came out louder and faster than Dash had intended, but Pinkie didn't seem insulted; she just shrugged and kept skipping along the street.

Dash followed, but she still couldn't help wondering what the city would look like from the air. Down on the ground, it seemed really spread out, a lot of rolling grassy hills that the streets wound around, shops and cafes scattered here and there, all the towers twisting up ev'rywhere with windows and balconies at random intervals: maybe those were apartments? Off among the hills sat other buildings—they looked more like mushrooms to Dash since she couldn't really tell how big they were, not from down here at least.

It just wasn't right, seeing things from a ground-bound angle like this! Aloft, it was so much easier to shift around, to see things from every side, and with Canterlot, well, the city changed a *lot*, she knew, depending on whether you were flying in low from, say, Ponyville, or wheeling past high above like the patrols she'd done out of Cloudsdale during flight school.

From below, for instance, the city seemed to perch on the side of the mountain like an eagle's nest, but really, that was just the two palaces sticking out on the city's south side. It was only from above, in fact, that a flyer could see that the mountain wasn't really a mountain, that it was the cone of a big dead volcano, that the *real* city of Canterlot stretched up along the walls inside and spread out onto the fertile valley in the middle.

That was the best part as far as Dash was concerned: the way Canterlot was like two things at once. She just couldn't see how ponies could really appreciate that if the only angle they saw it from was down on the ground all the time! And while she'd flown over the top of the city, she'd never had a chance to swoop around inside the crater before. She sighed, turned to Pinkie... and blinked at the big floppy white hat her friend was wearing. "Where did you get *that*?"

"Like it?" Pinkie took a few mincing steps like she was a model on a runway. "A guy back there was selling them. I woulda got you one, but you were all spacing out and I didn't wanna bother you."

Dash looked back, saw an earth pony pulling a cart full of hats up the road toward the scattered towers they'd been walking through, and realized they'd come down onto the flatlands at the center of Canterlot, the unicorn city almost lost on all sides in the morning mist rising around them.

Another bad thing about poking around on the ground like this: It let her mind wander too much!

Shaking her head, she focused forward and found that the area ahead looked a lot like Ponyville: buildings square and plain, the trees and flowerbeds giving the place a much earthier smell than the rarefied air Pinkie had been going on about when they'd been further up the slope. Ground Town, Captain Destrier's lieutenant had called it, the place where the earth ponies who tended Canterlot's fields lived. And maybe where somepony had the saw that had cut through the beam at the Day Palace...

Time to unleash her secret weapon. "Okay, Pinkie." Dash waved a hoof at the cluster of shops and houses before them. "Where d'you wanna go first?"

"Hmmm..." Pinkie scrunched up her face. "Let's see." Suddenly she reared back on her hind legs, spun around with her front hoofs flailing. "Eenie meenie, chili beanie baked with three-cheese tortellini! Doughnuts, coffee, tea, and milk to eat with breakfast or its ilk!" She screeched to a halt pointing at a storefront down the street, its window displaying hats just like the one she had on. "Not there!" Pinkie scowled at her hoof and shifted it to point at another building, tables set up out front, more tables showing through a big picture window with a stack of pancakes painted on it. "*There!*" And she galloped across the street.

Rainbow Dash grinned and took off after her. Random Pinkie Pie might be, but when she started spinning, twitching, and pointing, it usually meant *something*.

This time, though, the scent of pancakes, eggs, and hash browns frying made Dash think maybe it was hunger that had guided Pinkie's aim. Not that Dash would turn down a bowl of maple syrup with some oats floating in it: it'd been *hours* since breakfast.

Pinkie bounded right in, Dash following to hear her shout, "A double good 'good morning,' sir! What've you got with chocolate in it?"

Stepping inside, Dash saw an older dun-colored earth pony wearing a white apron blinking at Pinkie from the other side of the counter, the whole wall behind him—and *all* the walls, she saw as she looked around—decorated with old farming equipment: buckets with the bottoms knocked out; wash tubs and butter churns; most of a plow a lot more rickety than the one she'd seen Big Mackintosh drag around Sweet Apple Acres.

"For breakfast?" The pony behind the counter rubbed his chin, then winked at Pinkie Pie. "I reckon I could mix a couple spoonfuls of chocolate syrup into some cream of wheat."

"Yes, please!" Pinkie slid into a place at the counter, her tail wagging like Applejack's dog Winona when Dash would bring her biscuits.

The guy turned to Rainbow Dash. "And you, ma'am?"

From here, Dash could see his cutie mark was a pancake flipping, so she nodded to the grill along the back wall. "I'm guessing pancakes're the house specialty?"

He grinned. "Pancake by trade and Pancake by name." Reaching under the counter, he brought out two bowls, poured water into them from a jug, and slid them in front of Dash and Pinkie. "One short stack coming up!"

"Make it a tall," Dash said. "It's been a long morning."

"Hey!" Pinkie jumped a little and turned her head quickly from side to side. "It *is* morning!"

Dash lapped at her bowl. "Ever since sunup, Pinkie."

"Well, whaddaya know?" She winked at Dash, then turned a confused expression toward Pancake, pouring batter onto the sizzling grill. "So how come we're the only ones in here having breakfast?"

The pony sighed. "Used to be full ev'ry morning from the Night Ministry letting out—a lotta those ponies live over in North Ridge, see, so they'd pass right through here coming and going to work. We still get the day crew stopping by for supper on their way home, but, well, hardly anybody wants pancakes for supper."

"Huh." Dash tried to sound like she was just making conversation. "Hadn't really thought about it, but I guess Princess Luna closing the Night Ministry musta ruffled a few feathers 'round here." She shook her wings at him when he turned to blink at her.

He shrugged, turned back, flipped the pancakes halfway to the ceiling, grinned at them landing perfectly back on the grill. "Folks adjust."

"Pssst!" Pinkie hissed, and Dash scowled at her. Just when she had the suspect on the ropes with her probing questions! She was about to tell Pinkie to keep quiet when Pinkie pointed to a section of the wall above the plow parts. "I *don't* spy with my little eye something beginning with 's!'"

Dash could only stare at her friend. Pinkie pointed again, and Dash swung her head around to look at the wall. A curving stretch of paint along the top of it *did* seem to be a slightly darker color, and... was the bottom of the curved shape jagged with little teeth instead of smooth like the top? In fact— "A saw!" she whispered.

Pinkie put a hoof to her mouth and turned back to Pancake, drizzling chocolate syrup over the bowl of mush he'd dished out of a big pot on the stove. "Gee, Mr. Pancake," Pinkie said in such a girly voice, Dash almost laughed, "I'll bet you know ev'rypony in this whole valley—prob'bly in this whole city!"

Pancake grinned again, flipping Dash's order onto a plate, sliding it and Pinkie's bowl onto a serving cart, and pushing it along the counter to where they were sitting. "You been here as long as me, you get to know a lotta folks, all right."

"Hey, yeah!" Dash thought she knew where Pinkie was heading. "So if we were, say, looking for somepony to do some work for us—just regular, like, *work* work, chopping and hauling and cutting and sawing and like that—you'd prob'bly know folks we could hire!"

He pushed the bowl onto the counter in front of Pinkie. "I might just. There's—" Hoofs clattering in the doorway stopped him, and Dash looked back to see four ponies rush in, two pegasi and two earth ponies, each pair looking so alike, Dash could only guess they were brothers and sisters. "Now that's timing!" Pancake said, his voice full of smiles. "These gals was just looking for some folks to help 'em out."

"Really?" the earth colt said, no smile anywhere near him, the cutie mark on his ash-colored hide a big ax. "Turns out *we're* looking for a pink pony who just bought one of Hatrack's hats. He said she told him to send the bill to Princess Luna at the Night Palace 'cause she was her new Minister of Laughter."

Dash swallowed, the other ponies pretty big and unhappy-looking, too, the air suddenly smelling like it did just before a thunderstorm. "Uhh," she said, trying to throw together some sort of story about how Pinkie had always had that hat, but—

"That's me!" Pinkie cried out, spinning from her place at the counter to stand in front of the four frowning ponies. "Pinkie Pie, at your service!" She put a hoof to her chin. "And I hafta say, the four of you look like you could *use* a laugh."

"Oh, don't worry," said the pegasus filly, a little stylized tornado on her dusty-white flanks. "We're gonna have all *kindsa* fun here in just a couple seconds." And she tensed up, unmistakably about to launch herself directly at Pinkie.

Which was all Dash needed to see. Leaping forward, she beat her wings hard against the air, zipped over Pinkie's head so close, she felt that mop of a pink mane tickle her stomach, and bowled into the tornado pegasus with exactly enough force to knock her

onto her back and slide her along the tile floor straight out the door, Dash following along to press her snout right into the surprised filly's face. "You wanna talk?" Dash said. "Let's do it outside, huh?"

"Hey!" came a cry from inside, and Dash heard the unmistakable ruffle of wings unfurling; springing up and sideways, she easily dodged the pegasus colt, a red and yellow streak that banked wide through the air above the shop across the street and started heading back toward her.

"Don't!" she shouted, but it was too late; side slipping again, she tried to stomp the colt as he rocketed under her, the same sort of surprise on his face as she'd seen on his sister's, but Dash knew it wouldn't help. She could only shift the angle of his trajectory by maybe an inch, not nearly enough to stop him from smashing right through the plate glass window of Pancake's diner.

She followed in his wake, saw him sprawled along the counter, his face in Pinkie's chocolate mush, Pinkie herself dodging the kicks aimed at her by the brother and sister earth ponies. "You guys are really good dancers!" she was saying. "Better than your pegasus friend, at least!"

The pegasus groaned, Pancake shouting, "My window!"

And *another* shout rang out from the street: "Freeze, all of you, in the name of the Equestrian Home Guard!"

Snapping around again, Dash saw Captain Destrier and four uniformed pegasi landing in front of the diner, six flashes of light resolving into unicorns also wearing the familiar white and gold armor.

Stay cool, Dash, she thought, then out loud, her voice not even cracking: "Hey, captain! Just in time to join the party!"

Captain Destrier cocked his head, his hoofs crackling the shards of glass as he stepped inside. "Well," he said, looking around. "I can see that Minister Applejack's idea to follow you, Minister Dash, was indeed a sound one." He gave a whistle. "Guards! Take all these ponies into custody!"

"What?" Rainbow Dash stared at him. "You're *arresting* us?"

A sigh, and Captain Destrier put a hoof to his forehead. "Not *you*, ministers..."

"Oh." Dash gave a little laugh. "Right."

"You can't seriously suspect Pancake!" Rainbow Dash pounded a hoof against Captain Destrier's desk. "He didn't *do* anything!"

Captain Destrier gave her a sideways glance; Dash grinned sheepishly, brushed the dusty hoofprint away, and settled herself back onto the carpet, the noontime light shining bright through the window of the captain's office. "I mean, yeah," Dash went on, "it was his hacksaw, but he just *loaned* it to those other guys! They didn't tell him they were gonna use it to chop down part of the Day Palace's roof and try to squash ev'rypony or whatever!"

"In the first place," the captain said, "we don't know for a fact that these are the ponies who did it. That's why we call them 'suspects.' In the second place, we still don't have the saw in question; we found none here on the palace grounds, and of the suspects you led us to, only this Pancake fellow is doing any talking. In the third—"

"There!" Dash couldn't keep from springing up to hover over the carpet in Captain Destrier's office. "See? He's *trying* to help us! Those other jerks aren't! *They're* the ones we need to lean on, not Pancake!"

He cocked his head. "This means a great deal to you."

It wasn't a question, so Dash didn't answer it.

"And yet—" The captain glanced at the big clock ticking against the wall. "You only met this Pancake fellow five and a half hours ago. Is that correct?"

"Doesn't matter." She wished she could use words as well as Twilight Sparkle, could explain to him why she was right, but, well, she couldn't. So she just set her jaw and said, "He didn't do anything."

Captain Destrier looked at her. Rainbow Dash looked back. And after a minute, the captain blew out a breath, touched a hoof to a part of his desk, and spoke into the glowing circle that appeared there: "Yeoman Sycamore, if you'd bring your pad in here, please?"

A soft clatter of hoofs in the hallway, and a young light blue unicorn stepped in, a pad and quill pen floating in the glow of her horn. "Take a note to Warden Hoosegow. On Minister Dash's recommendation, she's to release the earth pony Pancake immediately." He turned half-closed eyes toward her. "Anything else, Minister?"

"Fix his window," she said without even having to think about it. "And if he wants to repaint his sign or hire some other pony to do it, tell him Princess Luna'll pay for that, too."

The captain's eyes opened wide, and he blinked them several times before a smile curled his muzzle. "You heard those last, yeoman?"

"Yes, sir." The quill scratched against the paper.

"Dismissed, then."

The unicorn tapped a front hoof against the floor, turned, and left the room, Captain Destrier shaking his head. "I don't know that I've ever met another pony quite like you, Minister Dash."

"Prob'bly not." She ruffled her wings. "Call me Rainbow, and tell me what time dinner is tonight."

• • •

Fluttershy could only stare. "And what happened then?" she asked breathlessly.

Rainbow waved a hoof. "Pancake told me I could have breakfast at his place any time on the house, and I'll be heading over to formal mess at the Citadel tonight as the captain's guest a half-hour after sundown." She grinned her big grin, the one that always made Fluttershy want to grin, too, and leaned back against the small cloud she'd somehow managed to gather together in the middle of the sitting room Princess Luna was using while in the Day Palace.

Fluttershy could only stare at that, too. Cloud handling was supposed to be in a pegasi's blood, as natural as breathing or even flying, but most days, Fluttershy found, she could barely manage anything more complicated than walking on them. "Yep, yep, yep," Rainbow was going on. "Not a bad day's work, I'd say."

A snort from Applejack, settled on a cushion beside one of the open windows among the bookshelves, the afternoon outside such a perfect crystal blue, Fluttershy imagined weather ponies with big brushes painting it. "Least y'all got somethin' to show," Applejack said. "Me an' Fluttershy spent hours poking 'round that whole dome in the throne room and didn't find nothin'!"

Fluttershy nodded sadly. It had been kind of scary, flying so close to the fancy metal and glasswork all over that ceiling, but Applejack had been there, too, and watching her crawl along those little steel catwalks was so much scarier, Fluttershy had spent most of the time worrying about her friend instead of herself.

"And if that weren't bad enough," Applejack was going on, "turns out there *weren't* no guest list fer the shin-dig this mornin': nopony knows who all was here and and who all *wasn't*! We's no closer now to catchin' the unicorn who triggered the thing to fall than we been all day!"

The door to the sitting room crashed open, Fluttershy's heart bouncing, and Pinkie Pie leaped in. "Lunch time!" Her smile cracked into a scowl. "Was an hour ago! Where were *you* all?"

Applejack's eyes narrowed. "We was gettin' some actual *work* done!"

But before Fluttershy could try saying something to stop the argument she could smell brewing, she heard several more hoofsteps in the hall, and Princess Luna came into the room with Twilight and Rarity, two soldier ponies in their scary armor taking up positions just outside the door.

Fluttershy leaped up and bowed, the others doing the same, and the princess nodded her head, the door closing. "Ministers. A bit more excitement than I'd counted on our first day."

Applejack stuck out her chin. "Don't you worry none, ma'am. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Princess Luna nodded again, and looking at her, Fluttershy couldn't help speaking up: "Did you eat anything at lunch, your Highness?"

The surprised look the princess snapped over made Fluttershy's knees shake, but those drooping eyelids, that sagging tail, the tight and anxious waver that rose from her like steam from a bath: Fluttershy knew signs of exhaustion when she saw them. "You need to eat, Princess, then you need to take a nap."

The others were staring at her, and Fluttershy suddenly realized she was giving instructions to the pony who currently controlled the sun and stars. Her ears folded, and she opened her mouth to squeak out an apology, but Princess Luna was doing some more nodding, her eyes closed and a little smile on her lips. "I'd been wondering why Celestia's schedule listed several napping periods." She moved toward Fluttershy like a

leaf on a breeze, bent down, and touched her horn to the ribbon in Fluttershy's mane. "Will it be all right if I have my sandwich *after* my nap?"

Fluttershy wished she could blow away like a leaf, too, but instead she got herself to nod.

The princess straightened to her full height. "During her long years running both day and night, Sister developed certain protocols concerning how and why she should be roused from one of her naps. The Day Ministry is now operating under those protocols, but you six—" She looked around the room. "If you feel anything needs my attention, please bring it to me at once." She closed her eyes again, Fluttershy feeling her fatigue as if it were her own. "I'm so very glad you agreed to help me with this. I... when that beam fell, I almost... the darkness—"

She stopped, shook her head quickly, stepped toward the door at the back of the room. "But I'd best away to my couch before Minister Fluttershy turns her fabled stare upon me. I shall see you all in two hours." The door opened at the flare of Princess Luna's horn, and she walked through, the door clicking closed behind her.

A moment of silence, then Pinkie Pie's tail frizzed. "Ooo! I forgot to ask her about the tiki party tonight!"

Pinkie made half a move toward the back door, and Fluttershy found herself airborne, spinning to land right in front of her friend. "Don't you *dare*, Pinkie Pie!" she said with a force that surprised her. "That can wait till after her nap!"

It seemed to surprise Pinkie, too, the way her eyes went wider than Fluttershy had ever seen. "Taking charge!" Pinkie said. "I like it!"

"Besides, darling," Rarity drawled from the other side of the room, settling herself upon one of the cushions, "Twilight and I already *have* an engagement for this evening."

Twilight looked up from the book she'd taken from one of the shelves. "We what?"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Orrery Stargazer? The stallion I met this morning before all the unpleasantness began? He invited me to a reception at his uncle's, and I asked one of those delightful soldier ponies to take him our reply that we'd be most pleased to attend this evening. I thought you'd want to come since you knew his name when I mentioned it—"

"No, no, no, no, no," Twilight said quickly. "Ory and me, we..." She swallowed so hard, Fluttershy could hear it. "We go way back."

"Ooooo!" Pinkie spun in place. "*That* sounds juicy!"

"It's not-! We're just-!" Twilight stopped, took a breath, shook her head. "Ever since we were foals, Ory and I have been... connected, I guess you'd say: we were still in first grade when his mother declared that he would take over as Night Minister when she retired, and since my parents worked in both Ministries and Princess Celestia had taken such an interest in me, I... I became pretty much the consensus choice to become Day Minister whenever Lord Daybreak stepped down.

"But, see-" She stopped again. "It's traditional for the two Ministers to be members of either the Daybreak or Stargazer families, and since I wasn't, everypony sort of thought that... that Ory and me, that we'd... we'd-"

A little laugh from Applejack. "Had the two'a you all hitched up, did they?"

A bigger laugh from Rainbow. "Twilight! You never told us you had a colt friend!"

"One date!" A blush glowed over Twilight's purple cheeks. "Junior prom! It was the most uncomfortable night of my life, and Ory pretty much frowned the whole time, too!" She blew out a breath. "We just didn't 'click' at all, but by then it was like we were set in stone: our parents were already picking out the designs for our wedding bowls!" The hard-as-granite look that came into her eyes made Fluttershy want to hide. "Never mind that I didn't want to do it or that Ory was even more of a stick-in-the-mud than I was or that-"

"Really?" A smile played over Rarity's lips. "He seemed rather charming to me."

Rainbow cleared her throat, and Applejack said, "Sugar cube, *you* could charm the rocks right outta the fields."

Rarity batted her eyelashes. "Well, *that's* true."

Twilight was tapping a hoof against the floor. "But my *point* is: he and I together in the same room is a recipe for awkwardness. And after what Spike heard out in the city this morning, we *definitely* don't need any-"

"Hey, yeah!" Pinkie looked up from the books she was stacking into a wall. "Where *is* Spike, anyway? I haven't seen him since before the thing fell this morning!"

"Ah." Twilight cleared her throat. "I guess you and Dash had already left before he- See, he always had a lot more friends in Canterlot than I did, and pretty much everypony he's

spoken to today—" She looked around and leaned forward, her voice dropping. "They're all convinced that Princess Luna can't be trusted!"

"What?" Fluttershy hadn't meant to speak, but the words just squeaked out of her. "Why?"

Twilight was shaking her head. "Spike heard all kinds of reasons—because she was Nightmare Moon, of course, but also because she disbanded the Night Ministry after a thousand years of service, because she rarely attends social functions whether they're held during the day *or* at night, because she doesn't stay long when she does attend and never seems engaged or interested while she's there." She sighed. "More than a year she's been back, and, well, she said it herself: we're the closest things she has to friends..."

Applejack gave a snort. "Which sure does take the biscuit! Ain't gonna do us no good askin' 'round town who dropped that dang beam this mornin' if'n folks're wantin' to give 'em a medal!" She shook her head. "'Specially since it hadta be a inside job. Ain't no other way them ponies coulda got in here an' sawed that beam mosta the way through without nopony noticin'." Determination filled her face, and Fluttershy felt better just seeing it. "I'm tellin' ya, Twilight, we needsta talk to them two Ministers, Lord Daybreak an' Lady Stargazer, an' we needsta talk to 'em now!"

"They'll be here at three." Twilight nodded at the big pendulum clock softly ticking away along the wall. "I'm not looking forward to *that* little get-together, either."

Rarity gave a little sniff. "Fine! You needn't come to Ory Stargazer's reception even though it's only likely to be the single most important thing any of us does today!"

"What?" Rainbow sprang forward from her cloud pillow. "Hey, I caught the guys who tried to drop that beam on the crowd!" She shrugged. "Unless, y'know, it turns out it *wasn't* them, but I caught 'em, whoever they are!"

"Yeah!" came Pinkie's voice, but when Fluttershy looked over, all she saw was a big circular wall of books—'til Pinkie's head popped up from inside. "And I got to dance with some guys who were pretty darn good!"

Rainbow rubbed her forehead. "Pinkie, they were *fighting* with you!"

"Really?" Pinkie blinked. "Then I guess they weren't as good as I thought."

"Yes, yes," Rarity said. "All valid accomplishments." She turned to Applejack, the cider-colored earth pony's scowl making Fluttershy's ears fold. "Especially you, Applejack, the

way you've been thrown into heading this entire investigation and all. But, well, you heard Twilight: Our princess has an image problem in the city at large." Rarity sighed. "And it looks as if it will be up to Fluttershy and myself to remedy that."

"Who?" A chill shot through Fluttershy's wings. "Me? How... how can I-?"

"The two of us *together*, darling!" Rarity's eyes sparked, and Fluttershy's heart sped up: her friend was getting one of her ideas. "I, the up-and-coming fashion designer! You, the beloved former model known across Equestria! We shall lend the princess our unimpeachable cachets and reverse this terrible declining trend in the only way such a thing *can* be reversed!" She leaped to her hoofs, her mane flying so dramatically, Fluttershy had to catch her breath. "With overwhelming fabulousity!"

A little silence, then Twilight's voice: "Not sure that's a word, Rarity."

"Nonetheless!" Rarity fixed such an imploring gaze on Fluttershy that she felt frozen in place. "We must all serve our princess to the best of our meager abilities, and if that means Fluttershy and I must attend every fashionable gala and salon scheduled this week in Canterlot, then who are we to shirk our duty?" Her eyes wavered. "Surely you can see that, can't you?"

"I—" Fluttershy began, wanting with all her heart to come up with a reason why she should just head back to her room in the Night Palace and stay there 'til it was time to go home. But... She sighed. "If you think it'll help the princess."

"It will." It was Twilight who said it, and Fluttershy looked over to see the purple unicorn with a thoughtful look on her face. "This is another really good idea, Rarity."

Rarity smiled. "Why do you always sound so surprised?"

Twilight returned the smile. "I'm a slow learner."

The others had gone on talking—"planning strategy," Twilight had called it—but Fluttershy couldn't focus on anything but the upcoming party at some strange stallion's house. It made her stomach tighten, and her breath got so loud and raggedy, Applejack had finally suggested she go lie down for awhile.

Pinkie had volunteered to take her back to the Night Palace, but Fluttershy hadn't wanted to be any trouble. Panic building, trying to think of something soothing she could do without bothering anypony, the picture and the words had just popped into her head: "I'll just... just go out into the garden," she'd said.

To be honest, she'd been hoping for an excuse all day to get outside. The palaces were very pretty, of course, but nothing about them breathed the way a flower or a tree or a bird did. The stones of the walls sat around tame and shaped and settled, not like real stones, all funny and lumpy and friendly. The buildings looked like the guard ponies, she realized as she hurried past the two standing outside the sitting room door: stern and kind of scary, like they didn't really want her there.

Fluttershy picked up her pace, the scent of fresh air and growing things tugging at her; down the stairs, around some corners, knowing the way even though she hadn't used these corridors before, galloping now almost, blushing at the stares of the ponies she passed in the hallways, she gave one final burst of speed and came out into—

The sunlight of a late fall afternoon, so crisp it seemed to rustle against her freshly-dried blankets. She breathed a silent 'thank you' to Princess Luna for the feeling, closed her eyes and just felt the whole day caressing her skin, a breeze as smooth as milk and twice as tasty, damp earth somewhere ahead calling to her. She soaked in it, her heart settling for the first time since this had all started Saturday morning, opened her eyes, and stepped through the little gate into the palace gardens.

Everything had been trimmed back for the approaching winter, of course, the loam sleepy under her hoofs, many of the trees and bushes already with their leaves run off—though the untrampled ground made Fluttershy wonder if the unicorns used magic to help the foliage get ready for its winter nap. Still, she found herself gasping with nearly every step she took, the aromas and the colors and lovely murmurings of the branches and twigs as they—

"Eep!" somepony squeaked off to her left, and Fluttershy jumped into the air, ready to head for open sky if it was—

A little unicorn filly a slightly darker yellow than Fluttershy herself, her eyes gray, her mane and tail a purple so deep it was almost black. No cutie mark showed on her flank, and she seemed every bit as terrified as Fluttershy: "Please don't throw me in jail!" she wailed.

"Jail?" Fluttershy blinked down at the filly. "Of course not! Why would I ever do that?"

"'Cause I'm trespassing!" Tears welled up in her eyes. "I ought to be in school right now and my brother says if the guards or the gardeners or the princess catches me, they'll throw me in jail for sure!"

"Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't!" Fluttershy reached a front hoof for a leaf of the fern they were standing beside and bent it down to the filly. "Dry your eyes. I won't tell anypony you're here."

The filly wiped her nose on the fern leaf, then jumped back like she'd been stung. "But you're one of the princess's advisers or something! I saw you and the rest of them this morning with the princess, and I've seen you somewhere before, too! I *know* it!"

And as much as Fluttershy wanted to hide, she couldn't help asking, "You mean you've been here since this morning? But... but it's past lunchtime now!"

"I know." The filly hung her head. "I just... I just wanted to—" She looked back up, her horn glowing with sudden fire. "Everypony says such awful things about Princess Luna! But *I* know she's not mean anymore! I can see in her eyes how sorry she is, but my mom and my dad and my brother and at school, they all just... they don't *understand*!" Her horn sputtered out, and she sniffed. "I just wanted to... I don't know. To tell the princess that I... that she... that she wasn't all by herself is all. I guess..."

Fluttershy's heart beat faster, but not with fear for a change. "That's very nice of you," she said. "And in fact—" She settled back onto the ground. "If you don't mind too much, may I ask your name?"

The filly blinked. "I'm Juniper Borealis, ma'am, but—"

"And can you use the magic of your horn to untie this ribbon from my mane, Juniper?"

"Ribbon?" Juniper's eyes got even bigger. "But... *you* were all wearing those ribbons! Even the princess!"

"That's right." Fluttershy smiled her gentlest smile, the one she used when animals were hurt or scared or confused. "And if you wear it around your horn, even if you can't get close enough to the princess to talk to her, she'll *see* it. And then she'll know you're her friend, too."

The amazement that blossomed over Juniper's face pushed the last of her tears away. "You... you really mean it?"

"I do." Fluttershy lowered her head.

Another moment, then Juniper's horn blazed up again. Fluttershy felt some tugging at her mane, and the ribbon came away, Fluttershy's mane falling forward to half-cover her face again. "Wow..." Juniper breathed out, her eyes focused upward, the ribbon slowly wrapping her horn and tying itself into a bow. "That's—" Her gaze came back down, and she jumped back with a gasp. "You're Fluttershy! From the magazines! I *knew* I'd seen you, but with your hair back, I wasn't sure! But it's really, really you!"

Fluttershy forced her smile not to waver. "It is me. Now, will you help Princess Luna by wearing your ribbon?"

"I will!" Juniper's face lit up, her every tear vanished. But just as quickly, the wrinkles returned to her brow. "But... what will you do for *your* ribbon?"

"Oh, don't worry." Fluttershy patted Juniper between the ears. "My friend Rarity has lots of them. But you'd better get home, Juniper, before your parents get worried."

"I will!" Juniper cried out again. "And thank you, Fluttershy! Thank you so much!" The little unicorn reared up on her hind legs and waved her front hoofs in the air. "I've got a red ribbon! I've got a red ribbon!" She spun then and dashed for the garden's gate.

• • •

Twilight couldn't help smiling as Fluttershy breathily told them about her encounter in the garden. "So you're right, Rarity!" she finished with an excitement that Twilight rarely heard from her. "We *can* help the princess by being us!"

Rarity was nodding and rubbing her chin. "And the ribbons will make lovely tokens to pass out as well." She raised her voice. "If that's all right, Pinkie Pie?"

Pinkie had built two book towers by now and was busily constructing a tunnel to connect them, something Twilight would have disapproved of, but, well, the books here, she'd

already noted, were copies of old agricultural manuals used by young unicorns to practice the techniques of magically working a quill pen. "It's great," Pinkie said, absently waving a hoof. "Lemme just get this flying buttress nailed down, and we can go cut 'em."

She set a few more books out, and Pinkie, Rarity and Fluttershy left, heading for Rarity's workroom. "We'll meet back here just before sundown for the procession to the Night Palace," Twilight told them, then turned to Rainbow Dash, still lounging against her cloud. "If you'd like to sit in on our meeting with—"

The cloud vanished, Dash sitting forward and shaking her head. "Meetings and me are allergic to each other." She stood, stretched, flared her wings, and jumped into a hover. "I've been wanting to take a turn around town, give it a look from the air. I'll be back for the big parade, though!" And she shot out the window, Applejack grabbing her hat to keep it from blowing off.

"Allergic," Applejack muttered. She blew out a breath. "You an' me, then, I reckon, Twilight."

The clock said twenty minutes to three, and Twilight settled deeper into the cushion, determined not to spend the time sunk in worry. Just because she was about to interrogate two ponies her parents had known for years, whose houses she'd been to, whose children had been her first playmates—but never her friends, she realized, smiling at Applejack, dozing on her own cushion beside the window. For all that she'd grown up with Ory and his sisters and that whole herd of Daybreak foals, she hadn't really known them, hadn't really known *anypony* till all the events that had brought her to Ponyville two summers ago...

A light knock startled her from her thoughts; the door opened, and one of the white and gold armored guard ponies stuck his head in. "Minister Sparkle? Lord Daybreak and Lady Stargazer are here."

Twilight blinked at him, looked at the clock, saw it still showed nearly twenty minutes till three. Applejack had roused herself by this time, and the quizzical look she gave Twilight summed up Twilight's own thoughts. "O... kay. Show them in, then, please, lieutenant."

He bowed, pushed the door the rest of the way open, turned to face the hallway, and the two unicorns came trotting in, Lord Daybreak looking older than Twilight remembered, the white streaks in his steel blue mane wider than before, but Lady Stargazer seeming quite chipper, a sporty red shawl around her shoulders that set off the blackish-green of

her coat quite nicely. Twilight stepped forward with a smile she only partly felt: "Lord Daybreak, Lady Stargazer, may I present my friend Applejack?"

Applejack had also climbed to her hoofs, gave the two a slight bow, the open suspicion on her face ruffling Twilight's mane a little, but "Pleased to meet'cha" was all the earth pony said.

Lady Stargazer gave a laugh. "Oh, now, Twilight, I'm not really Lady Stargazer anymore, so please, both of you, call me Phillipa." She nodded toward Lord Daybreak. "Unlike poor old Bucephalus here, I'm out of the government game now, and let me tell you, I feel ten years younger." Her hazel-brown eyes wrinkled with her smile. "But look at you, Twilight! Right here at the princess's right hoof! Just like we always knew!"

A snort from Lord Daybreak. "Wrong princess, though, and a damned nuisance this whole thing's been." But he smiled, his eyes dark blue and his coat the deep honey-gold of a summer dawn. "But Phil's right: it's good to see you again, girl. And good to meet you, Minister Applejack."

So many memories washed around inside Twilight's head, she found herself tongue-tied. Fortunately— "Y'all're a little early," Applejack said, waving a hoof at some of the other cushions. "But we really 'ppreciate yer time an' hope not to take up too much of it."

Lord Daybreak nodded and sat, Lady Stargazer—no, Twilight corrected herself; Phillipa—Phillipa tucking herself onto the cushion beside his. "Hard to believe," she said, shaking her head, "that anypony would actually *do* something as horrible as dropping that beam on the crowd this morning!"

"Oh, they weren't," Applejack said, taking her own seat again.

"Weren't?" Twilight blinked at her friend. "Weren't what?"

"Weren't droppin' it on the crowd." Applejack shrugged. "Not really, I mean. Whoever done it knew there'd be plenty enough unicorns in the audience to stop it from fallin' even if Princess Luna didn't see it and stop it herself. They didn't want no pony gettin' *hurt*, after all."

For the second time in as many minutes, Twilight found herself speechless. Lord Daybreak, though, made several sputtering noises before finally getting out: "Didn't want anypony getting hurt? Really, minister! You make it sound like some sort of foalish joke!"

"That it surely weren't, sir." Applejack sounded more serious than Twilight had ever heard her. "Can't rightly say what our culprit had in mind, but whatever they're playin' at, they wanted to let us know they could easily be playin' for keeps." She leaned forward. "I was actually hopin' to get any thoughts you two might have had 'bout all this. Seein' as how y'all know Canterlot inside-out an' sideways an all."

Lord Daybreak nodded. "The Day Ministry is entirely dedicated to catching whoever's behind this foul deed. An attack on the Day Palace is an attack upon all of Equestria, and that it should happen at such a sensitive time in our history, a history we all thought was mere legend just over a year ago, well, it's the gravest threat I can recall during all my years as Day Minister! I only wish I knew a way to contact our princess! Surely she would return then and set this whole matter—"

"She would," came Princess Luna's voice from the other end of the room, and Twilight leaped to her hoofs again, bowed to the floor, the others doing the same. "And however much I would like to call her, Minister Daybreak, I don't believe Sister Celestia would consider that the best answer to the problem we've had set before us."

"Set before us?" Lord Daybreak straightened from his bow and blinked at the princess as she stepped lightly across the carpet to settle on a cushion beside Applejack. "Forgive me, your Highness, but you make it sound as if this were—"

"A test!" Eyes wide, Phillipa Stargazer took half a step forward. "Of course! Oh, I was a fool not to see it before! She needs to see how we all work together, and what better way to do that than to rig up this whole—!"

"No!" Twilight couldn't keep her voice down. "Princess Celestia would *never* do such a thing! I mean, dropping a huge metal beam on an unsuspecting crowd? That's... that's—!"

"That's politics," Lord Daybreak muttered.

"Politics?" Twilight blinked at him.

Phillipa turned, cocked her head at Twilight. "And if there's one thing Princess Celestia is, it's a consummate politician. Watching her work a crowd, getting them to do what she wants while making them think it's their idea, pretending to involve them in decisions she's already made: everything I know about governing, I learned from her." She looked back at Princess Luna. "And I think you're right, your Highness. Calling her now would be a definite mistake."

"Quite so." Lord Daybreak gestured with a hoof. "After all, as Minister Applejack said, there's no real danger here." He blew out a breath. "That is quite the load off my mind, I have to say. If this is all just a test—"

"But it *isn't!*" Surprised she had the self-control not to shout, Twilight still felt herself blush. "It *can't* be! I mean, I've been Princess Celestia's student since I was old enough to talk, and—"

"And I," Phillipa said, the kindness in her voice making Twilight's face get even hotter, "have been her student since your parents were young." She patted Twilight's hoof. "I know it's hard discovering that your shining princess, the ideal of all your thoughts and dreams, isn't really all that different from the rest of us." She stood, bowed to Princess Luna, and Twilight saw the princess was looking away, such sadness on her face, Twilight almost cried out. "It's one reason I'm glad you did away with the Night Ministry, your Highness. Your honest insistence that you could do your job yourself got me out of the grinder, and I thank you for that every afternoon when I'm not girding up for another trip over here to mix it up with the rest of the politicians."

Lord Daybreak got to his hoofs as well. "Quite a productive meeting, Minister Applejack, Minister Sparkle, your Highness." His smile beamed, and Twilight could almost smell the relief rolling off him. "If we can keep up this level of cooperation, we'll *certainly* show Princess Celestia she's got nothing to worry about!" He bowed to Princess Luna, and she gave the scarcest bob of her head in return. "So!" he continued, looking at the clock. "Sunset in just under two hours! See you all there!" Almost a skip in his step, he headed for the door, Phillipa right behind him.

The only sound in the room after the door clicked shut was the ticking of the clock, and it took Twilight several of those ticks to find her voice. "You know Princess Celestia wouldn't do this, your Highness!"

"It makes sense," Princess Luna said softly, still not meeting Twilight's gaze. "She needs to know she can trust me not to go all Nightmare again at the first little crisis. And what better way to do that than to make up a crisis and—"

Twilight jumped the distance between herself and the princess, slid onto her knees in front of her, grabbed her hoofs between hers and stared up into her startled eyes. "Do you trust *me*, Princess Luna?"

A few more ticks of the clock, a few blinks, and the princess said, "Of... of course I do!"

"Then trust me on this. Princess Celestia wouldn't do this to you. She wouldn't do it to us. And she *certainly* wouldn't do it to all the ponies in Equestria."

Applejack's sigh made Twilight's ears perk. "I reckon it that way, too, ma'am. Them ruffians Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie caught, they don't seem to me the sort Princess Celestia'd turn to if'n she was puttin' any sorta plan together." Twilight turned, saw Applejack frowning at the door. "Them two as just left, though, them I ain't too sure about."

And as much as Twilight wanted to jump up and shout that they couldn't be involved any more than Princess Celestia was, she found just enough doubt in her to wonder...

"Very well." Princess Luna's voice was still soft, but she didn't sound nearly as lost any more. "Continue your investigation, Minister Applejack, but quietly. Perhaps we can lure the culprits out by making them think we're no longer searching for them." Twilight looked back, found she was still holding the princess's hoofs, the princess smiling down at her. "And thank you, Minister Sparkle."

Twilight moved to let go, her blush back, but the princess was bending her head, touching her horn to Twilight's, a sound like a crystal chime sending a wave of sweet warmth running straight out to the tip of her tail and making her catch her breath.

Then Princess Luna was rising, turning for the door, saying, "Four-thirty, ministers, if you'd be so kind, in the hall of the Day Palace. Sunset's at 4:44 this afternoon." And by the time Twilight could get her hoofs back underneath her to stand, the princess was out the door and gone.

So far, Pinkie Pie thought, humming a song backwards as she walked frontwards with her friends into the already darkening throne room of the Day Palace, it had been the best day ever.

Of course, she thought that about *every* day. And weirdly enough, it always turned out she was right.

She was wearing her dress again, the one Rarity had given her this morning, the one that hugged her tight with one part of it while the other part flared out all poofy and made her feel just exactly the way a balloon would feel, she was sure, if a balloon ever wore a dress–

And that was such a great idea–dresses for balloons!–she almost stopped to get her notebook out to write it down for when they got back to Ponyville.

Except she didn't have her pack on so she didn't have her notebook. Which meant she had no choice but to start muttering it to herself over and over–"Dresses for balloons! Dresses for balloons!"–since that was the best way, she knew, to let it squirm into her brain like bees into a tree stump–

Oooo. Dresses for bees...

"Ministers?" somepony was saying, and Pinkie looked up to see Princess Luna, her Highness drifting down the carpet from the throne, her mane definitely fuller and more flowing like her older sister's. "Good evening."

Pinkie's heart grew about three sizes bigger every time she saw one of Equestria's two royal ponies, and as much as she wanted to start laughing and dancing at the feeling, she knew that sort of thing would summon Twilight Sparkle's grumpy look. So she bowed instead which was even *better* 'cause all her friends bowed at the same time and that made it just exactly like a dance!

"Captain Destrier?" the princess said, and the gold and orange pegasus that Dashie liked so much stepped forward with a bow of his own. He was really good at it.

He straightened, turned smartly, gave a whistle, and a slow sort of waltzing music started up. It wasn't sad, but at the same time it kind of *was*. Just exactly like evening, she realized, the way it's sad that the day's over but not really sad since night time can be fun, too, and then there'll be the next day and the next day and the next day after that, each one, she knew, destined to be the best day ever.

The captain began marching toward the big doors at the end of the throne room, and Princess Luna followed, all Pinkie's friends falling into step behind her. So Pinkie did, too, tried her best to match her hooffalls with the tapping of the princess's silver shoes, but with the princess being just that much taller and her legs just that much longer, Pinkie ended up kind of hopping rather than walking.

Oh, well. Close enough.

Ignoring the narrow-eyed almost-glare Rarity was giving her, she concentrated on the looks Rainbow Dash was so purposefully not giving Captain Destrier. He wanted to be looking at her, too, Pinkie could tell, and she started thinking about the fun of being Auntie Pinkie to a little herd of blue and orange flying foals even though she knew it would never happen. The captain was married to his job and Dashie was married to the open sky, and that pretty much was that!

More soldier ponies lined the hallway, the arch at the end showing the late afternoon sunlight against the dark but still sparkly walls of the Night Palace across the courtyard. Princess Luna stepped outside, and Pinkie couldn't help noticing that the crowd was a lot smaller than it had been this morning when they'd walked the other way along this same path: three or four dozen ponies instead of the three or four hundred that had filled the place earlier. They weren't all standing together, either, not crammed in like a group but spread out like each pony was here all by him or herself.

Pinkie blew out a breath. They really needed to get organized, have a party and start getting to know each other. "Tomorrow night," she said out loud, and when Rarity and Twilight both looked at her with their lips all tight, she explained, "The party. Tomorrow night."

They were halfway across, now, the music and soft lights of the Day Palace still washing over them from behind, and Princess Luna turned her head to look west down the long, broad plaza. "The sun sets," she announced, and her voice settled into Pinkie's ears so much like a great big bell tolling that she wanted to slip her hoofs into some tambourine shoes and start tapping out a rattling clattering counterpoint of her own.

But again, she didn't have her pack! She shook her head. "I am so totally unprepared for this," she said.

"You're not the only one," Dashie muttered, and Pinkie looked around, saw the Night Palace squatted dark and silent in the sudden shadows ahead, Captain Destrier bowing to

Princess Luna and marching back toward the Day Palace. "Like flying through a cold front," her pegasus friend went on.

"Yes," Princess Luna said, her voice soft and normal again, her shoes still striking the paving stones a bit too far apart for Pinkie to match her pace. "I hadn't... hadn't noticed the contrast before..."

They moved along in silence till they reached the big archway that led into the Night Palace, and that was when Pinkie noticed the line of other ponies. "Hey!" she said, excitement surging through her. "Maybe *those* guys're here to spark the place up!"

The ponies all stood silently a little ways to the east of the archway and watched with what Pinkie could only call hungry eyes as the princess led the way through the archway and into the big empty corridor that ran to the doors of the throne room. And even though she'd only seen their faces for a couple seconds in the gathering dusk before the wall of the Night Palace cut off her view of them, Pinkie was pretty sure they looked way too solemn for ponies who'd come to party even though the longing on their faces made her think they wanted—she might even say they *needed*—to be inside.

Twilight Sparkle's little gasp echoed. "Your Highness, have you been holding general audiences each evening?"

"What?" Princess Luna gave Twilight a startled look. "No, I... I never saw the need."

Twilight swallowed. "But you said earlier that you were following Princess Celestia's schedule, the same one she used when she ran both night and day?"

Princess Luna's eyes unfocused for an instant. "Ah. Yes. I..." Her mane seemed a lot less flowing all of a sudden. "I saw the listing there for audiences, but I hadn't expected... I mean, why would anypony show up now? I was sitting over *there* dealing with petitioners most of the day!" She jabbed a hoof back in the direction they'd come. "Why didn't they just come then?"

Pinkie cocked her head. "Y'ever notice how some ponies are more comfortable at night, your Highness?"

All her friends and the princess stared at her, and Pinkie laughed. "Just like you, y'see?" She bounced forward to the big wooden doors, pushed them open to reveal the recesses of the Night Throne Room. "They wanna be your biggest fans, but this is prob'ly the first time you've given 'em a chance to come and tell you so!"

The others had all followed her in, the only light the barest grey afterglow washing down the corridor behind them. "But... ," Princess Luna said. "We can't hold audiences *here!* Look at it!" Her horn glowed, the pillars casting shadows all along the bare floor and walls. "There's no proper receiving area, no way to record their petitions, no one to escort them in and out, nothing at *all* like the set up Sister has in the Day Palace!"

"All right," Twilight said in what Pinkie recognized as her 'problem solving' voice. "We'll just need to... to put something together, something that'll--"

"How can we possibly?" Princess Luna stomped a shoe against the floor as loud as a lightning strike. "Those ponies are expecting to meet the ruler of all Equestria! And I'm in no fitter state for that than this room is! I--!"

"Hey!" Pinkie had been looking around and was surprised to see her pack leaning against the base of the carpeted ramp that led up to the Night Throne. She trotted over, picked the pack up--and was even more surprised to see the great big switch it had been covering.

Until it all come back to her. "Oh, yeah!" She stomped on the switch, and the fire pots she'd found while poking around the Night Palace's kitchen all reacted to the trigger spell and flared to life. "I knew I'd spent all afternoon doing *something!*"

Torches crackled softly, their flames illuminating the walls and making the whole chamber glow. The big fire pit in the center of the room sputtered and caught, too, and the effect of the pillars and the friendly fire light, Pinkie was overjoyed to see, really *did* give the hall the look of a summer campout in the woods.

Giving a nod, she turned to the others, staring around with their mouths hanging open. "We want to keep it simple, cozy, and intimate, right? So maybe ponies can meet you here by the fire, Princess, instead of up on the throne."

"Pinkie!" Twilight didn't have her grumpy face on at all, the torchlight shining in her eyes. "It's... it's--!"

"Perfect," Princess Luna said. She stepped forward, bent down, touched her horn to Pinkie's head so soft and warm and gentle, Pinkie thought about being a balloon again so she could drift up to the ceiling and float around there for a while. "I can see," the princess went on, turning to smile at all Pinkie's friends, "that I really need to just stop

worrying about whatever impossible task might next confront us. Because with the six of you here, the word 'impossible' loses all meaning."

And Pinkie really had no choice then but to pull open her bag, slip her front hoofs into her tambourine shoes, and shake a quick rhythm up and around everypony, grins perking their faces. "Okay!" she told them. "I'll be hostess and guide our guests in and out. Twilight, you be here with the princess and write down anything that needs writing down. Applejack, you keep an eye on everything." She waved a shoe at Dash, Rarity, and Fluttershy. "You can go about your business, but I'll wanna hear all about it at breakfast tomorrow!"

• • •

"You're sure?" Rarity asked again, still a little overwhelmed by the lovely and tasteful decorating job Pinkie Pie–Pinkie Pie!–had done in the throne room.

"Go," Pinkie said, tapping her ridiculous shoes alongside Rarity and Fluttershy down the main hall toward the huge stone archway of the Night Palace's main entrance. "Laugh. Sing. Dance. Party." And she punctuated each word with a rhythmic rattling step.

"Well, if you insist." Rarity shook herself so the traveling cloak fell more completely around her: she'd had her and Fluttershy's gowns set out all afternoon, so they merely had to slip into them once they'd made that lonely procession into the Night Palace. "Although if Orrery Stargazer truly turns out to be as boring as Twilight Sparkle says, we may be back here before you're done with your duties."

"Oh!" Fluttershy perked up. "A nice, quiet little party would be *so* nice!"

Pinkie rolled her eyes at that, Rarity saw, but they emerged from the archway at that moment and came into sight of the ponies queued up outside: not more than twenty, it seemed to Rarity, but she was more interested in the black stallion standing a bit to the side and looking quite dapper, she thought, in his evening clothes, a stylish white shirt front and black bow tie visible under his own cloak.

"Ooooo," she heard Pinkie say softly. "A lotta things there, but boring *ain't* one of 'em." Rarity turned to give her a quizzical look, but Pinkie had already started tapping toward the line, was calling out in a voice that barely sounded like her, "Thank you *so* much for coming tonight, dear friends. Our beloved Princess Luna is gratified that you would take the time to seek out her company, so–"

She moved out of earshot, then, Rarity and Fluttershy continuing on toward the stallion. "Good evening, Mr. Stargazer," Rarity said, not quite sure how she felt about the little smirk she saw now on his face. "I do hope we didn't keep you waiting."

"Not at all, Miss Rarity." He gave her a slight bow, his eyes straying to the dark bulk of the Night Palace. "I was just standing here doing my best not to become a crotchety old plow horse."

"Indeed?" She cocked her head. "Is that a likely event, sir?"

"I fear so." He waved a hoof at Pinkie, leading the first of the waiting ponies through the archway, the rattling of her shoes echoing as they stepped inside. "For you see, back when *I* was undersecretary of the Night Ministry, we had an honor guard for our receiving lines and banners with—" He stopped, shook his head, smirked his smirk. "But there I go, living in the past. Princess Luna is not Princess Celestia, and expecting her to have the same tastes and manner is utter foolishness."

"Yes," Rarity said, the thought occurring to her suddenly that Orrery might very well be a suspect in this whole roof collapsing incident Applejack was investigating. His entire family had lost their jobs, after all, had in fact been thrown from the only home they'd ever known when Princess Luna had returned and disbanded the Night Ministry...

It quite gave Rarity palpitations, wondering if she and Fluttershy were perhaps on the verge of entrusting their lives to some sort of fiend, and wracking her brain, trying to think of a clever way to expose his guilt, she found nothing coming to her but etiquette. "I don't believe you know my friend Fluttershy." She turned, her smile phony enough to feel painted on. "Fluttershy, this is—"

"Fluttershy?" a small voice asked, and Rarity blinked to see a young filly gallop from the line across the paving stones toward them. "Oh, Miss Fluttershy!" She clattered up, the night too dark to see more than the red ribbon tied around her horn. "And you must be Miss Rarity!" The little unicorn was practically dancing in place. "You're even more beautiful than your pictures!"

Rarity smile became quite real, then, more than a little pleased that Orrery was watching all this. She was about to ask the clever child her name when Fluttershy spoke up: "Juniper! I thought you told me you were going home!"

"*I did!*" She waved a hoof back at the line, two slightly older unicorn fillies edging from their places, their nervousness so palpable, Rarity was sure she could smell it. "But when I

told my sisters I'd met you and you'd given me this ribbon to wear, they wanted to get ribbons, too!"

"Ribbons?" Rarity did some more blinking, then recalled the story Fluttershy had told earlier. "Oh! Yes! Of course!" She turned her smile toward the slowly approaching fillies. "Do you also wish to be special friends of Princess Luna?"

"They do!" little Juniper cried out, jumping up and down. "They were afraid to say anything at home 'cause Mom and Dad always got so mad at me for talking about Princess Luna, but when they saw my ribbon, that was it!" The two other unicorns had sidled over by now and were looking as mortified as only big sisters can when confronted by the antics of a younger sister. "So I showed 'em how I sneak outta the house, and we all came over here to maybe see Princess Luna and maybe get some ribbons! And now we can!"

Nodding, Rarity sparked her horn, made two lengths of the ribbon she'd cut earlier float from her cloak. "May I ask your names, please?"

The oldest of the three stepped forward. "I'm Aurora Borealis, Miss Rarity, and this is my sister Zephyr. We—"

"Aurora?" Orrery asked, his horn lighting up bright enough to cast a glowing puddle all around them. "I *thought* I recognized your voice."

All three of the little unicorns stared, and Aurora looked like she wanted to be anywhere other than where she was. "Mr. Stargazer! I... I didn't... didn't know it was... was *you* over here..."

He gave a charming smile. "Oh, now, don't fret. I won't tell your parents you were here—if you follow Miss Fluttershy's advice and head home straight away."

Juniper's face fell even further. "But Mr. Stargazer! We wanna tell the princess that we—!"

"And you will." Ory's voice made Rarity think of sweet hot tea. "*Tomorrow* evening when I shall be more than happy to escort the three of you to Princess Luna's salon."

"You will?" the Borealis girls all said at once.

Ory held up a hoof. "With your parents' permission."

Their horns practically drooped. "They'll *never* let us do that!" Juniper said, her lower lip trembling.

Rarity let her horn spark again, touched it to the tip of the filly's. "Perhaps we can persuade them."

• • •

The streets of Canterlot at night simply took Rarity's breath away, tiny twinkling lights strung between poles and along the towers giving quite a festive air to the bustling cafés, bookshops, and boutiques, these last nearly calling out to Rarity as their little group trooped past. Just the designs she could see in the windows started ideas tumbling through her head, and several times, she found she had to force herself to keep walking.

Fortunately, the fillies were so overwhelmed at meeting Fluttershy that they clustered around *her* talking of the various small joys and anguishes inherent in a schoolgirl's life, Fluttershy's gentle nature, Rarity saw once again, more than enough to win their hearts completely.

Which was just as well as it allowed Rarity to drop back a few steps and ask Ory, "The sentiment against Princess Luna, Mr. Stargazer. I understand it's not confined merely to the elders of the Borealis family."

His mouth went sideways. "If one wished to strike a fear into the heart of Canterlot greater than any threat of earthquake, flood, or even the suggestion that the volcano beneath us is perhaps not quite as dormant as we might like to think, one should merely whisper the word 'change' along our ivy-covered streets."

She started to laugh, but when he turned his dark eyes upon her, the intensity there made her mane stand on end. "Make no mistake, Miss Rarity: I love Canterlot. But being home to Princess Celestia for so many generations has solidified the general opinion here that we are indeed the center of the universe. By the simple act of returning, Princess Luna has reminded the citizens of our fair city that they *don't* know everything, that there was a world out there before they were born, a world that will continue after they're gone. And we Canterlotians don't take kindly to that sort of thing."

"I see." Determined to keep the atmosphere light, Rarity tossed her mane. "Rather like the crotchety old plow horse you mentioned earlier?"

"*Exactly* like him." Ory gave her a slight smile. "We know how things ought to be done since we've always done them that way." He shook his head. "Never mind that Princess

Luna was doing things *her* way a thousand years before any of us were even born, and who's to say that this change might not be for the best?" His smile became much broader. "I for instance have returned to my study of the jazz trombone now that I needn't worry about besmirching the dignity of my office and the good name of the Night Ministry, as my mother so often put it."

She stared at him. "The trombone?"

He gave a little shrug under his traveling cloak. "I've sat in on a few small gigs around town, received more than a few invitations to return, have started picking up some coin here and there for my efforts. Nowhere near as steady as ministry work, but then, well, there *is* no more ministry. Yet life goes on, does it not?"

And for all that jazz was not at *all* her choice of music– "Are you playing anywhere this week?"

"There's always a session somewhere." Ory gave her a sideways glance. "Would you be interested in–?"

"We're here!" one of the fillies called, and Rarity looked forward to see that they'd come into a residential part of town, the houses not large but immaculately kept, hedges and trees and the lovely towers that seemed to crown most buildings in Canterlot all tasteful and delicate. Fluttershy and the three Borealis girls had stopped at the base of one of the many stairways that wound up from the street, were all looking back at Rarity and Ory with expressions of fear and excitement mixing over their faces.

Ory's ears flicked, and he bowed to Rarity. "If you'll excuse me, I believe my diplomatic skills are called for."

• • •

Rarity wasn't at all surprised when Hibernus Borealis and his wife Hesper recognized Fluttershy at once, but she got to do a little preening herself when Hesper came all over gushing about some of the hat designs Rarity had sent to Hoity Toity last month. The young couple ushered them all into the family's sitting room, and there, over cups of green tea, Rarity learned that they'd both worked in Ory's office at the Night Ministry. "And a better boss no pony could ask for!" Hibernus insisted.

So they readily accepted Ory's story about coming across their three daughters just a few minutes ago a mere block from home– "Although," he went on, "when they said they

were headed for the Night Palace over your objections, well, I'll admit I didn't know *what* to think."

Hesper's face hardened, and Hibernus shook his head. "I can't understand it myself," he said. "You try to raise your girls right, and *bam!* Outta nowhere, they get all weepy about this... this—" He looked around and lowered his voice. "This usurper Luna!"

"Usurper?" Rarity couldn't keep the indignation out of her voice. "Now see here!"

Ory resting a hoof on her shoulder stopped her. "I should perhaps inform you," he told the Borealises, "that Miss Rarity and Miss Fluttershy are here this week assisting Princess Luna with her duties."

Both the dun-colored unicorns went wide-eyed, their ears folding back. "No!" Hesper blurted out. "How *can* you?"

Fluttershy ruffled her wings. "She's our princess."

Hesper sniffed, and Hibernus shook his head. "I've no wish to quarrel with you," he said. "So perhaps we'd best let you be on your way." He looked at Ory. "Thanks for bringing the girls back, Ory. I'll give 'em a talking to, don't you worry about that."

Rarity started to open her mouth again, but Ory was faster. "How're you two doing?" he asked.

Hibernus shrugged. "I got one of the new positions over at the Parks Department, and Hesper's sister's done so well with her shoe store, she needed an accountant." He flashed a grin. "It's taken some adjusting, but yeah. We're doing okay."

"And the others from the old office?" Ory took a sip of tea. "Harlow and April and all? Heard from them lately?"

Brightening, Hesper proceeded to tell several stories about ponies Rarity didn't know, all of whom had found a greater or lesser degree of success in other positions around town after the closure of the Night Ministry. "Give good ponies enough time and the chance to do so," she finished up, "and they'll turn every challenge into an opportunity!"

"Exactly." Ory's eyes got deep and intense again. "Might I ask, then, that you give Princess Luna that time and that chance?"

Again, both unicorns went wide-eyed, and Rarity's heart swelled in her chest. "We've all been there," she said, picking up Ory's words. "In difficult situations like these, all we can do is our best, and all we can expect from those around us is that they do their best as well. I can assure you that Princess Luna relishes the opportunity to serve the ponies of Equestria, but to succeed, she needs friends."

Rarity found that she'd leaped to her hoofs, and she let her voice rise and ring out as dramatically as she knew how. "Friends who can forgive her her mistakes, who can give her advice on how to avoid those mistakes in the future, and who can help her settle back into her rightful place among us! Half the day is night, after all, and having the true ruler of that half in our midst once again can only bring Equestria greater happiness and greater prosperity!"

Cheers went up from the three fillies in the corner of the room. A look from their mother quieted them, and Rarity thought perhaps her words had missed their target. But then Hesper sighed. "We have been a bit hard on the princess, I'll admit that." A bit of her former hardness came over her face. "But is she willing to listen? Really and truly listen?"

Hoping the princess wouldn't mind, Rarity said, "She's just this very evening reinstated her sister's practice of holding general audiences. I *know* she'd love to hear from those who are as concerned about the future of Equestria in general and Canterlot in particular as she is."

"In fact," Ory added, "I was thinking of attending the princess's salon tomorrow night." He tapped a hoof against the floor. "Why don't we all go together! Hi? Hesper? Show Princess Luna that we're willing to give her a chance if she's willing to take it!"

"Please, Mama? Please, Papa?" Juniper was jumping up and down, the ribbon around her horn flouncing with her. "And we can all wear ribbons so she'll know we don't hate her!"

"Indeed." Ory turned to Rarity, his dark eyes sparkling. "Which reminds me, Miss Rarity. I never *did* get my ribbon from you."

• • •

She'd tied the ribbon behind his ear, strangely thrilled to be stroking her magic through his mane. Each Borealis got one as well, and promising to see them all the next evening at the Night Palace, she, Fluttershy and Ory had stepped back onto the street to resume their interrupted journey.

"Wow, Rarity." Fluttershy sounded more like herself than she had all day. "That was a really great speech!"

"Yes," Ory said, and Rarity couldn't quite place the tone she was now hearing in his voice. "Quite stirring."

She tossed her mane. "One does what one can. My *real* concern, of course, is that we not arrive too late for your party, Ory. I'd hate to think—"

"No," somepony said ahead of them, and out of the doorway of a shuttered grocery store stepped a figure wrapped in black from ears to fetlocks. "Sorry, filly, but that's *not* your real concern."

"Who—?" Ory began, but he stopped when a second black-clad pony stepped out to join the first. A clatter behind her, and Rarity glanced back to see at least another five shadowy figures moving to block any possible retreat.

"You." The first figure gestured with a metal-shod front hoof. "Stargazer. How 'bout you just trot on home, huh?"

"I beg your pardon?" Ory drew himself to his full height. "What manner of—?"

The first pony made another gesture, and the pony behind him rushed forward, spun around, and kicked at Ory's head; Rarity gasped, but the pony didn't seem to make contact, her rear hoof flashing past Ory before she whirled again to face frontwards.

But Ory cried out, too, his hoof touching his cheek, and in the dim light of the tiny street lamps, Rarity saw a red streak against his dark hide, the awful and salty stink of blood suddenly in the air.

"That's one," the first pony said quietly. "You really don't wanna see what two is. So how 'bout you get on your way before—"

"How... *dare*... you?" came a voice Rarity hadn't heard since the time she'd been standing on a mountain peak with a full-grown dragon glaring down at her; she glanced over, saw Fluttershy hovering above the paving stones next to Ory, the air crackling with static electricity. "Attacking my friends?" Fluttershy demanded, and even though it wasn't aimed at her, Rarity felt the force of Fluttershy's stare like a winter wind brushing by. "Oh, I don't *think* so!"

The full brunt of the stare struck Ory's attacker, and the pony froze in place. "Run!" Rarity shouted, slamming her head into Ory's side in the hope that it would shock him awake if he'd caught any of Fluttershy's backlash, and following her own advice, she galloped full-tilt toward the one pony ahead of them.

"Hey!" he yelled, but by then she'd whisked past him, was heading for the open street.

Hoofbeats behind her: she looked to see Ory following, blood still welling from his cut, Fluttershy airborne at his side. "Who were those ruffians?" he panted out.

"I've no wish to make their further acquaintance!" Rarity forced herself to slow till the two caught up. "Might you have some thoughts as to how we can get away from them?"

"Ummm... here!" He wheeled up a sidestreet, and she followed, let him take the lead. Another turn, a quick stretch of street, then he was skidding to a stop at a small stone shack of the sort Rarity had seen squatting here and there between the buildings they'd been passing all night. His horn glowed, a key floated from beneath his cloak, and he jabbed it at the stone shack's metal door, the door sliding open without nearly as many creaks and groans as Rarity had expected from it. "Quickly!"

Fluttershy swooped in, but Rarity had to stop, her nose wrinkling. "It looks filthy!"

"It isn't!" Fluttershy popped her head back out. "Please! They're coming!"

Shuddering, Rarity leaped through the doorway, Ory right behind her and pushing the door closed with a boom. His horn still glowed, though, the key turning the inside lock, and Rarity glanced around to see nothing but a set of wooden steps leading down, a strange whooshing noise reaching her ears, her nose twitching at the scent of—

"Fresh water?" she asked.

"Canterlot's aqueducts." He turned, the key tucking back into his cloak. "They pass under the city from the wells at the center of the volcano's caldera." Giving her a grin, he started down the steps.

Fluttershy looked at her. She nodded, gestured with her nose, and followed. The whoosh became a rush as they approached the first turn in the stairs, and rounding the corner, she almost had to squint at the rush becoming a roar, a flood of water crashing through a vast stone tunnel to her right, the little wooden walkway built into the wall ahead lit only by Ory's horn.

He started out onto the walkway, turned that grin of his back over his shoulder. "Its perfectly safe!" he called above the water. "These paths are so very handy for getting from one end of town to the other without worrying about street traffic, I kept these keys when I left the Night Ministry!"

Fluttershy had moved out onto the walkway as well, her eyes wide and fixed on the torrent beside and below them. Rarity shuddered but stepped out just as a voice beside her whispered, "So many of us did."

Snapping her head over, she saw a shadow moving to the side of the walkway. The boards shivered below her hoofs, shivered and cracked and tipped, her inner ear spinning, the walkway slowly heeling over beneath her. "Ory!" she shouted, but the whole stretch of walkway was going, Ory and Fluttershy both looking back at her with their mouths open just before the whole thing fell, water swallowed them and lashing against Rarity worse than any rainstorm she'd ever been caught in.

How she clung to the walkway, she had no idea, but it bobbed up under her, let her open her eyes, her mane drenched and plastered against her head. Ory's light still burned ahead, he and Fluttershy also clinging to the boards, and she saw the tunnel flashing past, the water barreling them along at a pace that made Rarity's stomach yaw and spin.

"Where?" she tried to shout. "Where does this go?"

Ory's head was up staring into the blackness they were hurtling into, but then he turned and shouted one word, a word that made Rarity go even colder than she was: "Waterfall!"

For an instant, she saw Canterlot from Ponyville, saw the shimmer that even at that distance danced below the domes and spires of the Day Palace, the great waterfalls and the seemingly magical mist they shed over the whole valley below.

And then she was back on the whirling wooden walkway, a darker darkness looming in front of her, Ory's light suddenly just a pinpoint, the flood of water dropping away, the open sky surrounding her, stars shining in the blackness.

A second or two of suspension, then the end of the walkway arched downward, and Rarity felt them start falling.

The whole of the valley spread out in the darkness before her, lights sparkling under the stars along what Rarity guessed was the river, and she found she could trace the route all the way back to Ponyville, a glowing cluster that didn't seem that far away, actually.

If only she weren't about to plunge to her death, she found herself thinking, the length of wooden walkway that she, Fluttershy and Ory had ridden down the rapids of Canterlot's underground river sailing from the waterfall at its end and arcing delicately through the night sky before starting horribly, inevitably downward–

If it weren't for *that*, this would be rather pretty.

In front of her, Fluttershy suddenly leaped from the wooden planks, her traveling cloak flaring out above her spreading wings, and Rarity felt a surge of hope. Of course! She so seldom saw her friend flying, it had completely slipped her mind that Fluttershy was a pegasus!

Not that she would be able to keep both Rarity *and* Ory from falling, of course...

Fluttershy began spinning in place, whirling faster than any pegasus Rarity had seen other than Rainbow Dash, and before she could even wonder why, she gaped to see a cloud forming under Fluttershy, spray from the waterfall gathering into a substantial mass. "Rarity!" Fluttershy shouted almost as loud as an actual shout. "Ory! Grab my hoofs!" She sprawled on her stomach across the cloud, reached her front hoofs toward Rarity, her back hoofs toward Ory.

Rarity's sprang from the planks falling away beneath her, saw Ory further down turning, flexing his legs, jumping toward them both. Her front legs twined around Fluttershy's, her heart pounding so hard it made her ears twitch, but looking down, seeing the walkway dropping, seeing Ory stretching, sailing, slowing, his flailing hoofs not going to meet–

"Ory!" Rarity swung herself along the curve of Fluttershy's cloud, snapped her tail out, saw Ory's neck straightening, his mouth opening, his teeth chomping into the waves of purple hair. Gritting her own teeth, she let herself swing back, Fluttershy crying out, and it was just enough, pulling him the last six inches that he needed to catch Fluttershy's hind legs, and–

Panting, swaying, clamped onto Fluttershy like the most precious diamond she'd ever found, Rarity realized she *wasn't* falling, was hanging from Fluttershy's front legs, Ory

hanging on behind, Fluttershy sweating, her eyes clenched, her body trembling and draped over a lumpy mess of a cloud, all their clothes dripping with water.

She wanted to shout "We're alive!" But of course, that could change at any moment... "Ory!" The stallion shifted his wide-eyed stare from the darkness below them to her. "Your magic! It doesn't have anything to do with signaling, by any chance, does it?"

"I—" His eyes went even wider, and he brightened. Quite literally: his horn lit up, a bubble of what looked like pure sunshine expanding around him. "I can make daylight and darkness!" he cried. "If anypony's looking this way, they'll be able to—"

"Rarity!" Fluttershy moaned. "The heat! I can't... this cloud, it's not—" She whimpered and slid an inch downward, the cloud puffing to steam as the light hit it.

Ory gasped, his horn flickering, the warm glow pulling back before it could vaporize any more of their life raft. "We'll have to do something else!" he shouted.

Rarity looked back at the Day Palace shining above and behind them, drifting further away with each moment, and tried to think, tried to come up with something that would make them stop moving or even get them moving in the—

Moving! Of course!

"Hang on!" she yelled and activated her own horn, reached out with her gem-finding sense, hoped that Princess Celestia really *did* keep as large a collection of royal jewels as the magazines all said she did, and—

And felt it, felt the huge stash of them grabbing hold of her, pulling her backwards, tugging Fluttershy, cloud, Ory, and all back toward Canterlot.

A gasp from Ory. "How... how on Equestria are you—?"

"What, this?" Giddiness swept through Rarity, the breeze cool against her face as they picked up speed. "Just a little ability of mine. Quite handy now and then, I've found."

The rocky cliffs below the Day Palace swept past in the light from Ory's horn, Rarity following the tug and lifting the whole group of them over a parapet to a balcony of some sort, a scenic viewpoint, she guessed, a flight of stairs leading up from the far end. The gems were higher still, but she forcibly cut the power to her horn, dropped the four inches to the stonework of the balcony floor, said to Fluttershy, "Open your eyes, darling! We're safe!"

"Safe?" Fluttershy's voice sounded smaller than ever, but she cracked an eyelid, let out a squeak and fell, the last bits of her cloud vanishing, Ory touching down with his hind legs, catching Fluttershy, and setting her to quiver on the floor of the stone circle, her eyes clenched again, little squeaks of "We're safe! We're safe! We're safe!" coming up from her.

"That..." Ory's horn was still glowing, but as she looked over, it sputtered out, darkness falling except around Ory's eyes, wide and fixed on hers. "That was the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me."

Trying to find another quip, Rarity found herself instead gazing into his deep, dark eyes, her heart still pounding, but with a very different sort of anxiety. She stepped forward as he did the same, touched her nose to his, heard him draw in a breath, her lips opening to meet his—

And Rarity's first kiss was exactly as perfect as she'd always known it would be.

• • •

"The Night Guard?" Des cleared his throat. "They're... uhh..."

Rainbow Dash couldn't help glaring at him. "They're *what*? Complete and total losers?"

He glared at her, and that made her feel a little more normal. After the whole weird thing with Princess Luna moving from the Day Palace to the Night Palace, she'd set out kind of peeved for the Citadel and her dinner with the guard. All those ponies in their shining white and gold armor in the Day Palace, and no one at all in the Night Palace? She knew Captain Destrier was in charge of all that, so she'd flown for the turrets and spires of the Citadel, perched on the inside rim of the volcano just past the two palaces, with a few sharp questions to toss at him.

On arriving, though, the captain meeting her at the gate, giving one of his big whistles, the gate rolling open to reveal rank after rank of soldiers, the band in the corner striking up a drill tune she remembered from flight school—

And then she was reviewing the troops with the captain, the commanders of each battalion stepping forward, snapping out smart salutes, telling her how much they'd been looking forward to tonight—

And then into the Citadel itself, the banners and the shining sabers and the ponies marching in, and while she'd hated every minute of the bowing and saluting when she'd

been at school, she found she didn't mind it nearly as much when everypony in the place was saluting and bowing to *her*...

Dinner was great, the unicorn cadets floating each course in and out with such precision, Dash made a joke about the cook having to be an air traffic controller, a joke the ponies at the head table with her and the captain actually laughed at, all of them real fliers who knew how to stretch their wings and all of them wanting to talk about it with the only pony alive to ever pull a Sonic Rainboom–

"*Two* Sonic Rainbooms," she reminded them with a wink.

Then after dinner, meeting more lieutenants and commanders who kept wanting to talk to her and kept wanting her to talk about herself over a dessert Pinkie would've gone *crazy* for, and finally strolling under the stars through the neat gardens overlooking the rest of the city with the captain–"Call me Des," he'd said, grinning in a way that had made Dash glad it was too dark for him to see her blush–

It all almost made her forget how mad she was. Almost.

"The problem with the Night Guard," Des said when she finally asked, "is that technically, it no longer exists."

"What?" Dash looked from him to the lights of the city glowing all up and down the walls of the crater and out along the flatland between. "You mean the sun goes down around here, and the guard just goes home? What if there's an emergency or a fire or something?"

Des puffed a breath. "Exactly the point Princess Celestia and I raised with Princess Luna when she informed us that she hadn't had soldiers attending her when she'd *last* done her job and didn't see why she needed soldiers *now*. Princess Celestia pointed out how a city like Canterlot is quite a different place from their former palace deep in the Everfree Forest, but Princess Luna was adamant. And a direct command, well, I had no choice."

Still mad–just not quite sure anymore who she was mad *at*–Dash shook her head. "That's crazy! The princess can't just disband the Night Guard after a thousand years!"

"Well..." He sounded so uncomfortable, Dash turned to look at him again. "They aren't exactly disbanded, either."

She tapped a hoof against the little stone path. "Unless they're all, like, ghosts or something–"

"They're not—" Des sighed. "You see, in the past, we had a rotation, every member of the guard spending one week on night duty, then three weeks on days so we could spread it out among the whole cohort." He stopped, seemed to be searching for the right words. "When Princess Luna declared that she didn't require the services of the Night Guard, however, against my advice, Princess Celestia took the troops stationed at the time in the night barracks and renamed them. They're now the Canterlot Night Police."

"Night Police?" Dash blinked at him. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means that for the past six months, a whole company of my former soldiers have been sitting over there in the night barracks." He gestured with his muzzle to a low building snuggled up against the back wall of the Night Palace, lights showing through its small square windows. "The ranking officer happened to be Aurelius Blueblood, the most useless waste of horseflesh I've ever come across, so while I've seen a few of the soldiers patrolling the city at night, I think they're just doing it because they're bored." His face hardened. "For all the suggestions I've sent over, Blueblood doesn't seem to care! They've no mission and no mandate, and I've no authority over them anymore!"

"Huh." Dash couldn't stop a grin. "'Cause, y'know, I'm thinking *I* just might..."

• • •

Flying around the barracks, Dash saw three doorways: a big one at the far end of the building and two smaller ones on the long side that faced away from the Palace. Picking the door nearest the back, she landed and bucked it in with a move she knew Applejack would've been proud of, the frame shattering, the panels crashing to the floor; she spun, zipped inside, and shouted, "Ten-hut!" at the top of her voice.

The lights in the barracks were fairly low, but Dash couldn't see anyone flying at her, ready to fight. Some of the beds along the far wall seemed to be occupied, though, and a big white unicorn stallion, lounging on a sofa beside the fireplace to her right, his uniform jacket wrinkled and unbuttoned, looked up from the comic book he was reading. "I beg your pardon?" he asked in a voice so snooty, Dash was surprised it didn't come out of his nose.

Movement now on her left, fifteen or twenty ponies, their uniforms in various stages of disrepair, flying or galloping the whole length of the barracks to snap into respectable ranks for a surprise inspection. The clatter of their hoofs got a few heads popping up in the beds now, too, but the big guy, still lying on his couch blinking, well, Dash was pretty sure she'd found Des's waste of horseflesh.

"One more time!" she shouted, remembering Sergeant Sprinkles, the one pony at flight school that she and Gilda had never even *considered* pranking. "For the foals in the slow class, I said, 'Ten-hut!'"

There were maybe forty ponies now in the ranks, their faces a mix of fear and confusion, and the big guy lumbered to his immaculate hoofs, the white of his coat so combed and polished, Dash felt like squinting. "Now see here!" he said. "If you seriously expect that I'll—"

She swooped past him so fast that when she landed on the other side of his couch, he was still staring at the door she'd kicked in. Dash gave a little whistle, then, grinned when he spun, and waited 'til his widening eyes told her he'd noticed his captain's bars now clenched between her teeth.

As delicately as she could, she tucked the metal clasp into the big side pocket Rarity had stitched into her jacket. "You were saying something, *commander*?"

"I am *Captain* Blueblood!" Sparks shot from the tip of his horn. "How dare you come into my—!"

This time, she spun rainbows around him three times, his mane when he staggered to a stop sticking out in all directions. She waited for him to recover again, waited for the shock on his face to become horror when he saw that she had his commander's bars this time. "*Lieutenant* Blueblood, y'mean?" she asked, tucking the insignia into her pocket.

"Sir!" someone hissed behind her. "That's Rainbow Dash! She's one of the—!"

"Silence in ranks!" Dash whirled, glared at the ponies, but she couldn't tell which of the stone-frozen faces had spoken. "Maybe it's just me," she said, "but anypony who wants to be a captain in Canterlot prob'bly oughtta know who's who and what's what already." She swung her head around to look at Blueblood. "I'm not gonna ask if you agree, lieutenant. I'm just gonna remind you—for what I *really* hope is the last time—that I said 'ten-hut.'"

The former captain scrambled into the ranks, and Dash gave him a point of smarts. "Now!" She tapped the wooden floor. "I'll need the company commanders front and center."

A pudgy pegasus, her uniform a little tight, her cutie mark a shapeless yellow splotch on her slightly paler coat, stamped smartly, sprang forward, and settled in front of Dash.

No one else moved, and that struck Dash as odd. "It's been a while since I was in ranks," she said, "but shouldn't a company this size have *two* commanders?"

The commander licked her lips. "Commander Rigel has patrol duty tonight, ma'am," she said, her voice maybe the one Dash had heard calling to Blueblood earlier.

"And you are?"

"Cream Custard, ma'am!"

"Well, then." Dash plucked the captain's bars from her pocket and clipped them onto the other pegasus's uniform. "It's your lucky night, Captain Custard."

Custard's eyes were so wide, Dash thought they might just fall out, but Dash couldn't stop now. "I'll need you to pick a lieutenant, captain."

Without hesitation, Custard said, "Lieutenant Foxfire!"

A sparkle among the ranks, and a thin blue unicorn stallion appeared beside Custard. Dash pulled out the commander's pin she'd taken from Blueblood and chomped it into place on the unicorn's jacket. "Congratulations, Commander Foxfire."

The new captain was still quivering. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

"Not just yet, captain." Dash waved a hoof at the ranks. "Actually, fall back in, if you wouldn't mind."

Custard and Foxfire both stamped, spun, and moved into place at the end of the front line. "'Cause maybe you're about to say," Dash went on, pacing up and down along the ranks, "that you're not the best choice to be captain. Maybe you're gonna say I should pick this Commander Rigel, or maybe you're gonna say that I really shouldn't've kicked Lieutenant Blueblood off his cloud like I just did." She stopped in front of Custard. "That sound like the sorta things you're likely to say, captain?"

"Yes, ma'am," Custard said, a bit of a waver behind her words.

Dash nodded. "Lesson number one, then: not only is life not fair, a lotta the time, it's downright stupid. Sometimes, you take the blame for stuff that's not your fault, and sometimes, you get a promotion you don't deserve." She moved to the center of the group, tried to sound more confident than she felt. "Take tonight, f'rinstance, when none

of you showed up for the changing of the guard between the Day Palace and the Night Palace."

"But--!" Blueblood started, but he pulled his snout closed quickly, earning another point from Dash.

"Yeah, I know." Dash shrugged. "Princess Luna herself said you shouldn't show up, so you'd think that'd make it okay. The problem is, y'see..." For the second time that day, Dash wished she had Twilight's brain for just a few minutes. "You took an oath, right? Not just to Princess Celestia--or even to Princess Luna, 'cause, I mean, who even knew about her 'til last year?" She caught herself grinning, stopped, cleared her throat, tried to get her thoughts back on track.

"The oath you took was to *Equestria* is the thing, an oath to serve all ponies wherever they need it and however they need it." That was in the oath she remembered from flight school, at least. "And guess what? It turns out Princess Luna really *has* needed you all this time. She just didn't know it, and your former captain, well, he didn't do anything that woulda made her see it. So here we all are."

Dash looked at them, pegasi and unicorns with a few earth ponies mixed in, and hoped she was right about this next part. "Now all you guys who didn't quit when Princess Luna disbanded the Night Guard, well, I gotta think there's a *reason* you didn't quit. Yeah, maybe you're just in it for the money or there's pressure from your family or you didn't wanna resign your commission or whatever. But more than any of that, it's... it's 'cause you wanna do this. You wanna *be* this. You feel it right here." She thumped her chest. "You're soldiers, all of you. Soldiers of the Guard."

A shuffling of hoofs, the ranks straightening a little. Dash raised her voice. "So, yeah, for the last six months, they've called you the Night Police or whatever, and it's great, Captain Custard, that you and Commander Rigel have made up some patrols, have started trying to figure out what that maybe means. But, well, since I'm Princess Luna's Minister of Loyalty--" She touched her necklace, its jewels in the shape of her cutie mark, the thing she'd looked at every night before going to bed for the past year. "I'm telling you right now. You're the Night Guard again. And now I'm gonna tell you how that's gonna work."

• • •

A couple hours later, tired but feeling pretty good, Rainbow Dash sailed through the Night Palace's archway and down the hall, Pinkie's torches now lined up along the walls.

Landing just outside the throne rooms doors, she strolled in, strutting a bit: wait 'til she told the others about–

"–sailing out into empty air!" Rarity was saying, she and Fluttershy wrapped in towels and lying on cushions beside the big pit with the bonfire Pinkie had started when they'd all first come in at the start of the night–however many hours ago *that* had been. "I've never been so frightened before in my entire life!"

Everypony else was sitting on cushions, too, their eyes wide and their expressions running from Twilight's absolute shock to Pinkie's quivering excitement to Applejack's pinch-mouthed concern to Princess Luna's simmering anger. "Fortunately," Rarity went on, "Fluttershy put together a cloud for us, and I–"

"What?" Dash couldn't stop it from bursting out. "A cloud? *Fluttershy?*"

All heads swung toward her, and Fluttershy leaped into the air. "Oh, Rainbow Dash!" Quicker than Dash had ever seen her friend move, Fluttershy zipped across the throne room and wrapped her in a huge hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

The force of the greeting almost knocked Dash over. "What the–?"

"Your cloud!" Fluttershy let go, landed, started hopping up and down like Pinkie, her eyes curled into crescents. "The one you made in Princess Luna's library earlier! It got me thinking about how I could never do clouds back in school, and then when Rarity and Ory and me went falling off the cliff, there was all this water from the waterfall! And I just–"

"Cliff? Waterfall?" Dash looked back and forth between Fluttershy and the rest of her friends. "Whatta you guys been doing tonight anyway?"

The story made Rainbow Dash shout "What?" more than a few more times, and by the time Rarity got to the part about her and Ory Stargazer kissing, Dash wasn't the only one.

"What?" Twilight's mane seemed to be standing on end. "Ory? But he's... he's-!"

"Such a *gentlecolt!*" Rarity breathed. "I always dreamed of coming to Canterlot and meeting a prince, but, well, Ory was going to be Night Minister, and that's *nearly* the same thing." She sighed, a blush lighting her cheeks, and Dash couldn't help remembering her own blush earlier in the Citadel garden with Captain Destrier.

Which made her clear her throat. "I think you're missing the point here, Rarity! Somepony just tried to kill you!"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Well, yes, if you want to dwell on the more *unpleasant* aspects of the evening..."

A snort from Applejack. "And that *proves* this ain't no test from Princess Celestia. This is broken-leg serious."

"Indeed." Princess Luna spoke for the first time since Dash had come in, and the rumble of anger in her voice made the cheerful firelight suddenly a whole lot scarier. "You said earlier, Minister Applejack, that you suspected Lord Daybreak or Lady Stargazer of being behind this. In the morning, then, I'll have Captain Destrier and the guard--"

"No!" Dash shouted--and was more than a little surprised when Rarity and Twilight echoed it just as loudly.

Pinkie blinked at them. "Was that just a song? Did I miss rehearsal?"

"It's *impossible!*" Rarity was saying. "Why would Ory's mother or his uncle want to kill him?"

"And think about it, your Highness!" Twilight cut in. "Arresting the Day Minister and the former Night Minister? They have a lot of friends in Canterlot, and you--" She bit her lower lip. "Well, you said it yourself, princess. You just have us."

"Nope!" Pinkie waved a hoof. "She's got all those ponies who came tonight, and all those ponies who'll come tomorrow night!" She turned to Rarity. "Oh, and I gave 'em all ribbons, too. Hope you don't mind."

Rarity gave Pinkie one of her sideways look. "Darling, *you* were the one laying down rules for ribbon distribution."

"That was me?" Pinkie seemed genuinely shocked, and Dash couldn't help grinning. "Huh. Well, I guess I musta known what I was doing, then."

"But we need more evidence, your Highness." Twilight sighed. "And by 'more,' I mean 'any at all.'"

Princess Luna's eyes narrowed. "I really must remember to thank Sister for going off on vacation and leaving me in the middle of all this." She turned those narrow eyes toward Applejack. "Minister?"

"She ain't wrong, ma'am." Applejack looked really worn out, Dash thought. "We got nothin' 'nless we can find a good, solid connection to them ponies Dash and Pinkie brought in this mornin'—or *yesterday* mornin' now, ain't it?"

The princess huffed a breath. "Politics." Then suddenly her gaze was swinging around and fixing on Dash. "And you, minister? What's *your* objection?"

"Oh." She tried to act nonchalant. "Just that you don't need to wait for Des and the Day Guard if you wanna arrest anypony since, y'know, you've got the Night Guard and all."

"The—" Princess Luna's face went blank for a moment, then slid into a slight scowl. "I believe I've made it plain, Minister Dash, that I have no need of—"

"Yeah, but, see, you *do*." Dash grinned at the sudden silence, everypony staring at her now, and she had to wonder how often the princess got interrupted. Not often, she guessed, her stomach flopping queasily, so she pretended she was doing something easy instead—like flying blindfolded through a thunderstorm. "And I'll be happy to explain why, too, if that'd be okay, your Highness."

Another moment, then a little smile pulled at Princess Luna's muzzle. "Well, now that you've got me interested..."

"It's just—" Dash tried to organize her thoughts, but it was way too late—or like AJ said, way too early—for that. So she gave up. "I mean, *you* saw it, your Highness, same as I did! We walked outta the Day Palace with Captain Destrier and the music and the banners and ev'rything, and when we got to the Night Palace—" She stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry.

"Hey!" from Pinkie.

"Okay, yeah." Dash nodded to her friend. "You did a great job with the place, Pinkie, but that you hadta do so much work just proves my point! You remember, your Highness, how worried you got that first minute we walked in here?"

Twilight still seemed a little shocked, but the princess was looking more thoughtful than mad. So Dash figured she might as well go on. "Of course, we don't want any big productions like they do over in the Day Palace, but a little something is a whole lot better than a big nothing. And the thing is: you could've had that little something already here the whole time!" She waved her hoof toward the night barracks. "Six months ago, you had a hundred ponies out there, ponies who'd sworn their lives to serve Equestria. And you said you didn't want 'em." She lowered her voice. "Might be you know what that's like, showing up night after night to do a job no pony seems to appreciate."

The only sound for a moment was the crackling of the torches. Dash tapped her necklace. "Those forty-nine loyal ponies who haven't resigned yet, your Highness? They've been trying to figure out what they can do for you. But loyalty's a two-way street. They go through the academy, prove they've got the stuff, and swear their oath, but then, see, then it's *your* turn. 'Cause you're their princess. And you've got responsibilities to 'em."

Princess Luna was looking into the fire. "It was so much easier before..."

"What?" Pinkie's voice came loud as a cymbal crash. "No, it wasn't!"

"I beg your pardon?" Anger creased the princess's forehead as she snapped a glare at Pinkie Pie.

"Well?" Pinkie glared back. "If it was so easy back then, why'd you spend a thousand years on the moon?"

"Pinkie!" Twilight was on her hoofs now.

But Pinkie had leaped up as well, was springing past Twilight to slide on her knees to Princess Luna's side, Pinkie's eyes wide and shimmering. "But you don't *hafta* be jealous anymore, princess! 'Cause, sure, we love your sister, but we love you, too! And your sister loves you even more!"

The princess had gone completely still, her purple-black mane puffing up so much like a thunderhead, Dash had to swallow, the sudden tightness in the air making her feel the way she did when she really let herself go, just poured on the speed and blasted over the

landscape, everything vibrating and blurring like she was heading for the sound barrier with no hope of stopping. "Uhh, Pinkie?" she managed to say.

"But you hafta stop trying to be the sun!" Pinkie was going on, glowing against the rising dark of Princess Luna. "You don't shine on ev'rypony the same all the time ev'rywhere like your sister does! You're closer, softer; you just shine on one pony at a time!" She waved at the big double doors across the throne room. "You saw those ponies here tonight, each one private and quiet and just wanting to see you and be your friend! And *that's* how we love you! Like a fire on a cold night or a breeze on a warm evening!"

Princess Luna still hadn't moved, wasn't even breathing as far as Dash could tell. Then: "You... you love me?" a tiny voice asked from her lips.

"Of course!" came Twilight's shout, Fluttershy following with a breathy, "Oh, yes, princess, we *do*!" and Rarity adding, "The three young fillies I'll be presenting to you tomorrow night, your Highness, are positively *enraptured* at the thought of meeting you!"

"And the Night Guard," Rainbow Dash put in. "Soon as I told 'em they were back in service to the throne, it was like they turned into brand new ponies."

"I—" Princess Luna's eyes shone like stars in the midnight of her face. "I don't know... don't know what to—"

A soft rustling snore, and Dash looked over to see Applejack had fallen asleep, her chin tucked between her front hoofs. Another little rasp of breath, and the princess began laughing softly. "This double duty *does* take a bit out of a one, doesn't it?" She touched her horn to Pinkie Pie's ribbon, tangled in her mane. "But I thank you all so much."

Pinkie gave a happy little squeak, her eyes curling into crescents, and Twilight bowed her head. "It's an honor and a privilege, your Highness."

"Still..." Princess Luna looked at the torches, and they began going out. "We have schedules we must keep. An hour's nap for me while the rest of you should follow our Minister of Honesty's example and turn in 'til the dawn procession."

A laugh from Rarity. "Your Highness, I doubt all the warm milk in Equestria could get me to sleep tonight!"

Which was just what Dash had been hoping for. "So you wouldn't mind, y'know, designing and putting together, like, forty or fifty new uniforms for the Night Guard?"

Something like the Day Guard has but..." She rubbed her chin. "I dunno: darker and cooler, maybe?"

The way Rarity was staring at her, Dash felt like she'd suddenly sprouted a horn. "Just like that?" Rarity's lower eyelid began twitching. "Just design and assemble fifty uniforms? *That's* all you're asking?"

"Well—" Dash began, but the princess interrupted:

"If you can design the uniforms, Minister Rarity, I've heard Sister say that all Canterlot's clothiers are most amenable to any work we can send their way."

Rarity's eyes widened. "Even... even Lace Brocade?"

The princess shrugged. "I'm not familiar with most of the fashion houses, but if this Lace Brocade is in Canterlot, I'm sure we could work something out."

"That... that.. .that—" Rarity looked almost frozen to Dash, a snowpony shaped like her friend. "One of my designs," she whispered. "At the House of Brocade..." She snapped to life so suddenly, Dash almost jumped backwards. "I'm seeing black and silver where the Day Guards have white and gold, the shape very similar, of course, but... a red plume atop their helmets!" She leaped to her hoofs. "You'll excuse me, your Highness!" Throwing off her blanket, she galloped across the throne room and disappeared down the side corridor.

Twilight laughed quietly. "No one works like Rarity. Once she gets started, I mean."

Another snore drew Dash's attention to Pinkie, tucked up fast asleep beside Princess Luna. Dash smiled and nodded to Twilight. "Fluttershy and me can prob'bly carry Applejack if you can float Pinkie."

Fluttershy giggled, and Twilight nodded. They all stood, bowed to the princess, but when Dash straightened back up, she was right there in front of her: Princess Luna, just that much taller than Dash so she had to look up to meet those deep, dark eyes. Then the princess was bending forward, touching her horn to the ribbon Dash had almost forgotten she had tied in her mane, the rush of it cool, sweet, and refreshing as skating over a flat evening cloud top on her way home after a hard day weather wrangling. "When will my troops be ready for review, Minister Dash?"

It took Dash a minute to find her voice. "I was thinking we could go down after your first morning session. If the uniforms're done, you can be there when we pass 'em out."

The princess nodded. "Until dawn, then," she murmured, and springing into the air, she vanished into the darkness as the last torch sputtered out.

"Oh, my gosh..." Dash heard someone mutter, and she was a little surprised to recognize it as her own voice. She shook her head and looked at her two non-sleeping friends. "What's a dumb crash jockey like me doing in a place like this?"

Twilight's horn glowed, tiny lights swarming around Pinkie, lifting her from the cushion. "I was wondering the same thing about a certain egghead," she said with a grin.

Another giggle from Fluttershy. "I'm just surprised I haven't been fainting more often than I have."

"Well," Pinkie said groggily, "like my Uncle Egmont used to say..." But all that come out of her then was a snore.

• • •

"C'mon, AJ!"

Applejack jerked awake, couldn't think for a minute where she was or what time it might be or why Rainbow Dash was standing sideways above her saying, "We all got places to be after we take our big walk, so let's move it!"

Rolling out of bed, stretching, shaking her head, the events of the previous day slowly trickling back into Applejack's memory, she blew out a breath. "I feels like forty miles of bad road..."

Dash chuckled behind her. "Y'know, I wasn't gonna mention it, but—"

She kicked out a hind hoof just hard enough to tap Dash nice and solid in the chest. "Reckon I look better'n *you're* gonna in about half a minute."

"Oh, yeah?" A whoosh, the blowback from Dash's wings scattering the loose hairs from Applejack's pony tail into her face. "'Cause half a minute's about all you've got!"

"What?" That brought her fully awake, sent her spinning around, Dash smirking in her fancy blue duds. "Horse apples! Why didn't ya wake me 'fore now? How'm I s'pposed to—?"

Dash rolled her eyes. "Okay, maybe it's half an hour."

A rattling sound from the open doorway, and Pinkie pushed in a cart full of pastry. "Most important meal of the day!" she crowed. "Especially when it's stuffed with brown sugar and covered in frosting!" She nudged a plate with her nose. "I saved you some apple fritters!"

Applejack's stomach growled. "Well, now, that's right neighborly of you, Pinkie." The fritters were perfectly baked, too, the second one even better than the first since she slowed down enough to taste it. Stepping to the wash stand, she undid the ribbons at the end of her pony tail with her teeth, reared up, grabbed the pitcher, and laying her head in the basin, dumped the water over herself, the cold absolutely bracing and just what she needed.

"Oooo," she heard Pinkie say. "Dashie, remind me to put milk in that pitcher tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Pinkie..." Rainbow Dash sighed. "It doesn't work as a prank if you tell her about it before you do it!"

"Prank?" Pinkie sounded confused. "I was just thinking how much cereal you could put in a bowl that big!"

Applejack dried her face with the towels waiting on the sideboard, then settled back with hoofs and teeth to start plaiting her mane. "So what's the schedule, then? Reckon I musta dozed off afore we got anything settled last night."

"Easy peasy!" Pinkie said around the donut she was sucking down. "Me and Dashie getta go visit the Night Guard and- What was it you said we were doing, Dashie?"

Rainbow Dash gave a grin that positively sent chills up Applejack's spine. "Putting 'em through their paces. I figure I can take the fliers out for a little spin, and, well, we'll see if the ground troops can keep up with Pinkie."

Flopping her pony tail onto the counter, Applejack tightened the ribbons at the end into place. "Them poor fellers ain't gonna know what hit 'em."

"It'll be *great!*" Dash waved at the doorway. "Then Rarity and Fluttershy'll be cruising the fashion spots or whatever: she got the Night Guards uniforms designed last night, and some pony she's all excited about is gonna actually build 'em while she and Fluttershy let all the fancy ponies in Canterlot know about Princess Luna's ball tonight."

Pinkie made a noise like air squeezing out of a balloon. "That! Will be! Epic!" She spun in place on one rear hoof, her pink dress flaring out around her. "Those gentleponies then abed will think themselves *accursed* they were not there!"

"And while *that's* going on," Rainbow Dash went on, "you and Twilight're meeting Spike at Twilight's parents' house to, y'know, figure out who's trying to kill us and ev'rything."

"Naw." Applejack slipped her head through her Element of Harmony neck piece and put on her hat. "It's Princess Luna they're after, not *us*."

Stillness froze the room, made Applejack turn to see if her friends were still there. They were, Dash with her rainbow mane sticking out even spikier than usual and Pinkie with her mouth and eyes wide. "Of course!" Pinkie muttered.

"What?" Dash shouted, leaping into a hover. "Somepony's trying to kill the princess?"

More cries of "What?" from the hall, and the others came rushing in, Twilight in front, Rarity and Fluttershy right at her hoofs. "Kill the princess?" Twilight shouted.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Applejack reared back, flailed her hoofs for attention. "I didn't say that, and that ain't what's happenin' here at *all!*"

"Yeah!" Pinkie gave a glare all around. "They don't wanna kill her! They just wanna drive her away again!"

Twilight's horn was sparking. "How-? What-? You can't-! Why-?"

"All right, now!" Applejack pitched her voice the way she would talking to nervous cattle. "Let's ev'rypony all just settle down and *listen* for a minute!"

Every eye in the room focused on her. "I been askin' myself over and over why anypony's even *doin'* all this, and all I can figure is: they wanna get Princess Luna so riled up, she busts out all Nightmare Moon like she did a thousand years ago, and us or Princess Celestia hasta send her to the moon again." Applejack didn't much like this explanation, but it best fit the facts. "It's why I'm so darn sure it's either Lord Daybreak or Lady Stargazer behind it. They's the ponies got the most invested in seein' things go back to the way they was, I reckon, and--"

"Yes," came a shadow of a voice, and Applejack started back to see Princess Luna standing in the doorway, her mouth tight, her eyes narrow. "It makes sense."

Swallowing, Applejack bowed to the floor, the princess's mane whipping like a flag in a windstorm. "But as you said last night," she continued, stepping into the room, "we haven't much in the way of evidence." She stopped beside Pinkie's cart and sniffed. "Oh, these smell *heavenly!*" One of the pastries rose into the air, and Princess Luna nibbled at it. "My compliments, Minister Pie. But your thoughts, Minister Applejack, on how we can prove any of this?"

"Well, ma'am..." Again, Applejack had thought and thought, but none of the options she'd come up with much appealed to her. "The party tonight'll be their next obvious target. I'd say our best bet'd be to have the Night Guard out in full force, have all of us with our ears pricked, and catch 'em in the act." She shrugged, looked up at the princess. "It ain't what I'd call the best plan, but it's kinda the easiest since we don't gotta arrest anypony till they actually *do* somethin'."

Princess Luna was nodding. "Very well. Gather intelligence today however you can, and I'll ask you all to meet in my antechamber at 3 o'clock this afternoon so we may form a final approach to this evening's festivities."

"Ooooo!" Pinkie slung her pack around, started rooting through it. "Festivities! I gotta write that word down!"

A smile from the princess, and a little of the tightness eased in Applejack's shoulders. As long as Princess Luna kept smiling, things couldn't be *too* bad. "Minister Rarity?" the princess asked. "What word on the Night Guard's uniforms?"

Rarity looked perfect, of course, her dress this morning dark blue, not nearly as fancy as the one she'd had yesterday, as close to a business suit, Applejack figured, as a pony like Rarity was likely to get; though if Applejack looked close, the little twitch around her edges told the story of her late night. "The courier I sent with the designs to awaken Lace Brocade an hour ago returned with an estimate of mid-morning."

Princess Luna nodded. "Let's plan on a presentation to the Guard before lunch, then." She turned to Rainbow. "Will that fit in with your plans, Minister?"

Dash shrugged. "I can make it fit."

"Then, ministers?" The princess raised her head, her mane definitely flowing more like Princess Celestia's again. "If you'll attend me, I shall raise the sun, and we will get this rather full day started."

• • •

Despite what she'd said, Applejack was still a mite concerned that whoever was behind all this would get antsy and try something at the morning end of things. But since they'd blown their attack on Rarity and Fluttershy and Rarity's new beau last night, odds were they'd be doing some serious regrouping this morning.

That new beau was waiting in the courtyard between the Night Palace and the Day Palace, Applejack noticed, when they came marching out just before dawn, a bigger crowd watching than she'd been expecting. A good looking fella: not as beefy as Applejack liked 'em, but, well, if he was an egghead the way Twilight said, he likely didn't get much exercise. And he started the chant, too—"Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equestria!"—the ponies around him, most of 'em with red ribbons tied somewhere in their manes, joining in.

Applejack had to smile when the princess nearly missed a step, caught herself, bowed, and continued to the archway leading into the Day Palace. The ponies of the Day Ministry stood at their desks in silence, their heads bowed to the princess, but Applejack couldn't stop a quick glance upwards at the empty stretch of ceiling where the beam had been. As near as she could tell from poking around up there yesterday, it had been ornamental instead of structural, so she wasn't worried about the whole roof collapsing. But still, it made the hairs prickle up along the back of her neck... .

Minister Daybreak stood at the foot of the Day Throne, and Applejack gave him a squint-eyed look. He still struck her all brazen and blustery, but she couldn't decide which of those he had more of: just bluster to complain about Princess Luna's return changing everything, or enough brass to try getting her out of the way again.

He was bowing to her at least; she bowed in return, faced the big stained-glass windows to the east, and her horn lit up almost too bright to look at. "The sun rises," she announced in that echoing voice, and light flooded in, Applejack's not the only gasp in the throne room, a smattering of applause from the ministry workers.

She stole a quick glance at Lord Daybreak, saw him frowning, but he cleared his throat and bowed again as Princess Luna ascended the Day Throne. He gestured to the guard at the side door, and that pony led in the first petitioner of the morning. The Day Ministry swung into work around her, and Applejack blew out a breath. Now, if Dash hadn't been joshing around earlier, she was supposed to go with Twilight to talk to her parents, so—

"Oh, Lord Daybreak!" Rarity's voice, Applejack looking over to see her friend smiling at the older unicorn. "Might I ask a favor?" She fluttered her eyelashes, and Applejack

grinned again: nopony didn't melt a little under *that* treatment, she knew from experience.

Sure enough, Lord Daybreak puffed out his chest and smiled. "Of course, Miss Rarity! How may the Day Minister be of assistance?"

"I was wondering, sir..." Rarity's horn glowed, and from the folds of her gown floated a ball of red ribbons. "Might I distribute these to the ministry workers here today? We've been giving them out around town since yesterday, and--"

"Ribbons?" Lord Daybreak's smile edged downward. "Not exactly part of the dress code, is it?"

Rarity blinked at him, her own smile fading a bit. "Dress code, sir?"

"Strict policy, Miss Rarity."

"Oh, but, *surely*, sir, considering the current circumstances, you can--"

"No, madame." He puffed out a breath and shook his head. "I've no say in what these ponies wear after they leave this building, of course, but while they're here, I shall have this be a place of business." He bowed stiffly. "Now, if you'll excuse me." Turning, he started toward the desks along the far wall of the throne room.

Rarity looked like she'd been hit in the leg with a hammer, her face bunching up like she was maybe gonna start yelling about it; Applejack sidled over and murmured, "Let it go, girl. If'n he's the one, we'll get him tonight."

For another few seconds, Applejack didn't think she'd gotten through, but then Rarity seemed to deflate a little, the pink tinge around her ears fading. "Yes," she said, an edge in her voice that Applejack knew all too well from the times they'd tussled in the past. "I shall look forward to that moment." She stepped away, then, suddenly nothing but sweetness. "Fluttershy, darling!" she called. "Shall we be on our way?"

• • •

Twilight seemed about as nervous as Applejack had ever seen her, her ears flicking up and down as the two of them made their way through the bustling streets of Canterlot. And as much as she didn't want to pry, well, it always paid to be prepared, she'd always found. Keeping her voice as light as she could, she asked, "So, Twilight! Been a while since you seen your folks, ain't it?"

Twilight tried to shrug, but her shoulders were too tight for it to look anything but painful. "A year and a half, maybe. We write back and forth, though."

No bad blood between them, then: Applejack nodded. "Whoa. I plain don't reckon I could do it, going so long without seeing my kin."

"Well, it's always been just the three of us, no aunts or uncles or cousins or like that." Twilight gestured to the next cross street. "We turn left up here."

Isolated, then, wealthy and educated and– "You said you kinda took 'em by surprise, too, didn't you?"

Twilight smiled, more of the unicorn Applejack knew in her face than before. "Thirty years they'd been married when I came along, and since I moved to the University right after I got my cutie mark, we–" That troubled look came over her again. "We're not exactly the Apple family, AJ."

Applejack blinked. *That's* what had Twilight so worried! "Sugar cube..." She butted her shoulder gently against her friend's. "Ain't only one way to be a happy family, y'know. Long as your folks don't call me a country bumpkin right to my face, I reckon I'm gonna like 'em just fine."

Judging by Twilight's broad grin, it was right thing to say.

They turned left, then, the Palaces visible between the spiraling towers sprouting from all the whitewashed houses in this neighborhood. Applejack couldn't stop a grin. Typical unicorn way of building: everything close together, all pretty much the same size, shape, and color, and each one with at least one tower...

Marble steps led from the street up to every door, and Twilight turned at the third house along, tapped up the stairs, reached for the door just as it pulled open to reveal Spike, the little dragon looking relieved. "Twilight!" he cried out. "You're here! Great! 'Cause Lady Stargazer's here, too, and... and we were just talking about you!"

Applejack felt her hackles rise, but she smoothed them down quick enough, put on a smile, and said over the silence of Twilight's panicked stare, "Well, now! What a coinkydink! Me an' Twilight was just talkin' about Lady Stargazer!" Couldn't hurt to put a little shake into one of their main suspects, after all...

Spike stepped to the side, pulled the door open the whole way. "C'mon in, guys! We've got tea all set up!"

Dark wood lined the entryway, their hoofs clattering a bit as they followed Spike inside. Not a lot in the way of decoration, one small table in the hallway holding a vase with a few sprigs of pussywillow arranged haphazardly in it, and while the whisper of voices came from the first doorway on the right, Twilight didn't rush forward, calmly following Spike. All mighty reserved, and Applejack wondered if a little of her Manehattan accent might be useful here.

But no. Playing up the whole 'country bumpkin' thing with Lady Stargazer in the room could be useful. City folks always figured that meant 'stupid,' after all...

Stepping after Twilight, Applejack had to smile again at the shelves and shelves of books along all four walls of the room they were walking into, the smell of old paper everywhere. Windows among the bookcases let in plenty of light, and the furniture—low tables and generously-cushioned sofas—made the place look perfect for lounging around and reading, something Applejack got to do all too rarely.

Off to one side under the largest of the windows sat three ponies, Phillipa Stargazer the one Applejack recognized, though the other two were so obviously related to Twilight, Applejack reckoned she would've known them anywhere. Both unicorns, of course, and while they weren't as old as Granny Smith—not that anypony in Equestria was likely *near* as old as Granny Smith—they had more silver hairs among their manes and tails than Lady Stargazer.

"Mom! Dad!" Apparently unable to hold herself back any longer, Twilight skipped across the sitting room floor to the others.

"Kiddo!" Her father stood, his cutie mark a dark blue crescent moon and single star against his silver-blue flank. "What's all this I hear about you at the Palace?"

Twilight rolled her eyes, tucked her head to her mother's neck, her mother reaching up to stroke Twilight's face. "Oh, you know me, Dad: trouble's my middle name." She looked back at Applejack. "Mom? Dad? This is my friend Applejack, owner and operator of Sweet Apple Acres outside Ponyville. Applejack, this is my father Nocturne and my mother Tercey."

Applejack came up and bowed to them. "Right nice to meet you folks." She aimed a bow at Lady Stargazer, then. "And nice to see you again, Lady—" She pretended to catch herself. "I mean, Phillipa, weren't it?"

"Quite right, minister." The blackish-green unicorn's horn sparked, her teacup rising to her lips. "Spike was just telling us some of your amusing adventures in Ponyville." A shudder, and she sipped her cup. "I can't *imagine* living so close to the Everfree Forest! What dangers you must face on a daily basis!"

The same frustration she'd felt earlier when talking to Lady Stargazer nibbled at Applejack. Unlike Lord Daybreak, everything the lady said was friendly enough, but the scent behind her words made Applejack want to sneeze. "Well, now, I'm sure you've got dangers a-plenty hereabouts, ma'am." She watched Lady Stargazer, hoped she might give something away to show she knew about the attack last night, but all the other pony did was set her teacup back down.

"Dangers?" Twilight's mother asked. "In Canterlot?" She whinnied a little laugh and nodded at Lady Stargazer. "She's starting to sound like *you* now, Phillipa!"

Lady Stargazer flinched ever so slightly, and Applejack somehow kept her ears from perking. "You don't say!" She gave Lady Stargazer the most innocent expression she could round up. "Feelin' nervous lately, Phillipa?"

Her chuckle wasn't *close* to real, Applejack could tell. "Oh, well, now that I'm retired, I've little enough to do each day but chatter away with my equally retired friends." She smirked more than smiled. "Old ponies' tales: nothing more."

Applejack decided to pounce on that. "Y'mean like the Mare in the Moon? That sorta thing?"

The former Night Minister went very still, but Twilight's father gave a snort. "Oh, don't get her started, Minister Applejack! And as much as I agree that Princess Luna made a mistake disbanding the Night Ministry, it's long overdue, her stepping forward the way she is this week!" He patted a hoof between Twilight's ears. "Who would've thought, kiddo, that *you'd* be helping somepony get out more into public! Just goes to show anything can happen!"

"Oh!" Twilight had settled onto one of the cushion, but now she started back. "That reminds me!" Her horn glowed, and several red ribbons popped into the air above the tea set. "We're having a ball tonight at the Night Palace, and I was hoping you'd be able to come!"

"A ball?" Tercey's voice wavered a bit. "At the Night Palace?" She looked past Twilight to her husband. "Must be nearly fifty years ago now, wouldn't you say, Turney?"

"Very nearly." Nocturne smiled, his horn glowing less brightly than Twilight's, a wave of light reaching for two of the ribbons, pushing one toward Tercey, pulling the other to himself. "Your mother and I first met at a Night Palace ball, Twilight."

Twilight's eyes were actually sparkling. "Then you'll come? Both of you?"

Her father's magic was pleating the ribbons among his mane and his wife's. "We wouldn't miss it," he said.

Smelling an opportunity, Applejack reached a hoof for one of the other ribbons floating above the table, scooped it up, offered it to Lady Stargazer. "And you, Phillipa? Reckon you'll be able to make it to the shin-dig tonight?"

The frozen depths of the lady's gaze almost made Applejack shiver. But Lady Stargazer smiled, sparks crackling from her own horn, the ribbon drifting up from Applejack's hoof. "Why, certainly, Minister Applejack." The ribbon touched her horn, wrapped itself loosely around the base. "I wouldn't miss it for all of Equestria."

And, yes, while she still didn't have one single lick of evidence, Applejack knew at that moment in her heart of hearts who was behind everything that had happened in Canterlot since yesterday.

"Anything for the princess," Lace Brocade was saying, the ruffles around the edges of her black frock coat just exactly the right shade of ecru to contrast with the bright red of her hair and hide. "And your designs!" She kissed her right front hoof and waved it at the ceiling. "An absolute *pleasure* to work from! If you have any further need of the House of Brocade, don't hesitate to call!"

It took every ounce of Rarity's self-control not to fall at the fashionista's hoofs and start kissing them. Lace Brocade! Praising *her* designs!

But instead Rarity took a breath and said, "This has been the single most fulfilling experience of my professional life so far, Ms. Brocade! I can't thank you enough for—"

"Oh, now, *really*, Rarity!" The slender unicorn gave her a smile. "Certainly you'll be calling me Lace from now on."

For the first time in her life, Rarity wished she could be Pinkie Pie for a moment, could somehow express the pure joy bubbling up inside her without having to worry about how foolish she'd look jumping around like an idiot. She allowed herself one little giggle—not too much, or she knew she wouldn't be able to stop—and said, "Then here's hoping, Lace, that we'll have many more opportunities to work together in the future."

"I'll see to it that we do." Lace Brocade nodded, turned, and started back into the depths of the workshop behind the House of Brocade showroom on Canterlot's main square just down the road from the Palace.

And even though Rarity knew they had to get back, had to get the uniforms delivered, had a million other things to do before the festivities this evening, she didn't want to go, wanted to just soak in the pure creativity washing around her like a warm and lovely breeze from the lighted design tables to her left, the sewing machines to her right humming like a hive of contented bees, pegasi swooping among the looms at the back of the room, even a small smithery, unicorns and burly earth ponies working together to create metallic fashions unlike any seen anywhere in Equestria.

"Is she all right?" she heard Ory whisper behind her.

"Oh, yes," came Fluttershy's voice. "She gets like this sometimes at home, too. 'Zoning out,' Rainbow Dash calls it."

"Actually, darling—" Rarity tore herself away and turned to her two friends. "It's called 'being in the zone.' But, yes, perhaps we'd best be on our way before I decide this is one zone I never wish to leave." She forced a step, another, two more, found herself breathing easier, Ory's scent as he smiled at her sparking an entirely different set of sensations within her.

And considering the hour or so of sleep she'd had since arriving in Canterlot—were they really starting only their second day?—the adrenaline from all these various sensations was pretty much the only thing keeping her upright at this point. So she returned Ory's smile and said, "Would you be so kind as to escort us back to the palace, Mr. Stargazer?"

He bowed. "I should be honored, Miss Rarity."

In the street outside the showroom under the crisp and cloudless blue of a late autumn morning, unicorns were raising the last of the uniform-filled crates onto huge carts, earth ponies in orange vests limbering up before slipping into the harnesses at the front of each wagon. The largest of these ponies wore a hat—the strawboss, Rarity assumed—and he waved a hoof at them, called out, "So we're taking these to the Citadel, right?"

"No, no, no." Rarity fluttered her eyelashes, not sure that she needed to but fairly certain it couldn't hurt. "The barracks of the Night Guard."

The strawboss blinked. "I thought there *weren't* no Night Guard no more."

"They've been reinstated." Which, she was fairly sure, was *not* the correct term, but she pushed on regardless. "And these are to be their new uniforms."

"Huh." The strawboss nodded. "They taking recruits? 'Cause I got a colt at home could use a little infantry training, y'know?"

"I *don't* know, actually." And the idea that struck Rarity then nearly blinded her with its brilliance. "When you get to the Night Palace, however, ask for Minister Dash. *She'll* certainly know. In fact—" She turned to Fluttershy, nervously watching the hubbub. "Fluttershy, why don't you fly ahead and alert Rainbow that the uniforms are on their way? Then she'll be standing by when they arrive and can answer this gentlecolt's question."

Fluttershy looked from her to the Palace a few blocks away, then back again. "Are you sure you and Ory will be all right walking back on your own?"

Rarity had never been surer of anything in her life. "We'll manage somehow, darling."

"All right." Fluttershy leaped gracefully into a hover and nodded to the strawboss. "I'll let them know you'll be along very soon, sir!" And she zipped off.

The strawboss grinned, his gaze following the pegasus. "Ooo la la, I love this job," he said, then he bowed to Rarity, spun toward the carts, and shouted, "Harness up, you slob! Move! Move! Move!"

Ory gave a chuckle beside her. "How certain of your safety *are* you, Miss Rarity?"

She glanced over at him. "Have you had a premonition, Mr. Stargazer?"

"Nothing specific." He gestured up the street toward the Palace with a hoof, and when Rarity started in that direction, he fell into step beside her. "But, well, a lovely young lady? Alone in the big city with no one for company but a disreputable jazz musician?" He shook his head. "One hesitates to contemplate the possible dangers."

"On the contrary." She tossed her mane. "I find myself suddenly *quite* contemplative on the subject."

His laugh this time was full and rich. "Oh, Rarity! You're so... so *alive*! And I'm not saying that just because we were almost killed last night. I've never—" He stopped, and she looked over, found him looking back wearing an expression she could only call rapturous. "I've never met anypony like you before."

"I should say not." She wanted so much to touch his nose, give him a little 'beep' with her hoof like Pinkie so often did, and whether it was her lack of sleep or her current state of euphoria, she found herself doing so, reaching up to tap him gently between the nostrils. "After all, there *is* no pony else like me."

Her touch seemed to freeze him in place, his gray eyes wide, and she turned, continued a few paces along the street before he laughed again and caught up with her. "So, hypothetically," he said. "If a sturdy young trombonist, an itinerant jazz musician, say, were to decide he'd had enough of Canterlot, that the dubious pleasures of the city had begun to pall and grate upon his sensitive nature..." His voice became suddenly quieter. "What sort of welcome might such a wandering minstrel find in, oh, I don't know, say a town like Ponyville?"

The serious undertone in his question made her look at him again, almost afraid to imagine what he was actually asking. "Well," she said, stalling as whatever wit and charm she'd been feeling a moment ago deserted her completely, "as I'm sure you know from our travel brochures, there's any number of attractive features about Ponyville—"

"Oh, yes." Ory reached out a hoof and gave the end of her nose a quick touch. "If the present example is any indication," he went on in that same quiet voice, "I can only imagine that the town itself must be breathtaking."

She found herself wishing she hadn't sent Fluttershy on ahead, that she hadn't taken such efforts to be alone with him, her heart beating faster than it had since their kiss last night. "Would you?" she asked. "Come to visit, I mean?"

"To visit?" He shook his head. "To *stay*, however, to settle down, to become a part of the town and—" He swallowed so hard, Rarity could follow the motion along his throat. "And perhaps a part of your life?" The depths of his eyes made her catch her breath. "I can think of nothing I would rather do, Miss Rarity."

Aware that they'd stopped in the middle of the street, aware of the stares and the grins of the unicorns moving around them, Rarity found she didn't care about any of it. "And I," she said, smiling at him, "I can think of nothing I would rather *have* you do, Mr. Stargazer."

• • •

Fluttershy reached the palace quickly, forcing herself not to stop, not to go back, not to hide on a rooftop along the way to see if Ory and Rarity might—she couldn't stop a little giggle—might *kiss* again.

It just made her so happy, she had to do a little loop above the balustrades of the Day Palace. For as long as she'd known Rarity, on their every excursion and spa day or just getting together for lunch, her friend had spoken about her dream, about meeting a prince of the former royal family in Canterlot, about being swept off her hooves, about the whirlwind courtship and eventual marriage into the dynasty that had ruled the unicorn city before largely abdicating their power and inviting Princess Celestia to move in when she'd left her original palace in the Everfree Forest.

But after the disaster at the Grand Galloping Gala, Fluttershy hadn't heard Rarity mention anything about her dream again until last night. And while she'd never understood Rarity's whole obsession with romance—the one thing Fluttershy had taken away from her horrible, horrible modeling career was the understanding that other ponies really did think she was pretty, but whenever anypony looked her up and down like that teamster had a few minutes ago, she just wanted to crawl into a rabbit hole and pull it closed behind her—that dream meant so much to Rarity, and Ory was such a nice

pony, a gentlecolt like Rarity had said, Fluttershy really, really hoped things would turn out okay this time.

She landed in the courtyard between the two palaces, flinched when the guards at the door saluted her, and rushed past them into the hallway to the throne room. She tried to keep her hooves from tapping, tried to move as quietly as she could while still hurrying, and was happy only a few of the Day Ministry staff looked over at her when she entered.

Princess Luna sat on the Day Throne looking so very regal, Fluttershy had to stop and catch her breath. Just since yesterday, the princess seemed to have grown taller, her wings even more graceful, her mane dark but flowing with silver like the full moon on a summer night. She still looked sad, though, nodding at something the Day Minister was saying, the unicorn scratching notes with a quill on a pad suspended in the gray light of his horn.

Several long moments went by, and Fluttershy thought about tip-toeing outside again, maybe coming back later when the princess wasn't so busy. But Rarity and Ory and those big ponies with their carts were on their way. So should she just stand here and wait? Is that what one of the princess's ministers would do? Or would she be expected to walk up to the throne, all the way up at the front of the room where everypony could see her?

She already felt more than a little out-of-place in the gown Rarity had set out for her this morning: not that the Ministry ponies weren't dressed well, of course, but she could feel more and more of their eyes turning toward her, a pressure building around her worse than before one of Rainbow Dash's electrical storms or—

"Minister Fluttershy?" a deep voice asked softly behind her; she barely stopped herself from screaming, just leaping sideways instead and whirling to see one of the soldier ponies blinking at her. "Have you a message for the princess, miss?"

Panting, telling herself over and over again frantically, *He's being nice! He's not going to throw me in the dungeon!* She finally managed to nod, and by then, she could tell, even more of the ponies at the desks were staring at her. Eyes clenched, she could almost hear their thoughts, almost hear the words 'cute' and 'stupid' and 'famous' and 'useless' simmering around her like the sizzle of the deep-fried eggplant Angel like so much, and she wished so very much she was out with her animal friends who didn't think at all, who didn't make the air thick and heavy and hard to—

A rustle of wings above her, and a little gasp from the guard pony. "Your Highness, I thought she might be—"

"Yes, thank you, lieutenant." Princess Luna's voice touched Fluttershy cool as an evening breeze, gently ruffling her wings and letting her draw what felt like her first breath in minutes. "Minister? Are we needed at the barracks?"

"Yes, your Highness," she managed to say though she couldn't quite manage to pry her eyes open. "I'm sorry, your Highness."

"Not at all." The breeze this time was so real, Fluttershy had to look up, had to stare at Princess Luna standing above her, a smile on her muzzle, her great dark wings caressing the air. And while a little part of Fluttershy still quailed back with a cry of 'Nightmare Moon!', most of her just saw her newest friend. "I had a feeling it might be time," the princess finished.

"Yes," was all Fluttershy could get out, but this time, it was happiness blocking her throat.

Not that the ponies at the desks would know that, that same annoying little part of her whispered. They'll still think you're nothing but a foolish, flighty filly who doesn't know the first thing about-

Princess Luna bent down suddenly, puffed a rose-scented breath into Fluttershy's face, touched her horn to the ribbon in her mane, and the nasty voice whisked away like dust. "Surprise," the princess whispered, then she straightened up, looked back at Minister Daybreak. "Carry on, Minister, and I shall look forward to our lunchtime briefing."

"Of course, your Highness." He bowed and started down the carpeted ramp that led up to the Day Throne.

Smiling, the princess nodded to Fluttershy. "Shall we?" And she stepped out of the throne room.

Fluttershy followed, the sort of calmness smoothing her jangled nerves that she hardly ever felt anywhere except in the woods around Ponyville. "What-?" she found herself asking out loud, hurrying to catch up with the princess. "Your Highness? Did you just... just-?" She didn't know how to ask. "Blow away my nervousness?"

"No." Princess Luna cocked her head, glanced sideways at Fluttershy. "Well, not *really*. But I've been thinking a great deal about what Minister Pie said to me last night, and it looked to me as if you could benefit from a bit of that same advice."

For a moment, Fluttershy could only blink. Last night—after all the scary parts were over—had been the most wonderful time she could remember in a very long time, all her

friends gathered together and talking beside the fire. But the things Pinkie Pie had said to the princess, well, Fluttershy found that she usually understood maybe three of every five things Pinkie said... .

"It's just..." Princess Luna was looking down the hallway ahead, but her gaze seemed to be focused well beyond the stone walls of the palace. "I'm not the sun. And trying to *be* the sun was what led me to... led to all my problems." Her head shifted, and Fluttershy found herself caught up in the princess's dark eyes. "I am the moon and the stars and the night. You are a beautiful, gentle, kind and quiet pony. Trying to be what we imagine other ponies want us to be, well, that's just going to make us both unhappy. Don't you agree?"

A giggle rose up inside Fluttershy's chest, and because it felt so good to do so, she let it out. "Oh, princess! I think that's *exactly* right!"

"Good!" Princess Luna brought a silver-shod front hoof down smartly against the marble floor. "Be it hereby resolved, therefore, that I will be dark, sad, and grumpy, and you will be bright, naïve, and frightened! In other words, I will be Luna and you will be Fluttershy no matter what else happens!" She stopped suddenly, seemed to shrink a little as Fluttershy looked back at her. "And more is *going* to happen, I'm afraid, more good ponies getting thrust into harm's way because of me."

"No." Fluttershy said it quietly, but she put as much force into it as she could, feeling bolder than she had in months. "It wasn't because of you that somepony pushed me and Rarity and Ory over that waterfall."

Princess Luna's head came up, her eyes wide. Fluttershy stepped forward. "It was just like you said. It was because of some *imaginary* Princess Luna they've got stuck in their heads. That's why the party tonight's so important, why we'll have a party every night if we have to! So everypony in Canterlot can get to know you as well as..." She swallowed. "As well as I have."

Silence, then for the second time that morning, Princess Luna leaned down and touched her horn to Fluttershy's ribbon. "Becoming Nightmare Moon was the best thing that ever happened to me," the princess murmured, and Fluttershy couldn't help starting back, the princess smiling down. "Because it led me straight to the six of you."

Then she was turning away, once again as tall and regal as she'd been earlier, the flare from her horn pulling a door open, and they stepped through into an open-air courtyard, the whole city of Canterlot spread out down the slope and across the plain before them. The wall behind them was black marble, and Fluttershy realized that they'd somehow

passed through both the Day Palace and the Night Palace to reach this place, though she didn't remember walking all *that* far.

Princess Luna's doing, she decided...

Looking around, Fluttershy saw a tall wrought iron gate stretching off to her right, a paved road following it around the corner of the Night Palace, some large and fancily decorated buildings on the other side. And to her left, she blushed at the hindquarters of maybe thirty earth ponies and unicorns huffing and puffing through some movements that could've been an exercise or a dance, Fluttershy not at all surprised to hear Pinkie's voice up front: "Okay! Left brush knee and-! Oh, hey! Your Highness! Fluttershy! Hi!"

The other ponies all froze, Pinkie scampering through their ranks. "At ease, ev'rypony!" she called out, skidding to a halt beside Princess Luna and hopping up and down. "This has been so much fun!" She seemed to spin in mid-air, her mane frizzing into even higher tangles. "We are *totally* gonna try square dancing next! You guys wanna join in?"

"Company!" a thin blue unicorn with some sort of stripes on the front of his workout vest shouted. "Salute!" And all the ponies sprang to attention, stomped a front hoof against the cobblestones, then touched it to their chests. "Your Highness!" the same unicorn called. "Night Guard ground troops at your service!"

Princess Luna had gone completely still, her mane barely flowing, but she stepped forward, bowed to the soldiers, and said, "Thank you, commander. And my thanks to every single one of you. I... I know we got off on the wrong hoof, but, well-" She smiled. "Minister Dash set me straight on a few things last night." She looked over at Pinkie. "Speaking of whom, Minister Pie..."

"Whom?" Pinkie blinked at the princess.

Fluttershy cleared her throat. "She means Rainbow Dash, Pinkie. Is... is she here somewhere?"

"Oh! Yeah!" Pinkie reared back on her hind legs, put her front hoofs to her mouth, and shouted, "Dashie! The princess is here!" She landed with a little dance step and glared at the thin blue unicorn. "And c'mon, Foxy! I told you guys 'at ease!'" She started hopping again. "'Cause you're gonna be getting presents!"

"Yes, ma'am!" from the blue unicorn. He barked, "At ease!" and the troops swung into less formal stances, some of them even smiling at Princess Luna, Fluttershy was glad to

see. Some of them *weren't* smiling, though, and a couple looked downright unhappy. Nervous, even, she thought...

A whoosh from the bright blue mid-morning sky, and Fluttershy's heart leaped into her throat as Rainbow Dash and another dozen pegasi swooped around the corner of the low building squatting along the back of the Night Palace. Their wings arching in unison, the whole company landed with perfect precision behind her friend, Rainbow whirling on her front legs to tell the others, "Now *that's* what I'm talking about!"

"Company!" The chubby pegasus behind Rainbow whirled as well. "Salute!" They all faced Princess Luna, did the stomp and chest touch, and the pudgy pegasus called out, "Your Highness! Night Guard air troops at your service!"

Rainbow Dash, grinning from ear to ear, came sauntering across the courtyard, and Fluttershy wanted to start hopping up and down like Pinkie was. "Hey, guys," Rainbow said. "Whaddaya think, Princess?"

Princess Luna again stood stock still for a moment, then said, "I think, Minister Dash, that I have been a fool."

"What?" Rainbow's mouth dropped open, and Fluttershy felt her own doing the same.

"My own shortsightedness has led me to ignore these excellent ponies for more than a year." She shook her head. "But I intend to learn from this mistake as I am learning from all my others." She raised her head and her voice. "That you have all chosen to remain steadfast to your oaths humbles me to the greatest degree, and I will strive from this moment onward to be worthy of your dedication."

Most of the ponies started clapping their hoofs against the cobblestones, some even whistling, but the same few who'd looked nervous to Fluttershy's eye before now seemed even jumpier, their expressions the sort she usually imagined she had on her own face. But why would they be scared? They were soldier ponies! She couldn't imagine what-

Rattles and rumbling creaks began echoing from the walls of the palace and the barracks, whistling and deep breathing and a rough voice shouting, "Slow up, there! Steady now! Steady!" Ears folding, Fluttershy looked around, tried to see where the noises were coming from, and the teamster ponies came galloping around the corner, the carts behind them clattering on the courtyard's cobblestones, the big pony with the hat hauling from the front harness.

"Slow up!" he shouted again, the unicorns trotting alongside each cart pointing their glowing horns at the wheels. "Steady, there! Steady!" And the whole parade crunched and ground to a halt, the soldier ponies staring wide-eyed at the five heavily-laden wagons.

"Ah!" Princess Luna was moving past Rainbow and Pinkie, the teamster ponies turning, their jaws dropping. "And unless I'm greatly mistaken, this will be the shipment with your new uniforms arriving."

The big pony with the hat had the same look on his face as the others, his head tipping back as the taller princess came up to him, her silver shoes tapping in the sudden silence. "Your Highness!" the big pony blurted out, then he dropped into a bow, all the other teamsters doing the same. "I didn't know *you* was gonna be here, ma'am!" He straightened up, grabbed his hat, and pulled it off. "I'da worn my good hat otherwise!"

The princess nodded. "Quite all right, strawboss. Have you need of any assistance in offloading your freight?"

The strawboss blew out a breath, sat back, slapped his front hoofs at the straps of his harness, the buckles unsnapping and dropping the thing to the ground. "I won't say 'no,' ma'am. This's the biggest load we've hauled all year!"

Princess Luna turned to look at Rainbow. "Minister Dash?"

Rainbow grinned and waved at the pudgy pegasus pony. "Captain Custard?"

The captain glanced at the pegasus beside her, a white stallion with ice-blue mane and tail, his cutie mark one big yellow star. "Commander Rigel?" the captain said.

And the commander, when he started barking order—"I want flyers up top undoing those ropes! Any of you zappers with lift magic, get your horns popping! And you grounders! Line up! Let's move!"

Fluttershy felt her whole insides freeze. She *knew* that voice...

• • •

Dash hadn't had a better day in months, rousting the Night Guard up just after dawn, leaving Commander Foxfire and the infantry in Pinkie's hyper hoofs, then slipping into one of their workout vests and leading Captain Custard, Commander Rigel and the rest of the flyers out in some simple maneuvers over the roofs of Canterlot. Like any group

she'd flown with, some were better at the straight speed stuff while others had the fancy moves, but all in all, a pretty balanced outfit.

And Rigel! She grinned, watching him order the troops into place to help the teamsters with the crates. That pony was almost as good as he thought he was...

A familiar little clearing of throat beside her, and Dash turned her grin to Fluttershy. "Looks like you and Rarity got your mission accomplished." She looked around. "Hey, where *is* Rarity, anyway? I thought she'd wanna be here to make sure we didn't dent her suits or whatever."

A blush glowed over Fluttershy's cheeks. "She, uhh... She and Ory, they... they--"

Pinkie gave one of her full-throated laughs and pushed her lips out, wiggling them up and down like a fish.

Dash rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess we can manage to get 'em unpacked without breaking anything. Is there, like, a list inside of which ones are which size? Or--"

"Ummm..." Fluttershy, of course, looked nervous and scared, but something about her shifting eyes, her folded ears, the way she kept trying to get her mane to fall over her face even with the ribbon holding it back made the hair stand up along Dash's neck. "Rainbow? I... can I... can you...?" Her voice trailed off.

Pinkie stopped hopping beside them. "Fluttershy? What's wrong?"

"That... that pegasus." She jerked her nose in Rigel's direction. "He... last night, when Ory and Rarity and I got... when those ponies in black stopped us." Fluttershy swallowed, her voice getting even softer. "The one who was giving the orders. He sounded just like him..."

Dash's wings flared. Last night. Custard had said Rigel was out patrolling the city with--

"And, uhhh..." Fluttershy's gaze shot over her shoulder toward the ground troops lining up by the carts. "That blonde earth pony with the bells for her cutie mark? She's been looking scared at me, and I just..." Her breathing came faster and faster. "I think she's the one I gave the Stare to! The one who kicked Ory and cut his face!"

A cold lump of anger began forming in Dash's gut. "You sure about this, Fluttershy?" she asked as quietly as she could.

Fluttershy gave a convulsive nod. "I'm sure about that voice. And after I do the Stare, I can... I can kind of *smell* it for a while afterwards..."

Pinkie was turning slowly to look at the whole Night Guard. "That one," she said, nodding to one of the unicorns. She went all the way around, nodding to one more earth pony, pegasus, and unicorn in the troop and saying, "And that one" each time till she was facing Dash again, the look on her face the most serious Dash had ever seen there. "All those ponies are really, really nervous right now."

The lump in her gut getting hotter and hotter, Dash whirled and shouted, "Captain Custard!"

"No!" somepony screamed, and the blonde with the bells on her flanks broke formation, took off galloping for the road at the corner of the Night Palace.

"Mirabelle!" Another voice—Rigel's this time—and when Dash snapped her glare over at him, absolute panic flooded his face. "Scatter!" he yelled, and took off into the sky.

More commotion, the other ponies Pinkie had picked out darting suddenly in different directions. "Custard!" Dash planted her hoofs. "Detain all ponies who were out on patrol last night! Now!" And she launched herself after Rigel.

He'd had a few seconds' head start, his white wings a blur against the clear blue above; Dash narrowed her eyes, stretched herself thin, front hoofs feeling the wake of his passage, and pounded the air in the way that made it flow around her, made it curl back and lift her from behind. The consternation in the courtyard dropped away, no sound in her ears but the streak of the wind, the only scent in her nose the clean, clear in-and-out pumping of her own breath, the only sight in her eyes the traitor Rigel, the guy who'd tried to hurt Fluttershy and Rarity.

She gained quickly, the walls of Canterlot's volcano whizzing past them, and got within hailing distance as they shot out into the open air. "Rigel! Heave to, you hear me? You're under arrest!"

He jogged sideways, a move she would've bet money he couldn't do, spun in a tight circle, and lashed out with his rear hoofs, nearly clipping the tip of her nose. She snarled, dove to the left, swooped around under him, and aimed a front hoof for the commander stripes on his vest.

His backflip at full speed in mid-air pulled him out of the way, but she did a jackknife of her own, wrenching her stomach muscles in a way she knew she would feel in a couple

hours, and slammed her hind legs into his. The impact jarred her all the way to her back teeth, sent her into a tumbling forward roll, and she heard Rigel give a cry; flaring her wings, Dash leveled out, banked hard in case he was coming down for another pass.

Looking up showed her nothing but empty blue. And looking down—

Rigel was falling, spinning, his wings flailing, the open mouth of Canterlot's volcano gaping like it wanted to swallow him.

"No, you don't!" Dash shouted, and she shoved herself after him, sliced through the air, cut through it so fine and so close, she almost felt the suction of it pulling her downward. He was still thrashing around at least, still conscious and trying to slow himself, so she didn't need Sonic Rainboom speed to catch up to him and yell, "Go limp, you moron, or I'll let you splatter all over the landscape!"

For an instant, she thought the anger in his face would win out over the fear, but he closed his eyes, spread his wings and all his legs; she plunged beneath him, grabbed him hip and shoulder, spun them both around so he was below her, his back toward the ground. Straining upward, then, she fought the pull, fought the draft, fought to dump the speed she'd just worked so hard to build, her back arching, her teeth gritting, her back joining her stomach on the list of muscle groups she was going to hear complaints from later on.

Fortunately, they hit a tree; she'd been trying to steer for some of the parkland near the palaces since, in her vast experience of crash landings, she found she liked the extra braking power of a tree canopy to the straight-out slam into, say, a building or the ground. She'd already slowed them a lot, too, and, well, there was a *reason* she'd made sure Rigel was on the bottom...

The leaves and branches still gave her a good slapping around, and the "Oof!" when they came bouncing out and finally hit the grass was both deep and heartfelt. She was able to draw a breath, though, and that was a *whole* lot better than any of the alternatives.

Rigel sucked in a breath, then, and Dash heard cries above her, Captain Custard and some of the other Night Guard pegasi winging over the treetops toward them.

Nodding, Dash looked back down at the pony beneath her. "Once again," she panted out. "You are under arrest."

Shuffling a deck of cards always took most of Pinkie's concentration, but it was still one of her favorite things to do. She'd loved it, in fact, ever since her Uncle Abernathy had taught her how to do it after her cutie mark had appeared and the family farm had started getting more famous for its parties than for its rocks.

Of course, Pinkie had known even as a twinkie Pinkie that none of the ponies who'd come to live at the farm after her parents had started smiling and helping out with the parties were *really* related to her, but she'd loved them all so much, not a one had ever objected when she started calling them aunt and uncle and grandma and grampa and cousin.

She could still see Uncle Abernathy with his gap-toothed grin and his plaid vest flinging cards around with hoofs and teeth in ways she was sure even Twilight couldn't match. And all the time he'd spent with her at that big table in the barn where he and the other uncles would play cards all night, whooping and laughing and drinking her dad's root beer! Pinkie had practiced and practiced and practiced like nothing else she'd ever worked on before, and after a few months, she could shuffle cards and deal them out as easily as any of her unicorn uncles could.

Which was lucky since she *needed* something to keep her busy, sitting in Princess Luna's library with the others. The castle she'd built with books yesterday had been taken apart and put away, and as much as she wanted to get them back down and rebuild, the sheer weight of all the frowniness around her made the air seem almost too heavy to move. So she dug through her pack 'til she found her cards, stretched out on the carpet, and shuffled while her friends tossed around words, words, and more words.

"I'll get him to talk!" Dashie was shouting, hovering so angrily, Pinkie was surprised she didn't have a little storm cloud floating between her ears. "Some iron shoes and five minutes, and Rigel'll tell you anything you want!"

Applejack blew out a slow breath. "I'm starting to think we might *hafta*."

"No." Princess Luna was getting more beautiful with each passing minute, Pinkie thought, and not scary-pretty like when she was Nightmare Moon, either: royal-pretty like her sister. Even if she *was* just as serious-faced as ever... "The very reason we *have* laws, Minister, is for those rare occasions when a pony does wrong. And since those laws have saved my life twice, giving me banishment instead of death and allowing me the chance for return and redemption, I will see them followed in this case."

Dashie rolled her eyes. "Fine! But Des has been downstairs to talk with Rigel, AJ's been in there, Twilight's been in there, *you've* been in there, princess, and nothing!" She spun in mid-air and waved at Fluttershy, sitting with her legs tucked under her next to Rarity, both of them way grayer than they usually were. "Unless you can give him the Stare, Fluttershy—"

"Oh, no." Fluttershy's ears drooped. "It's too awful. And anyway, you know I can't control it, Rainbow." Her voice got even quieter, something that always amazed Pinkie: getting louder was easy-peasy, but the way Fluttershy could get softer? "Though I almost wish I *could*," Fluttershy went on in that whisper of hers, "if that would let us find out who's behind all this terrible commotion."

A sigh from Twilight. "That's the problem. We *know* who's behind it." She gave Applejack a distressed look. "I've been thinking about what you said after we left Mom and Dad's, AJ, and you're right. No pony would've thought twice about Lady Stargazer moving around the palaces, and she could easily have recruited Commander Rigel and those other members of the Night Guard. She's got to be the one."

"Well?" Dashie shot practically to the ceiling. "Let's go get her!"

"Ha!" Grouchiest of all, Spike sat clenched like a fist beside Twilight, his green ear ridges almost flat against his head: Pinkie was starting to think she maybe shouldn't've told him about the plans she'd started making for Rarity and Ory wedding when he'd asked her at lunch what was up... . "If there's one thing the Stargazers know, it's how to make friends, so we pull in Lady Stargazer, we better be ready to prove our case to ev'rypony in Canterlot!" He kept trying not to look at Rarity, but his squinty little eyes slid over to her all the time anyway. "Orrery, though, I'll bet if we arrested *him*, he could prob'bly tell us all about—!"

Rarity cleared her throat, her glare louder than any words she could have said.

"Well?" Spike waved his arms. "You wouldn't be the first pony to fall to that guy's slick patter! He's a—!"

"Slick?" Twilight's mouth went sideways. "Spike, you used to say *mud* had more personality than Ory Stargazer."

Spike's eyes wavered, and Pinkie almost threw down her cards to rush over and hug him. But before she could, he was standing, bowing to the princess and saying, "If you'll excuse

me, your Highness, there's some things I need to take care of in the city." He turned and began marching toward the door.

Concern on her face, Twilight called, "Spike? You'll be back for the party, won't you? We'll need all of us there if we're going to—"

"Yeah, yeah." He pushed out through the door into the hallway, and when it clicked closed behind him, Pinkie almost felt her mane straighten out, Spike was so sad. A couple dozen donuts, though, she knew, and he'd be back, ready to show Rarity he was still the best friend she would ever have. Pinkie could already see him in his purple tuxedo and gigantic bow tie at the wedding, too, so that pretty much settled it as far as *she* was concerned.

Rarity gave a sigh that Pinkie figured was at least three-and-a-half times bigger than the one Twilight had blown out a minute ago. "This is going to *devastate* poor Ory, knowing his own mother was behind the attack on us last night! I don't know how I'll ever be able to tell him!"

"Don't," Applejack said sharply. "Even supposing he ain't in on it—"

"He's not," Pinkie told her, cutting the cards and shuffling them again. "But you're right about not telling him, Applejack. I'm pretty sure Ory would be almost as bad a liar as you are."

That got half a smile out of Rarity, a real achievement, Pinkie thought, considering how drab everypony was being.

"Speaking of which," Pinkie said then, spreading the cards out on the floor and flipping the whole row of them from face-down to face-up with one flick of her hoof. "It's about time to stop all this moping around, don'tcha think?"

The gloomy silence in the library got even thicker, and Pinkie could almost smell how tired Applejack was when her friend closed her eyes and let out another big breath. "'Less we can get those varmints to tell us what they know 'bout Phillipa Stargazer, we ain't got much else we *can* do..."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Pinkie squished her cards together into a big jumbled heap, stuffed them into her pack, and jumped to her hoofs. "Like my uncle Abernathy used to say, 'Some other pony shuffles the cards, you get a deck fulla deuces!'"

The others all stared at her; it was Twilight who finally asked, "Which means what, exactly?"

"Which means—" Pinkie skipped toward the door. "I'll go talk to 'em!"

• • •

"You're sure about this, Minister?" Princess Luna's silver shoes tap-tap-tapped along the stone hallway leading down to the Day Palace Detention Center.

Pinkie had been doing her best once more to match the princess's stride, but even though Princess Luna wasn't as tall as her sister yet, she was still taller than last night, the last time Pinkie had tried to walk like her. It meant a lot more hopping than Applejack or Twilight seemed to approve of, but with all the sourness today, Pinkie wasn't really surprised by that.

She wasn't surprised either when, after telling the princess, "I'm sure about *ev'rything*, your Highness!" the doubt in Princess Luna's sideways glance came out as sharp as her hooffalls. "I'll just start with the sister," Pinkie told the three of them, "and work my way around!"

"Sister?" Applejack pulled up short, and since she was walking in front, Pinkie couldn't stop from mooshing face first into AJ's tail; she'd been paying such close attention to Princess Luna's hoofs— "Rigel ain't got no sister!" Applejack looked at Twilight. "Does he?"

Twilight's horn shimmered, and a scroll popped into the air in front of her, unrolling as she skimmed through it. "An only foal," she said.

Pinkie brushed her mane out of her eyes. "Not *Rigel!* Why would I wanna talk to Rigel?"

The scroll vanished, Twilight blinking. "But Pinkie, I thought you said—"

"I said I'd talk to *'em!*" She made sure to pronounce the last word very carefully, but figured she'd better explain anyway. "That means 'them,' y'see, not 'him.'" She shook her head. "We wanna get Rigel talking, we've gotta start with the sister, then the brother, then the *other* sister. 'Cause *that's* the sister Rigel's in love with."

Twilight was still looking confused, but Applejack's eyes suddenly went wide. "Them earth ponies you an' Rainbow Dash brought in yesterday morning! Didn't hit me 'til just now how much they both looks like—!"

"Right-a-roony!" She tapped a hoof against the tip of Applejack's nose.

"Mirabelle," Princess Luna said, a trace of a smile touching her face for the first time in months, days, *hours*, even, Pinkie was sure. "One of the Night Guard ponies whom Minister Fluttershy identified as attacking them last night," she explained to Twilight's still-confused look.

"Huh." Twilight's scroll reappeared and did some more unrolling. "Mirabelle has—" She gave a little smile, too. "A brother named Lumberjack and a sister named Sharpen."

"Yep!" Though Pinkie hadn't known the names 'til just now, the minute she'd seen Mirabelle exercising this morning, she'd known she was related to the two who'd been dancing with Pinkie at Pancake's. And sure, maybe Dashie was right that they'd been trying to *fight* with her, but she was sure they'd be good dancers, too, if they put their minds to it...

Another sigh from Twilight. "I blame myself." The glow of her horn flickered out and took the scroll with it. "If I'd checked the backgrounds on those ponies as soon as you brought them in—"

Pinkie turned to tell Twilight it wasn't her fault, but Princess Luna was already saying it. "With just seven of us trying to run half a world..." The princess shook her head. "But we have the information now, and we shall act upon it." Those deep dark eyes shone down over Pinkie. "We're in your hoofs, Minister Pie."

A little squeak bubbled up inside Pinkie, and she let it out, listened to it float toward the ceiling. "Just like we practiced it, then!"

Applejack blinked at her. "Practice?"

"Makes perfect!" Pinkie spun the rest of the way into the detention center and gave her biggest grin to the guard ponies standing there. "Hi, ev'rypony!" she said. "You'll never guess who I am!"

The pony with the most scrambled egg-looking stuff on her uniform, a gray unicorn with stripes like a prison window on her haunches, saluted. "Minister Pie. We were told to await your arrival as well as— Ten hut!"

All the ponies, already standing so straight and tall they made Pinkie's knees ache, got even straighter and taller when Princess Luna stepped in with Twilight and Applejack. "At ease, Warden Hoosegow," the princess said.

"Yes, your Highness." She gave a whistle, and they all went back to just being regularly straight and tall again. "If I might speak freely, however, ma'am, your message was..." The warden smelled just the slightest bit uncomfortable for a moment, and Pinkie found she liked her a lot better because of it. "Somewhat unspecific," the guard pony finished.

The princess nodded. "I think the phrase is 'playing it be ear,' warden."

Pinkie giggled. "But not *really* with your ears," she said, flapping hers. "Unless you've got great big ones and a pair of bongo drums!" She took several shuffling steps toward the corridor that opened at the back of the guardhouse. "Now, who's gonna unlock the door for me?"

A burly blue unicorn gave a smart little stomp and moved up next to her so smoothly, it was like the room and everything in it slid over while he stood still. "Oooo," Pinkie cooed, looking up at him. "Do that again!"

"Minister," Princess Luna said, and everything she *didn't* say came out almost too loud for Pinkie to hear.

So she pretended she hadn't not heard any of it, and skipping down the corridor, proclaimed, "This is gonna be the best surprise party ever!"

"Yes, ma'am," the burly unicorn said, and Pinkie skipped even higher, her ears almost feeling like pegasus wings. But that meant she didn't notice when her escort stopped by one of the stone doors a short way down the hallway; he cleared his throat, though, and she hopped back to land beside him. "If you're ready, ma'am?" he asked.

"Always," Pinkie told him.

He grinned, his horn flaring, its glow flipping through keys 'til one floated forward, stabbed into the door's lock, and the door slid open without a sound. Pinkie stepped inside, and a young pale brown earth pony, the plain round gray circle of her cutie mark almost brand-new, looked up from the pile of hay in one corner of the cell, afternoon light steaming in through the small barred windows along the top of the wall.

"Hi," Pinkie said with what she hoped was the right amount of perkiness for interrogating a prisoner in a dungeon. "I'm Pinkie, and you're Sharpen, so this should be easy!" She shrugged off her pack.

Sharpen didn't say anything, but Pinkie could smell how scared she was, maybe more scared than she'd ever been in her life. Pinkie wanted to tell her everything was gonna be

okay, but, well, that really depended on more things than Pinkie could juggle in her head right now. So instead, she said, "You and your brother are really good dancers! Do you practice that, or is it just a natural thing?"

"How did you know-?" Sharpen's voice was a lot gentler than Pinkie had expected, and that made her get a little more hopeful. But then the other pony's voice got hard and asked, "How long have you been spying us?"

Pinkie shook her head, pulled some streamers from her pack, started tacking them to the rough stone walls. "I just got into town yesterday, a couple hours before we met at Pancake's place." She smacked her lips. "He sure does make good chocolate mush!"

"What are you doing?" She was confused, Pinkie could tell, but it wasn't making her mad: *another* hopeful sign!

"You wanna help?" Pinkie held a streamer out to her.

She didn't get up to take it, and the way her mouth went sideways told Pinkie she had just enough of a temper to make her interesting. Which was good since the few uninteresting ponies Pinkie had ever met weren't much fun at *all*. "Lemme guess," Sharpen said, her voice as dry as extra-fine flour. "It's my 'getting out of jail' party, right?"

Pinkie grinned and turned to press the streamer she was holding in place against the wall. "That's up to you."

Sharpen gave a little snort. "Oh, I get it. Turn on my friends, and I can go home."

"Your friends?" Pinkie shook her head. "I'd never ask anypony to do that. All I'm asking is--"

A knock at the cell door, and Pinkie couldn't keep her mane from poofing up a little. "Oooo! Our guests are arriving!"

"Guests?" Sharpen asked, but by then the door was opening, Applejack standing there with the burly unicorn guard and- "Lumberjack?" Sharpen darted forward to meet the other earth pony Pinkie had met yesterday, and happiness blossomed so brightly around the brother and sister, Pinkie almost had to squint. She didn't, though, not wanting to miss an instant of it.

"Sharpen!" The big colt pushed his head into her neck, and the two hugged as Applejack nodded to Pinkie and the door swung shut again.

"Surprise!" Pinkie didn't even try to keep the bubbles out of her voice.

"Who-?" Lumberjack looked up, his eyes narrowing as they focused on Pinkie. "You!" He stepped around Sharpen and started toward her. "You're the pony who-!"

"That's right!" A quick swoop to her bag, and Pinkie lunged forward, snapped the elastic band of a blue-and-white striped party hat around his chin and straightened it between his ears. "I'm the pony who's throwing you this party!"

He staggered back, his jaw dropping, and Pinkie stuffed a paper noisemaker into his mouth, the swirly end of it puffing straight out with a squeak when he shouted, "Hey!"

Pinkie smacked a purple and gold hat over her own tangled mane and held a third hat out to Sharpen. "I saved you the pink one!"

Sharpen blinked at her, but Pinkie could hear the corners of her mouth cracking as she tried not to smile. "What are you doing?" she asked again.

"Giving you a hat." Pinkie realized then that Sharpen was older than Lumberjack but not as old as Mirabelle. And as the middle foal in the family, she would feel like she had to be the responsible one, would respond to- "Cause maybe we're all not friends yet, but we sure aren't enemies, either. At least, I'm hoping."

She waggled the hat, and after a moment, Sharpen stepped forward and took it, all the angles of her face saying 'prove it to me.' Pinkie giggled, grabbed the folding table she'd stuffed into her pack, and slid it out. "Can you please help me with this, Lumberjack?"

The big earth pony had managed to spit the noisemaker out and was staring at Pinkie like she was crazy, a look Pinkie was *very* familiar with. "Sis?" Lumberjack asked, his eyes darting in Sharpen's direction.

"It's okay, LJ," she said. "We're just getting a little song and dance here."

Pinkie clapped her hoofs together. "Dancing again! Yes!" She gave Lumberjack her biggest grin. "Your sister says you guys practice a lot, and I sure could tell!" She gestured to the table. "You take that end, I'll take the other, okay?"

Almost all his anger gone, he stumbled a little stepping forward, but he grabbed one of the table's handles-she'd known she didn't have to explain to him how it worked-and pulled when Pinkie pulled, the table snapping open quite nicely. "Sharpen?" Pinkie

flipped the little leg locks. "If you're real careful, you should be able to pull a cake out of my bag there."

"Cake?" A little of that edge was back in her voice. "Okay, there's no possible way you've got a—" The words cut off, and Pinkie looked over to see her staring down into the bag, her hoofs shaking as she reached in and pulled out the chocolate double-layer cake Pinkie had set in there earlier.

For a second, Pinkie shook, too, afraid that not even *that* would do it, but then, oh, then, the most beautiful thing in the whole entire world happened and Sharpen smiled a real, honest, happy, amazed smile. "I'm not even gonna ask," she said, and she turned to set the cake gently on the table.

The knocking that should've come from the door at exactly that moment didn't come 'til a couple seconds later, but that was okay since it gave Lumberjack a chance to go all wide-eyed at the cake as well. And when the door opened to reveal Twilight and Mirabelle with the big guard unicorn, Pinkie decided those couple of seconds really added to the effect.

"Surprise!" she yelled again, getting things back on schedule, and the three earth ponies all rushed together, gasping out each other's names and hugging, the door closing with a click none of them even noticed.

She gave them as much privacy for their moment as she could, trotting over to her packs to rummage out a gold and silver hat for Mirabelle, and when she turned back, the Night Guard pony was staring at the cake and the decorations, her brother and sister standing behind her. "What—?" she asked, and that she was the older sister came through so clearly, Pinkie missed her own sisters for just a second. "What in Equestria is going on here?"

Pinkie held out the hat. "I hope you don't mind, but I really needed to throw a party for all of you."

"That—" Mirabelle shook her head. "That makes no sense."

"Sense?" Pinkie could see them at home, now, could read in the tired lines of every hair on their manes how much their lives had been like hers before Dashie's first Sonic Rainboom, before Pinkie had seen the truth, before her heart had popped open like a firecracker and spread all of life's banquet before her. "Parties don't need to make sense. In fact—" She raised her other front hoof and blew over it, the colored glitter she'd

stepped in while getting out the hat scattering green and blue into the air between them. "The best ones make the least sense of all."

Mirabelle stared, her every muscle still clenched. Pinkie slid a careful half-step toward her, the hat extended. "You haven't had a lot to celebrate lately, I know, but you saw the guard barracks coming back to life this morning, you heard Princess Luna say she was gonna make things right, and you can feel the change happening." Another half-step. "It's a good change, so you're not used to it, but—"

Pinkie stopped, took a breath, wanted to jump up and down, squealing these next words at the top of her lungs, but she knew that would be the worst thing in the world she could do. So she thought about Fluttershy, about how her friend made herself quieter when she wanted to make a point. "But it's *real*, Mirabelle," she said as quietly as she could. "The reallest thing anywhere ever." She wiggled the hat. "We're asking you please to be a part of it, please to look at what we're doing, please to think about what we're doing, and—"

This next knock came exactly on time, the three siblings turning as one to stare at Rigel stomping in, Princess Luna framed by the arch of the doorway behind him. "Miri!" he cried, his wings shooting out, and leaping into Mirabelle's waiting embrace, the pegasus whirled her around a couple times before the two dropped back to the floor of the cell.

Pinkie found her heart blocking her throat so much, she could barely whisper, "Surprise," but the relief and joy in the tangled voices of the four ponies in front of her would've drowned the word out even if she'd yelled it, she figured. She nodded at Princess Luna, still in the doorway, and found the blue and yellow party hat in her pack while the commotion settled behind her.

"I know," she said turning to meet Rigel's half-angry, half-confused gaze. "It's not what you expected. But that's really kinda what this is all about." She held out both hats. "'Cause *we're* not what you expected: me and my friends, sure, but mostly Princess Luna. She's not a tyrant and she not a monster and all we want is a chance to show you, a chance to prove it to you." She couldn't keep from bouncing a little. "And I really, really, *really* wanna dance with you guys! So please say 'yes!'"

The smile that pulled at Mirabelle's mouth made Pinkie's heart soar, and when Rigel nodded, turned to Princess Luna, and bowed, Pinkie almost did a back flip. "Your Highness," he said. "After everything I've seen so far today, I'm starting to think Lady Stargazer was wrong about you."

• • •

Feeling like she'd swallowed a pine cone, Twilight marched beside Princess Luna, the rest of her friends following, her namesake time of day darkening the late-autumn evening above. A lot more ponies filled the courtyard than the night before, but this time instead of the Night Palace lying cold and dark ahead of them, Pinkie's torches lined the archway and the corridor beyond, a really dramatic effect, Twilight had to admit.

Of course, it would've been even *more* dramatic if Commander Rigel had been able to carry out the plan Phillipa Stargazer had set up, the plan he'd told them about while leading Applejack and some of the Night Guard troops to a cache of flash powder globes that he was supposed to be bursting right now to disrupt the procession. And as much as Twilight wanted to trust that Rigel had indeed had a change of heart, she couldn't help darting some glances around the crowd in case he hadn't been privy to all Lady Stargazer's secrets.

But everypony bowed quietly—they never cheered dusk the way they did dawn, she remembered, even back when Princess Celestia was running the whole show. Most of the crowd, she was pleased to note, had red ribbons twined in their manes or tied around their horns, and a surprising number wore evening clothes, too.

Or maybe *not* surprising: Spike had reported upon his return just before sundown that he'd heard talk about Princess Luna's salon all over Canterlot. "It's like a different rumor on ev'ry block!" he'd said. "We're gonna have a full house of ponies tonight just wanting to see what happens next!"

At least the Night Guard was out in force, and she had to admit they looked terrific standing at attention along the wall of the Night Palace in their black-and-silver uniforms. So if anything *did* happen...

Step by step across the courtyard, the music from the Day Palace fading behind them, and Captain Custard gave a whistle, all the ponies stomping a salute, the red plumes on the helmets snapping in unison. Princess Luna inclined her head and entered the arch, Twilight moving after her and allowing herself a puff of relief as they proceeded down the corridor with nothing popping or cracking or falling from the ceiling.

She heard Applejack snicker. "Couldn'ta said it better myself, sugar cube."

A swoosh of feathers. "Didja see 'em?" Dash was trying not to shout, Twilight could tell. "Rarity, those uniforms were 150% cool! A hundred and eighty, maybe!"

"Indeed," came Rarity's voice. "But the pride with which your troops wore them: *that's* what makes the look a success."

Another rustle of feathers. "So many ponies," Fluttershy whispered, the excitement in her voice something Twilight rarely heard there. "And they all looked so nice in their suits and gowns and scarfs and hats! Oh, tonight's going to be all calm and friendly and fine! I just know it!"

"A-*hem*," Pinkie said—she didn't clear her throat; she actually said the word. "It's going to be a *little* bit wild, Fluttershy. I mean, it's a party, right?"

Princess Luna turned a smile over her shoulder that looked so much like one of Princess Celestia's, most of the prickliness in Twilight's stomach just plain dissolved. "Not *too* wild, I hope, Minister?" the princess asked.

Pinkie's sigh ruffled Twilight's tail. "Since it's our first party, fine. But by the end of the week, you better believe I'm gonna be leading a conga line at least a hundred ponies long around this place!"

"Understood." The princess nodded as they reached the door to the throne room, two more of the Night Guard soldiers waiting there. They saluted, and when Twilight followed Princess Luna in, Spike waiting at the foot of the carpeted ramp that led up to the throne, the rest of Twilight's unease disappeared. Whatever happened, they were all together.

She looked at Applejack, her neckpiece shining red and gold in the torchlight, and nodded. Applejack smiled and swung her head around to take in all the others. "Ev'rypony got the plan?" she asked

"Party!" Pinkie shouted.

Rainbow Dash shook the jagged edge of her mane back and forth. "Gotta go with Pinkie on this one."

Applejack gave a little snort. "Just keep your eyes and ears open. Reckon we're gonna get this thing wound up tonight or not at all." She turned to Spike. "How's ev'rything shaping up 'round here?"

Spike closed his eyes, raised his snout into the air, and clapped his hands twice. Lights immediately sprang on at the far end of the throne room to illuminate rows of tables, and

unicorns in black and white waiters' outfits began filing in through a doorway, plates and pots and platters suspended in the glow of their horns.

"Ooooo." Pinkie leaned forward, something like a glow coming over her. "It smells like a bakery! Only better!"

"All righty, then." Applejack tapped her front hoofs on the marble floor. "Showtime, folks!" She ran to the big doors, spun, and lashed out with her hind legs, the crash ringing through the whole palace as the doors swung open completely to reveal the torch-lined corridor, the two guards catching the swinging panels in the glow of their horns and easing them into place. "Pinkie! We're up!"

Pinkie danced over to Applejack's side, and the two earth ponies headed down the hallway toward the arch out into the courtyard. Spike, quick claws fastening his red bow tie into place, took his position in the doorway; since he knew everypony in Canterlot, Twilight figured the best place for him would be at the door so he could announce the guests as they arrived. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy took off so they could keep the whole throne room under surveillance, and Twilight, taking her stance on Princess Luna's right, nodded to Rarity, doing a bit of last-minute primping to her mane on the princess's left.

Looking up, she caught Princess Luna's eye and gave her a smile. "Nervous?" she asked.

"Only completely," the princess answered.

Then Twilight heard hooffalls in the corridor and turned to meet their guests—and was surprised at how smoothly it all went; she could even forgive Spike for mangling Ory's name when the stallion arrived with the Borealis family, a group she vaguely remembered as Night Ministry workers from her years in Canterlot. Rarity, who had been as charming and vivacious as Twilight had ever seen her since they'd begun greeting the guests, somehow got even more so, and Twilight shook her head. Ory had filled out a little maybe since she'd last seen him some two years ago, but he still looked like the same Ory Stargazer she'd had such an uneasy relationship with since they'd both been foals—

Until he came up, bowed to her, to the princess, to Rarity, and introduced the Borealis daughters, their eyes shining, their red ribbons carefully placed within their perfectly styled manes. He then slid up beside Rarity, and the two of them fell into a light and witty banter that almost made Twilight's chin drop.

What was it Applejack had said the other day? That Rarity could charm rocks out of a field? 'Cause she'd certainly done *something* to Ory...

More guests, then, Spike calling out their names, Princess Luna telling them how glad she was they could come, Twilight nodding to those she knew—former classmates, mostly, some of them with husbands, wives and foals in tow—while Rarity and Ory seemed to know the rest. The throne room began filling up, a small combo in the back swinging into some sort of music so light it was almost invisible, and Twilight found herself having flashbacks to the Grand Galloping Gala.

Not that Pinkie was letting *that* happen, popping around the room to clap a pony on the shoulder, drop some enigmatic phrase into the conversation, and whirl away in a cloud of streamers. Twilight saw Dash shoot overhead more than once, Captain Destrier and several other pegasi, obviously military even in civilian clothes, often with her, and Twilight's good feelings kept growing, Fluttershy's words about everything being calm and friendly and find coming back to her—

'Til Spike announced, "Nocurne and Tercey Sparkle, and Phillipa Stargazer."

And Twilight's whole stomach tightened.

• • •

"Twilight!" Phillipa Stargazer still looked exactly the same as she always had, and Twilight scolded herself for expecting otherwise. Just because she was responsible for all the bad things that had happened the past couple of days...

"Phillipa." Twilight forced a smile, looked away, and focused on her parents. "Princess Luna? Have you met my father and mother?"

Princess Luna dipped her head as they bowed. "I've not had the pleasure, though I've of course heard so many wonderful things about the both of you." Her voice softened. "Your daughter is the reason I'm able to be here tonight, and her friendship has meant more to me than I can ever express."

The sentiment made Twilight swallow against a tightness in her throat, as did her father's gentle reply: "We Sparkles have been privileged to serve Equestria's royal household for generations, your Highness. And seeing our daughter here at your side is the proudest moment of our lives."

A gust of breath from Phillipa Stargazer that almost sounded like a snort to Twilight's ears. "Yes," she said. "Though of course in my case it's my *son* who's standing here and, well, perhaps 'proud' isn't the word I'd use."

"Yeah." Applejack had come up quietly behind the three elderly unicorns, the Night Guard troops moving in to take positions along the walls of the throne room. "I don't reckon so. 'Specially since you been trying your ding-dangedest to sabotage ev'rything all week."

Phillipa's ears twitched, as sarcastic a smile as Twilight had ever seen spreading over her snout. "Why, Minister Applejack, I don't know what you—"

"S'all right." Applejack moved around to stand beside Ory, the stallion's brow creasing with confusion. "Once Commander Rigel showed us them flash bombs, we set a couple guards waiting, and they grabbed the varmints you'd sent to cause trouble tonight." She shrugged. "So I reckon most ev'rypony'll be able to enjoy the party just fine."

When Lady Stargazer's ears twitched this time, they stayed down, her smile edging over into something much closer to a frown. "Mother?" Ory asked then, and Twilight saw Rarity inch closer, press her shoulder against his.

The party went on around them for a few seconds, then Applejack blew out a breath. "Y'wanna do it this way, Phillipa? Y'want me to in'nerduce Ory here to Mirabelle? 'Cause we got her and her shoes, and I'm betting a little unicorn medical magic'll show the blood on them came from the gash on Ory's—"

"Stop," Phillipa said, her eyes clenching shut.

"Blood?" Ory stared, one front hoof going to the cut on his cheek. "Mother? What is she talking about?"

"Stop!" Lady Stargazer didn't quite shout it, but it was still loud enough to make Twilight and her parents flinch.

Applejack turned to Ory. "Mirabelle's the sister of Lumberjack and Sharpen, two more ponies your mother knows. They was nice enough to tell us where they hid the saw they borrowed so them and their pegasus friends could cut the—"

"Thank you, Minister." Princess Luna lowered her muzzle to Phillipa's ear. "Lady Stargazer, I'll ask you please to surrender yourself into custody. Your actions against the ponies of Canterlot—"

"What?" Lady Stargazer's head snapped up, anger in her eyes. "You were the one destroying the foundation and balance of this city! I acted in *defense* of Canterlot when you refused to listen to reason and Princess Celestia refused to overrule you!"

Princess Luna gazed steadily down into Phillipa's glare. "That I was at fault in what I did I have admitted and will continue to admit. But what *you* did, madame—"

"Mother!" Ory's mane was nearly standing on end. "You— You tried to kill us last night!"

Pain flooded over the anger in Lady Stargazer's face. "I knew you'd be all right, Ory! I knew you'd find a way to save yourself and—"

"But I didn't!" His eyes narrowed, his lips pulling back from his teeth. "If not for Rarity and Fluttershy, I'd be spread all over the valley right now! How could you—?"

"Stop!" This time, she *did* shout it, nearby groups of ponies turning wide eyes to stare. "I did it for you, Ory, for your future!" The words seemed to tear out of her. "It wasn't like I had any other choice, and—!"

"No." Princess Luna spoke softly, but Twilight knew everypony in the room could hear her. "There is *always* a choice, Lady Stargazer, *always* a point at which decisions are made and actions taken. And when those decisions we make are wrong, we must own up to them, correct them, and strive to do better. Therefore, for the decisions you have made and the actions you have taken—"

"No!" Phillipa reared back, a light exploding so brightly from her horn, Twilight felt the force of it against her like a driving wind. Eyes clenched, she sparked her own horn, threw a defensive bubble around her with as large a radius as she could, heard cries and gasps, the rustle of other unicorn magic pushing back into whatever spell Phillipa had blasted out.

Until the light cut off, the pressure dropping so suddenly, Twilight almost fell forward. Opening her eyes brought nothing but darkness, frightened and confused voices starting to crackle through it. But a spark of light to her left glowing from a unicorn's horn, spreading to show her Ory's face, Rarity and Applejack beside him, Princess Luna staring upward, the bubble of light growing to show more faces, more ponies looking around, 'til it fetched up against a complete and utter darkness covering the ceiling, walls, and floor of the throne room: a shield spell so thick and complex, Twilight wanted to get out her pen and start taking notes.

"She's gone!" Her mother's cry brought Twilight's attention back down, her parents blinking at the spot where Phillipa Stargazer had been standing a moment before.

Panic began building in the room like static before a thunderstorm, but Princess Luna raised her voice. "It's all right," she said. "It's merely a shield spell. Twilight Sparkle and I will begin unraveling it at once. I'll ask the Night Guard to stand ready to pursue the fugitive and—"

"Twilight!" Rainbow Dash's voice from above, and she swooped down, slid along the darkened marble floor. "It's Fluttershy! She was feeling a little boxed in, so I told her to go out into the garden for a while!" She waved a hoof at the doorway, completely covered with the solid shell of the spell. "She's still out there!"

Swallowing, Twilight clenched her eyes again and started tracing the structure of the magical wall surrounding them.

• • •

As dark as it was in the garden, Fluttershy found she wasn't scared since, after all, it was supposed to be dark on the night of the new moon. Besides, it was so lovely here this time of the year, the animals and plants all tucked away already for their winter naps, and after the party inside—

Not that it was a bad party: Fluttershy had been having a wonderful time with the Borealis girls, the fillies so proud to introduce her to their classmates. But a little party went a long way, she'd learned when she was still in school, and Rainbow's idea to take a restful walk through the garden before heading back in was—

The sound that struck her from behind then wasn't really a sound at all, she realized at once. It was more the complete and sudden *lack* of sound, the little rumble of the party that had followed her even out here just plain gone. Turning, she saw the whole Palace wrapped in darkness like the skin around old pudding, a layer of something that made the night sky seem bright.

Unable to move, she stared at it, and something flashed beside the garden gate, a figure appearing, its head bowed, the anguish in its voice simply heartbreaking as it muttered, "No, no, no, no, no!"

The figure took a few staggered steps, and Fluttershy couldn't help fluttering forward, had to call out, "Hello? What happened? Are you okay? Do you need any—?"

A light from the figure's forehead showed Fluttershy it was an elderly lady unicorn, and when she turned, tears streaming down her face, her eyes wide and as wild as any injured animal Fluttershy had ever found in the forest, Fluttershy recognized her: she hadn't actually met Lady Stargazer, but from Applejack and Twilight's description—

"No," Lady Stargazer said, her voice like broken glass. "I won't! Won't allow you to... to destroy everything I've tried to build here!"

Fluttershy's heart buzzed like a hummingbird's wings. "What... what did you—?" A horrible and familiar pressure began building in her chest. "My friends are in there!" She waved a shaking hoof at the black and silent palace. "What did you do?"

"They're fine!" The lady fell forward onto her knees. "I'm not a monster! I'm *not*!"

The energy expanding inside her poofed away to nothing, and Fluttershy stepped forward, settled down beside the sobbing unicorn. "Of course you're not," she said the way she would to a hawk or a snake. "You were just doing what you thought was right."

"My whole life!" Lady Stargazer buried her face in her hoofs. "My *family's* whole life! For a thousand years, we ran half the world, and she... she *thanked* us! Like we'd brought her a sandwich or a dish of ice cream! And then? For the princess to leave *her* in charge of *everything*? It... it... it had to stop! *I* had to stop it!"

Fluttershy kept her voice quiet. "By dropping metal beams on ponies? By threatening them in the street at night? By making them fall into a river and—?"

"No!" Lady Stargazer's sobs grew even louder, her whole body shaking when Fluttershy stroked a hoof along her back. "What have I done? What have I—?"

The palace exploded in light and sound, shards of the dark layer scattering into the night, and with another flash, all Fluttershy's friends popped into the garden beside her, Princess Luna towering above the others. "Fluttershy!" Twilight shouted. "Are you—?"

"Shhh!" Fluttershy gave them all a stern look. "Lady Stargazer feels bad enough about what she did without all this noise!"

Twilight's eyes went wide, and Pinkie hopped forward. "Wow, Fluttershy! Did you give her the Stare?"

"No." Fluttershy couldn't help smiling. "It's like my uncle Sharpeye always said: 'Never play an ace when a deuce'll do.'"

Completing her third circuit of the throne room without seeing Ory, Rarity felt a touch of panic. After the awful and disturbing spectacle of Night Guard troops leading the weeping Lady Stargazer into custody, if Ory had vanished as well—

Of course, she couldn't *show* how distraught she was, not with a fair percentage of Canterlot's elite buzzing around the refreshment tables like bees ready to strike. She had to smile sadly, shake her head, and project a confidence she didn't quite feel: "Yes, it's just so dreadful! When Minister Applejack presented Princess Luna and the rest of us with the evidence against Lady Stargazer this afternoon, well! I could hardly believe my ears! It will all be read tomorrow morning in open court, of course, but oh! Such a shock!"

Exhausted upon leaving one particularly unhappy group of unicorns in evening dress, she was on the verge of tears when Applejack sidled up to her and whispered, "Yer smoothing more ruffled manes tonight, sugar cube, than the rest of us put together, but I can see it's getting to you. So you turn on in any time you need to."

Heartened by the words, she took a breath and said, "I'll be fine." Yes, she could run off all a-fluster looking for Ory or even fold herself into a puddle of misery in a room somewhere, but with loose ends that still needed trimming, frowns in the crowd that she could perhaps turn from angry to thoughtful... So she stayed at it, speaking and listening 'til the atmosphere became more somber, less threatening.

Soon, couples and small groups began bowing their farewells to the princess, and at last the guards closed the big doors, Princess Luna heading out to see to the night. And while Rarity tried to help the others clean up, after dropping her broom four times in the course of a minute, she felt a nudge at her shoulder and heard Fluttershy say, "Rarity, you're going to bed now, and you're going to sleep."

All her protests were to no avail, and collapsing into a bed she wasn't sure she'd actually used since arriving in Canterlot, she started awake seeming minutes later with Pinkie Pie calling from the doorway, "This five o'clock in the morning stuff is *great*! I've gotta do it more often!"

Rarity blinked, took a breath, discovered she didn't feel as much like a balloon about to burst as she had last night. "When's our promenade?" she asked, her voice hardly cracking.

"An hour or something. Plenty of time!" Pinkie hopped out of sight around the corner, then hopped back into sight. "Oh, and make sure you've got plenty of red ribbons today! I got a flappy-eyelid feeling they're gonna be popular!"

The promenade to the Day Palace did seem a bit more crowded, the Borealis girls right up front, their eyes and ribbons bright as they started the chant: "Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equestria!" Princess Luna nodded quite regally, Rarity thought, something much more ethereal about the princess this morning. The Night Guard troops marching alongside their little group made an impressive display, their dark uniforms standing out well in the gray light of pre-dawn, and they saluted their Day Guard counterparts sharply at the center of the courtyard before she and her friends followed Princess Luna into their keeping, the first time in nearly a year, Rarity realized, that this ceremony had occurred with all the appropriate pomp and circumstance.

Still, she couldn't help but notice the complete lack of Ory anywhere in the vicinity...

Entering the Day Palace to the more-than polite applause of the Day Ministry workers, she watched with the others as Princess Luna announced the sunrise, then she felt obliged to step outside and observe whether the Night Guards' uniforms really *did* drink in the sunlight the way she'd hoped they would. The effect was most satisfactory, and the group of ponies that respectfully pressed in upon her with requests for ribbons gave her some satisfaction as well: they were largely earth ponies and pegasi, two groups among whom she'd not had much chance to mingle since arriving in the capital.

She did her best to engage everypony in witty small talk, but it felt more than a little automatic, as if her charm was a machine she had overworked to the point where it gave off a bit of a grinding sound. Tying ribbons in manes and around ankles, she expressed Princess Luna's thanks for their support and Princess Luna's dismay at Lady Stargazer's actions and Princess Luna's assurance that the malefactor would be treated with all due diligence according to Equestrian law and custom. It seemed the right tone to adopt...

By the time she returned to the throne room, Phillipa Stargazer's name hovered in the air, Princess Luna on the dais in consultation with Twilight, Applejack, and the odious Lord Daybreak. Rarity, however, found herself less interested in the fate of the mother than in the current whereabouts of the son, and not seeing Ory—again!—in the crowd gathering to hear the charges against the former Night Minister, with a rush of determination, Rarity swept from the palace, her dark blue dress simple but elegant enough, certainly, to call upon a friend about whom she was concerned.

The streets of Canterlot bustled with ponies and their carts going about whatever sorts of business ponies with carts did—hauling things, she presumed, vegetables and dry goods and other such sundries as a city this size could not do without—and Rarity was several blocks away from the palace before she realized she didn't know where she was going.

Popping into one of the lovely little boutiques around the edges of whatever park she'd wandered into, she meant only to ask for directions to the home of Lord Daybreak, but, well, she couldn't very well rush off without complimenting the proprietor on the smart line of hats she had on display. One thing led to another—the proprietor admiring Rarity's dress, Rarity admitting that she'd designed it herself, the proprietor brightening, familiar with Rarity's name and work, Rarity tucking a business card into her bag—but some fifteen or twenty minutes later, she was on her way again, heading along the inner curve of the volcano's crater, the streets wider and less trafficked, the shops dwindling as the residences grew larger and more expansive.

At Daybreak Court, then, the tidy little cul-de-sac the shop's proprietor had directed her toward, she found herself looking over a picket fence at an immaculately-kept front garden; steeling herself, she pushed the gate open and started up the white stone path toward the house.

Her hoofs feeling heavier and heavier with each step, she started wishing she'd taken an extra hour or two at her toilette. The curve of her mane, the drape of her dress, the placement of each eyelash: it all needed to be exactly right. Of course, it largely *was*—she wouldn't've left the palace otherwise—but she'd been walking now for some time, had been engaging in commerce as well, and following the walkway between the carefully-placed trees and grass-covered hillocks, she couldn't help but feel the eyes of Canterlot upon her.

Not that anypony in this neighborhood would be so gauche as to stare openly from a balcony or a picture window, and the Daybreak estate itself looked more like its own little town than a part of the city behind her. Still, Rarity knew very well the tingly sensation of being stared at. And she was getting that sensation right now.

More than that, even, the air itself seemed different here, full of history, the Daybreak family's thousand years of service to the crown as thick as the scent of the narcissus flowers. It got her wondering why the Stargazers didn't have a similar place, why the family had had to come *here* after Princess Luna had closed the Night Ministry, but by then she'd wound her way through the garden and had reached the front door, a stylized golden sunburst knocker in the center.

The glitter around the edges of the sunburst sent a nice little shiver down her horn-diamond dust, she could tell—and she used her magic to tap it, the door swinging open almost immediately to reveal an old liveried earth pony, his black and white coloring the same as his butler's uniform. "Yes, madame?" he asked in a voice that made Rarity think of Pinkie Pie's chocolate pudding: sweet, rich, and deep.

Knowing that everything rode on this moment, she measured a little extra warmth into her tones and gave him what she felt was the correct amount of smile. "Miss Rarity to see Mr. Stargazer."

"I'm sorry, madame," the butler said. "But Mr. Stargazer does not wish to be disturbed."

She turned up the heat just a bit. "That may very well be, sir, but you and I both know that Mr. Stargazer *needs* the proper sort of disturbance right now. And I hope you'll agree with me that I am the pony to provide that disturbance."

He gazed imperturbably at her, and for a moment, Rarity was afraid she'd misjudged the situation. But his face softened just a bit, and she could see quite clearly how much the old pony cared for Ory. "Indeed, madame." He stepped back. "If you'll come this way, please?"

"Thank you." She moved into the semi-darkness of the entryway, the walls and floor all natural wood, the ceiling smooth and highly-polished marble. Oddly tasteful, she thought, considering how rude Lord Daybreak had been to her yesterday: perhaps his wife was in charge of the decor...

Shaking her attention back to the situation, she quickened her steps following the butler down the hall. "Is Mr. Stargazer alone, or are his sisters with him?"

"The Miss Stargazers have all gone *en masse* to the palace for the reading of the charges against Lady Phillipa." The butler turned right down one corridor, then left down another, Rarity getting mere glimpses of other elegantly decorated rooms as she passed them. "Mr. Stargazer did not feel up to the task." He stopped before a doorway and turned, his eyes wavering. "Thank you for coming, Miss Rarity."

She touched his hoof. "Thank you for caring about him."

The butler nodded, drew in a breath, tapped the door, and pushed it open. "Miss Rarity, sir."

"What?" came Ory's voice from inside. "Confound it, Mandrake! I said I wasn't to be—!"

"Ha!" Rarity put on her determined face and pushed past Mandrake into a spacious sitting room, light filtering through the curtains at the far end. Bookshelves lined the walls, a few closed doors situated among them, the floor a random scattering of cushioned lounges, tables, and piles of pillows. That the space was being shared by several ponies became obvious to her at once from the stacks of magazines and the distinct scents of five different types of perfume, but the only figure currently in residence lay wrapped in a well-worn robe across one of the lounge chairs in the far corner of the room, Ory's expression all glaring eyes and flaring nostrils.

Rarity took a stance, glared back at him, and said, "Ha!" once more. "That I should live to see one of Canterlot's most cultured gentlecolts leave a party without bidding good night to the hostess! It's simply unfathomable!"

His glare melted into a stare. "Bid her good night?" A twitch pulled his cheek, and he waved a hoof wildly. "As she'd just arrested my mother for treason, I rather felt my continued presence in the hall might not be entirely welcome!"

"Nonsense!" She stomped forward. "Your mother's actions were her own!" Activating her horn, she pushed the curtains open, a lovely view of a hillside elm grove outside. "I can't think of one pony in Equestria who would hold you at all responsible for-!"

"Her actions?" A dark flash to her left, and she turned to see him leap from the lounge, his horn pulsing to cast shadow around him despite the late autumn sunlight. "Endangering the public after devoting her life to their welfare? Trying to kill me? Trying-" His voice broke, and his eyes squeezed shut. "Trying to kill *you*..."

"She wasn't." Rarity stepped toward him, used the magic of her horn to brush the tangles of his mane back from his forehead. "She was angry at both princesses and afraid for your future, and while that certainly impaired her judgment, I'm inclined to believe her when she says she planned everything with an eye toward creating mayhem, not injury."

Ory started back, surprise blossoming into his scent. "You've spoken with her?"

"My friends have." Fluttershy and Applejack had spent most of the night talking with Lady Stargazer in her cell, had given their reports while breakfasting before this morning's promenade, and-

And the idea that struck Rarity then made her knees weak, it felt so right. "But as soon as you've tidied yourself up," she said with a nod, "we shall *both* speak to her."

He did some more blinking. "You... you expect me to-?"

"I do." Rarity glanced around at the various closed doors among the bookcases. "I assume that one of these is your room and that you have appropriate clothing?"

A bit of his earlier anger flitted across his face. "And what would you recommend for visiting one's mother in prison?"

Already close to him, she moved closer, and without allowing herself to think, she touched her lips briefly to his, felt the sweet, sweet shock of it and saw that same shock rattle through him from his ears to the tip of his tail. "Something nice," she murmured. "Not too formal, however, I think."

His chest rose and fell, and when he swallowed, Rarity could hear it. "Very well." He cleared his throat, turned, and headed for one of the doors.

She couldn't help shelving a few books and stacking some of the magazines while she waited, but the door finally reopened, Ory emerging in a cravat and jacket that were perhaps a bit on what Rarity would have considered the formal side. Still, she was never one to underestimate the power of the proper outfit in a trying situation. If these were the clothes he needed, then that was all there was to it.

Mandrake, the butler, seemed to approve as well, intercepting them in the hallway as they neared the front door. "Going out, Mr. Orrery?"

"Yes," Ory said shortly, then he sighed, turned to the older pony, and bowed his head. "Mandrake, I... I must apologize for being so beastly to you this morning." His eyes narrowed, his gaze sliding over to Rarity. "I can honestly say that I'm already paying the price for it."

The subtlety of the butler's smile made Rarity hope she would have a chance to better make his acquaintance. "I cannot think of a more delightful burden, sir."

• • •

All in all, Rarity reflected afterwards, once more in the front hall of Daybreak House, the visit had gone quite well. The presence of Ory's sisters had been an unexpected plus, nine fillies ranging from slightly younger than Rarity to perhaps Sweetie Belle's age swinging their heads around as the jailer had opened the door to a well-lit and spacious cell, their dark coats and manes declaring them to be Stargazers.

The brief awkwardness, however, had quickly dissolved into tears all around, Ory hugging his sisters and his mother, but when Rarity had tried to make a discreet exit so

the family could be alone, Lady Stargazer had not only insisted that she stay but had gone on to offer such a heartfelt apology for her recent actions that Rarity had found herself more convinced than ever of the lady's repentance.

More tears had followed, only a knock at the door finally breaking the cathartic scene up, a unicorn stepping in and introducing herself as Limpid Dewdrop, the psychologist who would be treating Lady Stargazer. Then had come tearful farewells and promises of daily visits, and walking with the Stargazers back to the Daybreak estate, Rarity had done rather well, she thought, distracting Ory's sisters with talk of the latest fashions and the tale of her and Ory visiting Lace Brocade's workshop the previous day.

She'd so lightened the mood, in fact, that now, standing in the front hall with the Stargazer girls surrounding her, she found herself unable to depart: "Oh, *do* stay, Miss Rarity!" Urania, the youngest of the fillies, was saying. "It's almost time for tea!"

"Ummm..." Rarity looked at Ory.

"Actually," he began, stepping forward, "Miss Rarity has many other duties in the princess's service that she must—"

"Duties?" Melpomene, the next eldest after Ory, pushed out her lips to make smooching noises, and Rarity felt her ears heat up.

A gentle clearing of throat, and she looked past the girls to see Mandrake standing in a doorway. "Excuse me," he said, "but your aunt asks if it's not too great a burden that her nieces attend her at this time."

The girls went wide-eyed, turned, and nearly galloped down the hall. Rarity blew out a breath, inclined her head to the butler, and smiled at the bow he gave her before he followed the Stargazers out of the hall.

She heard Ory chuckle behind her. "Auntie's not one to be kept waiting."

Turning, she cocked her head at him. "Will you then be hurrying off as well?"

He gave a rakish smile. "Oh, she's long since despaired of *me*. She doesn't care for the trombone." A seriousness came over him that sent a lovely little tingle down her spine. "But thank you, Rarity, for... well, for everything, I suppose. I don't know what the girls and I would've done without you." He coughed a laugh. "Actually, I'm fairly certain I would've sat here brooding for a week, growing all the while more resentful and grotesque. But now, I almost feel up to asking you to lunch."

"I should hope so." She tossed her head. "We'll need to visit a number of establishments, after all, if you're to gather a sufficient ensemble for this evening."

He blinked at her, then smiled. "I'm beginning to think I should simply make it my regular practice to assume a befuddled expression when in your company."

She sighed in mock exasperation. "Tonight's party at the Night Palace. I told Pinkie Pie I had made the acquaintance of a local trombonist and that I would prevail upon him to supply music of an appropriate nature."

"Ah." His ears folded. "And this is something you only thought to mention now?"

It took some work, but Rarity managed to look innocent. "Surely it can't be *that* great a task to track down a group of musicians talented enough to perform before the reigning monarch of Equestria at what is likely to be the social event of the season in the, oh, four or five hours before sundown."

"You're serious." Ory's eyes seemed to be quivering in their sockets. "And since it's for the princess, as you say, I imagine the pay would be somewhat higher than the average nightclub gig..."

Rarity could quite literally smell his excitement. "Well, of course! But the honor of performing before royalty would surely be enough to entice—"

"The best players in town." His voice had gotten quiet. "Rarity, I could get... this could be—" He spun for the door. "We haven't a moment to lose!"

And while it took her a few more hours to finally get the lunch he promised, the places she visited with Ory that afternoon made the wait worthwhile: out-of-the-way bistros and basement-level clubs that even in the brilliant sunlight of that autumn afternoon still seemed dark, mysterious, and intimate. And the music, while not entirely to her taste, was quite lovely when the musicians slowed down and concentrated on the melodies.

The day simply flew in Ory's company, and by the time evening was drawing in, he'd contacted everypony he'd hoped to and had rounded up a few more, all of them just as excited as he was about performing at the party. "This is going to be my dream band, Rarity!" he was gushing as they headed back toward the palace. "We'll have to stick to standards and the classics, I suppose, since we won't have any time to practice, but this is going to be a sound the likes of which Canterlot has never heard before!" His eyes met hers, and the lustrous glow in them made her catch her breath. "Once again, I find that I owe everything to you..."

And as much as she wanted to lose herself in those eyes, she forced a laugh, tossed her mane, began approaching the subject she'd been dreading all afternoon. "Well, we'll have to invite your sisters, then, and Mr. Mandrake." She shook her head. "Though I suppose that will bring your aunt and uncle into things, and I'm not sure he likes me much."

"Uncle Daybreak?" Ory's mouth went sideways. "Oh, he likes you. It would politically unwise of him not to, and uncle never does *anything* politically unwise." He sighed. "Living with Aunt and Uncle while Mother's in treatment will do the girls good. I just wish—" He stopped and snorted. "Well, as Father used to say, 'If wishes were fishes, we'd all be gasping for breath.' I never understood what he meant by it, but it's about all he left us, so..."

Rarity just cocked her head, hoping that would be enough prompting, and it was. "Father sold the family estates, y'see, when I was just a colt. We all lived in the Night Palace anyway, hardly ever visited our acreage on the other side of the valley, so why keep it?" A trace of bitterness came into his voice. "It's not as if anypony would possibly dissolve the Night Ministry after a thousand years of service and kick us all out into the streets! How could *that* ever happen?"

Rarity touched her shoulder to his as they walked, and he gave another sigh. "Lord and Lady Daybreak aren't even really that closely related to us, but they've been kindness incarnate during all this. My sisters could have much worse guardians than them."

Not wanting to say the words but knowing she couldn't live with herself otherwise: "I can think of a much better guardian with no effort at all."

His gaze was focused on the street at his hoofs. "Taking them with me on the road is out of the question." He darted a glance at her. "Perhaps once I've settled down in Ponyville, started getting work, begun making a name for myself, I can send for them and—"

"Ponyville?" *Stop talking!* she told herself. *Don't get him thinking thoughts he doesn't want to! That I don't want him to!* But— "Where there are no bistros like we've visited today? Where there are no musicians like we heard today? Where we've had the same mayor for as long as I've been alive and none of the politics you were born and raised to? Where there's not—?"

"There's you," he said simply, his shoulder brushing hers, and Rarity squeezed her mouth shut, tried to make herself believe he meant it. But the set of his ears, the furrow to his brow, the way he turned his attention back to the street again, it all spoke volumes to her, volumes she once again didn't want to hear...

• • •

They parted in the courtyard, Ory continuing at a gallop to the Night Palace to check on the progress of the band's arrival and set up, Rarity making her way at a more leisurely pace through the hallways to the Day Palace throne room. Dusk was starting as she ambled in, the others already gathered at the foot of the Day Throne, Princess Luna descending, the starlight-silver flow of her mane even more exquisite than it had been this morning.

Rarity nodded to her friends as she took her place, but the looks she got in return confused her a bit: Twilight more serious than usual, and Fluttershy seemed almost on the verge of tears! She began wondering if she'd missed some important development while out and about with Ory, but she couldn't image what. Lady Stargazer and her accomplices were in custody and beginning treatment, so what else—?

She couldn't ask, of course, as the music began at that very moment, the Day Guard troops forming up around them, Princess Luna leading the regular procession from the throne room out into the courtyard. More ponies filled the space than at any time since that first morning when Princess Celestia had walked with them, and Rarity nodded and smiled to those whose eyes she caught: the Borealis family right up front again in their evening clothes and red ribbons; the strawboss from Lace Brocade's delivery service, a strapping younger version of himself shifting uneasily from hoof to hoof; several of the ponies Rarity had spoken to this morning, the ribbons she'd given them proudly displayed as they chanted, "Luna! Equestria! Luna! Equestria!"

All went exactly as it should have, the Night Guard troops waiting at attention for them, saluting appropriately, their uniforms so very much the way she'd imagined them in those long hours in front of her sketch pad two nights ago that Rarity couldn't keep a bit of a strut from her step. And as they all moved into the Night Palace's main corridor, the music that greeted them was a lovely old piece she remembered her mother and father singing, something about meeting one's true love beneath the light of the blue moon.

Entering the throne room then, Rarity smiled at the changes Pinkie had made during the day, a dance floor now in front of the low stage where Ory and the band sat, the decor making her think more of a party pavilion than the camp ground of last night. Ory waved a hoof at the musicians, and they immediately slid into something more sprightly and danceable, Pinkie visibly bouncing in her place beside Rarity. Princess Luna was bobbing her head as well, and the shuffle of hoofs behind her made Rarity realize the crowd was filing right in after them, tonight's party apparently beginning now.

She kept with her friends, trailing the princess to the foot of the Night Throne, and the hall filled quickly, ponies tapping their hoofs to the music. Seeing—and hearing—Ory wield his trombone for the first time astonished her; he was good, of course, but his playing didn't impress her half as much as the way he led the group, the musicians watching and responding to his prompts in a way that created a lovely balance to the sound. It was hard to believe they'd never performed together before.

The tune ended, ponies whistling and stomping, and Princess Luna raised her voice, every head turning to focus on her: "Welcome, one and all, to the Night Palace and to the second of what I hope will become regular get-togethers here to celebrate that half of the day we call the night. I'll be the first to admit I'm not the most social of ponies, but watching my inestimable Minister of Laughter, I think I've picked up a few pointers."

Pinkie's eyes opened wider than Rarity thought she'd ever seen them, and she slung her pack off, began rooting around in it, the usual cascades of streamers and glitter pouring out. "I've gotta write that word down so I can get it printed on a card!" She sat back and spread her front hoofs. "The Inestimable Pinkie Pie!" she announced.

Laughter scattered through the crowd, and Princess Luna smiled. "I've been doing a great deal of watching the past several days," she went on. "More watching, possibly, than I've done in my entire life. And one thing I've seen—and not just seen but also taken to heart, I think—is, well... is all of you." She stopped, and Rarity heard not a single breath in the entire throne room. "For so long, my world consisted of Celestia, a small group of retainers, and my job. It was all I knew, and upon my return last year, I immediately sought the familiarity of that same situation. But—"

Again she stopped, and for just a moment Rarity caught a glimpse of the little lost pony she'd first seen cowering in the ruins of the Pony Sisters' Palace that fateful day a year and a season ago. But then Princess Luna raised her head, her mane an aurora every bit as regal as her sister's. "But it was that isolation that fueled my break-down, I now see. I didn't know you before, didn't understand you, and therefore didn't know or understand myself. It's taken the unfortunate events of the past few days to show me how wonderful the world can be when one enters into it, and how few things are more awful than a relationship gone sour and broken."

She turned a smile toward Twilight. "Celestia quoted a phrase to me from one of your dispatches, Minister Sparkle: friendship is magic, you told her. And I've come to see how true that is." The princess looked back out at the crowd. "Since I was uninterested in any bonds of friendship between myself and the House of Stargazer—broke those bonds,

really, before they could begin to form—well, I can't help but think how much better things might have turned out had I acted differently. Which is why—"

And suddenly, the air seemed to thicken around Rarity, everything slowing to a stop—except Princess Luna, her neck a dark fluid flexing, her gaze fixing on Rarity's, her voice appearing soundlessly in her head: "Rarity, I'm so, so sorry."

Rarity couldn't even blink until with a snap she could feel, the whole world sprang back to normal, Princess Luna looking at the bandstand and saying, "Orrery Stargazer, I would ask you please to become my Night Minister and recreate the august body that I so precipitously dissolved."

The words went through Rarity like a sewing machine needle—sharp, quick, and painful—and across the crowded room, she saw Ory's whole body react as if somepony had kicked him in the ribs. "For Sister Celestia and I truly are not Equestria," the princess was saying. "All of us *together* are Equestria, every earth pony, pegasus and unicorn here tonight, every pony in Canterlot and Ponyville and Cloudsdale, in Manehattan and Fillydelphia and all points north, south, east and west. If I had seen this a thousand years ago, had seen that the night was not mine alone but belongs equally to all of us who stand and gaze upward in the dark, again, how much better things might have turned out."

Anguish filled Ory's gaze, and staring into those eyes, Rarity knew that all she had to do was say one word for him to turn the princess down, leave Canterlot for Ponyville, and—

And be miserable for the rest of his days. Oh, he'd pretend he wasn't, gentlecolt that he was, would be as gallant and charming and attentive as the princes she had always dreamed about. But—

Feeling the weight of her Element of Harmony necklace around her shoulders, Rarity closed her eyes and nodded.

"Tonight, however—" Princess Luna's voice rolled around her. "I'll begin the process of laying aside all my 'might have's and 'should have's. Tonight, with your help, we can open a new chapter in the history of Equestria, the first chapter of a story more wonderful than any we've yet known."

Excitement quivered the air, but Rarity couldn't open her eyes, could only listen as Ory spoke smooth and perfect from the other side of the room: "Your Highness, the House of Stargazer is honored at this sign of your forgiveness and trust, and I promise—" His voice

broke, then went on as clearly as before. "I promise to fulfill my duties as Night Minister to the utmost of my ability."

"Whoa!" Pinkie exclaimed from somewhere behind her. "Didn't see *that* one coming!"

• • •

The late autumn sun wonderful along her back, Applejack drowsed, stretched out on her stomach in the palace garden, and tried not to think about the work going on back home, getting the orchards ready for the first snowfall and all.

It helped that a postcard from Princess Celestia had arrived while they were all gathered at breakfast this morning, Rarity edgy as a plowshare after last night's party—Applejack could still hear the sweet and melancholy song about flamingos flying that Ory had dedicated to 'the rarest jewel in all Equestria' as the shin-dig was ending—but Rarity was trying so hard not to show how broke up she was that Applejack had pretended not to notice. Spike had just brought her a mug of hot chocolate when his face had screwed up like he'd bit into a windfall apple and he'd coughed up a gout of green fire and a scroll.

Twilight had laughed after unrolling it, the purple glow of her magic setting a photo on the table: Princess Celestia wearing a big floppy hat and dark glasses, a turquoise sky behind her and the words 'Wish You Were Here' swirling over it in glowing letters.

And if Princess Celestia could actually take some time off, well, Applejack figured she could, too. Now that all the hoo-roar was settled, at least...

A scuffle in the grass, and Princess Luna's voice: "Please don't rouse yourself, minister. I just wished to thank you personally for your efforts here this week."

Applejack couldn't help it; she got to her hoofs and bowed before sprawling back into the grass. "Glad we could all help, your Highness."

The princess gave a breathy laugh. "I shall certainly miss your straight-forward approach to things."

That made Applejack laugh. "Folks always *says* that, but I reckon you're the first I've heard who's *meant* it." She opened one eye, fixed it on the princess standing above her. "But you got some good ponies hereabouts. You really listen to 'em when you wants advice, and you'll do okay. And anytime you're in Ponyville, you got a standing invite to chow down at Sweet Apple Acres."

Princess Luna smiled. "I'm honored, minister."

"Ah, shucks, ma'am." Applejack pulled her hat down over her eyes. "Y'all can just call me AJ."

• • •

Since the dinner had been her idea, Rainbow Dash explained to a slightly suspicious Pinkie Pie, she felt she had to be there. "Besides, the Night Palace party'll still be going on when I get back, won't it? I mean, the last two went on 'til, like, oh-dark-thirty! So one boring dinner, and I'll be here quicker'n anything!"

Of course, she didn't mention that, as much as she loved the food the Day Palace chefs prepared, nothing she'd ever had in her life so far had been as great as that first dinner at the Citadel. In fact, she was so looking forward to the dinner itself that it wasn't until she landed in the courtyard with Captain Custard, two pops behind her signaling that they'd been joined by Commander Foxfire and Commander Blueblood—and Dash was still a little peeved at Custard for promoting Blueblood to take Rigel's place, but when she'd been venting about it earlier, Applejack grunting the word "Politics" was all it took for Dash to decide she didn't want anything else to do with it—that she started wondering if this might not be a little more tense than she'd thought.

Since maybe Captain Destrier, standing at parade rest in front of them, might still consider himself the *real* captain of the Night Guard and all...

The dinner, though, went really well, everypony saluting without arguing about who was supposed to go first, Des introducing his commanders to Custard and her doing the same even though Dash was sure they all knew each other. Polite small talk drifted around the head table, and Dash got to bring them all up-to-date on what was happening with Lady Stargazer and with Ory and the Night Ministry and everything. And the food? Even better than the first time!

Then she and the captains and the commanders all headed into the next room—"the library," Des called it even though it looked a lot bigger and more organized than Twilight's place back in Ponyville—and over another chocolate dessert that Dash could've eaten five more servings of, Captain Destrier asked, "So, Minister Dash. What exactly was it you wanted to discuss with us?"

Dash swallowed her mouthful. "Well, mostly, I thought maybe you two captains oughtta talk about what happens now that you've each got a princess to protect."

A startled look crossed his face, then he cocked his head. "That's true. I'd just been assuming you all would retake your places in the Day Guard and we'd return to the old rotation, but--"

"Exactly." In her silver and black uniform, Captain Custard looked less chubby than solid, more muscular than chunky. "We're neither of us really the Night or Day Guards anymore, it seems to me, sir. After all, someone needs to be guarding Princess Celestia while she sleeps, and since we're out with Princess Luna in the Night Palace at that time--"

"Yes." Des was looking at Custard like he hadn't really seen her before. "So we would each have a day shift and a night shift, but our duties would be toward Princess Celestia while you all would see to Princess Luna."

Custard nodded. "It'll take some reorganizing on both our parts, a certain reallocation of resources." She lapped at her dessert, her eyes never leaving Destrier's. "We'll need off-duty space here in the Citadel while you'll no doubt want some of our barrack space to keep a force in the palace complex at all times. That sort of thing."

Des smiled slowly. "That's a discussion I look forward to having, captain."

Dash couldn't stop a grin. Yeah, these two were gonna get along great together.

• • •

Fluttershy trotted down the street in the light just after dawn, absolutely amazed. Ponies were going in and out of shops, calling to each other, eating their breakfasts, setting up their market stalls, and she was just walking along, looking at it all and hardly even feeling nervous!

In fact—and this amazed her the most of all—she kind of *enjoyed* it!

And yes, she was only a block from the palace, and yes, her heart was pounding against her ribs like a squirrel against a particularly tough nut, but she'd been out walking all on her own through the streets of Canterlot now for five whole minutes!

Which was just about enough. Touching a hoof to the pavement of the intersection so she could say she'd gone two blocks, she turned, almost leaped into the sky to get back to the palace quicker, but seeing Rarity gazing forlornly into a shop window down the street she'd just reached stopped her. "Rarity?" she asked.

Her friend started and blinked at her for a moment. "Fluttershy? Are... are you lost, darling?"

"No." She waved at the buildings, tried not to notice how there were a few more ponies on the street now than she really cared for, kept her brave face on, and smiled. "I was just out doing the town."

Rarity blinked some more, so Fluttershy went on. "But I thought you'd be helping Ory and his sisters move back into their rooms in the Night Palace."

The way Rarity's eyes drew shut, Fluttershy realized she'd hit a sore subject. But she couldn't understand why. Unless— "You and Ory are still friends, aren't you?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"Yes, of *course* we are, darling!" Rarity said quickly and forcefully enough that Fluttershy believed her. "But he's not... we're... we're not—"

"Is he moving to another part of Equestria?" Fluttershy asked. "A part so far away, you'll never see him again?"

"He's staying here," Rarity muttered. "And for all that I know it's the best thing for him, for his family, for Princess Luna, for all of Equestria, really, I still wish—" She stopped and coughed a little laugh. "But Ory said something amusing the other day about wishes not being fishes, though I'm not quite sure what point he was trying to make..."

Fluttershy shook her head. "It's not that far from Canterlot to Ponyville, you know. You could visit each other all the time."

Rarity looked at her hoofs. "It wouldn't be the same."

"But it would be something!" Fluttershy thought perhaps she was shouting, but since no one was staring at her, it seemed more likely that it only *felt* that way. "And wouldn't you rather have something than nothing?"

That seemed to catch Rarity's attention; she looked up, at any rate, the expression on her face much more like what Fluttershy expected to see there. "Yes," she said, a sudden sound of decision in her voice. "You... you're absolutely right, Fluttershy!"

"Then come on!" This time, several passing ponies *did* look at her, and Fluttershy immediately reined herself in, continued in more reasonable tones: "We'll go and see if your friend Ory needs any help moving."

"Yes." Rarity beamed, and Fluttershy felt warm and nice all over. "That's exactly what we'll do!"

• • •

Dancing, dancing, dancing: oh, how Pinkie wished it could go on forever!

But, she reasoned, sticking her face into a nice cool bowl of chocolate pudding, if she danced forever, it would be just like walking, wouldn't be special anymore.

"Which is why," she said to anypony who might be listening—though she realized they might find it hard to understand her since she was licking pudding from her face at the same time, "I don't walk anywhere. Because ev'rything is always so much more specialer than that!"

She looked around, but no ponies were nearby to answer her. So she answered herself: "It sure is!"

The few other ponies still in the throne room were all gathered around the other tables where the new Night Palace chefs were setting out breakfast, and Pinkie realized that she'd done it, had created the absolute masterpiece of her career, the legendary and—as far as she knew—never before attempted thirty-six hour party! Starting at dinnertime, then going all night to breakfast, then keeping on all day through lunch to dinner again, then another night 'til right now, the next day's breakfast!

Unable to contain herself, Pinkie scrunched up her face, leaned forward, and whispered in her best Fluttershy voice, "Yay!"

And sure, she was the only pony who'd stayed through the whole thing, but that was the magic of it! Ponies had partied, danced to whichever of the twenty-six bands was on stage at the time—including yesterday afternoon's longest conga line in the history of Equestria—then had gone home, slept, and come back, all of them having such a good time that they hadn't been able to stay away! She could feel the party atmosphere spread over the whole city like butter on toast, sinking into every nook and cranny exactly the same way as the coming dawn soon would! It was perfect in every way!

A tap on her shoulder, and she turned to find her face suddenly full of warm soapy washcloth. "Hey!" she shouted.

"Hold still," she heard Twilight Sparkle say. "Princess Celestia will be home in a few minutes, and I don't think you'd like pudding dripping from your mane for that."

Pinkie stopped squirming to think about that, and by the time she realized she agreed with the idea, a towel had finished drying her off, her eyes, clear now of the chocolate film, showing her Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Fluttershy and Dashie all standing there in the special "last day" dresses Rarity had made, her own dress floating like a cotton-candy cloud in the glow of Rarity's horn. "Then we did it?" she asked, glad for once she would have somepony else to answer.

"One week." Twilight nodded.

Shadows swirled behind her, and Princess Luna stepped out. "And as far as I can tell, the city's still standing."

"Standing?" Pinkie stared at her, grown into such the perfect dream of a night princess that Pinkie hated to point out the obvious. "Well, duh, your Highness! I mean, where would they get enough chairs for ev'rypony in Canterlot?"

Dashie rolled her eyes, and Twilight blinked. But Princess Luna threw back her head and laughed, as wonderful a sound as Pinkie thought she'd ever heard. "Minister? As I also lack a chair at this time, I stand corrected." She gestured toward the big main doorway to the throne room, and Pinkie saw the seven of them were alone. "But sister'll be back shortly, so, as long as we're all standing, perhaps we can walk over to the Day Palace and greet her."

"Now *that*," Pinkie said, scampering over to where her dress awaited her, "makes sense!"

• • •

Twilight fretted quietly every step of the way during that last procession. What if Phillipa had been lying this whole time and had accomplices still at large? Or what if some *other* pony with a grudge had been waiting to spoil things at the last minute and make them all look bad in front of Princess Celestia? Or what if—?

But the crowd, though bigger than even during that first dawn—was it really only a week ago?—remained boisterous but happy, the chant this time, "Luna! Celestia! Equestria! Luna! Celestia! Equestria!" The Night Guard troops, the red crests on their helmets echoed by the red ribbons she saw everywhere, marched them along at a brisk but stately pace, but this time, she noticed, Captain Destrier and the Day Guard troops weren't waiting at the halfway point to meet them.

Twilight's hackles rose, and she started looking around, ready for the attack this no doubt presaged, but a nicker from Rainbow Dash drew her attention. "Don't panic, Leader Girl," Rainbow whispered with a wink. "Part of the plan."

And in fact, Twilight saw now, two Day Guard ponies stood on either side of the entry arch into the Day Palace, the two groups of guards saluting each other smartly as the princess led them all into the corridor, the music and banners somehow even brighter than before. More Day Guard troops lined the hall, and in the throne room, they stood along the walls, the spaces between them just large enough for one Night Guard soldier to step nimbly into as Princess Luna continued toward the throne, all the Ministry workers on their hoofs, the Day Ministry in white and gold mixed with the new Night Ministry workers in black and silver, Ory looking quite becoming, she had to admit, in his frock coat beside Lord Daybreak, all the ponies stomping, whistling, cheering—though glancing back quickly, Twilight was happy to see Fluttershy nodding and smiling rather than passing out...

Princess Luna reached the throne, then, turned, and raised her head, the entire assembly falling silent in an instant. "My friends," she said, her voice resonant and lovely, "if there's one thing we all know about Sister Celestia, it's that she's always on time. And since today's sunrise is scheduled for five seconds from now, I think I can safely say that she will be gracing us with her presence—"

Sunlight blossomed from the eastern windows of the throne room, and Princess Celestia sailed down its beams, her wings dazzling, her mane and tail the perfect pastel rainbow. She landed with a dainty skip, and seeing the two princesses there together, both tall and regal, each the exact compliment to the other, Twilight felt like her heart was going to burst.

She bowed herself down to the floor, saw everypony in the room doing the same, and a voice above her, a voice she could've sworn was Princess Celestia's, whispered, "Oh, sister! Welcome home!"

• • •

Then speeches were made and medals were placed around necks, good-byes were said and promises were made. And at last, several hours after dawn, with her friends heading back to the Night Palace to gather up their things before Princess Luna transported them home, Twilight made herself stop in the doorway of the study Princess Luna had been using in the Day Palace, the two princesses having risen from their cushions to bid them farewell.

Princess Celestia cocked her head. "Something else, Twilight?"

"It's just—" And as much as she didn't want to, Twilight looked her teacher in the eye and said, "You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

The princess's smile faded, and she looked at the floor. "I hoped it wouldn't."

"What?" Princess Luna, looking a little bleary-eyed at this point in the morning, took a step back.

Twilight nodded. "But you knew it would."

Princess Celestia puffed a sigh. "Phillipa Stargazer had brought her complaints to me, but I told her the night was no longer my department. If she had comments—" She looked over at Princess Luna. "I told her she needed to bring them to *your* attention."

"But—" Her brow wrinkled, Princess Luna blinked several times. "But you could've *told* me, sister!"

Princess Celestia kept her gaze focused on Princess Luna. "I should live her life for her? I should live yours? No. If Phillipa wasn't willing to address you directly, to bring her problems into an open forum where they could be discussed and debated, then, well, it's not my place to force anypony to do anything." She sighed again. "But by leaving and putting you in charge, I hoped Phillipa would choose the constructive path rather than..." Her voice trailed off.

"But," Princess Luna said again, and Twilight nearly gasped at the plaintive tone behind her words. "You could've told me I was making a mistake! You could've—!"

"You *weren't* making a mistake, sister!" Princess Celestia stepped forward. "You had made an informed decision as to how you wanted to run the night! It was a perfectly reasonable decision, and for the most part, it was working quite well. If there was any mistake here, it occurred when Phillipa Stargazer refused to talk to you. Everything else followed from that."

Princess Luna's eyes wavered, and Twilight stepped toward her as well. "She's right, your Highness. You said yourself when you reinstated the Night Ministry that you didn't understand how much you needed the Stargazer family. Well, Phillipa certainly knew how much she needed you, but she apparently didn't make any effort to reach out and tell you."

"I—" Her silver mane flickered, and Princess Luna closed her eyes. "I need to think about this. And I need to get some sleep." She drew in a breath and smiled at Princess Celestia. "I'm so glad you're back, sister." She turned that smile toward Twilight, and the warmth of it wrapped around her like a comforter on a winter night. "And I'm so very, very glad for your friendship, Twilight Sparkle." She leaned forward and reached her horn down.

Twilight stretched her neck, touched her horn to the princess's. "And I for yours, your Highness."

"Oh, yes," came Princess Celestia's voice. "That reminds me. I wanted to ask what those red ribbons were all about."

"You see?" Luna asked, her gossamer diagram spinning above the center of her room, the spark in her voice making Celestia smile. "It'll be just like what we were doing before except now we'd announce the dawn and dusk there in the center of the courtyard where as many ponies as possible can see it instead of each of us going back to her throne to make it happen." She grinned with an eagerness Celestia hadn't seen in her for a long, long time. "Whaddaya think, Sunny?"

Celestia cocked her head. "I think my vacation did you more good than it did me."

Luna laughed. "I think you're right." Her smile faded. "It's just... we owe them so much, all those ponies, and we can't... I mean, they can't... they don't-" All her previous good humor disappeared, and Celestia's shoulders tightened. Could it finally be time?

She leaned forward, touched her nose to Luna's neck. "Starry? What's wrong?"

Her voice came out as the barest whisper. "How, Sunny? How can we be friends with them when someday they're all going to... to-" She choked off and turned her head to meet Celestia's, her distress darkening the glow of her horn.

Yes, it *was* time. "Like this," she said softly, and flexing her neck to bring her horn into contact with her sister's, she cast the spell she'd been longing to share with Luna for a thousand and one years.

Luna's room vanished around them, the dark of the early evening sky outside replaced by a stranger darkness, a velvet quality to it that Celestia had only ever found in this place. "What-?" Luna asked in alarm, stepping back, looking around, the silver aurora of her mane suddenly spiky. "Where-?"

"It's all right," Celestia said quickly. And it was *better* than all right, the tree beside them exactly as it should be, the grassy hills rising up on all sides to create a little valley under the soft violet light of the sky. "This is the Grove, a place I found at the end of that horrible, horrible first week after I'd sent you into exile, a place I once thought was a dream, but now... now I know it's not."

Still looking around, Luna seemed to have lost most of her panic. "It feels so... so welcoming somehow." She turned to face the tree, and Celestia heard her gasp at what—or rather who—was lying there asleep: Twilight Sparkle and her friends, just as Celestia had expected, but also Ory Stargazer and his mother. Which made sense, Celestia decided.

"That—" Luna swung her head from the sleeping ponies to Celestia and back again. "That isn't really them. Is it?"

"It will be." And for all the time Celestia had had to plan, she still wasn't sure how to explain this place to Luna. "I first found my way here the night after we'd gotten the stars I'd managed to blow out back into the sky. I saw all the ponies who'd helped me, all the ponies I now thought of as my friends, all sleeping under this tree just like this."

The quiet made her whisper, but Luna's pricked ears told her she was catching every word. "And then... then the next week, Swampy, one of the old earth ponies who'd shown me how to get the marsh gas burning, she died, and after the funeral, in my grief, I sought this place out again, wanting only to see her safely asleep, and instead... instead when I arrived here, she... she was *awake*, Starry. She was awake, and she knew me, knew everything she should've known, was herself, her real self, here... forever..."

Luna was staring at her. "You mean... she's here now?"

Celestia pointed her nose to the hills around them. "Just over the crest with everypony else who's awake. At least, I'm guessing: this is *your* Grove, not mine. But it feels the same here, so I'm betting mine's not too far away."

"Then—" Luna kept looking back and forth. "Any mortal friends we make, they... they come *here* after they die?"

"They do." Celestia couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice. "And any friends our friends make, they'll show up as well! My Grove is a huge valley filled with sleeping ponies, dragons, griffins, every living creature who's ever made a friend, a chain linking back a thousand years with me in the center! And with *two* of us out in the world now—"

"But Twilight and AJ and everypony!" Luna's horn glowed black in confusion. "Aren't they already in your Grove? And... are you saying—" Light danced in her eyes. "You're saying I can meet the ponies who helped you with the night all the time I was gone?"

Celestia flared her wings. "Let's go see," she said.